From comparative descriptive linguistic fieldwork to documentary linguistic fieldwork in Ghana

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This paper surveys linguistic fieldwork practices in Ghana from the earliest times to the documentary linguistic era. It demonstrates that the most profound effect of the documentary linguistic turn in the language sciences on fieldwork in Ghana is in the rise of “insider” and “insider-outsider” fieldworking linguists. This goes against the definition of prototypical fieldwork as something done by remote outsiders. The challenges and opportunities of this development are reflected upon. It is argued that relevant fieldwork methodologies should be further developed taking the emerging features of different “insider” practices into account. Moreover, it is hoped that characterizations of documentary linguistic fieldwork would move beyond the outsider and accommodate the different types of “insider” fieldworkers.

1. Introduction Perhaps the most profound impact of the documentary linguistics turn in the language sciences on the study of Ghanaian languages has been in fieldwork practices. Its effect has been two-fold. First, it has led to the shift in the practices from native speaker linguists investigating their own languages, based on a combination of introspective methods and interaction with other native speakers, to trained native speaker linguists engaging in documentary linguistic fieldwork: gathering data, archiving and analysis. Second, it has also led to an increase in a category of fieldworkers and language documenters that I call “insider-outsiders”. These are people who are “insiders” by virtue of the fact that they share and participate in the wider Ghanaian community. They identify as Ghanaians just like members of the community they research, and in most cases they have as part of their linguistic repertoires the languages of wider communication such as Ewe and Akan that form part of the mosaic of languages in the communities of speakers of the languages they document (cf. Anyidoho & Dakubu 2008). In their recent textbook, Felicity Meakins et al. (2018: 4) characterize the “insider-outsider” as someone from a marginalized group, or, if from the same country, from
another minority group, but not from the speech community being researched. As an example of the former, they mention Annelies Kusters, a deaf researcher from Belgium who works in the Adomorobe deaf community in Ghana as an “insider-outsider” as she belongs to the wider deaf culture, but lacks specifics of the Adomorobe (Ghanaian) context (Kusters 2012). In my understanding of the term, the “insider-outsider” researcher need not come from a minority group. What is critical is that they should have some knowledge about the wider cultural norms and practices of the community but they are not local members. These “insider-outsiders” are different from the “insiders” who are native speakers and members of the linguaculture being documented or researched. Note that in the prototypical conception of fieldwork (e.g., Bowern 2008, Newman & Ratliff 2001, Sakel & Everett 2012), these “insiders” are not considered typical fieldworkers. Fieldwork is usually carried out by an “outsider” who comes to spend time in the researched community. This aspect of linguistic fieldwork may be a vestige of its roots in ethnography where there is no place for “insider” ethnographers for they are not foreign to the researched community. Yet “insiders” (of different types) have lots of insights that are not easily accessible to the “outsider” (see Owusu 1978 and references therein on the problems of evaluating outsider ethnographies by “insiders”).

In this paper I reflect on fieldwork practices especially as they have been shaped over the past twenty years. To appreciate the developments, I provide a historical overview of the different types of linguistic fieldwork that have been carried out in Ghana since the end of the 19th century. Then I survey the developments in the documentary linguistics era. I conclude with reflections on how to move documentary fieldwork in Ghana forward and expand on the available documentary corpora. In particular, I advocate that more native speakers of lesser studied languages in the country should be motivated to be trained as linguists (see also Ameka 2006a). Moreover, there should be more done to increase archived language materials from Ghanaian languages, from both the better studied languages and the under-studied ones.

2. The early years Prototypical linguistic fieldwork, with the goal of collecting primary data through interaction with native speakers in the natural habitat using multiple methods including observation and interview, has long been practiced with Ghanaian languages. Missionaries as well as colonial explorers sought to understand the ethnolinguistic groups among whom they were working through a study of the languages. Notable products from this era are authoritative and insightful grammars, dictionaries and text collections of three bigger languages of southern Ghana: Gá (Zimmermann 1858), Twi (Akan) (Christaller 1875, [1881] 1933) and Ewe (Westermann 1907, 1930, 1928, 1954). Around the same time there was fieldwork related to the collection of data for determining the genetic relations among the languages. Some of the people involved in addition to Dietrich Westermann (e.g., 1922) and Johan Gottlieb Christaller were Rudolf Plehn (1898), and Emil Funke (e.g. 1910, 1920).

