A Model of Participatory Action Research:
The Mayangna Linguists Team of Nicaragua

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Abstract

This paper proposes a model of collaborative participatory research involving a mixed linguistic team, one formed by internal as well as external linguists. This methodological approach addresses the issues of power inequalities that arise when members external to the language community engage in linguistic projects and suggests specific ways in which power imbalances can be redressed. Finally, the paper also addresses the issues that these considerations may raise in the way research and teaching is carried out in the western world.

Setting the Issue

This paper addresses the issue of power inequalities that arise when an outsider linguist works on an endangered or minority language, and proposes a model of interaction that tends to neutralize the power imbalances that result from that initial state.

The imbalance of power that arises out of a situation like that represented in Figure 1 below, when contact between an external linguistic research project and a language community happens, stems usually out of the fact that the researcher, the linguist, is an outsider to the community.

Figure 1: Initial contact

Why would non-belonging (a condition that, in other social contexts, usually brings disadvantage to the outsider rather than advantage) bring about inequality to the detriment of the insider? In the most common situation, the linguist, an outsider, is making decisions about who will be a participant in the research, how the research project will be organized or articulated, how the linguistic research will proceed and how the funds

will be spent. That leaves little agency to the language community: they can decide very little about what will be done with and about their language and by whom. This is (at least, one of) the most common root for an imbalance of power when a relationship like the one in Figure 1 arises. Returning agentivity back to the community or, put in other words, redistributing agentivity among the different participants of this endeavor is a way to address the situation.

In order to reinstate agency back to the community, it is necessary to change the value that created the imbalance to begin with. If that value was that the linguist was an outsider, changing its value means that the linguist will need to be an insider, that is, a member of the community. One way to accomplish this is by training, that is, by transferring to the community the knowledge that makes us linguists knowledgeable:

Figure 2: Beginning rebalancing

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However, this one-way transfer of knowledge will not by itself accomplish a rebalancing of the power structure, because it presupposes that those with the knowledge are the outsiders. In order to obtain a balanced relationship, we need to recognize that the community also has knowledge and that, though of a different nature, that community knowledge is at the same level as the knowledge the outsider linguist brings into the equation. A more balanced picture, then, arises when we recognize a complex system of knowledge(s) and of mutual sharing, as Figure 3 is intended to represent:
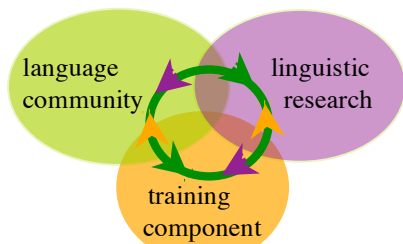

Figure 3: A rebalanced system of knowledge flow and interaction

In this paper, we will present a particular implementation of these ideas into the context of Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast, into what can be called a linguistic model of Participatory Action Research. Though concrete situations in the field may, and in fact do, vary quite a bit, this model can be applied, allowing for adaptations in the corresponding variables, to a variety of contexts where the situation of Figure 1 applies.

In the next section we will present the basic organizational principles of this approach and in the following one, the particular implementation we as a group carried out in Nicaragua. Finally, we address some issues that derive from these views that concern the way research is done in the western world. We end with some final considerations in the Conclusions.

A three-legged platform

In this section we elaborate on the three foundations that underlie the implementation of this participatory approach to linguistic work. We will address, in turn, the *basic principles* on which Participatory Action Research is based, the *general goals* that come out of integrating those basic principles with a schema of the type of Figure 3, and the *specific mechanisms* that will set the path to obtain those general goals.

The Basic Principles

Adapting from the work in the social sciences as put forward in, e.g., Christie et al. (2000), the *basic principles* on which a model like this is based are:

1. the **(self-)empowerment** of the speaking community, an abstract concept that includes the notion of

reclaiming agentivity by the community, that is, where the members of the community assume an agentive role in the process of linguistic research, and not just merely, that of 'informant.'. It also includes notions of 'control' over the language materials collected, the uses that they will be given, the place where they will be kept, who will have access to them, where and how to publish them, etc...

2. The existence of an **egalitarian relationship** between external and internal researchers, a point that derives from the community members taking an actively agentive role in the research process, a process that will go from involving a 'subject' and an 'object-of-research' to a 'subject-subject' pair involved in the process of creation of knowledge.

