

on their work, and before the day was out, many employers simply sent the staff home. Everybody had their own little story, which they gradually pieced together into a larger narrative. One of my coworkers, Elizabeth, had been apartment hunting with her husband. They were standing on the street looking at a building when it suddenly started to rock back and forth. Andrea, from my office, had been at the supermarket on her way home from work when the bottles started to fall off the shelves. Some of them burst open when they hit the floor, and she found the noise strange and unsettling. Everyone ran into the parking lot, where the street lights slowly waved around.

People old enough to remember the quake of 1974 compared the two. The earlier one had lasted half a minute, and waves were short and jerky. This one lasted much longer, for two minutes, but the waves were longer. The earth moved gently this time, like a rolling sea. If it had lasted for two minutes with the intensity of 1974, Lima would be in ruins, they said.

For Lima the quake was a near disaster. It was like a near-death experience, like almost getting hit by a car, or almost stumbling off a cliff, except this was collective, the way everyone remembered where they were when Elvis died. For five or six days most conversations seemed to start with “what were you doing during the *temblor*?” Aftershocks went on for a week. Some people began to imagine tremors, or perhaps to feel movements that the others ignored, until it was not always clear which shocks were real. It took Lima about a week to talk out the quake, and to go back to its normal routine. There was little damage in the city of Lima. The Ministry of Labor cracked and may be torn down, but most buildings are fine. But it was a close call and everyone knew it. This could have been the big one.

Please send any comments, suggestions, ideas, including photos for future columns to Hortensia Caballero-Arias, Centro de Antropología, IVIC, Carretera Panamericana Km 11, Caracas 1020-A, Apartado Postal 21827, Venezuela; hcaballe@ivic.ve.

Society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists

DAVID L R HOUSTON, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Intro, or Who Reads this Stuff Anyway?

Last month I introduced three titles in a look at books with an eye toward how each can provide a spark and do more than act as a conduit for a better mark. This month, I want to look at ethnographic writing, a staple of our profession. Although scholarly intent tries to communicate detail about persons and places, it is often far removed from the real, lived experiences of students. Undergraduates rarely have any fieldwork exposure, a process undeniably alien to them. Can ethnographic accounts engage

students, convey knowledge about the subject and draw the student closer to their own individual experience?

Shamans of the Foye Tree: Gender, Power and Healing Among the Chilean Mapuche by Ana Mariella Bacigalupo is considered here. The author is clear at the outset that this is an “experiential” process. She is a native of Peru, later attending school in Chile, finally becoming a nationalized Chilean citizen.

The book begins with an account of the author’s own experiences with her subjects. Several chapters examine the gender aspects of *machi* (shamans in Mapuche society) identity. Two chapters discuss the historical and present-day relationship of the *machi* to colonialism and modern Chile. The next several chapters consider male and female identities and how these intersect with the *machi* and their reactions to these identities. A concluding chapter wraps up the book nicely.

Early in the text, Bacigalupo states that “Chilean national discourses construe *machi* as sexual deviants who voluntarily engage in gender crossing.” The *machi*, once revered as an integral part of a social structure, are now outsiders—deviants—defined not by their innate abilities to cross boundaries but rather by appearance. Here is an opportunity to coerce connections to our students lives: how are members of our own social aggregate similarly (re)constructed? Might this include you or people you know?

The author then states that “The Chilean state stigmatizes *machi* as witches and sexual deviants regardless of the sexual acts they perform, and it constructs them as exotic folk practitioners in spite of their hybrid healing practices.” Stigmatizing by the state is a timeworn process, which may marginalize according to a particular political need. Are you as a student stigmatized for being yourself?

In the relationship of the *machi* to present-day Chile, “Female *machi* and male *longko*, conversely, have become symbols of tradition.” Here the acceptable notion of female sexuality (buried in the association with healing and land care) and an ideal of male identity (*longko* is the community chief) are enshrined as unassailable tradition. In other words, the state disallows any notions of feminized or “receptive” men, as well as any notions of “male” or warrior women. How do individual students deal with their own gender issues? The author continues: “By fossilizing the actions of *machi* and *longko* in a folkloric past, nationalist discourses erase contemporary realities of exploitation and domination.” Although the US today does this to Native Americans, it is equally effective against *any* marginalized group. Rendering the past through a rarified lens—folklorizing it—makes managing the present easier. Students will note figures from past US history—actors, scientists, singers or politicians who may have transgressed boundaries—are “re-engineered” to more neatly fit acceptability and preclude denigration of larger social and political issues.

