

### The Power of Face-to-Face

Much of what we do as human beings centers on social interaction. Diminished communications because of an absence of closeness has multiple implications. There is a vital strength in the face-to-face encounter, be it with family, friend or even foe. The experience of direct, personal encounter is often an exercise in subtlety: facial expressions, shifts in tone, body language. It is telling that despite a vast electronic communications medium that would seem to offer more opportunities for contact, the authors find this growing distance. It begs the question: might this same distance erode the kind of solidarity, commitment and dedication to a cause that is a hallmark of activism?

### The Personal and the Political

Let's get personal. If identity development is a growing part of how humanity fashions itself, then "activism" may be less a matter of how a large group foment change than about how small, even tiny, incremental decisions do the same thing. For those self-identifying far outside the usual margins of sexual or gender identification—those labeled gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans- or other value and action systems of sexual alterity—activism can sometimes boil down to tiny incremental choices, often made from moment to moment as the individual decides on how they might "fit" into a particular situation.

One of my informants, whose struggles with sexual identity issues have occupied almost a quarter of her life, told me she faces daily choices at work and home about how much of her true self she can safely "reveal" to others. "I often feel I have to wear a certain piece of clothing or a particular pair of shoes simply because they fit the stereotype of who my co-workers expect me to be" she told me. On the occasions when she decides to "brave it," and present her true self to others in the course of a day, she is effectively an activist. "Being out is scary," she says. "There really is no community of persons I can attach to and through that community find solidarity and comfort, but I think challenging assumptions is important." Her family is largely unaware of her struggle. Is she an activist? I tend to think so.

There is the larger problem of how we study personal decisions and, so, activism as it might be today. Eric Rofes blessed us, no matter what our perspective on him or his work might have been. Agree or disagree, his kind of activism was observable, tangible. It made sense. Studying that sort of activism meant (and to some degree may still mean) the observation and ethnographic accounting of a coterie of individuals. But when we attempt to gather meaningful data about personal decisions as a form of activism, ethnographic encounter may fall short. We must do more.

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## Society for Linguistic Anthropology

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### The DoBeS Program in Action: A Report from Argentina

The *Dokumentation Bedrohter Sprachen* (DoBeS, or Documentation of Endangered Languages) Programme was started in 2000 by the Volkswagen Foundation. An archive of data from some 30 teams is housed at the Max Plank Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen in the Netherlands. The goals of the project are to help maintain or revitalize languages on the verge of extinction, as well as to be a clearinghouse of information on these largely unknown languages. This month we have a report on one of these projects by Lucía Golluscio and Silvia Hirsch.

### The Chaco Languages Project of Argentina

By Lucía Golluscio (*U Buenos Aires*) and Silvia Hirsch (*Chacos Language Project*)

The indigenous languages spoken in Argentina stand among the least known and studied of South America. In 2002 we received funding to document four endangered languages of the Chaco region of Argentina in their ethnographic context. The objective was to develop integrated, computerized and digitalized texts, lexicographic and ethnographic databases along with documentary videos for the DoBeS project of endangered languages. Documentation was carried out by a team of linguists, anthropologists and media experts. The overall project was coordinated by us with the department of linguistics at the Max Planck Institute in Leipzig, and Bernard Comrie was general advisor.

It was imperative to undertake this project because of the subaltern position of local aboriginal peoples, the intense and continuous pressure from Spanish, and the increasing influence of the media, among other factors, that have accelerated the risk to these indigenous peoples and their languages.

The languages selected for this research project belong to four different linguistic families. These include Mocoví (Guaycuru), Tapiete (Tupi-Guarani), Vilela (the last Lule-Vilela language) and Wichí (Mataco). In the case of Mocoví, we focused on the most endangered or least documented varieties: the Mocoví spoken in Santa Fe. Regarding Wichí, the study centered on the least documented: those of the Teuco River (Formosa and Chaco). The major criterion behind this selection was the degree of urgency for which a language calls for documentation. These factors have been taken into account: 1) language endangerment, 2) amount and type of extant documentation, 3) speakers' commitment to the future of their language, and 4) the cultural role attributed to it.

The speakers of the languages show extremes in language attitudes, which has been challenging for our research. For Mocoví, Tapiete and Wichí, these languages have been important markers of ethnic identity and the revitalization, and use of, these native languages has been welcomed by the community. The study of these cultures at school is also one of the demands advanced by the members of the communities. In these cases, the implementation of bilingual programs is necessary, and certain practical questions are critical (such as the need for adequate teaching materials, linguistically accurate texts, and lexicographic and ethnographic databases). In these situations, a project such as ours can offer significant input.

In contrast, the surviving Vilela people seem to wish to "forget" their origins. They hide their identity among the Toba, Mocoví and Creole populations with whom they live. They seem to have made explicit social decisions towards language and culture shift.

Our goals have been to collect, process and archive linguistic, cultural and historical data and to elaborate and update phonological and grammatical sketches of the selected languages. We also focused on providing linguistic training for native speakers in phonetic, as well as orthographic, transcription, as well as text collection. Furthermore, we developed pedagogical and ethnographic materials in the languages studied in order to support literacy and bilingual education programs carried out at some of the indigenous schools. In this case, our native assistants actively participated in these developments.

Finally, we should mention that the interdisciplinary component of our project was one of its main characteristics. Linguists worked together with anthropologists, not only in the data gathering process, but also in developing appropriate methodology for research. Our project also assumed local participation. In other words, we strongly believe that this project would succeed if and only if it was meaningful for the aboriginal peoples involved: that is, if they became activists in the enterprise and felt fully committed to the goals of the project, rather than being mere objects of study. Thus, our project promoted the participation of indigenous community members at different stages of the documentation process, as linguistic and cultural consultants, fieldworkers and participants in workshops.

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