Defining ‘Process’ and ‘Result’: Making Space for Collaborative Methodologies in Linguistic Fieldwork*

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Abstract

Linguistic research in field settings presents a distinct set of ethical dilemmas as linguists navigate their responsibilities to a variety of constituencies (Dorian 2010). This thesis focuses on the relationship between the linguist and the speech community and its impact on the research agenda. I consider prominent collaborative models for fieldwork, which vary with respect to the level of decision-making power accorded to the parties involved in a research project (Cameron et al. 1992; Czaykowska-Higgins 2009). Using case studies drawn from the linguistic ethics literature, I highlight both the challenges and benefits of community collaboration in research, paying particular attention to the impact of community control of the research agenda and publication of findings. I also consider the potential of increased reflection and self-reference in linguistic writing.

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1 Introduction

Fieldwork presents linguists with a variety of ethical, interpersonal, and professional dilemmas. Funding organizations and communities, as well as linguists themselves, are increasingly advocating for fieldwork to be collaborative and community-based, but these methodologies are not without challenges. This thesis explores the difficulties and benefits of conducting collaborative linguistic fieldwork, from the stage of choosing a fieldsite and securing funding to the eventual published results of the project. This paper is anchored by discussion of several case studies, which serve to illustrate the realities of conducting fieldwork. I am particularly concerned with the norms of linguistics as a discipline, and how the process and results of collaborative fieldwork challenge these norms. I consider how, despite these challenges, incorporating reciprocal fieldwork practices and self-reflective approaches to writing are beneficial to linguistics as a field.

In §2, I discuss linguists’ responsibilities to a variety of constituencies, including speakers, communities, intellectual traditions, and funding organizations. The difficulty and importance of defining the boundaries of a speech community are considered in this section. §3 is an overview of existing ethical frameworks for fieldwork methodologies, focusing on work by Cameron and colleagues (1992) and Czaykowska-Higgins (2009), with particular attention to collaborative and community-based fieldwork practices. §4 details three case studies drawn from the linguistics ethics literature; these case studies provide concrete examples of the commonalities and differences between different fieldwork contexts. I refer to the case studies in §5, in which I discuss the implications of collaborative fieldwork for linguists and for the discipline. In §6, I conclude by considering the published outcomes of collaborative fieldwork and suggesting that community-based methodologies and autoethnographic approaches to linguistic writing have much to offer, both despite and because of the ways that they challenge the norms of the field.

2 Professional and Ethical Responsibilities

Linguists work at the confluence of “multiple and cross-cutting obligations” (Australian Linguistic Society 1990). As scientists and scholars, linguists are accountable to the scientific community and to the larger scientific and academic enterprise of knowledge production. However, the interests of science and of the scholarly community can conflict with those of speakers and speech communities (Eckert 2013). In this section I consider the stakeholders in linguistic research projects, and how linguists’ obligations to these various constituencies might come into conflict with each other. These conflicts constitute ethical dilemmas, where
following the norms presented by one stakeholder may result in unethical behavior with respect to another stakeholder (Whiteford & Trotter 2008).

Many professional organizations have developed ethical codes as a response to these ethical dilemmas. Ethical codes and other established ethical standards “work on the basis of balancing as fairly as possible the needs of a discipline in its pursuit of knowledge and truth with the interests of the people on whom the research is conducted” (Cameron et al. 1993:19). This description highlights one of the most prominent ethical conflicts for any scholar conducting research, especially in the field. As scholars, linguists have a responsibility to their discipline to pursue knowledge and to add to the information base available to their peers and successors.

2.1 Speakers

As Cameron and colleagues note, the desires and needs of subjects must be taken into consideration alongside responsibilities to the discipline. In the case of linguistic research, some might argue that language itself is the subject, and that speakers simply provide data to researchers. If this perspective is taken, though, speakers take on a role closer to that of an experimental subject, and the consideration of their wishes and rights becomes even more important to the success of the project. Because of this role, compensation (whether monetary or otherwise) is frequently offered to speaker consultants. Linguists are also responsible for communicating clearly about the intentions and potential risks of their work with the individuals who participate, and are expected to obtain informed consent from participants.

From the perspective of some funding organizations and other outside groups, informed consent takes the form of a single instance of oral or written permission-granting which can then be recorded as proof that the individual understands the implications of the work. While an understanding of one’s participation may seem more pressing in the case of research where the participant may be harmed or significantly impacted by the study (e.g. medical drug trials), informed consent is seen as crucial for conducting ethical work involving human subjects. Without an understanding of the implications of their participation, research subjects may feel that they have been manipulated or treated dishonestly by the researcher. Such outcomes reflect negatively on the researcher and on the study itself, not to mention having a negative impact on future research in the field or in a nearby location.

While informed consent is viewed as essential for research to be ethically sound, Dorian (2010) suggests that the idea of informed consent is at best improbable and at worst unattainable for several reasons. Despite the best efforts of researchers, speaker sources
may not fully understand how the linguistic material they provide will be used. This is particularly true when the language being studied is spoken in a place with different access to technology or different expectations or norms around how knowledge is shared. Researchers themselves may also not be able to fully predict the future use and availability of their data. For example, linguists working several decades ago would have been unable to predict the impact of the internet or digital recording technology on the potential reach of their data. Communities today may not have access to the internet, or may be unfamiliar with Western academic practices around publication. These factors, among many others, contribute to the difficulty of obtaining truly informed consent.

Dorian’s doubt about the feasibility of informed consent suggests that another approach is needed for conducting research while treating speakers ethically. Some of the challenges of fully informing speakers would be resolved by a more dialogic process, in which researchers and speakers communicate throughout the course of the project. This is important because linguists’ and speakers’ expectations for the structure of their partnership may vary dramatically, and often change throughout the course of the project. Collaborative approaches to field research are discussed in more detail later in this paper, in addition to examples of collaborative research in contexts where community expectations diverge from the disciplinary norms of linguistics.

2.2 Communities

While communication with the speakers who serve as consultants or informants is crucial to the pursuit of an ethical research project, Dorian (2010) notes that linguists also have a responsibility to those speakers’ communities. The notion of the speech community is complicated and has shifted over the years; the characteristics of speech communities have a significant impact on the ethics of research in them. Muehlmann (2014) offers a basic definition from the perspective of the scholar: the speech community is a unit of social analysis with language as its defining factor. When a linguist is working on or with a particular speech community, the linguistic particulars that define group membership vary depending on the researcher’s agenda. Muehlmann notes that definitions of the speech community tend to be constructed based on researchers’ perceptions, “over the participants’ own understandings of their practices. Therefore, most definitions of the speech community exclude speakers that do not share the analysts’ criteria of membership in that community even if they count themselves as members of that community” (2014:580).

