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COMMUNITY COLLABORATIONS: BEST PRACTICES FOR
NORTH AMERICAN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE
DOCUMENTATION

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Abstract

This article describes a collaborative project for language documentation involving the North American indigenous languages of Mohave and Chemehuevi. We define the essential elements of field methods and of project design while proposing a basic model for collaborative community-based projects in language documentation. Our recommendations apply to community-based projects in North American indigenous communities; however, we anticipate that they will be extendable worldwide to others working in the field of language documentation.

1. The community and the languages

The project in focus is based at the Colorado River Indian Tribes (CRIT) reservation, which is located on Arizona's western edge along the banks of the lower Colorado River near Parker, Arizona. The project, "Mohave and Chemehuevi Language Documentation Project," is funded by the National Science Foundation/National Endowment for the Humanities Documenting Endangered Languages program.¹

The CRIT community is a complicated one. The tribes originally indigenous to the area are Mohave and Chemehuevi, whose languages are the focus of this project. However, CRIT is also home to Hopis and Navajos who settled in the area shortly after World War II. Chemehuevi is a Southern Numic language of the Shoshonean branch of the Uto-Aztecan family,² with three to five fluent/semi-fluent speakers remaining. Mohave is a Yuman language of the Hokan language family, with approximately thirty remaining fluent speakers. There may be additional speakers of Chemehuevi on the Chemehuevi Valley Reservation and of Mohave at Fort Mohave.

The first year of our project focused on Chemehuevi due to the urgency indicated by the number of remaining speakers. Previous work on Chemehuevi is quite sparse and is represented in the unpublished field notes of well-known linguistic fieldworker John P. Harrington and his field assistant Carobeth Laird (1919–1920) and in the published works of A. L. Kroeber (e.g., 1925), Carobeth Laird (e.g., 1976), Pamela Munro (e.g., 1978), and Margaret Press (e.g., 1979). Other related work that informed this project and provided some direction for initial language documentation includes Major's (1969) collection of oral history with Chemehuevi speakers, in the form of word lists, narratives, songs, and stories in both English and the native language.

As our project entered its second year, Mohave was added. Mohave, a Yuman language of the Hokan language family, has received more linguistic attention, primarily represented by the published work of Judith Crawford (e.g., 1978) and Pamela Munro (e.g., 1976, 1992) and the unpublished field notes of John P. Harrington (1910–1920).

While the above work documents lexical items and many traditional narratives, there has been little work that documents naturally occurring conversation or interaction. Neither language has been the subject of formal linguistic study since the late 1970s. We are acutely aware that the definition of language documentation at this time needs to go far beyond a basic description of either language. Himmelmann (1998: 166) notes that, “the aim of language documentation is to provide a comprehensive record of the linguistic practices characteristic of a given speech community” (as quoted in Foley 2003: 83). We are mindful that the training of community members needs to specifically take a broad approach to language documentation that includes all genres of language — not just a lexically defined corpus and an accumulation of narrative, but a comprehensive attempt to identify the language in a wide range of contexts, to collect samples of all genres of language, and to factor in ethnographic considerations related to language use. This approach is successfully defined by Woodbury (2003: 35–51) and also by Foley (2003: 86), the latter of whom argues for a linguistically “thick description” (as per Geertz 1973), advising the fieldworker to “stay close to the full range of data, all register and genre types; avoid differential evaluation of some text types over others, but search out the native estimations and their rationales for such . . . and when developing a description on the basis of these data, be prepared for inconsistencies and contradictions.”

2. The project framework

The framework for this project parallels discussions in the work of Furbee and Stanley (2002), Rice (2006), and Hill (2006). While Furbee and Stanley (2002) have proposed a model for collaborative work related to language revitalization using community language “curators” (2002: 118), we are working toward a model that will support collaborative projects aimed at language documentation. The ethical stance of our work outlines an *empowerment framework*, similar to that discussed at length by Rice, who proposes (2006: 132) that, “. . . work is on the language, for the speakers, and with the speakers, taking into account the knowledge that the speakers bring and their goals and aspirations in the work.” Central to this framework is the notion that, “. . . a linguist has a debt to the communities in which he or she works, and must spend a certain amount of time doing practical work at the behest of the community in addition to carrying out fieldwork to meet his or her personal goals” (2006: 133). Our work also aims to foster a broad definition of language documentation that is inclusive of ethnographic considerations (Franchetto 2006; Hill 2006; Mosel 2006).

