

*ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE LINGUIST FENCE
–THE CONSULTANT WORLD–*

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This paper is a text format of the presentation given by a Malagasy speaker consultant who was invited to speak at AFLA 28 about her experience being a language consultant. The intention was to include the presentation in the proceedings while keeping the spirit of an oral presentation as much as possible, rather than reformatting into a formal proceedings paper. Therefore, only minor edits were made to the original text by the editor.

1. Introduction

Manao ahoana! Hello everyone. The good thing about this Malagasy greeting is that it applies to good morning, good afternoon or good evening from here in Montreal. Thank you, Dr. Jessica Coon, for the introduction and Dr. Lisa Travis for the invitation to speak.

My name is Vololona Razafimbelo, and I am a native speaker from Madagascar working as a Malagasy consultant for about over 20 years now and am currently working with McGill's Linguists.

The subject I will be presenting today is new, meaning a topic that has not been discussed in previous AFLA conferences. So far, most, if not all, of the talks here come from the linguist side. They are very interesting, but I do not really feel related to all those studies, and therefore cannot give an objective evaluation of the talk. Which is normal because I am not a linguist. I am rather that person who sits across from you at the elicitation session table.

Today, I would like to take you on a journey of exploring my world as a consultant. This talk is meant to be as honest and authentic as it can be. It is not technical research, with no evidence to demonstrate, no test to make, just more of a human side point of view of an experience, more of the flip side of the coin, and this will make this presentation so different.

Here are some questions I will explore: What does it look like to be the language Consultant, what are its challenges and expectations? What is the importance of this role in the linguists' research? What kind of impact does the consultant's input have? Is there such a thing as a good consultant or a not-so-good consultant? What is the criteria to choose from if the linguist had the opportunity to choose?

If I wanted to get more personal, why do I like doing it? And am I still enjoying it? Or what you wish I would have done better or done less of? What should a linguist keep in mind when working with the language consultant?

2. Role

I have a hard time defining it myself. I remember my first session as a Malagasy consultant where it was explained to me that my role during the session was to say Yes (Mety) or No (Tsy mety) to a bunch of sentences, linguists call data. I worked for one hour on sentences such as:

- *Manga ny lanitra.*

- *Ny lanitra dia manga.*
- *Ny lanitra no manga.*

All those sentences mean “The sky is blue”. At the end of the session, I wondered why in the world someone would be interested in knowing why ‘The sky is blue’ or ‘It is the sky which is blue’. What is the difference? What is the linguist trying to find out? Very often, around a dining table with my fellow Malagasy, I have been asked what my role as a Malagasy consultant at McGill consists of. After explaining that the assignment consisted of telling the linguist *mety* and *tsy mety*, I often could see the doubting look in their eyes. “Really, it can’t be that simple. . .” and “That’s hard to believe!...” and “you get paid for that!!!”, they would often say.

As years went by, I felt comfortable to ask the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of such studies. The answer I got is that the linguist is interested in the little word *dia* because it, or this kind of preposition more generally, also exists in another language.

So? What if it does exist? I could not see the importance of it all. Why spend time and resources to research *dia* when they all mean: “The sky is blue”?

But then, slowly I accepted the fact that linguists study something for some reasons only they know. Here is another example of how I perceive their studies:

- *Nanadino nanidy varavarana Rakoto.*
- *Nanadino foana nanidy varavarana Rakoto.*
- *Nanadino nanidy foana varavarana Rakoto.*
- *Nanadino nanidy varavarana foana Rakoto.*

These sentences can be translated to: “Rakoto always forgot to close the door.” I just guessed that the study is focused on the place of the adverb *foana* ‘always’ in the sentence. Or maybe the linguist is trying to find out if *foana* refers to ‘forget’ or to ‘close’. But over time, I realized that even though it is possible to guess the WHAT, the WHY stayed obscure to me for quite a long time and it is hard to understand that my role would simply consist of something so simple.

Over time, the whole thing became some kind of a game, where I try to guess the WHAT that the linguist is studying. Basically, to summarize, the role of the consultant is to say “Yes” or “No” to provide data, with or without necessarily understanding the WHY of the study. Following this way of thinking, a consultant can be anyone you meet as long as he/she is a native speaker: someone on the street, someone you talk to in a restaurant, or even in a bus. A complete stranger, as long as he/she speaks Malagasy.

