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DISCUSSION NOTES

From linguistic elicitation to eliciting the linguist: Lessons in community empowerment from Melanesia*

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As an outsider, I would feel very uncomfortable if I were to advocate to a speech community that it ought to try to keep its language alive. It is entirely up to the community or to individuals within a community as to whether they want to put in the effort to develop new speakers for their language. Community members have the right to advocate within their community for the survival of their language; someone from outside the community does not. The right to language choice includes the right to choose against a language. This is the logical result of believing that maintaining an indigenous language is a matter of human rights, a belief virtually all language advocates must share. The outside expert’s role is to assist in providing the means for language survival or revival to motivated community members and perhaps to provide encouragement and a sense of hope that it can be done. (Leanne Hinton, 2002:151–52)

1. COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT AS A GUIDING PRINCIPLE IN ENDANGERED-LANGUAGE LINGUISTICS. For the humanistically oriented field linguist, the present historical moment is an exciting but also highly demanding one in which to work. Confronted with the great changes in linguistic ecology now taking place on a global scale, many linguists feel compelled—indeed, they are exhorted by leading voices of the discipline¹—to take on the weighty responsibility of recording and preserving the world’s linguistic diversity for the sake of future generations. Those engaged in this work are required to master not only ‘a broad variety of language related (sub)disciplines’ at various degrees of remove from the traditional center of descriptive linguistics (Himmelmann 2002:10), but also such areas as videorecording, archiving, and digital technology—and all this in conformance with emerging best-practice standards (see e.g. Bird & Simons 2003, E-MELD 2005). Compounding these demands, linguists working in endangered-language (EL) communities frequently find themselves having to address problems of language maintenance and revitalization.² As a result, fieldwork now often involves an applied or ‘language development’ component creating orthographies and pedagogical

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² Not to mention such nonlinguistic matters as land claims, economic development, political advocacy, and individuals’ health problems.
materials, compiling dictionaries, advising communities on matters of language policy, and so on.

Without a doubt, endangered-language documentation and preservation contributes to the richness of the resource base available to theoretical and typological linguistics. But there is also little doubt that the increased interest in endangered-language documentation and development (ELDD) that we have seen in linguistics over the past two decades derives its meaning and motivation not only from a scientific frame of reference, but also, significantly, from a moral one that adds to the weight on the field linguist’s shoulders. Although there is probably no one formulation of this frame to which all linguists would assent, a key component is the recognition, often implicit, that the superficially voluntary shifts in linguistic code now taking place in many small, minority, and indigenous language communities are in fact driven by those communities’ political, cultural, and economic marginalization. Many linguists feel an obligation to aim, through their work, to help people overcome these marginalizing forces so that the use of their vernaculars might reemerge as a viable choice. One of the most powerful statements of the moral imperative for ELDD can be found in Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine’s book *Vanishing voices: The extinction of the world’s languages*, which connects the phenomenon of language endangerment to threatened ecological and cultural diversity and couches its significance as a matter of universal human rights. Nettle and Romaine write:

> We believe that people should be given control over their environments at the local level to the greatest extent possible. We also believe that where this is done many people will choose... to retain elements of their cultural heritage... To choose to use a language is an act of identity or belonging to a particular community... [T]he choice to be who one wishes to be is a human right. (2000:172–73; see also Dorian 1993, Bobaljik 1998)

In line with this understanding of language shift’s moral dimension, autonomy and self-determination have become prominent themes in linguists’ activism. Aiming to construct their relationships with threatened language communities as ‘symmetrical’ ‘empowering’ ‘collaborations’, endangered-language linguists have been at pains to empower members of speech communities with the kinds of skills and knowledge that would enable them to plan and implement their linguistic agendas on their own (Cameron et al. 1992, 1993). This idea is by no means a new one—indeed, Ken Hale argued for the professionalization of native speakers on both scientific and moral grounds in 1969—but it has gained new momentum with the growing strength of indigenous rights movements and with the adoption of human rights activism as a major pillar of ELDD. Thus, many endangered-language linguists are now working to prepare endangered-

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3 Indeed, the essays on ELs that effectively inaugurated the field of ELDD when they appeared in *Language* in 1992 were contributed at the invitation of the journal’s editor, Sarah Grey Thomason, with the intent of addressing ‘the topic of “responsible linguistics”’ (Editor’s note to Hale et al. 1992:1). Not that there are not dissenters, such as Ladevede (1992), who rejects the notion that language endangerment is a moral problem for linguistics, or Mufwene (2000:250; see also Mufwene 2003), who interprets language shift as ‘normal adjustments that people continue to make to changing ecologies’.

4 There is clearly a profound truth in this position, which has been effective in attracting funding, providing a rallying point for community activists, and bringing the problem of language endangerment to the attention of high-profile international organizations like UNESCO. For many it is also more compelling than the trope dramatizing language attrition as ‘the loss to humanity of priceless cultural treasures’. This latter form of appeal is not always meaningful to lay audiences, for whom the cultural value of such structural linguistic wonders as noun incorporation or nonconfigurational syntax is anything but obvious, and it may be outright resented by endangered-language community members, who hear it only further appropriation and commodification of their already beleaguered cultural heritage (Hill 2002).
language community members to carry out their own language surveys and documentation, do their own community organizing, run their own language classes, guide their own materials development, and so on. Within the academy a number of programs have evolved specifically in order to train community members to "take over the role of linguist," an approach now often championed as an emerging ideal in the field (Rice 2006:143; see also Battiste & Henderson 2000, the papers in Hinton & Hale 2001 Part 8, Woodbury & England 2004, Yamamoto 1998). Latin America is one area of the world where this approach has fit particularly comfortably: "[F]or outside linguists...to combine doing fieldwork with teaching, training, and mentoring native speakers for sustainable documentation projects...is clearly the aimed-for state of affairs in most of Latin America today" (Grinevald 2003:60). Hence the founding of such institutions as CILLA, the Center for the Indigenous Languages of Latin America, at the University of Texas. The core aim of CILLA is "to offer state-of-the-art training in documentation and description to new generations of community language activists with a total focus on indigenous students," an agenda that is intended to "respond...directly to questions of academic responsibility" (Woodbury & England 2004:124, 123, 133; see also England 1992:33–34, Watahomigie & Yamamoto 1992:12, and Woodbury 2003:48–49, among others).5 Citing Furbee, Stanley, and Arkeketa's view that "[i]t is the job of the outside consultant to help [a community identify potential indigenous scholars], train them, and step aside" (1998:79), David Crystal devotes a whole section of his book on language death to describing how and why ELDD would be carried out by community members themselves 'in a truly ideal world' (2000:156; see 154ff.).6

But there is a flip side to linguists' assumption that empowerment requires autonomy and self-determination: a self-conscious limiting of the role outside linguists can or should have in facilitating language revitalization. This is evident in the idea, which David Margolin (2004:30) has called 'a truism of the field', that the motivation to carry out any kind of language program must have its source in the community itself, or else it is bound to fail. The literature is full of invocations of this idea, the effect of which is to place full rights and responsibilities for the success of language revitalization initiatives—which we know to be enormous and very difficult undertakings even under the best of circumstances—squarely on the shoulders of EL communities themselves:

It is only if an indigenous speech community itself desires and initiates efforts toward language survival that such programs should exist or would have any chance of success. (Hinton 2001:5)

Only the indigenous community itself can save its language. (Crystal 2000:111)

The overall success of any revitalization program depends on the motivation of the future speakers and the community which supports them. (Grenoble & Whaley 2006:20)

In other words, outsiders are justified in helping to get language programs started, serving as technical advisers, and providing guidance and encouragement. But if a language program must be driven or continually energized by outsiders in order to function, it is by definition not self-sustaining and cannot have an enduring effect on the linguistic situation. Of course, 'languages need communities in order to live' (Crystal...
tal (2000:154), and as the primary stakeholders, community members surely know better than outsiders what is appropriate for them. But the empowerment model has implications not only for whose right it is to implement local language programs and see to it that they succeed, but also for whose responsibility it is when they fail: both the credit and the blame ultimately must rest with the communities themselves.

