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## Losing a Vital Voice: Grief and Language Work

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Working with speakers of endangered languages often involves developing a deep rapport with the eldest members of a community. These relationships present unique challenges that include navigating great losses – not only of the language of study, but, more profoundly, the attendant death of its speakers. This essay is motivated by the recognition that the death of close consultants is inherent in work with endangered languages. It draws on case study examples to examine the emotional components of language work, specifically grief and loss, from both personal and professional perspectives. Our focus is on two key issues. The first is as a methodological issue that arises for those operating under a collaborative model of language work where investment by the community and participatory research by the fieldworker is the norm. The second is as a training issue involving our responsibilities to those we mentor in understanding the reality of close work with speakers, particularly of endangered languages. This reality includes careful consideration of their families and communities. Our hope is that this essay may serve as a foundation upon which a more thorough consideration of methodological issues and preparation through honest and open approaches to training can be constructed.

**1. Introduction**<sup>1</sup> Working with speakers of languages that are threatened often involves developing a rapport with the eldest members of a community and spending a great deal of time with them. These relationships present the outsider researcher with challenges that are unique to this type of work. In addition to basic social interaction, the undertaking typically involves navigating great losses – not only of the language of study, but the attendant death of its speakers. This essay examines the emotional component of language work, specifically grief and loss, from both personal and professional perspectives. We focus our discussion on two interrelated themes. First, as a methodological issue, we examine how the experience of grief and loss in linguistic field research with speakers of endangered languages interacts with community-collaborative fieldwork models. Secondly, as a training issue, we ask how

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<sup>1</sup>Words are inadequate to the task of expressing our gratitude to the many speakers of endangered languages of the Americas with whom it has been our honor to work. We are grateful for the relationships we have been fortunate enough to build and hope that our efforts in crafting this essay serve primarily to honor them. We are also indebted to the two anonymous reviewers whose thoughtful suggestions have improved this work immeasurably. Any errors, of either omission or interpretation, are ours alone.

we, as established linguists, can better prepare those we mentor for the inevitable pain of loss that comes with the death of a trusted partner in language work and for its impact on the future of that work. In both cases, we provide case study examples from our own work to frame the discussion.

Outside the discipline of linguistics, particularly in anthropology, both fieldwork models and training guides address the researcher's emotional state as a part of the methodological fabric of field research (Rosaldo 1993; Behar 1996; Hedicán 2006; Throop 2010; Henry 2012). Reflexive consideration of researcher grief has been addressed in print at least since Rosaldo's (1993) seminal work. In an exploration that is at once deeply personal and profoundly moving, he relates his own grief at his wife's death in the field to his subjects' bereavement practices. It was only after experiencing his own great loss that he was able to fully understand the depth of his subjects' anger in grief. Rosaldo (1993) laid a foundation for later explorations of a researcher's grief and emotional responses in participant observation in anthropological field research (Behar 1996; Hedicán 2006). Furthermore, his work led to a shift in the ways knowledge is constructed in anthropological research. Since interpretation of events is part and parcel of anthropological work, reasons for examining one's own responses are more transparent. To be a participant observer at the funeral of a community member that one has spent a great deal of time with assumes some sort of emotional response on the part of the researcher that affects the interpretation of events. The personal and the professional intersect in ways that may then be explored in print and used in training. As Behar (1996:169) notes, we should not ignore "the key role that the position of the observer plays in social [indeed, linguistic, TT] analysis."

By contrast, in field linguistics with endangered languages, and especially in the training of younger scholars, there is less transparency about the emotionally taxing parts of the work. The stresses and emotional aspects of field research receive a light touch in even the most comprehensive recent works (Chelliah & de Reuse 2011; Austin & Sallabank 2011; Thieberger 2012). There have, however, been some examinations of the researcher's role in community-collaborative field research that assume more intimate relationships with speakers (Dobrin 2006; Bower 2008) with occasional discussion of expectations (see, for example, RNLD on personal relationships: <http://www.rnld.org/node/226>). Additionally, some sources address the feelings of loneliness, isolation, and inadequacy that may accompany the field experience (Macaulay 2004; 2012),<sup>2</sup> as well as the stress of transition into and out of the field situation by outsider linguists (Dobrin 2006), all of which play a significant role in shaping the experience of language work. Bower (2008) makes explicit mention of the complex relationships that develop between linguistic fieldworker and language consultant and the feelings of guilt and depression that often accompany the death of an elderly speaker of the language of study. Likewise, Dobrin & Berson (2011) make at least passing mention of the "experience of personal loss as one's elderly consultants and friends pass away," but mainly in the context of a wider discussion of the distribution of linguistic and cultural knowledge in a speech community – a kind

<sup>2</sup>In developing this essay, we found Macaulay's and Bower's work to be especially valuable.

of reassurance that the sources of knowledge at the researcher's disposal are varied. Although they are often an unavoidable part of working with speakers of endangered languages, the specific subjects of grief and loss remain largely unexamined.

