Semantics, indigenous languages, and linguists in the community

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Language
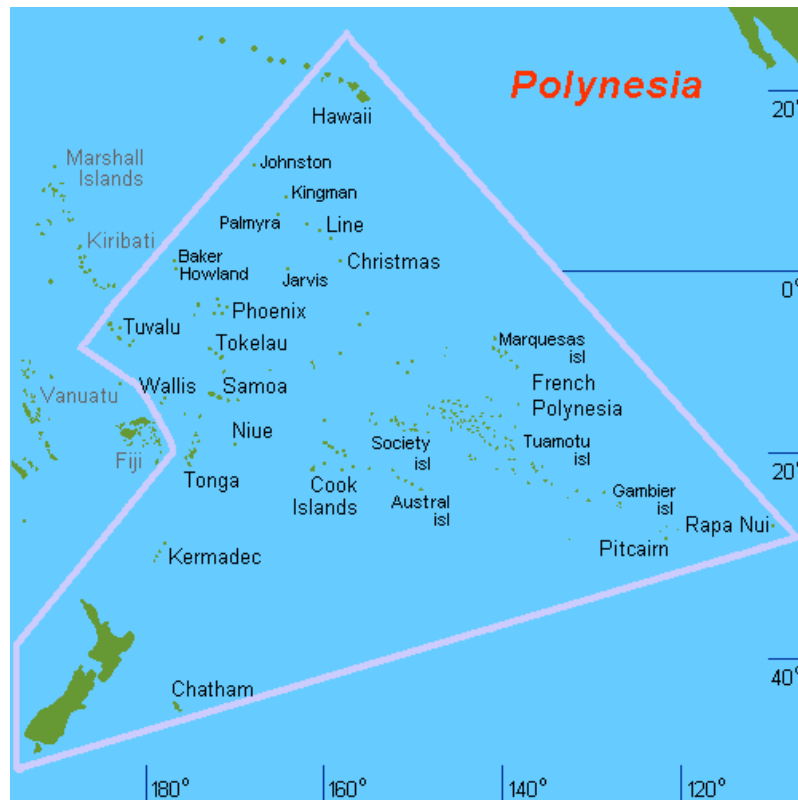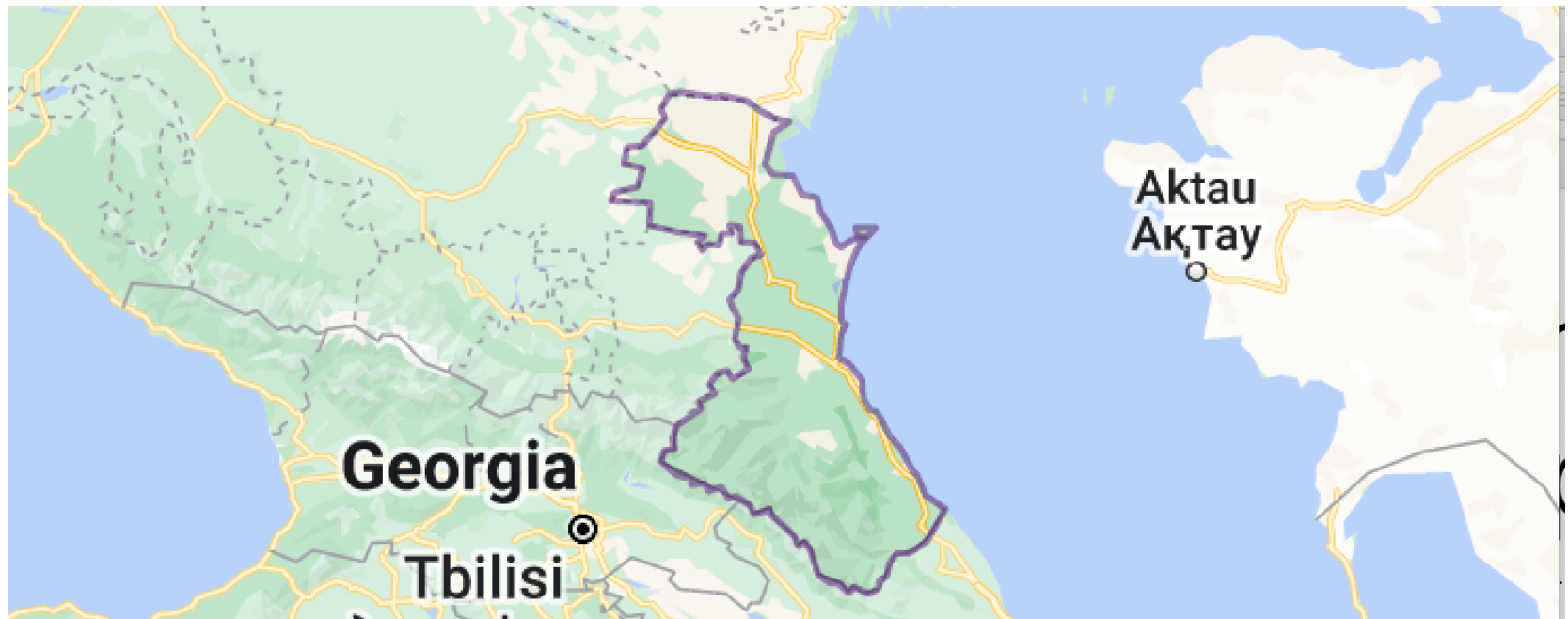at Maryland

