



# Operationalizing Linguistic Gratitude: From Principle to Practice

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## Abstract

Although there is a well-established tradition of social engagement in sociolinguistics, there is little explicit discussion of the rationale, methods, and procedures for implementing the principle of linguistic gratitude. What approaches to the dissemination of sociolinguistic information must be adopted with communities and with the general public when language diversity is interpreted in terms of a prescriptive, correctionist model? What venues, activities, and products are the most effective in dialect awareness programs? And how does linguist–community collaboration work on a practical level? We consider theoretical, methodological, and practical issues in sociolinguistic engagement and dialect awareness outreach programs based on a range of experience in a variety of local and general public venues. The approach is based on the principle that the public is inherently curious about language differences and that this intrigue can be transformed into informal and formal public education. It is further premised on evidence that language differences can be linked to legitimate historical and cultural legacies, and that positively framed presentations of language differences in sociocultural and sociohistorical contexts can effectively counter dominant, seemingly unassailable ideologies in non-confrontational ways. A variety of venues are considered in collaborative engagement, including video documentaries, oral history CDs, museum exhibits, formal curricular programs, and popular trade books on language differences. Challenges in operationalizing linguistic gratitude include working with the community; balancing community linguistic expertise and community perspectives; design and audience, and practical logistical issues.

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Of what use is linguistics? . . . In the lives of individuals and of society, Language is a factor of greater importance than any other. For the study of language to remain solely the business of a handful of specialists would be a quite unacceptable state of affairs. In practice, the study of language is in some degree or other the concern of everyone. Saussure (1916 [1986: 7])

### *Introduction*

Along with a robust, empirically based research tradition, modern sociolinguistics has compiled an impressive record of application. The relatively short history of sociolinguistics, particularly social dialectology, has demonstrated that it is quite possible to combine a commitment to the rigorous analysis of sociolinguistic data for descriptive and explanatory purposes with a concern for the social, educational, and political implications of language variation, leading to principles of sociolinguistic application such as Labov's *PRINCIPLE OF ERROR CORRECTION* and *PRINCIPLE OF DEBT INCURRED* (1982: 172–3), as well as Wolfram's *PRINCIPLE OF LINGUISTIC GRATUITY* (1993: 227). Labov's principles are primarily reactive in that they focus on the obligation of linguists to expose misunderstandings and misinterpretations about language 'to the attention of the widest possible audience' (1982: 172) and to 'use knowledge based on data for the benefit of the community, when it has need for it' (1982: 173), whereas Wolfram's gratuity principle encourages linguists to 'pursue positive ways in which they can return linguistic favors to the community' (1993: 227).

In working with communities, there are a number of relationships and roles that sociolinguists can assume. Cameron et al. (1992) define several different kinds of research based on relationships between researchers and those they are researching, including *ETHICAL RESEARCH*, *ADVOCACY RESEARCH*, and *EMPOWERING RESEARCH*. Ethical research assumes that there is minimal inconvenience to participants and that the subjects are adequately acknowledged for their contributions. Advocacy-based research is characterized by a 'commitment on the part of the researcher not just to do research on subjects but research *on* and *for* subjects' (Cameron et al. 1992: 14), whereas empowering research is research *on*, *for*, and *with* the community in light of the fact that 'subjects have their own agendas and research should try to address them'. As Cameron et al. note (1992: 24), 'if knowledge is worth having, it is worth sharing.' At the very least, researchers should seek to share their insights with community members and to 'give back' to the community, with the goal of empowering the community in some way. As John Rickford (1999: 315) puts it:

The fundamental rationale for getting involved in application, advocacy, and empowerment is that we owe it to the people whose data fuel our theories and descriptions; but these are good things to do even if we don't deal directly with native speakers and communities, and enacting them may help us to respond to the interests of our students and to the needs of our field.

Sociolinguists can work with community members to ensure that language variation is documented and described in a valid and reliable way; to raise the level of consciousness within and outside the community about the past, current, and future state of the language variation; and to engage representative community agents and agencies in an effort to understand and explicate the role of language in community life.

While few linguists are, in principle, opposed to giving back to research communities or establishing collaborative partnerships with them, constructs such as gratuity, collaboration, partnership, and benefit are ideologically laden notions that need to be examined critically (Wolfram 1998). At the very least, we need to be aware of some of the issues that underlie alliances between researchers and research communities, with an eye towards establishing parameters that might inform researcher–community relationships. From the outset, there are questions about a community’s need for sociolinguistic information. The focus of sociolinguists on language differences is typically viewed as an oddity in most communities, whose overt concerns are much more likely to be attuned to economic, social, and political issues. There are also the underlying questions about sociolinguists’ motivations in working with communities. Most sociolinguists, for example, promote an agenda of social and educational change that is at odds with mainstream language ideology; namely, the ideology that Standard English is inherently ‘better’ than vernacular varieties and should be promoted to the exclusion of the vernacular variety.

Researcher–community partnerships further involve issues of power and authority, with implications for assuming ‘ownership’ of linguistic knowledge. The specialized expertise of linguists sets up an asymmetrical relationship of authority with respect to language matters. On one level, this is to be expected. Linguists have studied language extensively and naturally have specialized expertise and meta-language in the subject matter; they need not be apologetic about this training. By the same token, their own attitudes associated with this expertise can potentially lead to disrespect for and the dismissal of community-based observations about language. Linguists are not always right in their observations, and they need to be sensitive to community perspectives – on language as well as on other matters. As Sally Johnson (2001: 592) notes, ‘scientists themselves have much to learn from the reception of their ideas by those outside their area of expertise.’

Another issue that arises is commodification. Sociolinguists and dialectologists tend to highlight the more marked and vernacular features of dialect – the ‘exotic’ and traditional forms of language variation – in their representations to wider audiences (as well as to fellow linguists). While we preach about the variable nature of socially diagnostic linguistic features in our texts and in our classrooms, we run the danger of creating oversimplified, dialect caricatures that defy the authentic complexity of variation in the dialect community and perpetuate language stereotypes in the general public. As Rickford (1997) points out, the themes that researchers highlight in their presentations may serve to reinforce or even create new kinds of stereotypes about the lives and language of a speech community. Although often unconsciously, our portrayals are shaped by how we wish our information to be received and perceived. One of the tendencies that social dialectologists have to guard against, for example, is the ‘basilectal stereotype’, in which vernacular dialects are portrayed in their maximally divergent form when they are, in

reality, highly variable and share the vast majority of their structures with standard varieties.

