Issues to Think About Before and After Working on Indigenous Language Projects in Remote Areas

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Abstract

There are many issues that affect language and linguistic projects that linguists, linguistic organisations and registered training organisations may not yet be aware exist. These include training, sociological, environmental and cultural issues. Some can be resolved through the training of indigenous and non-indigenous language researchers but others cannot. Several of the issues which are not amenable to training solutions can be resolved through language and linguistic organisations, but there are also others which are so embedded in culture that they may not be resolvable in some language communities. It is important for non-indigenous language researchers to be aware of these issues when working with remote indigenous language communities. It is also important for linguists to know about them prior to starting work with indigenous Australians on language projects.

This paper draws on concerns raised by indigenous people, including elders, indigenous language researchers and other community members, during recent fieldwork in the Torres Strait, Cairns, Townsville and communities in Central Australia, Top End Northern Territory, the Pilbara and the Kimberley. Their concerns include: Community status; linguistic fluency; working together as one; appropriate terminology; benefits to the community; and respect and recognition for all participants.

The data shows that many of these issues are still current, despite being aired for some 30 years. The paper therefore aims to raise awareness so that language projects and the relationships between community and non-indigenous linguists are more successful for all involved.

Keywords

Documentation. Maintenance. Endangered Languages. Australian Indigenous Languages. Terminology. Community Status. Protocols. Ethics.

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Introduction

Training, sociological, environmental and cultural issues affect language and linguistic projects in ways that language researchers, linguistic organisations and registered training organisations are not always aware of. Some of these issues can be resolved through the training of indigenous and non-indigenous language researchers[1] but others cannot. Others can be resolved through language and linguistic organisations, but there are others that are so embedded in culture that they may not be able to be resolved in some language communities. Whether or not they can be resolved, all language researchers need to be aware of these issues when working with remote indigenous language communities.

This paper draws on some of these issues as well as concerns of research abuse raised by indigenous people about non-indigenous language researchers collecting data in their communities. This paper has been written to reflect the voices of the people who raised these issues and concerns. Therefore, there are long quotes from individual interviewees and each quote is written exactly as the individual voiced it. Each voice reflects the concerns and issues other indigenous people expressed, both within their own language group and from other language groups across Northern Australia. These concerns have been raised previously by other authors (eg. Wilkins 1992; Cameron et al., 1992) and are partially reflected in today's ethical standards for engaging with indigenous communities (eg. AIATSIS 2000), but the current research sheds additional light on community concerns in the context of linguistics research in particular.

Research Background

The concerns of this paper arose during field work related to another research question, *"To what extent, and in what ways, does linguistic training assist in the documentation or maintenance of endangered languages?"* In this section I outline how this fieldwork was being undertaken in order to place the topic of this paper into the context in which it was raised.

Ideally indigenous Australians should be documenting and maintaining their own languages but in practice outside help is often needed. Therefore, non-indigenous people are invited into communities to work on language projects. But researchers also do language research for their own benefit, such as PhDs and Masters, and for government funded projects so on. Therefore, it is important for non-indigenous researchers to be fully aware of the issues and concerns raised by these indigenous language communities prior to starting their language project.

The aim of the underlying research is therefore to assess the relevance of indigenous linguistic training in remote areas and the effects it has on Australia's endangered languages. It is anticipated that the results of this research will contribute to more of Australia's endangered languages being documented or maintained by indigenous Australian's through improved training, and by addressing the cultural, environmental and funding issues that affect such work from being done.

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[1] The term language researcher is used to refer to the traditional terms of linguist, language worker and indigenous linguist or community linguist.

A combination of Patton's (2002: 342-348) qualitative interview approaches, interview guide and standardized open-ended interview, were used during interviews with over 80 indigenous elders, indigenous language researchers and other indigenous community members. All interviewees were adults aged approximately 30 – 70 years representing over 30 language groups across Northern Australia. By using the open-ended interview technique each interview took the form of a casual conversation, with all parties discussing a particular topic but not answering direct questions, therefore no two interviews were alike and most interviews were relaxed with the interviewee dominating much of the discussion. All interviews were held in the interviewees' home community and in a place nominated by the interviewee, which contributed to a comfortable informal atmosphere resulting in much openness and honesty from each individual. Most interviews were conducted in open-spaces, under trees in the desert, on beaches along remote coastlines, outside community stores or at airstrips. Apart from the interviews in language centres and remote community schools very few interviews were carried out in-doors.

