

## DIALOGUE

### Scrutinizing linguistic gratuity: Issues from the field<sup>1</sup>

Walt Wolfram

*North Carolina State University*

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The unequal partnership between sociolinguistics and the . . . speech community . . . represents a far more general problem between linguistics and the community of speakers whose data fuel our descriptive grammars, theories, and careers.

(Rickford 1997: 186)

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In this discussion, I examine the concept and practice of returning linguistic favors to host research communities, the so-called *linguistic gratuity principle* (Wolfram 1993). Following the model of Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton, and Richardson (1992), I use a case study format as the basis for scrutinizing researcher-community relationships. Our research in the post-insular dialect community of Ocracoke, located on the Outer Banks of North Carolina (U.S.A.), represents one of the most extensive examples of the application of the gratuity principle in social dialectology, and is therefore a good case study for raising some issues about researcher-community relations (e.g. Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1995, 1996, 1997; Wolfram, Hazen, and Schilling-Estes 1998).

In the United States, social involvement by researchers has been canonized in Labov's (1982) *principle of error correction* and *principle of debt incurred*. From our perspective, these principles seemed to be too reactive and restricted. We wanted to be more proactive and encourage researchers from the outset of their research to think about ways in which they might constructively share their expertise and knowledge with host research communities. Hence, we proposed the *principle of linguistic gratuity*. To a large extent, our concerns were driven by a similar notion to Cameron et al's: 'If knowledge is worth having, it is worth sharing' (Cameron et al. 1992: 24).

Almost from the outset of our sociolinguistic research on Ocracoke and other communities in North Carolina in 1992, we have actively engaged in

community-based *dialect awareness programs*. The goal of these programs is to inform members of the host community and the general public about the dialect heritage of the community and matters of dialect diversity in general. We have viewed our relationship to the community as 'advocacy research' in terms of Cameron, et al's (1992) tripartite distinction of researcher-researched relationships: ethics, advocacy, and empowerment.

Our dialect awareness program in Ocracoke involves an extensive set of formal and informal educational activities, and engages different types of community institutions and agencies. These activities, programs, and presentations include the following:

- The development of a week-long, dialect awareness curriculum on dialects and the Ocracoke Brogue (Wolfram, Schilling-Estes, and Hazen 1995) which is now taught yearly on the 8th grade level at the Ocracoke school.
- The publication of a book written for general audiences (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1997) available in tourist sites on the island and in popular bookstores and museums around the state. Royalties from the book are shared with the Ocracoke Preservation Society (OPS).
- The production of a video documentary on the Ocracoke Brogue, as the traditional dialect is referred to popularly (Blanton and Waters 1995). The documentary, available through the OPS, is shown in informal and formal educational venues with all revenues from its sale going to the OPS.
- The development of an archival tape collection of selected excerpts from interviews conducted as a part of our research project.
- The establishment of a permanent exhibit on the Ocracoke Brogue for the local historical preservation museum operated by the OPS. Funds for its establishment were obtained through a special grant written by our research staff on behalf of the OPS.
- The design and distribution of a souvenir T-shirt with the slogan 'Save the Brogue' printed on the front of the shirt and a set of unique dialect terms printed on the back. The shirt is distributed at the museum operated by the OPS, with all revenues from its sale donated to the OPS.
- The presentation of a series of lectures and workshops on dialect variation and Outer Banks speech for community groups (e.g. preservation society meetings) and for Outer Banks visitors (e.g. visiting groups of students, civic groups, and teachers).
- Cooperation with a variety of media specialists producing feature stories on the historical roots and the current, moribund state of the Ocracoke Brogue. Articles have appeared in newspapers ranging from *The Times* of London to the local Ocracoke school newspaper. TV and radio coverage has ranged from BBC-produced features aired internationally to local and state-based TV and radio spots.

Our attempts to return linguistic favors to the community have involved social, educational, and economic alliances. Although we would like to think of

our application of the *principle of linguistic gratuity* as a model of how sociolinguistic researchers might work productively with a community on language issues (e.g. Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1995, Wolfram forthcoming), we are aware that community-based collaboration raises deeper issues about the roles of sociolinguistic researchers in local communities. Few sociolinguists, in principle, would probably be opposed to returning linguistic favors to a host research community and to establishing collaborative relationships with local communities in ways that might benefit the community. But notions such as 'favors', 'collaboration', and 'benefit' are ideologically loaded. Furthermore, working out the everyday details of gratuity and the exact nature of community-based partnerships can often be complicated and controversial. At the very least, some underlying issues about these partnerships need to be raised, with an eye towards eventually establishing principles to guide researcher-community partnerships with respect to returning linguistic favors. In attempting to implement the principle of linguistic gratuity, a number of issues specific to Ocracoke have arisen, but the ideological, sociopolitical, and ethical matters that emerge from this particular case also seem quite generalizable to sociolinguistic partnerships with local communities wherever they might exist.