The boundaries of the speech community may look different to different stakeholders in a research project. Dorian (2010) describes linguists’ responsibilities to the community
as not necessarily being only to speakers—young people who are not speakers of their ancestral language are also impacted by linguists’ work, particularly in the case of language revitalization projects. In order to use the idea of the speech community in a useful way, Dell Hymes suggests that the speech community be conceived of as “an object defined for purposes of linguistic inquiry,” that is, as a construct useful within the parameters of a particular linguistic endeavor (1974:48, quoted in Muehlmann 2014:583). The importance of the speech community as a stakeholder will vary depending on the project—in the case of revitalization work, the boundaries of the speech community may extend to include semi-fluent speakers or younger non-speakers impacted by language shift (Yamada 2007). At another extreme, the notion of speech community might not have much bearing on general research done on a language with many millions of speakers.

Whether individuals are fluent native speakers, heritage non-speakers, or any point in between, they may be important stakeholders in research conducted on their language (depending, as explained above, on the size and composition of the community in question). As Muehlmann notes, “language is . . . an object of focused attention, crucial to the way that people conceive of themselves as part of social collectives” (2014:592). Linguists are obligated to consider the impact of their work not just on individuals but also on communities because of the importance of language as a marker of social belonging and cultural heritage. Communities may have beliefs and norms surrounding language use that diverge radically from the expectations of linguists. Several examples of these divergences are discussed in the case studies in §4.

Rice (2006) discusses the ownership of data as an aspect of research with a community that must be considered. Approaches to data ownership, management, and publication vary widely, and Rice suggests that keeping this fact in mind can minimize frustration if communities’ desires do not conform to linguists’ expectations. She argues that, when conducting collaborative work, linguists have an ethical responsibility to bring together their own intellectual tradition with that of the host community. While this may mean abandoning some of the Western intellectual norms that underlie most formal linguistic training, Rice states that “collaborative working arrangements are not truly collaborative if the linguist still controls the content and framework of the research, and the form in which it appears” (2006:149-150). In order to truly collaborate with communities, linguists must be prepared to make compromises about the structure of their research projects.
2.3 Intellectual Traditions and Value Systems

Alternative approaches to knowledge transmission and education may contradict established practices within an academic discipline. Academic values of independence and objectivity are often in conflict with indigenous ideas about knowledge (Battiste & Henderson 2000, Farella 1993, Wilkins 1992). Theories of knowledge then become an area of interest for linguists seeking to work equitably with speech communities, particularly those with histories of oppression. Dwyer (2006) notes that truly collaborative fieldwork methodologies will only be possible if reciprocal commitments to learning about others’ intellectual traditions are made. The researcher is obligated to learn about the knowledge system of the community, but insider collaborators should also understand the researcher’s tradition in order for both parties to successfully mediate between the two systems in their working relationship.

Mediation between knowledge systems is particularly necessary in relation to ideas of language ownership. Many communities feel a sense of ownership over their language, and assert that this ownership gives them a “primary right” to any data collected, or to research conducted on their language (Rice 2006: 147). Ethics statements for professional associations of linguists and anthropologists, such as the Linguistic Society of America (LSA), acknowledge the inherent rights of indigenous peoples to their intangible heritage, including oral traditions, literature, and traditional environmental knowledge. The LSA’s Ethics Statement notes that “some communities regard language, oral literature, and other forms of cultural knowledge as valuable intellectual property whose ownership should be respected by outsiders … Other communities are eager to share their knowledge in the context of a long-term relationship of reciprocity and exchange” (2009: 3). The range of different beliefs about language held by communities requires a range of responses.

Feelings of linguistic ownership and the acknowledgement of linguistic rights in ethics statements may conflict with the idea that information about human language belongs to humanity as a whole. The system of beliefs surrounding language and its use is likely to be fraught with conflict between community perspectives and the perspectives of linguists. Linguists are scholars working in a field that generally uses the scientific method and treats language as an object of study. Language is treated as a source of data, which can be analyzed to provide new insights and knowledge. In a Euro-American academic context, the knowledge generated by scientific research is generally considered to be a contribution to the academic project of knowledge production. Producing such information adds to the overall knowledge base available to future scholars and to humanity as a whole. From the perspective of the academic community, the benefits of linguistic research are generalized to the entire discipline and, perhaps, to all of humanity. Given the potential for widespread
positive impact, the academic view is that the pursuit of knowledge should be unrestricted. However, individuals and communities may not hold this view. Individual speakers may see their language as God-given (Gasser 2015), as a highly valuable cultural object (Debenport 2010), or as a marker of in-group identity that should not be shared with others.

2.4 Funding Organizations

Balancing the expectations of linguistics as an academic discipline with the beliefs and desires of individuals and communities presents a range of ethical dilemmas. In addition to these major stakeholders, working linguists also have specific obligations to funding organizations. Funding may come from a linguist’s academic institution, in which case expectations for research will largely align with academic and disciplinary norms surrounding the pursuit of knowledge. When applying for funding, researchers are required to submit detailed plans for the structure, timing, and execution of their project. The research agenda is therefore predetermined. While plans for research projects can, and do, change during the process, coming into a field situation with a preconceived objective presents an obstacle to collaborative work and accommodation of community requirements.

The deadlines and advance planning required to obtain grant funding may create ethical dilemmas. Academic departments and university promotion committees may impose similar conditions to funding organizations. This is particularly true in the context of requirements for hiring and tenure, which are often described as ‘publish or perish.’ These obligatory conditions preclude the time- and energy-consuming process of conducting collaborative work with communities. This is a real quandary for researchers, and is in many cases intractable. Fieldwork in particular requires financial investment, and without funding may not be possible. The requirements of funding organizations are then important factors that may limit or permit different types of research in the field.

Despite the potential for conflicting responsibilities brought on by the conditions of grants, funding organizations can also be allies of communities and community-based work. Some organizations are particularly eager to give grant funding for work on endangered or otherwise receding languages. When the communities that speak these languages have requirements surrounding collaboration with linguists, as Debenport (2010) describes, funding organizations may be obliged to support community-based work. Some specific challenges and benefits of collaborative research with regards to funding are discussed in the case studies later in this paper.
3 Existing Ethical Frameworks

Of the many approaches to linguistic research, no single methodology is universally applicable or appropriate (Cameron et al. 1992, Czaykowska-Higgins 2009, Gasser 2015, Holton 2009, Rice 2006). Following the same general ethical framework can have very different practical results depending on the context and the type of research being conducted. Some types of linguistic research, such as historical or comparative linguistics, may not require much interaction with speakers or communities, instead depending on previous documentation and historical sources. On the other hand, in the case of revitalization work, the products of the research are intended to serve and, perhaps, change the speech community and therefore require particular ethical care. The methodology one chooses is clarified and informed by one’s ethical stance, and not necessarily prescribed by it. Each stint of fieldwork requires a new approach depending on the sociopolitical context, the type of research to be conducted, and the various stakeholders involved. The stakeholders also need to be explicitly defined, as Czaykowska-Higgins points out: “In practice each research project, especially if it is collaborative, needs to define for itself how it will constitute ‘community’ for the purposes of the project and the research situation” (2009:19). In the following subsections I discuss several widely cited frameworks on which research methodologies might be modeled.