3. The recognition of the existence of **knowledge systems of equal value** among external and internal linguists rounds up the other two principles mentioned above: assuming an agentive role and obtaining an equal-to-equal relationship leads to an interaction between the agents, the subjects of the process where they exchange knowledge that is complementary and thus of equal value.

In the context of this discussion, internal linguists are those who are also members of the speaking community and, in the best case scenario, also speakers of the language, whereas external linguists are those who are not members of the community.

The General Goals

Assuming the principles outlined in the previous subsection, the primary goals that emerged in articulating our first approach to linguistic research under the umbrella of participatory research are the following:

1. to create and train local **technical indigenous linguistic** teams. As stated before in Figure 2 and 3, this component is the main tool we will have to initiate a more agentive participation of members of the community in the research process;

2. to **create materials** relevant for the community, which will be part of the community taking more control over the research process, including deciding which kinds of materials are collected. It also concerns the question, raised already by Deloria (1969), Hale et al (1992) and Bach (1995), of who gets to benefit from the research, the linguistic community, the language community or both.

3. to implement a **participatory dynamic** in the day-to-day work interaction of the members of the technical teams. This goal was added at a later stage when we as a group realized that even though the other elements had been put in place, the internal dynamics of the group still reverted to a non participatory mood, where the decision making process and the responsibilities associated with it were not being taken equally by all

the members of the team, including external and internal members.

Implementation Mechanisms

In order to get this process moving, under the goals and the principles stated above, a set of *implementation mechanisms* was established, including three basic components:

1. a mechanism for **joint decision-making**, which ensures the participation of all involved in the process, and the inclusion of the priorities of the community.

2. a mechanism for a **continuous training program**, which ensures the existence of the training component that links language community and external linguists, as in Figure 2 and 3.

3. a mechanism of **self-evaluation**, a crucial element that contributes in great manner to maintaining the focus on the defining aspects of the approach and, in particular, in maintaining a participatory dynamic within the day-to-day doings of the group.

Implementation

In this section we will present the details of how a participatory action research project was implemented in Nicaragua, along the lines sketched above. Of particular interest is how to articulate and intersect into a single model of linguistic research the needs and goals of language community, linguistic research, and the different members of the linguistic team.

The linguistic research team is currently formed by an external linguist and the Mayangna Indigenous Linguists Team (*Mayangna Yulbarangyang Balna*), integrated by 7 members of the community who are linguists themselves, two of whom are members of the minority variant Tuahka, and five of whom are women.

The location

This project developed in the Eastern Coast of Nicaragua in Central America, in an area also called the Atlantic Coast or simply 'the Coast', in what is politically an autonomous region within the country, RAAN (*Región Autónoma del Atlántico Norte*). The Coast constitutes approximately the eastern half of the country and is a multilingual, multiethnic and multicultural region (see Figure 4).

Mayangna, the language spoken by the communities we worked with, is spoken in the northern region by about 10,000 speakers, with varying degrees of endangerement. It has three major variants (Tuahka and Panamahka in Nicaragua, and Tawahka in Honduras) and together with Ulwa forms the Sumu branch of the isolate family Misumalpan (Craig and Hale, 1992).

The town where most of the activities of the group take place is Rosita (marked with a star in the map in Figure 4), under the auspices of the Institute of Linguistics, IPILC, of the regional university URACCAN, an institution of higher education whose mission and vision is to, precisely, attend to the educational needs of the population of the Coast and, in particular, of the indigenous population.
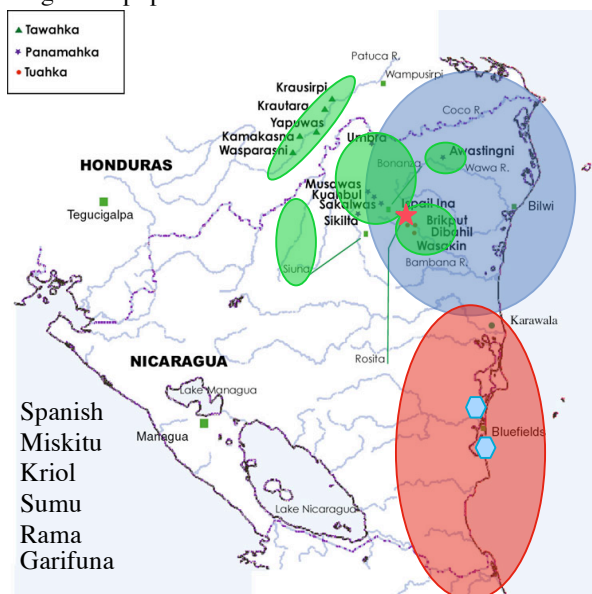

