

## TALK IS CHEAP: CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC FLUENCY DURING FIELD RESEARCH

GREGORY VEECK

A great attraction of geography for many practitioners is an opportunity for the kind of field research that regularly takes us from our natal culture and plunks us, Cinderella-style, into places with significantly different pumpkins and coachmen. Our projects generate basic information, test the efficacy of current theory, and allow us to serve as bridges across cultures through our research, teaching, publications, and outreach. Field research serves as a vital check against the unguarded surety of theoretical abstraction. Frankly, the inductive/deductive cycle is seldom possible without field-based research that allows both the collection of data and the verification and analysis of existing explanatory models. All of this is possible only if we really understand what is going on around us and can ask questions.

Successful field research and productive communication skills go hand in glove. Few scholars would disagree on this principle, but somehow intensive language training is less than a central goal of secondary education in the United States; nor are language courses well represented in the undergraduate and graduate geography curricula in many a Canadian and U.S. university. Beyond brushing up on the French, Spanish, or German learned in halcyon undergraduate days, two-year master's programs and four-year doctoral programs in geography seldom have "space" for four to six semesters of a language. Furthermore, seldom are opportunities seized to continue to upgrade language training once we find ourselves in the traces and hames of a professional career. Field research has to be fitted with on-the-job language training, for language classes are overlooked perhaps even more frequently than are courses on field-research methods. Yet language proficiency is a centerpiece of successful fieldwork, and achieving real competence in language is the prerequisite for a kind of cultural fluency that allows a genuinely successful career.

Lofty ideals, you may scoff, but the fact remains that for most of us cultural and linguistic fluency is a work in progress. Caring about the quality of our research, we continually improve our language skills. Well-considered strategies can facilitate language acquisition while bettering field research. Yes, the way to Carnegie Hall is via practice, practice, practice, but there are concrete strategies that simultaneously improve language skills and assure research of high quality. In this essay I take the ideals of linguistic and cultural fluency as givens for most successful field projects, but I wish to bridge the gap between this often end-of-career ideal—it's a lifelong process—and the reality many of us face. In short, how do we conduct a successful field project while improving our language and cultural fluency, so that our future projects are even better?

---

✦ DR. VEECK is an associate professor of geography at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan 49008-5053.