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John P. Harrington's Field Work Methods: In His Own Words

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JOHN P. HARRINGTON'S FIELD WORK METHODS:  
IN HIS OWN WORDS

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1. INTRODUCTION. During the early 1970s, the Survey room was one of three main loci of work on the papers of the then recently deceased John Peabody Harrington (1884-1961). One of Mary Haas's earlier graduate students, Catherine Callaghan, undertook to do a preliminary inventory of the papers at Berkeley. Other portions of Harrington's papers resided in the National Anthropological Archives at the Smithsonian Institution and the Department of Anthropology at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History. The Berkeley and Washington portions of the papers were united in the mid-1970s in Washington, after which a series of newly minted Ph.D.s spent either a post-doctoral year (Geoffrey Gamble, Marc Okrand, Kathryn Klar, Kenneth Whistler) or a short-term residency (Katherine Turner) at the Smithsonian, continuing their own research and assisting Elaine Mills in her monumental task of organizing the disparate fruits of Harrington's half a century of field research. Other students (including Richard Applegate and Jon Philip Dayley) in the Survey at the time worked with Harrington's notes as well, and researchers from other institutions were frequent visitors. His legacy is now available for perusal on some 500 reels of microfilm.<sup>1</sup>

One of the many problems faced by the first students and scholars to tackle Harrington's original notes was that so many of the bunches of paper seemed to lack any order, and where there was some order, the system was clearly idiosyncratic. We noticed early on that parts of certain language collections were in Berkeley, with additional material to be found in Washington. (We knew little about the Santa Barbara holdings at the time.) We joked wistfully and often about holding a "seance" just to ask Harrington exactly what he had been up to. We never had any real guidance from Harrington himself, in the form of a description of how he had envisioned his field work.

While doing biographical research recently, I came across some lecture notes that Harrington had made while he was teaching in his summer school classes in San Diego ca. 1914-15. The notes reproduced below represent what he taught his linguistics students about how to conduct field work; they provide insight not only into his methodology, but into his ideas about what field work should ideally accomplish.

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<sup>1</sup> The numbers after each entry from the microfilms or quote therefrom refer to the frame numbers on Part VIII, Reel 22 of the Harrington microfilms. \* marks an indication in the notes of Harrington's use of visual aids. Notes are reproduced exactly as found. [ ] indicate author's comments.

Harrington's most famous student during this period was Carobeth Tucker, who would within a year become Mrs. John P. Harrington, and who would collaborate with her husband on numerous projects over the next four years. Reading the lecture notes along with Carobeth's description of that period in *Encounter with an Angry God* confirms the earnestness with which she describes Harrington as approaching his all-important mission to "save, save the lore" (Laird: 2ff., 80).

There remains no specific record concerning Harrington's own training in field technique, but we can infer that it took place over a period of approximately ten years (1902-1912) and once fixed, scarcely varied. He noted in his own *Curriculum Vitae* that as early as 1902 he had worked with the Indians of Santa Ynez.<sup>2</sup> He studied formally at Stanford University with Henry Rushton Fairclough from 1902-05, though his primarily Classics curriculum would seem to have offered little opportunity for work with non-written languages. His studies in Germany in 1905-05, however, especially his work with Franz Nikolaus Finck, probably had a deep impact on his methodology. Finck, an Indo-Europeanist by training, had also worked extensively with Caucasian languages, Armenian, Gypsy (Rom), and Irish Gaelic. Finck endorsed the principle of working synchronically with the most remote, unknown dialects of modern languages (such as Aran Islands Irish, for which he wrote a grammar) in order to illuminate the earlier history of the language families involved. Whether Harrington had approached field work this way prior to his German *Wanderjahr* we can't know; if so, Finck's broad experience and encouragement confirmed him in his ways. If Finck's ideas were new to the young Harrington, he endorsed them wholeheartedly and made them his own. Had Finck not died a sudden, untimely death in 1910, Harrington would likely have returned for further study with him. In such a case, it is interesting (but ultimately useless) to speculate on the course his subsequent career would have taken.