Although we have carefully specified that we are working toward a model for collaborative language documentation within indigenous communities in North America, we also want to appeal to those who are working with language documentation in community contexts worldwide. We recognize however that this type of fieldwork being done in other parts of the world does not bring with it the same historical and cultural context as does work done in North America. The long North American history of use and sometimes abuse by outside researchers has made the issue of establishing and maintaining good relationships paramount for all community-based projects where outside researchers are involved. This politically charged history colors all work exchanges that take place between outsiders and tribal communities. As Brayboy and Deyhle (2000: 166) relate, “Studying and researching issues in American Indian communities from either the ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ are always framed from an ethno-historical set of relations between and among Indians and Whites — relationships that are politicized and cannot be viewed in a distant manner.” This complex backdrop leads Rice (2006: 124) to note that, “I find that in discussion with linguists who work, say, in Africa and those who work in North America, we often have different senses of what our full range of responsibilities are.” Still, she is also careful to note, and we agree, that, “. . . not even North America can be conceived of in a monolithic way . . . because each community has its own unique background and future goals” (2006: 124). However, we feel that the strong demands

on researchers working in North America should set an ethical standard of accountability to the community that can be replicated elsewhere.

3. The project design: collaborative fieldwork

The project design rested on having a clearly defined and well-established working relationship with the community. Several prior projects set the stage for this relationship and laid the groundwork for the present work. Two of these projects developed technology training to support both Mohave and Chemehuevi in the CRIT community and elsewhere (Penfield 2002; Penfield et al. 2004). They offered training both at CRIT and at the University of Arizona for community members. Another ongoing project drew on existing documentation to compile lexical items for Chemehuevi using a community-authorized orthography. The compilation of lexical items has resulted in a framework for an XML-based Online Chemehuevi Language Database (Nelson et al. 2004; Tucker et al. 2006). This continually growing database contains a Chemehuevi-to-English and English-to-Chemehuevi dictionary, audio examples of words and phrases, traditional stories, and personal narratives, all in Chemehuevi. These preceding projects provided a context for expanding on the relationship between members of the CRIT community and linguistic researchers and contributed to creating a firm foundation for the current project.

We began by developing a project plan, which had the following overall goals:

1. To provide training for team members in data collection and language documentation using both digital video and audio equipment, following the known “best practices” for archiving digital material, and training in community ethno-history and protocols.
2. To conduct fieldwork (i) as a team where both groups are working together to accomplish specific goals and (ii) individually by staying in touch with other team members online using the new technology represented by the Online Language Environment (OLE) board,³ which allows users to interact in an asynchronous online environment via Web cams.
3. To use the collected data to increase the lexical database for electronic dictionaries of both languages and expand on the existing linguistic analysis for these languages.
4. To make a corpus of text, audio, and video materials and make a portion of the materials available on the Web.

5. To further the pedagogical goals set by the tribes for language revitalization.
6. To develop a handbook for indigenous communities focused on language documentation.
7. To work, in concert, learning from each other, establishing a model for indigenous communities related to the public use of digital databases and archives.

The central concept of the project was to create a language documentation team, some of whom were university based and some community based. The project was designed from the outset to balance the workload and responsibilities. The central reason for placing research responsibilities with community members is well stated by Furbee and Stanley (2002: 114), who note that “. . . chief stakeholders for a heritage language are its native speakers and their descendants, those persons have both primary claim to the language and primary responsibility for determining its future.”

Our concept of creating a research team builds on what Rice (2006: 144) calls “. . . a team model, where the linguist and speakers work together, each contributing their expertise.” We built a university-based team consisting of an applied linguist with a long community association, a phonetician, and a syntactician. The tribal team members were also carefully chosen: two Chemehuevi collaborators,⁴ one a fluent speaker and one a community language advocate (and a semi-speaker), and two Mohave collaborators, one the tribal librarian and archivist and the other a technician who trains tribal members in computer use; both are semi-speakers who are interested in revitalization of the language. Thus, each person involved brought something unique and special to the project.

