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Notes from the Field

We begin here an occasional feature in which linguists may share noteworthy field experiences. We do so at a time when there is renewed interest in language ecology, and when a generation of linguists who have had little or no training in studying languages in their natural setting contemplate undertaking such study. The role of the participant-observer is neither neutral nor easy, and there is little in the current linguistic literature to draw upon. Oceania would seem to be an area that has much to offer, and for which much can still be gained. The two somewhat disparate contributions presented here should help set what we hope will be a tone of frankness and openness, but can touch on only a few of the many issues that need addressing.

AIN'T MISBEHAVIN'? **TROBRIAND PRAGMATICS AND THE** **FIELD RESEARCHER'S OPPORTUNITY** **TO PUT HIS (OR HER) FOOT IN IT¹**

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To realize that one has just behaved like a bull in a china shop is certainly embarrassing. However, linguists and anthropologists doing field research have experienced many such moments and know that each instance can not only be embarrassing but also illuminating with respect to the pragmatics of the speech community they are studying and in which they are living. This paper describes certain such experiences of my field research in the Trobriand Islands of Papua New Guinea. The cases in which I “put my foot in it” in the Trobriands can be subdivided into mistakes, misunderstandings, and misbehavior. I illustrate this classification with a few examples and discuss their relevance for Trobriand pragmatics—especially with respect to the cognitive processing of communicative strategies in the Trobriand Islands.

1. INTRODUCTION. Linguists as well as anthropologists doing field research in what many people cannot refrain from calling “exotic” languages and cultures

usually have many tales to tell about their work and their experiences, if not adventures, in their field, in “their” culture, and with “their” people. I must admit that I myself sometimes lose control and hardly realize that I am in the middle of monopolizing a conversation if someone asks such an innocent but incautious question like “And how is it in the Trobriand Islands”—where the “it” can refer to a broad variety of topics. However, these linguists and anthropologists (the author of this paper included) rather rarely, if ever, tell tales about situations where they either made mistakes, or misunderstood something, or even misbehaved in the interaction with “their” people in “their” culture. People interested in anthropologists’ and linguists’ mistakes, misunderstandings, and misbehavior have to consult either satire—like the literary–anthropological oeuvre of Nigel Barley (1986), for example—or publications of wicked widows who after the death of their husbands publish the latter’s personal field notes under titles like “A diary in the strict sense of the term . . .”

It goes without saying that it is difficult to confess one’s own mistakes. To realize that one has just behaved like a bull in a china shop is certainly embarrassing. However, any linguist or anthropologist doing field research has experienced not only one but many of these moments—and field researchers know that these moments are not only embarrassing but also very illuminating with respect to the pragmatics of the speech community they are studying and in which they are living. In this paper I describe certain such experiences of my field research on the Trobriand Islands in Papua New Guinea. I am relying here on those field notes I have been making ever since I set foot on the Trobriands in 1982—with the explicit intention to finally transform them into a kind of “confessio.”

The cases in which I “put my foot in it” in the Trobriands can be subdivided into those already mentioned above, namely, mistake, misunderstanding, and misbehavior. In what follows I illustrate this subdivision with a few examples and discuss their relevance for the pragmatics of Kilivila, the Austronesian language of the Trobriand Islanders.²

2. MISTAKES. Many of the mistakes I made were based on purely linguistic grounds. When I first set foot on the Trobriands in 1982 I could only rely on a few sources that document some aspects of the Kilivila language. Besides a few rather superficial, if not incorrect, comments by Capell (1969) and Lithgow (1976),³ I had only the linguistic information Malinowski provides us with in his work (see especially Malinowski 1920, 1935)—and it turned out that the great anthropologist was indeed the only reliable linguistic source. When I arrived in Tauwema, my place of residence on the Trobriands, I had learned from the Catholic priest in Gusaweta the interrogative pronouns *avela* ‘who’, *avaka* ‘what’, and *ambeya* ‘where’, the general deictic *beya* ‘this, that, here, there’, and the sentence *Magi-gu ba-nukwali Kilivila* (wish-my 1.FUT-learn K.) ‘My wish is to learn Kilivila.’

In the village I started collecting data and learning the language by pointing at real things or at pictures in a picture dictionary and asking for the Kilivila words for these objects; moreover, I immediately started to record and to transcribe whatever utterances of the Kilivila native speakers I could get. It was to be expected that I was doomed to make many mistakes in this first phase of learning the language.

