

Language Documentation and Description

ISSN 1740-6234

This article appears in: *Language Documentation and Description*, vol 3. Editor: Peter K. Austin

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Cite this article: Thomas Widlok (2005). Cross-disciplinarity in the documentation work of anthropologists and linguists. In Peter K. Austin (ed.) *Language Documentation and Description*, vol 3. London: SOAS. pp. 12-21

Link to this article: <http://www.elpublishing.org/PID/032>

This electronic version first published: July 2014



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Cross-disciplinarity in the documentation work of anthropologists and linguists

Thomas Widlok

1. Introduction

The starting point for this contribution is that the recent increase in language documentation research has put the inter-disciplinary work of anthropologists and linguists, once again, on the agenda. Recent funding initiatives explicitly foster inter-disciplinary work. In the field of language documentation this is particularly true for the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project and the DoBeS programme of the Volkswagen Foundation. In times of lean research funding many linguists and anthropologists find themselves in joint projects just as partners may find themselves in arranged marriages or marriages of convenience. In such a context this paper may therefore be considered to be part of marriage consultancy, outlining the productive potentials as much as the potential problems in an attempt to create a stable and at the same time dynamic marriage. Like all consultancy it will not by itself be able to create, maintain or reinstall love between the partners since that can only be achieved through the process of inter-disciplinary work itself. The aim is more modest, namely to highlight common hopes and shared misunderstandings between the two partners.

It should be noted that inter-disciplinarity, as it is conceived here, is not limited to large groups of researchers. In fact, inter-disciplinary problems (and benefits) are also realised in one-person projects and are therefore more appropriately termed 'cross-disciplinary'. There is sequential inter- or cross-disciplinarity as individual researchers may crossdisciplinary boundaries. Neither polygamy nor sequential marriages are prohibited in our academic relationships but they may have their own problems that need to be discussed. To begin with we need to free ourselves from the bias that considers being single to be the normal default state of affairs, as if there were originally 'pure' disciplines that only mingle and mix at their own peril. This image is not only historically false, it may also turn out to be rather unproductive for the future. While it is a common Western bias to consider individuals to be the 'given' units that 'make up' unions, cross-cultural research suggests that it is useful to consider the inverse perspective according to which relationships are prior and produce the individuals that emerge from them (see Wagner 1991; Strathern 1992).

This paper is structured as follows: after outlining some of the general advantages and assets of cross-disciplinary work, I will highlight some practical advantages of cross-disciplinarity in language documentation. This will then be followed by some reflections on the problems of cross-disciplinary research in which a discussion of practical difficulties will lead to the outline of problems that are theoretically inspiring and should therefore be considered positive challenges instead of negative obstacles.

2. Cross-disciplinary assets

There are a number of general benefits of cross-disciplinary work independent of the disciplines involved. With regard to the flourishing relations between anthropology and linguistics one could in fact argue that the need for justification is no longer with the proponents of inter-disciplinary work but with those who choose to remain mono-disciplinary, in celibacy so to say. Cross-disciplinary work not merely facilitates the acquisition of research money, which is after all a prerequisite for any documentation work, it also allows researchers to cover more ground and it creates synergies. Covering more ground in the context of language documentation is not simply a matter of 'the more, the better' but a certain 'more' is a prerequisite to producing a satisfactory documentation. To begin with there is a critical minimum size of a corpus for it to be of interest beyond the rather specific likes of an individual researcher. Today the isolated lists of vocabulary collected in the early stages of linguistic research are hardly considered a useful form of documentation. Currently, similar reservations are being aired with regard to the corpora that are made up of only one or a few text genres. I suggest that future generations of researchers will look at purely audio-based corpora in the same way. And corpora that provide no ethnographic contextualisation but are purely based on externally designed elicitation techniques may soon be considered similarly obsolete. Covering more ground is therefore not simply a matter of adding more to the database but also broadening of the database in a way that makes it more 'sustainable' for the future. The database envisaged in this more comprehensive documentation task makes the effort of documentation and archiving more worthwhile, for researchers and the speakers alike, in that the corpus can be analysed in many more ways, including new uses emerging from the community of speakers itself. The minimum requirements for what is considered to be a useful corpus are likely to be expanded further and language documentation projects in particular need to be sensitive to this situation. Boosting inter-disciplinary work is an obvious response to growing demands on language documentation and its purposes.