3.1 Linguist-Focused

Within the ethics literature, Cameron and colleagues (1992) propose a tripartite framework of fieldwork models: “ethical”, “advocacy”, and “empowerment”. Cameron and colleagues call their first model “ethical,” but I will refer to it as “linguist-focused,” using a term from Rice (2006) and Czaykowska-Higgins (2009), to distinguish the methodology from a general discussion of topics related to ethics. I have chosen this term to reflect the fact that research done on a linguist-focused model generally follows ethical best practices, but is less context-sensitive and inclusive of research subjects/participants than the other models discussed below. In linguist-focused research, informants advance the researcher’s goals; researchers conduct research on their informants. A linguist-focused and -led model of research “assumes that linguists and the communities they work with belong to separate worlds, that there is a divide or boundary between researcher and researched, expert and non-expert, linguist and language-speaking community” (Czaykowska-Higgins 2009:17). Czaykowska-Higgins acknowledges that such a divide may not be problematic if the language being studied has millions of speakers or is spoken by a population with political or economic power.
Researchers working on a linguist-focused model are concerned with the well being of their subjects, as they should be, but Cameron and colleagues see this model as treating the subjects’ needs and desires as a constraining, negative force that prevents the researcher from following their own agenda. Rice characterizes this approach as contemptuous of non-dominant knowledge systems and dismissive to individuals’ and communities’ needs if they do not align with the researcher’s priorities. Linguist-focused work may also undervalue the knowledge of native speakers by assuming that “the speaker is there to help the linguist achieve his/her research goals and is assumed to have little ability to contribute beyond giving data” (2006:129). Czaykowska-Higgins echoes the dismissiveness of linguist-focused work: “Linguist-focused language research as a research model idealizes abstention from action and excuses accountability precisely because in its most idealized form, it tries to ignore the context in which it takes place” (2009:38). In certain circumstances linguist-focused work may ultimately benefit the host community, perhaps by producing grammars, dictionaries, or corpora that can be used by community members to meet their own goals. However, by its nature linguist-focused work is not typically designed with the intention of benefitting the community.

3.2 Advocacy

Both linguist-focused and advocacy-based methodologies are rooted in the positivist tradition, which emphasizes a detached attitude towards the research context. In theory, this emotional distance allows the researcher to maintain an objective, scientific stance and thereby generate value-free conclusions (Cameron et al. 1993). An approach rooted in positivism corresponds to the norms of academia and scientific disciplines, so working in a linguist-focused or advocacy framework can make it easier for linguists to meet their responsibilities to the discipline and to academia. By maintaining a critical distance from the research context, linguists will draw conclusions that are less context-dependent. For future research on the same or similar languages, this may allow for more generalizable conclusions.

Advocacy work moves beyond linguist-focused research in that the research is conducted both on and for the community. Some anthropologists view advocacy for the populations they study as a moral obligation of their profession. An advocacy framework puts would-be advocates in the position of “pay[ing] their debt to the community by countering error and bias with the objective factual truth to which their expert status gives them privileged access” (Cameron et al. 1993:22). Many linguists, by virtue of their access to an interested audience and to funding sources may be in excellent positions to advocate
for communities in meaningful ways. By directing attention to the needs and challenges of communities and clarifying misconceptions to a wider public, this advocacy may have significant positive impact. Dorian (2010) suggests that the social unnaturalness of the researcher's position in a community can be mitigated to some extent by increased community involvement, such as through service projects, and that some communities make such service a condition of the researcher's presence.

While researcher-advocates may be working on behalf of a community, their voices, opinions, and systems of knowledge are privileged. Advocacy can also devolve into an ethnocentric “imposition of the researcher's moral values rather than advocacy for the stakeholders’ values and position” (Whiteford & Trotter 2008:94). The suggestion that linguists are obligated to advocate on behalf of their communities may put linguists in the position of choosing what is best for the community, although an awareness of this dynamic on the part of the linguist can result in advocacy that aligns with community desires. Additionally, some communities may reject or resent outside advocacy on their behalf. By suggesting that advocacy is a moral imperative of the fieldworker, the agency and priorities of the community are overlooked. Another particular issue that is specific to advocacy research is the question of the community itself. When the research agenda and types of advocacy are fieldworker-determined, the fieldworker's conception of what constitutes the community is privileged and the community members' own self-identification may be ignored (Cameron et al. 1993).

3.3 Collaborative Methodologies

As much as positivism can offer in terms of objective, generalizable results, fieldwork is neither politically nor culturally neutral, and using the supposed objectivity of linguistics as a science fails to remove the sociopolitical context in which research is carried out. Czaykowska-Higgins (2009) suggests that this argument provides motivation for conducting research in a collaborative framework. Some of the concerns regarding informed consent also support conducting collaborative fieldwork, as the dialogic and interactive methods that characterize collaboration mitigate some of the ethical problems that result from obtaining informed consent in a single discrete interaction. Yamada advocates collaborative methodology for many of the same reasons but does not suggest that it is universally appropriate: “the historical or comparative linguist interested in addressing a very limited set of research questions may find collaboration with speech community members impractical” (2007:279). Grinevald (2006) notes that not all fieldworkers prioritize advocacy for or empowerment of communities in the same way, and that some of this variance is regional. Linguists working
in the Americas or Australia, whose fieldwork is often in indigenous communities, tend to be more socio-politically involved with those communities in a way that linguists working in other regions may view as radical. Because of Australian indigenous communities’ long history of advocacy for their own rights, Australian linguists have particularly well-developed guidelines for ethical fieldwork.

Collaborative and community-oriented models are being more widely advocated for by funding agencies and indigenous groups, but linguists have been moving towards such methodologies over several decades. In a short essay published in 1981, Nida provides an early example, using his own personal experience working with native speaker informants to argue for increased collaboration between linguists and speakers. His work describes an approach for training informants to independently produce linguistic data and provide basic analysis. Nida acknowledges the prevailing attitudes of his contemporaries by listing some of the reasons why linguists might find the investment of time, energy, and resources towards training speaker informants as not worthwhile. He counters this reasoning by briefly explaining some of the benefits of collaborative research, both to individual projects and to linguistics as a field.