The most frequent mistakes resulted in my wrong parsing of certain Kilivila phrases and expressions. To give just a few examples: I saw a spider-web, and asked someone from Tauwema, “*Avaka beya?* ‘What is this?’,” and noted down the answer, *Kapali la bwala*. I already knew that *kapali* translates as ‘spider’, but I wrongly inferred that *labwala* was another noun, which I translated as ‘net’. Only after I had managed to elicit the various forms of the possessive pronouns did I realize that *la* and its variant *ala* are the forms for the 3rd person possessive pronoun indicating an intimate degree of possession, that *bwala* is a noun that denotes ‘house’ in general, and that the phrase therefore should be parsed as ‘spider 3.POSS.PRO.(its) house’. As another instance, pointing to an angel’s trumpet (*patuna arborea*), I asked for the name of this flower. The reaction of my respondent was *makena lala*. I did not realize that this was a question consisting of a noun and a demonstrative pronoun with an infixed numeral classifier referring to wooden things, and that this phrase parses and translates as *ma<ke>na lala* (DEM<CLASS.WOODEN>DEM flower) ‘This flower?’ Instead, I noted down *makenalala* and wrongly glossed it as being a noun denoting ‘angel’s trumpets’.

However, I also made mistakes on a less complex level either by assigning a meaning to a phrase or an expression I heard too quickly or by misclassifying an expression linguistically. While translating songs that the people from Tauwema sang during the harvest festivals, I came upon the expression *Bweyowa*—and after some discussion with my informants I translated it as ‘here, there’ and classified it as a deictic expression. During one of our visits to the Catholic mission station on Kiriwina I realized that one of the old maps of Kiriwina hanging there referred to the island as *Boyowa*—and I remembered that this was one of the names used to refer to the language of the Trobriand Islanders. As soon as we returned from our trip to the main island I checked my word-files and changed the translation of the entry *Bweyowa* into “variant of *Boyowa*, traditional name for Kiriwina Island, also used to refer to the language” and re-classified it as a noun.

The Trobriand Islanders are famous for their carvings, and after a few weeks in the field people came and asked me to buy their artefacts. The first carving I bought was a small crocodile. I asked, as usual, “What is this?” and got the answer *uligova*, noted it down and translated it as ‘(piece of) carving’. After that I referred to every carving I saw with the expression *uligova* and just could not understand why all the people listening started to smile. It was only weeks later when I—together with my wife and our friend Weyei, the weather magician of

Tauwema—were walking around Kaile'una island that Weyei pointed out to us a crocodile in the mangroves that we just had passed, walking on the reef to circumvent the swampy area. When I asked "What's the name of this animal?" (I had made some progress) he started to giggle and said *uligova*. I learned not only that I once again had made a wrong inference with respect to the meaning of the name for an object, but also that *uligova* was one of my nicknames in Tauwema. The Kilivila word for "(piece of) carving" is *tokwalu*, by the way.

When the Trobriand Islanders want to know what clan a person belongs to, they look at the lines on the inner sides of the hands. The lines on the right hand denote the mother's line, the lines on the left hand denote the father's line. After I had been in Tauwema a few days, people wanted to know something about my pedigree. They looked at the insides of my hands and classified me as a Lukwasisiga.⁴ I asked "What is this?", pointing to the lines on my hands. The answer was *kumila*, and I noted it down as 'lines on the inside of one's hands'. However, I soon learned that it means 'clan', and that it is an extremely important concept for Trobriand society indeed.

Asking "What is this?" while pointing to pandanus leaves, I got as the answer *miyasina*, which I noted down, classifying it as a noun and translating it as 'pandanus leaves'. Again, I did not realize that this response was a question consisting of a demonstrative pronoun with an infixed numeral classifier used to refer to flexible, thin things, an expression that has to be parsed as *mi<ya-si>na* (DEM<CLASS.thin, flexible-PLURAL>DEM) 'these (flexible things)'. The nouns that refer to various kinds of pandanus, including the plant, the leaves, and the fruits, are *keibwibwi*, *kenivadila*, *vadila*, *vaoma*.

During the first weeks of my staying in Tauwema all the little children started to cry as soon as they saw me—a stranger and a white man. One day a mother came to the veranda of my house with her little boy in her arms. The child did not cry—and I asked for its name. As soon as I had opened my mouth the little guy started to cry, his mother smiled at me and said, *gwadi ekokola*. I took this phrase as the name of the child—and only later learned that it parses and translates as *gwadi e-kokola* (child 3-to be afraid) 'The child is afraid (of you).'