Also of note in this period are two descriptions of the Fante variety of Akan. There was Balmer & Grant (1929) based on introspection who seemed to have been the first to use the term “Serial Verb Construction” in the description of a typical verb construction of West African languages. Another grammar of Fante was produced by Welmers (1946), who worked in the US with the first President of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, as the language expert. Kwame Nkrumah was bilingual in Nzema and Fante. Their interaction represents an example of descriptive fieldwork outside the linguistic milieu and in a university office environment (see Hyman 2002). It also exposes the extent to which linguists in those
days paid little attention to the linguistic life histories and repertoires of their consultants. Kwame Nkrumah, from all accounts, was Nzema dominant. Hence the grammar could be described as a grammar of a second language speaker of Fante.

3. The last half of the twentieth century

3.1 SIL International and GILLBT A landmark in the fieldwork-based investigations of lesser studied Ghanaian languages was the beginning of work in the country by SIL International in 1962. SIL entered a partnership with the newly established Institute of African Studies (IAS) at the University of Ghana, Legon. The first SIL-Ghana Director, John Bendor-Samuel, was a Scientific Staff member of IAS. SIL sent teams to different communities. They published a series of Collected Language Notes at IAS. These were field reports containing wordlists and grammatical notes gathered in situ. Some of these have remained the only sources on several Ghanaian languages to date (e.g., Crouch & Smiles 1966 on Vagala). The goal of these activities was literacy development leading to Bible Translation. Some teams have conducted sociolinguistic surveys as well (e.g. Ring 1981). When Ghana SIL became autonomous, its name changed to the Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy and Bible Translation (GILLBT) with headquarters in Tamale in the northern part of the country. Descriptive linguistic work by GILLBT teams is primarily carried out by “outsiders”. The documentation of Nkonya by Wesley Peacock with its online dictionary is exemplary.1 GILLBT members have continued the tradition of the Collected Language Notes and published more substantial descriptions of some of the languages in the Language Monograph Series also published by IAS (see e.g., Casali 1995, Smye 2004).

Among the output of the GILLBT teams are also several dissertations which provide a comprehensive description of hitherto undocumented languages based on immersion fieldwork. These include works on Kɔnni (Michael Cahill 2007), Chumburung (Keir Hansford 1990), Tuwuli (Matthew Harley 2005) and Safaliba (Paul Schaefer 2009). Works on semantics and pragmatics, as well as anthropological topics, have also been carried out by some GILLBT members, e.g., Tony Naden (1986, 1993) and the late Gillian Hansford (2005, 2012). Although there are more Ghanaians working with GILLBT these days, I am aware of only one “insider-outsider” linguistic work on the Ahanta language (Ntumy 2002).

In addition, GILLBT teams are involved in dictionary work on some of the languages. Apart from earlier published dictionaries such as Blass (1975), there is a major dictionary project on Adele, a Ghana-Togo Mountain (GTM) language. There is also an ongoing Buli (Gur, Mabia) dictionary for which the Rapid Word Collection Method has been used.2 While many of the publications of the GILLBT teams are available, the extensive recorded data collections on which they are based are less available and accessible.

3.2 The era of the West African Languages Survey and beyond In the early 1960s, another major project—the West African Languages Survey—initiated and directed by Joseph H. Greenberg, was launched in Ghana. The goal was to gather data through interactions with speakers of the languages for comparative-historical studies, as well as for uncovering typological features of the languages. Ladefoged’s (1964) *Phonetic*
study of West African languages was one of the outcomes of the project with significant contributions on Ghanaian languages. This is a pioneering work in phonetic fieldwork. The recordings are archived and available. Indeed, Ghanaian languages have contributed to the development of fieldwork techniques for investigating the phonetics of tone languages (see e.g., Gleason 1961 on Ewe). This tradition was later followed in the 1990s by Russell Schuh (e.g., 1995) and Ian Maddieson (e.g., 1998), who investigated some GTM languages. Another outcome of the West African Languages Survey with relevance for Ghanaian languages is the West African Languages Data Sheets, which has grammatical notes and vocabularies from several languages (Dakubu 1977, 1980).