The interviews took place in six case study regions; the Torres Strait, Northern Queensland, Central Australia, the Top End Northern Territory, the Pilbara and the Kimberley.
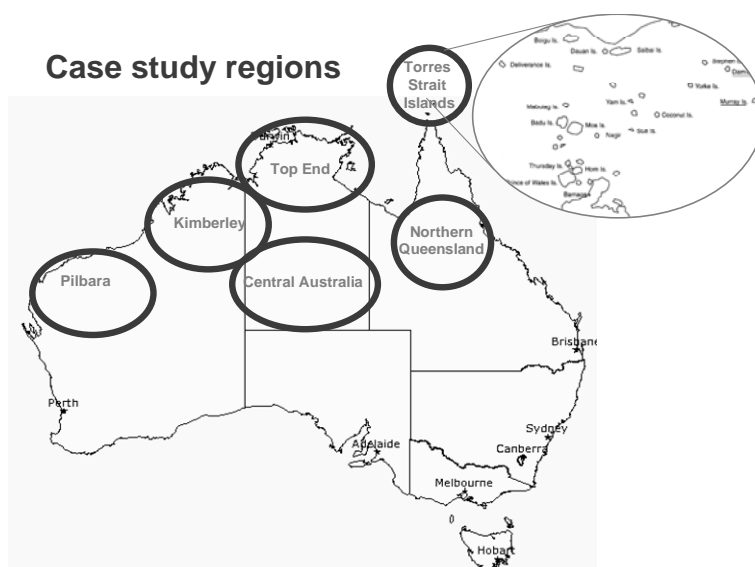
Map 1: Case study regions.

During these interviews a series of issues not directly related to the underlying research topic were raised, which broadly fell into the categories of issues derived from cultural differences and preferences, and those related to the (actuality or perception of) abuse of research privilege, each of which are explored in more detail in the remainder of this paper. Some of these issues are cultural differences or preferences that researchers need to be aware of when working on language projects in remote communities. Other issues, which have been discussed by many researchers since the 1980s, can completely derail a project or, worse, destroy the respect for linguistic researchers in communities or linguistic researchers across the board. The aim of this paper is to raise awareness of the cultural differences and preferences of remote communities and re-open the discussion of research abuse, without going over previous discussions in detail (refer to Wilkins 1992 for a detailed discussion of issues relating to research privilege), and to highlight the fact that these issues are still a cause of major concern for indigenous Australians.

Cultural differences & preferences

A number of issues relate to underlying cultural factors which cause indigenous communities to treat language and collaboration with language researchers in ways that are different to those which we are used to in the dominant research culture.

Community status

Community status is a very important cultural issue for all of the communities I visited. Community status is the cultural position a person holds within their community. In Australian indigenous communities the older you are the more linguistic and cultural knowledge you have or are given. Certain knowledge is provided at a certain age and not provided to people not yet ready for that knowledge.

In several interviews, in quite different communities, senior people discussed at length why language is withheld from the younger generations or those not ready to have such knowledge. This is an extract of what one of these people[2] had to say:

> There are rules about who and what information can be discussed or developed or dealt with by certain people and everyone knows and understands that it is the senior people and the older people in our language community who have the language knowledge…. But we also acknowledge that young people need to learn that history and learn that knowledge from the senior people. But those senior people also know what can, what information can be made available to younger people and what they withhold until it is time to inform people of different things. So it is a gradual, no young person can just have all the knowledge because people know that they're not ready for it in their own minds and their own development. And so the older we get different knowledges is disclosed to us ….. But that's done gently and in the right way ….. we need to be clear the fact that at different stages of life different information is disclosed, different knowledge is made available to young people and the senior people know what information they can provide to young people….. At the same time they're disclosing this information they know what information to give that won't create conflict or trouble or concern for the senior people in the community, and I think they handled that really well. These rules that have been here for thousands and thousands of years, and people do that.

It is essential to be aware of how people deal with these matters as they are an important part of the culture but are kept private and not openly discussed. This is a sensitive issue in communities so care is needed when researchers discuss who and why they want to work with particular people. It is best to let the community guide researchers to the people to work with – researchers should avoid making their own decisions about who to work with as it can cause conflict within the community and problems for the researchers themselves. Usually if researchers work with the people the community recommend, more accurate data is gathered, thus resulting in a better and more useful project.

