

Fieldwork and Documentation of Speech Genres in Indigenous Communities of Gran Chaco: Theoretical and Methodological Issues

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This paper presents some theoretical and methodological reflections on documenting and analyzing texts gathered from indigenous communities, based on my experiences working with communities in the Gran Chaco region of Argentina. The purpose of this essay is to discuss how the selected fieldwork model, the methods of data collection, the degree of access the researcher has to the material, and the type of relationship that develops between the investigator and the consultants all influence the type and quality of the data. In my experience, a collaborative approach that relates the description of linguistic structures to the study of discourse as verbal art greatly enriches the documentation of endangered languages.

1. INTRODUCTION. Documenting texts in languages with and without writing is a traditional practice for the linguist as well as for the anthropologist. Besides drawing up grammar rules and vocabulary lists, gathering texts in indigenous languages has contributed to descriptive, historical, and comparative linguistics since the time of Boas. It has also been key in developing theories of linguistic typology and universal grammar.

Woodbury (2003:39) and Foley (2003:86), among others, have argued that linguistic description is a culturally constructed practice that is filtered through the investigator's own ideologies. As a result, most efforts are focused on describing the grammatical structures of the languages, drafting descriptive grammar rules and dictionaries, and gathering a great number of stories (prioritizing storytelling over other genres that the investigator either cannot perceive or considers less "neutral"¹). The concept of language that lies at the heart of this practice is that of a system of abstract elements, constructions, and rules that constitute the underlying invariable structure of the observable utterances of a speech community (Himmelman 1998:166). The gathering methods are limited, for the most part, to eliciting lists of words, grammatical paradigms, and a set of stories told by the native speakers.

This perspective is also related to what Duchêne and Heller call "the language-culture-nation ideological nexus" (2007:7). These approaches to language also have the effect of presenting the current threats to languages and the environment in a way that essentializes language, nature, and indigenous people, and of prioritizing language data over speakers (Muehlmann 2007:15).

¹ Such as jokes, requests, advice, shamanic tales, etc.

Since the development of the ethnography of speaking and accompanying changes in linguistic anthropology in the 1970s, the study of discursive genres in preliterate societies has also become an important means to learn about the uses and functions of language in specific speech communities. Some linguists dedicated to language documentation consider that the task of documenting speech genres is essential, since linguistic documentation cannot leave aside the full range of communicative practices of a speech community (Himmelman 1998:166).

When theoretical approaches began to focus on the use of language in context, speech appeared as a new focal point in research. A more extensive and comprehensive unit of analysis came to the forefront: the speech event, which includes both the contextual aspects and the structural phenomena of the language (Hymes 1972). From this perspective, language is no longer viewed as the window into the human mind that it had been for Boas and his disciples. Instead, language becomes a fundamentally *social* phenomenon that cannot be assessed without considering the interests, activities, and relations of its speakers, who are often adapting to changing sociocultural and socioeconomic conditions (Mufwene 2004). Language research, then, should be based on observing and/or participating in situated speech events. In this approach, data gathering methodologies emphasize the importance of working in real and spontaneous speaking situations, combined with ethnographic methods such as participant observation, informal interviews, and the use of techniques that allow social settings and relations to be reproduced, such as dramatization and play.

In the Gran Chaco region of Argentina, although some anthropologists and linguists have collected texts among the indigenous communities, little research has focused on speaking genres as communicative practices produced in specific social contexts.² In general, anthropologists have mainly collected stories as a source of ethnographic information (Cordeu 1970, Martínez Crovetto 1975, Wilbert and Simoneau 1982, among others). For linguists, text compilations have always been an essential part of the corpus required to draft grammar guides and dictionaries (Viñas Urquiza 1976, for Wichí language; Censabella 2002, for Toba language). From both perspectives, the result is a compilation of solid, unchangeable texts, carefully transcribed and edited, which provide the information necessary for ethnographic and linguistic research. Earlier researchers working in the area have generally not clarified what theories and methodologies they have used for recording and documenting oral genres among Chaco indigenous groups.

² With the exception of the pioneering work by Klein on Toba discourse styles (1986), Wright's work on the "advice" genre (1990), and Messineo (2004) on Toba verbal art, there are no systematic investigations on the speaking genres of the indigenous peoples of the Gran Chaco.

This essay is based on my personal experience of working with the Wichí³ and Toba⁴ indigenous groups of Gran Chaco, and of analyzing the data gathered during fieldwork. I present some theoretical and methodological reflections that have arisen during various stages of my research, which focuses on documenting speech genres. My main argument is that the chosen fieldwork model, the methods of data collection, the degree of access to the material, and the type of relationship that develops between the investigator and the consultant are all important factors that can influence the type and quality of the data, as well as how well the data represents the language. I would like to suggest that a collaborative approach to the study of the verbal art of a speech community greatly enriches the documentation of endangered languages. For this kind of documentation to occur, researchers need extensive databases, comprised not only of utterances obtained through elicitation, but also those recorded in contexts of natural language use in ample and varied genres.