2. Why do local ELDD projects fail? It is the rare community indeed that transforms itself in the way Marianne Mithun describes for a Mohawk community that 'simply resolved' to go back to speaking the vernacular (1998:187–88). Locally controlled language programs are notoriously difficult to sustain: they lose momentum, become embroiled in conflict, or simply fail to achieve their stated goals. But there are very few studies specifically devoted to exploring the practical, ideological, and political factors that work against local language programs’ success. While a considerable literature addresses the kinds of larger factors (called ‘macro-variables’ by Grenoble and Whaley (1998, 2006)) that language programs must overcome, such as the need for EL speakers to accommodate to a national language or the imposition of education policies that prevent the use of vernaculars as the medium of schooling, only four studies that I am aware of analyze in detail particular cases of ELDD program failure.⁸ Significantly, the community’s relationship to outsiders is a factor in all four cases. I summarize these studies below.

Margolin (2004) focuses on three communities in which the level of commitment to language-development projects was less than wholehearted: the Tawahkas of northeastern Honduras, the Ulwas of the Nicaraguan central coast, and the Tlingits in Southeastern Alaska. Critically evaluating the program goals set in these communities, Margolin found that they reflected an interest in the language not as something that can be spoken, but rather as something that can be owned, a symbol of affective ethnicity functioning to shore up the community’s sense of identity in the surrounding local and regional context. As Margolin observes, there was ‘no ongoing effort on the part of Tawahka leaders to support the documentation of the language or the development of pedagogical materials’ even as the community was training teachers to use the vernacular for instruction in schools. There was ‘no program in place to train Ulwa bilingual teachers’ even though community members were actively documenting their vernacular in collaboration with linguists (2004:23, 24). With Tlingit, an institutional push for vernacular-immersion schooling in the late 1990s by the Sealaska Heritage Foundation had to be implemented in a drastically reduced way—despite major grant funding—because sufficient involvement could not be generated within the community. As Margolin shows, the specific form of ELDD activity that each of these communities chose to pursue served the ultimately nonlinguistic end of strengthening the community’s position in relation to the surrounding society in very precise ways, even if it did little to slow or reverse language shift.

Drawing in part upon Margolin’s insights, Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer (1998) focus on the reasons why ELDD work has produced such disappointing results in Southeastern Alaska, locating the source of the trouble in these communities’ actual, as opposed to stated, goals. Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer appeal

⁸A thorough inventory of the range of problems encountered in ELDD can be found in Tsunoda 2005: 179–200. In a provocative article entitled ‘Even with the best of intentions. . . . Some pitfalls in the fight for linguistic and cultural survival’, Wilkins (2000) raises in a general way the need to explore the kinds of issues I deal with here.
to Joshua Fishman’s (1991) concept of ‘prior ideological clarification’ in arguing that Native Americans in Alaska have embarked upon a number of projects to reclaim their heritage languages without having first ‘undertake[n] an open, honest assessment’ of the meanings those languages hold for them (1998:71). If they had, the authors suggest, they might recognize that they harbor negative feelings about their vernaculars as a result of the experiences they have had with white outsiders over the preceding century of political and religious domination. Because of their ambivalence—being attracted to the language as a badge of ethnicity while unconsciously rejecting it as dispensable and even unpalatable⁹—institutions have tended to distance themselves from their own role in linguistic transmission and have looked instead to technology, institutions, or others to do it for them. Given these motivational realities, Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer conclude that a widespread renewal of intergenerational transmission (Fishman 1991, 2001; see also Romaine 2008) is less realistic than the accomplishment of limited linguistic goals by a small number of dedicated Native Alaskans seeking personal satisfaction. In this cultural area, then, it may be more productive for ELDD projects to focus on helping such dedicated individuals rather than operating at the level of the community.

In the Itzaj Maya case discussed by Charles Hofling (1996), the ebb and flow of an ELDD project in the Petén of Guatemala could be tied quite directly to developments in the community’s relationship to outsiders, including the author himself. While they drew their energy in part from the pan-Mayan indigenous rights movement and built on groundwork carried out by a national Mayan language organization, Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala, Itzaj language activists in the Petén were also buoyed by the community’s relationship to Hofling, an anthropologist who worked with local people to create Itzaj vernacular literacy, curriculum, and documentation materials.¹⁰ But what really got the movement off the ground was the talk surrounding a foreign-sponsored project, the Biósfera Itza, which sought to establish an Itzaj cultural and ecological reserve in the Petén. Through the Biosphere project, the community’s concerns were brought to the attention of a number of outside organizations, some of which promised to provide the Itzaj with considerable financial support. But as actual funding failed to materialize, the people’s enthusiasm for cultural revitalization devolved into distrust, infighting, and low morale. In Hofling’s assessment, language revitalization in the Itzaj community broke down because the movement was ‘in reaction to or stimulated by outsiders’, with local people adopting a familiar role of client in which their cooperation was tied to the hope of economic gain (1996:112, 113–14). Hofling concludes that even when their motives are earnest and altruistic, outsiders can cause unanticipated and undesired outcomes when they intervene: while our ‘sympathies naturally lie with preservation revitalization of disappearing languages, we are not necessarily helping indigenous peoples by uncritically advocating such efforts’ (1996:114).

The problem of unanticipated outcomes emerges again in the fourth and final case of failed ELDD, the White Mountain Apache language education program Ndee Biyati studied by anthropologist Eleanor Nevins (2004). Nevins worked with skilled community members as a paid linguistic and technical consultant developing web-based language materials for use in Apache reservation schools. Although the project proceeded smoothly and resulted in such useful and well-received products as a unit on kin relations

⁹ In some cases literally, because it brings back the taste of the soap their mission schoolteachers forced them to eat whenever they spoke the language as children.

¹⁰ Ironically, Hofling saw this work as important for ‘lessen[ing] their dependency on outsiders’ (112).
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and an interactive alphabet, *Ndee Biyati* became a source of political contention in the reservation community, and in time it was canceled. In attempting to understand what led to this end, Nevins found it necessary to interpret people's criticisms of the project from an Apache cultural perspective. Alongside the more familiar discourse associating the potential revival of the language with the political aspirations of submerged nations, Nevins also heard Apache people speak about language endangerment in ways that made little sense from a western perspective. Apache youth who did not speak the language were described by some parents and elders as failing to 'listen' as evidenced by the fact that they did not spend time with their families engaging in day-to-day activities like baking bread and chopping wood. What did Apache people mean by this, and what did it imply about the collapse of *Ndee Biyati*? Nevins argues that by constructing the language as isolated words and phrases to be acquired in a school setting, the project threatened to estrange the language from its use within the family, the core domain in which specifically Apache ways of speaking and social practices are cultivated and sustained. In short, Nevins argues, the *Ndee Biyati* project was perceived by many Apache as undermining their authority to transmit their language and reproduce their culture in precisely those ways that were most meaningful to them.