Figure 4: The Languages of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua

URACCAN, together with Purdue University, the European Union, the National Science Foundation and others have provided funding for this and previous projects (see Benedicto et al, 2002).

The community

In order to obtain a balanced out picture as that intended in Figure 3, the members of the team who belong to the community established, in consultation with other members of the community, what kind of materials could be of interest to the Mayangna community at large, including the state-run bilingual school system, PEBI, that takes care of the primary school system in the area.

Among the priorities set by the cultural interests of the community, were the following kinds of material to be collected and published:

- Traditional folktales
- Traditional songs
- Oral history, including the history of past and current leaders, past heroes, past community events, cultural celebrations and festivities.
- Endogenous technology, including accounts by local indigenous experts about the construction of traditional water transportation methods like the *kuring*, of utilitarian and artistic objects, etc...

The collection of this kind of lingusitic data would provide the linguistic research project with *free spontaneous language data*, one of the subsets of data targeted in the research project.

Another kind of data that was of interest to the community was to obtain accounts by prominent members of the community about their life stories and about their opinions on the direction society and the community at large was going. This kind of data was collected in such a way as to provide what was called 'targeted data', in which particular structures were sought without asking overtly for them.

Thus, we see how one single activity, in this case data collection, can satisfy both the needs of the community and the needs of the research project. We will see next, too, how data collection can be used to feed the training component.

The research component

The interest of the research component consisted of completing a description of the language, including a grammar and a dictionary, and carrying out an explanatory analysis of certain structural properties of the language having to do with modal constructions and classifier auxiliaries.

The training component

The training component is one of the most interesting components under this approach, not only because it is crucially instrumental in obtaining a situation like that in Figure 3, but because it is probably the factor that deviates most from a more traditional model of fieldwork.

Training takes place at different levels, but mostly at the university level, where the role of URACCAN has been instrumental. URACCAN has been organizing professionalization courses for in-training teachers, as well as associate and bachelor's degrees in Bilingual Intercultural Education (EIB) and has graduated already several generations of Mayangna students. All those degrees have a corresponding module on Mayangna linguistics, and the members of the linguists team have all graduated from a degree offered by URACCAN. The most usual trajectory for potential Mayangna linguists is to be a student at one of URACCAN's degrees, to choose a linguistic topic, whether in morphology, syntax or phonology, as the subjet matter for the BA thesis, which provides an extra edge in a traditional linguistic training, and to get integrated in a linguistic working groups. The current members of the linguists team also participated in a postgraduate Specialization in Linguistics, also offered by URACCAN. External or outside linguists usually play a crucial role at this stage of training.

The last stage in the training component is the one that forms part of the research project itself, where normal research activities are taken as training opportunities. This usually takes place, in our case, twice a year, during the visits of the outside linguist to the field. As an example, during the sessions scheduled to analyze the modal constructions we were interested in, the members of the team took the data they had collected (in the shape of interviews) and transcribed the tapes, inputing the data into Excel. Excel was used as a very basic database-like tool, because it is generally available in Nicaragua, no extra expense needed to be done and certain members of the team already knew how to use it. Furthermore, it can be easily transferred to more sophisticated software tools. The Excel table also included the ancillary information associated with the recorded data (place and date of recording, information about the participants in the conversation, transcriber and date of transcription, etc...).

The following steps were the most interesting for the linguistic training, where the members of team worked with the outside linguist to learn to identify, first, the particular morpho-syntactic features that we were interested in, later, to identify the individual syntactic patterns in which they appeared, and finally, to categorize those individual patterns into a small set of pattern categories. Since this particular study had to do with modality, the next step was to correlate the syntactic patterns with the corresponding semantic interpretations. This also facilitated the opportunity to review the issues concerning the study of modality in a deeper way than what could have been covered during their linguistic classes.