We problematize the experience of death in the field in two interrelated ways. One is as a methodological issue that arises for those operating under collaborative models (Yamada 2007; 2010;<sup>3</sup> Czaykowska-Higgins 2009; Leonard & Haynes 2010; Rice 2010) where investment by the community and a long-term commitment by the field-worker are the norm. Through the lens of community-collaborative field research, we focus on the management of personal and professional aspects of loss, the researcher's relationship to the circle of bereavement, and questions raised regarding proper, and ethical, use of data and recordings. Secondly, we address grief and loss as a training issue involving the responsibilities we bear to those we mentor in understanding the reality of close work with elderly speakers, particularly of endangered languages. Our foci in training include: providing adequate preparation, managing responsibility – to the language, community, and profession – in a way that can be borne through loss, and understanding and fulfilling expectations held by the community with regard to participation in death traditions.

Necessarily reflexive, this essay uses case study examples from our own fieldwork that illustrate both our personal and professional perspectives. In using the phrase *personal and professional*, we implicate an “outsider” perspective that we hope will not be unwelcome. The phrase is meant to implicate an order of importance, since, in our view, the professional is subordinate to the personal when it comes to loss as we discuss here.

We each have several years of experience working with members of communities whose heritage languages are endangered. Thornes began working with members of the Klamath Tribes of south-central Oregon in 1994 and the Burns Paiute Tribe of eastern Oregon in 1997. His work has since included speakers from four additional Northern Paiute and Bannock heritage language communities. Sapién has been doing language work with members of the Kari'nja speaking community of Konomerume, Suriname since 2005. Prior to that, she had served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the community for three years. We hope our descriptions of personal examples humanize our discussion in a way that is respectful of the community members with whom it has been our privilege to work. Throughout the essay, we indicate when one or the other of us is writing of his or her own individual experiences. Otherwise, we write as a team and refer to ourselves as “we.”

**1.1 Language Work, Communities, and Collaboration** The term *language work* in our title is meant to be inclusive of traditional descriptive linguistic fieldwork with speakers of endangered languages, as well as language documentation, language maintenance and conservation efforts, language revitalization, and other forms of language activism. Additionally, the support of these and other programs involving speakers, researchers, teachers, learners, and other stakeholders from within and outside the heritage language community fall under the umbrella of language work. *Com-*

<sup>3</sup>Sapién published previously as Yamada.

*munity*, here, refers to a social group that shares a common cultural heritage and/or goals and aspirations for the group as a whole. No community is homogeneous, and any group of people can be expected to disagree. However, we use community here as a shorthand to delineate the different groups of people we work with. As academic researchers, we navigate multiple communities as both insiders and outsiders. As insider members of the academic community, we are expected to conform to particular norms and standards of behavior. As outsiders to the communities with whom we conduct fieldwork, expectations that apply to insiders may or may not apply to us.

Stebbins (2012) articulates a useful framework for understanding the three main communities in which an academic field linguist operates: the academic community, the speech community, and a shared “third space” occupied by members of both. She describes the ways in which knowledge is constructed and disseminated in each community and the sometimes competing identities a linguist may be expected to enact in each. In our experience, the purportedly unbiased knowledge sharing in the academic community comes with an unspoken expectation that unbiased equals rational or unemotional. As insider members of this community, we have both felt pressure to subjugate our emotional responses for fear of having our scientific objectivity called into question. Given the deeply personal relationships we have developed with speech community members, we find ourselves discouraged, in most academic contexts, from acknowledging to other academics the emotional complexity of our field research. As outsiders to the speech communities with whom we work, we have experienced the tension between having an abiding understanding of the norms of behavior expected of insiders and our own status as outsiders. In both cases, we have found that community-collaborative models, with their expectations for engagement, are useful in navigating the many issues that arise when a trusted partner in language work dies.

Traditionally, the division between field research for academic description and more community-oriented work, such as support for revitalization, was more rigidly defined, but more recent approaches to fieldwork with endangered language communities assume a more collaborative stance that often blurs the line between “researcher” and “subject.” Hale et al. (1992) served as a clarion call to linguists working with speakers of endangered languages and led to the development of more community-responsive approaches to field research. Cameron et al. (1992; 1997), with their empowerment model, defined as sociolinguistic research *with* speech community members, served as a springboard to many more recent collaborative approaches. Several case studies illustrate the ways in which outsider academics have collaborated with speech community members to document, describe, and preserve their endangered heritage languages (Wilkins 1992; Yamada 2007; 2014; Yamada et al. 2008; Vallejos 2014). These form the background for recent work articulating models of community-collaborative linguistic field research (Stebbins 2003; Penfield et al. 2008; Wilkins 1992; Czaykowska-Higgins 2009; Florey 2004; Grinevald 1998; Yamada 2007; 2010; Rice 2006; Leonard & Haynes 2010; Furbee & Stanley 2002).