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw intense fieldwork activity mainly by “outsider” linguists. One of the foci at this time was the collection of wordlists for comparative historical linguistics studies. Thus, at the IAS several wordlists for various languages were collected and published (e.g., Stewart 1966, Kropp 1967, and later Snider 1989). The source items for these lists have found their way into the SIL African Comparative Wordlist (Snider & Roberts 2004). At this time also, fieldwork for the seminal comparative historical study of the GTM languages (Heine 1968) was carried out. The other strand of work was related to descriptions of the languages informed by the linguistic models of the time, especially the generative paradigm as outlined in Chomsky & Halle’s (1968) Sound Patterns of English (for phonology) and Chomsky’s (1965) Aspects of the theory of syntax (for syntax). At this time, the first PhD degree to be awarded in linguistics by the University of Ghana was bestowed on Kevin Ford for his description of Aspects of Avatime syntax (Ford 1971), a GTM language. Another dissertation based on extensive fieldwork was produced by Alan (1971) on Buem, another GTM language. The late Nick Clements also conducted fieldwork on the Anlo (Anyako) dialect of Ewe, leading to a dissertation on the verbal syntax of Ewe (Clements 1972). This work is important as it is a precursor to current micro-variation studies of syntax. The Humboldt University of Berlin carried out field investigations on the languages of the Central Togoland, generating grammatical descriptions of Nkonya, a Guang language (Reinecke 1972), and Leleme (Buem, GTM; Höftmann 1971) and a collection of oral traditions Höftmann & Ayitevi (1968). At this time Colin Painter also carried out a survey of Northern Guang languages and produced a grammatical description of Gonja (Painter 1967, 1970).

The contribution of the late Mary Esther Kropp Dakubu to field investigations of Ghanaian languages is phenomenal. She carried out comparative historical work to reconstruct the Gã-Dangme subgroup of Kwa. She did ethnographic fieldwork on a Gã clan (Dakubu 1981). In addition, she compiled dictionaries of Gã and Dangme (Dakubu 1999). She also published a grammar of Dangme (Dakubu 1987) and a phonological description of Gã (Dakubu 2002). She has collected grammatical notes on other languages such as Dagaare, and has collaborated with native speakers of Gurene to produce its first dictionary (Dakubu et al. 2007). She also published a description of the language and culture of the Gurene people (Dakubu 2009) based on ethnographic fieldwork.

Sociolinguistic investigations based on structured interviews and questionnaires were also carried out at this time. There was the IAS Madina Project, the aim of which was to study the linguistic situation and profiles of members of a new suburb of Accra. Surveys of language use in markets across Ghana were conducted for language planning purposes. Dialect surveys were also conducted at this time. A significant example is the study of the cluster of languages Ewe-Gen-Aja-Fon (now called Gbe) proposed by Capo in his

http://archive.phonetics.ucla.edu/
University of Ghana 1981 dissertation that was published in 1991. Similar comparisons of the dialects of Akan were undertaken by Lawrence Boadi (e.g., 2009) and Florence Dolphyne (e.g., 1976). Even though various works on varieties of English had been carried out since the 1960s, it was only in the mid 1990s that some field investigations were carried out especially on Ghanaian Pidgin English. The description by Magnus Huber (1999) contains a CD of the field recordings upon which the book is based. It was the first work to make available, publicly, the field recordings in a publication on Ghanaian languages.