Linguistic fluency

In some remote communities it is considered important for indigenous people working on language projects to be fluent in their traditional language. In other communities fluency is not

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2 Due to confidentiality requirements all names, language groups and community identification and individual identification have been removed from all quotes used in this paper. In addition, to protect the identity of the participants at their request, quotes are not referenced.

so important as long as people are trying to document or maintain their traditional language – trying to keep their language strong.

In one community a resident felt such shame when he tried to speak language that he now chooses not to try to keep the language strong. This is what he said:

> I tried to speak [language] but people, elders, laugh at you when you make mistake, so I don't try anymore. They make you feel shame.

Another example, from the same community, comes from two qualified indigenous language researchers. We were discussing the language and cultural maintenance classes that they had tried to initiate in the community school.

> (Q) But you're willing to do it [design and teach the language and cultural programs], but you're saying you can't do it because of the support or the training?

> (A) The community. The council. The community too, especially the elders. We tried to go up to the school to teach it but we couldn't teach up at the school because we weren't fluent speakers and we tried to explain what we were doing but still they told us not to go up there. So we stopped.

> (Q) Oh, the elders asked you not to go up there?

> (A) No. They **told** us **not** to go up there. We shouldn't be teaching up there because we weren't fluent speakers. We told them that we may not be fluent speakers but we are willing to teach the kids, and, whatever. The council wasn't much help; they ignored us in the end.

This was so devastating for these language researchers that they no longer study or try to keep their language strong, and as a result there is no language program going on in that community at all.

However, in contrast, other communities are happy to work with anyone who is interested in working on language. Elders are happy to provide language data to language researchers who are not fluent in language as they think this is the only way they can hand language on to the younger generations. Therefore, they will work with anyone who is interested in working on language, bearing in mind that there are the restrictions on what these language researchers are told, as discussed under community status above.

Working as one

All the communities participating in this research project discussed the importance of indigenous and non-indigenous people working together, as one, and on an equal level, to document and maintain language, as each person has something vital to bring to the project that others cannot. As one indigenous language researcher said:

> Working together is the best because I have my world and you have your world and we can work things out together. It should be a collaborative approach, we can both bring things to it.

Another indigenous researcher basically said the same but also highlighted a major community concern:

> I think both they should work together as they are coming in with two sets of values. You know. You know. What an indigenous person has to offer. He might offer something that

a non-indigenous person can't. Non-indigenous person might offer something that the indigenous person can't offer. They have to work, and their values have to work and meet half way, so that, with them both working together, you know, come up with something that would be good. Structured. Yeah..... I reckon both. But then again the copyright laws, who's got ownership of the work. That's the bottom line because non-indigenous person can say well I did all the work, I can take my stuff away. So for the indigenous person we are back to square one, more-or-less….. you got to play the game safely, eh? You got to be one step ahead because someone might say ….. So they should come together, indigenous and non-indigenous, indigenous person got the language skills and the non-indigenous has those methodologies on how to maintain it and they need to meet half way and say alright we're working together, this is the deal, that we both have a copy of each of what we done. So they covering each other, they have to have a contract, but they should both do it.

As these quotes state, it is very important for the quality of the work that both parties work together, as each person brings with them vital skills that will enhance the project. But indigenous people are concerned with the final outcome as raised in the final quote, which will be discussed further under research privilege abuse below.

Appropriate terminology

Some communities find certain titles offensive. Simple terms such as linguist and language worker can offend some language researchers. In one particular community visited, people preferred to call anyone in the community who had undertaken any linguistic training 'a linguist' regardless of whether they completed a diploma, advanced diploma or degree in linguistics. In another community the terms linguist and language worker were not used at all as they were considered offensive. This is a direct quote from one of the interviewees in this particular community.

We're trying to get away from just saying language worker because that's confused with linguists and aboriginal people, and in our case, history has it that the aboriginal person is the language worker and the non-aboriginal person is the linguist. In some way it sort of presents to people that they're this trained, western trained, technical expert. But then a language worker is kind of, if you look at it that way, is a lesser thing. But we know that the linguist without the language worker, in our case, can run into some problems. So these people who we call language workers, who we now call language community development officers, have a lot of expertise and a lot of knowledge that they bring to the project, as well as what the trained western linguist can bring.

This same speaker also reinforces the importance of working together. However in other communities the difference between the terms 'language worker' and 'linguist' is important as they distinguished between someone having a degree in linguistics and someone who does not. To avoid offending or degrading the other researchers and community members it is important to check with people in the community that the right terminology is being used before the language project starts.

