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The long and short of it

Vowel length, placenames, and ecolinguistics

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Placenames (toponyms) give insight into relationships involving people, place, and language. An exemplary placename derived from long-term engagement within the sensitive linguistic ecology of Norfolk Island in the South Pacific is used to detail how a fusing of linguistic analysis, words, and cultural memory is beneficial for what constitutes an ecolinguistic fieldwork methodology. Differences between the ethnographic method and an ecolinguistic fieldwork methodology are presented. This enduring and keyed-in commitment with Norfolk Island's social and natural surroundings offers significant perceptiveness into and suggestions about how prolonged ecolinguistic work can be beneficial to language documentation projects, particular those incorporating lexical (word) and semantic (memory) description.

Keywords: cultural memory, ethnography, fieldwork, the Norfolk Island language, phonology, toponymy

1.   Anomaly

Norfolk Island is a linguistic and social oddity. It is an external territory of Australia and home to around 800 descendants of the *Bounty* mutineers and their Polynesian counterparts who were moved to Norfolk Island from Pitcairn Island in 1856. The language this small population speak – Norfolk – remains an enigma for language contact scholars, and has received considerable interest from language ecologists.[1] In this short position piece-cum-research note, I illustrate how several social quirks and structural anomalies in Norfolk can be used to reflect on ecolinguistic theory. I argue for a staunchly empirical directive sensitive to col-

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1.   While the spelling of the glossonym for the language of Norfolk Island remains at issue, I prefer to use 'Norfolk' when referring to the island's language, and 'Norfolk Island' (in full) when referring to the place.

lecting real ecolinguistic data which questions what such reliable data are or could be. The general assertion is that a stringent yet flexible fieldwork methodology must inform ecolinguistic theory, and that this theory should in turn strengthen respective fieldwork methods. I claim that elicited data becomes more pertinent and representative when coupled with relevant and real fieldwork derived experiences. Explicating this ecolinguistic fieldwork methodology is achieved through nitty-gritty interaction with actual people and informants in vibrant multilingual linguistic ecologies. Situations where languages are in danger of becoming extinct exacerbate the need for quality fieldwork and good researcher-informant-community relations. It becomes starkly apparent that if longstanding relationships congenial to language documentation and conservation are not established, many languages will be lost even with the best intentions and skills of the researcher and the community.

I have chosen the distinction of vowel length in one particular placename in Norfolk as a central example to illustrate aspects of how people talk about the wider ecology of the place where they live. The realisation of this feature is indicative of how many other elements of the language and its insider nature are operationalised. It helps portray Norfolk and Norfolk Island as a multilayered, multifactorial, and dynamic linguistic ecology. The tack I take favours the in-depth analysis of one placename and its implications for fieldwork methodology and theory in ecolinguistics, rather than producing and analysing masses of placename data. This is based on my assertion that the combining of data with field-work experiences and (meta)theory about language and environment interaction can help us arrive at a better understanding of how linguistic ecologies actually work. Placenames are linguistic ephemera people use to orientate and navigate themselves in both known and unfamiliar environments. Norfolk Island provides a unique example of naming and environmental adaption, because, prior to European settlement in 1788, it was an unnamed island that was subsequently named. All naming was undertaken by newcomers. Further, its diglossic linguistic ecology is an isolated case study of language contact between English and Norfolk.

2.   The scene, the people, the language

Norfolk Island is a small isolated island of 35 square kilometres in the South Pacific Ocean approximately 1,700 kilometres east of Sydney. It is an Australian external territory and is the most eastern part of political Australia. The history of the island is inextricably linked to the colonisation of Australia, the establishment of a notorious penal colony, and the legend of the relocation of the entire popu-

lation of Pitcairn Island to Norfolk Island in 1856. The Pitcairners were and are still a cultural, sociological, and linguistic mystery-cum-curiosity. The discovery of their uniqueness as a group and the insider element of their language, experienced mainly through the lack of intelligibility to outsiders, was first realised in 1808 when an American trading vessel first discovered the Pitcairn Islanders. An awareness of an insider-outsider dichotomy has continually played a substantial role in the construction of self, self-esteem, and placement in the world. Historically, the perceived threat to the Pitcairners' and Norfolk Islanders' self-appraised sense of self can be measured in terms of the extent of the use of the Norfolk language, and particularly the use of Tahitian lexicon (Mühlhäusler 2003a). The arrival and relocation of the Pitcairners to Norfolk Island altered the cultural, natural, and linguistic ecology greatly, and particularly the naming of places and life forms. Norfolk Island has been named differently by different people and different groups at different times. The island presents the ecolinguist with a quintessential example of the naming of a desert island.