Concluding the book, she states that “*machi*’s gendered identities and practices can be experi-

enced and interpreted endlessly along different paths and for different purposes that simultaneously draw people together and draw them apart.” This book provides a window into other lives through the experience of the author in capturing the words and statements of those studied. We can easily draw parallels to the lives, paradoxes and contradictions of those with whom our primary audience interacts. We so easily marginalize others as deviants through a wide range of informational systems (social intercourse, Internet and communications technologies, printed media, and movies). What better way to build a dialog than to provide a kind of “parallel universe” effect that allows the reader to grasp their own limitations about the ways in which they too might be part of a larger problem? Such a dialog can be public—in a classroom in a lecture, in a casual conversation—as well as private and internal.

Join us. SOLGA wants you! Visit www.solga.org—news, mentors, listserv and more. Please send any comments, suggestions, ideas for new columns or just say “hi” to David Houston (dlrh-an@uvm.edu).

Society for Linguistic Anthropology

JAMES STANLAW AND MARK PETERSON,
CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

A Linguistic Mistake from the Internet

By James Stanlaw

Amidst all the emails I have received lately—those promising me a fortune in Nigeria, cheap drugs from Canada, or (here at home) ways to improve my sagging love life or increase inadequate parts of my body—the first paragraph in Table 1 caught my eye (literally).

As with most people on seeing this text for the first time, I was amazed that I could read it as easily as if it were the front page of the *New York Times*. Although this was passed on as just one more cute time waster from the Internet, two questions immediately came to mind. First, where did this idea come from, and second, is it true? It turns out that the answers to both are surprising.

This paragraph, or some things like it, apparently first hit cyberspace in Sept 2003 (sometimes with the variation that the cited research was from Cambridge U). The content was even mentioned on the listserv LINGLIST. The discussion is still going strong in the blogoverse; if you Google in “Elingsh Uinervtisy” there are more than a half a million hits. But the supposed research referred to is, at best, apocryphal. Nonetheless, laypersons—especially people like me who cannot spell their own names—and even psychologists and reading educators perpetuate the idea. Even as late as last year some scholars have used this example to discredit the “alphabetic principle” (or “phonics”) of teach-

TABLE 1

A Linguistic Mystery from the Internet

Accordng to rscheearch at an Elngsh Uinervtisy, it deosn't mttar in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoentn thng is taht the frst and lsat ltteer be at the rghit plcae. The rset can be a toatl mses and you can stll raed it wouthit porbelm. Ths is bcuseae the huamn mnid deos not raed evrey lteer by istlef, but the wrod as a wlohe.

Translation

According to research at an English University, it doesn't matter in what order the letters in a word are, the only important thing is that the first and last letter be at the right place. The rest can be a total mess and you can still read it without problem. This is because the human mind does not read every letter by itself but the word as a whole.

ing reading, and argue for a "whole language" contextual approach (see www.illinoisloop.org/phonicsfraud.html).

Interestingly, Spanish and French versions appeared shortly after, eliciting similar responses. Matt Davis, (really!) on the Research Staff of the Speech and Language Group at Cambridge's Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit posted a dozen other languages displaying this phenomenon, including Albanian, Hungarian, Indonesian and Russian (www.mrc-cbu.cam.ac.uk/~mattd.Cambridge).

Davis claims that the origin of this thread likely was inspired by a letter Graham Rawlinson wrote to the *New Scientist* in 1999 about his 1976 PhD dissertation saying that randomized letters in the middle of words have little effect on the ability of skilled readers to interpret prose. However, Davis says that in its extreme version, this claim is clearly wrong. For example, how could we disambiguate "SLAT" and "SALT" if only initial and final letters were important? Davis suggests that this text was particularly easy to read for several reasons: most small function words (eg, "at," "the") stay the same, the text is easily predictable, and words were often scrambled by the simple transpositions of adjacent letters.

However, this very same example was explored by Richard Shillcock and Padraic Monaghan in their article "Reading, Sublexical Units and Scrambled Words: Capturing the Human Data" in the book *Connectionist Models of Cognition, Perception, and Emotion II* (edited by H Bowman and C Labiouse, Singapore: World Scientific, 2004). They agree that more information is needed than merely the first and last letters—otherwise "CARTHORSE" and "ORCHESTRA" would be perennially confused—but it is not clear that the brain "requires or habitually uses all of the letter-order information that is available when the word is read" (p 244). And in contrast to "look-see" reading advocates, they believe the literature tells us that words are read in terms of letters, not some overall "word shape." Instead, they claim that a word must be somehow differentiated from the other words

in the lexicon. The brain does this by crudely dividing a word into two "slots." In the case of "CARTHORSE" above, then, all that is needed, is to know that A, R and T fall in the first half of the word, and O, R, S and E in the second, the precise order within each half being not required. The reason why words are bifurcated in this way is because of the two hemispheres of the brain. "The human fovea is precisely vertically split, so that when a word is fixated, the part of the word to the left of fixation is initially projected to the right hemisphere, and the part of the word to the right of fixation is initially projected to the left hemisphere" (p 247). Thus, just knowing which letters should go in which half of the word provides a very substantial clue to the word's identity.