We outlined the goals for both community and university parts of the team. The community team members (i) actively collect data, (ii) train university participants in community ethno-history and protocols, (iii) learn basic descriptive linguistics, and (iv) establish protocols for access to archived materials. The university team members (i) train community team members in various issues related to documentation and descriptive linguistics, (ii) learn about community protocols, (iii) compile a corpus of all collected data, and (iv) perform electronic formatting and archiving of material.

Below we offer general recommendations, recognizing fully that the specifics for any individual community may differ considerably.

4. Toward a model for collaborative projects in language documentation

Here we offer a set of ten recommendations that ultimately help us to define our guidelines for the “best practices” (or as Aristar-Dry and Simons [2006] note, “Good, better and best practices”) for community-based language documentation projects. We would like to emphasize that the recommendations offered below are idealized goals and may not be fully realizable in the context of specific projects. Collaborative projects represent a positive step in passing control of language materials and language work back to the community where most feel it belongs. In many ways, such projects are the bridges that are restoring community control over their own languages but doing so in a way that ensures that the appropriate expertise to carry out the work is also in place. Our general recommendations are as follows:

4.1. *Recommendation no. 1: have a plan, but not an agenda*

Those considering a collaborative project need to begin with a general plan; a focused agenda may invite problems. Having a specific agenda does not take into account the frequent complexities encountered in community-based planning. Often outside researchers are unaware of circumstances that may exist at the community level, for instance:

- There may be one or more groups with distinct language, culture, and political differences.
- There may be long-standing family differences that make collaborations between tribal members difficult.
- There may be different attitudes toward what community members perceive as “language documentation,” “language revitalization,” “linguistics,” or “linguists”.
- Language ideologies related to saving the languages may vary; community attitudes toward language education are often shaped by memories of English-only boarding schools and other negative language experiences.

These circumstances, and others, mean that a plan, not an agenda, is in order. Over time the situation may change and dictate changes in your plans; flexibility will benefit the team in the long term.

4.2. *Recommendation no. 2: get permissions*

Resolve to be ethical on all levels. Begin by seeking permission at the highest level. Rice (2006: 140) writes, “Ethical behaviour towards com-

munities involves seeking permission from the relevant body within the community, ensuring that this body understands the research, seeking guidance from them as to rates of pay and the like, and working out issues concerning ownership of material.” In North American indigenous communities, the highest level is the tribal council.

We recommend getting permissions for work long before the work actually begins. Be aware that a number of communities now have their own Institutional Review Board, structured in a way similar to most university boards that designate the required permissions for all research involving human subjects. For example, the Tohono O’odham Nation has recently established its own Institutional Review Board for research (Ofelia Zepeda p.c., 2006). Getting permissions from the recognized general governing body, as well as from individuals who might be directly involved in the work, is paramount.

We approached the CRIT council (the local governing body) with a sketch of the proposal *before* we wrote it and asked for a letter granting their permission to proceed with the application. We then sent a report to the CRIT council as soon as the grant was awarded, and we will present yearly reports, in person, as the fieldwork moves forward. Keeping the CRIT council and relevant committees informed benefits both the community and the research team.

Paying consultants and collaborators also requires permission — both from the university (human-subject issue) and from the community. Pay needs to be consistent with other projects that might be in existence. We have learned that there is not always an understanding in the community about what research grants can offer in terms of hourly wages and salaried positions. We also cleared the wage standards with the council before beginning.

4.3. *Recommendation no. 3: do your homework*

Part of the homework to be done before launching fieldwork is to be aware of all existing documentation and to be willing to spend the time searching for it in the various archives. Typically, this is done as part of a proposal development. However, in the first year of our project, many things were revealed that were new to us. As often happens, when we began work in the community we learned about materials that individual tribal members had in their possession and discovered other public sources and repositories. Much of the responsibility for determining the extent and type of existing documentation has fallen to the university team members. However, community members also have a stake in what

documentation is needed and their suggestions should be sought. We have also become acutely aware of the need to broaden the concept of what must be included in documenting a language — far beyond the collection of lexical items, text, or even conversation and discourse that we originally proposed.