Norfolk is the sister language of Pitcairn, the language which developed on Pitcairn Island some 6,000 kilometres from Norfolk Island. It is the language of the descendants of the *Bounty* mutineers and their Polynesian counterparts which took root on Pitcairn Island after the settlement of Pitcairn Island in 1790. The relocation to Norfolk Island meant the Pitcairners brought with them the Pitcairn language, a unique blend of eighteenth-century nautical English, Polynesian varieties, and St Kitts Creole, and culture, including aspects of their Polynesian ancestry, such as tangible culture and modified religious beliefs and practices. The Pitcairners brought with them to Norfolk Island a view of the world which was reflected in their linguistic and toponymic behaviour. For example, they considered themselves children who had been gifted a new island and that it was their task to turn hell into paradise again after the closing of the Second Settlement penal administration on Norfolk Island in 1855.

One of the major differences between the history of place-naming on five kilometre square Pitcairn Island (see Ross and Moverley 1964:170–188) is that it was named from scratch, while in 1856 Norfolk Island had already been colonised and named. These layers of placenames which evolved across events, uses, and time in the same geographical location is what makes Norfolk Island of particular interest to linguists and toponymists. This interest is increased by the relatively stable diglossic situation (Flint 1979) and the interaction of elements of Polynesian lexicon and grammar in Norfolk with a typologically different language, English. The placename 'Paalu Park', which I analyse here, is an example of the dual Norfolk-English placename where the Norfolk element is clearly of Tahitian origin. Let me now describe what I have labelled an *ecolinguistic fieldwork methodology*.

In an interview in February 2008 focused on eliciting previously undocumented ephemera and unmapped placenames with a respected member of the Norfolk Island community, I recorded the placename 'Paalu Park', literally 'Masturbation Park' (*paalu* < Tahitian 'to masturbate'), and figuratively 'Lovers' Lane'. 'Palu' has the phonemic representation /paːlʊ/. There is variation in vowel quality in the realisation of 'palu' resulting in two possible phonetic variants – [pʰaːlʊ] and [pʰʌːlʊ] – depending on the location of the elicited vowel. The place is located in the southwestern region of Norfolk Island in the Rocky Point Reserve area, also known as Hundred Acres Reserve. I was informed that it was, and possibly still is, a prime location to which island boys would take their girlfriends for a bit of 'paalu', that is, to get up to a bit of mischief, to frolic in the woods. This etymology is quite plausible as the area is remote and densely forested and would lend itself well to a secluded setting for such behaviour. Its location and meaning are known to few people as I found out when I used my new knowledge to question other informants. During this supplemented questioning, however, I was not aware of the possible variation of *paalu* using a short, rather than long, back vowel – *palu* – meaning berley, a substance thrown out to sea used to attract fish when fishing. 'Palu Park', represented as [pʰalʊ] or possibly [pʰʌlʊ], once again depending on the location of the produced vowel, literally meaning 'Berley Park', as opposed to 'Paalu Park', takes on a whole new meaning. This etymology alludes to the plausible action of setting out bait, and the metaphor that the opposite sex is to be attracted like fish. 'Palu Park' would in this context be the place where such an action is undertaken. Phonemically, a minimal pair distinguished by vowel length is present which illustrates a significant semantic case in point: 'paalu' is a taboo word and 'palu' a non-taboo word. For this reason, Norfolk speakers can and do distinguish between these expressions.