2. A FEW KEY CONCEPTS. The notion of *discourse* is critical in the documentation and linguistic description of endangered languages (Woodbury 2003). Discourse is no longer understood as merely a textual plot (the highest level of the linguistic hierarchy formed by phonology, morphology, and syntax), but as a verbal phenomenon belonging to the level of language usage, which originates in a specific culturally constructed social situation involving speech.

When one articulates the notion of discourse with an ethnographic emphasis, the diversity of speech styles and genres among societies with an oral tradition is particularly relevant. In empirical investigation, the notion of style is necessarily and imperceptibly mixed with that of *genre*, although in theoretical terms, the latter takes into account the meaning or the function of the discourse rather than its formal features. Therefore, speaking modes can be differentiated; for example, a story can be distinguished from a myth, a song, or advice (Hymes 1972:65).

In attempts to systematically study the discourse of the indigenous languages of the Americas, several works (Bauman 1975; Hymes 1981; Sherzer 1982, 1987; Woodbury 1985; Briggs 1988; Bauman and Briggs 1990; and Sherzer and Urban 1986, among others) have argued that specific indigenous speech genres are based on specific discursive units and so constitute, in this respect, forms of poetry or verbal art. These units—marked by prosodic features, intonation, and other formal characteristics such as discursive connectors, parallelism, and repetition—structure the discourse at many levels and allow genres

³ The Wichí live in the provinces of Salta, Chaco, and Formosa in Argentina and in the Tarija Region in Bolivia. Wichí is a Chaco language of the Mataguaya family (Najlis 1984) or the Mataco-Mataguaya family (Tovar 1961). Nowadays, speakers refer to both themselves and their language as “Wichí.” The languages that make up this family are Chorote, Niwaklé, and Maká (in addition to Wichí).

⁴ Along with the Wichí, the Toba constitute the most numerous indigenous group in the Greater Chaco Region. They live in the provinces of Chaco, Formosa, and Salta (Argentina), in the Tarija Region (Bolivia), and in El Cerrito (Paraguay). Additionally, there are currently settlements in “neighborhoods” located in the cities of Resistencia, Presidencia Roque Sáenz Peña, Rosario, Santa Fe, Buenos Aires, and La Plata (Argentina). The Toba language, along with Pilagá and Mocoví, is in the Guaycurú linguistic family.

and specific styles to be defined in languages with an oral tradition. Briggs 1988 introduces the idea of competence in performance,⁵ in reference to verbal art in the indigenous cultures of the Americas, especially the skill to perform specific genres. Competence refers to the performer's ability to show his or her aesthetic competence, or knowledge of stylistic and formal standards of a particular genre. However, competence is also related to the performer's responsibility—that is, the degree to which a community's members access traditional knowledge and the way in which speakers articulate this knowledge based on the present social interaction. Performance implies the notions of creativity and improvisation, which are found in all types of communicative activities and speech events, from the most ritualized and formal events (requests, guessing formulas, shamanic chants) to the most daily and casual (conversations). Not all people belonging to a speech community have the same access to traditional knowledge or the same ability to perform a particular genre. This skill is related to factors such as age and education, but it also depends on the degree of the threat to vernacular language.

By using the concept of competence in performance as a starting point, I propose to classify the consultants and collaborators with whom I have done field work in the Wichí and Toba communities in the Gran Chaco region. According to this classification, speakers-performers are grouped according to their degree of competence in performance. This classification is similar to that proposed by Dorian (1982) and Grinevald (2003),⁶ based on the degree of communicative competence of the speakers of endangered languages. I propose the following categories:

1. Speakers who are able to perform one or several genres, and who display communicative skill and activity. These speakers are not passive responders to the dictates of tradition or of their physical and social environment; on the contrary, they have the ability to create, recreate, and actively transform the language in the course of their performance. This category generally includes fluent speakers of the language, especially the elderly or adults specializing in specific activities (shamans, hunters, fortune tellers, etc.). For a researcher to access the knowledge that such speakers have of their own communicative practices requires prolonged fieldwork and the use of techniques such as dramatization.

2. Speakers who are able to reproduce or repeat certain genres. They can be fluent speakers, though they may not be competent enough to assume the responsibility of performance. This is often the case for adults or young people who do not maintain the communicative practices of their ancestors but who are able to remember when requested, for example, the stories their grandparents told or the advice their parents gave them as children. The elicitation, in this case, allows data to be obtained in the form of specific texts, removed from their social

⁵An idea based on *communicative competence*, a concept coined and reformulated by Dell Hymes (1966). Hymes, in turn, based his idea on Chomsky's linguistic competence, which consists in not only dominating the grammaticality of clauses but also the situations in which verbal activity is appropriate.

