From Grab and Go to Engaging Communities in Language Research

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Abstract

In many cases, language researchers collect data from community of speakers and then go on to write their theses, academic articles book, and present at conferences. The benefit of the research to these communities is often minimal. There is often no social obligation for researchers to give back to communities via knowledge-sharing activities. This leaves a large gap in the process of language research as the research findings have little or no impact on the communities concerned. This paper discusses (i) shifting the ‘grab-and-go’ research approach to one that incorporates knowledge sharing and community engagement; (ii) ways in which researchers can engage communities to help them to document, preserve and revitalize their language drawing on specific examples of the cycle of language research, documentation and revitalization of Malacca Portuguese Creole.

Keywords: community engagement, language research, Malacca Portuguese Creole, endangered languages, research impact.

Introduction

The typical model of language research involves data collection, analysis and then presenting the findings in an oral or written format. There is very seldom any attempt made to make the research relevant in a practical sense or to give back to the communities involved. Ethical considerations often stop at obtaining written consent from participants. They do not tend to involve the question of how the research findings can contribute to the participants. For example, a postgraduate student conducts research on a particular method to teach pronunciation. The study is then written out as a master’s dissertation which includes recommendations to use this particular teaching method. It is unlikely that the teachers and students involved in this study would have benefited directly from the study in terms of, for example, teachers receiving training on how to employ this teaching method to teach pronunciation, or teaching materials based on the findings of the study.

The same situation can be observed in relation to field research on minority and endangered languages. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, language researchers collect data from a community of speakers, and then go on to present at conferences, write their theses, academic articles and books. The benefit of the research to this community is often minimal. There is often no social obligation for researchers to give back to communities. Even funders generally require research output in the form of publications rather than measuring impact on communities. This leaves a large gap in the process of language research as the research findings have little or no impact on the communities concerned. This paper is concerned with
closing this gap by engaging communities. Specific reference will be made to the cycle of language research, documentation and revitalization of Malacca Portuguese Creole (MPC).

**Shifting from Grab-and-Go to Engaging Communities**

Within the context of language research on endangered languages, researchers need to ask themselves how their research can have an impact on the documentation and revitalization of these languages. We have a social obligation to engage the communities from which we gather our data, and to discover if there are language-related needs within the community that can benefit from our research. There needs to be a shift in the way that we approach our research so that we move from a ‘grab-and-go’ type of research model to one that engages the community to address their language-related needs. In order to do so, we have to stop thinking of our participants as research subjects, and their language as data to be analysed. In fact, we should start referring to the participants as our language consultants. Figure 1 shows the research cycle of language research which attempts to engage communities in knowledge sharing, and to make the research findings relevant to the community.

![Research cycle with a focus on community engagement](image)

The language research cycle shown in Figure 1 includes obtaining the required permissions and consents to collect data. Consent should also be obtained to take and use photographs and video recordings of the community members and their environment. The main idea is to engage the community from the onset of the research. The output goes beyond academic presentations and publications. It may include documentation of the language that is accessible to the community members. This could be in the form of a website, for example. Through knowledge sharing and working with community members, outputs like teaching, learning and reading materials in print or electronic form can be produced. Other outputs may be in the form of a heritage language learning syllabus and language learning classes.

However, we must keep in mind that language does not exist in a vacuum. Thus, researchers must also take into account, among others:

- the demographics of the community
• contexts of language use in the community, including looking at the other languages that are used by the community or that are used within the larger society in which they live
• the political, socio-economic context and dynamics in which they live
• cultural and /or religious practices
• their physical environment
These factors must not be seen in isolation, but as interacting factors that make up the ecology of community.

In the case of MPC, these factors are related to their need to keep MPC alive. MPC is part of a cultural heritage that identifies speakers as being of Portuguese descent:

I don’t want our language to die so I will keep on speaking Portuguese until the last day ahh...and I will pass it on to my grandchildren too...because I don’t want it to die...why should it die? It (has) to be there forever because we are born a Cristang, might as well be until the last a Cristang (= I don’t want our language to die so I will keep on speaking Portuguese until my last breathe [laughs] and I will pass it on to my grandchildren too...because I don’t want it to die...why should it die? It has to be there forever because we are born Cristangs (Portuguese Eurasians), we might as well die as Cristangs).