It is important to recall that this process need not start from scratch. There is a strong cross-disciplinary tradition that considers anthropology and linguistics to 'naturally' belong together, for instance as in the American 'four fields approach' to anthropology. There are also suggestions as to how the disciplines that have drifted apart can be brought back together following strong arguments that they should not have been separated in the first place (see Agar 2002). This is important to underline because a discourse of inter-disciplinarity may in fact backfire by cementing boundaries between disciplines, boundaries which need to be crossed and which have only recently been erected in the first place. There is always the possibility of abusing the demand for inter-disciplinarity in language documentation projects if its purpose is only to carve out clear-cut restricted domains of interests for one discipline, leaving the rest to the cooperating discipline. Such a juxtaposition of disciplines, to be called multi-disciplinarity at best, may enlarge the database in a simple additive sense but it would be restricted to the sum of its parts and forfeit the true potential for cross-disciplinary research. A core potential of this work is that new perspectives can emerge that lead to unexpected new insights. Therefore, it is important to move from the general level of

inter-disciplinary discourse to the more specific benefits and difficulties of cross-disciplinary research.

3. Advantages of cross-disciplinarity in language documentation

It is common knowledge among linguists and anthropologists that knowing the language helps to do ethnography, and to some extent is even a prerequisite for doing ethnography, and that knowing ethnographic facts helps to do linguistic field research (and, again is to some extent a prerequisite). At this level the two disciplines consider one another to be aides that help to do what linguists and ethnographers are supposed to do according to convention. The same kind of argument could be made for most inter-disciplinary co-operations such as those that make up ethnobotany (see Coelho, this volume), ethnoarchaeology and ethnomusicology (see Barwick, this volume). However, my argument is that when it comes to language documentation, cross-disciplinarity becomes even more critical. Let us begin with a fundamental but at the same time very practical problem, namely how to organise the documentation of a language in a corpus. With regard to the individual research agendas there are as many ways of organising the data resulting from field research as there are linguists and anthropologists. The agenda of language documentation of endangered languages is more demanding because the corpus that is created here is supposed to be useful in a long term perspective, enduring changes in the theoretical agendas of individual researchers. It is an illusion that a non-theoretical organisation of a corpus is possible but to have a meta-theoretical organisation is still a valid objective in so far as it envisages a corpus that can cater for a broad spectrum of researchers and theoretical interests. One way of responding to this challenge is to organise the language documentation in a way that not simply follows the theoretical landscape of a single researcher or a single discipline but instead orients itself along the social landscape of the speakers. This social landscape can only be captured in the cross-disciplinary research between linguists and anthropologists. In the most basic sense this involves the documentation of genre types as defined in the language and by the speakers. More generally it means that the speakers are met on 'their own turf'; that the situations of speech that matter to them are taken seriously by the researcher. Cross-disciplinary research facilitates the identification of genres and situations of speech because it provides a certain control over the narrow theoretical interests of one discipline. This is not only a theoretical issue but it leads on to a number of practical questions, for instance concerning the definition of a 'session', often taken to be the basic unit of language documentation and archiving.

In a number of cases the definition of sessions seems to be unproblematic, for instance if a certain elicitation task is carried out or if a well-defined speech event or genre is concerned. However, the question as to what led to a certain genre that is being used in a situation or what led to the specific results that are gained in an elicitation task can often only be answered if a larger fragment is defined as the relevant session. Elsewhere (Widlok 2004) I have shown how this applies to the documentation of the =Akhoe Hai//om healing dance. A dance lasting several hours may be defined as a

single session but at the same time certain sections of the dance, possibly overlapping, may also be defined as sessions. The metadata descriptors that are today commonly used easily allow for such overlapping definitions. The electronic archive need not cut a linear piece of film or tape into mutually exclusive ‘chunks’ because the boundaries of sessions are set through the metadata irrespective of the physical media boundaries and of any previously defined sessions. What holds for the division of the corpus into sessions also holds for reconnecting sessions that are distributed over a large corpus. Again cross-disciplinarity can help to solve the task. Connections between sessions may be made through linguistic forms, e.g. linking all instances of a lexeme being used, or through relations of speakers, e.g. linking all instances of mother-child talk or mother-in-law and son-in-law interaction. It is not only interesting to both disciplines to see the correlations between these connections but re-connecting the sessions in as many ways as possible also helps to capture a key element of spoken language, namely its dense connectedness.