The training component is not limited to the university-level education. Though not always successful, attempts are made to re-cycle the results of linguistic research back to the bilingual schools, through participation of the members of the team in the revision of the textbooks, and on the preparation of teaching materials. The bilingual educational system (PEBI) only covers primary school, but there is talk of extending it to secondary education. This would provide an excellent venue to introduce linguistic topics early on the educational careeer of students that would be better prepared by the time they reach university.

Integrating all the components

In the preceding discussion we have seen how it is possible to articulate a linguistic research project in a way that takes into account the needs of the community (as determined by its members), integrates the members of the community in a meaningful agentive way (that is, as researchers), conducts its activities in ways that help each of the participants (inside and outside members alike) to grow and gain more knowledge than they began with, and produces materials that are relevant to both the language community and the scientific community.

The way all these different components are articulated is the following. At the onset of the project, the whole group, including the Mayangna linguists and outside linguist get together and discuss the goals and objectives for the period of the research. The indigenous members of the team collect ideas from their respective communities to be included in the discussion. The ideas for linguistic topics to be analyzed are also included;

these can come from either the external linguist or the internal linguists. Then, the group discusses how many of those pieces can be successfully integrated in the project for the amount of time available. Next, we establish the phases or stages of the research: what should be done first, second, etc... so that when it comes time to do X, we have already laid down the previous work needed for it; for instance, how much time should be allotted for data collection, so that it can then be transcribed, introduced into the database and coded on time to work together on the analysis.

Activities are planned around 4 different periods within the year: two shorter ones, of about one month each, where the group gets together, internal workshops are organized and the linguistic analysis, organization of next phase and evaluation of past work happen; and two longer ones, of about 4 to 5 months where each of the members of the team go back to their usual places of work and conduct individual assignments, such as data collection, processing of dictionary entries or linguistic coding of the material. All these activities concern equally the external and the internal linguists.

During the longer extended periods, the Mayangna members of the team also maintain the rest of the community informed of the progress of the works underway.

Out of the experience of the last years, one of the elements that has proven to be most useful is the evaluation mechanism that allows all the participants involved to assess if the direction of the work, the way things are being done and their outcomes are in agreement with what we set out to do and, if not, in which way they can be redirected. During these sessions, we lay out point by point all the initial goals set out at the beginning of the period (that is, either 4 months earlier or a month earlier) and assess whether we have attained that specific goal or not; if not, then we analyze the reasons why the goal could not be obtained and, most importantly, what measures could have been taken to produce a successful result (so that this can be done next time around) and what measures can now be taken to actually obtain the initial goal. If the goal turns out to be unrealistic or irrelevant at that point, then we reevaluate its need and set out a new goal. Though difficult the first time around, on successive cycles, knowing that we will have to explain how and why we did things actually facilitates an active and involved participation in the day-to-day activities of the project. It has also helped all the members of the group to become more aware of the philosophical and ethical implications of the work we do and the reasons we do it that way. In so, it has also allowed for the different members of the team to take on new responsibilities and to take more active roles in the decision making process and in the execution phase of the project.

Evaluation

The initial goal of this approach to linguistic fieldwork was to rebalance the power relationships between (external) linguist and language community. The idea was that if the linguists were in fact members of the community, the decision process would remain within the community and, thus, the power imbalance would have been reduced (this, of course, does not mean that there is no power imbalance at all: community-internal power structures do exist, but these are part of the community itself and not brought in by outsiders).

Working in this participatory way has definitely allowed for the creation of a professionally trained local indigenous team of linguists, whose members are already taking positions where they can make decisions about language issues in the community.

On the other hand, it has also brought about the realization that the goals each individual has may shift during the research project and that different individuals may have different personal goals, all of which need to be respected. It has also become clear that 'the community' does not necessarily have one single voice, and that different opinions and goals and priorities may be voiced, and that the final decision should lie within the members of the community and not with the outside member.

On the positive side, too, it has also allowed some of the members of the team, especially women, to take on responsibilities that would not have been in their initial set of goals, and to develop into amazingly good professional and community leaders.