In researcher–community collaboration, we can expect to encounter conflicting beliefs and values about language that may differentiate community members from the professional linguists who study them. As professional linguists, in accordance with the principle of error correction, we are quite prepared to counter popular beliefs about the systematic patterning of vernacular dialects. But how do partnerships work operationally when community members and linguistic researchers enter into collaboration with different belief systems about cultural and linguistic diversity? This is a difficult question with no easy answer, but it affects not only researcher–community partnerships but also the sharing and dissemination of knowledge in significant ways. The sharing of information, as well as the very definition of ‘information’ or ‘knowledge,’ has to be negotiated between researchers and community members when the two parties collaborate to help meet the needs and desires of the community as well as the goals of the researchers.

In the following sections, we consider some of the challenges of implementing linguistic gratuity based on extensive, ongoing engagement programs that have included a range of public education venues, from the construction of museum exhibits and documentary TV productions to formal dialect curricula for public education about dialect diversity. Our goal is to identify the kinds of challenges that confront sociolinguistic researchers in implementing these programs, extending from ideological and philosophical perspectives to concrete and practical suggestions. Under the rubric of the North Carolina Language and Life Project, established at North Carolina State University in the early 1990s, we have attempted to unite research and extension in the following ways: (i) to gather basic research information about language varieties in order to understand the nature of language variation and change; (ii) to document language varieties in North Carolina and beyond as they reflect the varied cultural traditions of their residents; (iii) to provide information about language differences for public and educational interests; and (iv) to use research material for the improvement of educational programs about language and culture (Wolfram 2007b: 159).<sup>1</sup> The state-based model for engagement activities seems to operate efficiently for the establishment of centers for dialect awareness programs (cf. Hazen 2005 and Nunnally 2007 for state-based programs of West Virginia and Alabama, respectively), though other models might also work. For example, a center for a specific variety [e.g., African American English (AAE), Appalachian English] or region (e.g., the South, New England) might also work, but the state-based model offers obvious advantages for overcoming idiosyncrasies of formal, school-based curricula and taps into an uncontroversial focus on ‘state pride’ exhibited by many states.

*Principles of Engagement*

On one level, language seems like a relatively convenient subject area for engagement with communities and the general public. As Saussure (1986: 7) notes, ‘In the lives of individuals and society, language is a factor of greater importance than any other’, and its study should not remain ‘solely the business of a handful of specialists.’ Many aspects of language variation are so transparent that it can be assumed that most speakers of English or any other language will readily notice these differences. Unlike some topics of inquiry, language differences are naturally intriguing to people; they notice and discuss them. Virtually everyone has a personal story of miscomprehension, misperception, or misjudgment based on language differences. In many cases, these experiences have come to symbolize interaction with different social groups, and is one of the first items commented upon when characterizing groups and individuals. Furthermore, the transparency of language differences embedded in cultural consciousness leads to a presumed knowledge about language diversity that entitles people to make evaluative observations derived from an underlying, socialized language ideology promoted by the ‘principle of linguistic subordination’ (Lippi-Green 1997). Not only do lay people notice language diversity, they often interpret the characteristics cataloged by language differences. Thus, while it is relatively easy to capitalize on people’s inherent interest in language, it is sometimes difficult to convince the general public to accept the need for language study, a prerequisite to changing uninformed opinions and assumptions about language variation. This socialized conflict is a major challenge for the implementation of collaborative dialect awareness programs.

Another principle of sociolinguistic engagement is the intrinsic connection between language differences and sociohistorical, sociocultural, and regional traditions. There is a level of consciousness about regional and sociocultural language variation that easily segues to the discussion of language diversity. For example, in the South, language is one of the most frequent attributes associated with the region and often serves as a symbolic proxy for a whole range of behaviors considered to be ‘Southern’ (Preston 1997; Tamasi 2000). ‘Speaking Southern’ is a behavior that most Americans overtly recognize, so that it is hardly peculiar to raise the issue of language variation in this context. The awareness of regional place in the South tends to be hierarchical, in that people identify strongly with their local community, the Southern state in which it is located, and the overarching Southern region (Reed 1993, 2003). For example, in North Carolina, where we conduct most of our community-based outreach and engagement activities, native residents show the highest level of affiliation with their home state of any Southern state (Reed 1993), with over 90% of residents considering the physical locale as an important part of their personal identities. Although this regional linguistic consciousness often evokes a concomitant set of stereotypes and prejudices about language and a relatively high level of linguistic insecurity

among some speakers, it nonetheless provides a natural opportunity to address language issues in sociohistorical context. In piloting various language awareness programs over the past decade, we have found that the connection of language to community, state, and regional place has proven to be one of our strongest appeals. In historically isolated communities where we have conducted research, many residents are dedicated to preserving the past, ranging from the charting of family genealogies to the documentation and reconstruction of past events. Princeville, North Carolina, for example, defines its identity largely on the fact that it was the ‘first town incorporated by blacks in the United States.’ Accordingly, this theme is prominently displayed and emphasized in their self-definition and their presentation of the status of the community to outsiders. Enabling the town’s residents to promote this interest through our historically based documentaries [e.g., *Princeville Remembers the Flood* (Grimes and Rowe 2004) and *This Side of the River: Self-Determination and Survival in the Oldest Black Town in America* (Rowe and Grimes 2007)] leads to a more synergistic research effort for our sociolinguistic team.

Historical and preservation societies often play a significant role in small, rural communities, and several of our most active, ongoing partnerships have taken place under the auspices of these community agencies. Unlike their largely invisible counterparts in most metropolitan areas, they are often ascribed high local status and civic prominence. Such organizations are often interested in capturing high-quality audio recordings of narratives told by older residents, providing an ideal setting for cooperative ventures with linguistic researchers who can help collect and preserve linguistic data on behalf of the community.

There is also a sense of cultural heritage that embodies language along with other cultural phenomena. The perception that culture, history, and language are inseparable is a common theme voiced in interviews with residents in diverse language communities and serves as one of our foundational rationales for establishing language awareness programs. In community settings where cultural identity is a significant theme, the link between language and culture has become one of the biggest sociolinguistic enticements we offer in our collaborative activities. For example, among the Lumbee Indians of North Carolina, whose authentic Native American identity is constantly under scrutiny from groups that range from the federal government to skeptical European American and African-American cohort groups, many Lumbee people express pride over the fact that they are uniquely identifiable through their dialect of English (Wolfram et al. 2002).