Most models share the goal of meeting the needs of a variety of stakeholders in language work through projects that are mutually determined and of balanced mu-

tual benefit. Rice (2006) describes ways of meeting these varied needs in a way that is responsible, reciprocal, and respectful. Since building effective collaborative partnerships depends on developing trusting relationships, most models also assume a long-term commitment by the outsider academic to working with members of a particular community. In communities whose heritage languages are endangered, the lasting effects of colonization are often manifest in a justified mistrust of outsiders. Having patience and building trust over the long term is particularly important in communities where outsiders have at best been passively exploitative, and at worst been overtly damaging. In §3.1, we raise the issue of the so-called “exhausted community” (Bown 2008) and the vital importance of learning as much as possible about the historical traumas that have shaped the community and its members, not only through secondary research, but also through listening and sensitive, respectful observation.

Although the establishment of relationships with community members is assumed in collaborative models of engagement, there is little discussion of the emotional investment required of both researchers and the community members with whom they work. The loss we focus upon here is that of long-time collaborators, most typically elderly speakers, in a project involving an endangered language. That said, our emerging framework could apply to experiences of grief and loss in a variety of collaborative research situations. Our general, if not intentional, focus on elderly speakers of highly endangered or threatened languages typifies a context where grief and loss seem most inevitable. Despite this inevitability, few published sources engage specifically with the issue of grief – whether in the articulation of a fieldwork model or as a component of a training program. In the next §, we provide some background, including some of our personal motivations for exploring the issues of grief and loss in language work.

**1.2 Background** I (Thornes) recall the moment, more than a dozen years ago now, when I stopped by the office of one member of my dissertation committee for an update on the draft of another chapter. He asked me how things were going in a kind of offhand way, and I, recently returned from a trip to a reservation community in eastern Oregon, replied, “I had no idea I would be attending so many funerals when I got into this field.” Therein resides a major rationale for developing an essay on the subject of grief and loss in endangered language work. Ten years earlier, as a student early in my graduate career, embarking on what would become first my MA, then my PhD work (Thornes 1996; 2003), I hadn’t really given much thought to the reality that my first field experience, working with a kind and incredibly patient gentleman of 85 – the last known speaker of the Yahooskin dialect of Northern Paiute – would end with his death two years later.

In the acknowledgements section of my master’s thesis, I wrote of him, “I am still only beginning to realize how profoundly he has affected my life (Thornes 1996:vi).” The commencement of that realization visits me still, and much of my personal and professional life, I can say without exaggeration, is the direct result not just of Mr.

Weiser's appearance early in my career as a linguist, but also of his absence today and in the intervening decades.

I (Sapién) was grieving the loss of another Kari'nja elder when my co-author (Thornes) recounted his musing about funerals and work with speakers of endangered languages. His words resonated with me because I, too, had not realized when I began working with Kari'nja speakers in Suriname how frequently I would be experiencing the grief of loss. Prior to that moment, I had felt alone in my mourning. It seemed disrespectful somehow to grieve openly among members of the Konomerume community when the pain of their losses seemed so much more profound than my own. Furthermore, my interest in the language was as an outsider academic, not as a speaker or heritage learner. It also seemed inappropriate to share the deeply emotional aspects of this type of work among my colleagues in the US because our professional relationships and status as scientists demanded a certain level of distance and detachment. And so, I would mourn alone, only occasionally letting the sadness seep out around the edges.

When my co-author shared his own experiences with grief and loss, it was a revelation. We shared comfort in the recognition that we were not alone and we expressed sadness that our experiences were far more common than either of us had ever realized. In 2010, we had the good fortune of working together as instructors at the Institute on Field Linguistics and Language Documentation (InField) at the University of Oregon. My co-author happened to be acquainted with a local grief counselor and suggested we ask her to lead a supplemental session on death and loss in the context of endangered languages work. Despite being scheduled outside of the regular sessions, this workshop was the best attended of the institute. Participants represented a wide range of experiences, including students, language consultants, and both early and late career academics. Sitting among colleagues and friends from around the world, each sharing the grief of loss, was a profoundly moving experience. It was as though each person present had been grieving in secret, afraid to openly share the emotional aspects of this work.

Despite its success in 2010, the grief workshop was never replicated at later iterations of InField (renamed CoLang in 2012), and many of the issues raised remain unexplored, at least in print. We suggest here that the consequence, or rather, inevitability, of experiencing firsthand the loss of speakers with whom one has developed relationships, ought to be acknowledged and addressed in order to better navigate the personal and professional impact of loss on documentary language work in general.

Further, we discuss these issues as they relate to the preparation and training of budding field linguists. For newcomers to work on endangered languages, we provide the intellectual space for them to either 1) consider these issues seriously as they embark on a career path that involves intimate and emotionally taxing work, often with speakers who are elderly and perhaps even frail, or 2) honestly reconsider their choice of dissertation project based upon their professional goals or personal make-up. Both choices are equally respectable. Our field provides ample room for all sorts of approaches to and perspectives on language. Here, our point is not to be overly

discouraging. The fact of the matter is, humans are quite resilient in the face of tragic or otherwise emotionally charged experiences, and so there is also, in our view, plenty of reason to be confident in one's ability to navigate the issues and processes we explore here. A key motivation for exploring our experiences and sharing them lies in acknowledging that most, if not all, who do language work in communities whose language is endangered have or will experience loss. Beyond that, we hope that those who may be taking up a project working in such a community are, if not prepared, at least aware of the inevitability of the experience of grief and loss, however that manifests itself at an individual level.

