

On communicative competence...in the field

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Abstract

For many linguistic anthropologists, fieldwork entails working with and in a language or languages we do not master. However, little has been written on field language communicative competence, the development thereof, or the influence it has on the research questions we ask and how we answer them. I describe ways in which I addressed research challenges posed by limited field language competence, developed communicative competence while engaged in research, and made the two endeavors mutually enriching. I call for further discussion of field language communicative competence and our repertoire of practices for managing and improving limited field language while in the field.

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1. Field language communicative competence

For many scholars of language and linguistic behavior, fieldwork entails working with and in a language or languages we do not master. Among those linguistic fieldworkers who are solely or primarily interested in grammar, communicative competence – the ability to comprehend and produce speech in real situations in ways that are effective and appropriate in relation to the context (Hymes, 1972) – in the field language(s) is esteemed but not considered fundamental to research. It is neither unusual nor unacceptable for a linguist to enter and leave the field with limited competence, which may be due to factors such as the lack of materials and opportunities for study prior to entering the field (Everett, 2001), issues of social inappropriateness of field language use by the researcher (Mufwene, 1993), or a practical need to focus one's learning energies on a local lingua franca (Newman and Ratliff, 2001).

Several of the contributors to Newman and Ratliff's (2001) volume *Linguistic Fieldwork* discuss the value of learning the language under study. Dimmendaal (2001) and Dorian (2001) argue that the development of field language competence is essential for listening to language use in real-life contexts. Gil (2001) stresses its importance for developing intuitions about the language and its use. Everett observes that learning the language is a way of demonstrating commitment to and becoming integrated into the community. In their introduction, the editors note that '[i]t no doubt would seem odd to an anthropologist that this is even worth mentioning, since the anthropological tradition – or at least ideal (Burling, 1984) – holds that fieldwork should be carried out in

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a native language' (pp. 4–5). Indeed, Boas and Malinowski both stressed the importance of learning the community language(s), and the ideal of the fieldworker who is or becomes communicatively competent in the field language(s) has been with us ever since.

This ideal is part of what Borchgrevink (2003) calls the 'fieldwork mystique', the idea that the anthropologist obtains true and deep insights into another society through extensive and intensive observation of and participation in the daily lives of its members (p. 96).¹ Despite – or perhaps because of – its centrality to anthropological practice and authority, field language competence is little discussed in ethnographies and fieldwork methods texts² (Borchgrevink, 2003). Borchgrevink argues that one reason for this silence is that to raise the issue would undercut the authority of the anthropologist:

'If anthropologists should be unable to learn something as public as the language of the people they study, how could they ever claim to be able to understand the innermost meanings that people attach to things and events, or to discover the hidden mechanisms that make society function, or the secrets hidden from outsiders and casual observers? Clearly anthropology's claim to understanding other people and their lives, societies and cultures, could be convincing only if it were based upon mastery of the local language' (p. 96).

In his textbook *Linguistic Anthropology*, Duranti (1997) observes that '[r]ealistically speaking, it is often difficult for a researcher to be already fluent in the local language before arriving at the field site. This means that the most common situation is...the ethnographer knows something about the language...but is not a fluent (or even a minimally functional) speaker' (1997, p. 110). However, '[t]here is no question that fieldworkers should try their best to become familiar with the language(s) used by the people they study' (1997, p. 110). Duranti gives three reasons for this. For one, the fieldworker's efforts to learn 'symbolize a commitment, a respect and appreciation for the cultural heritage of the people they study' (1997, p. 111). Moreover, a lack of field language competence forces fieldworkers to rely too heavily on members of the community who speak a language the fieldworker speaks. While such bilingual speakers can be a tremendous resource to the fieldworker, in communities where bilingualism is not the norm they are 'probably not the most typical members of the community' (1997, p. 112). According to Duranti, the most important reason to learn the field language is 'for understanding what is going on'; that is, for following what community members say to one another and how they say it (1997, p. 110).

Because linguistic anthropologists study 'language as a cultural resource, speaking as a cultural practice' (Duranti, 1997, p. 2), the ideal of the communicatively competent fieldworker may be particularly influential within our ranks. How can we presume to understand how natives use their language(s) to accomplish expressive and social goals and to interpret the linguistic behavior of others if we are unable to do so ourselves? Thus, for linguistic anthropologists who are not native or near-native speakers of the language(s) of the communities in which we conduct our research, our communicative competence in the field language(s) can be a delicate issue. Whether we are just beginning to work in a language that is not our own or we work in a community where multiple codes are in contact and flux, many of us feel that our field language competence is not all it ought to be (cf. Tonkin, 1984). Most of us report little on our own skills or how we developed them, despite the fact that our field language competence has strong bearing on the research questions we ask and how we answer them.

