

Emmon Bach

Postcolonial(?) Linguistic Fieldwork

I
LOOK AT A MAP of British Columbia. Run your eye up the coast to Prince Rupert across Hecate Strait from Haida Gwaii (Queen Charlotte Islands) to Prince Rupert, just a finger's width below the end of the Alaskan panhandle. A thumb's length gauge will show you that you are about halfway up the entire south-to-north span of this huge province. We are in northern British Columbia.

There are three major river systems here running down to the coast. The Stikine mouths in southwest Alaska. The next two going south are the Nass and the Skeena. Follow the Skeena east an inch and a half to the town of Terrace. That is 147 kilometers on Highway 16, the Yellowhead Highway. At Terrace break away from river and highway toward the southwest onto Highway 37 for the town of Kitimat, BC (58 km). Just as you go into Kitimat you will see a road to the left leading to Kitimaat Village, a distance of about 10 km. We will be on the Kitimat Arm of the Douglas Channel. Kitimaat Village is the present home of the Haisla people I first went to this village more than three decades ago to undertake work as a linguist studying a language that had not been studied before by colonialist (Euro-American) linguists. It will be the center of my recollections and precollections in this meditation about the land and water, some of the peoples and cultures, and the rewarding, daunting, frustrating, and humbling activity of so-called fieldwork.

While you have your map open, take a look at some of the names of mountains, towns, roads, rivers, islands. Like several mentioned already—Kitimat, Kitimaat, Haida Gwaii, Yellowhead—the names on the lands and waters are fossil records of history. So

are the names that you do not find on the map. The Haisla name for the site of Kitamaat Village is C'imauc'a ("Place of the Snags"—"snag" in local English means a stripped or dead tree or log). The English name for the people, Haisla, is the nearest you can come in English to the name for a site along the the Kitimat River, across the bay, Xa'isla, which means "(living) downriver or downchannel."

When invaders come, they arrogate the right to bestow their names on the land. So most of the place names in British Columbia that you see on maps (made by the invaders) are English: Queen Charlotte Islands, Prince Rupert, Prince George, Douglas Channel. Now, in response to political pressures from the 'invadees' older names emerge: Haida Gwai for the Queen Charlottes, Gitwinksilhk for Canyon City (on the Nass). Some names like Kitimat and Haisla are derived from original names, but not always reflecting present day proprietary relationships. Kitimat is a case in point. The name is not Haisla but rather Tsimshian in origin: "people or person of the snow" is the usual translation. The orthographic snarls reflect later history: Gitamaat is more or less the original Tsimshian form, Kitimat, Kitamaat, are the official regularizations for the names of the town and the village respectively. Kitimat is a company town built from scratch in the early nineteen-fifties when the Aluminum Company of Canada (Alcan) built one of the world's largest aluminum smelters here.

To get to Kitimat, you have three choices, all spectacular. Flying up from Vancouver to the Kitimat-Terrace airport takes about an hour and quarter. If the day is clear, you will see nothing but mountains, glaciers, forests for miles and miles. At the extremes there are lots of logged-out areas, but in between the kind of country that makes you believe in the possibility of Big Foot, *bekw'es* he is called in Haisla. Or you can take a ferry from Port Hardy, near the upper end of Vancouver Island. It takes about eighteen hours to Prince Rupert, and you will mostly be in the Inside Passage, hours and hours of steep forested land, often disappearing into low clouds, pure white waterfalls skinning down from above. If you are lucky you will encounter orcas in the

water, see a black bear on the shore, mountain goats on the peaks, eagles for sure. From Prince Rupert you will proceed as sketched above. Or if you want to drive, a glance at a map will show you that there are no roads at all straight up from Vancouver; so you will have a two-day trip up along the Fraser River to Prince George and then west on the Yellowhead. If you had driven across Canada from the east you will probably have picked up the Yellowhead at Portage La Prairie, just west of Winnipeg, and driven halfway across Canada on a slow north-western rise through endless prairie lands, then steeply up and over the Canadian Rockies at Jasper and then along the Cariboo mountains to Prince George. The Yellowhead Highway is named after Tête Jaune, a legendary part-Cree guide from around the turn of the twentieth century.