⁶The types of speakers identified in Grinevald's recent work are (1) native fluent speakers (2) semi-speakers, (3) terminal speakers, and (4) rememberers (Grinevald 2003:64).

context and sometimes stripped of the aesthetic and performative component (the use of formulaic phrases, parallelisms, repetitions, etc.) that characterize speaking genres among oral societies.

3. Speakers who are able to passively participate in a speech event or situation in the vernacular, and who are able to creatively reinterpret a traditional genre in new contexts of language use in a different language. This category includes a wide range of speakers, including semi-speakers (Dorian 1982), as well as receptive speakers who may not use vernacular language regularly but who can easily manage the appropriate contexts: they can understand a joke or receive advice in the vernacular. They also may perform as good political or religious speakers, able to access traditional vernacular communicative skills, in order to use them in Spanish. This category is different from (2) and (3) in that speakers are not grammatically competent in the vernacular language, but are skillful performers of new speaking genres produced in situations of linguistic contact and movement. Two examples of this type of speaker are the presidents of the new Toba communities and the evangelist preachers from indigenous churches.

These categories are not absolute nor are they meant to exclude; they are useful for documenting a wide range of genres, from the oldest and most traditional to those that have arisen as the result of evangelization and of the new political activities of leading community members and as part of staking claims for indigenous rights.

3. TRIAL AND ERROR IN FIELDWORK. Registering the linguistic practices of a speech community—especially communities with an oral tradition—is no easy task, especially for those linguists with traditional training in linguistic description. The first problem is the prevailing concept that fieldwork is simply a trade that can be learned in classes on fieldwork methodology. In this respect, I agree with Grinevald (2003:56–57), who argues that fieldwork is more of an “art,” an experience that develops over the span of an academic career and which involves a wide range of human relationships as well as the demands, tensions, and conflicts generated by academic pressures, research deadlines, and the personal life of the researcher.

Some authors (Cameron et al. 1992) argue that fieldwork is fundamentally based on the way in which human relations in general and the relationship of power between the speakers of the studied language and the field researcher in particular are organized. The theoretical and methodological proposals of the investigator along with the type of project and the demands and needs of the community, then, determine which fieldwork model applies. Based on the writings of Deborah Cameron and her colleagues (1992), Grinevald (2003:57–60) summarizes the following four frameworks which have prevailed over the past few decades:

1. Fieldwork is simply conceived of as fieldwork ON language, with exclusively academic purposes.⁷ The gathering methods are basically limited to

⁷ Bloomfield and Sapir are representative of this model.

eliciting lists of words, grammatical paradigms, and a set of stories told by the native speakers.

2. Fieldwork with an added dimension: it is done FOR the language community. This framework contributes to defending the linguistic rights of a language or a specific language variety.⁸

3. Fieldwork is done WITH speakers of a language community, which involves aligning the research aims with the requirements of indigenous communities that desire greater participation in the processes of researching their own languages.⁹

4. Fieldwork is done directly BY speakers of the linguistic communities. This trend combines an outside researcher's fieldwork with the linguistic training of the speakers themselves in order to assist them in researching and teaching their own language.

Taking into account the aforementioned considerations, I will present here a discussion of certain difficulties and findings related to my work recording discursive genres among groups in Gran Chaco (Wichí and especially Toba). I have organized the presentation around three specific points in time which, though presented chronologically, have each been equally significant for my training in linguistic fieldwork. In the first stage, which coincides with the fieldwork model ON a language proposed by Cameron et al. (1992), I show the impact of a communication crisis that occurred between me and a Wichí speaker. During our interviews, it was impossible for me to record the mythic narratives (*pant'e pahlalis*) that I was hoping for. In the second stage, which is related to the fieldwork model FOR a Toba community, I focus on the difficulty of obtaining speaking genres, such as Toba advice (*nqataGak*), using traditional elicitation methods. Finally, in the third stage, I summarize my experience of collaborative work WITH speakers from an urban Toba community. By documenting several Toba speaking genres and by analyzing certain features of the Toba rhetorical structure observed in specific genres, I show that Toba verbal art has its own organization. Explicitly or implicitly, this organization reveals the knowledge that native speakers have of their own language and of their own communicative practices.

Following the description of each situation, I will present some theoretical and methodological reflections that arose during the fieldwork.

3.1 INITIATION PHASE: FIELDWORK ON A LANGUAGE. During the first phase, fieldwork was not particularly difficult for me: the heat, the food, and the mosquitoes were no obstacle for me at the age of twenty-four. However, a few stories serve to illustrate the perplexity of my consultants when I tried to elicit lists of words or grammatical paradigms. The following examples also show my reaction to the responses of a Toba speaker with whom I tried to elicit the paradigm of inalienable possession:

⁸ The prototypical case of this approach is the work done by Labov to get African American Vernacular English recognized in its own right by the U.S. Congress.

⁹ This includes models related with "investigation-action" and with "negotiated fieldwork."