My goal in this article is to begin a more open and detailed discussion of how our field language communicative competence shapes and is shaped by our research. I discuss my research in two densely multilingual communities in northern Cameroon and how my field language competence affected my selection of commu-

¹ Mead (1939) and Lowie (1940) debated the degree of field language competence that was necessary. Mead argued that a very minimal grasp of the language was sufficient for the anthropologist to use it as a 'fieldwork tool', while Lowie argued that a far higher level of competence was necessary for participation in the lives of the people under study.

² Borchgrevink (2003) surveyed 20 recent anthropological monographs and found the following: 'Only five of them were explicit in stating the author's level of language proficiency (two claiming fluency, one a fair level, and two little language knowledge). From the texts, a further five anthropologists could be inferred to have a fair to excellent command of the language in question. For the remaining 10, no conclusions could be drawn, although the impression conveyed was that many of them had at least a fair command of the field language. None of the works included any discussion of the impact that language proficiency had had on the fieldwork or of the methodological implications of bi- or multilingual field settings (which would seem to involve at least 15 of the works)' (p. 98).

nities and topics of study, as well as my collection and analysis of data. Despite formal language training in two community languages and two years of immersion as a Peace Corps Volunteer (1992–1994), I confronted problems as an interviewer, a producer and interpreter of transcripts, and an observer of and participant in community life. I describe the ways in which I attempted to address these problems, develop communicative competence while engaged in research, and make the two endeavors mutually enriching. I conclude by reflecting on the nature of field language communicative competence and calling for further discussion in order to expand our repertoire of practices for documenting and analyzing cultural/linguistic practices at the same time that we ourselves are learning them.

2. Multilingualism in the mountains

The development of communicative competence has always been at the heart of my research. I work within the language socialization paradigm, studying how children are socialized *into* language and socialized *through* language through participation in recurrent interactions with more expert members of the community (Ochs and Schieffelin, 1984; Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986). Language socialization researchers take an ethnographic and holistic view of communicative competence and the practices through which it is developed. As Garrett and Baquedano-López (2002, p. 345) state, research in this paradigm is ‘concerned with all of the knowledge, practices, and orientations that one needs in order to function as – and, crucially, to be regarded by others as – a competent member of (or participant in) a particular community or communities’.

My own experiences as a cultural/linguistic novice in West Africa have shaped me as a researcher from the very beginning, my research growing out of questions that arose during my service in the Peace Corps. For 2 years I worked in community health and development in the northern Mandara Mountains, a region with a long history of societal and individual multilingualism. In my work area, 15 Central Chadic languages were spoken, in addition to Fulfulde, Hausa, Kanuri, French, English, and Arabic (Dieu et al., 1983). Before arriving in Cameroon, I was highly proficient in French thanks to study abroad in Togo and ten years of classroom study. During my three months of in-country training, I received instruction in Fulfulde. Once at post I was tutored for a few months in Wandala, the language of the dominant group in the region and the local lingua franca, and studied some on my own using descriptive linguistic work done by SIL linguists. A number of other languages were spoken in the communities where I worked, but I never learned much more than greeting sequences. Instead I relied on Fulfulde, Wandala, and – most of all – my many multilingual colleagues.

By the end of my first year at post, I found myself using as many as six or seven different languages in a day. My proficiency was very limited in Fulfulde and Wandala (I could manage simple conversations on familiar topics in both) and negligible in all the other local languages, but I was nonetheless impressed by my own linguistic virtuosity. The local population, however, was not. After a brief period during which people exclaimed over my ability to speak Wandala, my efforts were often mocked for being limited, imperfect, or simply incomprehensible. Villagers who had been initially charmed by my greetings chastised me for not progressing further in their languages. I was frustrated and hurt by these responses until I began to understand that multilingualism was the norm among a large part of the population and that I was not meeting local expectations. This was the seed of my Masters research. For my thesis, I returned to a village in which I had worked as a volunteer. There were approximately 1000 inhabitants, speakers of 14 languages among them. I wanted to know who learned second languages, how, when, and why.