As collaborative methodologies become more widely recommended and used, their benefits and challenges need to be explored and articulated. Czaykowska-Higgins (2009) argues for explicit discussion of such models in the literature so that their implications in various field settings can be fully understood. In the following subsections, I discuss two frequently cited collaborative frameworks: the empowerment model proposed by Cameron and colleagues (1992), and Czaykowska-Higgins’ (2009) Community-Based Language Research (CBLR). These sections are followed by a series of case studies, which illustrate the benefits, challenges, and other consequences of using these models in various field settings.

### 3.3.1 Empowerment

In order to counteract some of the issues with advocacy research, many linguists are now working within an empowerment model, which is the third of the frameworks provided by Cameron and colleagues (1992). Empowerment research is done on the language for and with the community. The empowerment model focuses on relationship building and reciprocity within the period of fieldwork as well as after. In doing empowerment-focused work, researchers’ obligations to the researched population may supersede the acquisition of new knowledge, or the pursuit of a research agenda, if those goals conflict with community needs or desires. The goal, however, is not to subjugate the researcher’s own interests but
to collaborate “to identify projects of mutual benefit” (Yamada 2007:271). Empowering research is set in contrast to positivism and its values of “objectivity, disinterest, and non-interaction” (Cameron et al. 1993:23).

Linguists conducting empowering fieldwork engage with communities intentionally, acknowledging that their collaborators have their own agendas that linguists can try to address alongside their own projects. Collaboration with communities also affirms the importance of language as an element of cultural heritage and allows community members to reclaim their language through their involvement in linguistic research (Yamada 2007). An increase in empowering research corresponds to trends in the literature on ethical fieldwork identified by Rice (2012): increasingly symmetrical relationships, active participation of community members alongside scholars in research projects, and the responsibility of the researcher to work to advance the community’s agenda if asked to do so.

3.3.2 Community-Based Language Research

Community-based language research (CBLR) is a collaborative fieldwork model articulated by Czaykowska-Higgins (2009). This model advocates for linguistic work on a language, conducted for, with, and by members of a speech community. Within such a model, knowledge produced may not have linguists or the academic community as its primary audience. Linguists may also not be the primary researchers or the drivers of the research agenda. Rather, the community and its members play a role as researchers and as the audience for the research. CBLR rejects the assumption, implicit in linguist-focused and advocacy models, that the Western approach to knowledge production should be privileged and used as the framework for linguistic work.

In moving away from normative Western knowledge production, CBLR recognizes expertise and ability beyond academic training. “[I]t recognizes that linguists are neither the sole researchers nor the only experts and that their role is to be partners in a collaborative relationship in which all partners learn from each other” (Czaykowska-Higgins 2009:26). This structure is challenging to the roles of researcher and informant, which traditionally have firm boundaries and have much less room for reciprocal exchange. The potential for mutual learning and bi- or multilateral contributions to the research project are significant benefits to the fieldwork. Linguists and communities working in tandem may be able to produce deep, nuanced pictures of language in its social and cultural context. Future generations of linguists benefit from such thorough background, as well as from a history of well-established relationships within a community, just as their ability to work in certain
contexts suffers when those communities have had previous negative experiences with linguists or fieldworkers.

While there are many benefits to CBLR, this method does pose challenges to both the researcher and their academic tradition. In her discussion of some of the challenges of CBLR, Czaykowska-Higgins highlights the establishment of working relationships and the definition of participants’ respective roles as particularly challenging aspects. It takes time, trust, and accountability to build strong and productive working relationships, and time may be in short supply for linguists who have obligations to their departments, students, and funders. Trust and accountability are also hard to come by in communities with histories of oppression by outsiders (e.g. indigenous communities, minority language communities, etc.). In terms of defining roles, most linguists are familiar with the linguist-focused dynamic of researcher-informant and may struggle to relinquish some of the power that that relationship affords them. It is also the case that community members may initially require training before they are able to fully participate in the research; renegotiating responsibilities and levels of participation over time is necessary in such situations.

Conflicts with established norms of the discipline may also arise as a result of conducting community-focused or collaborative work. The results of CBLR are often different from the hypothesis-testing and data-driven conclusions of much linguistic work. “In community-based research, it is often the case that the process itself is a result” (Czaykowska-Higgins 2009:43; emphasis in original). The dialogic work of establishing a working relationship with a community and of understanding the target language in the context of its speakers is a major outcome of this methodology. As a result, many fieldworkers conducting community-based or collaborative research produce reflexive metanarratives of their fieldwork, reflecting on their roles within the community and how the relationships they formed influenced the trajectory of their research. Czaykowska-Higgins notes that these outcomes, which are common results of collaborative research situations, are often characterized as “informal” or “not rigorous” by other linguists (2009:43). A potential challenge both for collaboration-oriented field linguists and for linguistics as a field is to consider whether and where such accounts of collaborative methodologies can and should be included, highlighted, and shared.

4 Case Studies

As the previous sections show, collaborative and community-engaged methodology is advocated for in the literature. However, relatively few articles describe the process and outcomes of collaborative fieldwork (Yamada 2007). The following case studies provide examples of articles that convey two different types of information about collaborative linguistic
fieldwork. Firstly, each article details the experience of a particular linguist in a unique field context, illustrating varying types of linguist-community relationships and the methodological approaches used in each situation. Additionally, each article illuminates the conflicts between academic expectations and community requirements, and presents solutions to these quandaries. Each case is discussed individually in the following subsections, and in §5 and §6 common themes and overarching questions are raised.

4.1 Wilkins 1992

David Wilkins’ (1992) widely cited account of his experience conducting fieldwork in an Aboriginal community in central Australia illustrates many of the potential challenges of collaborative methodology. Wilkins explores the utility of articles like his own, in which linguists narrate in detail the context, structure, and outcomes of their working environments. His work is similar in both style and content to other articles describing collaborative fieldwork situations. As one of the earliest such pieces I have come across, Wilkins’ article represents a foundational set of issues that recur in more recent work. Despite these common themes, Wilkins’ experience (like all fieldwork experiences) is unique; its particulars are explored in this section and discussed in relation to the other case studies in §5.

Wilkins’ initial connection with his eventual host community was unusual, and offers a potential path for other linguists interested in establishing a collaborative relationship with a community. After completing his undergraduate work in linguistics, Wilkins received an offer of a scholarship to pursue PhD research. Feeling ambivalent about linguists’ outsider position and their impacts on communities, Wilkins determined that he would only accept his PhD funding if he found a community that was not just willing to host him but actively wanted a linguist to work in collaboration on the community’s projects. To this end, Wilkins wrote to Aboriginal communities and organizations around Australia offering his training and expertise in service to the community. Through this process he wound up at the Yipirinya School, an Aboriginal school operated by the Yipirinya Council in Alice Springs, Australia.