This whole land, in all its variety, is very rich. It supported a big population, especially along the coast, before the invasion of the Europeans and Americans with their diseases, alcohol, and guns, which began towards the end of the eighteenth century. Estimates of population loss in the nineteenth century among the First Nations, as they are called now in politically correct Canadian English, vary wildly, mostly according to the hobbyhorses of the estimators. A two-thirds loss is a conservative figure. In some communities it was as high as ninety percent. The linguistic diversity of the whole area is great: there are languages from seven or eight completely distinct language families, as different from each other as English and Japanese. This diversity reflects the length of time people have lived here and the richness of the land and sea, which supported many small groups of people.

The populations have improved in recent years, as has the power of the First Nations. There are at present some forty odd sets of negotiations going on in British Columbia, in each case involving three parties: the federal government, the provincial government, and the various original native groups. As might be expected there are also disputes among various of the First Nations as to their exact traditional territories. At issue are land rights, including terms for economic exploitation of lands and waters—logging and fishing and minerals—and sovereignty.

(The story of the encounters between Indians and whites in British Columbia has been told mostly from the point of view of the latter. Wilson Duff was among the first to try to tell it from the other side. See Duff, 1969.)

North, South, and Central America contain some of the linguistically most diverse areas of the world. The amount of diversity varies a great deal, mainly as a function of population density and landscape. Across the whole span of the north, from extreme northeastern Siberia to Greenland, one family of languages—the Eskimo or Inuit branch of Eskimo Aleut—is all there is. The Pacific Northwest, stretching from California to Alaska is an area of great diversity, as just noted for British Columbia. A conservative guess at the number of different languages in the whole hemisphere at preinvasion times might put them at about two thousand. Compare with this an estimate of different languages in the world at present at about six thousand. All of the surviving native languages in the United States and Canada are severely endangered.

Haisla is a Northern Wakashan language. Its nearest linguistic sisters are located some hundreds of miles down the coast; its more distant Southern Wakashan cousins are located on the west coast of Vancouver island and in the Makah community in Neah Bay at the tip of the Olympic Peninsula in present day Washington state. If you are not a resident or specialist on the area you will probably have heard (at most) of Nootka, or Kwakiutl (names no longer in favor). It has been estimated that the Northern and Southern Wakashan branches are about as far apart linguistically as English and Russian—that is, with a time of separation approaching five thousand years.

The unrelated languages that make up Haisla's geographical neighbors are (starting with the area of Prince Rupert and going clockwise) Coast Tsimshian, Nisgha, Gitksan (all Tsimshianic); Wets'uwet'en, Tahltan, and Carrier (Athapaskan); Nuxalk (Bella Coola, a Salishan language). Slightly farther away are the language isolate Haida on Haida Gwaii and in Alaska, Tlingit in far northwestern BC and adjacent areas of Alaska (distantly related to the Athapaskan languages). In addition, in coastal areas a trade-

language called Chinook Jargon was used for interlingual communication, including between the First Peoples and the Europeans and Americans. Whether this pidgin was in use before contact with the invaders is a matter of learned dispute.

Communication, trade, friendly and unfriendly interchange among these peoples were frequent and intense before the white people came, as retained in memories, oral traditions, and embodied in a whole system of “grease trails,” named after a still important product, oolichan oil (“grease”) rendered from a smelt-sized fish, sometimes called candlefish, that spawns in the smaller tidal rivers of the area.

II

European curiosity about the languages of the Western Hemisphere came with the first encounters—skipping the Vikings, about which we know little. Attention to the languages of this so-called “New World” was linked primarily to missionary activity. In the fur trade areas, starting from the northeast and spreading westward, practical reasons were also at play, but these could be served by much more superficial knowledge.

In broad strokes we can say this about the European tradition of language studies, where current Euro-American academic language study and linguistics are rooted: In ancient times, attention was centered on Greek and Latin, to which was added Hebrew in medieval times as a third “sacred language.” In the Renaissance, use and study of the European vernacular languages came onto the stage, while Arabic became relevant as a vehicle for increasing knowledge of Greek philosophy.