(Pillai, Soh & Kajita, 2014, p. 80)

The identity of Portuguese-Eurasians, with their unique cultural practices and festivals (e.g. Intrudu, Festa San Pedro, Festa San Juang), food and dances, is one that draws tourists and visitors to the Portuguese Settlement. The loss of MPC along with other cultural practices is likely to affect the livelihood of many people in the Settlement who are engaged in the food business, and cottage and tourism industries. As it is, land reclamation is already having an effect on the fishermen’s yield. Thus, in order to maintain their identity as a community with Portuguese heritage stemming from contact with the Portuguese in the 16th Century, the preservation, continued and increasing use of MPC is seen as an important factor.

Malacca Portuguese Creole
MPC, also popularly referred to as Papiá Cristang is the heritage language of people of Portuguese descent in Malaysia and Singapore. The biggest group of speakers live in Malacca, especially at the Portuguese Settlement. MPC has its roots in the Portuguese occupation of Malacca (located south of the capital city of Kuala Lumpur) from 1511 to 1641, when the Dutch took over. The Portuguese formed unions with locals and descendants of these unions are referred to as Portuguese-Eurasians (Baxter, 2005). MPC “belongs to the Malayo-Portuguese subgroup of the Lusoasián (Portuguese lexifier) creoles” (Hancock, 2009, pp. 297-8). The other creoles in this group are the ones spoken in Macau and Singapore, which have very few fluent speakers left, and the one that used to be spoken in Tugu, Indonesia.

The number of fluent speakers of MPC has been declining over the years (Baxter, 2005; David and Mohd Noor, 1999; Nunes, 1996). The Portuguese Settlement and its surrounding areas comprise approximately 1000 residents, and most studies indicate that those under the age of fifty are not fluent in MPC (Baxter, 2005). MPC is largely used in the family and community’s social domain, but with English becoming the more dominant language in the Settlement. Beyond the Settlement and Malacca, the switch to English as a first language has been reported, with even those in their 70s and 80s not being able to speak MPC at all (Pillai and Khan, 2011). This is not surprising given the language context of Malaysia, where English used to be the main language used in official contexts, such as in the legal and public administration sector as well as education. Upon independence of then Malaya
in 1957, Malay, which was designated as the official language, began gradually replacing English in these contexts. English is taught as a compulsory subject in the national primary and secondary school system, and is still widely used in business, media and private education. Mandarin and Tamil are used by many Malaysians of Chinese and Tamils heritage. Many other local languages as well as Chinese and Indian ones are also spoken in Malaysia. Minority languages, like MPC, struggle to survive amidst the dominance of Malay, and English, and even Mandarin.

The dwindling number of fluent speakers has resulted in the MPC being classified as an endangered language in the UNESCO Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger (Moseley, 2010). With the death, and near death, of the other Asian Portuguese creoles, MPC “is the last vital variety of a group of East and Southeast Asian Creole Portuguese languages” (Baxter, 2012, p. 115). As acknowledged by the MPC community, the loss of MPC would be a great loss to them, and thus, there has been growing interest and commitment to keep the language alive:

The Portuguese descendants, we, are speaking this language. I am always proud that this thing can go on with others, this younger generation. I always love that. Since what we know, if you are keeping to yourself, (it) is (of) no value, and if you know something that you can share, it’s not the value of money ... but you feel so proud of what you are as a descendant.