One of the immediate issues that surfaces in implementing the principle of linguistic gratuity in community-researcher partnerships involves *relationships of power and authority*. Although the members of a research team may assume a variety of negotiated roles and relationships as visitors, friends, and researchers, our initial and primary status in the Ocracoke community was framed as university-based language experts. We have never attempted to disguise our role as researchers who study language variation. In presenting ourselves as the 'dialect people' (a common reference by islanders who don't know us personally), however, we have been assigned a role as language authorities. In other domains of knowledge, such as the ways of the water or island life in general, we may rightly be considered naive or ignorant (I have been asked, 'How can you be a university professor and be so dumb?'), but when it comes to general matters of language variation we are ascribed expert status. This position carries with it an associated set of privileges and opportunities. In fact, we were provided the initial opportunity to develop a school-based program on dialect awareness and a program of activities with the preservation society because of this status. Certainly, acceptance by the members of the Ocracoke community hardly rests on academic credentials or expert status (it is indeed more of an obstacle to be overcome than an asset in establishing personal friendships), but our position established an asymmetrical relationship of authority about language matters.

The authority relationship in the language domain has clearly impacted *issues of ownership* with respect to the language-related activities that have been inaugurated since we arrived on Ocracoke in 1992. Notwithstanding the fact that some community members have repeatedly indicated their appreciation of the programs and activities to celebrate the dialect heritage of the community,

they are still thought of as 'Walt's programs,' not 'Ocracoke's programs.' In fact, one of the most telling statements comes from a classroom teacher who gave a glowing testimonial about the significance of a dialect awareness program carried out in her class by noting that, 'The pride that has been established through Walt's program is phenomenal . . .' As favorable as this comment seems, it still indicates that ownership of the program is not assumed by the teachers or the community.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, relationships of authority and power have influenced the assumption and assignment of ownership on a number of different levels.

The only linguistic domain where some proprietary language rights have been claimed by community members involves the lexicon. Not surprisingly, islanders have occasionally but symbolically challenged our definitions of 'dialect words,' and a few of them have even taken it upon themselves to collect sets of words and sayings on their own. (No community member has yet challenged us about our morphosyntactic descriptions.) We see the involvement of some local residents with the collection and presentation of the Ocracoke lexicon as a good sign, but we also have to admit that, following discussion and consultation with islanders, we have typically presumed the right to make final decisions about those items to be included in the published dialect dictionary of island speech. Thus, there is limited 'empowerment' in the community's role in the dialect dictionary.

A recent incident over an exhibit constructed for the preservation society underscored how we have sometimes unwittingly preempted the partnership relationship. On behalf of the OPS, we wrote a grant to design and construct a permanent exhibit on the Ocracoke Brogue, complete with creative background paneling, photos, and bulleted posters highlighting the dialect. The exhibit was designed and constructed by professionals we hired for the job, and we were quite pleased with its appearance and construction. Within a day of its erection on site at the local museum, however, it was dismantled. The elaborate background structure was discarded and the photos and posters were placed on the wall in a display arrangement that made no presentation sense to the designers or to us. We were extremely disappointed and debated whether we should raise the matter with the local museum staff. By our standards, the rearrangement of the exhibit compromised its aesthetic integrity (to say nothing of the financial cost we incurred personally beyond that budgeted for in the grant). But we also learned a valuable lesson. If this was a partnership, and the museum staff had different notions regarding the presentation of the dialect exhibit, then shouldn't they have the prerogative to present the exhibit as they saw fit? Or perhaps they seized ownership of the exhibit in a way that undermined our partnership rights? What if they had changed the presentation in a way that led to linguistic error? What rights would we now have in the partnership?