Most of these mistakes were corrected by my informants. However, it was only in 1992 that I realized that I have been making a mistake with respect to spatial reference—and again this mistake served as the basis for another one of my nicknames in the village. When I was in the field, I would generally go to the main island every fortnight by dinghy to do some shopping in Losuia and to collect my mail there. Whenever I went to Losuia I would say *Ba-la va Losuia*, which I parsed as (1.FUT-go to Losuia) 'I'm going to Losuia.' However, if a Kilivila speaker refers to a specific destination, he should not use the preposition *va*. I learned this during my elicitation of spatial expressions—and I know that up until 1992 my nickname was "Gunter goes (by boat) to to (!) Losuia."

These mistakes may seem to be trivial, at first sight at least, and every field researcher who has started to learn a so far undescribed language can immedi-

ately come up with a number of similar examples (if he or she dares to). However, in the field situation linguists or anthropologists who make, and later realize, these mistakes always have the feeling that they again have put their foot in it. The expectation of the people whose culture and language we are studying are extremely high with respect to the speed of our progress in language acquisition. After I had acquired Kilivila to such an extent that I could speak it fluently (but—as just revealed—not without mistakes), people told me that they could not understand why it took me, a “doctor” for languages, almost four months before I could utter my first more or less correct three- and four-word sentences creatively in actual verbal interaction (see also Franklin 1992). My main informants were especially concerned as to whether I would really make it. They were afraid that they would lose face and be blamed as incompetent teachers if I turned out to be a *tonagoa*—a ‘dumb’ person—in both senses of the term. I realized this tension and my teachers’ growing impatience with my progress, and this was great incentive for me to do my very best in acquiring Kilivila as fast and as well as possible. I was afraid not only of my teachers losing face, but also of losing mine.

Mistakes of a different sort than the ones just mentioned can probably best be classified as verbal and/or social faux pas in Trobriand society. I will illustrate this category of mistakes briefly with the following examples. Overhearing the conversation of two elderly women in the village discussing the physical condition of the oldest man in Tauwema, I joined in the conversation and asked them *M<to>na bogwa e-kariga?* (DEM<CLASS .man>DEM already 3-die) ‘Did he already die?’ After their somewhat startled reactions I realized immediately that I had mixed up the verbal expression *-kariga-* ‘to die’ with the verbal expression *-kato’ula-* ‘to be ill, sick’, and I corrected myself uttering *E, e, mtona bogwa ekato’ula?* ‘Eh, eh, is he sick then?’

I felt terribly upset and ashamed. However, the two Tauwema ladies comforted me, saying *Gunter, kusula, taga mtona tomwaya mokita, la tuta bogwa bivokwa*. ‘Gunter, you made a mistake, but this man is really an old man, and his time will soon be over.’ If I had produced this sentence referring to a young person I would have been in deep trouble: the Trobriand Islanders then could have easily mistaken this sentence either as a sign for my bad feelings against this person, or as a sign for black magic I was planning to use against this person to make my statement come true. However, given the age of the actual referent, my mistake was only taken as the verbal faux pas of a *dimdim*—a “white man”—who still had to learn a lot before he could master the Kilivila language adequately.

Another form of such a social faux pas consisted in my asking some informants persistently about personal names I hit upon in my transcriptions. Some of my best informants suddenly seemed to be no longer willing to verbally interact with me. It took me some time to realize that this always happened when I asked for names that referred to deceased persons who had been relatives of these in-

formants. It is a breach of Trobriand etiquette to mention the name of a dead person in the presence of a relative.

I always counter-checked the lexicographic work I did with one (group of) informant(s) with other informants. Checking the meanings of the expressions in a song I recorded I hit upon the verbal expression *-keya-* and the group of informants I first worked with—some teenage boys—told me that it meant ‘to ask a girl for her friendship’. However, I became suspicious when they giggled at my mention of the word. In the evening of this same day, I worked with my older informants—and trying to paraphrase the word I asked, *Ekeya vivila—makala: tau ekatupoi vivila minana magila mtona lubela?* ‘He will *-keya-* a girl—is it like: “A man asks a girl if she wants to be his friend?”’ They reacted with some consternation until I told them, in reply to their question, that it was a bunch of young boys who had told me so. Then they laughed and told me what *-keya-* actually means, that it translates most correctly philologically as ‘to fuck’. Although everyone realized that the boys had played a trick on me, some of my older informants told me that I should not inquire about the meanings of such words. However, when I had later collected more songs, lullabies, and verses that accompany games like string-figures and ring-around-the-rosie, my lexicographic work became centered of necessity even more directly in this portion of the Kilivila vocabulary. Working with the same informants, I jokingly commented on how they now cooperated so gladly, whereas a few months earlier they had given me the impression that I was doing something wrong. They seemed not to understand, and pointed out to me that we were now working on *sopa*, and that this was something completely different. I will not elaborate on the concept of *sopa* here, but will take up this aspect of Kilivila in the next two sections of this paper.