3. Strengths of the Consultant vs the Linguist

What are the strengths of the consultant? It is my language after all. I am born Malagasy. I do not have to study Malagasy. When I come to the sessions, I may come unprepared and I am allowed to do so. The data is in my head, it is a part of me. That gives us a consultant position of control and strength. The linguist sitting across from me at that table depends on my knowledge, has no idea how to know if what is said is right or not. Talking to other consultants, we sometimes cannot see why simple things, simple data or simple sentences are so hard for the linguist to grasp. We say: the linguists need us. . . but also if there were no linguists, there would be no consultants. So evenly important, consultants exist because linguists exist. We’re just the other side of the coin to each other.

This might raise the question to me: Why would a linguist want to know or understand someone else's language? If they speak English, shouldn't they only study English? They would have no trouble in checking, collecting data, proving data. At the very least, it would save linguists some time and resources.

No offence to all the Malagasy linguists around the world, but I do not think that many Malagasy would want to study and see the importance of why the sky is blue. If not for the foreign linguist, no one would study some of those Malagasy structure or syntax. Another point why I believe it is better for a foreign linguist to study another language than his own, is that the research would be more objective and more scientifically based. Like every science, linguistics is based on observations rather than just evidence, which can be misleading, and from there, conclusions are drawn. The more objective, the less biases, the better.

I realize I am being subjective here without going deeper, and I choose to leave the answer to this question to the department of the linguists as a possible subject of discussion. Nevertheless, I would bring a suggestion: the best is to have the foreign linguist learn whichever language he studies. This is a point open for discussion at least!

4. What's in it for me?

People around me often also ask: Why are you doing this? To me, the satisfaction consists of sharing the culture along with the language. Sharing my heritage, understanding that behind a language, there are people who bring a culture, and that culture is unique. Take these Malagasy words as an example:

- *Solomaso* – glasses (*solo - maso* : replacement of the eye)
- *Ranomainty* – ink (*rano - mainty* : water - black)
- *Ranomaso* – tear (*rano - maso* : water of the eye)
- *Masoandro* – sun (*maso - andro*: eye of the day)
- *Tranonkala* – spider web (*trano - hala*: house of the spider)

There is so much wisdom behind the construction of these words. Our ancestors did not have Google but wise common sense to construct so many of those Malagasy words. My joy is to share those cultural riches behind the language.

Also, I left my country over 35 years ago and working with linguists helped me to stay Malagasy, which reinforces my sense of identity, realizing that I am, and always will be Malagasy. I'm indebted to you linguists for that.

But also, somehow, I feel honored to contribute to research that tries to build bridges between people and cultures, sharing the same family of language and roots. Even if my input allows us to build 1 millimeter of those bridges, that is where my joy is. In the family of Austronesian languages, 386 million people are affected. This brings me a great satisfaction to participate in some of the studies. But it does come with challenges.

5. Challenges

5.1. Right or Wrong

What if you don't know? What if you are not sure if something is wrong or right? That is the biggest fear of the consultant. The linguist will try to ask over and over again the same sentence, and will use different angles to see if your answer would vary or not, and that is where the challenge is. Here are some examples:

- *Tapahina amin'ny antsy ny hena.*
- *Tapahina aminy antsy ny hena.*
- *Tapahina amina antsy ny hena.*
- *Tapahina amin'na antsy ny hena.*
- *Tapahina antsy ny hena.*

These sentences can be translated as: "The meat is cut with a knife." (3 of these sentences are *tsy mety*). They all mean the meat is cut with a knife. But you are not sure if it is: *aminy*, *amina*, *amin'na*? They all sound right. What do you do? Well, I believe honesty is the key to a good consultant. The best thing is to say: "I do not know". We talked earlier about the fact that the consultant can be a complete stranger. But the difference with the experienced one is this ability to recognize that sometimes you just do not know, and that is a humbling experience. You may also feel some kind of guilt or stress because it bothers you that it is your language and you do not know. It is not easy to accept. The best thing would be to request a second opinion. When the linguist is wrong, it is ok because it is not his/her language, but when the consultant makes mistakes, we kind of take it personally. I know I should not, but it took me years before I could accept the fact that I may not always know the answer.

5.2. Written vs Spoken

We have the difference between the spoken and the written. What do you tell the linguist? How should you pronounce the words since they do not sound the same in writing and in speaking? For example, *Fantatro* vs *fantako*, both mean 'I know'. *aminy* vs *amina*, both mean 'with'. My name is written as: Vololona Razafimbelo. But if you spelled it out the way it's spoken, it would look like: Vulul Razafimbel.

