
Bringing 'interactivity' into language documentation studies

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Proceedings of Conference on
Language Documentation & Linguistic Theory 3

Edited by Peter K. Austin, Oliver Bond, Lutz Marten &
David Nathan

19-20 November 2011 School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

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ISBN: 978-0-7286-0398-1

This publication can be cited as:

Yuko Sugita. 2011. Bringing 'interactivity' into language documentation studies. In Peter K. Austin, Oliver Bond, Lutz Marten & David Nathan (eds) *Proceedings of Conference on Language Documentation and Linguistic Theory 3*, 267-277. London: SOAS.

or:

Yuko Sugita. 2011. Bringing 'interactivity' into language documentation studies. In Peter K. Austin, Oliver Bond, Lutz Marten & David Nathan (eds) *Proceedings of Conference on Language Documentation and Linguistic Theory 3*. London: SOAS. www.hrelp.org/eprints/ldlt3_28.pdf

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1. INTRODUCTION

How and what we document of any particular endangered language has a great impact on its future including possible revitalization activities. In considering the subject of language documentation, Himmelmann (2004:48) has argued that ‘linguistic practices’ which manifest in everyday interaction should be the target of documentation. Looking at different archived data, however, reveals that interactive language use seems to be neglected. For instance, although recently more efforts towards documenting the Ryukyuan languages can be observed, most datasets which have been published so far are elicited words, sentences, narrative interviews, and/or non-conversational storytelling, e. g. a single consultant tells a folklore tale alone via the recording equipment. Yet, telling a story in the form of a monologue is rather uncommon in everyday life.¹ In this sense, if we want to document the linguistic practices of any given speech community, interactivity must be taken more seriously into consideration. The new linguistic paradigm of INTERACTIONAL LINGUISTICS (hereafter IL) (Couper-Kuhlen & Selting 2001) shows that approaches designed to fill this gap already exist and that their techniques and discoveries can be applied to the field of endangered language documentation. In what follows, I will discuss how interactivity can be better documented.

2. TARGET ACTIVITY AND A POSSIBLE METHOD FOR DOCUMENTING INTERACTIVITY

IL has developed over the past ten years as an interface of ethnomethodological conversation analysis, ethnography of communication and functional linguistics (Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 2001). In this and in neighboring fields, interactivity is the key issue for the analysis of language in use. In order to integrate interactivity into documentation studies, we can consult research output such as CONVERSATIONAL STORYTELLING which has been investigated extensively (see e. g. Sacks 1992, Norrick 2007).

2.1. Conversational storytelling

Conversational storytelling is an activity observed regularly in our everyday life. It is a verbal report which is centred around past events (Ochs et al. 1992: 42). It differs from monologic narrative in that stories are told interactively and recipients are active participants in the process. It is thus a suitable activity for documenting interaction. There are several methods of eliciting conversational storytelling:

¹ It can be questionable from an ethical point of view as well (cf. Mashiko 2002: 34-35).

recordings in near-spontaneous settings or more arranged settings at different ‘experimental’ levels.

2.2. *Group discussion with focused topics*

In order to ensure the documentation of a more ‘intensive’ form of conversational storytelling on specific topics, I suggest that group sessions be organized in the form of GROUP DISCUSSIONS. Group discussions are one of the traditional methods for data collection which have been applied especially in the field of empirical sociology in order to investigate personal views and experiences. These views and experiences manifest themselves in the interactional process. A stimulus (topic) and the interaction between the group members (group dynamics) are the main characteristics of this method (Flick 2006: 171). In principle, a moderator is present as a discussion leader and controls the discussion flow, yet, ideally, without interfering with the dynamics of the group itself. This method has become popular among marketing and media researchers under the name of FOCUS GROUPS or FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION (FGD). What counts as an ‘appropriate’ group, however, seems to depend on the aim of the study, as well as on cultural and social conditions. A group consisting of 6-12 strangers is argued to be ideal for focus groups in general (Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub 1996: 50, 63-64). In research contexts in Japan, however, Chitose & Abe (2000: 65-66), report that FGD has proven to be most dynamic when the groups consist of four people who know each other well. The necessity of a flexible variation of group discussions with focused topics or FGD will be discussed in sections 4 and 5 as a method of eliciting conversational storytelling.

3. DATA²

Towards the end of the methodological discussion, I will examine data which was recorded some thirty years ago by *Bunkachō* ‘Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan’. They conducted a large scale project between 1977-1985 aimed at documenting languages and local language varieties, all over Japan, which were facing extinction (Inoue & Tahara 2001: 93). The audiocorpus was partly published as CD-ROMs with transcriptions and metadata by *Kokuritsu Kokugo Kenkyūsho* ‘National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics (NINJAL)’ between 2001-2008³.