We do not claim to speak for the experiences of other professionals or students in the field who conduct language work, nor do we claim to express in any way the sentiments, in depth or breadth, of those experiencing loss most acutely – namely, the members of heritage language communities who have lost elders and the families involved. For the former, we hope only that this essay will ring familiar, and in so doing that some measure of relief will accompany that recognition. For the latter, we have little to say or predictably offer. In our varied experiences, we simply stand in awe of the capacities of the communities in which we have worked to absorb loss and to find the strength in one another, and in tradition, to move beyond it.

**2. Methodological issues** Conducting a language documentation project often requires that the researcher enter into complex, multi-faceted relationships with the eldest members of a community. From a methodological perspective, an adequate elaboration of a community-collaborative approach would explore the inevitability of the experience of grief and loss. In the subsections that follow, we examine three compelling issues through the lens of community-collaborative models of linguistic field research. In §2.1, we discuss the management of the overlap between professional decorum and personal grief. Our focus for §2.2 is the researcher's relationship to the circle of bereavement. This includes individual relationships with and responsibilities to family members of an elder who has passed on and the “right” of the researcher to grieve openly. Finally, §2.3 is devoted to consideration of the appropriate and ethical use and management of data and recordings after a speaker has died. We examine each of these issues through the lens of community collaboration with a goal of articulating a more comprehensive model of engagement.

**2.1 Management of personal and professional aspects of loss** Nowhere in our discipline does the intersection of our personal and professional lives appear more entwined than when faced with the death of a longtime collaborator, supporter, advocate, teacher, and friend. Collaborative linguistic field research could well be the most social of the social sciences. Most community-collaborative methodologies call for long-term commitment on the part of all stakeholders, which necessitates a level of participation on the part of the outsider researcher that is unusual in other types of fieldwork. As such, personal and professional losses in this context almost always end up crossing paths. If one is really experiencing a deep level of participation, the overlap between the personal and the professional need not be ignored in an effort



to maintain scientific distance. Rather, the question becomes one of how to navigate both the personal and professional impacts of these experiences.

“The field,” for me (Sapién), is a village in Suriname that was my home for three years as a Peace Corps Volunteer from 1995–1998. At the request of community members, my then-spouse and I had extended our initial 2-year commitment to a third year, during which I became pregnant. Although I was medically evacuated 37 weeks into the pregnancy, many community members felt a special connection to my son because he was, they say, made in Suriname.

When I began working on the language in 2005, elders frequently asked after my family, and especially my son, whom they had nicknamed *Kua’ji* while I was pregnant with him. “Tante” was one such person. A well-respected leader in the community, she had been a constant presence during my time as a Peace Corps Volunteer, and was an early and enthusiastic partner in language work. When other elders suggested we start a revitalization project that would include a formal teaching component for young adults, Tante was among the first to volunteer to teach her native language. She told me she had done really well in school when she was young, and had always wanted to be a teacher. However, her parents had not been able to pay for her to continue her schooling, so they gave her a husband instead. Discussing teaching for the Kari’nja language program, she said, “I can’t believe I am getting a second chance to be a teacher now, as a grandmother. It is my dream come true” (Tante, p.c.). She was a highly motivated and dedicated teacher who connected easily with students. In addition, hers is a prominent voice in documentary recordings of aspects of the language in use.

After I found out, by telephone, that Tante had died suddenly, it was months before I could again listen to her voice. Seeing her code in the texts can still elicit tears. She had a rough-hewn persona, but was quick to smile. Her voice and her laughter echo through many of the recordings I have of spoken Kari’nja. I think about her status in the community and cannot begin to fathom the pain her family members experienced in her passing. Although my dissertation was dedicated to her (Yamada 2010:x), it is only now, years after her death, that I am able to reflect on my experience of grief at her loss as it relates to linguistic field research.

My experiences in Konomerume make salient the fact that I work *with people* in addition to *on a language*. I have spent a great deal of time with elder speakers listening to their stories, laughing at their jokes, and lamenting about the younger generation’s shift away from Kari’nja. I have had the privilege of working with different generations of speakers and feel deeply grateful for their patience with me. Although our motivations differ, the people I work with and I share mutual goals of better understanding how the language works and expanding its domains of use. In addition, we share a passionate commitment to the speech community – them as insider members, me as an outsider academic with long-term ties. We are engaged in this work together as partners rather than as researchers/subjects.

The deeply personal ways in which I write about community members has occasionally caused other scholars to call into question my scientific objectivity. I recognize that I am not at all objective when it comes to *community members* and their

struggles. However, my commitment to them demands that my analyses and representations of the *language* be accurate and scientifically sound. The overlap between the personal and the professional contributes to my analyses in positive ways in that I am able to view the language in its most relevant context – deeply embedded in the special rituals and everyday traditions of its speakers. That is not to say that maintaining scientific detachment is always easy. In fact, I am often taken aback by the intrusion of the personal into the professional. However, acknowledging this allows me to take the time I need to honor and experience my personal emotional reactions and thereby understand their potential to influence my professional analyses of the language. In so doing, I ensure more comprehensive analyses that are enriched by their proper contextualization in cultural practices. The personal and professional aspects of loss discussed in this section are complicated by the intense and complex relationships that develop between speakers and academics engaged in collaborative projects. Relationships are the topic of the next section.