3.3 From outsider descriptions to native speaker descriptions Native speaker linguists took the stage during the era of theoretical linguistics. This era coincides also with the West African Languages Survey outlined in the previous section. With the rise of theoretical linguistics boosted by Chomsky’s (1957) Syntactic Structures, there was a particular interest in a trained native speaker as the linguist par excellence. Such persons were considered the “ideal native speakers”. The early 1960s saw the emergence of investigations of major Ghanaian languages by such linguists using various theoretical models of the day: generative linguistics, Firthian linguistics and Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar or Scale and Category Grammar. The main method at this time was introspection based on the idiolect and dialect of the native speaker researcher.

The first description of a Ghanaian language based on modern linguistic principles authored by a native speaker is the seminal study of Ewe tonal structure by Gilbert Ansre (1961). This was followed by his doctoral dissertation on the grammatical units of Ewe using Halliday’s Scale and Category framework (Ansre 1966). Similar foundational descriptions of Akan authored by trained native speaker linguists were by Florence Dolphyne (1965) on phonetics and Lawrence Boadi (1966) on the generative syntax of Twi. Other native speaker works using themselves or their family as consultants include Isaac Chinebuah’s (1963) Master’s thesis on the phonology of Nzema, based on his own pronunciation. Similarly, the very first studies of child language in a Ghanaian language is based on Eric Apronti’s observations of his 2 year old child (Apronti 1969). Issues of contact between English and the indigenous languages gave rise to studies of code-switching by native speakers (e.g., Forson 1979, Amuzu 2005).

The next generation of native speaker linguists working on their own languages augmented introspection with interviews of other native speakers for acceptability judgments and interpretations. They also relied less on their own production and, for the languages with some literature, illustrative examples were drawn from novels, plays and newspapers. Others also used media broadcasts such as radio and television drama. Thus, data sources expanded, and constructed examples based on introspection minimized. This is the mark of doctoral dissertations such as Osam (1994) and Saah (1994) on Akan; Bodomo (1997) on Dagaare; and Ameka (1991) and Essegbey (1999) on Ewe. In fact, Essegbey (1999) is probably a pioneer in using stimulus-based elicitation methods (Majid 2012) in gathering data as a native speaker (see also Kita & Essegbey 2001).

4. Language documentation and description in the 21st Century

4.1 Insider fieldwork In the 2000s, research on Ghanaian languages has continued the earlier traditions of descriptions by native speakers based on introspection and interaction with other speakers, plus the use of existing written literature and language use in mass
media as sources of examples. They can be considered as studies based on one or the other form of fieldwork by “insiders”. Many of these descriptions are dissertations. Recent descriptions of Gur/Mabia languages following this tradition include Musah (2018) and Abubakar (2018) on Kusaal, Mwinlaaru (2017) on Dagaare and Hudu (2010) on Dagbani. For Kwa languages, Akrofi-Ansah (2009) on Lɛtɛ, Agyepong (2017) investigated ‘cutting’ and ‘breaking’ events in Asante Twi (Akan), Campbell (2017) is a comprehensive grammar of Gà, Abunya (2018) is an examination of aspects of Kaakye syntax and there is on-going dissertation project on Gwa by Michael Obiri-Yeboah.

Other native speakers have embarked on documentary fieldwork in their own communities; recording and analyzing different genres of language use. The products are mainly dissertations. Some of these have archived their data. Examples are Cephas Delalorm (2016) on Likpe and Samuel Atintono (2014) on Gurene. These primary data are accessible at ELAR. Similarly Dodzi Kpoglu (2019) collected Tɔŋugbe primary data to investigate possession and the material available through DANS.4

A challenge with “insider” fieldwork is the suspicion with which consultants look on the researcher. As a community member the “insider” researcher is expected to share the same knowledge and practices being investigated. Why then do the researchers interview them about this same knowledge?

4.2 Fieldwork by insider-outsiders  Historically, “insider-outsider” descriptions came later than works by “insiders”. Samuel Obeng for example, worked on languages other than his first language Akan. He conducted descriptive linguistic fieldwork on the Guang language Efutu produced a grammar (Obeng 2008).