Finally, we may appeal to the fact that language differences are embedded in a more broadly based cultural and sociopolitical context, and that language variation often acts as a proxy for these deeper issues of language and cultural subordination and marginalization. Ethnocentric and xenophobic attitudes, for example, may target the language of other groups as a representation of their social or political status. Unfortunately, these attitudes are characteristic

not only of dominant groups, but of vernacular-speaking communities as well, because they may also adopt the dominant language ideology – at least overtly. Changing language attitudes involves long-term, formal and informal (re)education on both a local and broad-based level. Communities that have been socialized into believing that their language variety is nothing more than ‘bad speech’ are not particularly eager to celebrate this presumed linguistic inferiority, presenting a significant obstacle for the development of dialect awareness programs that celebrate local linguistic themes.

### *Venues of Outreach and Engagement*

Fulfilling the principle of linguistic gratuity requires seeking proactive ways of making people aware of the need for education. At the heart of the concern for public education about language diversity is a commitment to sociolinguistic equality regardless of the benefits in terms of professional advancement and status. We would, in fact, maintain that such projects are endemic to our role as socially responsible social scientists even though the effort required to create them is not commensurate with their value in the academic meritocracy. At the same time, commitment to applying sociolinguistic knowledge in no way precludes a scholar from academic success, as evidenced in the fact that some of the most respected research scholars in sociolinguistics have dedicated themselves to improving public understandings regarding linguistics and language diversity from the inception of their careers.

There is, of course, a wide range of activities and programs that might qualify as outreach and engagement, from opportunistic-based, teachable moments that spontaneously arise from current news events, to specific programs for formal education. We limit ourselves in this discussion to programmatic efforts that we have personally engaged in over the past several decades. These include documentary films and DVDs, museum exhibits, audio CDs, books and booklets for popular audiences, and a middle school dialect curriculum for formal public education.

Video documentaries produced with and on behalf of local communities are becoming an increasingly realistic option for outreach and engagement. Productions by the North Carolina Language and Life Project have ranged from special TV programs that have aired nationally or on the state affiliate of the Public Broadcasting Service [e.g., *Indian by Birth: The Lumbee Dialect* (Hutcheson 2001); *Mountain Talk* (Hutcheson 2004a); *Voices of North Carolina* (Hutcheson 2005); and *The Queen Family: Appalachian Tradition and Back Porch Music* (Hutcheson 2006)] to those produced primarily for community organizations [e.g., *The Ocracoke Brogue* (Blanton and Waters 1996) and *Hyde Talk Hyde Talk: The Language and Land of Hyde County* (Torbert 2002)], though these are not mutually exclusive. The majority of our documentaries have focused on language (e.g., Blanton and Waters 1996; Hutcheson 2001, 2004a, 2005), but our collaboration has sometimes extended to topics considerably

beyond language as a natural extension of partnerships with communities that have goals and agendas different from our sociolinguistic ones (e.g., Grimes and Rowe 2004; Hutcheson 2006; Rowe and Grimes 2007). Video projects have, in fact, ranged from short promotional features about a community [e.g., *Celebrating Princeville* (Hutcheson 2003)] to the celebration of people and events that are important to community members [e.g., *Celebrating Muzel Bryant* (Grimes 2004)]. Fortunately, current video editing software available at most universities makes these types of projects quite feasible for students and faculty to produce at modest expense.

The audio CD is another popular venue for collaborative engagement with communities. For example, in collaboration with a local Ocracoke historian, we have produced *Ocracoke Speaks*, a CD and accompanying booklet of stories and anecdotes from different speakers (Childs et al. 2000). Mallinson et al. (2006) also produced a CD and accompanying booklet to document and preserve local traditions, stories, and history for Texana, a unique African-American community nestled in the Smoky Mountains of Appalachia. Projects that merge oral history and sociolinguistics are becoming more popular (Hutcheson 2004b, 2006; Kretzschmar et al. 2004) and publicly accessible via software available for downloading on most computers.

The community-based museum exhibit is a particularly productive venue for collaboration, because it typically involves the donation of artifacts, images, and other memorabilia from the community itself. Such exhibits provide a presentation format of local culture and history for visitors at the same time that they celebrate the local community life and language. With the cooperation of community-based preservation societies and museums, we have constructed several permanent exhibits that highlight language diversity (Gruendler and Wolfram 1997, 2001), as well as limited-time exhibits on history, culture, and prominent citizens in the community (Vaughn and Wolfram 2008). Thus, an exhibit titled *Freedom's Voice: Celebrating the Black Experience on the Outer Banks* (Vaughn and Grimes 2006) includes images, a documentary (Sellers 2006), interactive audiovisuals, artifacts, audio clips first recorded for sociolinguistic interviews and re-appropriated as oral histories, and informational panels that highlight African-Americans' involvement in the history of coastal North Carolina. In an important sense, this exhibition combines history and culture through language in narrating the story of the 'other lost colony' on Roanoke Island. Another current exhibit, on Ocracoke Island (Vaughn and Wolfram 2008), celebrates the life of Muzel Bryant.

There are also activities related to popular writing, ranging from general books and articles for broad-based audiences (Tannen 1990, 2006; Rickford and Rickford 2000; Wolfram and Ward 2006) to those geared more towards specific language communities (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1997; Shores 2000; Wolfram et al. 2002). For the most part, such works are written about communities rather than with community members, although there are cases where some collaboration can take place in writing. For example, the book



*Fine in the World: Lumbee Language in Time and Place* (Wolfram et al. 2002) was co-authored with the Director of the Museum of the Native American Resource Center, Stanley Knick, and with the Director of Native American Indian Studies at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, Linda Oxendine, a well-respected leader in the Lumbee community. While neither are linguists, they provided important advice on how to present linguistic perspectives in a way that would maximize receptivity by community members.

More directly, it is possible to produce community-based dialect dictionaries (e.g., Locklear et al. 1999; Schilling-Estes et al. 2002). Engaging communities in the compilation of community-based dialect dictionaries is one of the most collaborative language activities, because it is a tangible product that a local community can understand with minimal background sociolinguistic information. It can further engage local residents meaningfully in the collection of data and in some aspects of the compilation process, and can be produced as an ongoing project within a relatively short time frame. In fact, we have found local community members to become more engaged proactively in this activity than in any other language-related project. Local residents and visitors have found these dialect dictionaries to be of considerable interest, and the one domain of language study that allows community members unequivocally to assert proprietary language knowledge.