**2.2 Relationships and circle of bereavement** I (Sapién) have a strong negative emotional reaction to accounts of languages with no currently living speakers that begin, “The language became extinct in...” My reaction is fueled by the sense that, by foregrounding *the language* in a passive voice construction, it is framed as more important than *the people* who are connected to it. There must be people for whom that so-called “extinct” language represents a connection to heritage and culture who are profoundly affected by the death of the last living first-language speaker. And what of that “last” speaker?<sup>4</sup> What were they like? Who were they in their community? Who is mourning their death?

Community-collaborative language work, and the long-term commitment it requires, provides the outsider researcher with a unique perspective on and connection to the language and, especially, its speakers. Having worked in close collaboration with some of those “last” speakers, I know their stories and have lasting relationships with their family members. I do not frame the situation as “the language becoming extinct,” but rather the loss of people whose families I continue to be close to.

Long before Tante and I began working together on the language, her mother had tried to teach me some Kari’nja while I was still living in the community as a Peace Corps Volunteer. At the time, elder native speakers rarely used the language outside the presence of other elders. Her willingness to teach me the language was tempered by her indignation when I asked the same question more than once. “That’s how elders are,” her granddaughter explained. “If you don’t get it right the first time, that’s your problem, not theirs. They don’t give you a second chance.” And we both laughed.

My lessons with Tante’s mother ended abruptly with the elder woman’s death. By that time, my then-spouse and I had lived in the community for over two years

<sup>4</sup>Framing language shift in terms of death and extinction is problematic for a number of reasons, hence “last” is in quotation marks here. A full exploration of issues is outside the scope of this article. Evans (2001) is a particularly good resource for further discussion of, among other things, the felicity of the phrase “last speaker.”

and were well acquainted with many village customs. Word of her death came in the middle of the night, passed from family to family until the whole village was awake and assembled at the grandmother's house. I can still picture the way her braid lay against her shoulder when they carried her body out into her open-air living space, and the way the dim lamplight lent a surreal quality to the experience. We sat among her grieving family members as they bid her farewell by placing their hands, one-by-one, on her forehead. Although I would normally have been invited to say goodbye in the traditional way, the other grandmothers would not let me touch her because I was pregnant with *Kua'ji* and they did not want her spirit to do him harm. At the time, I never could have predicted that I would be mourning Tante's death a decade after her mother's.

After Tante died, one of her daughters called me to ask for money to purchase funeral clothes. She reminded me that Tante and I had been "like family," and one of my familial responsibilities was to share in the financial burden of her burial. I felt fortunate to be able to support the family in this way, but recognize that many scholars may have neither the resources nor inclination to do likewise in similar situations. Exploration of relative wealth between an outsider researcher and community members is outside the scope of this essay, but I include this anecdote because it provides a counterpoint to the next topic I discuss, that of the "right" to grieve openly.

My first trip back to the community after she died was in time for Tante's six-week ceremony. This is a part of the mourning process that occurs six weeks after burial. During the gathering afterward, one of Tante's children (the granddaughter who had laughed with me years earlier about elders' lack of patience) challenged me, "Why are you crying? You're the reason she died. She died because she was working too hard on your projects." Her words stung and I wanted to shout back, "What do you know? Your mother and grandmother both told me they wished you had spent more time learning the language from them." In addition, her mother had told me that working on language projects, and especially teaching, represented a long-abandoned dream realized for her. I knew that Tante's daughter was merely expressing the anger that accompanied her grief by lashing out at whomever was available, but her words nonetheless brought home the painful realization that my "like family" status was limited and my own grieving should be done in private. Although I had spent time with Tante in ways that her daughter had not, I had no special privilege here.

A community-collaborative methodological approach requires ongoing discussion of roles and responsibilities between the outsider researcher and members of the community. The tension between a request for funds that is framed as a familial obligation and a challenge to one's right to grieve openly highlights the need to be transparent in communicating our roles and responsibilities. When an elder with whom the academic has worked closely passes away, the outsider researcher may feel unsure of how to negotiate changing relationships with family members. Fortunately, community-collaborative methodologies provide a framework for navigating the shifting interpersonal terrain. Effective community-inclusive field research depends on building trusting relationships and establishing open lines of communication. Within this context, I was able to look to other elders with whom I had

developed a rapport for guidance and support. This would not have been possible had we not already established trust and mutual respect in the years prior to Tante's death.