Have we obtained a balanced way of power sharing? Yes and no. The internal processes have evolved in the right direction, but we are not there completely. For instance, the external linguist is still the one that controls de money and it's the one that decided, initially, how much money to allot for which activities. Though in recent stages these decisions have shifted to take place in consultation with the rest of the team, the final power of decision still lies with the external linguist. As a group we have had discussions about the responsibilities that come with that power, and we have decided that a way to address this issue is by including a training component on how to write grant proposals, so that the indigenous members of the team can do it themselves and take on the control and the responsibility associated with the funding matters, too.

This project and the methodology that it has followed is work in progress and will continue to be. As someone once put it, the process is the goal, what we accomplish is the process itself. A shift from an outcome-oriented project to a process-oriented enterprise is probably one of the big contributions of this kind of work.

Consequences Beyond the Field

One of the issues that arises out of the whole dynamic of questioning why we do things the way we do, is what is the significance of all this in our western way of conducting research, what the implications are for our 'standard' accepted 'scientific' way of doing research.

In the most relevant sense, it questions the unspoken assumption that the PI (the 'principal investigator'), the main senior researcher is the 'expert', the one who is the repository of knowledge. It crucially changes the relation between all the participants in the research process, from the PI to the graduate students involved to the indigenous linguists and the members of the community, and recognizes the equally important contribution that each of these participants makes in the whole process.

So, the questions that this kind of approach brings to the table, may be summarized in these three groups:

(a)   who 'knows'
         what constitutes 'knowledge'

This concerns what in the social sciences may have been identified as the 'colonization of knowledge,' whereby only knowledge associated with the colonial powers (or, more generally, with the dominant culture) is 'proper' knowledge or real knowledge.

(b)   whose goals have priority
         how knowledge is 'distributed' (publications, language used in publications, etc...)

This concerns issues like what part(s) of the work gets to be published and to what kind of audiences, what language(s) are used for publication and which venues. For instance, much work on indigenous languages of Latin America is published in English and in English publications, which does not allow the speakers of the language to have access to its content.

(c)   who 'owns' the language
         who 'controls' the language

This concerns, of course, who decides who has access to the language and under which conditions. For example, can a researcher keep data collected for his/her own research? Some granting institutions will allow that; if so, for how long? And does the language community have a say on it?

The discussions that hopefully will arise around these questions inform, at least, in an immediate way, the two basic realms in which our western-style institutions work: the way we teach, and the way we do research.

With respect to the way we teach, we may immediately pose certain questions that affect classes like fieldmethods courses. These questions may include issues such as the status of the native speaker within the classroom, the specific rights the speaker and his/her community have with respect to the data, the right of 'return' (that is, the right to know about the results of the work facilitated by the speaker), and the responsibility of the instructor and students towards the community. Though responses to these questions may vary from institution to institution, in a recent case at a midwestern institution, the administration decided that the speaker had no right to see the presentations by the students or their papers. This may be argued to violate the right of 'return', that is, the right of the speaker/community to see the results of the research based on data they provided. It also reflects the lack of a clearly defined status and role for this person, and disregard for the value of the knowledge provided.

With respect to the way we do research, this participatory approach may inform the conditions under which granting institutions set their programs. For instance, the National Science Foundation in the US has set a *Broader Impact* set of considerations, under which proposals are evaluated, and has set, together with the National Endowment for the Humanities, specific programs to attend to the specific issues of endangered languages. Canada's *Social Science and Humanities Research Council* has set stronger and specific requirements to work with First Nations languages, and has also set a variety of programs specific to them (see Rice, 2004). The Linguistic Society of America's Committee on Endangered Languages has also initiated work on ethical issues concerning work with endangered and indigenous languages (see, again, Rice 2004). In conclusion, there seems to be some evidence for revising the way we traditionally have been doing research on indigenous and endangered languages, but also some resistance, at certain institutional levels, to accept a heightened level of power sharing by the members of the language communities.

Conclusion

In this paper we have explored some of the issues of power rebalancing that arise when outside and inside members of an endangered or minority language community work together on a linguistic project.

We have proposed specific (though not unique) ways in which a more balance, collaborative experience can take place, one which recognizes de particular knowledge(s) that each member brings to the group.

Though changes like the ones proposed here do not happen in an immediate way, and though new problems and issues may and will arise, this approach raises awareness about power inequalities and proposes a direction in which they can begin to be tackled.

Acknowledgements

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