This confusion and discrepancy resulted from my – the fieldworker's – inability to produce the most likely and expected Norfolk vowel for this placename in further interviews. The fact that the majority of my informants had not heard of this placename served to complicate their (not) eliciting and (dis)confirming my already elicited response. Eventually this placename and its two possible variations became difficult for me to discuss with any informants simply for the fact that I was not sure of its pronunciation. Since my fieldwork, I have confirmed through written sources long vowelled 'Paalu Park' as the most common production of the placename. This uncertainty, however, led to my being the brunt of several jokes, all in good fun, which developed into the major theoretical question here: How does the field linguist's research methodology inform theory when conducting fieldwork and vice versa? Other questions worth posing are: What role does the field linguist play in obtaining and collecting data? What role does the personalisation of data play? How reliable can one's data be when it appears

informants are playing games and even tricking the linguist? More technically and more specifically to Norfolk Island and Norfolk, can we arrive at a reliable inventory of Norfolk phonology considering the amount of possible individual variation in vowel production? I suggest asking these questions is at least somewhat productive in describing what it means to do work in fragile linguistic ecologies. That is, unless the linguist is aware of and sensitive to the needs and perspectives of the community they are working with, and actually becomes to a required extent an active member and participant in the language documentation of that community, it is likely that the fieldwork methods and theoretical basis for the fieldwork will not be such that the work is done in a manner suitable to an ecological understanding and approach to language documentation (Hinton and Hale 2001). In short, in documenting elements of the language, the ecolinguist must be aware of the importance of preserving the ecology of the language, the home where the language is spoken, and not just the language itself (cf. Mühlhäusler 2002).

3.   Processes

Establishing congenial research dealings, especially with the older members of the Norfolk Island community, is a time- and energy-consuming process. What one hopes to achieve in one or two interviews may not ever lead to useful data. As any language documentation programme is at best a work-in-progress account, I do not see a problem with providing work-in-progress conclusions based on such field situations. My fieldwork experience over several years has demanded a great deal of patience and persistence in dealing with locals. I believe the success of these dealings can be measured in terms of the quality of data elicited and the establishment of healthily maintained research dealings and friendships in mind.

When visiting Norfolk Island, the 'researcher' category is an irregularity not fitting within the usual categories of Norfolk Islander, i.e. people of Pitcairn Island descent, local, i.e. people of Australian or New Zealand heritage, temporary and general entry work permit holders, or tourists. Researchers are possibly the group of outsiders who are treated with the most suspicion, either suspected as spies or people who will poach valuable tangible cultural heritage for their own monetary ends. It is with this degree of care and awareness that the fieldworker must approach this sensitive and isolated community in order to obtain data which is of benefit to the community, which does not disturb or offend any members of the community, and which is of benefit for linguistic science through documenting this eclectic linguistic anomaly.

This is not an easy task. There are dissensions and factions in the community, especially when it comes to linguistic and cultural issues, not to mention complex and longstanding personal and familial matters and opinions which can affect the interview setting within such a small and insular group. When collecting data it is often advantageous not to be permanently on island. Although it is likely one may go deeper into a study of the people and the processes by which they interact linguistically when one is continually stationed, gaining access into the inner core of the community by outsiders is difficult and it may take years just to begin to be accepted in the community. In such a situation, the researcher is better able to work with focus and gusto on getting the job at hand done and obtaining the data required.

I claim that, although there are manuals and guidelines for doing ethnographic, anthropological, and linguistic fieldwork, there is actually no substitute to getting out in the field, exploring scenes and situations personally, and ultimately personalising relationships and dealings with informants as well as individualising data. The fieldworker is an active participant and affecter of data elicitation and in doing so brings biases and judgments to the research situation. Furthermore, it is through friendly, symbiotic, and win-win dealings that continued work with any community ensues and where more parameters and depth of understanding the linguistic ecology arises. I label this approach an *ecolinguistic fieldwork methodology*. I am certain that eliciting good quality data during my first two field trips to Norfolk Island was in part the result of engagement in hard labour on a farm with local people and becoming a part of the workings of the community. Being accepted as a person seriously intermeshed within the community and with a genuine interest in the preservation of the Norfolk language made organising interviews, social dealings, and consuming the culinary delights of Norfolk Island so much easier.

4.   The results

Only a brief explication of the two possible variant productions of the placename is required:

(1)   *Paalu Park* [+vowel length] lit. 'Masturbation Park', fig. 'Lovers' Lane'

(2)   *Palu Park* [−vowel length]   'Berley Park'

Although two possibilities were elicited, I concluded through analysis of various unpublished written documents and Norfolk word and placename lists that (1) 'Paalu Park' [+vowel length] is the most probable variation of this placename and

that it was indeed the name of the place to which the majority of informants were referring. In these documents, the spelling variation of *parloo* was used, where <-ar> may be interpreted as representing vowel length, and equating to my spelling of *paalu*.