The knowledge base was hugely expanded in the age of colonialist invasions and expansions. From India came an ancient stream of very sophisticated linguistic knowledge, feeding into the surge of interest in historical studies of vernacular languages, linking of related languages in the Indo-European languages, the Romance and Germanic subbranches thereof, and others, for example Uralic (Finno-Ugric), culminating in the great works of historical linguistics and philology of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth attention shifted to describing languages as they were at a single time, and emphasis was laid on couching such descriptions in terms that were appropriate to the individual language, not in terms taken over unquestioningly from the traditions of the classical languages. This trend of “immanent” description was especially associated in America and Canada with the development of anthropological linguistics (Franz Boas, Edward Sapir—see references).

About halfway through the twentieth century, under the leadership of Noam Chomsky, the focus of much linguistic work shifted to general theories, with an emphasis on the commonalities among languages and so-called ‘Universal Grammar.’ As a result there came to be a radical split between theoretical studies and descriptive studies, unfortunate for the field.

Studies by the colonialists of the languages of the colonized peoples, the ‘immigratees,’ those who have been immigrated on, have until recently always been conducted under an outside agenda and with motives that did not spring from the First Peoples themselves. Over the centuries, from Bishop Ulfilas on, a great deal of knowledge of the world’s languages has come from missionaries. Ulfilas translated the gospels into Gothic. We have no direct knowledge of Gothic beside what is contained there or in a few scattered old sources. For this we must be grateful, but we must not misunderstand the springs of this work. The missionaries are interested in saving souls. The ambiguities of the situation are typified by Diego de Landa, Bishop of Yucatan. In 1562 he ordered the destruction of all Mayan documents, but then went on to record in a few pages of a description of the Mayan people priceless information about Mayan glyphs that proved to be crucial in establishing the true character of the Mayan writing system. This understanding came about only in the second half of the twentieth century.

More mundane concerns are typified by the conquistadors and the fur traders. It was important for the first to communicate with those they conquered and to find allies and divide enemies. Trading, selling, buying all require some way to communicate.

Knowledge of the language of those you are dealing with in war or business is of direct benefit. But there is no interest in the indigenous languages in their own right.

What about more modern academic linguists? Two prototypes come to mind.

The linguist of the Boasian tradition works very hard at writing down and collecting texts, analyzing the language, producing annotated editions of texts with translations and glosses, descriptive grammars, dictionaries. Who are these for? In the era of Boas and his students and their students, these materials are for other linguists and anthropologists. Such materials can be of lasting value for a community. In recent years, texts recorded by Boas and his students almost a hundred years before have been used to jog the memories of elders to recall words and stories that would otherwise have been lost. But they require interpretation and “translation” from technical jargon and arcane transcriptions into the language of ordinary people if they are to be of any use to the community.

The second image is that of the theoretician who is interested in a language only as a ground for testing and revising (or junking) his or her theories. Vine DeLoria, Jr., gave a fitting caricature of this type of worker in the chapter entitled “Anthropologists and Other Friends” in his book *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969/1988). The picture can be readily translated into the field of linguistics. Every few years your friendly neighborhood anthropologist (linguist) appears on your land, equipped with a bag of this season’s universals. He or she spends six weeks trying to check out her/his latest claims about all human cultures (languages), then disappears. You may never hear from her/him again. If he or she does come back, it is only for a repetition with a new bag of questions.

Despite this scorn, it must be stressed that there is no such thing as a description of a language in a completely theory-free way. A linguist of the sort caricatured by DeLoria might ferret out facts that would otherwise never be known. But this sort of activity is again part of an agenda not set by the community.

The days of such colonialist research are gone forever.

III

On my first visit to C'imauc'a (together with a coworker, Reed Bates [Young]), I got my first lesson on the politics of fieldwork. We spoke with a potential consultant, (now-deceased) respected elder Mike Shaw. He asked us why we had come to this place from far-away Texas to find out about his language. We went through a longish and I'm sure boring explanation about linguistics.

Linguists are interested in the first place in learning about Language (with a capital L), Universal Grammar, the unique human capacity that we are all born with. In carrying out this theoretical/empirical study it is important to investigate as wide a range of languages as possible. Haisla is (we were sure) very different from English. Ergo: here we are.

Mike nodded and said that he could understand that. Then he asked a crucial question: Why should we help you? That question has stuck in my mind ever since.

