

**Listening as social action:  
Method and morality in endangered language fieldwork**

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Many linguists now working on endangered languages want more than to produce good data; they want to produce good data in a way that is respectful of speakers and socially constructive. While this is often understood in terms of the explicit negotiation of leadership roles and project goals, it also has much to do with the researcher's agency as listener in a broad range of interpersonal settings. After all, in carrying out fieldwork on endangered languages, outside linguists necessarily adopt the morally and linguistically significant role of interlocutor in a cross-cultural encounter that distills one of the central issues implicated in language shift: the perception of self vis a vis cultural others. Being a good listener is hard enough to do in one's everyday life, where one can rely on a tacit knowledge of the culture. It is more difficult to do still in an interaction that is framed by foreign cultural assumptions.

This talk will explore the fieldworker's role as listener, focusing in particular on a short oral text recorded during the author's fieldwork on Arapesh in East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea. In addition to revealing interesting features of Arapesh narrative discourse, a poetic analysis of the text following the principles of measured verse analysis (Dell Hymes 1981, 2003) provides a rich source of evidence about the speaker's experience in the research encounter itself, both straightforwardly through the text's content and indexically through aspects of its form. What emerges is a confrontation of perspectives that the speaker resolves (on several levels simultaneously) through a shift in code choice. By discussing this remarkable little text from numerous points of view—its content, its active organization (and reorganization) by the speaker, and the listener's influence in shaping both its ultimate oral and written forms—I hope to draw attention to the multiple and sometimes subtle forms of power that linguists-as-interlocutors exercise in their field interactions, and the way these are responded to by speakers. The goal is not to obliterate those forms of power, for that cannot be done, but to present a method for listening again “between the lines” that participants can apply in their own field situations and that may help them use their inevitable power more consciously and wisely.

Background readings:

Dobrin, Lise M. Forthcoming. From linguistic elicitation to eliciting the linguist: Lessons in community empowerment from Melanesia. *Language* 84.2.

Hymes, Virginia. 2004. Sahaptin: Celiloh. In Brian Swann (ed.), *Voices from four directions: Contemporary translations of the native literatures of North America*, pp. 195-208. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.