One of our most ambitious outreach programs involves the development of formal curricular materials on language diversity in the public schools. Unfortunately, formal education about dialect variation is still a relatively novel and, in most cases, controversial idea. Although we have taught school-based dialect awareness programs since the early 1990s (Wolfram et al. 1992) and taught a program annually on Ocracoke for the past 15 years (Wolfram et al. 1994; Reaser and Wolfram 2007a,b), school-based programs have still not progressed beyond a pilot stage (Reaser 2006; Sweetland 2006). Our pilot program is a middle-school curriculum in social studies that connects with language arts (Reaser 2006; Reaser and Wolfram 2007a,b), but similar units might be designed for other levels of K-12 education as well. Such curricula are based on humanistic, scientific, and social science rationales, and engage students on a number of different participatory levels. In the process, students and teachers learn about dialect study as a kind of scientific inquiry and as a type of social science research. The examination of dialect differences offers great potential for students to investigate the interrelation between linguistic and social diversity, including diversity grounded in geography, history, and cultural beliefs and practices. There are a number of creative ways in which students can examine how language and culture go hand-in-hand as they address language diversity.

One of the greatest advantages of a curriculum on dialects is its potential for tapping the linguistic resources of students' indigenous communities. In addition to classroom lessons, students learn by going into the community to collect current dialect data. In most cases, the speech characteristics of the

local community should make dialects come alive in a way that is unmatched by textbook knowledge. Educational models that treat the local community as a resource to be tapped rather than as a liability to be overcome have been shown to be quite effective in other areas of language arts education (Robertson and Bloome 1997), and there is no reason why this model cannot be applied to the study of dialects. The dialect awareness curriculum naturally fits in with North Carolina's standard course of study for eighth grade social studies ([www.ncpublicschools.org/curriculum/socialstudies/scos/2003-04/050eighthgrade](http://www.ncpublicschools.org/curriculum/socialstudies/scos/2003-04/050eighthgrade)) that includes the curricular themes of 'culture and diversity', 'historic perspectives', and 'geographical relationships' as they relate to North Carolina. In addition, the dialect awareness curriculum helps fulfill social studies competency goals, such as 'Describe the roles and contributions of diverse groups, such as American Indians, African Americans, European immigrants, landed gentry, tradesmen, and small farmers to everyday life in colonial North Carolina' (Competency Goal 1.07) or 'Assess the importance of regional diversity on the development of economic, social, and political institutions in North Carolina' (Competency Goal 8.04) (cf.

**Table 1. The alignment of *Voices of North Carolina* curriculum with North Carolina's Standard Course of Study (SCS)**

Eighth-grade SCS objective	Met in curriculum by:
Assess the impact of geography on the settlement and developing economy of the Carolina colony 1.07 Describe the roles and contributions of diverse groups, such as American Indians, African Americans, European immigrants, landed gentry, tradesmen, and small farmers to everyday life in colonial North Carolina, and compare them to the other colonies	Isolation caused by ocean, swamps, and mountains is examined, as is the Great Wagon Road American Indians, African Americans, and diverse groups of European Americans are examined in urban and rural contexts
3.05 Compare and contrast different perspectives among North Carolinians on the national policy of Removal and Resettlement of American Indian populations	The historical contexts of the Lumbee and Cherokee are contrasted, including the early integration and loss of native tongue for the Lumbee and the forced removal and return of the Cherokee
8.01 Describe the changing demographics in North Carolina and analyze their significance for North Carolina's society and economy	One of the fastest growing populations in North Carolina is Hispanics. This causes people to make assumptions about the effects of this group. The linguistic and social effects are examined in North Carolina
8.04 Assess the importance of regional diversity on the development of economic, social, and political institutions	Understanding regional diversity can be enhanced by examining regional linguistic diversity, which is reflective of social and economic institutions

Table 1). In aligning materials with competency goals, it is essential to seek ways to help teachers accomplish the goals they have for their students both in terms of the standard course of study and in terms of more abstract goals, such as teaching students to be better writers (Sweetland 2006).

A further consideration in targeting the social studies curriculum is that it tends to have more flexibility in terms of innovative materials than language arts, which is traditionally constrained by year-end standardized performance testing. The subject of language diversity may naturally merge with language arts and even science at points where the focus is on language analysis as a type of scientific inquiry. Students are not the only ones who profit from the study of dialect diversity. Teachers also find that some of their stereotypes about languages are challenged and that they become more knowledgeable and enlightened about language diversity in the process of teaching the curriculum.

The venues for outreach and engagement highlighted in this section are meant to be illustrative rather than exhaustive, and may be complemented by a number of other activities. Lectures and workshops on dialect variation in different communities are relatively common, including presentations for preservation and historical societies as well as for other special interest groups. Workshops on dialects for teachers and school children and special presentations at the museums and historical societies have also been conducted, including those requested by of the community. These activities may involve key community members and local institutions such as civic organizations and governing councils in an effort to raise awareness about local dialect history and customs. In some communities, this work may be highly collaborative and visible on a public level, with strong public support from community agencies.

### *Challenges in Implementing Linguistic Gratitude*

The venues and programs presented in the preceding section offer a somewhat idealized profile of outreach and engagement. In reality, the road to successful outreach activities is hardly ever paved smoothly. In the following sections, we consider different types of challenges in operationalizing linguistic gratitude: (i) working with the community; (ii) balancing linguistic expertise and community perspectives; (iii) design and audience; and (iv) the logistics of implementation. The challenges extend from theoretical and philosophical perspectives to practical and concrete decisions about what to present and how to present it. Our discussion is not necessarily intended to offer solutions, but simply to expose some of the issues that need to be confronted and to consider some alternatives for the promotion of collaborative engagement.

#### WORKING WITH THE COMMUNITY

Although it is a core concept in empirical linguistics, the speech community has proven to be relatively elusive in sociolinguistic description, both

as a theoretical and an operational construct. As Patrick (2002: 573) notes, the speech community stands at ‘the intersection of many principal problems in sociolinguistic theory and method.’ Invariably, speakers are connected to socially coherent groups, from large, geographically bounded metropolitan regions to small, discontinuous ethnic populations. Defining the community in outreach and engagement activities is no less problematic, although the practical, real-world, sociopolitical consequences may be more significant than they are for the extrapolated, abstract descriptions of speech community found in academic sociolinguistic work.