Perhaps this is another example, as Sapir used to say, of language being *just* complicated enough, but no more so. Otherwise, how could we know—using a sentence cited by Davis—that "*The sherpas had ponits and patles*" really is "*The sherpas had pintos and plates*" ... or is it "*The seraphs had points and pleats*"?

Please send your comments, contributions, news and announcements to SLA contributing editors Jim Stanlaw (stanlaw@ilstu.edu) or Mark Peterson (petersm2@muohio.edu).

Society for Medical Anthropology

KATHLEEN RAGSDALE, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

How a Child-Centered Health & Welfare Grassroots Organization Came into Being

By Kathleen Ragsdale

The November SMA column addressed the plight of the world's children, many of whom are forcibly conscripted into violent conflicts or sexual trafficking, or become abandoned "street children" or refugees. The column highlighted the SMA policy statement prepared by the Council on Infant and Child Health & Welfare (CICH), which discussed US failure to ratify the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Indeed, among 194 countries, only the US and Somalia have failed to ratify the convention. The CICH policy statement asked the compelling question, "Can we do anything to change the situation?" This question resonated with me at a very personal level, as I have been seeking out volunteer opportunities after moving to Starkville, Mississippi, this summer to join the faculty of Mississippi State University.

In September, I learned about a community-based organization in Starkville called "52 MOMS (Mothers on a Mission to Serve)." This group is Alison Buehler's grassroots answer to the CICH question, "can we do anything to change the situation?" As Buehler told me recently, "The idea for 52 MOMS first started when several friends and I saw the film, *Invisible Children*, about

child soldiers in Uganda. Initially, we joined with a group of Starkville High School students to raise money to rebuild a school in Uganda. After this project was completed, our group wanted to do more for the world's children. We thought, 'if you could get just 52 people to cover a child-centered project for one week each, it would be covered for a whole year'—and that become the impetus for 52 MOMS." As Buehler makes clear, " 'mom' is conceptualized loosely within 52 MOMS, as it includes all individuals who want to volunteer on child-centered projects in their communities."

Buehler's friends contacted others in their social networks and organized a larger meeting of like-minded individuals. The group chose a community-based project to benefit underserved children in northeastern Mississippi. As a result, 52 MOMS currently works with the Sally Kate Winters Memorial Children's Home for abused and neglected children in West Point, Mississippi, that, eventually, they want to expand the scope of 52 MOMS to work on child-centered projects across Mississippi, the US and abroad. Known locally as the Sally Kate Shelter, the home serves 13 counties and provides emergency shelter for children newborn–17 years of age who are experiencing a family crisis, abuse, neglect or who may be in danger of exploitation. Buehler says that, "The idea was to spend as much of your week as you could with the children at the Sally Kate Shelter; to take one week away from your children to hold the world's children."

According to Buehler, the idea behind 52 MOMS is that:

"[C]hildren are a unifying cause. You don't have to share the same religion, ethnicity, politics or culture to value all children's needs for food, love, shelter and access to health care, and a healthy environment. We decided that we wanted to center 52 MOMS mission around 'child honoring'—the concept that the needs of all children are important and should dictate our priorities. We believe this concept can unify people across cultures, religions, political affiliations, gender and race/ethnicity. If we can agree that all children's needs are important, we can find a lot in common ..."

This commonality could go a long way toward improving children's health and welfare. As a grassroots organization, 52 MOMS originally met in the homes of its members, but has attracted so many new members that they will need a larger venue. At each meeting, members of 52 MOMS hear about ongoing work at the Sally Kate Shelter as well as tackle one child-centered issue, such as childhood asthma, improved childcare or children who are victims of war.

As a new member of 52 MOMS, I will begin my volunteer work at the Sally Kate Shelter in October. I would like to extend an invitation to other SMA members involved in a health-related grassroots organization to share their experiences, insights, successes—and, yes, even their failures—in upcoming SMA columns.