We speak the language but not all consultants will be aware of the grammar or the rules behind it. I believe a good consultant will not try to change the way we say it, not to try to say it as the English or French say it but just as a Malagasy word would sound. That's why my name is Vulul.

Here is another example. This example is currently on-going research so I will make sure not to let out any result. These three sentences are good, *mety*.

- *Mankahala jerena ny zaza.* – 'The child hates to be watched.'
- *Fotsy varavarana Rasoa.* – 'Rasoa doesn't like to stay home.'
- *Vizana Rasoa.* – 'Rasoa is tired.'

But when *omaly* (yesterday) is added to the sentences, it is not good, *tsy mety*.

- *Fotsy varavarana Rasoamaly.
- *Vizana Rasoamaly.

You know these sentences are wrong, but you cannot figure out why they are wrong because grammatically they are right, just not culturally suited.

5.3. Context

Many times linguists also do not give us enough information about the context. That is normal because they cannot grasp the subtleties of the language. For example, *voa* and *tafa* are similar. They can both be used in these sentences, which mean 'Rasoamaly was able to open the door.'

- *Tafavohan'i Rasoamaly ny varavarana.*
- *Voavohan'i Rasoamaly ny varavarana.*

The purpose of the study is to understand the difference of *voa* and *tafa*. *Voa* means the action is completely done and *tafa* focuses more on the struggle. The linguist should keep in mind that not giving enough information on the context might affect the result of the study.

5.4. The biggest challenge

I believe the biggest challenge is to restrain yourself to not teach Malagasy. It is not necessarily trying to share knowledge but more about getting into the shoes of the linguist and trying to figure out where they want to go. An experienced consultant would be able to open up to this perspective.

Let me relate to you an experience I had which made me realize that there are three types of consultants. Take these two sentences as an example:

- a. *Tia mamaky boky Rakoto.*
- b. *Tia vakian-dRakoto ny boky.*

First, an experienced consultant would pick up that the active voice (a) works and the passive voice (b) does not. Why? Because with time I realized a book cannot be loved to be read, in Malagasy. But from the consultant point of view, he might try to understand if you are studying the function of *tia* or the active vs the passive voice.

A good consultant would just tell you if the sentence is ok or not. A not so good consultant would want to analyze the context or even would want to know what kind of book Rakoto reads. The linguist will take the time afterwards to process the results of your 'yes' and 'no'. The consultant will not! For one hour, the linguist's brain will not stop working. When the topic is easy such as the sky is blue, then there's no stress. But it can sometimes get complicated.

You try to give the linguist enough data to process for a longer period of time. The consultant does not have that time and that might affect the result, which makes the consultant feel insecure for the data will not be consistent.

6. Summary

I tried to summarize some of the criteria of: Is there such a good consultant and a not so good consultant? These are what I think are important things to keep in mind:

- Understand the purpose of the language and don't teach the language. The challenge is to master that difference and to restrain yourself.
- Honesty: The good consultant is not afraid to say "I don't know". it is sometimes a humbling experience.
- Be open to what the linguist is trying to understand. It is not necessarily sharing knowledge, it is more to get into the linguist's shoes and try to see where he wants to go.
- Teacher vs Consultant: teaching is to impart the knowledge you acquired. Consulting is more to impart knowledge you already own.

I hope that today's talk helped you to see my world. During those 25 years of experience, I realized more and more the give and take relationship between consultant and linguist. And it was definitely rewarding. Thank you all for giving me the opportunity to serve you and to be your consultant. I realize how important the consultant is for you linguists, but because this is not a research paper and more of a panel of discussion, a sharing moment, I will try to finish a little earlier than requested and I would like to ask you linguists, what are some of your expectations from us consultants? Were there circumstances where you were disappointed? I would like to hear from you as well.

7. Conclusion

The linguist is technical, they see the data. The Consultant considers more the human side of the relationship. At the end of a session, the linguist would say: "That was a great and interesting research paper". The consultant at the end of the session would say: "He or she was very nice". At that table, we sit across from each other. I am on the other side of that fence. Consultants are more people oriented but when I think of the purpose of the linguists' study, in the end they are people as well. Therefore, we can reach across that table because after all, we are all people. MISAOTRA.