Communities of engagement may be bounded or fluid based on geography, ethnicity, sociohistorical background, or other social, economic, and political factors. For example, the community of Ocracoke is defined simply by its geographical status as an island off the coast of North Carolina. But the community is also defined by historical continuity so that an *O’cocker*, the term used by residents for ‘natives’, is reserved for those whose genealogical roots on Ocracoke extend at least for several generations, and, in most cases, much longer. The definition of an *O’cocker* is significant for islanders and any representation of community by sociolinguists must abide by their definition. In fact, one of our most egregious offenses to community residents was our mistaken inclusion of a *dingbatter*, or outsider, as an *O’cocker* in the film credits of participants in the documentary *The Ocracoke Brogue* (Blanton and Waters 1996). The other major offense to the community was one of unintentional exclusion: after a group of islanders previewed a rough cut of the documentary, they insisted that an island leader be included in the final version of the film.

We have had similar concerns expressed about the status of Lumbee Indians, whose community status is related to their historical and cultural roots in Robeson County. A comment by a life-long Lumbee resident from Robeson County about the status of actress Heather Locklear, whose grandparent was a Robeson County Lumbee, illustrates the bounded yet fluid nature of the notion of Lumbee community.

I mean, you know, this Heather Locklear thing, Heather Locklear ain’t no Lum, I don’t care what nobody says, I don’t care if her granddaddy or great granddaddy or what-what came from here. She’s never lived as a Lum, she’s never been involved in this community, she’s never certainly had to experience the things that are just gonna be a part of your life experience if you are a Lum and live in Robeson County . . . you just gotta be a part of this culture, even if it is from a distance. I guess what I’m trying to say is that you gotta have the genetics and the culture. (Hutcheson 2001)

The connection of language to community and regional place can be a strong one, and with it can come both benefits and obstacles.

The nature of the collaborative relationships between researchers or documentarians and the community is another complicated challenge. McKnight (2003) notes:

What we mean by [collaboration] may vary greatly, depending on the project or the individuals involved, but implicit in these conversations is the belief that documentary work, at its core, involves reciprocity, shared action, common interests and mutual engagement. . . . Out in the field, the documentarian is not a solo agent pursuing art for art's sake, nor is she or he the old-school marauding ethnographer, parachuting into exotic territory and ferreting out cultural goods for publication or display at some high-minded institution. Instead, in this paradigm, practicing the documentary arts always involves tangible connections with the community, from start to finish, and that can – and should – take a long time (if there's *ever* a real end to these engagements). This means that the documentarians and the documented are in the experience together, inextricably, though the nature of their interactions will fluctuate from day to day.

There are a number of issues related to inclusion and participation. We have to recognize that it is impossible to include everyone, but how do we decide who is to be included? Furthermore, communities are not harmonious, consensual social organisms; how do we manage factions within communities? How do we ensure 'adequate' representation and handle representation problems that might arise? These are just a few of the questions we have confronted about general principles and specific applications. What does it mean to work with, not for, over, or above the community, and what level of community ownership is appropriate given the fact that the linguist is the research specialist? These types of questions are particularly germane to documentary activities, such as films or oral history compilations, where the ultimate editing decisions rest in the producer's hands. From the producer's perspective, the collaboration may be more appropriately viewed as a set of strategies to counter executive control over the documentary. Thus, film producer Neal Hutcheson (e-mail, 27 September 2007), who has produced the majority of the North Carolina Language and Life Project's documentaries, offers the following strategies for countering the control that the producer of a documentary film may have: (i) minimizing narration; (ii) using multiple community voices; (iii) providing space for interview comments; (iv) casually revealing the recording process; (v) avoiding trick shots, clever composition, and fancy transitions; (vi) using (show) local performers (e.g., musicians) in context; and (vii) using experts cautiously.

Other types of outreach and engagement offer different kinds of opportunities and levels of participation for community members. In museum exhibits, for example, community members may actively contribute various types of memorabilia. For the *Freedom's Voice* exhibit celebrating the contributions of African-Americans to the development of the Outer Banks, we collected artifacts and photos from community members and solicited input on the developing project design. We also relied on local citizens to help identify some of the unknown people in photos and enlisted performing groups for the opening who were also highlighted in exhibit, thereby integrating the exhibit within the context of the current community. The goal

of these activities was to encourage community members to tell and preserve their own stories and histories.

One of the sensitive dimensions of community engagement relates to the establishment of credibility, both in terms of the local community and in terms of outsiders, two groups whose standards may not always overlap. How do we ensure that the presentation will be received in the spirit it was intended and be embraced by community members? Although there are no guarantees of acceptance, we have adopted several strategies that seem to offer the potential for mutual support. First, we often involve recognized community leaders and personalities. Although hardly foolproof, it seems most appropriate to be respectful of social hierarchies within the community. For projects requiring narration, such as a documentary, we typically select a local, recognized leader for this position. In a strategic decision to provide credibility for the presentation of our documentary, *Voices of North Carolina*, we enlisted William C. Friday, arguably the most highly respected public figure in North Carolina, to narrate the documentary. For the documentary film, *Indian by Birth: The Lumbee Language*, we selected a respected Lumbee historian, teacher, and community leader. Tapping into local institutions and organizations is another way of promoting the community connection. The use of local performers, musicians, and artists, along with highlighting noteworthy community traditions and landmarks, also helps frame programs as symbolically collaborative and centered within the community.

As noted above, it is not possible to include everyone, but how do we decide who to include? For example, artistic or esthetic compromises may have to be made in order to include key community leaders. And naturally there are factions within the community that we cannot discount despite the fact that including them can be challenging. On one occasion, we had to confront rival tribal groups within the Lumbee community who were in litigation about the right to represent the Lumbee tribe. In this instance, we asked members from both groups to serve on our advisory panel to ensure that both factions were represented in the selection of spokespeople for the tribe in our documentary. Such intracommunity conflicts are not uncommon, and as much as we might prefer ignoring them, we cannot afford to do so without shortchanging our engagement efforts. Political sensitivity, compromise, and diplomacy are attributes that must be present throughout; at the same time, we must appear to be politically neutral and naïve about intracommunity politics in negotiating a path of least resistance to representing the widest range of community interests.