I knew from my Peace Corps experience that my field language competence would restrict what I could do (particularly in a period of 3 months), and I tailored my research to my limited competence in several ways. First, I chose focal participants who had completed primary school. These French language learning success stories interested me for many reasons, but it was primarily a convenience sample: I could speak with these adolescents in a language in which I was highly competent (Moore, 2004). Second, I made extensive use of audio and video recording technology, capturing interviews, language proficiency assessments, and natural discourse on tape so that they could be transcribed, translated, and commented on by assistants (cf. Duranti, 1997). I knew from my health education work how much could be lost or misunderstood when working with interpreters, and back-translation of interviews helped me identify and address hitches. Third, I relied heavily on multilingual research assistants in my collection and analysis of non-French and non-Fulfulde data. As a

volunteer I had worked with several community members who had developed skills in interpretation, transcription, and translation through training and work with researchers, missionaries, and development agencies. I was fortunate to be able to hire some of them to help with my research. And fourth, I focused on fairly broad patterns in marriage, residence, child socialization, communicative practice, and linguistic repertoire expansion, patterns with which I was already familiar from my work as a volunteer and my study of prior research conducted in the region (e.g., Breton and Maurette, 1993; de Colombel, 1986; Seignobos and Iyébi-Mandjek, 2000).

There were two distinct sociocultural groups in the Mandara Mountains: the socio-economically dominant Wandala and the traditionally mountain dwelling montagnards (Boutrais, 1984). I knew from my time as a volunteer that the two groups had very different linguistic profiles. The Wandala were largely monolingual, and competence in a second language was usually learned through schooling or trade and was considered a noteworthy achievement. The montagnards had a high level of multilingualism in terms of both proficiency and number of languages, most learned informally, and they regarded multilingual competence as normal and essential. During my fieldwork I began to realize that several features of montagnard social life worked together to reproduce and reinforce this norm of multilingualism. Exogamy created bilingual households and fostered early bilingualism. Loose supervision of children meant that they often played with children who spoke another language. Children routinely carried memorized messages in languages they did not yet command well or at all. And multilingual interaction was accepted and in many instances preferred.

The montagnards participants in my study expected to expand their linguistic repertoires throughout their lives. While they cited instrumental motivations for learning a language, simply being able to communicate with speakers of a language in their language was widely cited as a worthwhile goal in and of itself. The focal participants described and/or demonstrated several strategies associated with effective language learning, such as planning and rehearsing anticipated language tasks, identifying and focusing on specific difficulties they had (primarily in pronunciation and lexicon), and seeking private help from friends (for comprehensive reviews of second language learning strategy research, please see O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1989). Multilingual interaction they regarded not only as normal, but as an opportunity for active participation in second language conversations and a resource for learning new linguistic forms.

For my dissertation I would have liked to pursue research on the influence of montagnard norms and practices of multilingualism on their language learning. However, such research would have entailed very detailed linguistic analysis of the communicative and socialization practices of the community. My MA fieldwork had made clear that not only did I lack the necessary field language competence, I was not going to be able to make up for it. Too little basic descriptive work on the relevant languages had been completed. Other researchers were engaged in that work, employing many of the community members with whom I had worked. And the sociolinguistic complexity that made the region so fascinating made it at times overwhelming. I had my research assistants produce three-line transcripts: the top line was a transcription of the utterance; the middle line was a French translation; and the bottom line was for noting code switches, errors by the speaker, and anything else the transcriber found noteworthy (I abandoned a morpheme-by-morpheme line when that proved too difficult for my assistants). In analysis sessions, my assistants frequently argued amongst themselves over whether a word was Wandala or Wuzlam, whether a tone pattern or turn of phrase was native-like or not, whether a remark was critical or simply corrective, and I was in no position to judge. Such ambiguities were certainly interesting, but they also posed serious, perhaps insurmountable challenges for the kind of analysis I would have wanted to do.

So, for my doctoral fieldwork, I decided to work in another community with which I was familiar from my time in Peace Corps, one with a smaller linguistic repertoire, whose languages had been more extensively studied and in which I had greater competence. While I did not carry on with my research in the mountains, I carried with me to my next project several lessons from the montagnards about learning second languages. I learned some strategies that were particularly suited to informal language learning, such as planning and rehearsing, consciously turning overhearing into studying, and focusing on linguistic features that gave me trouble. I also learned to engage in multilingual discourse like the montagnards did, looking to learn new forms and practice familiar ones. Perhaps the most important lesson was not to be impressed with my own linguistic ability, but rather to continue pushing myself to greater communicative competence.