- (1)
 L: *How do you say “my ear”?* (trying to elicit the 1st person)
 C: *na 'artela* (“your ear”)
 L: *Aaaaaah*
- (2)
 L: *How do you say “the old man’s ear”?*
 C: *But, hey... is the old man sitting, standing, lying or dead?* (in reference to the system of nominal classifiers)
 L: ?
- (3)
 L: *How would I say, for example, “an ear,” that doesn’t belong to anyone?* (trying to elicit the 4th person indefinite)
 C: *What do you mean? ... Do you mean like “an ear” all by itself, lying there on the road?!...Hmmm... You could say it... Hmmm, but there are none.*

My attempts during my initial fieldwork to register speech genres and to draft a paper on Toba grammar were not productive or systematic in any way—at least, not from the perspective of an idealized and generally antiseptic fieldwork methodology (Wilkins 1992). My first approaches to the indigenous communities in Gran Chaco were instead characterized by what certain ethnographers call “the communication crisis in fieldwork” (Guber 1991).

From 1985–1988, I worked with Wichí groups from the province of Salta, Argentina. My first interview with a Wichí inhabitant from the community of Carboncito in Salta is a pathetic example of communication troubles resulting from the fact that the consultant and I had very different assumptions and interactional objectives. Equipped with a recorder and a questionnaire, I headed to José’s house early one morning: José was nearly 70 and he was considered competent in the Wichí language and known as a storyteller. Because of his competence in performing narrative genres, he would be considered a highly competent speaker of the first category, as defined above in section 1.

I explained to him (in Spanish, of course) the reason for my visit: “to study the Wichí language, especially the stories of the oldest members.” We drank mate¹⁰ for over three hours, almost without exchanging a word. My desire to break the silence and obtain data led me to continually make superfluous comments on the behavior of the children playing outside the house or the dogs lying in what little shade was available beneath the hot Chaco sun. That day, I was not able to elicit any story, let alone any grammatical paradigms. Some time later, I understood that I had suffered what some ethnographers refer to as “the communication crisis in fieldwork.” This crisis is fundamentally the result of interactional objectives that are culturally different for each participant in the speech event. While my objective was to obtain information through a speech event that was natural for me, by using a pre-established “question-answer” structure like an interview or a questionnaire (Briggs 1986), the interactional objective of my consultant corresponded to the speech used during a “visit.” One of the main features of this situation, according to the Wichí etiquette, is

¹⁰ An infusion prepared with the dried leaves of yerba mate (*Ilex paraguayensis*), a South American plant.

silence, or speaking as little as possible (cf. Basso 1972 for similar communicative situations among the Apache). As a non-native observer (and a beginning fieldwork linguist), I interpreted this behavior as indifference and avoidance by my consultants.

First reflection

The first reflection that arises from this initial fieldwork stage is related to the different communicative purposes that can exist between the investigator and the consultant, and with the way in which our consultants can interpret and respond to the elicitation techniques that we consider “natural”:

In the first contacts with the community, especially in structured interviews, it is possible that the interactional objectives of our consultants may be conventional, culturally different, and even incompatible with those of the researchers, given our assumption (as linguists) that the interview is a natural and common speech event. This could be interpreted according to the conventions of the speech events of the community (for example, an interview can be interpreted as a “visit”) or confused with regular external situations (a census, a political campaign, interviews conducted by local school teachers, etc.). In spite of the fact that this is a question of common sense, it takes time for the linguist and the consultant to form a close relationship (time that is not always taken into account on academic schedules). Finally, a clear and honest explanation of the objectives of the study is always required.

3.2 INTERMEDIATE PHASE: FIELDWORK FOR A LANGUAGE. In 1989, I began my research on the Toba language. One of the principal difficulties I faced was accessing a complete typology of Toba speech genres through traditional elicitation techniques. While the storytelling genres were the easiest to obtain, others—such as *nqataGako* ‘advice’ or *natamnaGako* ‘requests’—were difficult to access outside the context of their production. I made some progress with trained consultants, skilled in repeating or reproducing genres, and through contextualized elicitation (Himmelman 1998): “Tell me what advice your uncle gave you,” or through props such as: “Is this a *natamnaGak* (‘a request’)?” This type of elicitation was useful in obtaining data, but not for producing communicatively functional speech events.

That same year, I began working as an assistant at the Linguistics Department of the Training Center for Aboriginal Teachers (the Spanish acronym is CIFMA), which was part of the Intercultural and Bilingual Education Program of the Province of Chaco (the Spanish acronym is PROEBI). At that time, I gave classes on linguistics to train Toba and Mocoví people, and I made several trips to do fieldwork in the province of Chaco. Given the specific, explicit objectives of the trips (to gather data for drafting educational materials, especially a first-grade textbook for the Toba language), the investigation was akin to fieldwork FOR the community, according to the model proposed by Cameron et al. (1992). As for the gathering of speech genres, this framework was apt for observing language use in different communicative contexts and through theatrical techniques that allowed social scenes and relations to be recreated.