Wilkins’ choice to leave the decision of his fieldwork location so much up to others is outside the norms of even the most collaborative work. To a certain extent, it is a luxury that most established linguists and probably many PhD students would be unable to consider. For linguists who have already established areas of expertise—whether in terms of language family or subfield—leaving one’s fieldwork location up to this level of chance might make it impossible to pursue the research questions in which one is most interested. Similarly, many PhD students have already determined areas of interest that may not be accommodated by fieldwork positions solicited in this way. In addition to interest- and subfield-specific issues
with soliciting fieldwork locations in the manner of Wilkins, funding may not allow such a strategy. Wilkins was exceptional in that he had access to scholarship funding without having needed to submit a research plan as part of applying for it.

Despite having independent funding for his research, the Yipirinya Council required that Wilkins be hired as a paid employee, at least part time, so that he could be held accountable and his work more reliably controlled. Wilkins initially worked exclusively on projects laid out by the Council, particularly the development of curricular materials for the School. This arrangement carried some benefits for Wilkins: “...I was spared most of the troubles and traumas of justifying my presence, finding people to work with, and gaining acceptance that faces many researchers who are just starting fieldwork” (1992:185). His employment benefitted both the Council, which gained a measure of security by overseeing Wilkins directly, and Wilkins himself, as the process of making connections within the community was thus expedited and facilitated.

Because his work was done for the Council his status as paid employee was logical, but this particular requirement of the research relationship was also marked by past community experiences with linguists. Communities with past negative memories of linguists or other fieldworkers may have more stringent requirements for future work on their languages. During the course of his work, Wilkins was asked by a consortium of Aboriginal organizations to draft a policy that they could use in making determinations about work on and with their languages. He notes that the organizations held the view that “there should be very tight restrictions placed on researchers and they considered the academic view that there should be no restrictions placed on the pursuit of knowledge to be plainly wrong. As far as they were concerned, language and knowledge are not free to everyone, but are under Aboriginal control” (Wilkins 192:179). Aboriginal Australian speech communities have long histories of oppression by outsiders and the imposition of external value systems and norms.

This history is part of the reason for the strict requirements made for Wilkins’ research by Yipirinya leaders. In his article, he outlines the agreement he made with the community’s leadership with regards to research planning, publication, and the management of data. As an overarching aspect of community control, the Yipirinya Council’s consent was required for his continued work, both in the field situation and beyond, and they retained the power to revoke that consent at any time. All of Wilkins’ research methods had to be approved, as did any work based primarily on his field research that he planned to publish. On his published work Wilkins held joint copyright with the Council, and any recordings or fieldnotes belonged solely to the Council, with copies in Wilkins’ possession considered loans (albeit permanent ones). Wilkins notes that, after his period of residency in Alice Springs had concluded, the Council relaxed the terms of their agreement to allow him to
pursue his own agenda and submit work for publication freely unless very sensitive topics were involved. This point was only reached, however, after Wilkins had complied readily with the established guidelines of the working relationship for several years. His compliance with and respect of community wishes allowed the Council to trust that he would continue to hold the community’s interests in mind.

While the Council did not require Wilkins’ publications to be useful to the school and community, the agreement stipulated that his periods of residential fieldwork be of practical use. Much of his time during his research stays was dedicated to working with school staff to produce materials for the school curriculum. These activities were opportunities for Wilkins and other staff at the Yipirinya School to discuss a wide variety of linguistic issues that were salient to the community. These questions ranged from issues related to education and traditional knowledge to sociolinguistic topics relating to the age of speakers to questions about the level and function of bilingualism in the community. Within these sanctioned and useful avenues, Wilkins was able to frame a research topic of interest to him and focused on his particular interests in semantics, pragmatics, and sociocultural aspects of language.

While Wilkins was able to work within the requirements established by the Yipirinya Council for his fieldwork in that community, their agreement presented some difficulties for his work. Firstly, he notes that allowing the community to vet his manuscripts before they were published sometimes resulted in the redaction of explicit examples of a phenomenon while allowing a more general discussion to remain. This happened to him on several occasions when the topic of his research was in some way culturally sensitive (e.g. nicknaming or insults). In academic writing, a lack of example data can look to other scholars like “unsubstantiated hearsay” (Wilkins 1992:181). This corresponds to Czaykowska-Higgins (2009) comment that collaborative fieldwork sometimes results in research products that, in one way or another, fall outside the norms and expectations of the discipline. An additional issue involved Wilkins’ PhD funding, the granting organization for which was not able to accommodate the duration and intensity of his work in the field with the result that he lost his scholarship money.

Like Debenport (discussed in further detail in §4.3), Wilkins also encountered political difficulties during the course of his fieldwork. This “political minefield” was totally unexpected, in part because Wilkins was not fully aware of “what a distinct entity the Yipirinya ‘community’ is when compared to vaguer notions such as the Arrernte or the Luritja speaking community” (1992:183). This underscores the complexity of defining the boundaries and constituents of a particular linguistic community when linguists participate in collaborative work. It is also evidence for the fact that the deep community involvement that characterizes collaborative fieldwork exposes linguists to the political and interpersonal dynamics of the
community to a greater degree than linguist-focused work would.

4.2 Yamada 2007

Raquel-Maria Yamada’s article, entitled “Collaborative Linguistic Fieldwork: Practical Application of the Empowerment Model”, challenges the view that community collaboration is incompatible with academic production by giving concrete examples of mutually beneficial projects from her own fieldwork. Yamada’s strong collaborative partnership provided her with a richer understanding of the linguistic puzzles at hand and allowed her to focus her research on questions that were both locally useful and academically compelling. In discussing the establishment of collaborative relationships, Yamada advocates spending time at the field site in some other capacity before commencing one’s research, if at all possible. She herself began her collaboration with the village of Konomerume in Suriname as a Peace Corps volunteer. During her service, she made a connection with the village chief, who was working to document and teach the local language, Kari’nja. Later, when Yamada decided to pursue graduate work in linguistics, she contacted the chief to ask if he would be interested in partnering with her. This partnership involved Yamada’s own research, but also entailed her support of his ongoing documentation and revitalization efforts. Because Yamada had a preexisting relationship with a member of the speech community who was already engaged in work on the language, the groundwork for her research and other collaborative projects was already laid.

Yamada’s (2007) article describes a series of collaborative documentation and revitalization projects that she developed and pursued alongside members of the Kari’nja speech community, whom she refers to as speech community linguists (SCLs). A particular focus of her work and of her article is that such projects can truly be mutually beneficial, serving the needs and goals of both community members and academic linguists. A chart from Yamada’s article, which shows the needs met by various projects she pursued, is reproduced in Figure 1. The projects she pursued included opportunities for immersive Kari’nja speaking practice and several video documentation projects. Yamada highlights the films in particular as sources of rich ethnographic and linguistic data for her further analysis, in addition to recording cultural practices for posterity. The questions raised by these films as data sources are pertinent both to Yamada’s academic research and to the village’s education efforts.