It is uncomfortable to dwell upon cases of ELDD failure at a time when linguists feel so acutely the need to carry forward this important work even in the face of great obstacles. But the goal these four studies are reaching toward is a constructive one: attempting to see in cases of project failure not merely idiosyncratic circumstances, nor the working of unmodern irrationalities or frustrating interpersonal politics, but the real concerns motivating people in complex speech communities to act—or decline to act—in ways that are consequential for the continued vitality of their language. It is only by taking such concerns seriously that we can ever hope to improve upon our models for community-based ELDD.

But of these excellent studies, only Nevins's work on *Ndee Biyati* considers the possibility that the relevant local concerns might in fact be culturally particular. Otherwise, the kinds of issues pointed to are all ones that are 'natural' from a western perspective: jostling for power in the realm of local politics, grasping for the sugarplums of financial advancement, feeling ambivalence in light of prior negative experiences. Yet culturally particular concerns are likely to be significant in shaping the outcomes of ELDD programs too, even though they may be much harder for those steeped in western cultural values to detect, interpret, or extrapolate from. This is not to say that concerns that seem natural to western linguists are inauthentic or imposed upon the people to whom they are ascribed, nor that they are unimportant in any way. Nor need the culturally particular be identified with a timeless indigenous cultural state that is completely independent of outside influence. People everywhere are now interconnected in myriad and complex ways. But even so, the cultural worlds they create and inhabit are distinct in terms of the schemes of meaning that shape their interests and organize their actions. If we are dedicated to linguistic diversity and the cultural diversity that supports it, we should take special care to acknowledge those concerns that arise out of endangered-language communities' contemporary vernacular cultures (see also Fishman 2002).

Note also that all four of these case studies are drawn from the Americas, which is certainly understandable given the North American research contexts that produced them. Nevertheless, there has been something of a bias in ELDD discourse toward this region of the world, even though language endangerment is known to be a systemic global problem that requires our attention worldwide (Wurm 1996, Skutnabb-Kangas
The natural human tendency to generalize the moral framework most familiar to us, combined with western linguists’ own centrality as powerful outsiders in much of the ELDD work being carried out today, makes it imperative that we carefully consider the culturally particular concerns surrounding local language projects we are involved in, wherever they may be, and especially the ways in which those concerns implicate us.11

3. ELDD FROM A MELANEESIAN MORAL PERSPECTIVE. In this section I attempt to do just this by analyzing a constellation of moral issues that arose in the course of my fieldwork on the Arapesh languages, spoken in the Sepik coastal region of Papua New Guinea (PNG). My motivation to address these issues derives from a sense of unease that has grown for me over the past several years as I have tried to understand my role as an outside linguist working on these endangered languages in light of a professional discourse that has tended to privilege the cultural and political context of work in Native America and that is firmly rooted in a western view of empowerment as involving autonomy and self-determination. While the case here is drawn from the New Guinea Sepik, its significance may be more general inasmuch as similar dynamics can be found throughout Melanesia and much of Oceania. And perhaps even farther afield: as revisiting the case studies above in light of the Arapesh example would show (though I leave this task to the reader), the patterns of relations with outsiders I describe have resonances elsewhere in the world as well.

But even if the issues were limited to Melanesia, the implications for linguistics would still be broad. Although it remains understudied, PNG is probably the world’s most linguistically diverse country, with eight-hundred-plus languages spread over a mere four million people.12 Three-quarters of these are non-Austronesian languages that represent ‘about three dozen language families and close to the same number of language isolates’ (Ford 1998, Foley 1986, 2000:357). Most are spoken within very small communities: the average language has a speaker base of only 3,000 people ‘distributed over 10–20 villages’ (Foley 2000:358). Nearly half of PNG’s languages are found in what is known in PNG as the ‘Momase’ region—the four north coast provinces of Morobe, Madang, East Sepik, and Sandaun (Taylor 1981:8). There are three hundred languages in the Sepik-Ramu basin alone (Foley 1988; see also Alkhenvald 2004). But language shift to Tok Pisin, the nation’s English-based creole lingua franca, is now proceeding in many parts of PNG at a rapid pace, fueled by tendencies indigenous to the cultures in which they are spoken, including the attribution of positive value to cultural elements perceived as foreign. Margaret Mead’s famous designation ‘an importing culture’ (the subtitle of Mead 1938) applies not just to the Mountain Arapesh communities among whom I did fieldwork; it would be apt for many other Melanesian societies as well. This is nowhere more true than in the Sepik region, which alone accounts for a quarter of PNG’s languages and is arguably the most linguistically dense area in the world.13

11 In a discussion of ethics in language documentation, Grinevald (2003:70, n. 21) suggests as a ‘basic rule of thumb’ that we use ‘the common sense of wondering how we would feel’ in a given research encounter. What I am advocating is that we work to recognize the cultural particularity of just that ‘common sense’ and try understanding not how the encounter would make us feel, but how it in fact makes the others feel.
12 See Skutnabb-Kangas 2000:34–37 for a helpful comparison of several major language diversity surveys.
If we assume that autonomy and self-determination are necessary components of empowerment, then it seems only natural that any ELDD work carried out by western linguists in PNG should offer local people the skills and tools that would enable them to support and maintain their languages on their own. An excellent illustration of this principle in the design of local language-development projects can be found in the classic manual Working together for literacy (Stringer & Farclas 1987), which, while acknowledging the difficult conditions surrounding such work in third world contexts, proposes a method for implementing vernacular literacy programs with minimal help, money, and expertise from outsiders. In a similar vein Geoff Smith suggests that work toward language preservation in PNG should ideally take the form of ‘an initiative from within the community, relying on internal resources, and with minimal input from outside advisers’—in other words, ‘schemes [that] can be self-sustaining given sufficient motivation’ (1992:120).

But such an approach is not likely to be empowering in PNG. Papua New Guineans understand perfectly well that they are at the bottom of a global hierarchy of development and civilization, in what they sometimes half-jokingly call the world’s ‘last place’. It is precisely this negative self-consciousness (see e.g. Robbins 2004:170–73) that so energizes the rampant shift to Tok Pisin now taking place even in remote PNG villages that were traditionally multilingual. What is most troubling to Papua New Guineans about the superior wealth and privilege they perceive in outsiders is not how little they themselves have, but outsiders’ unwillingness to recognize the disparity. From a Melanesian moral perspective in which not independence but rather RELATIONALITY—having numerous interdependent relations with others—is the supreme cultural virtue (Robbins 2004), the appropriate response to an obvious difference in wealth and power is not to try to minimize it, but to show solicitude for those who have less through engagement with them in a relationship of ‘helping’ that has material generosity as its moral and emotional focus. While well-meaning westerners are intensely concerned to respect the dignity—implying autonomy—of people they see as poor or subaltern, Papua New Guineans often interpret westerners’ hesitancy to involve themselves in their affairs as a disdainful aloofness, one that leads people to draw negative inferences about their own moral worth (Bashkow 2006).

A negative self-evaluation in light of outsiders’ perceived distance is a theme that emerges clearly in Stephen Leavitt’s writings on the Bumbita Arapesh. Rather than attempting to deny or subvert the power differences they observe between themselves and white outsiders, the Bumbita accord whites the culturally respected role of paternal figures, who, by virtue of their obvious superior power and wealth, can and should be generous caregivers (Leavitt 1995:180). As such, whites have ‘obligations to share wealth as intimates should’, yet as Leavitt shows, the Bumbita are consistently disappointed by whites’ failure to respect these obligations: the Bumbitas’ ‘predominant experience with Europeans . . . is often one of aloofness, disinterest, and even disdain’ (Leavitt 2000:306). One finds many echoes of this sense of rejection in the literature on Melanesian cargo cults, popular religious movements (associated most closely with the post-WWII Pacific) in which natives attempt to redress their dramatic poverty and

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14 In this respect, progressive academic linguists are not alone: nongovernment organizations (NGOs), missions, and development agencies are similarly guided by the principle that community projects should be self-supporting, with outsiders ideally adopting only an advisory, project-seeding role for themselves.