Hill (2006: 113) makes it clear that “Documentary linguistics takes up a vision of the integration of the study of language structure, language use and the culture of language. Documentary linguistics demands integration. If we are to succeed in sensitive documentation, which by definition requires the deep involvement of communities, we must incorporate a cultural and ethnographic understanding of language into the very foundations of our research.” This calls for a much broader approach to documentation than some imagine.

Rather than advocating a loose inclusion of ethnographic data, we support the notion that Franchetto (2006: 183) puts forward: “Ethnographical information is a crucial component of any language documentation. If the wider goal is not simply to collect texts and a lexical database, but also to present and preserve the cultural heritage of the speech community, then ethnographical information must be linked to the linguistic data and its annotation and analysis.” This spells out the need to make ethnographic data an integral part of documentation and advocates for the use of digital formats to capture and link ethnographic and linguistic data (2006: 206). Such an approach requires a broader sense of data collection and needs to become an integral part of the two-way training described below.

4.4. *Recommendation no. 4: choose the team(s) carefully*

Because training is an integral part of community collaborations, it is also extremely important that the planning team, both linguists and community members, be carefully chosen in terms of their expertise with language, their ability to work within the community and with outsiders, their commitment and willingness to expand their own ideas and the ideas of others about language education. Team building is always a challenge, whether in the university or in the community. Some of the challenges may surface in terms of insufficient interest in the language from the university or community members and selection of team members who will remain stable for the duration of the project. Choosing the team requires a principal investigator who has good rapport with and detailed knowledge of the community on the one hand, and the ability to assess the skills of potential participating researchers on the other hand. It also requires

community members who have a good understanding about how to work with outsiders. Our collaborative team is comprised of six core individuals, each chosen for their specific expertise. Our work also incorporates language consultants as they are available.

4.5. *Recommendation no. 5: create a community-defined plan as a team*

The initial plan may need to be reconceived once the team is in place. Conceptualizing the specifics of the project is best accomplished if it is a venture shared by all of the team members. Conceptualizing the project as a team means: (i) identifying the community and individual goals held by the team, (ii) discussing how documentation might support those goals, (iii) laying out a plan of how to achieve the goals, (iv) determining which members of the team will be involved in which parts of the plan, (v) reviewing plans and following through with them.

If a community has a specified goal of revitalization, then the documentation that takes place can be focused in that direction. For example, one of the desired outcomes might be an interactive dictionary containing audio samples of lexical items that is user-friendly for language learners. Documentation can then focus on collecting digital word lists and creating accompanying sound files. Recalling *recommendation no. 3*, it is important to find out ethnographic information relating to the lexical items. This ethnographic information may provide a non-alphabetic method to sort a dictionary that would be more intuitive to the language community. Collaboration and discussion are vital at this point in the process — community goals need to be carefully articulated and linguists can be instrumental in helping to define what it takes to accomplish those goals.

It is important for the team members to regularly review their work and to address any new problems or concerns that may have arisen out of the work that has occurred thus far. This review process will allow the team members to identify progress that has been made and also identify areas that need more focused attention.

4.6. *Recommendation no. 6: plan to spend time in the community*

One of the challenges of our project is that the community and university participants are separated geographically. We have found that one of most important aspects of working together successfully is spending time in the community, especially at the beginning of the project. We are for-

fortunate that some members of our team have been working together for many years and already have established working relationships based on trust, so that new members of the team have been able to use this as a platform to establish their own relationships.

While staying in close contact is necessary for working on most collaborative projects, it is not always possible for many reasons; members of the team have many other responsibilities beyond language work. Thus far, contact for our project has been maintained through frequent phone calls, e-mails, and monthly on-site visits.