Some of my linguistic travels

Communities where I have done primary fieldwork

The Pacific: Polynesia and Fiji

Communities where I have done primary fieldwork

The Caucasus: Georgia and Dagestan

Communities where I have done primary fieldwork

Guatemala (Mayan communities)

Main points for today

- Semantics in fieldwork: K'iche' and Tsez
- Lessons learned

Semantics in fieldwork: Two examples

K'iche' and Tsez

K'iche': Tense or Aspect?

Work by Maša Bešlin, UMD
with Sindy Fabiola Can Pixabaj

(under the auspices of the
Guatemala Field Station)

Guatemala Field Station

Language at Maryland

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Langscape

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Guatemala Field Station

The Maryland Language Science Center has established a research field station near the beautiful Lake Atitlán in the western highlands of Guatemala. This is the first of several planned international field stations, which will support multi-disciplinary research involving local communities and languages.

The field station officially opened in 2016 and activities so

K'iche': Tense or Aspect?

- Mayan languages are claimed to lack the category Tense

  Temporal interpretation is instead said to be guided by grammatical Aspect
  (Larsen 1988 for K'iche', Vázquez Álvarez 2002 for Chol, Bohnemeyer 2002 for Yucatec Maya, Coon 2016 for an overview)

- This is far more often assumed than argued for

K'iche': Tense or Aspect?

a. **X**-in-b'in-ik
   TA1-B1SG-walk-SS
   'I walked.'

b. **K**-in-b'in-ik.
   TA2-B1SG-walk-SS
   'I am walking.'

(Bešlin 2022, 2023a, b)

K'iche': Tense or Aspect?

- In-depth work with K'iche' consultants revealed a standard Tense system:

- 2 markers:
  x- PAST and *k-* NON-PAST
  NOT perfective and imperfective

- R(eference) T(ime) is restricted with respect to U(tterance) T(ime);
  adverbials cannot move RT forward or backward

K'iche': Tense or Aspect?

- *x-* PAST, *k-* non-PAST

- R(eference) T(ime) is restricted wrt U(tterance) T(ime)

- Adverbials cannot move RT forward/backward

- *na* 'still' can occur with *x*-marked predicates

- Individual-level predicates are compatible with *k-*

- Both markers are compatible with 'for an hour' and 'in an hour'-type adverbials

K'iche': Tense, not Aspect

- A better explanation for concord in event time as reflected in complement clauses:

X-ø-inw-il-o   chi   x-at-ch'aaw-ik.
TA1-B3SG-A1SG-see-SS COMP TA1-B2SG-speak-SS
'I saw you speak.'   (adapted from Can Pixabaj 2015:181)

- The two ETs need not match perfectly, but both RTs must precede the UT

What do we learn from this overview?