15 The Bumbita Arapesh or Weri are an inland Sepik society that is culturally quite distinct from the Mountain Arapesh, although the language they speak belongs to the same family.
powerlessness in relation to whites by developing new indigenous rituals to elicit western-style material wealth or 'cargo' from ancestral or other supernatural sources. As the Papua New Guinean intellectual Bernard Narokobi writes, such movements have arisen in part because there 'never was any genuine person-to-person contact [with whites] such as to enhance Melanesian self-respect, identity and initiative' (Narokobi 1974:99; see also Burrige 1969).

In order to understand just what kind of 'person-to-person contact' it is that Melanesians want with outsiders, we need to know something about how they form relationships among themselves. The main means through which they do this is EXCHANGE: the anthropological term for the giving and receiving of material objects. While westerners build relationships primarily around episodes of talk, Melanesians are inclined to dismiss talk as unreliable, since it comes so cheaply and is open to the suspicion of being deceitful or dissembling on those grounds. Unlike talk, one's feelings toward another can be materialized—made real and knowable—through the gift of a desirable object, which, since it constitutes a real sacrifice, indicates the worthiness of the recipient. A person's ability to elicit exchange thus constitutes a highly valued form of empowerment, as it provides a basis for establishing self-worth. Exchange is a ubiquitous preoccupation in Papua New Guineans' everyday lives, the focus of enormous expenditures of time, effort, and planning. From a western perspective this Melanesian way of making friends can be disconcerting, because it revolves so centrally around giving and requesting things and so can seem materialistic or grasping. But such overtures are aimed at eliciting a healthy and lively pattern of reciprocal exchange. However real people's desire for an object, that desire is virtually always subordinate to the project of building and maintaining relationships. I saw this often during my fieldwork when I would finally give people things they had asked me for, and they would turn right around and give them away.\textsuperscript{16}

Exchange is all the more empowering when it involves others from afar. To have exchange relationships that range over a wide area demonstrates one's capacity for influence, and hence authority, in Melanesia (Munn 1986). Moreover, because the contrast with outsiders so dramatically overshadows divisions internal to a community, relationships with outsiders provide a highly effective means for communities to achieve unity—a valued social state that is widely assumed in Melanesia to be the precondition for success in any endeavor. In many Melanesian societies, individuals' unwillingness to subordinate their interests in the service of communal goals is felt to be an endemic social ill. But the promise of recognition in the form of material value elicited from outside can motivate people to put their individual interests aside and sustain coordinated activity. Exchange with outsiders is thus a primary mechanism through which Melanesian communities achieve their collective goals and enhance their sense of social value—empowerment, but in their own cultural terms. This positive cycle of empowerment through exchange with outsiders is illustrated in Figure 1. But when outsiders retreat and exchange subsides, the cycle works in reverse: individuals become disaffected with communal demands and begin opting out, leading to recriminations, ill will, further attrition, and ultimately passivity and self-blame (Brison 1991). In short, exchange relationships with outsiders are often highly constructive for Melanesian communities—all the more so when the outsiders are wealthy and powerful and come from afar—whereas the disengagement of outsiders is in fact disempowering, since it

\textsuperscript{16}Gift exchange is a central (if not the central) theme in the ethnographic literature on Melanesia (see e.g. Malinowski 1984 [1922], Strathern 1988, Schieffelin 1990).
undermines the fragile unity that communities continually strive for but find so difficult to achieve, and that community-based projects require in order to succeed.

So while the idea that outsiders should limit their involvement in local communities in an effort to respect their autonomy might seem to us commonsensical, it is at odds with the perspective of most PNG villagers, for whom foreign-sponsored projects of all kinds (economic, religious, health-related, etc.) are valued precisely because of the exchange relationships they bring with the outsiders who promote them. This applies to language projects no less, whether their aim is vernacular schooling, community literacy, Bible translation, language documentation, or language revitalization. Indeed, language is one of the few domains where Papua New Guineans recognize they have some basis for eliciting outside interest, particularly given their long experience with missionary linguists, now primarily represented by SIL International (SIL). Linguists usually assume that people will be motivated to reclaim their endangered language when they come to recognize its value for their cultural integrity, continuity, and identity. But while these considerations were not insignificant to the Arapesh villagers I worked with, what made my work in their community most valuable to them was the fact that it brought them into a relationship with a powerful outsider—a linguist—me.

When I arrived in the village where I made field home, I was surprised to find that the language I had traveled so far to study was rapidly obsolescing.\(^{17}\) In the mountaintop village I call here ‘Apakibur’, the linguistic medium of everyday life is now Tok Pisin. The youngest good vernacular speakers are all over fifty, and few children are able to understand the simplest everyday commands and greetings, putting the language on the verge of seriously endangered according to the scheme in Wurm 1998. Like the Gapun villagers studied by Kulick (1992), Apakibur villagers express regret that their vernacular \textit{(tok ples} in Tok Pisin) is falling away. They wistfully acknowledge that their focus on modern things has brought about the loss of their language and other indigenous forms of value, but brought little by way of material improvements in return. Villagers complain that their increasingly tenuous hold on traditional knowledge is affecting their lives in practical ways, so that now, when a young man is sent into the

\(^{17}\) I conducted fieldwork on Arapesh languages in East Sepik Province, PNG, from December 1997 to March 1999. I spent most of that time in a village where the Cemaun dialect of Mountain Arapesh was spoken, making short trips throughout the region to gather comparative data. While my research focus was on Arapeshan systems of noun classification, most villagers understood me as having come to ‘learn their language and write it down in a book’.
forest to cut down a nice solid abuk tree to build a house, he is liable to err and bring back wurumac, a species ill-suited for that purpose.

Again like Gapuners, Apakibur villagers will readily assign blame for what is happening to their tok ples. They blame their parents for not speaking it to them when they were children. They blame their children for being too stubborn to learn from the elders. They blame themselves for answering in Tok Pisin when they could be using the vernacular. But note who is not held culpable: not their former colonizers, the Germans and the Australians; not the Catholic mission, which has had tremendous influence in the region and has used Tok Pisin as the official language of its work since the 1930s (Mihalic 1996); and not the schools, in which English has been the sole medium of instruction since the 1950s. Instead, they lay the blame squarely on themselves.

Far from blaming outsiders, the people of Apakibur readily look to them for hope of a solution. During my fieldwork I was troubled to hear villagers say that I was going to revive their language, as one elder did upon my first visit to the village when he stood up and announced that the vernacular would now experience a renaissance. My village interlocutors occasionally pointed out that they were speaking Arapesh again simply because I was there—which seemed paradoxical given that I never learned to speak the language very well, having had so little exposure to it, and used Tok Pisin with nearly everyone instead. Ironically, the one such comment that I happened to record was uttered in Tok Pisin: ‘Oh Lise, because you have come we speak our language. If you weren’t here we’d be speaking pidgin.’

I certainly shared the villagers’ regret about the decline of their language. But I was totally unprepared to be attributed the ability to reverse it. My own concern was not to disrupt village life any more than necessary, and I simply assumed that language shift was a problem that had to be addressed by the villagers themselves. In retrospect, however, I can see that these comments were pointing to something real, and that in failing to take them seriously I missed an opportunity. As the village leaders saw, the outside acknowledgment I provided was precisely what was needed for a community-wide language project they were engaged in to succeed.