From this perspective, it was a productive phase, since I was able to finish my doctoral thesis, which presented the grammar of the Toba language, especially focused on pragmatic and discursive aspects. In addition, I obtained a corpus of more than one hundred elicited texts, a few of which were recorded in situations of spontaneous language use. The results of the investigation were also disseminated in articles published in linguistic journals and at academic conferences. I also participated in the publication of a first-grade reading book in the Toba language.

A few months before I delivered my work to my thesis committee, I visited several Toba communities in Pampa del Indio in the province of Chaco. My most intense work was done with an elderly man, Ángel, recognized by the community as competent and knowledgeable, a skilled performer of old stories, shamanic practices, and other genres of the oral tradition. Once again I found myself before a Toba speaker able to perform several genres and who displayed communicative skill and activity. I had witnessed his skill in performing shamanic songs and prayers in the context of a religious event that he had invited me to attend.

However, my interest at that time was to obtain cultural and contextual information on the genre of *nqataGak* ‘advice’. This genre is used by the Toba not only as a way to socialize children and young adults, but also for political and religious persuasion. It constitutes an efficient medium in which elder members transmit cultural content, social rules

, and moral guidelines to young members. However, this is done noncoercively; persuasion is a key element in Toba education. The function of advice is mainly to help prevent certain behaviors that could exceed the established social and cultural limits (Messineo, forthcoming). In terms of rhetorical structure, *nqataGak* combines an authoritarian, asymmetrical, and standardized discourse with the affectionate persuasion that emerges from close relations—generally blood relations (father-son/mother-daughter/grandfather-grandson)—between the speaker and the listener. In this respect, it is a discourse of authority (Bakhtin 1981:342–43) though it is spoken in an affectionate, persuasive tone. Therefore, *nqataGak* transmits strong cultural mandates through a key—to use the term of Hymes (1972)—that is affectionate, intimate, and noncoercive. (Messineo, forthcoming).

In spite of my intensive fieldwork with Ángel during twenty days, I was not able to get my consultant to offer me a single piece of advice, not even through contextualized elicitation.

I only had access to the required information a few minutes before departing for Buenos Aires. My consultant accompanied me to the bus station and started a long conversation in which he sadly made reference to the imminent loss of his language, something he was well aware of from conversations with the younger generations of the community. From this conversation, I received advice that Ángel “performed” for me:

(4)¹¹

1. *Yo no voy a mezquinar / mi nieta / to::do lo que yo sé //*
I'll tell it like it is / my granddaughter/ every:::thing I know //
2. *to::do lo que usted me pide / yo voy a vaciarme //*
every:::thing you've asked of me, I will spill it all //
3. *pero llegará el momento / en que voy a desaparecer//*
but the time will come / when I will no longer be //
4. *entonces / mi nieta/ recordará //*
and then / my granddaughter / you will remember //
5. *y llevará esto / a otros nietos de allá LEJOS // de Buenos Aires /*
and share this / with other grandchildren FAR AWAY // in Buenos Aires
6. *y dirá // e::sto es lo que traigo de MI YAPE' (abuelo) //*
and you will say // thi::s is what MY YAPE'(grandfather) gave me..
7. *Por eso/ este/ es / mi consejo //*
For this reason / here / is / my advice//
8. *'mira BIE::N lo que ense:ñas //*
"CAREFUL with what you tea:ch //
9. *porque / hay ALGUIEN / que sie::mpre está mirando nuestros corazones'//*
because/ SOMEONE / is a::lways looking into our hearts" //

In this true "performance," Ángel not only demonstrated his aesthetic competence to perform functionally communicative advice, he creatively rearranged our relationship (from interviewer-interviewee to granddaughter-grandfather). He established a new relationship—which is also asymmetrical, but this time controlled by him—in which he assumes the role of yape' 'grandfather' and the responsibility to transmit the customs and the

¹¹ The following notation is used to show the discourse units and prosodic features in the text:

A, B, C,...	section or episode
1,2,3,...	lines
/	brief pause between lines
//	long pause between lines
#	long pause between sections
[...]	silences
:, ::, :::, ::::	lengthening of a vowel, stretched out vowel
CAPITALS	emphasis

language of the elderly through advice. As can be seen in line 9 of the text, Ángel implicitly alludes to God's irrefutable authority,¹² legitimizing, in this way, his role in transmitting this information as an elderly man. However, the tone in which the advice is given is not coercive or authoritarian; it is persuasive and affectionate. By giving this advice, Ángel establishes a new relationship based on familiarity and trust in which he agrees to "deliver" the information and "spill" his knowledge. He simultaneously accepts his role as a consultant in that he offers me, in practice, a true performance of the advice—not merely as the giver of the information, but as the protagonist of his own performance. In this way, he shows his skill and communicative ability to improvise and to create new social relations in the course of his performance. In addition, in the very act of interacting, he brings to bear his responsibility as an elderly member of the community to transmit language and culture. His discursive practice in and of itself constitutes an attempt to reestablish intergenerational transmission, which has been broken or threatened. In this act, he includes me in the chain of intergenerational transmission, encouraging me to continue this work.