#### BALANCING EXPERTISE AND COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE

When the vernacular language norms of the community stand in opposition to those of mainstream, Standard English varieties, an immediate ideological conflict is brought to the forefront. Admittedly, linguists are ideological brokers themselves (Blommaert 1999: 9), making a bid to replace

prevailing language ideology with an alternative view of linguistic equality. Confronting negative linguistic self-images while working with dialect communities to preserve and appreciate local linguistic heritage is almost always the most critical challenge confronting researchers who work in non-mainstream community settings. In fact, the inability to ameliorate this ideological conflict is the primary reason that we have been unsuccessful in implementing dialect awareness programs in some communities where we have carried out research over the past several decades – and it continues to be the biggest single hurdle in establishing such programs. Given ambivalent community perspectives on language, it often becomes difficult to provide a genuine portrait of a linguistically subordinate variety that the community will endorse. Do communities really want socially disfavored linguistic traits of their speech highlighted in the representation of their language? And to what extent is it possible even to portray a unified picture of a vernacular variety anyway, given the fact that most communities are characterized by considerable diversity rather than homogeneity?

Members of a research team assume a variety of situated roles and relationships as visitors, researchers, and friends, but our primary status in these communities is framed by our role as university-based language experts. As noted, this specialized language expertise sets up an asymmetrical relationship of authority with respect to language matters that generally defines the relationship to the community regardless of how diversified our social relationships within the community may be.

One of the genuine concerns in representing community language is authenticity. Which speakers do we choose to represent the variety and how do we present them? In all of the communities we have studied, there is an expansive spectrum of speakers. As previously mentioned, sociolinguists are sometimes guilty of exclusively focusing on the most ‘exotic’ or basilectal speakers, leading to a commodification of the vernacular and a ‘kind of sociolinguistic nostalgia for the authentic vernacular speaker’ (Bucholtz 2003). One of the challenges in any linguistic representation is indicating a genuine range of variation. In film documentaries and CDs, this representation is controlled by the kind of speakers we choose to include and exclude in our production. It is essential to include different social, regional, and community voices, and to allow communities to speak for themselves.

One of the features of *Mountain Talk* (Hutcheson 2004a) – an hour-long documentary on Appalachian English produced for regional Public Broadcasting Service as well as a number of regional Appalachian agencies – is the notable absence of linguistic experts who provide commentary and interpretation. This was a deliberate choice in order to promote the voice of the community in our collaborative endeavor, but this choice has not gone unquestioned by our academic colleagues. For example, Montgomery (2005: 391) observes that,

However expert or compelling the natives may be as talkers, they cannot be expected to have an objective, much less historical, perspective on their speech and little way to know what in it is local or regional and what is not. A modest further investment of scholarship would have made the program more informative and often would have confirmed or corrected impressions left by speakers themselves.

The competing goals of a community voice and linguistic expertise may come to a head over the interpretations of language data and history by linguists and community residents. It is certainly understandable that there could be academic criticism of our decision to 'perpetuate' folk myths about the history of Appalachian English (e.g., 'Appalachian English is Shakespearean English' or 'Old English') by not 'correcting' them with an expert explanation; however, the real objection is that the communities use terms such as 'old English' to mean something quite different from what linguists use them to mean. While linguists strive to educate and provide information about language, the community may assume that a valid goal is the expression of a community perspective on language. From our standpoint, scholarly correction or interpretation of the community history of Appalachian English would have detracted from the community voice in *Mountain Talk*. We unavoidably did some interpretation through our editing, but we also wanted to represent the community's vantage point on its history. Ironically, one of the most enthusiastic aspects of the reception to *Mountain Talk* by residents of Appalachia was the very fact that it was devoid of outside 'experts' who interpreted the behavior of locals. Allowing community members to speak for themselves about issues of accommodation and identity and avoiding over-interpretation by outside experts seem to be ways of making documentaries more of a collaborative activity and providing community voice. At the same time, of course, linguistic experts need to carefully edit in such a way that erroneous impressions are not portrayed by community speakers.

One of the traditional reasons for infusing expert opinion into documentaries is based on the assumption that community-based views of indigenous language are naïve and uninformed, taking the form of 'language myths' (Bauer and Trudgill 1998). While fully acknowledging the existence of language myths, it is also necessary to admit that the division between myth and 'facts' cannot always be reduced to a simple dichotomy. As Dwight Bolinger once claimed in a presidential address to the Linguistic Society of America (Bolinger 1973), truth is often a linguistic question. In fact, we may question whether some of the popular myths so vehemently opposed by sociolinguists are actually figurative speech about language rather than unmitigated erroneous information endorsed by the general public. The conflict between technical terms, which have stipulated definitions, as opposed to the sometimes elusive meanings of ordinary language may be illustrated by one of the commonly alleged popular beliefs about language history, namely, the notion that the speech of isolated mountain and island communities in the USA preserves Shakespearean English, Chaucerian English, or Old English.



Such references, which linguistic experts did not overtly ‘correct’ in the documentary *Mountain Talk*, are based on a valid observation that some archaic lexical, phonological, and morphosyntactic features are retained in these Appalachian communities. Although such a broad-based claim is certainly not an accurate linguistic depiction of language retention given the dynamic nature of language, the statements do, in fact, figuratively capture the observation that selective language retention has preserved the use of forms that were in use hundreds of years ago. As noted in Wolfram (2007a), linguists are sometimes all too ready to see the folklore in others’ statements while ignoring the unintended readings of their own pronouncements that may lead to the development of ‘sociolinguistic folklore’ perpetuated by the linguistic community.

The qualifications raised in the previous paragraph are not intended to mitigate the obvious ideological conflicts that sometimes arise between a linguistic understanding and a community perspective of language difference. The effects of linguistic subordination run deep and wide, and just about all vernacular-speaking, non-mainstream communities suffer from an overt, collective condition of linguistic inferiority. There is no fail-safe strategy for overcoming this basic conflict, but it has become apparent to us that the most effective approach to mitigating this conflict appears to involve flying under the ideological radar. We have found, for example, that positively framed presentations of language variation hold a greater likelihood of being received than those that directly confront language ideologies considered to be unassailable.