Despite all efforts to collect many sessions, to make informed decisions about the boundaries of sessions and the connections between them, a corpus will always remain incomplete. Cross-disciplinarity is no wonder ailment that solves this incompleteness. What it can help to do, however, is to reduce the degree of arbitrariness that characterises the inevitable incompleteness. It is not possible to foresee all of the possible questions that future researchers may pose with regard to a certain corpus. But the combined expertise of linguistics and anthropology can help to make informed guesses about future research questions. In practical terms this applies, above all, to the way in which metadata descriptions are made. They should allow searches across the corpus based on relations between linguistic forms as well as relations between speakers, for instance their kin relations (see Widlok et al. 2005).

4. Practical difficulties in cross-disciplinary research

There are also risks in doing work across disciplinary boundaries. These risks are often not openly discussed as problems and thus cannot be tackled efficiently. It is therefore appropriate to name some of the key problems of cross-disciplinary research with particular reference to language documentation. There are practical problems such as risks to the careers of individual researchers, possible disagreements about the terms of interaction with consultants and other methodological issues, and there are problems of setting priorities in a continuously expanding research agenda.

The reflections above about the rich potential of cross-disciplinarity should not be misunderstood to say that disciplines do not exist and do not exert force on individual researchers. Boundaries are still being guarded not so much through authoritarian institutions but through a certain habitus that is generated in individual researchers. For instance it is part of the linguists’ habitus to expect complete paradigms for verbs or other grammatical elements and an ‘appropriate’ collection of informative sample sentences, usually presented on handouts at talks or seminars. It is part of the anthropologist’s habitus to expect a genealogy and a census as well as an ‘appropriate’ collection of small case studies, usually presented in rather personalised

and reflective prose. Cross-disciplinarity in this context is akin to bilingualism. Since there is no evidence that bilingualism does harm to your ability to speak, cross-disciplinarity does no harm to research performance. Possibly more damaging are those aspects of the habitus that may easily clash at a certain point, for instance at the crystallisation point of relations between researchers and ‘consultants’ (or ‘informants’). Again this may involve very practical matters such as the ways in which consultants are being remunerated for their efforts and their work. While linguists tend to pay directly for sessions of taping or transcribing, anthropologists are keen to point out that the most enlightening information often emerges outside these formally defined sessions of data-gathering. Anthropologists want to be able to write down (and possibly record) at any time, anywhere. Linguists want to be able to demand more disciplined responses from their consultants, if necessary through payment. The two practices are themselves a consequence of methodological dilemmas to do with the control of variables on the one hand and concern for the validity of observations on the other. Moreover, the informants/consultants over time also build up an image of their counterpart, of what they can expect and is expected of them. They may easily be confused or outright annoyed by inter-disciplinary teams without clear procedures. Cross-disciplinarity is therefore not simply the task of merging but also that of co-ordinating what, for a number of reasons, cannot easily be merged. As mentioned above, this also involves the management of inevitable gaps in the corpus because it helps to reduce the arbitrariness of these gaps. It is due to the complexity of this problem that no easy and general solutions are available. Many inter-disciplinary teams pay directly for transcriptions but only indirectly (and often non-monetarily) for the collection of spoken language. Meeting the speakers on their turf here means allowing their expectations and ways to be equal partners in the negotiations. As the relationship between the partners continues to change the compilation and organisation of a corpus is effectively also turned into an open-ended enterprise.

Apart from the practical difficulties outlined above, and the individual solutions to them, cross-disciplinary work also raises interesting and challenging theoretical problems to which the remainder of this contribution draws our attention. Three problems will be identified: Firstly, the problem of context and contextualisation. Secondly, the problem of change, especially with regard to the notion of documenting ‘endangered’ languages. And, thirdly, the problem of identifying ‘the other of language’. A discussion of these problems will show the relevance of language documentation not only for enlarging the database but for widening the theoretical horizon of anthropology and linguistics.

5. Problems in cross-disciplinary research

The key element that distinguishes language documentation from previous forms of language description (through grammars and lexicons) is that it presents data on the linguistic practices of speakers that are recorded in their relevant social and cultural contexts (see Himmelman 1998; Austin 2003). Context and contextualisation are crystallisation points for many inter-disciplinary discussions between linguists and anthropologists (see Dille 1999). Anthropologists tend to consider contextualisation to