Our answer to Mike Shaw was something like this: We think that children here are not growing up with a knowledge of your language. We can with your help figure out how to write things down accurately in your language and learn how the language works. We will be able to record stories and make dictionaries. Perhaps your grandchildren or their children will one day be glad that we have done this. Mr. Shaw accepted this answer and right away went to work as an active collaborator, giving us many insights into his language.

Here is an example. The Northern Wakashan languages have a very rich system of demonstrative expressions: words and pieces of words that mean "this, that" and so on. In related Kwakw'ala (Kwakiutl) there is a three-way distinction between "here (close to speaker)", "there (near you)", and "remote or yonder" and for each such distinction a contrast (roughly) between things that are visible and those that are not, giving seven forms in all. Other languages of the area show similar systems. We had expected this system in some form in Haisla as well. When Mike Shaw gave us forms for the remote location, he gave two forms, and when I repeated them to check whether they meant "some-

where else, we can't see them" he would say "yes" but then sometimes add "they're gone now." Here I learned another lesson: "Listen carefully and pay attention to what your expert is actually saying." It turned out that one set of expressions, where Mr. Shaw consistently said "gone now," actually had a temporal component: they referred to things that had been here recently but were now gone. In his few notes about about the most northern varieties of the Wakashan languages, Boas had noted something like this as well in Bella Bella (now called Heiltsuk). So listening to the answers of Mike Shaw provided knowledge about an important interaction of spatial and temporal notions that had been barely noted before and helped us understand something significant about human languages in general. And this detail about the language has duly gone into descriptions of the language both for the scientific audience and the Haisla people themselves.

Incidentally, the consequences of this system can be spectacular. Just a few years ago, the Canadian linguist Darin Howe and I were treated to a virtuoso performance by Mrs. Hilda Smith—a speaker of Ooweky'ala, a close relative of Haisla—who showed us forty-nine different ways of saying "his/her pencil" according to the position and visibility of the pencil and its owner relative to the speaker.

Mike Shaw was a natural-born linguist. He understood instantly what we were after. When you do fieldwork you quickly come to appreciate that different individuals will give you different gifts. Our other main elder/consultant that summer and the next time I returned was a man named Jeffrey L. Legaic.

The community itself led us to Jeffrey. When we had visited the chief councillor of the village, the late Heber Maitland, and asked permission to work there, he and everyone else we questioned told us we should work with Legaic. It was only after we found him and started work with him that many people in the rest of the community opened themselves up to work with us. I felt at the time that the community had followed an unspoken choice. Jeffrey was at loose ends. None of the children who

could have learned from him knew his language, nor were they interested in learning. Work with us fulfilled a real need on his part.

Jeffrey Legaic had been trained as a youngster to be a repository of the knowledge of the people. He was an inexhaustible source of information on words, customs, uses of plants and animals. He was also a storyteller. In that summer and the next summer that I returned (two years later) Jeffrey recorded a number of traditional texts in Haisla, and I have since found a few others made for Gisela Mendel, then curator of the Kitimat Centennial Museum. He also liked to retell his stories in English. These texts have been an invaluable source for understanding the language and—in more recent years—for use in advanced classes in the Haisla language. When I listen to these recordings now I can still see Jeffrey as he was then.

I have no pictures of him, for he refused to allow photographs. Unlike some other elders I have worked with, he delivered his stories as performances, speaking in a dramatic way, fixing his audience with a fierce gaze or with an undercurrent of humor stealing into his voice. A small man, his body, hands, face conveyed intense energy. You can gather the emotional force of his words even if you haven't the faintest idea what he was saying. As we, of course, didn't. Over the years I have often thought of the incongruity of the situation: an audience who didn't understand him, Jeffrey delivering stories to us, no longer as in the old days, when in the evening elders would be invited to tell stories to a group sitting around them in the big cedar-plank house, the fire lighting up the faces of the speakers and hearers, the children dozing off, waking up to say "Nausda! nausda!" from time to time to show that their attention was still there.

The word "stories" does not adequately capture the nature of these tellings. They are the embodiment of the knowledge, lore, precepts for behavior, wisdom of the People. Some of these stories and others I have been privileged to hear over the years were strictly local in content. Many of them exist in many versions in different communities. I was actually helped in interpreting a passage in one of Jeffrey's stories by looking at a version of the

story recorded by Sapir in the first decade or so of the twentieth century, in a different language and in a place hundreds of miles away.

