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## Documentation and responsibility

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### ABSTRACT

The sometimes conflicting responsibilities of endangered language fieldworkers to at least three distinct constituencies are considered: to other scholars, to native speaker sources, and to the ethnic community the sources represent. In the case of the author's Scottish Gaelic fieldwork, an original near-exclusive focus on responsibility to the scholarly community gave way to a greater focus on responsibility to sources via recognition of early fieldwork blunders arising from insufficient attention to the sensitivity of some materials. Also discussed are the implausibility of genuinely informed consent and the validity of ethnic community claims to materials supplied under confidentiality guarantees to the original sources.

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### 1. Introduction: fieldwork with endangered languages

Any researcher who leaves a record of his or her work assumes a number of responsibilities, chief among them responsibility for the record's accuracy. But when an endangered speech form is involved, as in the chief case I will discuss here, what might be called the 'last-chance' responsibility comes strongly into play: *right now* may be the one and only chance to create a record of the speech form in question, and right or wrong, what the late-stage fieldworker puts on the record is likely to stand.

A number of difficulties, some of them more immediately obvious than others, may lie in the way of a researcher who appears at a late stage in the history of a receding language, hoping and intending to leave a reliable linguistic record. If all of the remaining speakers are elderly, it may be that neither the current researcher nor future researchers will have an opportunity to gather additional material for confirmation or refutation of the original record. This is unfortunately a very common circumstance in research with at-risk languages. If the sampling procedure used by the researcher is inadvertently skewed in some fashion, a source who is unrepresentative of the speech community may come to represent the community in the official record of that community's speech. This happened, for example, with the record for Golspie village in the five-volume *Survey of the Gaelic Dialects of Scotland* (Ó Dochartaigh, 1997), where an overly literate man served as the sole source for the village, supplying written-language substitutes for some local dialect forms (see Dorian, 2010, Chapter 9). If the local language is no longer used in ordinary conversation, the researcher may feel obliged to question the naturalness or completeness of such speech as can be retrieved for the record. Haas raised these questions in her work with the last speaker of Tunica, a man who had had no fluent conversation partners for many years, even though he himself appeared to represent a high degree of fluency (Haas, 1941). If there are no longer any speakers who know how the language was used in connection with certain traditional practices, it may be impossible to gain a sense of the full semantic range of certain lexical items or expressions. Jocks (1998) describes the dimensions of the semantic range problem particularly well, coming to it as an adult learner of Mohawk (with native speakers still remaining in his ethnic community). If the speech community tolerates, or even embraces, a considerable amount of familial or idiosyncratic variation in the ways that Collins (1998) describes for Tolowa and Kroskrity (2002) for Western Mono, the researcher may unknowingly take the forms he has recorded to be much

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more generally representative of a local speech form than they actually are. It should of course be acknowledged that misapprehending some aspects of the data and failing to appreciate the full semantic content of some of the recorded material are not problems unique to working with receding languages. But these problems are heightened in late-stage fieldwork, because of limited opportunity to supplement or correct the record.

Impetus for receding language fieldwork may come entirely from the outside, with researchers arriving to look for languages reported still to survive, as with David Bradley's quest for remaining speakers of Ugong in Thailand (Bradley, 1989), or it may arise from speakers' own concern for the future of their speech form, as was true for Faetar in Italy (Nagy, 2000) and for Rama in Nicaragua (Grinevald, 2006). In the latter case sources are readily identifiable, but in the former case the researcher may have to hunt for elusive speakers. In particularly favorable cases the researcher may find speakers who have developed their own sense of mission about leaving a record of their language and are glad to work with a linguist to achieve that goal. In northeastern Australia the last Warrungu speaker, Alf Palmer, told researcher Tasaku Tsunoda, 'When I die, this language will die. I'll teach you everything I know, so put it down properly' (Tsunoda, 2005, p. 98). But as James Collins found in working with a thin scattering of Tolowa speakers in northern California, the linguist's narrow focus on contrastive forms and their distributions can be a very long way from what the remaining speakers have in mind when agreeing to a joint effort to record their language. 'Simply put', writes Collins, 'they were interested in words, not grammar' (Collins, 1998, p. 260; see also Grinevald, 2001, p. 295). Such discrepancies suggest the potential for conflicting objectives in any joint work involving academic researchers and community members and for discordant notions on the part of the two parties about the responsibilities of the researcher in the wake of that work.