3. Learning languages by heart

My dissertation research examined how Fulbe children in Maroua, Cameroon were socialized into becoming competent users of three codes – Fulfulde (the vernacular, dominant in domestic settings), Arabic (dominant in Koranic schools), and French (dominant in public schools) – and three genres – Fulbe folktales, Koranic recitation, and French school dialogues. As with my Master's thesis, I returned to northern Cameroon in order to understand something I had wondered at as a volunteer. During my service I had lived just around the corner from a Koranic school and visited public schools often for my work. In both settings, the development of competence in a non-native language was fundamental to all other learning. Children in both types of school spent most of their time repeating second language speech that had been modeled by the teacher. The goal of these activities was verbatim memorization and error-free performance of a text, what is commonly referred to as rote learning.

I came to reframe rote learning as *guided repetition*, a complex and context-sensitive practice for teaching and learning that involves modeling by an expert, imitation of that model by a novice, followed by rehearsal and performance by the novice (Moore, 2006b; Rogoff et al., 2007). At each stage, the expert supervises the novice and may assist, evaluate, and correct her efforts. Guided repetition was believed by participants in both institutions to be the appropriate, effective, and right way to teach children not only second language knowledge and skills, but also preferred ways of being in the social worlds in which these languages are privileged. Guided repetition had also emerged as a new practice for socializing children into the telling of folktales (Moore, 2006a). Traditionally, children learned folktales by observing multiple performances by experts. In recent years, expert tellers had begun explicitly teaching folktales to children through a routine that closely resembles public and Koranic school interactions.

Folktale socialization interested me not only because of these changes, but also because Fulbe oral traditions have been argued by Noye (1971) to be a significant force for the maintenance of the conservative Diamare dialect of Fulfulde spoken in Maroua. He claims that folktales (along with riddles and tongue twisters) highlight and provide for practice of several features of conservative Fulfulde. I wanted to know if the telling and teaching of folktales provided children with more conservative linguistic models and corrective feedback than they received in other activity settings.

In northern Cameroon, where Fulfulde is the lingua franca, several varieties of the language are spoken. Linguists and Fulbe alike often conceive of these varieties as a continuum (Fagerli, 1997; Lacroix, 1962). At one end is the conservative *fulfulde luuginde* ('deep Fulfulde') and *fulfulde laamnde* ('clean, clear, or pure' Fulfulde). At the other end is a variety or a cluster of varieties characterized by French borrowings and simplification of the lexicon and the systems of noun class concord and verbal aspect, voice, and extension (Noss, 1991; Noye, 1971). These varieties have revealing names such as *fulfulde lekkol* ('school Fulfulde'), *fulfulde haabeere* ('pagan Fulfulde'), and *bilkiire* ('idiot language'). Somewhere in the middle of the continuum lies *fulfulde delemre* ('light Fulfulde'). When asked about this variety, participants in my research described it as the Fulfulde spoken by many young urban Fulbe, who had neither the rich vocabulary nor the skill in indirectness (such as the use of metaphor and proverbs and exploitation of the noun class system to avoid explicit reference) that distinguished 'deep' Fulfulde speakers.

As a Peace Corps volunteer, I had learned Fulfulde from non-native speakers and spoke it mostly with non-native speakers. A brief romance with a Fulbe gave my language skills a boost. As a graduate student, I studied Fulfulde on my own and briefly under the tutelage of Anneke Breedveld, a Dutch linguist who had studied the language in depth and spoke it well. When I arrived in Cameroon for dissertation research, I was knowledgeable of conservative Fulfulde and could follow the speech of native speakers fairly well, but I had difficulty following conversations that got very 'deep' and often felt the need to confirm my understanding of what had been said. I spoke *bilkiire* and tended to fall back on French when the going got tough.