I would like to conclude this section with mention of one final type of mistake I unwittingly made in the course of my lexicographic work. In one of the texts I collected in 1983 I came upon the phrase *gwadi ikatuyeva*. One of my chief informants, Pulia, then a sixteen-year-old young man, was shocked when I asked him the meaning of the phrase, and claimed that he did not know. However, he hinted that it would be better if I were to ask a woman. When I asked my neighbor’s wife, Ibonoma, to paraphrase the meaning of this phrase, she first said I—as a man—should not ask such a question, but finally she consented to tell me that this phrase belongs to the lexicon of midwives, and translates “the child, it has turned,” meaning that the midwives, after having checked the position of a baby to be born, realize that they have to expect a breech-birth. Ibonoma told me that a man should not know these words and expressions, that they belong to Trobriand women’s language. Only a person like me—a linguist who pretends to be ignorant of the fact that there are sex-specific parts in the lexicon of a language—could get this information from a Trobriand woman.

3. MISUNDERSTANDINGS. Misunderstandings—as I learned—were misunderstandings of the function of certain speech acts in the Kilivila speech community in which I lived. I will present and discuss just three exemplary cases in which I put my foot in it during the first months of my field research.

Every morning after I had gotten up, brushed my teeth, and gone to the beach, I would grab my towel and the little box that contained my soap, shampoo, hair brush, and other articles we (slightly degenerate) West-Europeans consider absolutely necessary for having a bath, and I would walk through the village to the path that leads to a fresh water grotto about a ten-minute walk into the bush southeast of Tauwema. Although everyone could infer from the things I carried where I was going, and although all the villagers knew after some time that this was part of my morning routine, people always asked me in the village or on the path to the grotto, *Ambe?* ‘Where?’, implying ‘Where are you going?’ At first I reacted with a smile and answered with the name of the grotto, *Bugei*. However, after some weeks, having made some progress in my language acquisition, I responded somewhat impatiently by either waving with my towel to the people who asked this (for me then rather silly) question, or by simple answering, *O, kunukwali, bala Bugei makala yumyam*. ‘Oh, you know, I go (to the) Bugei every day’. After having responded to this question in this way for a few days, Weyei—my neighbor and one of my best informants and friends—approached me and told me that I should always answer this question as exactly as possible. Thus, after some further progress in learning the language, I could react to the question *Ambe?* in the appropriate Trobriand way, answering for example: *Bala bakakaya baka’ita basisu bapaisewa*. ‘I will go, I will have a bath, I will return, I will stay (in the village), I will work.’

With Weyei’s help, I came to understand that this question was a greeting formula, one of the more simple forms of which I later termed ritual communication in the Trobriand Islands (Senft 1987, 1991b). People who meet in the Trobriands and who want to indicate that they care for each other do not use greeting formulas equivalent to ours, such as “good morning,”⁵ but instead ask each other where they are going. This question is always answered as truthfully and as comprehensively as possible (as in the example given). This has a practical reason: all paths on Kaile’una Island, and most paths on the other islands belonging to the Trobriand group, are just small trampled paths that often lead over sharp coral rocks. Also, sometimes the paths cross a grove of coconut trees, where it is quite easy to hurt one’s foot or leg, and it has also happened that people on these paths have been severely hurt by falling coconuts. Moreover, Trobriand Islanders are very much afraid of the *kosi*. According to their belief the *kosi* are ghostly spirits of dead persons who were not properly mourned immediately following their deaths, and who therefore terrify the living. The apparition of a *kosi* may frighten someone in the jungle in such a way that they might lose their orientation. Therefore, the answer to this form of greeting function to secure one’s way and one’s safe arrival at one’s destination. If

people do not show up after a certain time at the places mentioned in their answers to the greeting question, their fellow villagers and friends will look for them. Thus, being greeted with this question is a sign that the community cares for the person. It is a daily routine that serves the function of social bonding. And it is considered so important, that Trobrianders who are not greeted in this way by at least their fellow villagers will conclude that they must have committed some serious offense against the community. A village community that does not greet one of its fellow villagers with this question indicates that it no longer cares for the person. So it was a completely inappropriate reaction when I—sometimes quite conceitedly—smiled about what I first thought to be a silly question. On the contrary, being greeted with this question by the people of Tauwema after only a few days in their village was a first sign of their good will and intention to integrate me into the community.