Long vowel length is the unmarked and typical condition in Norfolk. However, vowel length can also bring about contrast, as evidenced in other examples:

(3)   *kehk* [+vowel length] 'faeces, shit'

(4)   *cake* [−vowel length] 'cake'

(5)   *kaali* [+vowel length] 'carry'

(6)   *kali* [−vowel length] 'curly'

At the same time, the contrast in vowel length that occurs in (1) and (2) does not always hold for (3) and (4), and (5) and (6). Contextual features in conjunction with structural analysis and not structural analysis alone are the only key to ascertaining the phonological representation and meaning and intention of an utterance. This has broad ranging implications for how linguists analyse the interaction of structural and contextual data.

This placename, its history, and its location have now been documented reliably. This was not, however, the theoretical or methodological import of my discussion. I now summarise the argument by broaching implications for employing the ecolinguistic fieldwork methodology I have already considered.

The implications for developing an appropriate methodology for doing ecolinguistics and contributing to language documentation efforts in a sensitive and holistic manner garnered from this paper are widespread. The overarching focus is on documenting the language and its uses in the ecology where it is spoken. This involves intimate interaction with speakers of the language generally in informal settings where informants feel comfortable. The focus is on participatory and community based research rather than specialisation and technicalities. I have demonstrated by describing the initial participatory interview and elicitation of Paalu Park and the follow-up interviews, which led to the elicitation of Palu Park.

Structural linguistic tools are helpful to the extent they describe formal aspects of language. Any single level of linguistic analysis cannot explain the entirety of a language or the ecology in which it is spoken. The strength of analytical tools, in this case phonology, is measured only by their ability to do analytical work, and not by any inherent suitability or aptness of the tool employed. In the present example, the phonological aspect of a Norfolk placename has become a significant semantic issue in interaction with other informants. This significance, however, is not restricted primarily and only to phonology and semantics, but has wide ranging implications to the ecology of the language. The issue at hand here is

not phonological, a discrepancy in vowel length interpretation or semantics, but rather the interaction of lexical, grammatical, social, and environmental factors in the fieldwork situation. In the case of Paalu Park, the etymology of the name – the diachronic aspect – and its use – the synchronic aspect – and its relationship to the place of Norfolk Island will not necessarily give us an idea of (i) the reliability of variant pronunciations of the name, and (ii) the possibility of arriving at a reliable and general inventory of Norfolk phonology across informants and across time. The lack of any conclusive statement concerning Norfolk phonology is not necessarily a limitation of the available analytical tools, or appropriate fieldwork methods, but rather an acknowledgment of the complicated nature of the linguistic ecology and social history of Norfolk Island. Structural and grammatical analyses of language often will not help us in understanding the dynamic nature of the ecology within which a specific language exists.

The most reliable and effective data in terms of descriptive ability often arise out of the fieldworker's ability to key into the workings of the system. Traditionally, these informal aspects of the intricate elements of language in use have been shunned as not being central to linguistics or language description. An ecological approach to collecting linguistic data measures these situations and findings as paramount to gauging how (the) language is used in an ecology and the descriptive power and ability a language and a people possess to describe and talk about their surroundings. Working with the community in such natural and social environments helps the linguist ascertain the extent of linguistic vitality and how the language is actually used day to day. This is done in consultation with community members through interviews and by creating and maintaining social networks over long periods of time and continued engagement in the field. Indirect strategies such as informal public meetings to discuss language issues and placename locations have proven valuable on Norfolk Island. In the elicitation of Paalu Park I was engaged in informal dealings with a respected member of the community based on an invitation for tea, discussion, and a tour of his garden. It was in this less formal element of our interview that I obtained some important ethnobotanical knowledge about plants and characteristics of types of beans and other vegetables.