*Issues of presentation* about language matters always seem to be at stake in collaborative efforts. By presentation, here I mean the selection of language issues to be highlighted and discussed within and outside the community. We

have to admit that we decided these issues for Ocracoke on the basis of our expert status rather than by popular community determination. As linguists, we were concerned with the moribund status of the dialect and therefore stressed the dialect endangerment theme. Our ethnographic interviews on island identity and the recession of the Brogue, however, indicated that few islanders overtly associated the dialect directly with membership in the Ocracoke community, and that our concern for the recession of the dialect was not shared by island residents. The fact of the matter is that language issues are simply not paramount to islanders, who are much more concerned about economic and environmental issues such as property taxes and development. Our portrayal of the recession of the traditional dialect sometimes evokes sympathetic and nostalgic responses by islanders when we talk about the changing status of the dialect, but our focus is also viewed as a bit of an oddity. As one islander who has worked with us closely for the past five years put it in an interview to a newspaper reporter, 'The only person who worries about the dialect is Walt Wolfram.'

One of the riskiest presentation ventures we have engaged in involves cooperation with the media in presenting to the public the unique dialect heritage and its changing status. On a number of occasions, we talked to journalists and introduced them to islanders who have been exceedingly friendly and helpful to them. Our rationale has been to portray the dialect heritage in a positive light for those who don't know about it or recognize it as an important part of a traditional sociohistorical heritage. Islanders, particularly those whom we have recommended to journalists (a presentation issue in itself) have, for the most part, been satisfied and even happy with the news coverage. It does, after all, enhance the theme of island uniqueness that is an essential part of how islanders define themselves. But it is also a very high-risk venture, and there are no guarantees of how the people and their language might be portrayed. For example, a couple of stories have been based on erroneous stereotypes. On one occasion, a BBC correspondent in search of Elizabethan English on Ocracoke proposed getting some residents to read Shakespeare on camera. Although we strongly advised him **not** to ask islanders to do so, we later came upon one of our island friends, Rex O'Neal, standing on the dock in front of the TV camera reading Shakespeare.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, we had a good laugh, especially at the ironic parody of Rex gesticulating dramatically and reading Shakespeare with a contrived British accent. We jokingly referred to the performance as 'Rexspeare.' On the other hand, however, we have to admit that we probably played into the hands of those perpetuating stereotypes about the Ocracoke dialect as Elizabethan English in our zeal for publicizing the Brogue.

By the same token, one of our most gratifying experiences involving empowerment took place when the editorial staff of the biannually published school newspaper decided to feature the Brogue in one of their editions. We were interviewed in the role of the researched, and the student staff presented dialect issues from their perspective. Also included were essays and poems

written by students at various grade levels, with the perspectives on dialects representing the students, not the researchers.

Presentation issues are closely related to *issues of representation*, which I use to refer to particular ways in which the local dialect is characterized and commodified. How do we depict the dialect in our popular portrayals? For example, feature stories in journalistic accounts typically include and highlight sample dialect lexical items (e.g. words like *mommuck* 'harass', *meehonkey* 'hide and seek,' *dingbatter* 'non-islander,' etc.), even though our research focus as variationists is on phonological and morphosyntactic phenomena rather than the lexicon. Early in our research we compiled a dialect dictionary for local distribution. The rationale for producing such a product early in the study of a dialect community is that:

1. it is a tangible product that a local community can understand with minimal background information;
2. it can be produced as an ongoing project within a relatively short time frame, thus showing immediate results;
3. it can involve local residents meaningfully in the collection of data and some aspects of the compilation process.

At the same time, I have always scoffed at popular, amateurish attempts by non-specialists to capture local lexical items that mix pronunciation, eye dialect, and other associated sayings collected on an informal, impressionistic basis. Have we patronized or even misled the community by engaging in this activity or simply found a common ground of interest in language variation? By the same token, have we compromised the activities of serious, painstaking lexical collections such as the *Dictionary of American Regional English*, now entering into its fourth decade of production, by engaging in such rapid-fire production of dialect dictionaries? These are not insignificant questions in terms of balancing professional and community concerns as we present the dialect to the community and to outsiders.

In most cases, social dialectologists tend to portray more marked and vernacular versions of dialect – the more 'exotic' forms of language variation – in their representations to wider audiences, including audiences of fellow linguists. At the same time that we preach about the variable nature of socially diagnostic linguistic features in our texts and in our classrooms, our dialect awareness materials (e.g. Wolfram, Schilling-Estes, and Hazen 1995) sometimes run the danger of creating oversimplified dialect caricatures that defy the authentic complexity of the dialect community. Furthermore, the general public is not the only group that may have a tendency to create stereotypes. As Rickford (1997) points out, the themes that researchers highlight in presentations may serve to reinforce – or even create – new kinds of stereotypes about the lives and language of a speech community. One of the stereotypes social dialectologists have to guard against is the *basilectal stereotype*, where vernacular dialects are portrayed in their maximally vernacular form. Our

portrayals are shaped, perhaps unconsciously, by how we wish our information to be received and perceived.