The village chief’s Kari’nja teaching initiative provided Yamada with avenues for research that would both meet her academic requirement for advancing in her PhD program and support the community’s needs. One example of this involves a previously published grammar of Kari’nja which includes an analysis of a particular construction that native
speakers found to be inaccurate. Together Yamada and her collaborators determined that reanalysis of this phenomenon would not only be of academic interest and benefit to her but would also aid the Kari'nja teaching program by elucidating a grammatical point that was difficult to teach under the current analysis. Of her collaborative analysis with the village chief, Yamada says, “an alternative analysis would facilitate his teaching, describe the construction in a way that reflected his own knowledge about its use, and provide me with an opportunity to fulfill my obligation, as a graduate student, to produce an academic paper in order to advance to PhD candidacy” (2007:265).

This example illustrates how collaborative work can provide true benefits to both stakeholders in a research endeavor. The academic linguist, obliged by the norms of the discipline and of academia to publish the results of their work, is presented with a puzzle that can be productively addressed with the assistance and judgments of the native speaker collaborators. The use of native speaker judgments reflects common practice in linguistics, thus avoiding the potential for being accused of a lack of rigor (Czaykowska-Higgins 2009). There are also several benefits for the speech community members. In this case, the new, collaborative analysis helped the village’s language teaching program, and established an explanation of linguistic features that corresponds with speakers’ own understandings of their use. The inclusion of speaker judgments in the process of analysis is not unusual, but in this case the collaboration began earlier in the process, at the stage of identifying unanswered or unsatisfactorily answered linguistic questions. Such an involved partnership “can serve to ground descriptions in actual discourse use and lead to analyses that better reflect speaker insights” (Yamada 2007:274). Yamada’s close collaboration allowed her
to develop research questions that were of immediate benefit to the community while also having broader academic implications.

Like both Wilkins (1992) and Debenport (2010), much of Yamada’s partnership with the Kari’nja speech community revolves around education and the production of pedagogical and curricular materials. In conjunction with village educators, she has developed thematic dictionaries and a yearlong curriculum grounded in locally salient cultural practices. She describes, as her next project, a pedagogical grammar that will support the curriculum and further educational materials. For Yamada, working with the community to develop these materials has provided her with a stronger working knowledge of the language, which in turn enables her academic work. Drawing on a combination of knowledge gained from working on the teaching program and previously published linguistic scholarship on Kari’nja, Yamada is equipped to produce “an academic description of underdescribed aspects of the language, including syntax, semantics, and discourse” (2007:269). Yamada’s work provides evidence that collaborative fieldwork can provide opportunities for linguists in a variety of subdisciplines to pursue questions of interest to them and of benefit to other linguists.

Unlike Wilkins, Yamada does not describe significant tension between her own research agenda and the Kari’nja speech community’s ideas about language access. Her article does not mention specific requirements for the type of research questions that she could consider, or particular restrictions on her ability to publish certain types of data. It appears, based on her account, that her working relationship with the community was relatively unconstrained in terms of what she was able to research. In a discussion about archiving linguistic materials, Yamada notes that community leaders insisted on maintaining control over who would be able to access linguistic and cultural materials in the future. She attributes this to “a (not unjustified) sense that researchers have distributed and profited from materials with neither the knowledge nor consent of community members” (2007:270). However, she discusses the idea for increased community control as a consequence of work that she did to repatriate previously collected field recordings held by earlier generations of linguists. Yamada’s subsequent work has probably been impacted by community control of archived material, but she does not go into detail on this subject. This makes Yamada’s experience unusual when compared to the stringent requirements of both Wilkins’ and Debenport’s communities, but also illustrates that collaborative fieldwork does not always entail sacrificing academic autonomy to community-imposed constraints.
4.3 Debenport 2010

In her 2010 article, Erin Debenport responds to Wilkins’ (1992) account of his fieldwork in Australia, which she says corresponds to her own experience in the field. She follows Wilkins’ model of presenting her research experience and relationship with the community in a narrative structure that explores the challenges and benefits of her work. The fieldwork that ultimately formed the basis for her PhD dissertation was conducted in a New Mexico Pueblo community Debenport refers to as San Antonio Pueblo. Debenport’s host community, like other Pueblos, had historically been unwilling to allow outsiders access to their language, which is regarded by the community as a highly valued cultural object. Debenport was able to form an initial relationship with the San Antonio Pueblo community when she was hired to work in the community’s education program. Having an employer-employee relationship created a power dynamic in which Debenport’s skills and expertise related to language were acknowledged, but the community was in the position of determining how and for what purposes those skills could be used. As she built relationships and established trust with the community, she was able to pursue her own research questions alongside her work with curricula and pedagogical materials.

While Debenport was ultimately able to use her experiences working at the Pueblo as the groundwork for her dissertation, the community leadership had strict requirements surrounding how she was able to represent linguistic data and the community itself in her work. One significant step that Debenport took was to use pseudonyms for both the language (which she refers to as Tiwa) and the Pueblo itself (San Antonio). It appears that she chose to take this step of her own accord, without being asked or required to do so by the community, but rather as a gesture of respect towards the community’s own desire to maintain linguistic privacy. Pseudonymizing the Pueblo insulates the community from inquiries related to Debenport’s research, and creates a level of detachment between her work and the individuals with whom she collaborated. In terms of pseudonymizing the language, Debenport found a solution that would allow other linguists reading her work to contextualize the language without knowing exactly what language it is. Northern Tiwa and Southern Tiwa are both Tanoan languages with dialects specific to particular Pueblo communities (Lewis et al. 2015). By referring to the language spoken in the San Antonio Pueblo simply as Tiwa, Debenport allows her readers to identify the family and subfamily to which the language belongs without sacrificing the privacy of her community. This compromise is an example of strategies linguists can use to accommodate the desires of their host communities without completely preventing other linguists from making connections to similar languages.
The San Antonio community’s primary requirement for Debenport with regard to linguistic data was that she not use any target language data in work that was intended for wide circulation or publication. From the perspective of most linguists, this is an almost impossible accommodation to make. The presentation and analysis of linguistic data is foundational to work in most of the subdisciplines of linguistics. It is especially important when one considers the scientific principle that any claims or analyses should be supported with specific examples. Indeed, Debenport reports that other linguists expressed sympathy and alarm when hearing about the requirements of the Pueblo for her work. Contrary to this prevailing reaction, she herself describes being very willing to work within the framework established for her by the community, particularly after having invested a significant amount of time and energy building relationships in and contributing to the community.