Back in the United States, Harrington had little patience with the niceties involved in getting an advanced degree, such as enforced residency on a university campus for any great period of time, so he set out to find individuals and sources of support which would essentially leave him alone to do his field work. Among his influences at the time was Matilda Coxe Stevenson, a legend in her own time among the Southwest tribes she worked with. Harrington became her protégé; she believed, rightly or wrongly, that she was getting information no one else had access to and had to proceed in relative secrecy in order to protect her sources. Though of a considerably steelier disposition than Harrington, in this regard (as with Finck and field methodology) she either reinforced a pre-existing tendency of Harrington's or planted the seeds of a new necessity in him. The final discernible influence on Harrington was his work with Gerald and Ina Cassidy, artists whom he met in Santa Fé, New Mexico, and with whom he began to conceive his grandiose schemes to thoroughly research all the languages of the Americas and issue comprehensive publications based on that work. By the time Harrington began teaching

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<sup>2</sup> Harrington's *Curriculum Vitae* is among the personal papers in the Department of Anthropology archives, Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History.

summer school in San Diego in 1914, his field work methods were fixed, and he scarcely wavered in them for the next two decades at least.

In part, Harrington's methodology developed as a reaction to the Boasian tradition of field work. Boas had many students, but Harrington probably thought him a linguistic parvenu, with training (and an ear for fine distinctions of sound) far inferior to Harrington's own. Both would have agreed that "[if] primitive languages are worth recording at all, they are worth recording right" (0591). In Harrington's case, however, that meant complete dedication to the field part of the work. "Hurried work or work continued for a short time is quite useless" (0809L). He lived this principle throughout his life, as far as possible. Sapir's brilliant success with his *Takelma Grammar* after less than two months of intensive field work confounded Harrington; to Sapir he wrote admiringly but a bit archly: "I often look over your Takelma paper – the sketch of the language. I think it is a remarkably good piece of work considering the time you spent on the language."<sup>3</sup> Harrington recommended six months just to familiarize oneself with the sounds of an unwritten language! (0651R-0652L).

2. OUTLINE SUMMARY OF HARRINGTON'S LECTURE NOTES. A rough outline of Harrington's teaching on field work, reconstructed from his notes, looks like this:

- I. Introductory remarks.
  - A. Old methods of recording "primitive languages." (0590R)
  - B. New method: "Experimental phonetics." (0591-0592L)
  - C. "Informants." (0629LR)
- II, Slip-file method.
  - A. Slip-files (0592R, 0630LR, 0631R, 0633LR\*, 0634LR, 0635LR, 0636-39L\*, 0639R-0643R)
  - B. Notebooks. (0631L, 0633L)
- III. Text method. (0644-0645L)
- IV. Handwriting and printing (i.e. publishing) considerations. (0645R-0647L)
- V. What & how to collect. (0648-0649)
- VI. What to look for. (0650-0651)
- VII. Concluding remarks.
  - A. Interference from one's native language. (0651-0652R)
  - B. Areal characteristics of sounds. (0653L)
  - C. Hurried work useless. (0809L)
  - D. Summary of general requirements for field work. (0809R)

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<sup>3</sup> Harrington, John P. Letter to Edward Sapir, January 7, 1912. In the archives of the Canadian Museum of Civilization.

### 3. HARRINGTON'S LECTURE NOTES ON CONDUCTING FIELD WORK.

0590R

The ear and the eye and the morphological connections of words are a great help [sic] in the studying of language. But after all, by the old methods one usually ends by recording not the actual sounds spoken by the native, but the best imitation of these sounds which the record can make. ~~Our record~~

0591

If primitive languages are worth recording at all, they are worth recording right. ~~All~~ The other sciences make use of ~~measur~~ instruments in ~~w~~ making accurate measurements. So must the science of language. Experimental phonetics has become an indispensable a part of the investigation of languages and the experimental method is fast superceding [sic] all others. ~~The crude and~~ (over)

0592L

The old subjective method of divining and guessing at the character of ~~p~~ foreign sounds and of ~~recording them~~ writing them down inaccurately as they happen to impress one, is being superceded [sic] forever by the careful experimental method. What chemistry is to alchemy, the experimental method of studying languages is to the medieval, barbaric, haphazard method which still prevails at the present day.

0592R

The word or sentence should be written on as many slips as it contains elements or combinations of elements. On each slip one or more elements ~~sh~~ which should be underlined and in classifying the slips the underlined elements ~~shoud~~ are the ones referred to.

0629L

The natives are the only people who know the language perfectly. Good work and accurate records can be made only by the assistance of good, intelligent natives.

It is quite safe to refer difficult phonetic and other questions to natives for decision.

One native is never sufficient. One should do extensive work with several informants.

0629R

Method is most necessary in this work, if one is to attain results that are worth while.