To illustrate this approach, consider how we treat the case of AAE, still by far the most controversial dialect in American society. In approaching this topic in *Voices of North Carolina* (Hutcheson 2005), a documentary on language diversity across North Carolina, we strategically sequence the discussion of AAE after the descriptions of a number of other less controversial language varieties including Outer Banks English, Appalachian English, the Cherokee language, and Lumbee English, thus, embedding it well within the presentation of other regional and sociocultural varieties.

Similarly, our middle school dialect curriculum only considers this variety after discussions of dialect patterning in a number of other regional and cultural varieties, thus normalizing its status as a systematic variety of English. In addition, we frame the introduction of AAE in the documentary with upbeat, cultural images, and music. Against this visual and musical backdrop, the narrator introduces AAE with the simple voiceover statement, ‘Language is an important part of all social and cultural groups, but it seems to have a special place in the African American experience.’ Later in the episode on AAE, community members offer observations both about the diverse nature of speech in the African American community and the internal struggle about language and identity. One respected community leader notes, ‘Even inside the African American community, when you go from region to region, there are really different voices and sounds,’ while the host of a local radio

talk show offers insight into the nature of internal conflict about identity, 'For some people there is an internal struggle about, should they really be trying to do that, should you be trying to talk like white folk? Or, should you, all the time, no matter what setting you are in, speak the same way, speak the same way your momma taught you to speak?' The visual and narrative framing, the selection of comments, and the choices about what to include and what not to include (e.g., there is no mention of 'Ebonics') have led to a remarkably positive reception to this presentation of AAE – and no objections about its inclusion.

Decisions about inclusion, presentation, editing, and voiceover naturally emphasize the power of the producer and editor who ultimately control such choices. Hutcheson observes:

Regardless of the degree and kind of collaboration, the filmmaker is ultimately responsible for what is in the film and the final representation. The trust that the subjects place in filmmakers lays a heavy responsibility on them to set aside their inclinations, assumptions, and convictions, even aesthetic ones, in the service of the subject. The community is well-represented to the extent that it recognizes itself in the end result. But it is still an interpretation. The ultra gabillions of microscopic and macroscopic decisions made in the filmmaking process ensure a highly selective portrait, no matter who is involved and what their intentions are. (Neal Hutcheson, e-mail 27 September 2007)

In the process of collaboration, it is important for both leaders and lay people in the community to provide feedback and input into the emerging project. We have, for example, gained critical feedback from community residents that have led to significant revisions that made our projects align more with community perspectives without absolving our responsibility for the presentation of the final product.

#### AUDIENCE AND DESIGN

Naturally, the range of audiences for sociolinguistic engagement may vary, from predetermined, target populations such as a specific student population in a grade-level subject area to a general, open audience of television viewers who may happen to watch a documentary aired on prime time television. The design of the project and the goals will naturally be determined in accordance with the targeted or presumed audience. Consequently, the goals for a public video documentary might focus generally on developing an appreciation for the role of language as an artifact of cultural heritage and a representation of historical legacy whereas a dialect curriculum for a middle school social studies unit might include objectives such as understanding the basis for systematic dialect patterns, knowledge of specific dialect rules of different regional and sociocultural dialects, and contrasts between different varieties of English. In the latter context, specific objectives in the curriculum are, in fact, aligned with the Standard Course of Study for

**Table 2. Illustrations of how the *Voices of North Carolina* dialect curriculum taps different learning styles and intelligences.**

Learning style	Intelligence	Activity/curricular component
Visual	Spatial	Video vignettes
Aural	Musical	All regional video vignettes are accompanied by local music
Verbal	Linguistic	Teacher led discussions (e.g., dialect introductions, vocabulary)
Physical	Kinesthetic	Interactive settlement maps
Logical	Mathematical	Analyzing habitual <i>be</i> pattern
Social	Interpersonal	Group work/cooperative learning (Outer Banks English patterns)
Solitary	Intrapersonal	Individual exercises (e.g., <i>pin/pen</i> merger)

8th grade Social Studies, as illustrated in Table 1. In the left column are given the North Carolina 8th grade Standard Course of Study objectives, while the right column shows how the dialect curriculum, *Voices of North Carolina* (Reaser and Wolfram 2007a,b), meets these standards. In fact, one of the selling points of the curriculum is that it directly addresses 12 different objectives and six of the nine strands included in the Standard Course of Study.

The design of programs also has to take into account different learner styles and ‘multiple intelligences’ as set forth by Gardner (1983). Table 2, for example, shows how different learning styles and intelligences are integrated into the curriculum in a way that roughly approximates Gardner’s different intelligences.

While a curriculum on dialects for 8th grade social studies students might be expected to articulate quite specific objectives and accommodate different learning styles, other venues target more varied audiences and have quite different goals. For example, the goals of an exhibit on the role of African-Americans in the development of the Outer Banks (Vaughn and Grimes 2006) were: (i) to celebrate the significant but often-overlooked role of African-Americans in the development of coastal North Carolina and the Outer Banks; (ii) to inform visitors about the role of African-Americans in the historical development and contemporary life of the Outer Banks; (iii) to construct a permanent, multi-visual tribute to the durable role of the African-American community on Roanoke Island and on the Outer Banks; (iv) to encourage the archival collection of memorabilia about the past and present African-American presence on the Outer Banks; and (v) to promote the awareness of cultural and linguistic diversity in coastal North Carolina. The subsequent exhibit incorporated a variety of presentation formats that included more than 80 different informational panels, more than 150 photographs, and more than 50 artifacts, largely collected from members of the community. The gallery space is highlighted by a 14-min documentary film produced



Fig. 1. *Freedom's Voice* exhibit demonstrating its diversity of media and content.

specifically for the exhibit that highlights the Roanoke Island Freedmen's Colony (Sellers 2006), an oversized timeline detailing the history of the Freedmen's Colony, as well as interpretation of several primary source documents. Audio excerpts at four different listening stations throughout the exhibit space give visitors a chance to hear residents share their memories about life in the community, and a large flip-book tells the legend behind traditional African-American quilt patterns, guided by a quilt made by local Roanoke Island quilters in honor of the Freedmen's Colony. Obviously, the exhibit involved a partnership with community members who contributed photos, artifacts, and resource information. Its design offered interactive video and audio stations as well as a myriad of visual, text, and chart formats for visitors.