be the solution to research problems, more specifically the solution that their discipline can provide to the research problems raised by other disciplines. Unfortunately, in many cases this is a rather vacuous claim because it is not the case that other disciplines do not contextualise, but rather that they select differently as to what counts as context. Linguists, or more precisely anthropologically informed linguists together with linguistically informed anthropologists, now see context as part of the problem that needs to be broken down and operationalised. In this process linguists have so far focused on the context found 'in the text' while anthropologists focused on the context that is constituted outside the text or utterance, primarily in the mind of the researcher and in the wider historical settings that encompass speaker and researcher. The linguistic reduction on 'internal' contexts is seen with unease from an anthropological perspective because it often excludes big issues such as gender inequality, European biases and other forms of power relations. Conversely the anthropological reduction on 'external' contexts is met with critique from linguistics in that it easily leads to navel-gazing and reflexive interpretation that has lost touch with 'the data'. Behind this disciplinary quarrel is a fundamental theoretical problem, namely how to deal with the fact that not only are things and actions embedded in context but that contexts are also constructed through interpretation, not only by researchers but also by speakers themselves who continually make contextual moves as they contextualise their own action. The dilemma is, as representatives of both disciplines have pointed out (in Dillely 1999), that context is boundless. There is, theoretically, no end to context. All we can hope for is to achieve an appropriate degree of contextual saturation. The discussion as to how this appropriate saturation is achieved is the genuine field of cross-disciplinary work. Progress on the matter is to be expected to proceed laterally, that is from case study to case study rather than in a linear fashion from axioms that are defined once and for all.

In a case study on this point Hanks (1996) has pointed out that we cannot assume an axiomatic 'literal' meaning of a word or utterance which is then altered across possible contexts. He suggests replacing the theoretical notion, still going strong in some parts of linguistics, of the unlimited combinational capacity of language production with that of a limited practical feasibility. Speakers, due to their position in ongoing social interaction and communication settings, do not have indefinite or equal access to speech resources but are restricted by the immediate situation, their social position and the overall conditions for interaction and communication. A shaman, his wife and a visiting patient in a Mexican rural setting are positions in such a specific participatory framework (see Hanks 1996). Dancers, singers and patients in a southern African trance dance are another example (see Widlok in press). For both disciplines involved this implicates a re-definition of the unit of analysis. For linguists the unit of speech production and analysis is shifted away from that of individual speakers (or interview partners) and for anthropologists it is shifted away from that of the unified group or 'culture' (or the representative and omniscient key informant). In both cases the direction of shift is towards a participatory framework in which speakers and listeners engage with one another (see Hanks 1996). Positions and the participatory frameworks are subject to change as people take their language to its limits as it were.

The problem of change, therefore, is closely related and deserves particular attention in language documentation.

While conventional language descriptions, just like conventional ethnographic monographs, were able to ignore change, at least as something that structures a language or culture, this is not possible for the documentation of endangered languages. Here change is crucial because it is threatening to let linguistic forms, whole genres and modes of speaking fall into disuse. Again, there are specific disciplinary traditions of dealing with the phenomenon of change. Anthropology, for a long time, saw its role as the description of the structural continuities in the social order despite changes on the surface and in cultural forms. More recently, change and transformation have been considered to be the 'normal' way things go and inertia is what requires explanation. Linguistics, in its partnership with language planners, language teachers and the creators of orthographies and national languages, also maintained that stability was, if not 'natural', then at least 'desirable', and this was also reflected in a prescriptive mode of language description that cut out changes in spoken language. With regard to endangered languages and cultures both disciplines were driven by an agenda of urgent research, trying to salvage things before they disappeared. Despite this similarity there is also a degree of asynchrony between the disciplines. Some ethnographers, worried about the permeability and constructedness of cultural, ethnic or other group boundaries happily resorted to differentiating *languages* in order to avoid possible pitfalls when referring to *cultures* (see Maffi, Oviedo and Larsen 2000). Conversely, linguists seem to be more readily accept *cultures* as given entities which they can bring in as explanatory tools while anthropologists increasingly see 'culture' as something that needs explanation, as part of the problem, not the solution. In either case it becomes clear that the number of speakers may not necessarily be the best way of identifying what an endangered language or culture is and what the threats consist of. There are extreme cases where a whole group of speakers 'disappears', or is being eliminated, and in historical hindsight 'a language' seems to disappear *en bloc*. In most research situations, however, it is certain ways of speaking a language that disappear gradually as speakers shift to other ways of speaking, through code-switching and other means. In other words, language documentation research has to re-conceptualise the notion of 'endangerment' by moving it from the long-term hindsight perspective to a perspective informed by ongoing research.

