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Ruth A. McLeod
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MONOLINGUAL APPROACH

Ruth A. McLeod

Summer Institute of Linguistics, Brazil

The following notes deal with the way in which we handled the monolingual language-learning situation on the Indian Protection Service (S.P.I.) Post of Simoes Lopes, Mato Grosso, the pitfalls we found, and what we would do differently should we be starting afresh. It should be noted that certain difficulties encountered were due to the setup here, peculiar to the S.P.I. Posts of Brazil. The Post official arranged for a change of informant each week. Although we have had the occasional informal help of a man, our informants have been almost exclusively women. The Chavante on this Post number two hundred, or less, and all are almost completely monolingual.

When we first arrived at the Post (December '58) we asked for a Chavante woman to help us with the housework as well as doing informant work for us. The official sent us a different woman each week, some of whom were useless as informants, and so after a few weeks of frustration we asked if we could have the first girl to help us indefinitely, as she had been quite helpful (when we could persuade her to sit still). We learned later that this was a bad policy, for two reasons. First, the other Chavante women became jealous of our informant's weekly earnings of cloth and thread. Second, by keeping to the first reasonably helpful informant, and neglecting to try out other women, we failed to discover, for many months, those women who were really capable of being good informants. The fact that we have monthly linguistic goals made us feel rather desperate at our lack of progress with poor informants. It would have been better if we had prepared for a slow start, prepared to try out lots of informants, prepared to spend only a little time per day with an informant, and prepared to spend much more time at the village with the people, trying to learn names of things, simple action words, etc., in a natural context, instead of trying to create situations within the four walls of our house.

We made the mistake of expecting the informant to adhere to our timetable, instead of finding out at what times the people worked and when they rested. As soon as the dishes were washed after dinner we would seize the informant and try to extract more information from her. It was much later that we discovered the reason for her disinclination for afternoon work in particular, viz., the fact that the Chavante work from dawn until about 10 a.m. and do not resume work until mid-afternoon.

After the experiment of one woman for housework-informant work we asked for two women, one for each job. Although we had some trouble when each woman brought along a squalling baby, we benefitted by being able to listen to Chavante dialogue.

We found that it was not good to maintain too rigid a dichotomy between informant work and housework. We learned from the Post official that those who did only informant work were becoming proud and didn't want to do manual work for the Post! So now we send both women to the river for water, and sometimes give the informant other odd jobs to do.

We made two trips with our informant to the fields where the Chavante were working, during our first six months out here. The trips would have been more valuable if we'd taken two women with us, as we'd have had good opportunities for listening to the language.

Although there are usually one or two people in the village at all times, yet we've found the best time for visiting to be round about 4 p.m. when the women have finished work and the afternoon meal is over, and everyone is relaxing. It is important to sit down when visiting, whether invited to do so or not. To stand implies that we are simply onlookers, critical perhaps, without much real interest -- to sit down implies interest, friendliness and a desire to get to know the people. I've found that the Chavante accept us much more as one of themselves when we sit with them and spend time asking questions and giving them little pieces of information.

It is important to listen to the people talking in order to learn question words and phrases and to notice what people say when one is going anywhere -- most likely a question is being asked.

It is good to write down everything possible even though the meaning is not fully understood. It's most important to make a note of the context, as this often throws light on the meaning of a morpheme or morphemes in the clause or phrase. It is good to keep a morpheme file of phrases containing unknown morphemes, on 3x5's. This collection should be maintained, even after the meaning of a morpheme is learned, since the morpheme may have a much wider area of meaning than is apparent at the moment.

Some very useful pieces of information have been acquired in the course of trying to explain something to someone. For example, Eunice found a mirror of hers broken and she tried to find out who was the culprit. I tried to explain to our informant that Eunice was not angry, she just wanted to know who had broken the mirror. My informant in reply gave me a phrase meaning, "If I had broken it, I would have said", containing new morphemes or new usage of old morphemes for 'if' and 'would'. It is helpful to listen to comments of one person to another on one's explanation of something, if you are able to make a note of the comment.

Pictures are useful. I learned how to say 'become' when showing one informant a picture of the Royal Family. I tried to explain that our "chief" was a woman, and when she died her son, Charles, would be the new "chief". The informant responded with the phrase, "When his mother dies, he will become chief." A well-known reflexive morpheme had here acquired a new area of meaning.

Sketches are useful, when the people get used to the idea of meaning conveyed by a drawing on paper. For example, the contrast between a big mouth and a small mouth (nose, ears, eyes, etc.) can be shown by a sketch, and an intelligent informant will soon realize what is wanted.

The use of objects such as stones, sticks, etc., can be useful in eliciting modifying words. It is dangerous to create artificial situations and objects, however. I was trying to find the words for 'thick' and 'thin' (liquid and solid), and I concocted a flour and water paste to find the word for 'thick' (liquid). I later discovered that the word given was wajpoti 'like phlegm' !

It is good to make sure that the informant knows what you are indicating, when trying to elicit names of objects. For example, I pointed to a white cloud and asked its name. The word given later proved to be the name of a bird which was sitting on the roof in the direction of my pointing!

We have found it very dangerous to rely upon elicited material.* Verb paradigms, possessive constructions should be checked thoroughly before being accepted as correct. We have had informants who have gone down the line and the data has been completely unreliable.

Those of us working in tribes in Brazil are required to fill in a vocabulary list for the National Museum. I have found the list very useful as a guide to the kind of vocabulary I should know. I have come across some interesting constructions through working on the verb section. I found that certain words in the list were not easily elicited (e.g. blood, seed, tail) although these words are freely used within a natural context. It seems better to either omit the word altogether, or learn it in its context, if its eliciting seems likely to cause offence.

Our battery-operated tape recorder has been an invaluable asset in this monolingual set-up. Even when we were having informant difficulties, we did manage to get some text on tape, and we were able to spend time trying to ascertain meanings. We had some difficulty in getting the informant to record at times. The situation was helped by suggesting topics of everyday things; e.g., the snake in the wood-box, the coming of the plane. Later on, the informant recorded something that had already been told her, which gave us some idea of the subject-matter!

October, 1960

*underlining by R.S.P.