

Putting oral narratives into writing – experiences from a language documentation project in Papua New Guinea

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Transforming oral narratives into written texts certainly creates a new genre that is foreign to an endangered language and culture without any former literary tradition. But it does not necessarily do any damage to the language as some linguists warned. When members of the Teop speech community in Papua New Guinea edited the transcriptions of forty recorded oral narratives, they did not only eliminate speech errors and lexical borrowings from the dominant languages English and Tok Pisin, but also made syntactic changes by replacing parenthetical sequences of simple clauses by complex sentence constructions. As these constructions are – though less frequently – also found in the recordings, they are not considered as innovations, but are attributed to probably universal differences between spoken and written language.

For the grammatical analysis of the language, the edited versions reveal natural transformational equivalents of constructions that genuinely reflect the native speaker's metalinguistic knowledge. Furthermore, they enlarge the corpus with data which often show lexically and syntactically more elaborate structures than their oral equivalents.

In conclusion, the enterprise of editing spoken narratives is not only justified from the speech community's point of view, but is also fruitful from a purely linguistic perspective.