In researcher-community collaboration, we can expect to encounter *issues of conflicting beliefs and values* about language that may differentiate community members and professional linguists. As professional linguists, we are quite prepared to counter popular beliefs about the systematicity and logic of vernacular dialects in the name of the *principle of error correction* (Labov 1982) when we meet them in the classroom and in impersonal public gatherings. How do we honestly but diplomatically confront a community leader responsible for our social networking in the community who offers the following: 'We had a linguist here a couple of years ago who tried to tell us our speech wasn't just old English – we had to set him straight.' (For the record, this was uttered by a contact person in another Outer Banks island community where we did some comparative research, not Ocracoke.) How do partnerships really work when community members and linguistic researchers enter into a partnership with different belief systems and entrenched ideologies about language diversity – the typical case when dealing with vernacular-speaking communities? How do we present findings that must describe racist and sexist behavior as a part of the essential social background for understanding language variation, when the researcher is committed to sharing information with community members? Is it ethical to adapt information for different audiences in order to 'protect' our collaborative interests? These are difficult questions with no easy answers, but they affect the sharing of knowledge and researcher-community partnerships in significant ways.

Finally, there are *issues of need and profit*. Do communities really want and need our invasive collaboration? Who really profits from our participation in the community? We have been careful to invest financially in the Ocracoke community by returning the majority of financial revenues from our products to agencies such as the preservation society. The awareness about dialect as a symbol of cultural heritage among community members has also been heightened a great deal through our involvement in the community. Was this a mutual goal derived from the partnership or simply an imposition of our sociolinguistic and sociopolitical agenda on the community? We have also profited in return, in terms of our research reputations, professional advancement – and even in our recognition for proactive involvement with local vernacular-speaking communities (Rickford 1997: 184). Given how we stand to profit in our profession from such partnerships, it is hard to claim that we have no profit motive. Even if we took a position that favors to communities should be limited to activities unrelated to language, such as babysitting, tutoring, or other volunteer activities in host communities, our motives for offering such services might be suspect.

It is apparent there are many issues that need to be contemplated in advocating researcher-community partnerships and the implementation of the linguistic gratuity principle. This discussion is neither comprehensive nor

complete. These reflections are offered simply as a starting point for examining the full implications of sharing knowledge and expertise with host research communities in the name of linguistic gratuity. To be honest, the most instructive aspect of this inner dialogue is the self-revelation of the inequality in the advocacy relationship, which really didn't hit me until I started setting forth the issues in this essay. Relationships of empowerment are also an elusive ideal given the differential status of language researchers and community members, and prevailing ideologies in society with respect to non-mainstream varieties of language. But I can't give up the notion that returning linguistic favors in some form is a good and proper thing when we have mined if not exploited so many of the speech community's linguistic resources to our advantage. I am particularly interested in how other sociolinguistic researchers might partner with different kinds of communities in terms of returning linguistic favors, and welcome reactions of readers to the issues I have raised here.

## NOTES

1. Special thanks are due to Natalie Schilling-Estes, who sometimes challenged my manic impulsiveness in implementing the programs and activities reported here while risking the consequences of a working partnership herself. Thanks also to Kirk Hazen, who offered insightful perspective based on his longstanding experience with the Ocracoke research project. The reflections offered here were inspired by Allan Bell following a brief visit to Ocracoke with me in 1997. Most of all, I am in great debt to my friends and acquaintances in Ocracoke. I feel most fortunate to have worked in a community that is more tolerant and forgiving than we could rightly expect of our often-presumptuous attempts to apply the gratuity principle. It also doesn't hurt that Ocracoke is just a great place to hang out. As one of our friends on Ocracoke is prone to say while preparing freshly caught fish on a charcoal grill on a picture-perfect day, 'It don't get no better than this.' In this instance, it was not merely an 'exotic quote' but the truth about the Ocracoke community.
2. Notice also that the personification of the programs as 'Walt's' disregards the role of staff members who have done research quite independently and, on occasion, have challenged the findings of the most high-profiled member of the team, raising yet another issue of ownership in the research domain.
3. For a discussion of Rex O'Neal (who wishes to be known by name in published discussions of his speech) as a dialect performer, see Schilling-Estes (1998).

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Address correspondence to:

Walt Wolfram  
 Box 8105 English Department  
 North Carolina State University  
 Raleigh  
 NC 27695–8105  
 United States  
 wolfram@social.chass.ncsu.edu