While this form of communicative competence had served me well enough as a Peace Corps volunteer and in my MA fieldwork, it posed several problems for dissertation data collection. First, what effect would my Fulfulde have on the linguistic behavior of research participants? In my prior experience, Fulbe often accommodated me by simplifying their speech and code switching, and that was the last thing I wanted, since linguistic variation and syncretism were of interest to me. Second, how could I ask questions in ways that were appropriate and effective given my linguistic limitations? The Fulbe have a saying: Too many questions

spoiled paradise. My productive skills in pagan Fulfulde and my scholarly knowledge of ‘pure’ Fulfulde did not add up to the kind of communicative grace required to get the information I wanted without boring or aggravating participants. Third, how could I glean information from what was being said around me when I was not always secure in my own understandings? Comprehension checks tend to put a damper on spontaneous interaction. And fourth, how would my very non-native Fulfulde affect my relationships with Fulbe research participants? As the names indicate, the Fulbe do not think highly of non-native varieties or speakers thereof.

In order to minimize the first two problems, I left most of the talking with Fulbe participants to my research assistants Mayramu and Daada for the first several months. It would greatly surprise those who know me in English, French, or Dutch, to hear that I got quite good at keeping my mouth shut. My status was not that of by-stander or professional overhearer (cf. [Duranti 1997, p. 101](#)), for I actively participated in conversations during visits with families and Koranic teachers, but I kept my turns at talk brief and often used French. When necessary, my assistants elaborated, reformulated, and/or translated my utterances for the participants. When I looked confused, my assistants would reformulate what had been said in simpler Fulfulde or provide a quick French translation.

I was very fortunate to work with Mayramu and Daada. Both women came from villages where a more conservative Fulfulde was spoken but had lived in Maroua for several years. They were familiar with, interested in, and had (relatively) non-judgmental attitudes about different varieties of Fulfulde. Both were well educated by local standards, having read and written the Koran in its entirety and nearly completed secondary school. Daada was single and in her early 20s. Mayramu was married, the mother of three, and in her early 30s. Before beginning data collection, we spoke at length about the goals of my study and the linguistic forms, practices, and ideologies in which I was interested. Both developed an excellent understanding of my project. In addition, we discussed the specific questions and issues I wanted to address with participants before we visited them. These visit pre-briefings, combined with Mayramu and Daada’s global understanding of my project, enabled them to improvise gracefully and effectively in interview and video play-back sessions.

I hired Mayramu and Daada not only for their communicative competence in Fulfulde, but also for the background they shared with my research participants, and it quickly became clear how essential was the latter to the former. Both women drew heavily upon common experiences in interviews and video play-back sessions. Mayramu regularly embedded my questions about childrearing and schooling in accounts of incidents and concerns that arose in her own family. One particularly fruitful play-back session was kept on track by Daada when she and I visited a father of a focal child when he came home for Ramadan. He told us (in French) that he kept his family in Maroua while he worked in a neighboring country to prevent them from becoming *deracinés* (disconnected from their roots). However, he said, his children were nevertheless well on their way to being *deracinés*. This comment made his (non-French-speaking) wife bridle, and the discussion nearly ended there. Aware that I was very interested in beliefs about the (perceived) effects of urban life and public schooling on Fulbness, Daada skillfully kept the conversation going by telling of her own experience with rural relatives’ criticism of her modern city ways.

In addition to working with research assistants, I sought to overcome my language problems through technology (cf. [Duranti, 1997](#)). I made video recordings of natural interactions in homes and schools, as well as audio-recordings of interviews and play-back sessions with research participants. Permanent, electronic records of communicative interaction allowed me to explore language in its natural habitat but at my own pace and with support from people and books. My research assistants produced the first-pass transcripts of these recordings from an audio lift, while I did a second pass with the video, noting problems in transcription and questions I had. Then the three of us went over video and transcript together. *We all* made extensive use of prior works on Fulfulde ([Eguchi, 1986](#); [Noye, 1974](#); [Seydou, 1998](#); [Tourneux and Dairou, 1999](#)). The recordings made it possible to involve other community members in the production, translation, and annotation of transcripts, and play-back sessions with participants generated many insights into local ideologies of language and languages, child development, learning, and schooling ([Schieffelin, 1979](#)). I also benefited from the expertise of Fulfulde scholars Paul Eguchi and Guiseppa Parietti, who visited Maroua during my fieldwork and took an interest in my folktale data. Recordings and my interactions with assistants, participants, and other linguists that they afforded enabled me to notice and examine that which I might otherwise have missed, to comprehend that which I might otherwise have misunderstood.