The era of “insider-outsider” documentary fieldwork came to be established starting from my work in the mid 1990s on Likpe (Sɛkpɛlé). It gained ascendancy with the launch of the Southern Ghana-Togo Mountain languages (SGTM) project in 2003 funded by the Netherlands Science Foundation (NWO) under its Endangered Languages Programme (ELP). The researchers in this project are James Essegbey (Nyagbo/Tutrugbu, 2019), Kofi Dorvlo (Logba/Ikpana, 2008) and Mercy Bobuafor (Tafi, 2013). They are all non-native speakers of the individual languages they work on. They all have Ewe, the major lingua franca in the communities, as their primary language. Essegbey also works on Dwang and Animere, communities that use Twi as lingua franca, another of his primary languages. Since then, many more researchers have embarked on documentary fieldwork in communities where they are “insider-outsiders”. They include Rogers Asante (2016) on Nkami and Nana Ama Agyeman (2014) on Efutu who have archived their materials at ELAR, as well as Yvonne Agbetsoamedo (2014) on Sɛlɛɛ and other on-going dissertation work by Esther Dogbe on Dompo, a highly endangered, presumably isolate, language of the middle belt. Obed Nii Broohm and Victoria Owusu are also working on Esahie, a Central Tano Kwa language.

While “insiders” are viewed with suspicion for not knowing their own lingua-cultures, the “insider-outsiders” are suspected of different things. In my own case, some expressed doubt about why I would want to learn their language. Some thought it must be the case that I was dating one of their women and I wanted to impress her by learning the language. In the case of others, they are viewed with suspicion and skepticism. One researcher was viewed as probably being a government agent or a private detective, especially because he had recording gear. Some others get caught up in internal conflicts and are viewed as siding

4 http://doi.org/10.17026/dans-xxr-4sug
with one or the other party (cf. Essegbey in press). Yet others are warmly welcomed and seen as facilitators of empowerment. Rogers Asante reports how the Nkami people saw his work as a way of getting their language written, thereby removing a stigma and source of insults that the neighbouring groups hurl at them. “Insider-outsider” research is on the increase and the future lies in more collaboration between these and trained “insiders” of various communities for providing long-lasting records of the many under-documented languages of Ghana.

4.3 Fieldwork by outsiders Alongside “insiders” as well as “insider-outsiders”, the classical tradition of fieldwork by complete “outsiders” has continued in the documentary era. The main difference between earlier “outsider” research and current practice is the increased use of audio-visual recordings, accountability of data, and above all the accessibility of data collections on the various languages. There is also an increased sense of “giving back to the community” among the modern day “outsider” researchers. One of the first documentation projects awarded by the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme (ELDP) was for the documentation of Cala (Kleinwillinghoffer 2007). Fieldwork on Avatime (GTM) by Saskia van Putten (2014) and Rebecca Defina (2016) was initially funded by ELDP and later the Max Planck Society. The same organization funded work on Siwu by Mark Dingemanse (2011). Other “outsiders” working on Ghanaian languages include Victoria Nyst (2007) on Adamorobe Sign Language, Jonathan Brindle (2017) on Chakali and Cedar (formerly Lydia) Green (2009) on Logba ethnobotany. Purvis (2008) on Dagbani, Jason Kandybowicz and Harold Torrence (e.g., 2017) have also been conducting syntactic fieldwork on Kaakye (Guang, Kwa). These “outsiders” have striven to work with the communities managing speaker ideologies and attitudes in obtaining optimal records of the languages. They have been well accepted into the communities with one of them being formally initiated into a sacred society.

