A Fieldwork Squib

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This is for jorge, as in hankamer, one of my absolute favorite professors, way back, almost thirty years ago, at harvard. the one who taught me to present data from never-seen-before languages so that anybody interested could "see" what it was i was seeing that was interesting (remember the little square boxes on noun classifier deletion sites as we worked our way through the gapping process in jakaltek?).

i worked through several chapters of the jakaltek grammar with jorge, and learned to appreciate the usefulness of his blanking out when he did not "get it", which was most of the time at first. jorge was familiar with turkish grammar, but the intricacies of mayan morphosyntax were not his cup of tea; he was slow on the uptake, dense almost when compared to the desorienting quick computer mind of a kuno for instance, but he was the best that one could hope for in a mentor training you to do linguistic analysis. because, once he saw the issue at hand, for which he forced you to be articulate and clear, he guided you through arguing your point right. powerful, exciting! so when jorge would finally let go of a "it's good" comment, you knew you were on to something. teachers, professors like him are too few and too rare. one must salute the ones one has had a chance to work with and learn from.

here is a little story of fieldwork, a story of the kind of thing that keeps some of us going back to the field. the story of one of those occasional moments of sheer excitement, of a discovery that feels so matter of fact once you "see" what is going on that it is unsettling, of finding the answer to something that was bugging you, of things falling into place after the chaos that field work can create. a story of the back-and-forth of theory and description, of the constant feeding of one into the other (or so it should be in a sane world), a story of working with speakers of a non-standardized endangered language, far away from academic field methods courses that prepare you so little for that human adventure.

the scene is trinidad, a small town of the bolivian amazonian lowland, in the fall of 1995. a small room in a funky hotel with lots of sweat and tension, boredom and bewilderment. the protagonists are two speakers of a language called movima: a middle aged man, poised to bossy, and an old lady, beautifully smart and ornery (thanks for the word, jorge!). he turning out to be a semi speaker, but literate and the man of the scene, she turning out to be a native speaker and illiterate but the leader of the movima women's organization. his name is gilberto machado vega, her name is peregrina cayu mazaro. the linguist is a gringa type of academic, on a bolivian government contract to standardize (they called it "normalize") the alphabets of the amazonian languages (there are 29, we will have worked on 19, eventually, between 1995 and 1996). 25+

years of field linguistics, first time in bolivia, first time doing alphabet work, having accepted it only in the hope it would mean being called back for the grammar work that should have followed (and has not so far). alphabet work, frankly, is a bitch. a lot of headache, a lot of tension, very boring to the morpho-syntactician at heart that i am.

the encounter takes place in the first days of the contact with speakers of the language, in a pre-alphabet workshop week, where the goal is for the linguist to familiarize herself with the basics of the language before facing a team of speakers sent by the indigenous organization the following week in a big several language alphabet fair (or zoo!). the language is movima, an isolate language of the region that some sil missionaries had worked on in the late fifties-early sixties. which means that the few literate speakers have probably been trained in their alphabet, and the heat of the discussion will probably be whether to change the sil spanish based *c/qu* spelling to the now pan amerindian *-k-* (la batalla de la *-k-*!). the movima community is scattered in about forty isolated communities and of the few thousand movima left (maybe around 8000) only about a third still speak the language. there are no children speaking it today but the community is interested in ways to revitalize the language. hence their priority participation in the alphabet workshop.

what the linguist had noticed in the writings of the sil couple judy and judy (1962a,b) was some mention and preliminary description of what looked like a nominal classification system. and since that particular linguist thinks of herself as a specialist of those systems, enjoying poking at them and playing with them, she had decided to treat herself to a few hours of elicitation focused on checking out what judy and judy had said.

what they had said was that there were "pronombres objetos descriptivos" in the language, giving the two lists that follow, plus mentioning in passing that the number was much larger:

(1)   objects   pronouns
       a. round fruit, egg, nest, jug, etc.   *-ba*
       b. skin, paper, book, etc.   *-ben*
       c. seed, grain, star, viper, river, house, etc.   *-di*
       d. plantains, bird, insect, airplane, basket, tropical forest, etc. *-mo*
       e. yuca, totora, etc.   *-pa*
       f. tooth, spoon, point, etc.   *-!a*

(2) 'cane' *-as*, 'piece of pottery' (tiesto) *-bij*, 'plant' *-bo*, 'mud' *-bun*, 'chivé' *-cho*, 'person' *-e*, 'location' *-huaj*, 'milk' *-lo*, 'thorn' *-lej*, 'straw' *-mas*, 'water' *-mi*, 'shell' *-mo!*, 'wind' *-muj*, 'feather' *-mun'*, 'hadze' *-pi*, 'animal' *-poi*, 'clothing' *-oj*, 'hat' *-to*, 'dust like' *-vas*, 'hoof' *-ve*, 'wood' *-vos*, 'ashes' *-vus*, 'arm' *-yin'*, etc.

from the above data (and some more not given here) i had concluded that movima had "numeral classifiers", on the grounds that: (a) morphosyntactically they fit in that type, since there were examples given of classifiers on numbers (not shown here), and (b) semantically they did too, since it was possible to recognizable semantic groupings found in such systems, such as:

(3) (1a): round   fruit,   egg,   nest   and   jug,
          which could be a class of round objects
    (1b): skin,   paper,   book,
          which could be the class of 'flat and flexible' objects