I could not have done my study without recording machines and the methods they afford. However, it was neither practicable nor desirable to record every moment. So what about those times when the camera was not rolling? It was during participant observation that I was most acutely aware of my limited Fulfulde competence. Listening in was often difficult, the limitations of my Fulfulde competence compounded by the hubbub of multi-party interactions and children's play. Yet it yielded some of the most interesting data. I did not take notes and avoided side conversations with my assistants when visiting families and Koranic teachers because it would have been off-putting for participants. Instead, as soon as possible after a visit, I would debrief with my research assistant. I would ask her about things I (thought I) had heard/noticed and elicit her own observations. If we were at home, I took notes during these debriefings. If we were walking to our next appointment, I often used a small tape recorder (tucked discreetly under my shawl) to capture our discussion.

While these ways of managing limited competence made my research possible, they also made it possible for me to slack off on developing my communicative competence in Fulfulde. I had a number of excuses for not making more effort: the data collection schedule was grueling, I had chronic low-grade malaria, I was getting along fine as it was. My favorite rationale was that the Fulbe value reserve (Riesman, 1998), so my limited linguistic production was not just a research strategy, it was an important aspect of communicative competence. However, after a heart-to-heart with Mayramu and Daada and a visit with montagnard friends, I acknowledged that I needed to take action. My 'reserve' was inhibiting not only my development of competence in Fulfulde, but also the development of my relationships with focal participants.

In the months that followed I undertook several new measures to improve my language skills. Still concerned with 'dirtying' the Fulfulde data, I sought opportunities outside of my research to practice speaking. I chatted with people who were not involved in my study. I resumed formal instruction in Fulfulde. My initial motivation was to provide employment for a friend, but I soon found that being explicitly taught by a native speaker gave rise to different insights than did working on transcripts with Mayramu and Daada. Formal study helped me think about *possible* ways of saying something, not just the ways participants actually said it, as when a lesson on the passive voice made me start paying attention to children's avoidance of passive constructions. I also created my own informal field language curriculum: some days, as I went about my business, I would focus on the use (by others and by me) of a particular linguistic form or feature.

More than before, I made use of Mayramu and Daada as language teachers. At my request, they pointed out my errors and provided models of correct speech. I paid closer attention to and tried to imitate their strategies for obtaining information from and maintaining good relations with research participants. Drawing on what I had learned from the montagnards, I mined the multilingual nature of my interactions with assistants and participants: when Daada and Mayramu translated for me, I resisted the temptation to be thinking about my next question and instead listened carefully to what was being said, taking advantage of the juxtaposition of languages to learn new forms.

I also began to engage with recordings and transcripts as language lessons. As Duranti notes, recordings 'are an invaluable means for training the researcher's ear to the subtleties of local ways of speaking' (Duranti, 1997, p. 112). I used them to train my mouth as well, learning by heart bits of recorded interaction, memorizing the texts studied by the children at school. I got good at telling bits of folktales and singing songs embedded therein, and uttering proverbs that indexed folktales. Once, during a nighttime visit with a focal family, we were sitting in the courtyard, admiring the clarity of the night, and I sang a song that included a line about 'the stars are scintillating, it is far into the night' (*koođe liilire, jemmaare jenggi*). Everyone was delighted, and the older women marveled that I knew the deep Fulfulde verbs *liilirugo* and *jengugo*. Performances like these prompted interesting discussions and went a long way to demonstrating my appreciation for the Fulbe's language and oral traditions.

My limited efforts to learn and use Arabic also yielded several insights into community beliefs and expectations with regard to the language. Nobody expected me to learn Arabic since for most Fulbe it was a sacred language to be read and written without comprehension of the lexico-semantic content (Santerre, 1973). Working from the video recordings, I memorized some of the Koranic verses the focal children were learning. My recitations caused people to express concern that I had not learned the verses for the right reasons (religious practice) or in the right way (through face-to-face interaction with a teacher) (Moore, 2008). But while my efforts made people uncomfortable, they also made them hopeful that I might discover the true faith

through mnemonic mastery of Koranic texts. ‘Is she Muslim?’, one mother asked Mayramu. ‘No,’ she replied. Said the mother, ‘Perhaps she will learn to love the sound of the Koran, God willing.’