² I am very much indebted to Prof. Fumiko Inoue at NINJAL who kindly provided me with the materials. Information on the background of the data collection was very helpful. I also thank Fija Byron and Patrick Heinrich for their inspiring comments on the early version of this paper.

³ In the near future more data shall be digitised and published online as a database by a project group of NINJAL. Cf. <http://www.ninjal.ac.jp/english/research/project/a/endangerreddialects/> (17 Sep 2011). Note that Ryukyuan and Hachijō languages are called ‘endangered dialects’ in this project, while they refer to the ‘UNESCO Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger’ (Moseley 2010) as an important reference to commodify their research aim. For details about Japanese language policy with regard to such contradictions, see Heinrich (2011).

Since different methods were employed for data collection, the corpus contains diverse information which is worth examining. The reason for this variety of methods is apparently the Japanese sociolinguistic research tradition called *GENGO SEIKATSU* ‘language life’ which was popular at the time the data was collected (cf. Heinrich 2002). A wide range of discourse activities were documented in each target area. These included near-spontaneous conversation of several groups that consisted of people across different sociolinguistic variables (e. g. age, gender, social relationship etc.), biographical narrative or storytelling in the form of monologues and ‘role plays’ according to the situational and functional settings provided by the researcher (Kokuritsu Kokugo Kenkyūsho 2008: 245-247).

In this paper, I will introduce two excerpts from the audio data of *Nakijin* (or *Nacizin*), an endangered variety of the Northern Okinawan language *Kunigami* (see Moseley 2010). In order to examine two different documentation methods I have retranscribed the data according to GAT2 (Selting et al. 2011) and additional conventions (see Appendix II).

4. DATA ANALYSIS

For the data analysis, I will employ the method of IL by analyzing the sequential process of communication qualitatively.

4.1. Narrative as monologue

The first example, Transcript (1) in Appendix I, was documented in the Wakugawa area in *Nakijin*. One male consultant (CM born in 1908) was requested to talk about traditional verses in the presence of the researcher IF in the form of a monologue. As CM tries to explain the meaning of a verse in Japanese, he is interrupted by the female researcher telling him to speak in the ‘dialect’ (line 4). Long pauses and hesitation markers by CM in the rest of the excerpt indicate his difficulties in continuing speaking (line 5-19). The repetition of the word *hōgen* ‘dialect’, with the flat final pitch contour on the prolonged nasal after a hesitation marker, and a long pause (line 5-7) are ‘audible’ as though CM were confused in the situation.

The excerpt reveals that telling a story or explaining some cultural events in a monologue style is unnatural. It shows that CM is oriented to interaction in situ and wants to make the historical background and the meaning of the verse clear to his young ‘interlocutor’. However, this is ‘no good’ for IF as CM speaks in Japanese which is not her research target. The researcher is oriented to the research object. Later in the data, the consultant refers to the difficulties in speaking by himself and is apparently ashamed for not having been able to recite the verse with ease.⁴ People’s general orientation to interactivity is ‘default’ in our everyday life. This needs to be kept in mind for documentation studies.

⁴ The maxim of ‘do no harm’ regarding research ethics (Dwyer 2006: 35) must also be applied in such a situation.

4.2. *Conversational storytelling*

In the data of near-spontaneous conversation in the introduced corpus, particular topics were given to each group beforehand. Each group consists of two or three elderly participants of the same generation within the local community, or of two or three participants across generations. They talked about the given topics in their local language, and were rarely interrupted by the moderator. In some sessions, the moderator was partly absent. The employed method for the data elicitation is — intentionally or not — an amalgam of FGD and GROUP NARRATIVE. The latter is not moderated and is pursued without any special topical focus (cf. Flick 2006: 183-185).

The second excerpt introduced in Transcript (2) in Appendix I is a conversation between a female (TF born in 1904) and a male (UM born in 1902) consultant in the area of Imadomari in Nakijin. The two hour session was introduced by the moderator who was then absent for the duration of the session. The given topic was ‘seasonal events’ performed in their local area in the past. In the transcript, they are talking about a social event on the fourth of March. It was apparently a day on which young men and women could ‘have a party’ all night long. To find a ‘lovely person’ women made meals wrapped in leaves, and walked around the village, while men chased after a group of women whom they were interested in until they got the chance to eat the meal together and have a party on the beach. The event is recalled by UM and he is the one who mainly explains what was happening on that special day. Yet, as we shall see, TF plays an active role in constructing the past event collaboratively.