Another behavior I found difficult to tolerate during my first stay in Tauwema was the way people would ask me for tobacco. In 1982–83, money did not play an important role in the community, which then still based its economic interactions on the exchange of goods and gifts.⁶ Thus, I decided against paying my informants with money, because this did not seem to me to fit in with the general patterns of a system based on barter and exchange. Instead, I told the villagers that I would give everyone—regardless of whether they were working with me or not—tobacco, fishhooks, fishing lines, nails, flint stones, needles, and other such items. The people of Tauwema accepted this proposal immediately and quite happily. However, when the first people came and asked for tobacco, for example, I had difficulty in coping with the way in which they did this. According to my education and socialization, I expected some polite Kilivila formula for requesting a small gift, such as “May I have some tobacco, please?” However, what I was confronted with were people coming to my house requesting tobacco without any sign of politeness at all in the requesting utterance they produced. What I heard was: *Tobaki!* ‘Tobacco!’, *Agu tobaki!* ‘My tobacco! (implying: tobacco that I am intending to smoke myself)’, *Ula tobaki!* ‘My tobacco! (implying: tobacco that I will give away)’, and *Mesta tobaki!*, a shortened form of the phrase *Kumeya sitana tobaki!* ‘Bring me some tobacco!’. It was only the last formula that reminded me vaguely of something like a polite request. I have to admit that I was completely surprised being confronted with these forms of request, and I concede that I could hardly suppress the impression that these villagers were impolite brutes. Sometimes a Trobriander asking me for something in this way could easily read this impression in my facial expressions, when I reacted to the request and sometimes even gave reluctantly what I was asked for.

Again, I had to learn that my reaction was extremely ethnocentric and therefore completely inappropriate for such an interaction in the Trobriands. After some weeks, I realized that it quite often happened that people who had just asked me for tobacco, and who could hardly wait till they could smoke the cigarette they had rolled with the tobacco and the paper I had provided them

with, were approached by other people who waited in the background and were asked for tobacco in exactly the same way as they had requested it from me. I observed that they almost bewilderedly puffed what they had thought was “their” cigarette three or four times and then passed it on to the person who had requested it. It took me some time, and the helpful comments of my friends, to realize that these requests for small things like tobacco were another ritualized form of communication that served a very special end.

It is Trobriand etiquette—which is binding upon everyone even across clan boundaries—to pass on something like a cigarette almost immediately to someone who asks for it. If Trobriand Islanders refuse to do this, there are only two explanations for this inappropriate behavior. They are either temporarily ill, and do not realize how improperly they behave—this can be excused, if the “illness” does not last too long—or they are just mean. Meanness, however, is not tolerated in a society that is based on a free and generous exchange of goods, and a mean person has to face being asked to leave the village in which s/he lives. Giving and taking freely and generously is one of the cornerstones of the social construction of Trobriand reality. Thus, this form of requesting, giving, and taking can be described as another form of ritualized communication that serves the function of testing and monitoring in a daily routine whether all the members of the community still adhere to values that are basic for the social construction of this society’s reality. As long as these tests turn out to be positive—according to the standards of the community, of course—the coherence of this society is not endangered and need not be questioned.

When I had made such progress in my acquisition of Kilivila that I was able to talk with my neighbors, friends, and informants more or less fluently, I was quite surprised and even shocked when one evening in early 1983 one of my good friends, namely Mokeilobu, started to fight verbally with me. I had no clue whatsoever why he behaved so aggressively toward me. I was quite worried and I asked Mokeilobu himself, but also Gerubara, Pulia, Nusai, Weyei, and Kadawaya, who happened to be there, what kind of reason I unconsciously may have given for Mokeilobu to behave like this. Their reaction was hilarious laughter—and the comment that I still had a long way to go before I could use the Kilivila language adequately.

Then Mokeilobu and Gerubara staged for me a ritualized “fight with words.” I felt somewhat insecure and uneasy because what I heard was far from being a conversation between friends. However, the two men seemed to enjoy themselves very much, and everyone was devouring enormous quantities of betelnuts—the drug of the Trobriands—this particular evening.

Like many other speech communities, the Trobriand Islanders have developed a register in their language that allows them to playfully fight with words and even to ritually insult one another.⁷ The Trobriand Islanders refer to this register as *Biga Sopa*, a concept that is best translated as ‘joking or lying language’ or ‘indirect language’. The Kilivila metalanguage differentiates at least

seven of these registers, which I call “situational-intentional varieties,” because these language varieties or registers are used in special, given situations and are produced to pursue certain intentions.⁸

The *Biga Sopa* is characteristic of Trobriand discourse and communication. It is based on the fact that Kilivila, like any other natural language, is marked by features that include “vagueness and ambiguity.” Both vagueness and ambiguity are used by speakers as a stylistic means to avoid possible distress, confrontation, or too much and too aggressive directness in certain speech situations. If hearers signal that they may be insulted by a certain speech act, speakers can always retreat from what they have said by labeling it as *sopa*, as something they did not really mean to say (see Senft 1985; 1986:125).