3.1. The Apakibur Vernacular Language Preschool. One of the reasons I had chosen Apakibur as a field site in the first place was the exceptional interest the villagers had shown in their language, as evidenced by the effort they had put into establishing a vernacular language preschool (tok ples priskul, or TPPS) that was seen throughout the region as a resounding success. In order to understand the community’s aims in undertaking this vernacular schooling project, it is necessary to know the place of local languages in the history of PNG’s education policy. During the period of Australian administration in colonial New Guinea the language of schooling was English. This policy was carried over in 1975 when PNG became an independent state. But English-only schooling was never completely satisfactory, educationally or politically, given the population’s enormous linguistic diversity, the state’s limited investment in English-language resources, and the growth of Tok Pisin as the indisputable de facto lingua franca of the nation. Recently, however, PNG’s hundreds of vernaculars have been accorded some legitimacy as languages of early schooling. As a result of reforms enacted in the mid-1990s, PNG education policy shifted from exclusively English

\textsuperscript{18} Much has been written about this subject that need not be recapitulated here. See, for example, Bromhall & May 1975, Delpit 1984, Romaine 1992, and Taylor 1981.

\textsuperscript{19} The Organic Law on Provincial and Local Level Government, the Education Amendment Act, and the Teaching Service Amendment Act (1995).
immersion to a system of vernacular instruction for the first three years of school. The state has also begun to support vernacular language literacy (see the EFA Assessment Country Report for PNG, UNESCO 2000:4–5, Dutcher 2004). These changes mark significant steps toward a vision Papua New Guineans have discussed for a long time: incorporating local knowledge and languages into their system of formal education. When implemented conscientiously, vernacular language instruction can be immensely beneficial, especially for the early years of schooling: mother-tongue education helps students acquire literacy and other academic skills more easily; it makes the transition between village life and school less linguistically and culturally abrupt; and most importantly for language vitality, it lends prestige to the vernacular through the association with the western institution of schooling and the world of money to which it promises access (Hinton 2001:9; see also Baker 2006, Cummins 2000). A key feature of PNG’s new system is the transfer of responsibility for vernacular education to provincial governments, and above all, to local communities themselves.

But attractive as local control over education might seem, in PNG, as elsewhere, it is a knife that cuts two ways. To be sure, it gives communities authority over a domain that profoundly affects their lives, but it also justifies the withdrawal of centralized funding, training, and provision of materials. One of the anticipated advantages of PNG’s education reform was that the vernacular schools could be run inexpensively by using local ‘paraprofessionals’ as teachers, but the schools’ meager budgets are in the hands of provincial and local-level governments that have chronic problems with fiscal management, and the money for these teachers’ pay, training, and classroom supplies is often egregiously delayed or outright lacking. To bridge the gap between what is needed to run a school and what is actually provided by government authorities, the system relies heavily on foreign NGOs, particularly SIL. So thoroughly has the state withdrawn from the matter of vernacular schooling that we can now only estimate the number of schools in operation, and little evidence is available about how their students are faring (Dutcher 2004:95; see also Jongdu 1995). Over time the reform has come to be viewed by many PNG educators and policymakers as a great disappointment.

But back in 1994, Apakibur villagers were positioning themselves to take full advantage of the reforms, which were slated to take effect the following year. With material support and leadership from the village’s network of elite urban-dwelling kin, Apakibur built a TPPS for village children to attend before entering the nearby grade school. During my fieldwork I frequently heard the TPPS mentioned as an indicator of the community’s virtue. When I was considering Apakibur as a fieldsite, a provincial research administrator cited it as boding well for my well-being and the success of my research. SIL linguists working in the area spoke of it as a sign of the villagers’ striving that deserved to be encouraged. At intervillage or school events where formal speeches were given by principals, school inspectors, and visiting dignitaries, the Apakibur TPPS was regularly hailed as a model of the positive changes people can bring about when they work together. From all outward signs, the school indeed enjoyed remarkable community support. It was built on lands donated by one of the village’s leading clans; its corrugated iron roofing was paid for by the villagers’ wage-earning kin. The one-room, open-air structure was built of local forest materials gathered by villagers, and the community maintained it: when the grass around the school needed cutting, the villagers dutifully turned out with their grass knives in hand, so the school grounds always looked immaculate.

But once I had settled in, I began to notice that something was awry. Each weekday morning before dawn mothers would rise and cook, and groups of children would
descend the mountain to the grade school on the coast below. But I soon noticed that
the preschool children were staying home, playing in the central clearing or accompany-
ing their parents to their food gardens. Why were they not attending the TPPS? It turned
out there were a number of reasons, no one of which was decisive. One of the school’s
two teachers had picked up and left the village, a commonplace response to an interper-
sonal conflict he had been involved in. The other teacher, tired of working without pay
or money for classroom supplies, had returned to his own food gardening, church work,
and cash cropping. Parents neglected to pay the school fees, which amounted to only
a modest sum even in village terms, because they resented seeing their scarce resources
redistributed to the teachers, who were of course only ordinary villagers little different
from themselves. In time I came to realize that the school was not actually operating.
The teachers lacked adequate training, and even more problematic, neither of them
spoke comfortably in the vernacular. Needless to say, the celebrated Apakibir TPPS
was having little effect on childrens’ linguistic competence or ethnolinguistic identity.

Why was there such a disparity between the elaborate talk about the school and the
school’s actual functioning? Because the villagers’ focus was on the school’s utility
for strengthening their relationships with outsiders: district officials, the wage-earning
village diaspora, and wealthy foreigners like missionaries, NGO workers, and researchers.
Indeed, the villagers made it clear that my involvement in the school would be
most welcome. Yet I hesitated to do more than accommodate the occasional request
for help with supplies; after all, I thought, a village school needs to be able to function
independently. 20 Given the show of community dedication that the building of the
school seemed to imply, outsiders expected that the rest of the project (teachers, pupils,
learning, and so on) would follow as a matter of course. But when the school’s day-
to-day operation was left to the villagers to carry out on their own, their interest began
to wane. This is a common pattern in Melanesian rural development (Bashkow 2003). 21
While we might consider the final criterion of a project’s success a matter of its substantive
functions, the villagers’ yardstick was the school’s effectiveness in attracting money
from outside. 22

But it would be a mistake to interpret the emphasis on money, as Hofling does in
his description of the stalled Itzaj Maya project, as meaning that ‘the outside interest’
was simply another economic opportunity’ (1996:113). In the Arapesh area, where
people still mostly support themselves by subsistence gardening, the average income
is less than twenty dollars per person per year. This is barely enough to keep one’s
family supplied with even the most basic store goods, salt, soap, and kerosene, much
less the occasional kilo of rice, so any additional source of money is understandably

20 I now appreciate how much more constructive it would have been not just to provide or produce materials
for use in the school, but also to actively integrate my village exchange relationships into the functioning
of the school. I could have participated in lessons, paid the children’s school fees, and paid the teacher’s
salary myself. I could also have asked the older children to create encyclopedia entries describing their
natural world, following the model developed by Hviding (2006; see also Hviding 2005). Such an activity
uses western cultural forms to draw attention back to locally important cultural domains, highlighting
the connections between language, formal school learning, and indigenous knowledge while supporting community
engagement with the language and even contributing to academic research.