(Soh, 2015, p. 127)

Previous studies on Malacca Portuguese Creole have generally been academic in nature (e.g. Baxter, 1988, 1990; Hancock, 1969, 1975; Pillai, Chan & Baxter 2015; Pillai, Soh & Kajita, 2014; Sarkissian 1997, 2000, 2005; Régo, 1942; Thurgood & Thurgood, 1996). Apart from these, and the many theses and dissertation written on MPC, there are other non-academic resources, like the dictionary by Baxter and de Silva (2004), and numerous publications by Marbeck. However, the dictionary is not easily accessible to the community (Pillai, Soh & Kajita, 2014; Soh, 2015), and Marbeck’s works have largely received support from outside the Portuguese Settlement community. There is generally a sense of disconnect between what has been written and documented by others (e.g. researchers, authors, documentary producers) and the community’s involvement in them (Pillai, Soh, & Yusuf, 2015). Their involvement is generally as data providers, providing speech samples, answering questionnaires an being interviewed and recorded, and as performers (music, dance). This is more often than not done without payment and without acknowledgement. Most of them, including the leaders of the community have never seen the research outputs or productions.

In relation to this, there is a sense of losing control of decisions made about their language and community. Thus, debates about what the language should be called (e.g. Malacca Portuguese, Cristang, Serani?), how it should be written (e.g. Cristang or Kristang?) and pronounced abound. Questions of ownership have also arisen with one of the main questions being to what extent a community who uses the language daily, and to whom it is part and parcel of their cultural system, can be ignored in these debates, and to what extent others can appropriate their language and culture. All these partly arise because of the sense of disconnect between research and reality.

From Research to Revitalization

One way this gap was addressed for MPC was to engage the community as represented by the Malacca Portuguese-Eurasian Association, and more recently the Village Sub-Committee, and to work together on language documentation and language revitalisation efforts. Research findings and materials that were documented formed the basis for revitalisation efforts as shown in Figure 2.
Figure 2 illustrates the research to revitalisation cycle for MPC. The initial stage in this cycle was based on a typical research model of ‘grab-and-go’. While this research was on-going, a funded documentation project began, which demanded community participation. This project resulted in an accessible archive of selected audio and video recordings ([https://elar.soas.ac.uk/Collection/MPI130545](https://elar.soas.ac.uk/Collection/MPI130545)). More work continued on researching the sound system of MPC, and thinking of how this could be transferred into a more useful platform for the community the sound system of MPC. One of the outputs triggered by the research and documentation was the production of audio CD of Catholic prayers and hymns (MPEA, 2014) funded by a community engagement grant from the University of Malaya (UM). A beta version of an online dictionary was also developed and is currently being edited. The CD was produced in collaboration with the Malacca Portuguese-Eurasian Association (MPEA). A second major project with MPEA was *Beng Prende Portugues Malaká* (Singho et al., 2016), also supported by a community engagement grant from UM. A series of workshops were held in the process of preparing this book where researchers from UM and MPEA representatives discussed the content and organization of the book as well as issues of orthography, pronunciation and vocabulary. In this collaborative effort, the research team shared their linguistic knowledge and experience of teaching and learning languages, while members of the community shared their language and cultural knowledge (see Pillai, Phillip & Soh, 2017). One of the outcomes of this engagement was increased confidence of the community members involved to talk about their language, and to see it as a legitimate language with a system. Another outcome was to provide them with the skills to produce such a learning material on their own in the future. The successful production of the book is an example of how community representatives can take ownership and responsibility for their own language. In this instance community representatives have also taken to social media to share cultural elements of the language and to teach the language (e.g. on Facebook). Collaborating with researchers has also given the community, their language and culture more public prominence, enabling them to share their language and culture to others (e.g. [https://www.bfm.my/lingo-episode-11-kristang-part-2.html](https://www.bfm.my/lingo-episode-11-kristang-part-2.html)).
Challenges
Engaging communities as part of our research cycle is not without challenges. In the first place, the community needs to be motivated to revitalize their language. Their acceptance of the project and of working together with researchers also needs to be negotiated. There need to be a certain level of commitment. This is not always easy to obtain as people; including researchers are busy with their own work. Without key drivers or champions from among the community, it will also be difficult to engage the community and work on outputs together. Ideally, there needs to be a sense of ownership over their language and a desire to be empowered with the knowledge skills, and resources to make collaborative and informed decisions about their language.

Conclusions
The example of MPC has shown how it is possible to go beyond a ‘grab-and-go’ research approach to one that engages a community and rotates from research to revitalisation.

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References


