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This edited collection of 16 short essays, in addition to an introductory and final chapter, addresses methodological issues that researchers may face upon working in community settings. It offers interesting insights drawn from first-hand experiences that are then translated into useful tips for doing such fieldwork. The researchers include some who were completing dissertation studies as well as experienced professionals.

Each chapter (besides the first and last chapters) follows exactly the same structure: there is an abstract, followed by highlighted points of the essay, and a section detailing the study objectives and context. Then, in a ‘narrative’ section, each researcher involved expresses their thoughts about how they became interested in the topic, what particular problems they encountered in the field, as well as how they managed to confront or overcome them. This section is followed by the lessons learned during the study (e.g. “Labels are not static”) accompanied by a short elaboration of what led them to see this experience as a lesson to be learned. Finally, each chapter concludes with an annotated bibliography and a list of references used in the essay. These short chapters are about eight pages long, as described below.

The editors begin the collection with an introductory chapter. They present the format and general aims, pointing out that when research plans are challenged by unforeseen circumstances, researchers are obliged to reconsider their original assumptions and practices. However, they see those moments as valuable opportunities to pause and reflect, which are rewarding for both the research and personal growth. As such, the authors of the chapters were asked to document some of those critical moments and what they learned from them, thereby showing how they were affected by those challenges in significant ways. The community research here is based in the Asia-Pacific region, such as Australia, New Zealand, Pacific Islands (e.g. Vanuatu, Tukuitonga), Asia (e.g. East Timor, Japan), and the U.S. (San Francisco, the migrant diaspora in general). As the editors point out, these communities are diverse in languages and cultures, displaying rich ecologies.
on many levels. They have also witnessed much migration in recent years, which have become a recent feature of many communities (Blommaert 2010). The editors highlight the connectedness among all the contributions, such as topic, place, types of study participants, context, types of community (e.g. diaspora), stages of research at the time of data collection and researcher commitment to the specific community.

For those readers who expect to see results of actual studies, they will not find them here. The aim of the book is to shed light mainly on methodological concerns; not to present findings. One interesting aspect the editors discuss is the shifting nature of being an ‘outsider’ or an ‘insider’ in a community, clarifying that these labels can be gradient and fluid. Other issues presented are ideology and identity of researcher and selection of participants, challenges and rewards of working with communities, and relationships between researcher and participants, all of which are significant and thought-provoking.

Chapter 2 on “Human Rights” by Pandora Petrovska describes the situation when the community and language she was studying were relabeled in an official government language policy document. When they were changed from “Macedonian” to “Macedonian (Slavonic)”, the community reacted negatively, and the policy affected the official exams and student certificates. Petrovska highlights the issue of ‘linguistic human rights’ and how labels can function to make community identities invisible or not.

Louisa Willoughby, in “This Doesn’t Feel Right: Selecting a Site for School-Based Ethnography” in Chapter 3, examines determining factors in selecting a potential ethnographic fieldwork site for her dissertation study. She comments on the need to have a strong supporter on site and for the researcher to have a role that can legitimize the researcher’s presence. She also highlights the need for flexibility in research plans and protocols. Chapter 4, “Challenges in Conducting Ethical Classroom-based Research across Cultures”, by Richard Sampson, describes ethical challenges encountered in Japan during data collection. These range from having to seek permission for his study from the college president, who was not an academic, teacher or researcher, and therefore had little background by which to judge the ethical aspects of his study, to seeking consent from participants when his colleagues did not feel an information session and consent forms were even necessary. Among the lessons he offers are differing notions of ethnics, and being flexible in applying ethnics to the target population.

“What Happens When a Community Withdraws”, by Arapera Ngaha in Chapter 5, discusses the author’s experience as a Maori researcher who was working with a Maori community group when it suddenly chose to withdraw from her project on Maori identity. Despite the fact that the author was an ‘insider’ in the community, and the community members were shown transcripts of what
they had said and could edit them, the members suddenly became suspicious of why the researcher was studying them and their talk, and decided not to participate. The researcher also had to return to them her original audiotapes and notes. Among the lessons learned were that the researcher had to communicate goals very clearly, and to engage the community itself in the research. In Chapter 6, “Labeling Community and Language”, by Kara Tukuitonga, Donna Starks and Jason Brown, the authors address the problem of using labels for people and languages, and how they play a crucial role in identities in positive and negative ways. Even for Tukuitonga, an ‘insider’ in the Niue community, labels such as ‘Niuean’ could be construed as incorrect, since some refer to the Niue people with ‘Niue’, the name of the place. The label ‘FOB’ (‘Fresh off the Boat’) connotes a negative image, but she comments on degrees of being FOB, even with regard to the ability to speak the community language. Starks, the ‘outsider’ on the research team, remarks on the difficulties of finding appropriate labels to refer to the language and people under study. Lessons learned in the project include that labels are not static, and may reflect linguistic hegemony. Also, the authors find that transnational language use can lead to change in groups and create new identities.