Despite her willingness to work within the guidelines of the community, the interdiction against using Tiwa data required Debenport to focus on research questions that could be addressed while working around the absence of example data. One of the projects on which Debenport worked during her time as an employee of the Pueblo was a Tiwa dictionary, which formed the basis of her PhD dissertation. In her article, she describes writing her dissertation using full dictionary entries, with English morpheme-by-morpheme glosses, as examples supporting her argument. She was able to share this version, including data, with her dissertation committee and at her defense, since those contexts did not constitute wide circulation. However, as part of preparing her dissertation for publication, Debenport redacted all of the Tiwa data, leaving only the English glosses. A redacted piece of example data from Debenport’s article is shown in Figure 2.

![Redacted Tiwa dictionary entry](Debenport 2010:236)

Figure 2: A redacted Tiwa dictionary entry (Debenport 2010:236)

Such a stringent restriction on the part of the community certainly has significant impacts for the fieldworker. Debenport’s work tends towards sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, but if she were conducting phonetics, phonology, or morphology work, the absence of Tiwa data would more drastically affect her ability to provide convincing, well-supported analyses. Debenport’s experience working within this particular community requirement raises the question of how a linguist’s subdiscipline and research focus impact their ability to work collaboratively with communities. Any linguist might be able to
contribute to community-driven projects with community members as their target audience (e.g. dictionaries, curricular materials, or lesson plans). However, when linguists aim to advance their own research agendas based on their fieldwork, community requirements and opinions are more impactful and may prevent certain types of work from being done.

Debenport, like Wilkins (1992), entered her fieldwork at the same time as she was beginning the process of researching her dissertation. Because of this timing, she was in a position to let her choice of topic be guided by the linguistic situation in her community, and by the types of projects the community was most interested in. The research questions she was able to work on for her dissertation, and continues to investigate today, are mostly sociolinguistic and include ethnographic components. She notes that the politicized status of language in the community has enriched these areas of research. In addition to compelling possibilities for research created by the community’s unique dynamics, Debenport notes other benefits of her work in the San Antonio Pueblo. As mentioned above, linguists may sometimes find it difficult to conduct community-based work while complying with the concrete and time-bound requirements of grant funding. On the contrary, Debenport believes that she was sometimes able to secure funding for her own research in the Pueblo because of the fact that she was working on a poorly documented language whose speakers were known to have been unwilling to work with outside linguists. Her collaborative relationship with the community made her presence there possible, so her methodology also made grant funding easier to secure.

5 Implications of Collaborative Work

Throughout this paper, I have discussed the consequences of collaborative fieldwork methodologies in several ways. In §3.3, I explored two commonly referenced theoretical frameworks for collaborative linguistic work, focusing on the rationale for using such a methodology, and the motivation behind a general trend towards collaborative fieldwork. In §4, I discussed three case studies in detail, noting the linguists’ own descriptions of the benefits and challenges of their experience, as well as some of the particularities of each of their cases. In this section I consider the case studies in conjunction with one another, and consider how these and similar experiences and their narratives fit into the larger context of academic linguistic research.

As mentioned in all three of the case studies explored in this paper, fieldwork, particularly when collaborative, brings a variety of benefits and challenges for academic linguists. Some of the areas of particular concern are considerations that come at the very beginning of the research process: securing funding and developing research questions. The issue of
funding was experienced by the linguists cited in the case studies in different ways. Wilkins (1992) ultimately lost his PhD scholarship because of the time and energy he committed to working with his host community. This is doubtless a serious fear for many linguists, especially students, and could present a deterrent to those who might otherwise be interested in pursuing collaborative fieldwork. On the other hand, Debenport (2010) reports that, in her estimation, she had an easier time securing funding because her collaborative work allowed her access to an understudied community and was thus seen by funding organizations as particularly valuable as a source of new knowledge. Access to funding is impacted in various ways by the structure of one’s fieldwork, and fears of cases like Wilkins’ are well founded, but Debenport’s experience illustrates that there are other possible outcomes, some of which are more positive.

Similarly, the development of an agenda and specific focal points for research are shaped by the fieldwork context and experience. In each of the case studies discussed above, the academic linguist’s research agenda was framed by both a desire to pursue work that was mutually beneficial as well as by communities’ specific restrictions on which topics were appropriate to pursue. The notion that communities may be empowered to reject certain topics presents a constraint on the linguist’s academic freedom, and, depending on their subfield, may prevent them from conducting work related to their particular specialty. Within the range of community-accepted topics, though, there is potential for work conducted collaboratively to be richer and more contextualized than similar questions investigated within a linguist-focused model. Yamada (2007) describes the way that her work on community pedagogical materials and recordings of cultural practices deepened her understanding of the local language in authentic contexts, and enriched the linguistic corpus she was later able to use in her research. Materials developed as part of an initial period of working exclusively for the community are themselves valuable sources of linguistic data, with the added benefit of being produced with the input of community members, thus reducing the potential for errors and decontextualized information.

The cooperative working relationship and investment in creating mutually useful knowledge and products is both a significant positive outcome of collaborative fieldwork and also sometimes a source of difficulty. This is particularly true when language is politicized within a community, or when communities have other internal political divisions in which linguists sometimes become ensnared. Wilkins, Yamada, and Debenport all cite the trusting relationships they established with members of their host communities as important benefits of their fieldwork experiences for several reasons. As Wilkins notes, his established role in the community as a paid employee and as a participant in community-sanctioned and -desired projects made him a known quantity, and thus easier to trust. Because community members
knew him and understood why he was present in the community, some of the difficulties of finding informants and accessing information were alleviated. Establishing trust may also help both the reputation of linguistics as a field and the experience of future generations of linguists by counteracting some of the damage done by prior linguists whose work was less respectful of community members’ rights and desires. In Yamada’s case, working collaboratively meant that, after an initial outlay of time for training, community members were able to assist with the production and analysis of texts and other documentation. The division of labor both empowered community members and made Yamada’s own research less time- and energy-consuming.

The initial investment of time and energy in building working relationships with communities is another aspect of collaborative fieldwork that many linguists find challenging. This is particularly true in the context of academic calendars that seldom allow for long stretches of fieldwork, as well as with regard to the timelines stipulated by funding organizations. Yamada describes the viewpoint, held by her advisors, that conducting collaborative work with communities would diminish her academic productivity. She suggests a potential response to the problem of timing by recommending that linguists spend shorter periods of time at their fieldsites doing something other than their main research project (e.g. volunteering, piloting other possible projects) so as to build relationships in advance of the primary research stay. Wilkins and Debenport both note that, while their experiences working on community education projects were time-consuming and not always directly related to their own research interests, they both developed new skills as a result of their collaboration on these initiatives. Neither had had explicit training in applied linguistics or the development of educational materials, so the experience provided a kind of professional development opportunity. Working on projects for which the community particularly welcomes a linguists’ expertise also provides a sense of usefulness, and of being able to use one’s skills in service of a larger goal.