Once we had completed all our recording of natural interactions and were conducting play-back sessions, I began speaking much more Fulfulde with the families and Koranic teachers. I paid more visits on my own and I explicitly positioned myself as a language learner. Many professors had told me that that was often the most intelligible role for a linguistic fieldworker to assume, and I found many participants were very happy when I did. Because I was interested in ideologies and practices of (second) language learning and teaching, participants’ responses to my linguistic efforts provided useful data, such as what kinds of errors received corrective feedback, how, from whom, and why. When I commented on how difficult I found some aspect of Fulfulde, adults often laughed and gave examples of errors by children and non-native speakers. Not surprisingly, I found that the more effort I made to speak Fulfulde (pure or not), the more people wanted to talk with me, and not just on matters of language. Looking back at my fieldwork, I wish I had integrated my roles as researcher and language learner into my relationships with research participants from the start. This would have enhanced my field language communicative competence, my connection with community members, and, consequently, my research.

4. Language lessons from the field

Many linguistic anthropologists work in and with field languages we do not master, but most say little about their field language communicative competence and how it shapes and is shaped by their research. In describing my own experiences my goal is to jumpstart the conversation about this complex and sensitive issue, for open discussion will benefit fieldworkers and the field as a whole. Explanation of how we conduct our research while still developing field language competence is an important part of revealing our methodology and ourselves as the instruments of data production. By sharing our strategies and lessons learned, we help future fieldworkers and generate dialogue that may expand our repertoire of practices for managing and improving limited field language while in the field.

I have extracted a few practical lessons from my experiences in northern Cameroon that may be of use to others:

Face your field language limitations and plan accordingly. I was very sorry not to continue working with the multilingual montagnards, but I spared myself (and my advisers) much pain by doing my dissertation research in a community that was linguistically more manageable for me. My MA fieldwork taught me to budget ample time and money for the transcription and translation of recordings, as well as the importance of such records to double-checking my understandings and interpretations of interviews and natural discourse.

Many research activities and artifacts can be used for field language learning. It may seem obvious that interviewing, viewing and transcribing video recordings, and observing people using the field language are opportunities to learn the field language. However, I found that I had to engage in them as such *consciously* in order for things to stick. I was slow to realize that I could study recordings and transcripts of natural discourse as lessons, not just data, but once I did I found them much more interesting than my Fulfulde textbooks.

Field language learning can be used for research. My practice of informal study by focusing on the use of a particular linguistic form as I went about my work learn kept me tuned into the linguistic behavior of more people than just my focal participants. Language tutoring kept me thinking about the conservative forms of Fulfulde that I was *not* hearing from participants. My tutor also regularly provided fresh perspectives on data that Mayramu, Daada, and I had been staring at too long.

Research and field language learning may sometimes conflict, but you can usually work around it. My decision to leave the talking to my assistants in order not to dirty the data slowed my development of productive competence in Fulfulde. Ashamed by my lack of progress, I pursued activities outside my research and I began paying casual visits to focal families and teachers, during which I could be less preoccupied with the effects of my linguistic performance.

Taking a language socialization perspective helps. For my MA and my PhD, I studied children’s apprenticeship into non-native languages in multiple settings. Documenting and analyzing these cultural paths to communicative competence and community membership taught me new ways of learning field languages, such as learning texts by heart and using multilingual interaction as a resource. Even if you are not studying linguistic/

cultural apprentices, you are one. Attention to the way the community organizes (language) learning will help you position yourself as a learner and a researcher in ways that are intelligible and acceptable to your research participants. And you may become a better language learner for it.

Field language communicative competence is dependent on more than the knowledge of and ability to use a given field language in ways that are grammatical and socioculturally appropriate. Also essential is strategic competence,³ 'knowing how to recognize and repair communication breakdowns, how to work around gaps in one's knowledge of the language, and how to learn more about the language and in the context' (National Capital Language Resource Center, 2007). For linguist anthropological fieldworkers, strategic competence entails knowing how to make research and language learning mutually enriching endeavors by making the most of the resources and opportunities afforded by our methods, technology, and roles in the community. As scholars of language and linguistic behavior, we are acutely aware of the difficulties of navigating the communicative world(s) we enter as fieldworkers. Our field language limitations present challenges for our research, but many of these challenges cannot only be overcome, but can also prove a source of insight and inspiration.

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³ Strategic competence is a component in several models of communicative competence that have been developed by applied linguists concerned with second language instruction and assessment (e.g., Bachman, 1990; Canale and Swain, 1980; Celce-Murcia et al., 1995).

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