**2.3 Use of data and recordings after a speaker's death** My (Sapién) connection to speakers and grief at their passing occasionally takes me by surprise. Recently, while working with my co-authors on a manuscript analyzing a particular set of Cariban grammatical constructions, we were combing through each other's databases looking for examples. As I stood looking over my colleague's shoulder at the data on the screen, I realized that the text we were looking at was from a conversation between two elders about Tante's death. We found an example that illustrated the construction we were looking for, but the greater discourse context was a description of seeing Tante immediately after the stroke which left her unconscious, a loss of consciousness from which she never awoke. In the text, the elder, who was one of Tante's best friends, says, "*Oty ko me'i,*" *kaije i'ja*, "*oty ko me'i?*" "What have you done," I said to her, "what have you done?" (FM-MA 00429). She went on to describe the painful process of preparing her dear friend's body for burial.

These data are not numbers on a screen or samples in a jar. They were provided by people with whom I have long-standing relationships and whose stories I know well. Any attempt to view the texts objectively is clouded by the emotional reaction I have each time I am reminded of my friend's death. Taking time to honor that grief and mourn her loss allows me to return to the objective analysis of data. I used to try to power through, but wasted a lot of time that way. Now, I give myself permission to take a minute if I need one before returning to work. Fortunately, my co-authors were remarkably understanding in that they, too, understood the grief and loss inherent in this type of language work.

This example highlights two important issues related to recorded data. The first is a practical one of what to do with recordings of or about someone who has passed away. There may be cultural restrictions governing what may or may not be shared after someone has died. The second issue is the actual content of recordings. If one is documenting aspects of a language in actual use, there is the potential for recording sensitive material. In many cases, outsider linguists documenting endangered languages are working with members of communities that have faced great challenges. In addition to the example just described, such painful themes as poverty, invisibility, the boarding school experience, substance abuse, domestic violence, and loss of family members to suicide all appear in our texts. More than mere quantifiable data, our recordings document both joyous and painful experiences and these require sensitivity if they are to be used as examples in an academic description.

From a community-collaborative perspective, the most effective approach is one that involves community members, and especially the family of the deceased, in all aspects of data management and sharing. They are most qualified to determine how and whether recordings and texts may continue to be used after a speaker has passed away. In some communities, there are restrictions on the use of a person's name or image after their passing. Although audio and video recordings may be a more

recent phenomenon, they are nonetheless likely to be subject to the same traditional norms of access and sharing. While data that has already been published cannot be retracted, it is possible to restrict the future use of recordings and texts. Restricting access to (or even destroying) recordings may run counter to an academic researcher's sensibilities, but a comprehensive corpus of language data would include multiple voices. Maintaining the trust of community members by honoring their wishes should take precedence over a researcher's desire for access to data.

**3. Implications for training** This section is motivated by our desire, as established linguists, to serve our students in more useful ways. As we formulated our ideas for this article, we began with the question of, "What could our profession do better to prepare young fieldworkers (and ourselves) for the seeming inevitability of encounters with the grief that accompanies loss?" The special importance of preparing ourselves and our students for the emotional impact of work with mostly elderly speakers ought to be apparent. How can or should our profession provide better preparation for this undeniably challenging feature of our common experience?

We asserted at the beginning of this essay the necessity for providing something in the context of training for fieldwork that addresses issues of grief and loss, perhaps as part of a broader discussion of the emotional components of "life in the field." That said, we feel that the topic merits a focused discussion in its own right, and not only a passing mention as we reflect on what participatory research truly entails for anyone setting out to conduct it.

The death of someone close can be a signatory experience, often triggering a kind of emotional and/or existential catharsis. With it often comes a heightened sense of impermanence. Further, since language itself is impermanent, in the objective sense, the death of a friend and longtime collaborator who shares your interest and enthusiasm for the language (and may be one of a few remaining people to speak it with native confidence) can raise keenly personal questions about one's proper role in this new reality and even about the meaningfulness of the work itself.

In the sections that follow, we address training issues in three stages: 1) adequate preparation for the likelihood of experiences of death in the "field" (§3.1), 2) responsibilities to the community and the profession in the context of grief and loss (§3.2), and 3) the expectations of the community regarding one's participation in both the ritual and the physical aspects of death traditions (§3.3).

**3.1 Adequate preparation** We contend that the peculiarly complex factors surrounding grief and loss ought to be addressed before fieldwork is undertaken. Talking about death in the field is important for both the practical and emotional preparation of anyone embarking on endangered language work. As described in §1.2, I (Thornes) feel that I was ill-prepared, in either the practical or emotional sense, for the impact the death of the first elder speaker I worked with would have on me. What is offered here are a few key points of departure, ones that I would likely share with anyone planning to embark on fieldwork.

One way to begin to open the conversation is to consider that it may be appropriate to ask a student about to embark on their first trip to the field to recount any of their past experiences with death and grief. How did that experience unfold? What strategies did they use that helped navigate this sometimes harsh emotional landscape? Grief, as with other deeply emotional events, has a memory. How one experiences a new loss is sometimes felt through the recollection of a previous one. Offering stories from one's own experience(s) can be vital preparation for the uninitiated, stories that can be repeated, recalled, or elaborated upon should similar circumstances ultimately unfold for them. Discussion of one's own and others' encounters with grief and loss in language work must certainly be an important part of preparing students for a range of possible emotional experiences, especially those that impact the work and their ability to carry it out.