As a ritualized form of communication the *Biga Sopa* variety serves the function of social bonding and of blocking aggression, because it can ban elements of danger that may affect the community’s social harmony within the verbal domain by simply verbalizing these elements out of danger and bringing them up for discussion on a forum where the speakers can test out playfully how far they can go in their mutual interactions.

The Trobrianders just love these verbal fights, and the better the repartee to a verbal aggression, the better the interaction between the two mock-fighting parties usually develops. After having lived for a year in Tauwema I first dared to accept such a challenge—and I was quite proud that I did come out of this verbal fight with at least some honors, according to the pleasure of the audience.

4. MISBEHAVIOR. The cases in which I actually misbehaved—according to Trobriand standards, of course—consisted in my intended and unintended breaking of certain taboos of their society.

In public life the interaction between husband and wife on the Trobriands is rather controlled. Loving married couples do not exchange any signs of tenderness like holding hands, kissing in public, or embracing each other, not even after some time of having been parted from one another. The relationship of a wife and her husband seems to be rather detached, at least in our eyes. When my wife joined me in 1983 and stayed with me for eleven months in Tauwema—and also when we returned to Tauwema in 1989 together with our then two- and four-year-old children—we did not accept this kind of behavior for ourselves. Not only did we walk hand in hand and even kissed and embraced each other in public, we also swam together in the sea and went together to the Bugei, the fresh water grotto mentioned above, where we had our baths together. Trobriand husbands and their wives just do not do this—and as a result we had at least some privacy bathing together—if we forgot about a few peeping Toms, of course. All this was quite shocking for the villagers, and they told us that this was something that violated their feeling of *mwasila*—which can be glossed as “shame.” However, when some of my friends hinted to me that we should not do this, we told them

that the people of the Trobriand Islands have their customs, which we wanted to study together with their language, and that we had our customs, which we did not want to give up at all—just as they would not like to give up their customs. This explanation was accepted. However, whenever we broke their taboos with respect to the Trobrianders' idea of the proper public behavior of a married couple, the villagers could hardly suppress a smile or a giggle. Nevertheless, there are situations, I presume, where field researchers may decide even to “misbehave” in the eyes of their hosts, if they do not want to sacrifice important features of their own identity. And if field researchers present themselves to their hosts as a straightforward people of principle, it can be hoped that the hosts will appreciate the consistency, and thus the predictability, of their behavior—even if it may sometimes violate the prevailing local rules.

A completely different story are cases of misbehavior, where I indeed—unwittingly—put my foot in it. Three examples of such misbehavior should suffice for the purposes of this note.

Soon after my wife joined me in the field, our neighbor Nameruba visited us, together with her daughter, who greatly resembled her mother. I commented on this fact, intending my remark as a compliment to a proud mother. However, my “innocent” comment disturbed Nameruba, and she left us soon after, somewhat bewildered. Weyei, who witnessed the whole scene, explained to me that I had committed a faux-pas. One just does not say something like that to a mother, and I dimly recollected that Malinowski mentioned something like this in his monograph on *The Sexual Life of Savages in Northwestern Melanesia*. Indeed, there we read the following, “In a matrilineal society, such as the Trobriands, where all maternal relatives are considered to be of the “same body,” and a father to be a “stranger,” we would have no doubt in anticipating that facial and bodily similarity would be traced in the mother’s family alone. The contrary is the case, however, and this is affirmed with extremely strong social emphasis. Not only is it a household dogma, so to speak, that a child never resembles its mother, or any kind of its brothers and sisters, or any of its maternal kinsmen, but it is extremely bad form and a great offence to hint at any such similarity. To resemble one’s father, on the other hand, is the natural, right, and proper thing for a man or woman to do” (Malinowski 1929: 173–174).

However, it is one thing to read such a rule about good behavior (and the explanation for its existence) in a society, and another thing to remember it—with all of one’s own ethnocentricities—when living in the community where this particular rule holds. I got out of this without being publicly scolded. However, I did not do so with the next two cases of misbehavior I want to report here.