## 2. The responsibilities of late-stage fieldwork

As gatherers of increasingly scarce and highly valued information, endangered language researchers are typically responsible to at least three distinct constituencies: other scholars; individuals like Alf Palmer who serve as their sources; and the ethnic community at large (including younger Warrungu and Tolowa who were growing up without their ancestral language).<sup>1</sup> Some results of the scholar's activities may serve all three constituencies – for example, a clear, user-friendly, and accessible dictionary of the language. But it can also happen that the interests of the various stakeholders are at odds and can not easily be reconciled. In that unfavorable case, serving one set of stakeholders well may mean serving another set poorly or not at all.

If fieldwork with a single speech variety extends over some years, the sheer passage of time almost guarantees that the researcher's position with regard to her responsibilities will undergo some change. In my own case, 45 years of work with an isolated and unusual variety of Scottish Gaelic provided plenty of opportunity to reconsider the focus and scope of those responsibilities, thanks both to blunders that I made as a young researcher and to changing circumstances in the scholarly world and also in the ethnic community. Discussing the blunders in particular offers a way of focusing on potential ethical dilemmas in linguistic fieldwork, in particular fieldwork with a rapidly receding language.

My orientation as a young scholar in the early 1960s was typical for the time, I believe, in that I considered my research to be undertaken in the interest of other scholars and my responsibility to be primarily to the scholarly community. While I certainly felt a strong connection to the people I was working with from the very beginning, my orientation at the time conformed to the pattern that Himmelmann has described as typical of 20th century structuralist linguistics (Himmelmann, 2008, p. 341): I did not take the results of my fieldwork to be of any particular interest to the people whose language I was studying. The variety of Scottish Gaelic that I worked with had about 200 speakers in 1964; it currently has three less-than-perfectly-fluent speakers (four, if I count myself). It was a dialect of the extreme Highland periphery and was as atypical as peripheral dialects often are; it had been recorded up to then only in the form of lexical entries in a Gaelic dialect survey. The coastal East Sutherland Gaelic speakers had been fisherfolk, an occupation that created a separate Gaelic-speaking workforce that for some generations had needed only relatively limited English for commercial transactions outside the community and for part-year occupational involvement in the national herring fishery. Separate residential areas for fisherfolk had permitted community members to maintain their home and neighborhood use of Gaelic well into a period when other population segments in the surrounding region had become monolingual in English. But the fishing had come to an end after World War II, and by the 1960s most local speakers were elderly; only a few were under 40, and no children were acquiring the distinctive local dialect. The end of this speech form was already foreseeable, in large part because it was severely stigmatized. If an effort had been mounted to support Gaelic in this region, it would without a doubt have promoted a mainstream form of Gaelic and not the local variety (as in fact has happened in more recent years). The Gaelic that I recorded in the 1960s and 1970s would not be recoverable from the three speakers surviving today, since in every respect – lexicon, syntax, morphology, and phonology – their Gaelic is less full than that of their predecessors. This means that anyone who wishes to see or hear a full-fluency version of East Sutherland fisherfolk Gaelic will be able to achieve that goal only by consulting what I gathered of it between 1963 and the death of the last locally resident, fully fluent speaker in 2001.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A fourth constituency not discussed here, some sort of funding agency, may or may not be involved. For prolonged fieldwork in distant locations, institutional financial support is a necessity, but receding languages may also be encountered much closer by. I worked for example with secular Pennsylvania German speakers who were within manageable driving range of my home institution without requiring funding for that research.

<sup>2</sup> I specify 'locally resident' because it is possible, though by now highly unlikely, that one or two fluent speakers from the East Sutherland diaspora survive in New Zealand, say, or Canada.

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