- The analysis of K'iche' temporal marking is based on the developed theories of tense and aspect

- Revision of the analysis allows us to explain related facts in a more coherent way

- The characterization of *x-* and *k-* as aspectual markers in earlier work may be a reflection of an earlier stage of the language;
if aspect-to-tense shift happened, contact with Spanish may have been a contributing factor

Tsez: Non-finite relative clauses

Non-finite relative clauses

Starting with English

- *Here's a doctor* [*for Kim to talk to*]
- modal readings visible in paraphrases
  Could: a doctor that Kim could talk to

  Should: a doctor that Kim should talk to

  Would: a doctor that Kim would talk to

  (Bolinger 1988; Caponigro 2003; Faraci 1974; Fleischer 2008; Green 1973; 1992; Hackl & Nissenbaum 2012; Šimik 2011, 2013; Caponigro et al. 2021, a.o.)

Non-modal interpretation

- non-modal interpretation is only available in the presence of a particular set of modifiers: superlatives, ordinals, and *only* NP

  - ???*the/every/no man to walk on the moon*
  - *the first/tallest/only man to walk on the moon*

  (Bhatt 1999, 2003, 2006)

Non-finite relative clauses in Tsez

- The predicate of the relative clause is either infinitive or masdar (verbal noun)
- Overt head noun is required
- Wh-word is impossible
- Obligatory control reading
  #*the time* [*for snow to fall*]
- No relativization of the highest structural argument
  the guest to speak ~ the guest to speak to/
  *the guest that would/could/should speak

Tsez examples

[kid-b-ä   nełā neła-z   tuple-za-λ   teλ-ani-x]   micxir

girl-OS-ERG   REFL.nI-GEN1   shoe-OS.PL-SUB.ESS   pay-MASD-AD.ESS   money.ABS.III

'(the) money for the girl to pay for her shoes'

Tsez examples

[kid-b-ä   nełā neła-z   tuple-za-λ   teλ-ani-x]   micxir

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'(the) money for the girl to pay for her shoes'

[gulu   b-et'u-n   k'oλ-ani-r]   huni

horse.ABS.III   III-tear.away-PFV.CVB   run- MASD-LAT   road.ABS.IV

'the/a road for a/the horse to gallop on'

Tsez: Modal reading is **required**

- Non-finite RCs are impossible in the context of superlatives or *only,* thus the Tsez equivalent of (i) must be expressed by a finite relative clause

(i)   the first/only planet [*for the man to walk on*]

Distinguishing the modal readings

- Strong vs weak determiners
- Individual- vs stage-level predicates
- PPIs
- reconstruction effects

English: Some signposts to distinguish the modal readings

- Strong vs weak determiners
  many men for her to marry (could/*should)

- Individual- vs stage-level predicates
  many shoes for us to buy are expensive/on sale
  should   could

- PPIs
  someone for me to talk to is not available
  (should/*could)

- reconstruction effects

Extrapolating the diagnostics to Tsez

- No determiners

- No word for *every*, only *all* and *each*

- No evidence of reconstruction in the language (Polinsky 2015)

- No obvious PPIs (Polinsky 2015)

Available diagnostics: strong readings of weak determiners

- Environments that impose strong readings of weak determiners allow only should-readings (Hackl & Nissenbaum 2001)

- Indefinite subjects of individual-level predicates are associated with the *should*-interpretation

#Many women [for Ali to marry] are Russian

Many women [for Ali to marry] are away in the lowlands

Available diagnostics: continuations compatible with different readings

- There is a person [for me to talk to]

… I do not trust him (could/?should)
… I am angry about that (should/#could)

Available diagnostics: continuations compatible with different readings

- There is a person [for me to talk to/help]

… I do not trust him (could/?should)
~~… I am angry about that (should/#could)~~
[speakers use a finite relative clause instead]

→ Tsez non-finite modal relative clauses only have the availability reading, not the necessity reading

What do we learn from this overview?