The conversation sounds lively. This manifests in the ‘cheerful’ voice quality of the participants as well as in the absence of long pauses or frequent hesitation markers. The data also tells us how efficiently JOINT REMEMBERING (Edwards & Middleton 1986) works from the perspective of the researchers: one story invites the interlocutors to tell further relevant stories sequentially. For instance, the event on the third of March which they have been talking about leads to the memories of the event on the next day as can be seen in line 1 and 4-13. The talk about the event on the fourth of March then prompts UM to tell a story about an experience during the event (from line 38 on, which is a canonical story preface). Comparing this data with Transcript (1), it is evident that the very loose form of group discussion proves to be efficient for eliciting more liveliness in recalling past cultural events as well as for telling more relevant stories interactively.

If we look at further details of Transcript (2) on the sequential level, more indications can be found which explain why this data is recognized as less unnatural or less ‘harmful’ than the data in Transcript (1). Transcript (2) shows affiliative, endorsing, collaborative activities between the interlocutors.

For example, while UM has a problem in speech production (word-searching) at line 4 (*?unu*: ‘well’), TF helps him immediately with the repair. Overlapping UM’s hesitation marker, TF prompts the word which UM is searching for (*meerabincaa* ‘young women’). Her suggestion is immediately acted upon by UM. According to Edwards & Middleton (1986: 446), talking in unison, repeating or paraphrasing immediately what someone else has said is one of the devices applied in order to

express agreement in the activity of joint remembering. This is also evident in lines 7 and 8 where TF repeats the important part of UM's utterance (*jukka* '(on) the fourth') without any gap.

In line 18, TF also aligns with the positive assessment which TF has just made in line 13 ('That was fun, wasn't it' – 'That was nice.'). Furthermore, after UM tells about the event from the young men's perspective in line 17a/b ('men were trying to eat the meal, chasing after the women all night long'), TF completes the story with an utterance from the women's perspective in line 20 a/b ('(women were) saying 'I will find a lovely one and let him eat my meal)'). The participants are collaboratively constructing the joyful moments by together taking on the perspective of themselves as young people.

Such intensive exchanges of past experiences, emotive involvement and evaluation abound in linguistic, cultural and social knowledge. On the linguistic level, we observe the use of the mesial demonstrative *ɳuri(i)* 'it' for the event belonging to the 'shared territory of knowledge' of the interlocutors (cf. Heritage 2011) in line 13 and 18. This is remarkable if we consider the phenomenon in Japanese. In the standard variety of Japanese, the distal demonstrative *are* 'that' is used to indicate the shared territory of knowledge. This difference is also meaningful for the process of language contact.

Socio-culturally, the data provides us not only with the cultural information about how young people in Nakijin found a partner at the beginning of 20th century in the framework of communal arrangements of festivities, but more essentially, it informs us how local people experience and organise their life experiences. In addition, other data in the corpus show local people's knowledge about social constraints, the way this is internalized, and also, how they deal flexibly with these constraints. Moreover, documentation of such knowledge must be crucial for studies in the field of sociology, anthropology and cultural history.

5. DISCUSSION

In comparing two distinct sets of data, it has been shown that consultants are generally oriented to interaction in situ. Such orientation should be considered an opportunity for documenting language practices in interaction and establishing more suitable methods of data collection. The appropriate number of consultants and the topic must be established in accordance with each local situation. In any case, it is important to document the interaction as such, regardless of the researcher's current interests. This also implies that, even if the consultants use non-target languages or code-mix as in Transcript (1), such data should be documented too. Analyzing such data would contribute to understanding the mechanisms of language choice in endangered language communities and could prove essential in designing language revitalization programmes.

In order to establish a flexible version of group discussions with focused topics to elicit conversational storytelling, it appears to be important that the participants share the experiences with one another. In Transcript (2), both consultants know each other

well. The interaction clearly shows that memories need to be articulated for, endorsed by and constructed with a co-participant(s) who is able to share them. This fact is important from an ethical point of view as well, yet is a problematic issue in non-conversational storytelling. As Heritage (2011: 160-161) puts it, sharing and exchanging experiences is a fundamental activity in human communication:

[W]hen persons report first-hand experiences of any great intensity (...), they obligate others to join with them in their evaluation, to affirm the nature of the experience and its meaning, and to affiliate with the stance of the experience toward them. These obligations are moral obligations that, if fulfilled, will create moments of empathic communication.