One evening, at about sunset, Asinata and some other women were standing in front of our house together with their babies. Asinata’s baby, Isakapu, was not afraid at all to leave her mother and come to me. I took the little girl in my arms, played with her, and—as I used to do “back home”—first held her up in the air, and then tossed her in the air and caught her again. All the mothers

witnessing this screamed immediately—Asinata grabbed her baby, scolded me and asked me whether I had not heard anything about the *munukwausi*—the “flying witches” that become active after sunset and are said to eat the innards of children if they are not protected by their mothers or other adults. They invisibly fly through the air—and if a child is thrown up into the air they take it as a welcomed prey. Again, I now remembered having read about these “flying witches” in Malinowski (1922: 76, 237–244), but it was obviously too late, and it took me much effort and a lot of tobacco and other gifts to make friends with Asinata and the other mothers again. And I must confess that even nowadays I am very happy that nothing serious so far happened to Isakapu who by now is about eleven years old. Trobriand mothers have good memories and they seem to insist on good manners, as the next case illustrates.

One morning we saw Itakeda sitting on the veranda of Yau’s house. This meant that the girl had decided to marry her boyfriend, and her family as well as Yau’s family were busily preparing for a festive exchange of gifts between the two families. Itakeda’s father seemed to appreciate the choice of his daughter so much that he was even preparing to kill a pig. After we came back from our morning bath, we sat down on the veranda of one of the neighbors of Itakeda’s father. It was more or less by chance that this was the house where Itakeda’s best girlfriend Bomsamesa lived. She was sitting at my side, and her older brother crouched beside my wife and observed the preparation of this little feast in honor of the newly married couple. Observing all these preparations I—rather stupidly—asked Bomsamesa when she was going to marry her boyfriend. I had hardly asked this question when Bomsamesa’s mother—who was standing near by—came down on me like a fury and scolded me for having asked such an indecent question to a girl in the presence of her brother. I immediately realized that I had just violated the most important taboo on the Trobriands, the taboo that Malinowski (1929:433–451) had described as the so-called “brother-sister taboo”: siblings must not know about each other’s erotic engagements or love affairs—at least not officially. I knew this. I had read Malinowski before I went to the field, but nevertheless, in the actual situation I behaved like I would have done back home, not realizing that this came close to how a bull behaves in a china shop—for the standards of the Trobriand Islanders, at least. It was finally my friend Weyei who tried to calm down Bomsamesa’s mother—I left the scene quite depressed, and in the following weeks I tried to regain the friendship of Bomsamesa’s mother with much tobacco as a “peace-offering.”

One day I found her sitting with some of her grandchildren playing cat’s cradle, a string-figures game, with them. I listened to the verses she was reciting and it was now my turn to be shocked, as I realized what kind of verse accompanied the beautiful string-figure she had just developed for her grandchildren. The verses of this string-figure, called *Tobabana* (see Senft & Senft 1986:154–156; Senft 1991b:238), go as follows,

Tobabane, Tobabane,
 kwakeye lumta!
 Kwalimati.
 Kusivilaga,
 kuyomama.

'Tobabana, Tobabana,
 you are fucking your sister!
 You are fucking her to death.
 You are turning around,
 you are weary and tired.'

Thus, it was obvious that this game referred to a case of incest between brother and sister—the extreme case with respect to the violation of the brother-sister taboo (see Malinowski 1929:451).

I asked her why she talked like this to these small children, who obviously had a great time listening to their grandma, on the one hand, whereas on the other she had recently been so furious with me because of my innocent—according to my standards—question. She laughed at me for the first time since my faux pas, and said that this was completely different. She was only playing with her grandchildren, and this play was like *sopa*. So here I was once again confronted with the same concept discussed earlier in this note.

During my stay in Tauwema I learned that there are a number of games, played with accompanying verses and dances, that topicalize breaches of certain taboos and “play” with varieties of obscene language. However, these games and the playful use of certain vocabulary items permit the breaking of verbal taboos in a clearly defined situation only. This serves as a forum that permits a specially marked way of communicating about something “one does not talk about” otherwise, and thus functions as what has been called a “safety-valve custom” (Heymer 1977:187). Such customs are to be found in every society (Bornemann 1974; Rühmkorf 1967), because they actually help to secure the observance of important taboos within a society (Senft & Senft 1986; Senft 1987; 1991b; 1992:80). In the Trobriand case, it is again the situational-intentional variety called *Biga Sopa*, the “joking or lying language,” an indirect language that among other things constitutes a safety-valve custom and thus serves an important function in everyday social life in the Trobriands.