21 The failure of public enthusiasm to translate into success is also a common theme in the evaluation of vernacular
literacy programs. See Le Page 1997 for examples from India (46–48), Senegal (57–59), Nigeria (68),
and Tanzania (72).

22 This is not as exotic as it might at first seem. We too at times evaluate programs in terms of their ability
to attract funding. Craig (1993:99), for example, points to funding as evidence of the success of the Rama
Language Project.
most welcome (Hanson et al. 2001:209). But as we have seen, material value, in the
form of gifts elicited from outsiders, is also a powerful validation of moral worth. So
when I supplied the teacher with chalk and paper, not only did it help the school in a
much-needed practical way, but it also gave the teacher tangible evidence that I valued
him in that role, validating his authority and providing the motivation for him to con-
tinue. Conversely, the general lack of outside involvement in the ongoing function-
ing of the TPPS indicated to the villagers that that aspect of the school project was not
really worthwhile.

These concerns are illustrated in the following sample of discourse, which is drawn
from the meeting of the Apakibur village school committee that I recorded in November
1998. The meeting discourse illustrates how centrally the school’s role as an elicitory
mechanism was tied for the villagers to issues of community unity and moral self-
worth. The meeting took place in the evening, around a fire in an open-walled hut, and
was attended by the four committee members: the chairman of the village school board
who oversaw the village’s participation in the TPPS and the nearby primary school,
the councilor who represented Apakibur and several neighboring villages on the local
government council, and the school’s two teachers.

During the two-hour-long meeting—to my knowledge the only formal meeting of
this committee during my fifteen months of fieldwork—the participants discussed just
one matter of educational content, the importance of instilling good handwashing habits
at school. (A village child had recently died, and it was hoped that better hygiene might
prevent further such tragic events.) Despite there being a number of apparently disparate
agenda items, the discussion of each one turned quickly to the same topic: how the
needs of the school ought to motivate outsiders to help the village with money. The
conversation revolved especially around the situation they thought would elicit gifts
of money most effectively, namely, an opportunity to send one of the teachers for
training at the SIL-PNG headquarters in the PNG Highlands. The sum they needed for
this was in fact quite small; since SIL would pay for the teacher’s transport, registration,
lodging, and meals, all they needed was ‘a little pocket money’ to cover his betel nut,
cigarettes, and similar sundries. As was noted during the meeting, the school account
already contained adequate funds to cover the teacher’s trip. But the committee members
were not interested in using money they already had. What they really wanted to do
was take advantage of this opportunity to initiate a positive elicitation cycle with out-
siders (see again Fig. 1). Because the community would have to be brought together in
order to achieve this shared end (Fig. 1, five o’clock: ‘people cooperate in communal
activity’), they brainstormed about potential unifying activities, such as raffling off
chickens or holding a ‘basket exchange’, a kind of fundraiser in which pairs of villagers
trade plates of food and shake hands while dropping a small amount of money into a
collection pot. They also talked at length about appealing to their wage-earning relatives
living in town (Fig. 1, nine o’clock: ‘community’s value is acknowledged with material
generosity by outsiders’). In the end, it was an approach that activated the cycle at
multiple points simultaneously that they found most exciting, even though it was also
the most complicated and difficult. This approach, which they discussed extensively,
would be to have members of the village diaspora donate a large desirable object such
as a boombox, which could then be raffled off as part of a huge village-wide celebration
over the extended Christmas holiday. The proposed timing was not coincidental: Christ-
mas is the time of year when Papua New Guinean villages swell with homecoming
town-dwellers, creating opportunities for village unity on a scale rarely matched the
rest of the year.
Yet the conversation took a discouraging turn as participants discussed who they might appeal to for the initial donation. The process of trying to identify sufficiently generous individuals dampened their earlier enthusiasm, and they began to speak despairingly of the unresponsiveness they had experienced with outsiders, even with some of their own kin: 'Our “brother” James has forgotten about us.'

They told tales of past rejection like: 'I went to see [a successful villager living in town] and was told he was sleeping . . . I waited and waited but never got to see him . . . [I said to myself,] “What’s going on? Us two teachers, the school—do you see us or not? Are you going to feed us and look after us or not?”'

And then a new conversational phenomenon began: self-deprecatory joking about the villagers’ lack of social agency. Together, the meeting participants elaborated a series of dreamlike scenarios that expressed their anxiety and frustration at the inaccessibility of outsiders and the invisibility this implied of themselves. In one scenario, an Apakibur teacher was trying to reach an SIL contact in town but lost his way and ended up at the wrong mission. He was greeted at the door by an unfamiliar missionary who invited him in to be baptized, but of course it was material, not spiritual, help he was after. Nervous laughter ensued. Another scenario was constructed around the real-life situation of a friend who had been given a whistle that allowed him to announce his arrival at the SIL compound in town without having to negotiate the four or five huge guard dogs that threatened strangers at the front gate. A member of the group jokingly suggested that one of the Apakibur teachers might imitate this friend and acquire a whistle in the hope that he too could gain access. The meeting participants laughed in resignation as they imagined the missionary coming to the door, not recognizing the whistle blower, and saying to himself, 'Hey, who is this vagabond at my gate?'

Over the course of the meeting, then, we can see the participants’ talk regressing through the positions in the cycle connecting elicitation to moral worth—or in this case, its absence. What began as a discussion about how to elicit the engagement of outsiders led the participants into a direct confrontation with their own lack of social agency. The anxiety this produced in them was discharged through nervous joking in which they themselves were the butt of the humor. The meeting culminated in a lament at the moral inadequacy of the community as a result of its disunity, a natural implication for the villagers, given their cultural frame of reference.

When a village sits down well together, it pleases those both near and far. When you ask for something, it’ll come to you one-two, because people will say, ‘It’s a good village—they know how to listen to their leaders. They cooperate to do things and gather together for church.’ But if you’re like us, when the big men come they’ll say, ‘Ach, this village is no good. If we tried to help them the money would only be wasted, because they don’t get along and work well together.’

In sum, the Apakibur TPPS presents a case of a local vernacular schooling initiative that was struggling to serve two very different goals. One was the school’s publicly stated purpose, the substantive function seen as primary by outsiders: refashioning early schooling in such a way that the declining village vernacular might be transmitted to the next generation of children. At the same time, the school was a performance aimed

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23 Since it is the content of these utterances that matters here, rather than their form or the specific language used, the quotes in this section are given only in free translation. They were originally spoken in Arapesh, with frequent code-switching to Tok Pisin.

24 Despair over the inability to elicit the acknowledgment of outsiders is similarly dealt with through humor in the fiction of Pacific anthropologist Epeli Hau‘ofa. See especially his stories 'The Tower of Babel' and 'The glorious Pacific way' (Hau‘ofa 1983).
at attracting the involvement of outsiders, including foreigners like us. But because
the ongoing involvement of outsiders was critical for the villagers to maintain their own
commitment to the project, the TPPS was vulnerable to the ills plaguing other community-
based development projects in PNG, including a limited lifecycle that begins with
a spike of enthusiasm and cooperation, but then ends in desuetude. In Apakibur, an
initial donation of funds galvanized the community to build itself a school, and the
expressions of outside interest this generated were enough to keep the villagers from
abandoning their hopes in it for over a decade. I did see the school function briefly in
the period surrounding the teacher’s trip to the SIL training course, which took place
as scheduled in early 1999. But apart from a few such positive episodes, the Apakibur
TPPS has mostly been a hall-of-mirrors enterprise, with the community’s efforts and
the outsiders’ talk reflecting, and resulting in, primarily one another. Sadly, if not
surprisingly, a letter I received from the erstwhile school committee chair in December
2005 reported (in English) that the TPPS was ‘no longer functioning due to some
unknown reasons’. The Apakibur TPPS first appeared to present an exemplary case of
a local community acting on its own to help revitalize its dying language. But paradoxi-
cally, precisely because the villagers were acting on their own, the project amounted
in their own eyes to a failure. In the end, then, the school actually decreased the
villagers’ sense of power over the educational fate of their children and the value and
continuity of their language.  