Second reflection

The reflection that arises regarding the second stage of fieldwork addresses the type of relationship that is established between the linguist and the consultants and the way in which this influences the data:

The way in which social relations between the investigator and consultant are organized can change in the course of an interview, and the interviewee can actually take control of the situation. This was exactly what happened with the elderly Toba man when he spontaneously and naturally performed a true *nqataGak* 'advice' for me. This type of situation leads new relations to be consolidated (be these relations of closeness, distance, or conflict). It allows the objectives and interests of the speakers themselves to be expressed (implicitly or explicitly) and oftentimes, it becomes a medium for creating new types of social involvement that were not necessarily contemplated by the researcher in the initial objectives of the research project. At the same time, these situations are useful for accessing communicative practices of a speech community in a comprehensive way and for producing "dense descriptions" (Geertz 1973) of the languages studied. It was only through an experience situated in a context of real interaction that I was able to comprehensively access the Toba speech genre 'advice'.

3.3 THIRD PHASE: FIELDWORK WITH MEMBERS OF A LANGUAGE COMMUNITY.

This phase is partially the result of my commitment to the language, a commitment I assumed after receiving that piece of advice from Ángel in the Toba community of Pampa del Indio. After I completed my doctoral thesis, I began an interdisciplinary project aimed at linguistic revitalization and training of the Toba community in Derqui, in Buenos Aires. I will not describe this experience here, as it has been documented in several published

¹² The reference to God and the use of biblical quotations is one of the most frequent linguistic resources used by evangelist Tobas to legitimize their discourse. Quoting the Bible and mentioning an irrefutable authority allow them to connect an ideal model (values and customs of their culture) with a real one (the relationship between an interviewer and interviewee) through a concrete speech event. It constitutes a sign of competence in performance.

works (Messineo and Dell' Arciprete 2005; Messineo 2003, 2004). However, I would like to mention a few issues related to the fieldwork methodology and the production and widespread release of the materials used within the framework of this experience. The methodology was based on collaborative weekly meetings (workshops) in which certain community members got involved in documenting and studying their language and their communicative practices. During a four-year working relationship, participants learned to trust each other, and a mutual commitment to recover and study the Toba language emerged between community members and researchers. Within this context, the use of the audiorecorders became common among the indigenous people, who used them to record their own texts (myths, life stories, songs, etc.) and then to share the texts in the workshop meetings. At these meetings, the texts in the Toba language were transcribed and analyzed based on prosodic and linguistic guidelines previously systematized in "Toba grammar classes." The access to the data was more natural, since the research team members witnessed and participated in the interactions and performances of some discursive genres (storytelling, singing, rhetorical debates, and advice-giving) that arose spontaneously at the workshop meetings or which we recreated by staging prototypical social situations (visits and questions posed to a traditional doctor, the telling of traditional tales at night around a fire, advice from parents to children, domestic orders, etc.).

The collaborative work of documenting Toba speaking genres generally involved the following routine:

1. The recording of speaking events and genres in spontaneous situations or in recreations in which dramatization was used
2. The transcription of the text in Toba with a literal Spanish translation
3. A linguistic analysis of the text and a breakdown into meaningful units (for example, grammatical glosses)
4. The analysis of the rhetorical structure of the text (pauses, hesitations, the use of formulaic expressions, repetitions, parallelisms, linguistic resources, etc.)
5. The translation into Spanish, taking into account both the grammatical meaning and the rhetorical resources

Although at the beginning, it was difficult to specify our objectives and understand those of the Toba people of Derqui, after a long process of exchanging ideas and reflections, we began to share the interactional objectives and the goals of the research project. One of the key difficulties involved transcribing and translating the repetitions and the parallelisms of the oral discourse. In spite of our suggestion to respect and interpret these resources poetically, some Toba people insisted on "cleaning up the text" to make it "accurate" in the Spanish translation. Issues like these, as well as the grammatical aspects of the text, were discussed and analyzed in the Toba grammar classes, in which we showed data from other indigenous languages and discussed alternative analyses such as those deriving from ethnopoetic approximation (see McDowell 2000, among others). The specific features discovered in the different text types were systematized as the features corresponding to Toba verbal art, allowing for an initial classification of the discursive genres of this language.

The results of this collaborative work were included in purely academic works (Messineo 2004, and forthcoming) and in collaborative productions done by both researchers and community members (Messineo and Dell' Arciprete 2005, Messineo and Maidana, in preparation). Nearly all the material has been released in digital form and can be accessed by the public on the website: <http://tallertoba.tripod.com>.