5. Going forward The conceptions of fieldwork in the standard manuals (e.g., Chelliah & de Reuse 2011, Bowern 2008, Sakel and Everett 2012, Dixon 2010) assume that fieldwork involves an “outsider”. Aikhenvald (2007: 5) indicates that it involves an outsider “becoming a member of the community and often becoming adopted into the kinship system”. It is not surprising that linguistic fieldwork with its roots in ethnographic and anthropological fieldwork should consider fieldwork to be prototypically and usually carried out by “outsiders”. Nevertheless, it is a paradox in the documentary linguistics era for “outsider” fieldwork to be considered the norm. Chelliah & de Reuse (2011: 10–11) suggest that fieldwork in the documentary era involves “collection or gathering of linguistic data through a variety of methods and techniques with a focus on reliability, representativity and archivability” (cf. Thieberger 2012). Given such a view it would appear that fieldwork does not have to be an enterprise of an outsider to the community whose “doculect” is being investigated. Moreover, if one of the canons of documentation is that of collaboration with the community, what would be better than having professionally trained community members being the researchers of their own communities (cf. Newman 2003)? The only hope of having many more languages of Ghana documented is when more trained linguists engage in such work rather than focusing on their languages and modeling them in the latest fashionable yet ephemeral formal architecture.

There is a second aspect to the received practice of fieldwork that is not conducive to native speakers of African languages being the researchers. Newman & Ratliff (2001)
in their reflections on linguistic fieldwork note that their book and its discussions of fieldwork methodologies is constrained and focused on practices developed primarily by North American, Australian and Western European linguists. It is my hope that the practice of “insider” and “insider-outsider” documentation and fieldwork whose beginnings we see in Ghana and elsewhere in Africa will impact fieldwork methodologies. With a third of the world’s languages spoken in Africa, methodologies and techniques developed and lessons learned in Africa by trained professional community members should also feed into the global discourse about documentary linguistic fieldwork.

Table 1: Ghanaian languages with documentary materials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>ISO</th>
<th>Type of researcher</th>
<th>Output</th>
<th>Institution</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sign Language (AdaSL)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Animere</td>
<td>anf</td>
<td>Insider-outsider, outsiders (in progress), James Essegbey, Bryan Gelles</td>
<td>Multi-media record of linguistic practices</td>
<td>ELDP/ELAR, University of Florida, Gainesville</td>
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<tr>
<td>Avatime (Siya)</td>
<td>avm</td>
<td>Outsiders, Defina (2016), van Putten (2014)</td>
<td>Archived documentary corpora MA/PhD theses on information structure; event description</td>
<td>ELDP/ELAR, The Language Archive (MPI, Nijmegen)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chala (Bogon)</td>
<td>cll</td>
<td>Outsider, Kleinewillinghöfer (2007)</td>
<td>Archived documentary corpus</td>
<td>ELDP/ELAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dompo</td>
<td>doy</td>
<td>Insider-outsider, Esther Dogbe, Outsider, Roger Blench</td>
<td>PhD thesis in progress; sociolinguistics, grammar and texts wordlists</td>
<td>La Trobe University, Melbourne Australia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dwang</td>
<td>nnu</td>
<td>Insider-outsider, James Essegbey</td>
<td>Archived multi-media record; thematic documentation of fishing practices</td>
<td>ELDP/ELAR</td>
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<td>Effutu</td>
<td>a fu</td>
<td>Insider-outsiders, Nana Ama Agyemang, Samuel Obeng</td>
<td>Archived multi-media record; thematic grammatical description descriptive grammar</td>
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<td>Esahe (Sehwi)</td>
<td>sfw</td>
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<td>Farefare/Gurene</td>
<td>gur</td>
<td>Outsider collaborating with insiders, Dakubu et al. (2009), Samuel Atintono</td>
<td>Dictionary, a documentation of Gurene folk tales, riddles, songs, palace genres and other oral genres in Bolga</td>
<td>ELD/ELAR; University of Manchester</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gwa</td>
<td>gwx</td>
<td>Native speaker Michael Obiri-Yeboah</td>
<td>PhD research (on going)</td>
<td>University of California, San Diego</td>
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<th>Output</th>
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<td>Women’s language Kiliji</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Outsiders with collaboration of outsider-insiders</td>
<td>Recordings and annotated texts including songs</td>
<td>ELDP/ELAR Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon; Brindle et al. (2015)</td>
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