3.2. MY LINGUISTIC FIELDWORK. During my fieldwork I saw not only the disem-
powering force of outside detachment in the Apakibur TPPS, but also the constructive
power of positive outside engagement in villagers’ responses to the linguists who
worked in their communities. Whereas the details of my documentary research were
frankly of little interest to most of the villagers, my exchange relationships were of
great interest to everyone, and everyone recognized my coming to live with them as
a significant material sacrifice that demonstrated my concern for them. Part of the way
the villagers reciprocated this concern was through community-wide ceremonies that
celebrated my transitions in and out of the village. Apart from a couple of church
festivals, it was only the arrival of my husband after six months and then our departure
together almost a year later that motivated the villagers to do the substantial work of
organizing and performing traditional dances. Such dances have always been political
events concerned with a community’s self-presentation to outsiders, albeit historically
to other villages in the region (Dobrin & Bashkow 2006, Mead 1938). Given the high
value placed on social unity, the coordinated activity of traditional dancing gives people
the feeling of being at their cultural best: dances have associated color schemes and
ornaments, giving the dancers a uniform appearance; people arrange themselves in
ordery formations like circles and lines; and their movements are synchronized, iconi-
cally creating a kind of social alignment that is a remarkable achievement in New
Guinea (Bashkow 2003). So exhilarating are such moments of unity that when my
husband’s arrival was delayed due to a transportation problem, the dance the villagers
had prepared for him in greeting was performed anyway, despite the absence of the
guests of honor. When we finally managed to reach the village the next afternoon a

25 We must consider not only what stands to be gained through formal education, but also what it ‘teaches to
the losers—lessons of failures, supposedly located within themselves; lessons of exclusion and powerlessness’
subdued replay was offered for our benefit, but according to all reports, the night before the village had been ‘on fire’.

It is also customary throughout Melanesia to try to make a strong impression on those taking leave, to load them up with memories and debts in an effort to ensure that exchange will continue despite the distance and passage of time. The farewell feast the village held upon our departure was extremely generous, occasioning intense exchange and reflecting positively on the villagers’ cultural identity. The feast was attended even by members of the village diaspora, successful professionals and prominent politicians living far away in the national capital Port Moresby, who returned home for the event at considerable personal expense. From a western perspective, this farewell feast marked a step in the documentation of an endangered language, the successful completion of a worthy project. But for the villagers, it also signaled the end of a period in which an outsider’s care and concern was directed specifically toward their community, indexing its value. Once my work was finished, the villagers must have wondered, would there still be some basis for our relationship? And I wondered how I could wind up my fieldwork and say goodbye in this setting without reinforcing the villagers’ sense of powerlessness and marginality, precisely what they were seeking to symbolically overcome in shifting their linguistic allegiance away from the vernacular and onto Tok Pisin (see also Dobrin 2005).26

This same phenomenon could be seen in the ‘launching’ of the Ilahtai Arapesh New Testament that took place in 1998. The culmination of years of collaboration between Ilahtai villagers and an SIL linguist, Robert Conrad, this Bible launching was the largest, most spectacular, and most elaborately orchestrated village ritual I witnessed during my stay in PNG. Among the honored guests was a vanload of ardent mission supporters who had come all the way from the United States just for the event. Two senior Members of the PNG Parliament were also present. The purpose was ostensibly to celebrate the publication and distribution of a book, a vernacular language Bible. But the launching showed every hallmark of a Melanesian farewell feast put on not only to celebrate the results of past cooperation, but also to ensure that the relationship with a powerful friend from the outside would continue into a now uncertain future.

None of the foregoing should be taken to imply that linguistic work as such is unimportant to Melanesian communities. Far from it: the Arapesh people I knew often expressed concern that their vernacular was dying, and attracted as they were to the modernity they associated with Tok Pisin, they also wished to see their language endure. They were grateful that it was being recorded and looked forward to seeing the results of my research.27 Similarly with the Ilahtai Arapesh Bible: many Ilahtai villagers are now devoted Christians, and to have a New Testament in their tok ples is deeply significant for them. But all of these products find their importance within a system of values that is profoundly different from our own, one that idealizes the continuing engagement of outsiders in relationships of mutual solicitude and material ex-

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26 Though I have been unable for personal reasons to return to Apakibar since my initial fieldwork, I have tried to maintain my connection with the community despite the vast distance by corresponding with those back in the village by post, communicating with those living in town (and abroad) by phone and email, subsidizing the village childrens’ school fees, and sending individuals money gifts as circumstances allow. Apakibar is a remarkable village in having produced a number of highly educated professionals, and my husband and I once had the honor of hosting an Apakibar anthropologist in our home during his overseas travels. We intend to return to the village in the next few years for another substantial period of fieldwork, this time with our children.

27 A grammar, dictionary, and collection of texts are now in preparation; see www.arapesh.org.
change—in many ways inverting the western concern to avoid perpetuating relationships of neocolonial dependence.

4. CONCLUSION. The growing literature on the conduct of primary linguistic research now 'concerns itself with the role of language speakers in documentary projects and their rights and needs in ways not previously considered within linguistics' (Austin & Grenoble 2007:12). This is unquestionably a positive development. Nevertheless, our newfound concern has taken for granted a particular system of morality, one that is fundamentally western and modern. That system assumes that autonomy and self-determination are universally desirable and necessary components of empowerment. Given our recognition that language loss reflects speakers' subordination and marginalization within larger frameworks of power, respecting speakers' rights to independence has become a key principle of current ELDD activism. Linguists' commitment to this principle is evident when they yield to communities the right to decide the direction of work, leaving linguists (and linguistics) to live with the consequences, or when communities are treated as equal partners, as in the now widely recommended team approach wherein a shared set of project goals is negotiated by communities and researchers jointly. It also underlies the 'ideal' scenario in which the linguist's position is essentially offered over for communities to adopt as their own, as when indigenous people are trained to use linguistic methods and resources so that their speech communities can carry out ELDD work themselves, with the maximum degree of independence.

But what the ELDD literature has generally not done—and what has been my purpose here—is to situate linguists and their work within the culturally particular local systems of meaning in which language loss itself is taking place. When we do, new and potentially more productive modes of collaboration become imaginable, modes that attempt to acknowledge and bridge, rather than neutralize, the differences between us and them. As a starting point for resituating ourselves in this way wherever our fieldwork takes us, I would like to offer four general suggestions that do not usually find their way into linguistic fieldwork manuals.

1. Linguists preparing for fieldwork should read the contemporary ethnographic literature on the broader region in which they plan to work. While it is good to go back to classic sources on the specific communities whose languages we study, these can be unreliable guides to contemporary cultures given the many changes that have invariably taken place in the intervening years. But as we have known since Boas (1966 [1911]), there are often broad similarities in culture and historical experience that link people within a region even when they speak unrelated languages, so that the ethnographic record can be useful in orienting us to the common aspects of the region's cultures. Ethnographies, like linguistic analyses, engage theoretical discussions internal to a discipline; the point is not that field linguists should try to master all of these, but rather that they should read the literature selectively for the insights it might provide into their field community's key moral concerns and understandings of interpersonal politics.