Abuse of research privilege

Since the 1980's there has been much discussion about the abuse of research privilege. For example, David Wilkins (Wilkins, 1992) discussed in detail many of the issues he faced as a researcher on a Central Australian language, some of which are touched on in the following discussion; as well as whole books dedicated to this subject such as Deborah Cameron et al. (Cameron et al., 1992). These were shortly followed by the development and implementation of

many ethical guidelines and protocols for researchers working in indigenous communities, for example in Australia we saw the development and implementation of Australian Linguistic Society's 1990 Statement of Ethics and its 1984 Linguistic rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. There are also, among others, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies' (2000) *Guidelines for ethical research in indigenous studies* and the FATSIL (2004) guide to community protocols for indigenous language projects and many other documents currently available on ethics, intellectual property and community protocols. Despite these widely available documents, there is still, today, much talk of abuse by non-indigenous language researchers in remote indigenous communities. This abuse includes aspects such as failing to provide mutual benefits, and not respecting or acknowledging language informants once the project is completed.

Lack of benefits for the language community

Several indigenous elders and community members raised the concern that non-indigenous researchers come in to the community to collect data for their own benefit and the community does not benefit from the linguistic work done in their own community. They felt that they have not benefited from research projects because they did not get anything back from the researcher at the end of the project. In their eyes the researcher stole their language data from them just to get themselves a degree, research job or a promotion. It is vital that both parties benefit from any language project, even if the researcher's main benefit is a Masters or a PhD.

When communities do not receive anything, or anything useful, at the end of a project they may well feel that they failed to get anything out of that project and that the researcher was there just for their own benefit. To avoid such concerns it is vital to ensure the community receives a copy of the work done in their community, and to provide this in a form that the community can proudly look at and easily use. Too often researchers just send a copy of the final outcome of the project to the community, such as a grammar, a dictionary or a detailed phonological analysis of the language. These materials are often full of linguistic jargon and are too complicated for many people to read, so are deemed useless and of no benefit to the language community. It is important to send a copy of the final outcome of the project but it is just as important to also send some plain language materials that the community language researchers, elders and other community members can understand and use themselves. This is much more appreciated by the community.

Acknowledgement & Maintaining Respect

Researchers are generally well respected in remote communities; especially those working on a language project that helps to keep language strong. However, such respect, and future support for another project, can be easily lost. One example of this came from a dictionary that was compiled over several years. During the early stages of the project many people were involved, but during the final phase different people or a selected few people were involved in the project. When the dictionary was released, with great fanfare, some of the community members were very upset because they felt they were heavily involved in the project in the beginning and were not acknowledged at all in the end. This caused so much concern that some community members have refused to allow the involved researcher to work on any of their subsequent language projects at all. They felt this researcher wanted all the glory for writing the dictionary when in l fact it could not have done without the speakers of the language. In addition, one of the community members, who was undertaking a language and linguistic course, so she could work on her traditional language, dropped out of the course as she thought that "if that's how linguists work I didn't want to be one".

These outcomes were a great loss for all concerned simply because the researcher did not acknowledge all people involved, even though the researcher had the community's best interest

at heart. The researcher did not mean to offend – it was simply an oversight but left severe consequences for future language researchers. Often such problems can be avoided if publications from the project are published in all participants' names.

Conclusion

Researchers must be aware of community protocols and that each community has different protocols or preferences. It is recommended that researchers confirm such details with elders, the community council or coordinator of the area involved with the research project. It is important to know the community's preferences when it comes to titles and it is essential always to follow up with the community after the project is finished. People in remote indigenous communities do not want to lose their language so they are generally very supportive of any language project as long as their culture and beliefs are not breached, and community protocols are followed. Following community protocols will not only ensure the right people work on the project, but that better and more accurate data will be gathered, which will end in a better outcome for both the researcher and the community. And, finally, it is vital to ensure that all collaborators are duly acknowledged and obtain appropriate benefits from the project.

This paper raises few new issues or solutions, and most researchers today should know how to duly acknowledge research participants and to ensure that plain language reports should be sent back to the communities, and so on. However, it does provide new data that highlights the fact the issues still exist today, despite 30 years of awareness-raising. It may be time to re-examine what has happened over this period, in terms of researchers, whether non-indigenous or indigenous, funding, working and time commitments and to consider whether there may be new policies and or practices that fit in better with the ever changing pressures on researchers and on the endangered language communities themselves.

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