In the discussion cited above, Vine DeLoria, Jr., made an eminently reasonable suggestion. Let researchers who obtain grants to work in communities build in to their budgets matching funds for their projects to be given to the community to use in whatever way they wish. Mike Shaw's question—Why should we help you?—along with DeLoria's suggestion, led me to what I call "Mike Shaw's principle": Linguists who work in the field should commit themselves to spending at least half their time on work that makes sense for the community. If—as often happens nowadays—the community has political control over the activities and output of a project, then the community's wishes must be given primary weight. But even when a community does not make explicit conditions governing these matters, the researcher should keep such a pledge. It only needs a little common sense to see what such work should be.

In the years since my first encounters with the Haisla Nation, the balances of political power have shifted somewhat among the various institutions—political, economic, cultural—of the colonizers and colonized.

IV

What do you actually do when you undertake the study of a language "in the field"? The classical picture is this: you find a number of people who are willing to help you, ideally representing a cross-section of the community according to age, sex, social position. You then go to work learning about the language at all levels: the sound system is a necessary first, then basic grammar and lexicon, either by direct elicitation, imitation, and correction, or by collecting samples, oral texts, and so on. From Day One you are learning and analyzing, collating, preparing endless versions of everything you do. You use whatever technological aids you can bring with you: audio and video recording. If you are lucky enough to have a common language, you use it. If there is none, you have to proceed monolingually. Some workers prefer

the monolingual method on principle.

Your native language experts used to be called “informants.” That term was discarded some time ago presumably because of associations with “informers.” Now (in the U.S.) “consultants” is preferred. In any event, the role of the linguistic helper can be problematic. Frances Karttunen has written a fine book about the difficult life of these interpreters, guides, and survivors: *Between Worlds* (1994).

In reality, things go a little differently. When I once mentioned to a friend in Kitamaat Village the experience we had had with Jeffrey Legaic and the idea I also had that the community felt it would be good for Jeffrey to have someone listening to him, she said: Probably, people were just waiting to see if they could trust you. Aboriginal communities have not always had such great experiences with workers from the outside. You still hear horror stories that help you understand why a community would expect to be ripped off by the outsiders that come to them, “Greeks bearing gifts” to be looked on with suspicion (compare DeLoria’s description above). So you will no doubt end up doing all kinds of things you never expected to do, such as being a taxi, helping check nets for fish, and so on. I guess this is what the anthropologists mean when they talk about “participant observers.”

But in the present day context, when languages like Haisla are leading a precarious life, linguists can play a much more special and focused role.

V

Endangered languages have become a sexy topic. Every few months you see a piece about language loss in the popular press. The Volkswagen Foundation has put up a lot of money for the study of endangered languages. Linguists in America contribute money to an Endangered Languages Fund to support research as well as revitalization and preservation programs. Recently the Rausing Foundation has provided a large fund for setting up and maintaining an Endangered Languages Documentation Project (Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Documentation and

Training Programmes) at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

Of course, languages have always died out and new ones have come into existence by the inexorable process of language change. The English language today is not the same as it was in the days of Shakespeare, or Chaucer, or King Alfred. And it is not the same in the United States as in England or Australia or India or Pakistan. Besides the geographical spaces there is the space of age and social structure. Language change goes on inexorably, in spite of the attempts of “linguistic mavens” (Pinker 1994) to keep them from changing. The American linguist Muffy Siegel recently published a study of the ubiquitous word “like” that marks the speech of many younger speakers of American English, as in “Like everybody was there!” (Siegel 2002). The word is not just a sloppy filler or mark of an empty brain but has a clearly defined grammar and precise meanings. The furor greeting this study has been predictably fierce.

The only languages that do not change are dead. If they die with no record, we do not even know about them. If they die with only incomplete records of them, we cannot understand them. We do not understand the documents we have of the Etruscan language. Who knows how many different languages all over the world have died out over the millennia without a trace?

