Divining Siraya: Sources of language and authority in documentation and revitalisation

Meili Fang (Ochanomizu University) and David Nathan (SOAS, University of London)

Recent discussions in documentary linguistics have raised the bar for ethical and collaborative relationships between documenters and the documented (e.g. Czaykowska-Higgins 2009, Linn 2011, Yamada 2011). Relationships are no longer aimed only at ensuring fairness, but are now also seen as important dynamics in the conception, conduct and outcomes of projects. In this paper, we report on some preliminary fieldwork where the documenters and the documented are thoroughly enmeshed in the conception and path of the activity. The present case focuses on the Sirayan community in the Tainan area (south western Taiwan), or, to be more precise, two local village shamans. Tentative initial contact between Meili Fang and a local community co-ordinator resulted in a proposal to support revitalisation efforts through combining Meili's pedagogical expertise with the linguistic resources provided by, or via, the shamans. It was thought that the shamans, as exponents of their traditional culture, might have some vestigial language knowledge; more interestingly (and more controversially) community members proposed that in trances the shamans could channel knowledge from their god (Alizou). The notion of revitalisation through god-sent knowledge provides an anchor around which pivot a number of interesting elements of documentation practices and community identity, language and revitalisation ideologies. One was that the shamans, on behalf of their community, consulted Alizou on several occasions to divine not only approval for the documentation and other activities, but also to answer questions about revitalisation methodology. In this way, community (or divine?) control has played a principal role in deciding the course of the work.

Secondly, dynamics have emerged around the community's identity, especially in relation to Christian segments of the wider Sirayan community. Currently the main recognised language activity is associated with a Baptist group centring on a family who has been active in researching and publishing on the Sirayan language. The relations between this group and the shamans' communities seem tenuous. The Baptists' work through their publishing of primers and dictionaries provides them with conventional credibility, and they appear to disapprove of the villagers' shamanic traditions and any outcomes from them. On the other hand, we see the fragile struggle of the shamans' communities to attain recognition and to retain their traditional practices, tying both of these to language revival; they have, for example, recently rejected the Baptists' language materials as being linguistically unauthentic, as divined by the shamans. It appears that as language has become a locus of identity, each group has identified its own - very different - source of linguistic authority. Linguists usually maintain that language and culture are inseparable, but in the stances of these two groups, language and culture are irreconcilable.

In the paper we will discuss these and other issues in relation to making documentary recordings and potential revitalisation materials, drawing on video of the shamans' explanations and their unique verbal trance genre.

References

Czaykowska-Higgins, Ewa. 2009. Research models, community engagement, and linguistic fieldwork: Reflections on working within Canadian Indigenous communities. Language Documentation & Conservation 3(1). pp. 15-50. [http://hdl.handle.net/10125/4423]
Linn, Mary. 2011. Living Archives: A Community-Based Language Archive Model. In David Nathan (ed.) Proceedings of Workshop on Language Documentation and Archiving. London: SOAS. pp 59-70.
Yamada, Racquel-María. 2011. Integrating Documentation and Formal Teaching of Kari'nja: