

# THE LANGUAGES OF FOREIGN FIELDWORK

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Overseas investigation is today a diminished part of academic geography's self-image, in stark contrast to such fields as anthropology, where foreign fieldwork is acknowledged as a fetish. The minority of geographers who are fueled by curiosity to carry out a research plan in a distant land certainly constitute a kind of Humboldtian elite in the discipline. Like Alexander von Humboldt, those who leave hearth and home for expatriate research provide an empirical grounding for knowing the world, for finding the universal in the particular. Foreign fieldwork is no less about outsiders who, by choice of topic, particular points of view, special depth of knowledge, or precise ways of finding things out bring special qualities to bear on their research. Perspective comes in part from a sense of wonder about an exotic place in which difference, not familiarity, engages the critical mind.

My own experiences have brought me to an understanding of foreign fieldwork as it relates to scholarly, or even popular, communication.<sup>1</sup> For an American, language acquisition is usually the critical hurdle standing in the way of gaining the cultural competence to "get one's story" in the non-Anglophone universe. Geographers have written little about either how they have dealt with language apprenticeships or why they choose to work abroad and what kinds of experiences they have had there. To be sure, descriptions of the aspects of fieldwork necessary to keep body and soul together are often shared orally and informally. But in the absence of accumulated written records about these experiences, geography can hardly be said to provide a body of knowledge about fieldwork from which subsequent generations of young scholars can benefit.

## ADVENTURES IN FIELD COMMUNICATION

Both push and pull factors have influenced the relative diversity of my foreign experiences. Like Ishmael, who in the opening of Melville's *Moby Dick* is "growing grim about the mouth," I find myself periodically wanting to escape my own North American culture, to break up or avoid the long northern winter. With that comes a wish to renew the priceless perspective on home, tempered by detachment, that absence produces. An irresistible curiosity about a "problem" in a particular place leads to the formulation of a research question. The itch to know that pulls one abroad includes the need to overcome cultural-linguistic barriers by whatever means available. If braving the alien for the first time is scariest, it grows less so with successful repeated exposure. Curiosity steels the will to accept with equanimity the discomfort and risks of going to remote places. For me, this uncanny force, melding curiosity and resolve, is ultimately a more powerful motive for research and schol-

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