What is wholly new is the rate of loss, as with biological species. Michael Krauss (University of Alaska, Fairbanks, and the Alaska Native Language Center) estimated that of the 5,000 to 7,000 languages still spoken today, one-third will be gone irretrievably by the end of this century, with many of the rest moribund.

When is a language moribund? The critical point is when children no longer grow up learning the language naturalistically as their first or one of their first languages. After that it takes extraordinary efforts to keep the language alive as a full system of natural communication. Successful efforts to revive or maintain heavily threatened languages have been few and far between. (A representative recent collection of papers on language endangerment is Grenoble and Whaley 1998.)

Why does a language die? Mostly political, sociological, economic factors are at play. But what is most relevant here is that sometimes a dominant group takes active steps to wipe out a language, as part of a general official policy of genocide. This happened in the United States and Canada. Friends my own age and younger in Kitamaat Village have told me how they were punished for speaking their mother tongue in residential schools. Even without such active efforts the current radical loss would no doubt go on as a result of the general uniformitization of the modern world.

Does it matter when a language dies? Of course it matters to the speakers of the language. A language—a mother tongue—is a precious and fundamental part of your self. Take a minute or two and imagine that you woke up tomorrow and learned that everyone who spoke your own language had died overnight. One of the few remaining speakers of Western Abenaki (an Eastern Algonquian language) said to me once: Please hurry and learn my language so that I will have someone to talk to! It is a fundamental human right to speak the language that you want to speak and to teach it to your children. This right has been hugely abridged by colonial powers and is still being abridged all over the world. The colonial and neocolonial—and postcolonial!—powers have a moral obligation to redress these injustices. (On linguistic rights, see Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 1995.)

But it matters to the outside world as well when a language dies. It matters for our understanding of what the possibilities for Language are. And because language is such a central part in our very humanity, that means losing a vital part of what it means to be human. The late and sorely missed linguist Ken Hale wrote penetratingly about this (Hale 1998). But in the present context, I want to stress the things that linguists can do that others can't. The first most obvious thing is to make their results accessible. Nowadays, this means not just trying to help develop a practical and if possible beautiful spelling system and using it for practical dictionaries and texts, it means also helping devise user-friendly computer access for interested community members, teachers, maybe helping make websites, webcourses, digitizing and audio-

editing sound files, burning CDs, and so on. It means participating in setting up immersion programs for preschoolers and language classes for their parents, who will largely be in the in-between generation that lost out as the language lost its preeminence as a home language. Above all, it means urging and implementing technical training for community members, so that they can take over from you, the outsider, to do what needs to be done in a way that you never can.

Of course, we outsiders cannot provide the political will that will or won't save, revive, retain the local languages of the world. That is up to the People.

NOTES

I am grateful to the community of Kitamaat Village for their hospitality, help, and encouragement over the years. Let me name four elders especially who have now passed away: Mike Shaw, Jeffrey L. Legaic, Gordon Robertson, Sampson Ross. I thank Wynn Chao for many improvements in the present essay. Mistakes and infelicities are my own.

REFERENCES

- Boas, Franz. 1911. "Introduction." In Boas, 1911-1922.
- Boas, Franz, ed. 1911-1922. *Handbook of American Indian Languages*. 2 vols. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 40. Rpt. New York: Humanities Press, 1969
- Deloria, Vine, Jr. 1969. *Custer Died for your Sins: an Indian Manifesto*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press. Rpt. with new preface, 1988.
- Duff, Wilson. 1969. *The Impact of the White Man*. The Indian History of British Columbia, Vol. 1. Victoria: Royal British Columbia Museum. Anthropology in British Columbia Memoir No. 5.
- Grenoble, Lenore A. and Lindsay J. Whaley, eds. 1998. *Endangered Languages: Language Loss and Community Response*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hale, Ken. 1998. "On endangered languages and the importance of linguistic diversity." In Grenoble and Whaley, 1998. 192-233.
- Karttunen, Frances. 1994. *Between Worlds: Interpreters, Guides, and Survivors*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Pinker, Steven. 1994. *The Language Instinct*. New York: William Morrow.
- Sapir, Edward S. 1921. *Language: an Introduction to the Study of Speech*. New York: Harcourt, Brace.
- Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove and Robert Phillipson, eds. 1995. *Linguistic Human Rights: Overcoming Linguistic Discrimination*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.