A sensitive understanding of the speech community is important in preparing for language work there and ought likewise to serve as part of the training component. In Bower's (2008) manual of linguistic fieldwork, she describes the notion of "exhausted communities," which are those that have and continue to suffer profoundly from a range of social ills and post-traumatic experiences. We can readily recognize the fact that the heritage language has, if now in retreat to the point of endangerment, not likely gone quietly. Indeed, in a great many situations in the Americas and Australia in particular, the speakers were coerced, in one way or another, into abandoning it. Recordings may have been made of recounted experiences of abuse and tragedy that, although properly a part of the corpus in language documentation and of the oral history of the community, are a challenge to work with in the methodical way of the language analyst. It can be extremely taxing to visit time and again, on the page (or screen) and through the original recording medium, some of the most emotionally charged events of someone's life.

It is important to recognize and acknowledge the fact that these traumatic experiences are not set in the distant past, but remain as part of the collective memory as recent events. In the Burns Paiute community of eastern Oregon where I (Thornes) have worked the longest, within a 30–40 year timespan, the community experienced capture by the U.S. Army followed by a forced march of hundreds of miles during wintertime, the loss of a nearly two million acre reservation, resettlement into communities far from home, often in reservation contexts dominated by traditional enemies, with just a fraction of the original group returning to the Burns area where they received tattered army tents pitched in a section of unused municipal land situated between the local cemetery and the city dump.

Such experiences with personal accounts of injustices, wrought upon those with whom one also feels a new kind of kinship, may also intensify the grief one experiences when they die. Reasonable or not, there may have been an unconscious carrying of a portion of the burden of these injustices or a hidden hoping that one's work could restore some balance to the scales of community life, no matter how elusory or unrealistic. Feelings of guilt or regret, pointless and irrational as they may seem, are nonetheless important to acknowledge. Such acknowledgement and discussion ought to be part of one's preparation for the field experience.

**3.2 Responsibility to language, community, and profession** Grief and loss in language work strikes at the core of the “researcher and researched” relationship, as cogently described in the sociolinguistic context in Cameron et al. (1992; 1997). It is an ethical issue not adequately addressed as such within the context of endangered language research.

The impact of grief and loss on one’s professional life may be varied and profound, raising all sorts of questions beginning with how, or even whether, to continue the work. The community may be one where the number of speakers willing or able to fully participate is either limited or non-existent. Our experience has been that, although there may come with such a loss a renewed sense of urgency regarding the work, there may also be a protracted period where such work is deemed too much or too close to the time of death to be prudently continued. What has been lost, from both a personal and a professional perspective, is a working relationship, developed over weeks, months, or even years, and the ease and comfort of that relationship. It can take a long time to recover from such a loss, and it is important to have, and to place, reasonable expectations on productivity in the face of it.

Obvious challenges to restarting language work after the loss of an elder speaker include the availability of interested and capable speakers and the decision by family members about whether to include others in the work. Family members may have a proprietary inclination regarding the project. They have witnessed the hours spent by the elder in interviews and detailed transcription and translation work and may consider themselves the proper inheritors, responsible for continuing the project. In our experience, reluctance on the part of family to be more inclusive typically does change with time, but still requires patience and tact.

Bridging the personal and professional impact of grief and loss in the field, one will likely feel at least some guilt and regret surrounding the questions not asked or the stories not documented. Of course, those feelings are almost inevitably true for many of us at the end of any field trip, but are heightened with the knowledge that such questions simply cannot and will not be asked, much less answered. Such a period may be the best time to pause in the work and to take stock of what one has been able to accomplish and contribute under the circumstances. Although the family may not wish to hear recordings of a recently passed loved one (indeed, there may well be cultural taboos against it), knowledge of the materials and all they contain may prove important to review at this time. Like a family photo album, reviewing with others even the list of recordings and their contents may at times spark a renewed interest in the materials for their intrinsic value in connecting to the life of the elder. I (Thornes) recall sitting in a room surrounded by family members swapping stories we had heard told and experiencing a shared delight in a free association of memory that felt natural and essential, and that served to spark a renewed interest in continuing the work.

Should the work continue, it may come to involve semi-speakers and passive bilinguals more closely. Their input can be invaluable in the processing of texts as well as in the development of materials for language maintenance and revitalization efforts. In one instance, I (Thornes) witnessed the beginnings of a passive bilingual’s ability to

“re-activate,” to some degree, her speaking abilities by helping to transcribe and partly translate her aunt’s autobiographical narrative. Although the time taken was significantly longer than it would likely have been had a fluent speaker from another family been called upon, the validation that the activity garnered for the semi-speaker and her family was an important consideration. The examples presented in this section indicate the need for understanding, perhaps, on the part of both funding agencies and professional colleagues, especially those on promotion and tenure committees, that flexible timelines for deliverables may be appropriate and necessary in some cases.