No native of ~~any~~ speaking any language can be expected to be able to analyze words. The native can freely translate what a long cluster of coalesced elements means. Attempts at analysis irritate and disgust him.

0630L

The most gifted student cannot remember words well enough to make any other system than a slip-system practical in this work.

0630R

All recordings of ~~primitive~~ unwritten languages should be made on slips of paper.

0631L

According to von der Gabelenz ~~handbooks~~ notebooks have almost no use in the work of recording unwritten languages. If they are used, it is the common experience of scholars that ~~they~~ what they contain must be copied on slips before it is sorted.

0631R

The advantage ~~and~~ of slips is that they are detached and free.

0632L

The use of notebooks in recording unwritten languages should be confined to recording of connected texts. ~~Any~~ ~~The~~ Each word and group of words in the text should be slipped according to the usual method and fully explained.

0632R

~~Notes sh~~ Notes and slips, ~~should never be written with pencil,~~ but to be kept for permanent reference should never be written with ordinary pencil, but with ink or with indelible ~~p~~ in solid ink pencil. However, if the entire material on the slips is to be immediately worked over and published, ~~pencil the ???~~ of pencil and news stock may be used.

0633L

Size of slips – 4-1/2 x 2 inches in usually sufficient size.

Also bigger and smaller.

0633R

Since a great number of slips are [sic] required, thin and cheap paper should be used. The railroad manila (show) is well adapted to this purpose. The thinnest and coarsest quality of this paper costs only 5-1/2 cents a pound. News stock is also practical. This costs 4-1/2 cents a pound.

0634L

~~There~~

~~A word of sentence sh~~

~~An element, word~~

There is no occasion to be economical of paper. ~~A word~~ As many slips be filled as are ~~possibly~~ will possibly [sic] be needed ~~in the~~ for the complete ~~elassi~~ ~~elassifica~~ analysis classification, analysis and understanding of every sound, element, word and sentence.

0634R

Occasionally ~~very~~ larger or ~~very~~ smaller slips should be employed. ~~Oecasion~~ Occasionally Sometimes sheets the size of a letter paper are used to advantage.

0635L

The slips should be cut in a paper cutting machine to ensure their being of the same size.

0635R

When one does linguistic work in remote parts of the earth, it is important to have the slips small and light and have the writing on them proportionally small and neat.

0636-0638

Sample Slips Illustrating the Method of Studying the Morphology of Language

[Sample files slips are included here.]

0639L

Mohave.

[Sample file slips are included here.]

0639R

There should be one slip for each ~~syllable~~-~~Since~~ element or syllable. Since ~~syllables~~ are elements are usually coalesced with other elements ~~all-groups~~ one should ~~write~~ also write slips containing the ~~likely-com~~ combinations of elements, which seem to the recorder to be likely to be construed together.

0640L

Each slip should contain a reference to the language, informant or other source from which the linguistic facts which it bears were obtained.

0640R

Each slip should also contain the translation of the words it bears.

0641L

Additional information concerning the use or uses of an element should also be given on the slip.

0641R

~~Of course~~

⊖

Features of the language which occur ~~???~~ in identical form ~~???~~ a second or third times [sic] need of course not be slipped but once. However, ~~nothing~~ no labor ~~or even~~ a not ^even that occasioned by possible duplication should be avoided at the sacrifice of accuracy.

0642L

The slip method must be developed by the investigator according to the peculiarities of the language he is studying, the aims of his particular investigations, and according to the dictates of common sense.

0642R

The sorting of slips should be done in a large, windless apartments [sic] where the work will be undisturbed. ~~Many~~ Large tables are most convenient, although it often becomes necessary to resort also to placing slips on the floor. The sorting of many thousands of slips is a most tedious and laborious task. To many it is mere drudgery. (over)

0643L

It cannot well be done by anyone other than the collector. It is easy and interesting to record words on these slips by the thousand. The sorting however takes ~~about~~ many times as long as the recording.

[some type of scribbles at bottom of page, as if JPH were re-using paper]

0643R

The slips should be filed away after they have been sorted and used in analyzing the language. This is well done in pasteboard shoeboxes. Wire clips ~~or-s~~ and stiff cards ~~as-with~~ projecting above the general level can be used in indexing them. The slips can ~~be~~ best be stored in drawers.