In assembling a group of consultants, this aspect also needs to be taken into account.

To conclude, I would like to emphasize that conversational storytelling should be documented more often. Furthermore, group discussions with focused topics can be designed as a possible documentation method if two or more language speakers are available to be consultants, as is the case for all Ryukyuan languages at present.

APPENDIX I: DATA

Transcript (1) [28B Nakijin Wakugawa 1980]

001 CM <<p>n:> <<f, Jp> !ano:! jidai no: `ne>
<<p> we:ll> <<f, Jp> well at that time you know>

002 (-)

003 <<Jp> ano jidai

[no:>
<<Jp> at that time>

→ 004 IF [<<whispering, Jp> hōgen de onegai shimasu>
<<whispering, Jp> speak in the dialect, please>

005 CM <<p>pressed> o::: e:::>

006 (1.0)

→ 007 <<Jp> hōgen:->
<<Jp> dialect->

008 (--)

009 <<p, Jp> ano:>
<<p, Jp> we:ll>

010 (-)

011 ((clears throat))

012 (3.2)

013 e:::
ah::m

014 (-)
 015 <<pressed> e:>
 016 (5.2)
 017 kanazumitiisaazi
 (a) *handtowel with flower motif*
 018 (---)

Transcript (2) [6A Nakijin Imadomari 1978] (NINJAL 2008: 155-156, CD track 23-24)

001 UM ?uyabii=ja ?ancii si-cii mikka=[ni ?ari sii-ba
 parents=TOP such do-CVB the.third=DAT that do-COND
 while parents did such (festivity) on the third (of March),
 002 TF [un un
 hm hm
 003 (.)
 004 UM mata: ?ugaami nii?ee-?taa ?unu[:(.)meerabin-caa]=ja saa
 and we young.men-PL well young.woman-PL=TOP DSC
 we, the young men, we:ll (.) young women
 005 TF [meerabin-caa
 young women
 006 un]
 yeah
 007 UM jukka=[nu pii
 the.fourth=GEN day
 (on) the fourth (of March)
 008 TF [jukka
 (on) the fourth
 009 (-)
 010 TF <<pp, l> un>
 <<pp, l> *yeah*>
 011 (-)
 012 UM mata (.) kaasabin?too
 and packed.meal
 (with) their meal wrapped in leaves
 013 ?urii tanusimi ja-?taruu [jaa
 it fun COP-PST DSC
 that was fun, wasn't it
 014 TF [un
 yeah
 015 (.)

APPENDIX II: Conventions for transcription (adapted from Selting et al. 2011)
and morphological transliteration

Symbols		
[ ]	....	overlap and simultaneous talk
[]		
(.)	....	micro-pause
(-), (--), (---)	....	estimated pauses of approximately 0.2-0.5 sec., 0.5-0.8 sec., 0.8-1.0 sec. duration
( )	....	unintelligible passage
:	....	vowel lengthening
! !	....	extra stressed
`doo	....	falling intonation
joo-	....	final pitch contour: level
<<l> >	....	low
<<f>.....>	....	forte
<<p> >	....	piano
<<pp> >	....	pianissimo
<<all> >	....	allegro
<<:-)> >	....	smile voice
<<pressed> >	....	pressed voice quality
<<Jp> >	....	spoken in Japanese
((laughs))	....	non-verbal vocal actions and events

Transliteration	Morpheme category	Example
ABL	.... ablative.....	<i>ra</i>
CAUS	.... causative	<i>-sun</i>
COND	.... conditional.....	<i>-ba</i>
COP	.... copula.....	<i>en, ja-</i>
CVB	.... converb.....	<i>-?ti</i>
DAT	.... dative particle.....	<i>ni</i>
DSC	.... discourse particle.....	<i>jaa, doo, sa(a)</i>
EX	.... exclusive.....	<i>wattaa [we]</i>
EXCL	.... exclamative.....	<i>-sanu</i>
GEN	.... genitive particle.....	<i>nu</i>
INJ	.... interjection.....	<i>?ai, ?ee, etc.</i>
NOM	.... nominative particle.....	<i>ga</i>
PL	.... plural suffix.....	<i>-caa, -?taa</i>
PST	.... past.....	<i>-?tan, -tar-</i>
QUOT	.... quotative particle.....	<i>di, ri</i>
TOP topic particle.....	<i>ja</i>
1 first person singular.....	<i>wanuu, wan</i>
2.PL second person plural.....	<i>?ii</i>

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