**3.3 Community expectations regarding participation** For me (Thornes), “the field” has included a variety of reservation communities in the western United States, more specifically in the high desert areas of eastern Oregon, southern Idaho, and northern Nevada. Not long after the death of the first speaker I worked with and the completion of my master’s degree requirements, I was formally invited to an “Elders’ Potluck” by the Burns Paiute Cultural Resources Department. In the months and years that ensued, I came to play several roles in the interval leading up to the completion of a grammar of the Northern Paiute language – my dissertation project. These roles included work as an interviewer under a variety of federal grants on issues of traditional land use, volunteer consultant with language teachers, newsletter columnist, and all around “language guy,” as I came to be called.

As with my co-author, the relationships I have developed in the course of my work on the language are varied and complex, extending well beyond that between linguist and language consultant. The countless hours spent over coffee at a kitchen table, the passing through of curious grandchildren, their parents and friends, the delivery of local news by neighbors, and the prodigal return of adult children from the city, all provide the context not just for the participatory research one is engaged in, but also for the lives one bears witness to. Inevitably, there are particular relationships that reach well beyond a shared interest in the language.

My (Thornes) friend Nepa was a great storyteller, had an incredible memory for detail, and never shied away from speaking the truth, her truth, even if it would occasionally cross the line of another’s pentecostal sense of decorum. She had a fine appreciation for slapstick, and loved to watch old westerns on the television. She always laughed with irony about how the Indians always got the short end of the stick in these shows. I came to think of her as a grandparent. I was often responsible for picking her up for events like the monthly potlucks sponsored by the Cultural Resources department, and frequently took her to town to pick up her mail and help her shop for groceries. She loved field trips with others to the settings of many of her stories. Like my co-author, I too found it very difficult after her passing to focus on tasks associated with the “language data” in these stories.

When Nepa died, I suddenly found myself known to people I had never met, relatives from elsewhere who knew of me only through her. Although this knowledge did in some ways relieve some of the awkwardness around my own feelings of grief, I remained keenly aware of my status as an outsider, still more a witness than a full participant.



It is one feature of our experience that in addition to the feelings associated with deep personal and professional loss, there are also those emotions that accompany the uncertainty of one's place with respect to the "circle of the bereaved," as discussed earlier. This circle most certainly includes the immediate family, however defined, of the person who has died, but also ripples outward to include the wider community, depending upon their role. In the spirit of providing training for those engaging in language work, it is important to recognize that there may be a host of possible roles one may be, directly or indirectly, called upon to play in the context of a death in the community. As with much that has been discussed up to now, there is nothing comprehensive or predictive in what we describe here, much of which intersects with particular community perceptions.

Bowern (2008:164-168) very eloquently describes several aspects of work in endangered language communities that fit properly within the domain of preparing for the field. Many of these have to do with interpersonal perceptions and the outsider linguist's position with respect to the community. Insofar as these issues impact one's response to grief and loss, we include some concrete examples of possible roles one might play in the context of the community's response to the loss of an elder and family member.

I (Thornes) have found myself playing several roles, both official and unofficial, upon the death of an elder. These have included helping with the preparations at the gravesite, both excavation and interment, delivering the eulogy, and even reciting a prayer in the language as well as helping to set up the gathering place for both the funeral and the meal that always follows. My co-author (Sapién) was also prevented from participating in certain ritual aspects surrounding the death of her friend due to her pregnancy and the taboos surrounding it. Taboos surrounding death can of course be very complex and often unspoken and taken for granted. Therefore learning what one can in advance about appropriate participation may help to relieve, at least in part, the extreme awkwardness one may feel in the moment.

New and unexpected roles may also emerge as part of the ongoing relationship with the community long after the ending of one's co-participation in language work there. I (Thornes) have recently been approached by the youngest daughter of the first speaker I worked with to compose text for a memorial plaque "the way Dad would say it." It is of course a great honor, and one for which I am both humbled and gratified, knowing that that work still carries value for the family of the speaker, more than 20 years hence. The larger point raised is that, despite the personal and professional sense of loss, in terms of a "vital voice" in one's life, the continued impact of one's presence in the community can never be underestimated. Maintaining contact, or at least an open channel of communication, with the endangered language community following such a loss may carry with it a new starting point, one that, in its turn, reveals how profoundly one's life has been affected.

**4. Conclusions** As with Behar (1996), we find it necessary to grapple with our own emotional (and professional) vulnerabilities in relation to our friends and collaborators in the field. After all, when we document a language, we are taking on multiple

roles, including that of folklorist, ethnographer, historian, and, perhaps most to the point, biographer. Our involvement in the lives of those we work with is, or at least can be (if we count ourselves lucky), emotionally rich and profound.

This essay is reflexive at its core, and it leans toward acknowledging that all human endeavor – all science, really – is empirical only insofar as we acknowledge and try to understand the filter of the observer. As stated earlier, the point of this paper is neither to be overly depressing nor discouraging to students taking on the challenging and rewarding work of endangered language documentation. Human resilience applies to the participatory observer as much as it does to the community language worker. Our experiences have helped to shape us in ways we can only partly understand. Our hope is that these experiences, as outlined here, can serve as a foundation upon which a more thorough consideration of methodological issues and preparation through honest and open approaches to training can be constructed.


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