Follow up letters, continued contact, and requests for information are vital post-fieldwork communication and pre-fieldwork planning. Language documentation is a process involving academics, community members, and interested others which can only be undertaken with the combined efforts of all these parties. Blitzkreig or speedy and impatient language based impositions and data collection techniques can create havoc in small and sensitive communities causing harm to the linguistic confidence of the population that can take many years to remediate. Making people feel helpful and appreciated for their efforts, financially or in other

ways, is a key factor in creating friendships that enable further communication of information and experiences. Although Paalu Park is an esoteric and lesser known placename, my informant had no qualms in asserting its location, etymology, and importance to the culture of where he lives on the island. He was more than happy to receive me again on a subsequent visit.

Having technologies such as sound recorders and video cameras does not necessarily mean they should be used. Perceiving and being sensitive to the feelings of informants and interviewees is vital in dealing with a respective community over sustained and continued periods and often modern advancements in language documentation technology can be overwhelming and frightening, particularly to older people who possess large amounts of linguistic knowledge. The use of the simple notebook and camera when eliciting Paalu Park enabled a free flow of discussion and information transfer which was appreciated by my informant.

In response to the initial questions: the field linguist's research methodology informs theory by highlighting essential elements important to linguistic, social, and environmental interaction. By being inclusive in data gathering and investigation, the ecolinguist implicates and involves people, situations, and levels of linguistic analysis in ascertaining the sense, meaning, and placement of historical and current language use. In such situations the field linguist is the primary and essential element in collecting and precipitating data – without field linguists from outside the respective language community, much of the language documentation in the world would not occur. Linguistic data is personalised, motivated, and must have has some result in mind which should be of benefit to the community and to academia in terms of theory creation. The linguistic anomaly of Norfolk, which is yet to be adequately described and classified, can offer much. Norfolk Island lends itself greatly to demonstrating how linguists document a particularistic case of singularity in language evolution and uniqueness in its surroundings connected to a particular environment. Field linguists must be aware of the perils of data reliability, the humour of informants, and cross-referencing with any available written sources to check the reliability of elicited data.

5.   The ethnographic method versus an ecolinguistic fieldwork methodology

A reasonable question would be to query in what ways an ecolinguistic fieldwork methodology differs from any ethnographic, ethnolinguistic, sociolinguistic, or anthropological linguistic approach. While I have used the ethnographic method of participant observation as outlined by Labov (1966) and Saville-Troike (2003)

to operationalise aspects of ecolinguistic theory into action on Norfolk Island, there are key differences between the ethnographic method and an ecolinguistic fieldwork methodology.

As a method for collecting data, ethnography focuses on speech acts and communication in action. While the ethnographic method can incorporate diachronic archival data dealing with sociological components of language in use and context, it is primarily concerned with collecting and analysing synchronic speech in action. As a result, focusing on 'language in context' and fixing certain predetermined parameters to be observed when collecting data can be considered reductionistic.

The ethnographic method can become simultaneously too vague and too specific. For example, it is often not clear where the context of language in use ends. This method also does not consider the many variables in linguistic, social, and ecological interaction that go beyond what is observable in speech acts in the communicative setting and language in context. On the other hand, ecolinguistics uses tools common to ethnographic data collection, but extends the analysis of these data by considering parameters not commonly present in an ethnographic analysis. Because the primary concern with ecolinguistics is with interconnections and relationships, and not categories or classification, the ecolinguistic method helps select fields and topics of inquiry that are convenient and practical for analysis. Like the study of ecology, ecolinguistics cannot incorporate all parameters for analysis. Ecolinguistics selects those relationships which illustrate key patterns for describing the linguistic ecology. For example, the consideration of the feature of vowel length in a single placename within an ecolinguistic fieldwork methodology is related to more than just the people who know this name and who speak Norfolk. The social meaning of this toponym, the processes of history associated with how it and other toponyms came about, and the inevitability of toponyms as ecological artefacts, and their possible variant pronunciations that can be lost over time are also considered.

Ecolinguistics asserts that because each ecology is different, similar and different processes and patterns of collecting data and observing social and ecological connections can be observed in their real-life context. This approach does not impose any predetermined rules or guidelines for what data should be collected or how it should be analysed. The inductive nature of collecting and analysing data from an ecolinguistic perspective considers synchronic language in use and structural analyses as well as archival sources, deeper ethnohistory, and the linguistic effect of the intricacies of environmental factors, e.g. isolation, language contact, and interaction between different ways of thinking and acting. By combining synchronic, diachronic, and environmental history considerations into a structural linguistic analysis, ecolinguistics is a strong method for observing similarities and

differences between the form and function of language in social and ecological context. Because each ecology is different but at the same time similar, each ecology must be treated differently. What may happen in one ecology linguistically and toponymically may not happen in a different ecology.