Fiona Williams, in “Taking an Interest: Competence in and Affiliations with the Expected Languages of Schooling” in Chapter 7, considers her relationship with the Bislama, English and French languages and how it affected her understanding of linguistic issues in the educational system of Vanuatu. She highlights the importance of being competent in the language under study and to gain intersubjectivity with community members. As such, the researcher’s identity undergoes changes during the project as others position the language and researcher in interactions. She makes suggestions such as being aware of these identity changes and understanding how languages interact with each other.

Chapter 8 presents “Navigating the Multilingual Field: Language Choice and Sociolinguistic Fieldwork”, by Kerry Taylor-Leech and Danielle Boon. This work examines how language choices were mainly symbolic in a multilingual setting, and used as a resource in the study. Taylor-Leech discusses how the language she chose to use in the project sometimes caused the interviews to go well, especially in using the local language. Boon also comments on using the local vernacular to gain the confidence and trust of community members. Both discuss the importance of accommodating to multilingual situations as much as possible in language selection. They suggest learning the symbolic value of each language in the community.

George Major and Beth Zielinski, authors of “Interpreter-mediated Data Collection: Experiences of Talking to Migrants through Interpreters” in Chapter 9, examine the challenges of conducting research when participants and researchers do not share a common language. Major and Zielinski focus on the interpreter’s
role in the interview process as a mediator between the researcher and participants. Zielinski shares her experiences in learning how to best utilize the interpreter as a resource. Then Major, who had previously worked as a professional interpreter, discusses a specific instance that was difficult to navigate with an interpreter who was acting unprofessionally. Both Zielinski and Major emphasize how overwhelmingly positive the experience of working with interpreters can be, and one of the lessons they offer to readers is to see the interpreters as facilitators and friends.

Chapter 10 presents the situation of “Being a Part of and Working in an Overlooked Community”. Genevieve Leung shares her research experience in the Hoisan-wa language community in the San Francisco Bay area. Leung highlights the benefits that membership in this community affords her, including facilitating her ability to engage speakers of the Hoisan-wa language. Leung also considers the challenges of researching one’s own community. The author speaks positively of such an experience and encourages others to consider doing the same.

Kristen Smiler chronicles her experience in “Building Relationships with Whānau to Develop Effective Supports for Māori Deaf Children”. Smiler grew up within both the Māori and Deaf communities in New Zealand and describes herself as both an insider and an outsider, as she herself has hearing and grew up outside her tribal region. The author centers her chapter with a quote from Young and Temple (2014, p. 2): “to be Deaf is … to stand at multiple intersections of language, culture, disability, society, politics, ethics, and the body”, emphasizing how her status in the community affects the development of relationships with the Deaf community members. This personal connection to these communities drives the development of her research and advocacy efforts. She discusses the challenges of raising Deaf children in the Māori community with the linguistic and cultural crossroads that these children and their parents must navigate.

Chapter 12, “Establishing Connections: A Tale of Two Communities”, co-authored by Ilana Mushin and Rod Gardner, provides insight into how they built relationships in two very different indigenous communities in Australia. One community is rural and more homogenous; the other is urban and a mix of many smaller indigenous communities. Mushin describes her experience in becoming acquainted with the small and isolated Garrwa community. In contrast, Gardner describes gaining access to an urban indigenous community in Melbourne that represents a mixture of such communities, many of which have been forcibly relocated. Gardner describes the collective research fatigue of the urban community, due to a constant stream of researchers who work there without developing long-standing ties to the community. While each of these communities presents unique challenges for researchers wishing to become acquainted with them, both Mushin and Gardner stress the importance of sustained presence in the community.
The success of these projects is dependent on slowly building relationships and trust. This involves the researchers becoming invested in the community and also sharing ways that their work could benefit the community, to interest members in the project.

Rachel McKee in chapter 13, “Multiplexity in Sign Language Research”, presents the complex nature of working with the Deaf community in New Zealand. McKee structures her chapter with facts and figures about this community and explains how she became involved with New Zealand Sign Language. This introduction explains her long-standing involvement within this community as a researcher, ‘almost insider’ and activist. As a teacher of Sign Language and interpreting, she discusses the constant need to educate the hearing community about Sign Language. She emphasizes that that this language is a complete linguistic system and thus involves the inherent complexity of translating meaning and identity. Her research and the focus of this chapter is not merely an intellectual pursuit but also a personal calling, as she is a researcher and an advocate, pushing for resources for the New Zealand Deaf community.

