ON PLANNING FOR A MONOLINGUAL DEMONSTRATION
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1. CONTENT:

In a monolingual demonstration a speaker of a language unknown to the analyst is
brought on the platform. The analyst attempts to analyze something of that language—its
phonology, grammar and referential structures—without using any translation. By
pointing at various items the analyst attempts to elicit from the helper words or
statements about the props which the analyst has brought with him. The analyst tries to
write down in phonetic script these words or phrases, with a preliminary translation into
English.

2. AUDIENCE:

The normal audience would be an academic one, such as university students studying
linguistics. The minimum time planned for this would normally be one hour. If,
however, the audience is a church group, the timing can be cut often to a half hour with
adequate results.

3. VALUE:

More than any other technique know to me, this demonstration lets the beginner see what
analytical linguistics is like, in dealing with new material. The student—or inexperienced
staff—can “enjoy” the struggle of the analyst trying to find out what is being said, as well
as the struggle of the helper trying to understand what is wanted.

The audience can see the beginning phonetic writing, and the struggles where the analyst
changes it as he goes along. The personal involvement of the analyst in the actual
learning of the material is a kind of “holistic” one, philosophically, and perhaps should be
related to “becoming like a little child” while one is nevertheless an adult. Instead of
dealing with isolated bits and pieces, one is thrust into a total cultural background, with
an attempt to understand some of it by way of a language unknown to the analyst.

4. HISTORY OF THE DEMONSTRATION:

In 1936 I was brought back to Arkansas to “Camp Wycliffe” to teach phonetics (after my
ten days there of phonetics in 1935). One of the students said to me “but you are using a
translation into English. What would happen if we had no translation possibility with
us?” I said “I will show you—I did that for the Mixtec.” And then I used her as the first
informant, and she was a speaker of Dutch. I showed how I could start eliciting from her
words in that language and start analyzing them. This became the first monolingual
demonstration which I had done. And after that I did it every year there at Camp
Wycliffe, or later at the University of Michigan, and often times elsewhere, too, around
the world.
5. Informants Language:

The language to be chosen should be one not spoken by the analyst. It can be from anywhere around the world, but it would preferably exclude something like German or Russian or some language which the audience is likely to suspect that the analyst in fact knows. In addition, the informant should be told, in advance, that if he speaks several languages, the one which he would be requested to use would be his local one—from his local village—the one least known to the world. This tends to increase the surprise to the audience and to the informant as well, who may not have had anybody study his language before.

6. PROPS:

I would normally have with me on the platform leaves of different sizes, but preferably from the same plant if possible. In addition sometimes flowers of different colors; small twigs versus larger bits or branches, stones of several different sizes; a few pages of paper, a little fruit (e.g. oranges or bananas).

There need to be a sufficient number of blackboards (depending upon the audience as indicated above, from two to four) or two different overhead projectors which can be used at the same time so one can be writing on one while the other holds material being studied which has already been written on before. And for the black boards, different chalks need to be available—normal white, plus red or something to mark special forms.

7. TIME:

For the academic audience I would normally take about five minutes, or ten, to introduce to the audience what I intend to do—with the informant kept outside. Then the informant comes in, and a space of about twenty minutes is used to get the initial data. Following that, a lecture period of about fifteen or twenty minutes is used by the analyst to guess at what kind of phonological, grammatical or semantic data have been found, followed by a time for translation, in which the informant is asked to tell, in fact, what the words meant which have been written down (and whose meanings have been guessed at). In some instances, after that is done, the audience is asked if they have questions that they wanted to bring up to discuss publicly.

8. TECHNICAL MATERIAL:

An ordinary phonetic alphabet can be used, which ever one is appropriate to the experience of the analyst or the audience. The bits written need to be combined into a phonetic chart of a typical type during the analyst’s explanation to the audience. Similarly, the grammar needs to be analyzed in terms of noun phrases or verb phrases or clauses (or something larger) to show the development of the grammatical material. The discussion of the meaning of the lexicon will represent a referential structure in an initial form.
9. SOMETHING CAN GO WRONG:

Various kinds of difficulties can arise. In one instance, with an audience of 1,200 people in Australia, the informant said nothing whatever for about seven minutes. It turned out later that when a man came to a village he needed to know with whom he was related (so someone from the village would come from the village to find out) otherwise it would be incest to talk to the wrong women in the village.

In another instance a woman, when I greeted her, responded in the more formal language, Mandarin. But then when I asked about items that she used in her home, she responded in her home language; then when I showed her items that she used primarily in the marketplace, she used the trade language. She had used three different languages! This she told my wife, Evelyn, while I was explaining to the audience the structural features I had learned about “the” language. No wonder that in the first three words she used, I thought I was dealing with a tone language, but after that I didn’t find a noticeable pitch component!

In another instance, with a large academic audience, when I held up sticks, and wanted the word for “stick”, the informant said, “That is something that you kill birds with”. That kind of reply held me up for an hour before I got many of the first words!

In another instance I was searching for words for walking. I wanted to informant to say “You are walking”, and then “He is walking.” But the reply to the second part was “He is a good man, isn’t he?”

10. TELEVISION PROGRAMS AVAILABLE:

In 1977, the University of Michigan made five videos called “Pike on Language” (on ¾ inch video cassettes, but later available on smaller normal video tapes). The fifth program was “Program Number Five: ‘Into the Unknown [Learning an unknown language by gesture/a monolingual demonstration]’”. In half an hour one is able to see, there, this work being done with a speaker of Javanese from the island of Java, Indonesia.