- The analysis of Tsez non-finite RCs is based on the rich body of work on the semantics of non-finite relatives

- First cut: distinguishing modal vs non-modal meanings of non-finite RCs

- Within the modal readings, separating the possible interpretations based on existing diagnostics, albeit limited by language-specific factors

Lessons learned from work in indigenous communities

Lessons learned

- Motivation

- Listening

- Thinking as an insider

Lessons learned

- Motivation: Explain what you are doing and why, receive permission to do that

- Listening: Ask the community what they need and then deliver

- Thinking as an insider: Do not exotify the language you are working with

Lessons learned: Motivation

- Explain to your consultants in the community what you are doing and why

- What does not work: "I am trying to determine the entailment of X; the scope of quantifier Y, the prosody of focus", etc.

Motivation

- What does not work: "I am trying to determine the entailment of X; the scope of quantifier Y, the prosody of focus", etc.

- What works if your community has many bilinguals: let's compare English and Niuean and find differences in how they speak about what we imagine

- What works in a community with less extensive bilingualism: emphasis on text collection and preparation of materials for children (my own experience in the NE Caucasus and Guatemala)

Motivation

- It is difficult to imagine why one would ask questions about a language (unless they are about language history or etymology), so it is important to offer an understandable explanation of the goals and applications of work on language

- Focusing on gainful effects of language research often helps:
  - Use of language in education/teaching materials
  - Materials for young children
  - Preservation of cultural matters
  - Computer or phone apps
 - Workshops for teachers (practiced in Guatemala)

Lessons learned: Listening

- Be prepared to deliver the actual results that are valuable for the community
  - Tsez: Elementary school primer and folklore collection
  - Niuean: Materials for children's books
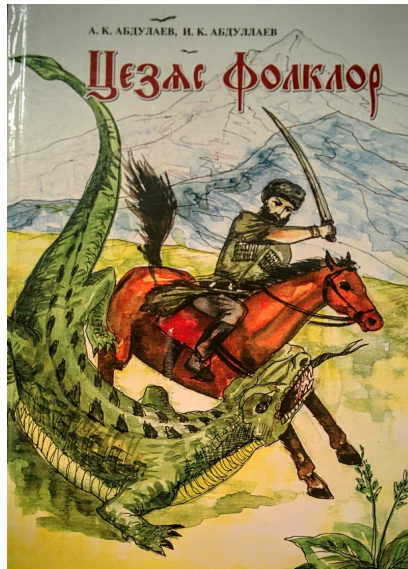
Kaqchikel recipes and oral histories as told by women of Patzún