Chapter 14, “Engaging with Communities and Languages in Multilingual Urban Settings”, discusses John Hajek’s work with the East Timorese community in Melbourne, Australia. The author presents history about the growth of Melbourne, including the various waves of refugees that have settled in the city. He then explains why traveling to East Timor to research the languages and community was impossible at the time he began research. This is where the deep linguistic resources of an urban city like Melbourne can be utilized, and Hajek describes how he slowly builds relationships with members of the East Timorese community without having to leave his home city. The author’s strongest message is to consider what communities are already nearby and, once one engages them, to stay connected and make sure the personal and academic work is given back to the communities.

“Imagined Linguistic Identity” in Chapter 15 discusses the language choice of a migrant Filipina in Australia during an interview. Loy Lising opens with an explanation of the different types of Filipino workers who come to Australia. The author explains that as a Filipina herself, she is keenly interested in the role of the English language in the lives and constructed identity of Filipino migrants. She interviews such migrants who all display relatively low English proficiency. In one particular interview, after asking which language the participant wanted to use, the person chose English, despite a low proficiency in the language. Lising discusses her analysis of this participant’s choice to struggle through the interview in English, even though it is clear she would be able to express herself more clearly and profoundly in either Cebuano or Tagalog, both languages that Lising also speaks. However, Lising reminds us that the participant’s language choice is a
strong expression of language identity and reflects a deep desire to be an English speaker and to consider Australia a permanent home, seeing the value of English in their present and future life.

“Becoming an Adopted Insider”, in Chapter 16, chronicles the path of Judith Kearney as she develops ties with the Sāmoan diaspora community in Australia. Kearney outlines a history of this community’s presence, including the struggles it has faced. To describe her status within the community, the author uses the term “the space between” by Corbin and Buckle (2009) to explain that being a researcher allows both an insider and outsider status. Her chapter focuses on how to navigate this space. For example, when the Australian government approaches her to create an educational document to explain to officers and health officials about Sāmoan culture, Kearney, an Anglo-Australian, feels that she is not the appropriate person to speak for the entire Sāmoan community. Yet, her ability to occupy “the space between” allows her to bridge communication with this community and the Australian government. Thus, showing the government’s request to community members, they collaborate together to write the document. Kearney’s ability to occupy this space positioned her well to create this positive, collaborative communication.

In Chapter 17, “The Narrative Journey: Adapting the Research Design to Capture the Voice of the Community”, Anikó Hatoss shares insight from her three-year study of the Sudanese refugee community in Australia, discussing how flexibility in her research design transformed the project into a collaborative movement of the community and gave them a space to share their stories. Gaining the support of the community Elders aided in advancing the project, and the development of a family unit interview allowed for the collection of varying interactions among family members that might not have been recorded otherwise. These group interviews also adhered to cultural and social norms within the Sudanese community and put the community more at ease. Thus, the flexibility to adjust research design allowed her to capture these participants’ voices effectively.

Finally, “Doing Research within Communities: Connecting Practice to Theory”, provides a review of the experiences in the previous chapters and extracts unifying principles. Taylor-Leech, Kerr and Starks focus on using theory to help direct research practices, but like Hatoss’ need to adjust research design, they also emphasize knowing how to utilize theories and understanding their limitations once working in the community. The authors point out that how researchers position themselves toward their communities and label them, and how they view themselves, can change while conducting these community research projects.

This collection of edited essays is an intersection of theory and practice, providing diverse accounts of linguistic researchers’ personal experiences in each section. While the essays focus on Asian-Pacific communities, what can be learned
from these shared experiences by researchers transcends region or culture. A unifying theme urges readers to listen to the target community, and to approach it with sensitivity and a genuine desire to build relationships with community members. One of the most important messages is that studies should not be just for researchers’ own gain or to fulfill a dissertation requirement, but that researchers should try to give back, even if by simply returning to the community to share the study results with members.

An appropriate audience for this book could be graduate students in a Field Methods course, as it discusses ethics and crucial issues that one will encounter while conducting linguistic research. One criticism is that later chapters have significant overlap in what these authors want to share with readers: the importance of building genuine relationships with community members and respecting different cultural and social norms when approaching these communities. However, while many of the chapters emphasize this, each story is unique and the researchers’ development with their communities is valuable. This collection is presented in clear and accessible language and can function as a useful tool to stimulate discussion and inform future researchers about the types of challenges and experiences they will encounter in the field.

References


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