6.   Implications

To my knowledge, such methodological outlines, i.e. how one should conduct sensitive and responsible fieldwork within the framework of ecolinguistics, have not been explicitly stated in the ecolinguistic canon. Evidence of such methodologies exists in Maffi (2001) and Mühlhäusler (2003b), but producing a synthesis-cum-ecolinguistic fieldwork manual still remains (see Fill and Penz's (2017) *The Routledge Handbook of Ecolinguistics* for some more recent ideas about ecolinguistic theory and methods). In addition, there are numerous approaches to anthropology, ethnoclassification, language documentation, and linguistic typology which mirror many ecolinguistic assumptions and use ecolinguistic methods but are not labelled ecolinguistics. It must certainly be in the knowledge range of such ecologically concerned linguists to be aware of and draw on efforts by researchers doing similar work even if not necessarily engaged in *doing ecolinguistics*.

On a deeper level, I have questioned the utility of ecolinguistics and its ability to make actual change in the world through observing a real-life situation of language endangerment and documentation. The two major aspects of ecolinguistics – (1) the language of ecology, i.e. environmental discourse analysis, and (2) the ecology of language, i.e. observing interactions between specific languages and specific ecologies – have existed within the fields of linguistics, environmentalism, and the humanities for more than three decades. So far, these have not lived up to their own expectations of creating a revolution in how linguists do linguistics. The conceptual evolution and theoretical rigour which any new discipline requires in order to meet the needs of its proponents and practitioners have with ecolinguistics witnessed a world gradually engulfed and engaged in talking about environmental issues rather than doing anything about rectifying them. This has made it extremely easy for ecolinguists to perceive themselves as doing better or more holistic linguistics than others engaged in linguistic science, simply for the reason that ecolinguists are open to the possibility of considering and analysing environmental issues and the ability of humans to be in linguistic consonance within an ecology. This does, however, require and demand that the eco-aware linguist is not only a good and sound researcher, but also a good communicator, for communication and dealing with humans in their own environment or *oikos* (home) is what participatory-action research must involve.

Greenspeak, greenspeaking, and the inability of language to keep up with technological, social, and environmental change (Harré, Brockmeier, and Mühlhäusler 1999) place an even greater demand on theoreticians of linguistics to put forward new ways of interpreting and theorising about the world. Other approaches, for example, Garner (2004), Alexander (2009), and Döring and Nerlich (2005), have addressed this already known gap between language and the world, but such approaches do not provide any palpable theoretical leaps forward by which academia, science, and interested stakeholders can navigate the tricky aspects of modern living which face us today. Rather than merely observing and bowing to the hegemony of communication outlets, such as the media and consumer culture which are so prevalent in modern milieus, ecolinguist(ic)s purport(s) to engage actively in and suggest new ways of doing linguistic research and understanding relationships involving between speaking, writing, and the world. This has been my major argument: that through intensive and rigorous fieldwork in accordance with a clear and focussed ecolinguistic fieldwork methodology, major inroads can be achieved into the practical task of language documentation. Such work is of importance to the concerned community, in parallel with theory creation, based on effective field methods for use in future ecolinguistic ventures, which is of importance and benefit to linguistics in general.

In any linguistic analysis, some aspects of language and its ecology are more salient than others. The Paalu Park example accentuates the particularistic nature of Norfolk Island and the relationships people and the Norfolk lexicon share with the island. Doing ecolinguistic fieldwork on Norfolk Island involves understanding the people, understanding the Norfolk language and its intricacies, and getting a feeling for the workings of the language community. Understanding the sociolinguistic tapestry of the place and how the Norfolk language is deeply related to elements of environmental management and description is an integral element of the process of documenting the language. I contend that Norfolk Island provides a useful and significant testing ground for the formulation and assessment of a general yet comprehensive ecolinguistic theory and methodology.

Acknowledgements

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