In order to offer some examples of the work described above, I will briefly refer to three characteristics of Toba narrative that were “captured” during the collaborative process of recording, transcribing, and analyzing the different narrative genres.

3.3.1 REPETITION OF DISCURSIVE CONNECTORS AT THE START OF A LINE. In storytelling, parallelism and the repetition of discursive connectors are two key structures. Both are important in constructing the text and serve as effective resources for ensuring discursive cohesion and continuity (Messineo 2004:461). Besides introducing the lines and thus reinforcing the prosodic and syntactic structure of the story, the repetition of discursive connectors represents a powerful ingredient that can be used for aesthetic purposes to manipulate the expectations of the listener or the audience.

The following fragment is from a tale that an elderly man from the Toba community of Derqui performed for a group of children during the project workshops:

(5)¹³

- | | | | | |
|--------|--|----------------------|------------|--------------------|
| (A) 1. | ko'ollaGa | som | | wayaGaqalachigi // |
| | ADV | CL-FOC | fox | |
| | At that time, the fox | | | |
| | | | | |
| 2. | kewotak / | na | lo'oge | so hawyaq // |
| | SA 3-ir-DIR-PROG | CL | POS 3 edge | CL forest |
| | was walking alongside the edge of the forest | | | |
| | | | | |
| 3. | keto'ot / | na | lo'oge | so hawyaq # |
| | 3 SA-to go-DIR | CL | POS 3 edge | CL forest |
| | he was skirting the forest | | | |
| | | | | |
| (C) 5. | wa' qaq | iwita | aso | 'epaq // |
| | CON | 3 SA-arrive | FEM-CL | tree |
| | <i>and he came to a tree</i> | | | |
| | | | | |
| 6. | wa' qaq | iloshigemek / | aso | 'epaq # |
| | CON | 3 SA-to look-DIR-LOC | FEM-CL | tree |
| | <i>and then he looked up the tree</i> | | | |

¹³ The following abbreviations are used in grammatical glosses: ADV (adverb); CL (nominal classifier); CON (discursive connector); DEM (demonstrative); DIR (directional suffix); DUR (durative aspect); FEM (feminine); FOC (focus particle); IMP (impersonal passive); LOC (locative suffix); NC (completive nexus); NEG (negation); PL (plural); POS (possessive); PROG (progressive aspect); SA (active subject); 1 (first person); 2 (second person) and 3 (third person).

forthcoming). In Toba, although relative and completive clauses can occur with a linker,¹⁴ there are no other formal distinctions between the expression of the dependent event and that of the independent event, given that both occur with full verbal forms (subject marker, aspect, directionality, etc.). This generalization becomes even more evident when we examine the storytelling style, where it is practically impossible to find dependent clauses: note what happens in the following lines, taken from a story that describes a process in which indigenous people receive their national identity cards:

(6)

cha'aze	se'eso	Ø	i'ottak	ana	ndokumento	lasetak
CON	DEM		3 to-make-PROG	FEM-CL	3-document	3-laugh (at)-PROG

Because the ones (that) made the documents laughed at

na	qom	Ø	saua'aGayget	na	doqshe	l'aqtaq
CL	Toba people		NEG-to listen	CL	non-Tobas	3- language

the Qom (who) didn't understand the language of the Doqshe

(7)

qayuatta'aguet	aso	tren	nache	hek	na	qom
IMP- to wait-DIR	FEM-CL	train	CON	3-to go	CL	Toba people

The Toba people were waiting for the train to leave (lit.: they were waiting for the train and in the train the Tobas are leaving)

(8)

saq	amaqtaq	na	no'onañi
NEG:many		CL	3M-to stay

Few stay,

qaq	ne'ena	no'onañi	nache	chektak	na	koka
CON	DEM	3 M- to stay	CON	3-to eat-DUR	CL	coca

and the ones who stayed are the ones who chewed coca leaves (lit.:and the ones who stayed,

ko'ollaGa
 ADV: pas
 they had eaten coca leaves before).

What can be expressed through clauses connected by completive or relative linkers is expressed through juxtaposition (example 6) or phrase coordination (examples 7 and 8).¹⁵ As for phrase coordination, the phrases tend to be connected by the discursive connector

¹⁴ These linkers are grammaticalized forms of the demonstrative.

¹⁵ This is the case when eliciting structured phrases in which it is possible to obtain, for example, relatives with linkers (Messineo and Porta, forthcoming).

nache, following the rhetorical standard of the language in which discursive connectors allow the referential continuity of the discourse to be maintained.