- The corpus reflects the culture
- Different personalities, different speakers
- Trust between consultants and linguists
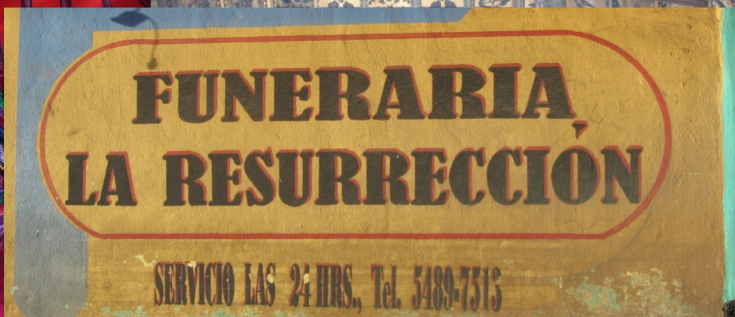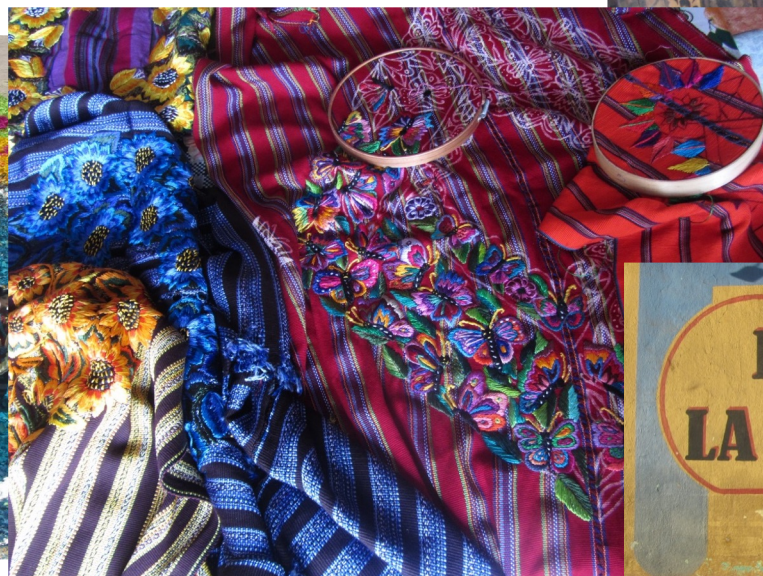
# Kaqchikel women speaking to...

Irina Burukina

Polina Pleshak

Topics

- Sacerdotes Maya

Mayan beliefs and ceremonies

- The history of the Kaqchikels

- Caholic priests

Patzún, festivals

- Mayan activists (women)

Marimbas

- A woman who deals with...

Traditional medicine

- A doctor from the *centro de maternidad*

Modern health services

- Making huipiles

Embroidery and ornaments

- The wife of an abducted man

Women in the Guatemalan Civil War

- A teacher in a school for adults

Education in Patzún

Businesswomen's life

- Women from the *Cooperativa Patzun*

Cooking in the cooperative

Lessons learned: Thinking as an insider

- Detailed semantic work on new language is a long-term commitment, with "citizenship" in the community and in the theory

- Community: It may be impossible to completely integrate in the community but it is critical to earn its trust and show long-term commitment with deeds, not words (hence the listening lesson)
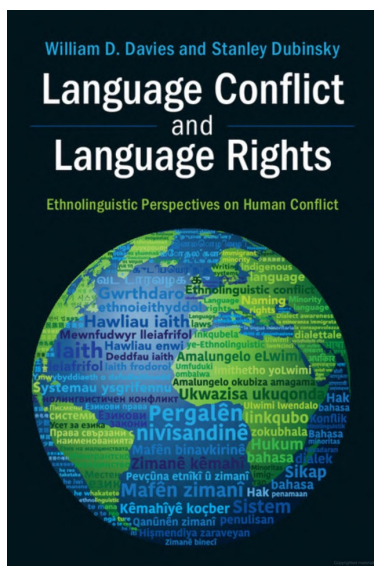
It is important to avoid the temptation to "exoticize" linguistic facts, and in so doing treat the speakers of the language exhibiting those facts as a curiosity .., something which is done not only by writers in the popular press but also by otherwise conscientious scholars.

As Pullum cautions in connection with what he refers to as the "great Eskimo vocabulary hoax", we must guard against "popular eagerness to embrace exotic facts about other people's languages without seeing the evidence." If we don't, it will lead us straight into a fabricated and imaginary … place.

(Davies & Dubinsky 2018: 97)

Language Conflict and Language Rights

William D. Davies and Stanley Dubinsky

Ethnolinguistic Perspectives on Human Conflict

Lessons learned: Thinking as an insider

- Detailed semantic work on new language is a long-term commitment, with "citizenship" in the community and in the theory

- Theory: The more articulated our theories the easier it is to see and predict patterns in a new language

- Approach your field language as an instantiation of options available cross-linguistically, avoid exotifying it for no good reason, and give it power to serve as a tool for testing theory

Thank you!