In a case study on this point Weiner (2001) has suggested that we should focus on the changing conditions in which the performative acceptability of modes of speaking is altered. In his study of relationships between indigenous people in Papua New Guinea and the representatives of multi-national oil companies he discusses how a language (and also elements of 'a culture' including group boundaries) are not given but only emerge in a situation of conflict. Similarly, one could argue that languages do not necessarily or most commonly disappear because all speakers are gone but because the lines that are drawn to divide languages are being redrawn. Languages (and cultures) are not natural things, viewed as a precondition for interaction, but they are also usefully seen as a consequence of certain constellations of speech encounters. Language endangerment becomes visible in field research as some encounters break

away (for instance those between parents and their children who are placed in boarding schools) and other speech encounters become deeply ingrained (for instance those involving a dominant language or variety). Speech encounters are multi-modal, that is they consist of the whole complexity of human interaction and not only of the spoken word. This leads us to the third and final theoretical problem raised by language documentation, namely that of 'non-language'.

One of the spurious 'inter-disciplinary' findings that is particularly difficult to undo is the temptation to describe all modes of interaction in terms of a conventional idea of language more generally. There is 'body language', but also 'the language of gifts', 'kinship as an idiom' and so forth. The main problem here is that inter-disciplinarity is exhausted in a simple transfer of one specific conception of language, namely that of a code, to virtually all other dimensions of interaction. However, there is sufficient reason to question that all modes of interaction follow the same structure. Moreover, a better understanding of non-verbal interaction may in fact improve our understanding of language. Cross-disciplinary experiences of language acquisition provide hints in this direction (see also Eisenbeiss, this volume). When in the field, anthropologists tend to acquire language not primarily through grammars and lexicons but by exposure, using their hands and feet, learning interjections first and mixing languages freely. This experience is closer to that of speakers than the learning of a language through the use of books and other teaching materials. This applies not only to the language learning of children but also to the ways in which adults learn to master more specialised fields. In a case study on this point Csordas has shown that the reservations that prevent a younger generation of speakers (in an endangered language setting) from learning the shamans' songs from tapes results from the fact that learning from the mouth of the expert, with all its muttering, half-understanding and right breathing is what matters in this process of knowledge transmission (Csordas in press). In a complementary fashion linguists tend to insist that whatever the situational influences there are also effects that are entailments of an underlying system. In a case study on this point Levinson has pointed at the entailments of certain kinship terminology systems which are not directly influenced by situational interaction. In other words, specific kinship systems, matrilineal or patrilineal systems for instance, produce specific dilemmas or contradictions which in turn allow only certain verbal or non-verbal jokes to be made by speakers with this kinship system (Levinson in press). Thus, there is enough evidence to suggest that to identify 'the other' of language, the logic that governs non-verbal interaction is not marginal to language documentation. The experiences of the situational and of the systemic non-verbal have effects on spoken language and by implication on language more generally. We know, as yet, rather little about these effects but cross-disciplinarity in language documentation is a most promising route for further investigation.

6. Conclusion

The inter-disciplinary relationship of linguistics and anthropology has a long history which in part has also been a development from an *intra*-disciplinary relationship to an *inter*-disciplinary one. This paper has not attempted to do justice to all aspects of this

very varied history of disciplinary relationships. Instead it has pointed at the cross-disciplinarity that characterises current research in language documentation and the potential of this cross-disciplinary work for the disciplines of linguistics and anthropology.

The inter-disciplinary discourse is in a way reminiscent of the advertising slogan that the Victoria and Albert Museum used some years ago. The Victoria and Albert, a huge museum in London, advertised itself as “an excellent cafe with a museum attached to it”. The strategy of this advertisement, it seems to me, is sometimes also found in inter-disciplinary discourse – except that linguists and anthropologists may disagree as to which discipline provides the museum and which one the cafe. According to the point of view of some linguists, anthropology provides the cafeteria, the exotic flavouring that really attracts people, while the heavy data collection is in fact done by the linguists. Conversely, according to the point of view of some anthropologists, they are quite happy to represent the cafeteria on the grounds that eating and sustaining yourself is really the basis of everything else. Of course both of these points of view are seriously flawed, even if we stay within the metaphor. Museums, even the ones that do not charge any entrance fee, were never solely made for documentation purposes but they were there to attract the public in pretty much the same way in which cafes do. Similarly, the food you take in when you visit the cafeteria continues to be digested as you later walk through the exhibition, in fact it is said that walking helps digestion as well as reflection. Thus the separation between the two should not be overdrawn since they are part of the same process. The purpose of this paper was to show that this is also true for the current documentation of endangered languages. There are good reasons for museums and cafes to go together; language documentation research suggests that the same is true for anthropology and linguistics.

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