One important benefit of collaborative fieldwork is that, in some cases, it is the only avenue by which linguists may be able to work on a language. This is the case that Debenport describes with her work in a Pueblo community in the southwestern United States. Communities that hold language as sacred or otherwise highly valuable may create barriers to access by academic linguists. Collaborative fieldwork’s emphasis on trust, reciprocity, and, crucially, mutually beneficial results may make the presence of linguists more palatable to otherwise reluctant communities. In such cases, otherwise poorly documented languages can become part of the universe of linguistic knowledge. However, as highlighted by Debenport’s example especially, stringent community requirements for acceptable use of language present serious roadblocks to linguistic research and publication. While Debenport herself was able
to work within and around her community’s requirement that no target language data be published or widely disseminated, such a restriction would be difficult to accommodate for a linguist hoping to conduct detailed phonetic, phonological, or morphological analysis, among others.

There is also the issue of smaller-scale redaction, as Wilkins experienced, of the target language examples that accompanied an analysis of a particular phenomenon. As he notes, this gives the whole discussion an air of unseriousness and falls outside disciplinary norms of transparent, data-based conclusions. This reflects poorly on the linguist’s own work, but also imbues their methodology with a similar air of superficiality, leading to a sense that collaborative fieldwork is incompatible with the rigorous scientific objectivity that characterizes linguistic research. Concerns relating to the possible scope of community-based projects and to the style and substance of their presentation in the literature are key concerns with collaborative methodologies in general. These questions and some possible responses are addressed in greater detail in the following section.

6 Conclusion

The three case studies explored in this paper suggest the diversity of fieldwork experiences, which is doubtless much greater than can be grasped by such a small number of examples. Even so, the differences between these case studies in the structure of working relationships and the impacts of these relationships on research and publication demonstrate that there is a range of possible outcomes of collaborative fieldwork. Debenport’s (2010) case, taken in isolation, might suggest that collaborative work precludes work that is heavily reliant on illustrative examples in published text, such as phonetics, phonology, or morphology. However, in a context like Yamada’s (2007), linguistic data is less restricted and research questions in these subfields could be pursued. Yamada’s audiovisual documentation and analysis of syntax and Wilkins’ (1992) work on semantics and pragmatics show that the products of collaborative work are not limited to applied or anthropological linguistics. The suggestion that collaboration with communities is only possible in certain subfields of the discipline is a misconception that the current literature has a limited capacity to dispel. Accounts of collaborative fieldwork methodology are relatively common in the ethics literature, but appear less frequently in other types of linguistic writing.

An important element of this discussion is the issue of rigor, mentioned by both Wilkins (1992) and Czaykowska-Higgins (2009). Linguistics as a discipline has certain norms for published work, including that it be fact-based and grounded in data. As discussed previously, some aspects of community-based work may complicate the production of work
that adheres to these norms. In particular, community requirements about the use of data can contribute to an impression that the resulting published work is “unsubstantiated” (Wilkins 1992:181). In this regard, particular communities’ restrictions on linguists’ ability to publish and circulate data do indeed challenge the established practice in the field, and obscure the analytical process through which conclusions were drawn. Following the scientific method in linguistic writing requires evidence-based conclusions and transparency in the analytical process; these characteristics contribute to linguistic work being recognized as rigorous.

Linguistic writing is also expected to be, or at least to be presented as, objective. The reflexive approach taken by articles like the case studies described above is labeled as “informal” or “not rigorous” because of the authors’ explorations of their roles in the research context (Czaykowska-Higgins 2009:43). However, in some respects articles like Wilkins’, Yamada’s, and Debenport’s might be considered more rigorous because of the transparency with which they articulate all aspects of their research process and methodology, including relationship building and other personal experiences. Wilkins notes early in his article that “it is often the particulars of the field situation and a knowledge of the fieldworker’s response within that situation which help to explain the strengths, weaknesses, and/or preoccupations which are found in his/her field-data-based academic writings” (1992:172). By giving detailed descriptions of their work in context, linguists help their readers to understand why their results are shaped the way that they are, and why certain omissions or gaps might be present.

Each of the three case studies described here illustrate the value of describing the research context for the reader of academic linguistic work. In Debenport’s case, which is perhaps the most extreme, the redaction of all target language data would be confounding without her accompanying explanation. Wilkins’ particular choices of research topics are clarified by an understanding of the working relationship within which they were formed. Yamada’s (re)analysis of previously published syntactic constructions is supported and legitimized by the knowledge that it was conducted collaboratively with native speakers. Yamada’s description of her relationship with community members and of their collaboration on a variety of linguistic projects provides background for her claims. Because Yamada (2007) is reevaluating a previous analysis and providing an alternative explanation, background information provides useful justification for accepting her claim over the previously articulated one. When written academic work includes rich detail about the entirety of the fieldwork process there are benefits for contemporary readers and for future successors. The reader is better able to contextualize the conclusions drawn by the author, and to understand how their work with community members might lead them to take different approaches than their predecessors. Descriptions of the research process are also useful to anyone hoping
to conduct fieldwork in the same community, as well as to other linguists seeking ideas about mutually beneficial collaborative projects. The decision to include the details of the linguists’ experience can add value to their work, rather than detracting from it.

The style of writing that Wilkins (1992), Yamada (2007), and Debenport (2010) use is similar to work in anthropology that is often referred to as autoethnography. Reed-Danahay describes several types of work that fall under the umbrella of autoethnography, one of which is “‘autobiographical ethnography,’ in which anthropologists interject personal experience into ethnographic writing” (1997:2). Autoethnography explores the links between the ethnographer’s own identity and values and their research practices. As an overarching concept, autoethnography also describes ethnography written by members of a given group or culture who create ethnographies from an insider’s perspective. In linguistics, the products of collaborative fieldwork often resemble autoethnography in that they articulate the author’s personal connection to the communities in which they work as well as creating space for community members to contribute actively to the generation of knowledge about their own language.

Throughout this thesis, I have explored the challenges and potential benefits of collaborative fieldwork, with emphasis on the fieldwork process itself. I have also argued in this section that an autoethnographic style of writing is an important and useful outcome of collaborative work by articulating its benefits to both communities and to other linguists. Linguistic anthropologist Jennifer Jackson writes, “ethnography reveals rather than conceals the analytical process” (2013:xxv). By taking an approach to writing that situates the linguist in their research context, articles like Wilkins’ (1992), Yamada’s (2007), and Debenport’s (2010) emphasize the important of process and allow “the process itself [to be] a result” (Czaykowska-Higgins 2009:43). These descriptive and subjective accounts sometimes contradict the established norms of linguistic writing as objective and detached, much as the fieldwork itself also pushes the boundaries of the linguist’s and community members’ roles in the research process. In combination, collaborative fieldwork methodologies and autoethnographically influenced writing benefit communities, fieldworkers, and linguistics as a field by making the process of generating new insights about language and its speakers more transparent, respectful, and mutually beneficial.
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