These examples of cases where I put my foot in it should suffice for the purposes of this note. I would like to finish this “confessio” with a few concluding remarks.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS. I hope to have shown in this note that culture-specific pragmatic frames and rules of verbal and nonverbal behavior are—probably inevitably—violated in intercultural communication between the field researcher, on the one hand, and the people whose language and culture he or she is studying, on the other. This note is intended to show that these violations are not merely embarrassing, but can be, and in fact are, extremely helpful in discovering, unveiling, and coming to an understanding of (many of) the pragmatic rules and regulations of the particular speech community being

studied. This may turn out to be quite difficult, and sometimes even humiliating. It is not intellectually easy to accept the fact that one has behaved in an ethnocentric, ignorant, or thoughtless manner, without sufficient sensitivity for the decency, tactful behavior, and ideas that are highly valued by the people who are one's hosts. However, I think it is worth the price if one really wants to find out something about the social construction of a society one studies and lives in, especially if one's main interest is to know something about how the language of this society under study is actually used in the everyday interaction and in the cultural context of its speakers.⁹

NOTES

1. This paper is based on twenty-three months of field research in the Trobriand Islands in 1982–83, 1989, 1992, and 1993. I want to thank the German Research Society and the Max Planck Society for their support in realizing my field research. I also want to thank the National and Provincial Governments in Papua New Guinea, and the Institute for PNG Studies for their assistance with, and permission for, my research projects. I express my great gratitude to the people of the Trobriand Islands, especially to the inhabitants of Tauwema. I thank them for their hospitality, friendship, and patient cooperation.

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2. Kilivila (also: Kiriwina, Boyowa) is one of the forty Austronesian languages spoken in the area of Milne Bay Province in Papua New Guinea. Typologically it is classified as belonging to the "Papuan Tip Cluster" group (Capell 1976:6, 9; Ross 1988: 25–27). Moreover, it is classified as one of the languages with VOS-word order (Senft 1986:107–112). The Kilivila language family encompasses the languages Budibud (or Nada), Muyuw (or Murua) and Kilivila. Kilivila is spoken by about 25,000 speakers, the majority of whom live in the Trobriand Islands.
3. I give just three examples to demonstrate how unreliable some of the sources providing information about Kilivila are: Capell (1971: 307) notes that there is no word-initial /b/ in Kilivila. However, the Kilivila word for language is *biga!* Capell (1976:6, 9) and Lithgow (1976) classify Kilivila as one of the languages with SVO-word order. However, my data indicate that it has to be classified as one of the languages with VOS-word order (see Senft 1986:107–112). Capell (1969:61) lists forty-four numeral classifiers in Kilivila. One of the formatives he presents is *ukdu*. However, this particle does not agree with Kilivila syllable patterns (Senft 1986:20–22), and this may be the reason why my informants were not able to confirm the existence of such a classifier in their language (see also Senft 1991a:27, 46).
4. When I returned to Tauwema in 1989 and donated a copy of my Kilivila grammar and dictionary to the village, the important men and the chief approached me a few days later and said they would like to have another look at my hands. After a short discussion they agreed that they must have made a mistake back in 1982–83, and then proudly told me that I am a member of the Malasi-clan, the highest ranking clan in the Islands.
5. These greeting formulae are *bwena kaukwau* 'good morning', *bwena lalai* 'good day', *bwena kwaiyai* 'good afternoon', and *bwena bogi* 'good night'.

6. This had changed dramatically when I returned to the Trobriands after another six years in 1989. I have described these changes in Senft 1992.
7. See for example Bohannan (1967), Hoebel (1967), Horak & Horak (1986:381–447), König (1925), Labov (1972:297–353), and Venbrux (1993:265–266).
8. For further information see Senft (1986:124–126; 1991b).
9. I checked this paper with my informants during my 1993 field trip to the Trobriands in June–July 1993. They agreed that the things this paper reports were indeed mistakes, misunderstandings, and cases of misbehavior. However, one of them, Mokeilobu, made the following comment, with which I would like to somewhat proudly finish this paper: *Gunter, igau makala ekugwa kuisisu Tauwema bubunem kagisesi sita makala dimdim, taga besatuta bogwa bubunem deli am livala bogwa bwena wala makala tolela Tauwema.* ‘Gunter, formerly, when you first stayed in Tauwema, we saw that your manners were a bit like those of the white people, but now your manners and your speech (behavior) are already good, as if you were a man from Tauwema.’

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LEND ME YOUR EARS!

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1. THE WELL-TRAINED PHONETICIAN. The ideal of “the well-trained phonetician” has existed, at least in theory, ever since I first began to study linguistics, and probably well before. It supposedly involves an absolute ability, like perfect pitch, except that one isn’t born with it. It is a state that one may