One of the important aspects of the exhibit design was its appeal to varied types of visitors, sometimes referred to as 'streakers, strollers, and students' (adapted from Scott 2006). This phrase aptly refers to distinct types of museum visitors, ranging from those who quickly survey the various stations and displays to those who read and study the contents in the panels and engage in the interactive activities. Figure 1 shows examples of the different types of content and modalities of media included in the exhibit *Freedom's Voice*.

People have different interests, abilities, learning styles, and goals, and diversity of media and content in the presentation allows them to take away

different levels of information from the presentation. Naturally, different venues of engagement hold the potential for different levels of collaboration, from the local exhibit where community members contribute memorabilia and monitor the presentation with the producers on an ongoing basis, to the documentary in which community members have input and ratify the final product but do not have an active role in editing. Comments on the visitor's log at the exhibit, such as 'Much needed!' 'Thank you for allowing me to better understand the past. Very valuable.' 'Grew up near [here]. Didn't know this!' and 'Thank you for sharing my history with me'. indicate that both community residents and outsiders benefited from the exhibit. Certainly, the active contribution of artifacts, photos, and other memorabilia by community members themselves symbolized their concrete investment in the project.

#### LOGISTICAL ISSUES

Finally, we should mention a few of the challenges of logistical issues related to outreach and engagement. The engagement experience often stretches our role beyond traditional areas of expertise in sociolinguistics, to marketing, publicity, and even the world of mass mailings. Our experiences have taught us important, practical lessons about such ventures in terms of expectations about collaboration and community responses to partnership. Few linguists have thought seriously about setting up an opening or premiere, designing a media stand at a bookstore, or distributing a brochure for DVD and CD products – and maybe they should not. At the same time, these practical, marketing aspects of engagement are as essential to the goals of outreach as the products themselves. If we want our efforts to reach as wide an audience as we would like, we cannot afford to dismiss these practical dimensions of outreach.

There are, of course, unforeseen obstacles in all outreach activities that simply cannot be anticipated, ranging from glitches in technology to unexpected reactions by community members. These are inevitable and must be considered as inherent to the process of collaborative engagement. Furthermore, some of the issues severely test the notion of collaboration. An incident over our first community-based exhibit, constructed for the Ocracoke Preservation Society (Gruendler and Wolfram 1997), underscores how we have sometimes unwittingly pre-empted the partnership relationship on a practical level. On behalf of the society, we constructed an exhibit on the Ocracoke Brogue in the museum, complete with creative background paneling, photos, and bulleted posters highlighting the dialect. The exhibit was designed and constructed by professionals, and we were quite pleased with its appearance and construction. Within a day of its on-site placement, however, it was dismantled by those in charge of the museum. The elaborate background structure was discarded and the photos and posters were placed on the wall. By our standards, the rearrangement of the exhibit compromised

its esthetic integrity. However, we chose to accept the decision of the community about what they wanted for the exhibit.

A second example, a failed documentary film on Harkers Island speech (Creech and Creech 1996), demonstrates the significance of the community's reception of an outreach project. When a rough cut was previewed at a community meeting, some community members felt that the documentary did not authentically represent the community in terms of the selection of music and framing of the presentation. The producers, satisfied with the editorial choices of the film, refused to alter it, severely curtailing our research and engagement activities with the community for a decade.

Our responses to the two communities demonstrate that community collaboration is, in fact, a process of negotiation and compromise and that the community must have significant input in consequential decisions about product and process. Researchers and producers need to be sensitive to criticism and input from different interest groups throughout the process of the development of a project, remembering why the projects were undertaken in the first place. We cannot afford to take criticism of our projects personally and become defensive about our investment of creativity, energy, resources, professionalism, and good intentions.

### *Conclusion*

In an important sense, engagement is more of a process than a final product, and consequently the ultimate shape of our projects and programs should reflect as much the concern for the process as for the product. If we have learned anything in our engagement activities, it is the fact that sociolinguists need to be flexible in the evolution of a project. When we take into account available resources, the input of community members, and our negotiated, developing, and revised visions of partnering with communities, we should not be surprised that our final product often bears only a faint resemblance to our original idea.

In the final analysis, continued engagement is related to a set of diverse, personal relationships established over time. While it is certainly possible for sociolinguists to engage in meaningful, short-term engagement, projects and commitments more realistically set us up for long-term involvement with particular communities. In Ocracoke, for example, we have been engaged for almost two decades in community activities that have ranged from different museum exhibits, documentaries, oral history CDs, popular books, and a dialect awareness program that has been taught to every 8th grader in the Ocracoke School for the past 15 years. Over time, we have been enlisted by friends and families with whom we have worked to help commemorate special events in the community including birthdays and deaths, as the practical extension of our gratuity principle (Hutcheson 2008). Although not without conflict, challenges, and frustrations, this and other

long-term commitments have convinced us that extended engagement can indeed pay great dividends for both the community and sociolinguists. Working out the everyday details of linguistic gratuity and negotiating community-based partnerships can often be complicated and controversial on a number of different levels, and sociolinguists cannot assume naively that community goals and sociolinguistic agendas will seamlessly mesh to the advantage of both the community and researchers. At the same time, it can be one of the most rewarding activities in our professional and personal lives and add a meaningful, complementary dimension to our research agendas.

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### *Short Biographies*

Walt Wolfram is William C. Friday Distinguished University Professor at North Carolina State University, where he directs the North Carolina Language and Life Project. He has pioneered research on social, ethnic, and regional varieties of American English since the 1960s, ranging from studies of urban AAE to descriptions of receding island dialects off of the coast of the American South. He has also been vitally invested in the effective dissemination of information on language variation to practitioners and to the American public. This interest has included work on a number of TV documentaries, museum exhibits, and curricular materials on dialect awareness.

Jeffrey Reaser is Assistant Professor of Linguistics in the English Department at North Carolina State University, where his research focuses on the effectiveness of curricular materials on dialect awareness. He has also developed online curricular materials for the MacNeil-Lehrer Productions documentary, *Do you Speak American?* and conducts workshops for teachers interested in teaching dialect awareness materials.

Charlotte Vaughn, currently a PhD student in Linguistics at Northwestern University, is also a graphic designer and exhibit constructor. She has designed

and constructed several highly acclaimed museum exhibits, including *Freedom's Voice: Celebrating the Black Experience on the Outer Banks* on Roanoke Island, North Carolina, and *Celebrating Muzel Bryant* at the Museum of the Ocracoke Preservation Society.

### Notes

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