We have found that distance communication can reduce time and space restrictions. In our second year, we are implementing the use of some new technology for this purpose. The OLE technology, recently developed at the University of Arizona, allows for asynchronous communication using voice, video, and text. Technology, where available, can enhance both documentation and revitalization as indicated by a number of relevant Web sites.⁵

4.7. *Recommendation no. 7: provide two-way training*

An appropriate model for training in language documentation must advocate for training of both the tribal members and the linguists. While linguists bring with them a knowledge of the technical side of language documentation (an understanding of descriptive linguistics, language learning theory, preferred equipment, archiving tools and strategies), the tribal members are far more versed in the things that will make a project work within the community (political considerations, ethnographic information, appropriate language use, and an understanding of the speakers and the contexts in which they speak).

In our experience thus far, training — in both directions — has taken place in two venues: (i) large-group training sessions involving the whole team, which have taken place in the CRIT tribal library, and (ii) individual training sessions related to specific data collection activities, which have taken place in convenient and comfortable locations like a home or a park. For training purposes, we find that teaching documentation practices is best done by designing a set of discrete activities. Work toward an interactive dictionary illustrates this approach: it is a concrete single activity that allows an individual to focus and complete a needed part of the documentation process. For example, a member of our team who is a fluent Chemehuevi speaker is recording sound files to accompany dictionary entries. While linguists are necessarily involved these days with large-scale databases and electronic archiving, at the community level we

recommend a step-by-step approach that moves progressively forward via discrete, manageable, fundamental activities that support data collection.

4.8. *Recommendation no. 8: document in a way consistent with community language goals*

What counts as documentary adequacy from a community perspective? Certainly, both linguists and community members have some preconceived ideas of what constitutes documentation. If the community has a declared set of goals related to language revitalization, then the team needs to tailor its documentation practices to those goals. From a community perspective, documentation and revitalization are not discrete activities — they inform each other. Language revitalization is a stated goal of most North American language communities; therefore, best practices for documentation must embrace the goals of revitalization. Specifically, this might mean that conversational practices need to be documented so they can be later turned into instructional materials to enhance speaking ability.

4.9. *Recommendation no. 9: be a language advocate*

All members of the collaborative team take on the role of language advocates. Whether community members or collaborating linguists, the team members are mindful of the state of language endangerment, methods of language teaching, aspects of language acquisition, and more.

Being an advocate means being willing to talk about the language work and inform others whenever possible — inside and outside the community. Linguists, as advocates, are often the main sources for securing the funding needed to launch language projects; community members, as advocates, are usually the main source of attracting interested people to be part of the projects and garnering community support. In collaborative models, part of the two-way training should be devoted to discussing how each member of the team can fulfill their role as a language advocate.

Language advocates are language educators. Co-collaborators must understand and be ready to explain why collaboration works, what role the linguists have, what role community collaborators have, what is being accomplished, and what it will take to do more. We have found that there are still many misconceptions on the community level. While there is much talk at the university level about shifting paradigms in anthropol-

ogy and linguistics, these discussions have not yet reached most communities. Part of what co-collaborators must do as advocates is to bring these conversations and examples to the community and demonstrate — not just discuss — how the community can be empowered to take over its own language work.

4.10. *Recommendation no. 10: ask the community to establish the protocols for access and use*

Part of feeling empowerment comes when the community accepts the role of establishing the protocols for accessing and using language data. It is useful to remember that there are at least two audiences who will be interested in the data: the academic world and the community or related communities. The use of digital archiving allows team members to make the material available to both audiences quickly and efficiently. While this is a wonderful thing for sharing data with the academic world, some of the material collected may be of a sensitive nature to the community so that they would prefer that it only be made available to members of the community. This is why tribally determined protocols for access and use are of paramount importance, as is local availability of archived data.

5. Toward a working model for community partnerships

We use the ten recommendations discussed above as a framework to develop a working model of community partnerships for language documentation similar to that proposed by Furbee and Stanley (2002). We feel that the term “working model” captures the idea that no two situations are the same and adjustments will have to be made for different implementations. Some aspects of their model for language revitalization can be replicated for language documentation projects: (i) they sought one or more colleagues, (ii) prepared to provide some linguistics training to such people informally and provide long-term support, and (iii) committed themselves to give support for any indigenous language renewal efforts (without considering internal politics).