3.3.3 LOW LEXICAL DENSITY. The examples above and the recurring use of the discursive connector *nache* as an effective resource to maintain the discursive referentiality bring up another feature of the oral genres recorded in spontaneous situations: low lexical density (See Foley 2003:94 for a discussion of low lexical density in oral Tibetan). When speakers tell a story or give advice, they use only the minimum, most essential grammatical forms with referential content. As a result, the structure is vague, fragmented, and not very elaborate in terms of lexicon, making translation difficult, since a great deal of the information must be taken from the context. Example (10) shows the quantity of referential information that appears elided when a text in Toba is transcribed and translated into Spanish:

(10):

1. *nache* **qoyenak** ze
 CON IMP-to say NC
 And (all of them) said that

2. **qayawegek** ana'ana registro civil
 IMP-to take-DIR DEM clerk's office
 (The Doqshe) took them (the Qom) to the clerk's office

-
3. cha'aze **se'eso** lasetak na qom
 CON DEM 3-to laugh (at)-PROG CL Toba people
 Because they (the Doqshe) laughed at the Qom

4. ndotek da dalaGaykpi na le'enaGat
 only CL new-PL CL 3 POS-name
 and only the new names (were kept)

5. nataqa'en **ne'ena**
 CON DEM
 and besides, they (the new names)

6. doqshe le'enaGat
 doqshe 3POS-name
 (were) Doqshe names

Clauses with verbs marked as impersonal that allow the subject to be defocalized (lines 1 and 2: *qoyenak* and *qayawegek*), elided constituents (line 2: *the Doqshe*, *the Qom*; line 4: *were kept*; and line 5: *the new names*), and the use of demonstratives and deictics (lines 3 and 5: *se'eso* and *ne'ena*) show a weakly integrated structure at first glance. However, they constitute typical features of oral language, and they imply a high degree of cooperation on the part of the listener, who must recover the implicit information available in the context

(both discursive and situational).

Third reflection

The third reflection has to do with the type of data that is obtained when speaking genres are collected and analyzed as a collaborative work between the researcher and the community:

From this perspective, the research objectives, along with the production and widespread release of the resulting materials, can be shared and discussed with community members. This does not necessarily lead to quick or effective academic achievements, but it does allow for a more comprehensive approach to the needs, desires, and demands of a community whose language and culture are in jeopardy. It can also provide greater comprehension of the language and communicative practices, as well as the social and cultural context in which the research is carried out. As a result, it influences the quality of the data and the ability of the data to represent the language.

4. CONCLUSIONS. The objective of this article has been to show that a collaborative approach that relates the description of linguistic structures to the study of discourse as verbal art greatly enriches the documentation of endangered languages. Two aspects of indigenous language research—fieldwork, and the documentation of genres in languages with an oral tradition—are generally not specified in conjunction with academic work, but are essential to language documentation.

Fieldwork involves a dynamic, ongoing, complex organization of the relationships between the linguist and community members with whom the linguist works. In order to consolidate these relationships, a great amount of time is required, time that is often not considered when research schedules are drafted.

The second aspect, the documentation of genres, is tied to methods of gathering data. We should consider that both eliciting speech and recording spontaneous speech events are valid procedures when one is documenting an endangered language. Although this may appear obvious, the problem lies in the fact that our own theories about what constitutes language and communication, along with our own perception of what type of units comprise utterances and what parameters define these units, act as filters when we record data. We ask, then, for single words, correctly structured clauses, verbal paradigms, and, once in a while, for texts.

This procedure not only perplexes and tires out our consultants, but also produces a special type of data. This is because our questions are related to the way in which linguistic forms are analyzed (affixes, lexemes, and syntagms) and made susceptible to traditional syntactic and semantic analysis.

Similarly, the way in which we approach fieldwork can determine the type, quality, and representativeness of the data recorded. The data that we access through elicitation are segmentable units on the surface, with a predominantly referential function (Silverstein 1972; Briggs 1986). Units such as deictic references, repetitions, intonation, emphasis, or the preference for certain lexical and syntactic structures that organize the discourse and the communication of societies with an oral tradition are not easy to access at the conscious level and therefore, they are hard to capture in grammar guides and dictionaries.

The examples analyzed in section 2.3 show that Toba verbal art has its own organization, with specific rhetorical structures that can be compared to one another. The repetition of connectors, the preference for juxtaposed or coordinated structures, and the low level of lexical elaboration are a few of the linguistic features that are typical of the narrative genre. Speakers have extensive pragmatic and metapragmatic awareness that allows them to reproduce and transmit the cultural practices coded in specific speech modes. These speech modes can be acquired by Toba children, even when they have lost the code and Spanish is their first language.

Trying to access the knowledge of speakers in a comprehensive and collaborative way, while attempting to keep from forcing the information through techniques formed by our own concepts of language and communication, is a commitment we must take on as linguists if we wish to work in collaboration with communities whose languages are in jeopardy. This approach gives new meaning to the documentation of oral genres, which can no longer be considered as fixed texts, but rather as aesthetic and cultural productions.

In addition, we must understand that it is not only the linguistic codes that are fundamentally important in contexts of endangered languages, but it is also the possibilities that these codes provide and the ways in which they are used, since these are closely related to literature, intellectuality, and art as expressions of human creativity (Woodbury 2003).

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