0644

Another method which involves less work than that described above, ~~eonsists~~  
[Large space with notes such as 'fader' etc. again as if JPH were re- using paper.]  
is the following: texts are recorded with word-for-word and also free translation. These texts are then published . (over)

0645L

The words or sentences are then cut apart and pasted on slips, the element (~~for-the~~) or elements for the investigation of which the ~~sentence~~ slip is prepared, being in each case underlined. This system ~~has~~ grave faults. One of these faults is that the texts ought not ~~to~~ be printed till carefully analyzed, which is ~~impor~~ impossible with this system.

0645R

Handwriting. This must be clear and legible. Printing of the letters is often best. Diacritical marks should be made carefully. ~~and~~

0646

In preparing linguistic work for the printer neat hand writing or printing out of letters is preferable to typewriting. The reason for this is that the typewriter cannot write the strange ~~sy~~ characters and diacritical marks. These have to be added by hand ~~as~~ and the typewriting [sic] letters are so small that the work is usually untidy. Besides this the (over)

0647L

typewriting and later adding of the marks, etc., ~~is~~ requires much unnecessary time and trouble.

0648

What and How to Collect.

~~The material collection must~~ The investigator must determine what to collect from his growing knowledge of the language he is recording. ~~A~~ Perhaps the best method is to ~~pa-pages~~ ~~???~~ obtain short texts and then ~~get-gr~~ obtain grammatical material based on each ~~we~~ element, word and construction of the texts.

All languages (over)

0649L

seem to distinguish nouns. Get as many usages as possible.

In working out the verbs, the persons, numbers, tenses, modes, etc., should be elaborated in great completeness, taking many verbs as the basis for such work. Also, ~~the~~ kind, ~~of-ae~~ directions, extent, manner, frequency of action should be investigated.



0649R

The adjectives will often be found to resemble either noun or verb.

**Preposit**

Adverbs are usually expressed by verb affixes and prepositions by noun affixes.

**Inter**

Conjunctions are usually few.

Interjections should receive careful attention. Men's, women's and children's sign [?] other points deserve attention.

0650L

What to Look For

However ~~well~~ gifted and well trained the student may be, he will find the first recording of an unwritten language most difficult at first.

0650R

It is a common experience to think one hears variations of sound which the native does not recognize at all. Still a more common experience is to ~~een~~ identify two or more sounds which the native considers entirely distinct and separate. These fluctuations and inaccuracies in writing often continue after one is very familiar with a language.

0651L

~~de-to~~

[JPH doodling? Or is this the other side of paper he is re-using?]

0651R

One thinks he hears the sound d, and writes d to indicate this sound. Later he discovers another sound in the language which differs from this first sound and which is more properly indicated by the symbol ḍ. D is therefore adopted for this second sound and the writing of the first sound has to be changed to t. And so with many other sounds. It usually takes about 6 months of constant study and

0652L

practice bfore [sic] one can be sure of the sounds.

0652R

We always hear our native sounds in a foreign language. This is even true of bird language. Tell of Indian.

0653L

Sounds similar even in languages not akin when languages are contiguous. Explain. Therefore sounds are "identified" and alphabetic symbols are applied.

0809L

Hurried work or work continued for a short time is quite useless.

0809R

Phonetic training, familiarity with many languages, a good ear and a good memory for words, quickness of observation and ability to get along with primitive peoples are necessary to successful ~~recording~~ recording and study of primitive languages.

4. CONCLUSION. Whether the notes reproduced above would have helped us a great deal with any specific language we worked on in the Survey Room in the 1970s is questionable. I think, however, it would have compelled all of us to recognize that the notes had been acquired and compiled based upon certain principles, and that insofar as possible, we should seek to restore that original order when dealing with separated and disorderly masses of material. Here on paper, at least, Harrington looks a great deal more organized than we thought of him as we opened those moldy, dusty boxes in the Linguistic Department storeroom thirty years ago. We would also have understood that the excessive amount of paper the man used was not only part of the madness, but of the method. ("There is no occasion to be economical of paper" (0634L).) And we would have been able to discuss with Mary Haas, a student of Edward Sapir, how Harrington's vision of field work differed from that of her mentor and her mentor's mentor.

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REPORT 12

SURVEY OF CALIFORNIA AND  
OTHER INDIAN LANGUAGES



PROCEEDINGS OF THE  
50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE

June 8-9, 2002  
University of California at Berkeley

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Leanne Hinton, Series Editor

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# PROCEEDINGS OF THE 50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE

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