Our model does not include community collaborators as curators but as fellow researchers, and we do not engage in language revitalization activities but do advocate documentation that would support those activities if the community designates revitalization as a goal. As in Furbee and Stanley’s model, collaboration is defined by dividing the work responsibility between team members who they deem to be the “linguist-

collaborator” and the “tribe member curator-collaborator,” although the respective responsibilities will differ. Furbee and Stanley (2002: 122) note that their “curator-collaborator . . . ‘directs’ in matters of selection and curation of materials, dissemination of materials, and selection of appropriate means of teaching the language to tribe members who will have different goals for themselves with respect to language learning — some tribe members will seek true fluency, while others will want culturally important keywords and phrases but not conversational skills, for example.” They add that the curator usually has some degree of speaking ability and must acquire in addition “. . . enough linguistic analysis to use information from articles and books and to interact with colleagues in professional venues” (2002: 123). Because our model focuses on language documentation and not revitalization, we have chosen to call our collaborators “fellow researchers,” with duties differing considerably from the notion of “curator-collaborator” above.

In our model, the community collaborators are directly involved in the research project and may or may not be speakers of the language. They are all, however,

- language activists who are deeply committed to insuring the future of the language in any way they can;
- charged with receiving training that puts them in a position to actively document the language through their own research, and engaged in data collection and the organization of that data;
- learning the technology that supports documentation;
- involved in the recording of (ethno-)linguistic material whether or not they are themselves speakers;
- collecting data from tribal elders who are recognized as fluent speakers.

Some are becoming involved in the analysis of the data and are actively becoming practicing linguists themselves. Our goal is to establish a workable collaboration for the purposes of language documentation. We ultimately hope to shift the responsibility for further documentation and archiving of the two languages to community members, who will have been well trained through the collaborative process.

In the end, we are still considering what constitutes best practices for documenting languages in the community context. The best practices for this type of work, we suggest, will always depend on how our recommendations play out in any given context. We do not claim to be providing a fool-proof blueprint as to how such projects are conceived and actually implemented. We are confident in claiming that best practices will go far beyond just knowing how to collect quality linguistic data and will go

into the realm which Hill (2006) so clearly defines as the broader inclusive goal of ethnography related to language documentation.

We can sum up by stating that the best practices must include: (i) flexible plans, (ii) necessary permissions, (iii) survey of any existing documentation and any language planning to date, (iv) collaboration, (v) constant interaction both in person and at a distance, (vi) ongoing training of all team members, (vii) data collection with ethnographic considerations in mind, (viii) documentation with an eye toward revitalization, (ix) language advocacy, and (x) community-determined protocols for access and use of the data.

6. Conclusion

It is our goal that this work will stimulate discussion from communities and researchers pursuing similar documentation projects. The recommendations included here have been gleaned from an intensive project in a multifaceted indigenous community and are aimed at contributing to a growing body of work describing collaborative research in documentation. It is our hope that this working model will be a benefit and a guide to others who may adapt it for use in their various situations.

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Notes

1. NSF award number 0505209.
2. In the older literature (e.g., Kroeber 1925), the Numic branch is referred to as “Plateau Shoshonean,” part of which is the Ute-Chemehuevi branch (Ute, Chemehuevi/Southern Paiute, and Kawaiisu). A more recent classification, introduced by Lamb (1964), identifies Numic as one of the eight subfamilies of Uto-Aztec and differentiates between Western, Central, and Southern Numic (Southern Paiute and Kawaiisu). Recently, Miller et al. (2005: 414) use the term “Colorado River Numic” as a cover term for Chemehuevi, Southern Ute, and Ute, which they claim are mutually intelligible but are “separated by different cultural practices and settlement patterns.”
3. Online Language Environment (www.ole.arizona.edu).
4. Rice (2006) discusses the choice and implications of different terms “informant,” “teacher,” “collaborator” as used in reference to community participants.
5. Some Web sites that support both revitalization and documentation include: Technology-enhanced language revitalization (<http://projects.ltc.arizona.edu/gates/TELR/>); E-MELD, Electronic Metadata for Endangered Language Documentation (<http://emeld.org/index.cfm>); OLAC, Open Language Archives Community (<http://>

www.language-archives.org/); AILLA, Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America (<http://www.ailla.utexas.org/site/welcome.html>).

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