2. Linguists in the field should embrace opportunities to participate in culturally appropriate relationships of exchange. Precisely because their own culture so greatly emphasizes independence, it can be hard for western linguists to recognize the importance in all cultures of reciprocity and ongoing exchange. Obviously, we must be generous in compensating individuals and communities for helping us with our research. But our cultural emphasis on the dignity of self-sufficiency should not prevent
us from forging relationships in which both sides can experience the dignity of being generous. In practical terms this may mean cheerfully accepting gifts like strange foodstuffs that we do not really want so that the bases for reciprocity are expanded, rather than looking for ways that our obligations can be discharged.

3. In their relationships with field communities, linguists should be prepared to take the long view. After all, documenting a language in all its intricacy is an undertaking that can take years, or even decades, to carry out thoroughly. But taking the long view is also important in terms of the argument presented here. It allows for the possibility, for example, of seeing the conflicts, disappointments, and failures that inevitably occur in any relationship not as final, but as bumps on a longer road. It also means that we should consider the community's concerns not only surrounding our arrival in the field, but also our departure from it. The issues involved in 'getting started' with fieldwork, such as getting informed consent, finding informants, and negotiating the terms of work, are regular topics in linguistic fieldwork training and linguists' reflections on their field experiences. But 'saying goodbye' requires planning and cultural sensitivity as well, even though for the fieldworker departures can be busy, stressful times. By attending to the tone of their withdrawal from small endangered-language communities, western linguists can avoid falling into the pattern of short-term, utilitarian relationships shaped primarily by the outsiders' constraints and interests, and demonstrate their ongoing commitment to a relationship based on reciprocity (Dobrin 2006).

4. We can help empower communities to be heard in their languages, as well as to speak them. Speaking local languages in the field is often advocated as a method for linguists and anthropologists to obtain better quality data. But it has another beneficial effect: it indicates to the local interlocutors that outsiders not only have things to say to them, but that they are also capable of listening to them. As Sutton (2001:461; see also Dorian 2001:148–50) has described for Australia, for example, 'linguistic competence in an Aboriginal language by a non-Aboriginal person' is taken to 'imply not only cultural competence and understanding, but also an acceptance of the worth of Aboriginal culture itself...'. When a non-Indigenous person is heard speaking an Aboriginal language... Aboriginal people are usually quickly of the view that this person has in some significant way entered into their world of values, their web of relationships, and their patchwork of country identities, and furthermore that this is someone who does not look down on them'. The power of the individual listener is often magnified because he or she is perceived as a conduit to a larger collectivity. When working with a storyteller over an extended period of time, folklorist Richard Bauman found that 'even one-to-one sessions with a fieldworker implicate larger audiences of strangers', and he could see this shaping the storyteller's performances (1986:105). The challenge for endangered-language researchers, then, is to bring these imagined audiences to bear constructively in their field interactions.

And how can understanding the Arapesh framework of meaning guide outside linguists toward more productive ELDD work in Melanesia? For one thing, it makes it clear that for outsiders to play a merely advisory role on projects we train people to carry out and sustain on their own will not in fact be helpful or empowering for most Melanesian communities. From a Melanesian cultural perspective what is most empowering about ELDD work is that it brings local people into relationships with outsiders who are associated with the modernity, wealth, and power they seek, yet who care enough to listen to them, even in their ancestral languages that have such little utility in the world they now find encompassing them. We know languages die when they no
longer have speakers, but in Melanesia speakers are giving up their languages because, in the ways that matter most to them, they have no listeners. So if linguists begin ELDD work in a community only to withdraw, either because their project has been completed or because 'only the community can save its language', they risk reinforcing the feelings of marginality that motivate language shift in the first place.

Nor is it enough for linguists to provide Melanesian communities with dictionaries, orthographies, books of legends, and so on, the standard products of our work. We should certainly 'make books', even 'for people who don't read', and they will assuredly be prized when we do (Terrill 2002). But we must recognize that these products' value derives not primarily from the objects themselves, but from the fact that they symbolize the community's relationship with the linguist who made them, and their ability to maintain their value depends in part on the continuity of that relationship. Terrill (2002) describes her negotiations with her Solomon Islands research community over the nature of the dictionary she was to provide as reciprocation for her documentary work in the community. From the perspective developed here, it is likely that her engagement in those negotiations was valued by the community just as highly as was the dictionary that resulted.

I am addressing this argument to the readers of Language because there are probably no outsiders with a greater interest in the fate of PNG's hundreds of languages than theoretical and typological linguists. And we have the opportunity to help maintain these languages and support linguistic human rights in PNG through our involvement in ELDD and the kinds of local vernacular schooling projects now possible with PNG's changes in education policy. But this work can only be empowering and effective when carried out in the context of extended exchange relationships between vernacular language communities and individual linguists—a conclusion that many readers will find burdensome but that I see no way around. It is a conclusion that I also confess surprises me in sharing more with the missionary model of how to serve humanity than it does with the socially conscientious academic one. The cultivation of long-term personal relationships is a methodological mainstay of mission linguistics, and Cahill (2000:33), for example, recognizes its importance in explaining cases in which SIL has been successful at reinvigorating the vernacular: 'Language situations vary tremendously in different parts of the world. The situation of many dying Northern Amerindian languages is vastly different from [those of Brazil and PNG] ... [In] cases where the local people themselves are helpless to revitalize the language ... long-term committed outsiders who are prepared to help in physical ways and in ways which boost the attitudes of the people [are] necessary to any revitalization efforts'. Until now, SIL has been the main group of outsiders actively engaged in ELDD in PNG; it has served in nearly 350 New Guinea speech communities since 1956 (SIL International 2006). Actively maintaining relationships in each of these communities for years or even decades has helped make SIL extraordinarily successful in PNG, where the organization enjoys widespread allegiance among the population as well as considerable influence within the government.

Through enduring personal relationships involving earnest solicitude and material generosity, linguists' direct engagement in planning and carrying out linguistic agendas in PNG would elicit not resentment but gratitude, and could make a significant impact on language maintenance by providing the kind of direct, ongoing assistance that village-based projects actually require and that reflects so positively for Melanesians on their communities. Such direct intervention need not be equated with the imposition of 'essentially colonial cultural change' (Silverstein 1998:408) when it is done in the
spirit of cooperation and mutual goodwill. And in PNG, this approach to linguist-
community relations presents a far more constructive framework for action than the
only realistic alternative: pinning our hopes for PNG’s languages on the slowing of
development due to the weakening state’s inability to maintain schools, roads, and
other infrastructure (Aikhenvald 2004:135), a ‘benign neglect’ position, to use Nettle
and Romaine’s term, if ever there was one.

As a result of attending to the moral dimension of ELDD, linguist-community rela-
tionships have been reconfigured in highly positive ways in many parts of the Americas,
where communities often wish to do things on their own. But our whole understanding
of morality is put to the test in places like PNG, where the western cultural emphasis
on respecting others’ autonomy could prevent outsiders from active and interested
intervention that is likely to be linguistically beneficial, culturally valued, and for many
communities, by virtue of their own social dynamics, actually empowering. If I under-
stand my obligation to Apakibur villagers as fulfilled by giving them a dictionary or
story books, I will have missed an opportunity to allow them power in the way they
value it, within their framework of meaning. I will have won the battle to document
another language before it dies, but lost the war over human diversity and linguistic
human rights, because I will have disappointed the villagers’ hopes that, in at least this
one context, their globally peripheral voices were actually being heard.

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