(1e): yuca   and   totora,
    which could, maybe, be a plant class

(1f): tooth,   spoon,   point,
    which could be taken to be a class of 'pointed objects'

a little chronological note is in order here: that was the analysis done in 1995, after working through a typology of classification systems (see craig 1986a,b, continued in grinevald 2000—although from a 1993 manuscript) which relied heavily on pioneering work on numeral classifier systems of the 70s, that judy and judy could not have had access to.

it seemed that there was a semantic puzzle left, around two questions: (a) what to make of the heterogeneous classes, such as:

(4) (1d): plantains, birds, insects, baskets and tropical forest
    (1c): seed/grain/star, but also viper, river, and house!

meaning, what sort of dixon-lakoff type of analysis could be constructed to account for these groupings, on the chaining model of the classic dyirbal case of the "women, fire and dangerous things" (dixon 1982, lakoff 1986); and (b) why so many so-called "unique" classifiers as the examples of (2) seemed to be, when such classifiers—which by definition head a class of one noun—are usually assumed to be few and of some cultural prominence.

the answer to this semantic puzzle turned out to be of a phonological nature. what elicitation work showed was that movima has a mixed system of "classification", with a limited subsytem which is semantically motivated, and a large open ended one, which comes from an apparently fairly productive system of truncation that produces "classifiers" with the last syllable(s) of the noun it refers to. the demonstration for this analysis was done in three steps:

1. by checking the word list of judy and judy, it became clear that the classifiers listed in (2) were indeed the last syllable of nouns, as double checked with the movima speakers, and illustrated in (5):

(5) CLASSIFIER   from NOUN

-b'e	*hub'e*	'typical small river embarcation'
-d'o	*chad'o*	'plate'
-lo	*nonlo*	'milk'
-mi	*tomi*	'water'
-mas	*d'imas*	'hay'
-muj	*pawmuj*	'wind'

2. by playing with adjectival phrases, where it turned out those so-called classifiers showed up too, one could also get the following kind of data, including then mass nouns:

(6)   adjective-CLASS NOUN
    a. *sokosoko'-mi*   'boiled (of water)' *tomi* 'water'
       sokosoko'-lo   'boiled (of milk)' *nonlo* 'milk'
    b. *sokosoko'-mi*   'boiling (of water)'

palui-mi	'cold (of water)'
koyb'u-mi	'muddy (of water)'

3. the most fun was actually bumping into a loanword unexpectedly, and finding confirmation of the process, although this time with the added twist that the "classifier" be this time two syllables long rather than one, as if to flag the word as a loanword (7a). confirmation of this two syllable requirement came with cases of reduplication when the word was too short (7b), as illustrated below:

(7) CLASS from LOANWORD from Spanish

a.	*-misa*	*kamisa*	*camisa*	'shirt'
	-pato	*sapato*	*zapato*	'shoe'
	-reta	*kareta*	*carreta*	'cart'
b.	*-sasa*	*mesa*	*mesa*	'table'
	-yaya	*siya*	*silla*	'chair'

voilà! the movima system is therefore a mixture of phonological truncation with no semantic motivation and a few semantically motivated classes (for animals and plants, actually originally based on the truncation of generic words). It turns out to be, in this regard, a very typical amazonian type of system, as more recent research in this part of the world is beginning to show.

so here is how one counts some common objects in movima, and how come so:

(8) a. *oy-d'o* 'two (plates)'

    oy-to 'two (hats)'

  b. *oy-pato* 'two (shoes)'

    oy-yaya 'two (chairs)'

  c. *oy-poy* 'two (pigs)'

    oy-poy 'two (anteaters)'

(8a) is by 1syllable truncation: *chad'o* 'plate' and *choramkwanto* 'hat', and (8b) by 2syllable truncation (+reduplication) of loanwords: *sapato* 'shoe' and *siya* 'chair'. (8c) is by semantic grouping: *-poy* '4legged animal', from *poy* 'animal', here used for *jochi* 'pig' and *waewae* 'ant eater'.

and there is much more to this story, such as the alternative ways of counting objects, this one being only one of them, and most strikingly, the stunning intensity of the arguing between the two speakers who often disagreed, on even very simple cases, such as 'two benches'. intense enough that we needed to take breaks and walk around to cool off, and i almost lost the female speaker who walked out on us at one point. was it the long standing case of another south american language not really into counting, or that of two linguistic informants seeing their role differently, or that of a decaying system of an endangered language in chaotic variation?

i have also ignored here the whole issue of the use of these so-called movima classifiers, although today, in 2000, it may have become one of the most interesting aspects of that system, in that they are not, in fact, "numeral classifiers", but rather a system of "noun classes" (à la

bantu but not as grammaticalized), and one could hardly justify the term classifier or class when the majority clearly don't classify and have nothing to do with categorization processes.

and so it is that interests evolve, field discoveries immediately look like old hat, and linguistics moves on. i just tried to share the kind of excitement this field encounter was for me, a special moment catching some of the spirit of the movima language, in the course of heated and exhilarating elicitation sessions, sitting between an articulate and domineering male "fluent semi-speaker" and a proud and stubborn female "old fluent" native speaker. just the kind of work that has been keeping some of us field linguists going.

so, happy birthday, jorge! hope i told this story clearly enough, there is so much to it that it was hard to keep it focused and short. in any case, thank you for good early mentoring and for steady friendship thereafter.

colette
as in craig before, as in grinevald now
from cambridge to eugene to lyon

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