

Documentation of Traditional Narratives in Yaathe

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1. Introduction

The Fulni-ô people is the only indigenous group of Northeastern Brazil that was able to keep its language – the Yaathe¹ – alive and active. They live in a reservation located around the city of Águas Belas, in the interior of the State of Pernambuco, in the area known as Sertão (semi-arid interior), 273 kilometers west of the State capital, Recife (lat: -7.0136; long: -37.0458; see Google image). Mostly adults and the elderly use Yaathe; children and young people use Portuguese more frequently. According to the latest UNESCO report, Yaathe, an isolated language that belongs to the Macro-Jê branch (Rodrigues, 1986), is *severely endangered*.² The Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), the agency responsible for statistical, geographic, cartographic, geodetic and environmental information in Brazil, in its latest national census, reported a total of 3.423 self-declared indigenous people living in the Fulni-ô reservation. Among these, only 47% declared themselves speakers of Yaathe.³



The Fulni-ô Reservation; Google Maps

Even though Yaathe may be losing ground to Portuguese, it still plays an important part in the Fulni-ô society. In the Ouricuri ritual, for example, it plays a crucial role, since it is the language preferably spoken in the fourteen weeks that the ritual lasts. It is then that the younger members are socialized by learning a symbolic code that is different from that used by the surrounding society. During this important ritual, several mythic narratives are told, primarily by the elderly, who still can remember them. Unfortunately, many of these traditional narratives were never documented by any means. Since these narratives are an essential part of the Fulni-ô culture, that are used to maintain a historical record and sustain their cultures and identities, it is imperative to document them so present and future generations of Fulni-ô can have access to them.

¹ Corresponding ISO 639-3 code: fun.

² <http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/en/atlasmap/language-id-596.html>

³ <http://www.censo2010.ibge.gov.br/terrasindigenas/>

2. Goals of the proposal

During the period of 2010-2012, a team of researchers from Universidade Federal de Alagoas developed and carried out a documentation project that collected audio and video recordings of lexicon, personal and procedural narratives and spontaneous conversation in Yaathe. All the recordings were deposited at *The Language Archive* (<https://corpus1.mpi.nl/>). The team consisted of two non-indigenous researchers (Miguel Oliveira Jr. and Januacele da Costa, the project PI) and a Fulni-ô master's student, who conducted the collection of data (Fábia Fulni-ô). Because of cultural restrictions, the student couldn't collect traditional narratives with the elderly (mostly men).

The original goal of this proposal was to train a group of Fulni-ô teachers to collect traditional narratives in Yaathe with the elderly. They would also be trained to transcribe and translate them and to organize a book for local distribution. The proposed products of this project were: (i) an electronic book with a total of 20 narratives in Yaathe, translated into Portuguese (and, possibly, into English) and (ii) a corpus of these narratives, fully annotated with ELAN, to be integrated into the existing Yaathe corpus, deposited at *The Language Archive*.

3. Results

Instead of training a group of Yaathe teachers, as originally planned, we focused on the training of a single teacher, who enrolled our post-graduate program in Linguistics (<http://www.fale.ufal.br/posgraduacao/ppgll/>) as a master's student: Elvis Ferreira de Sá (<http://lattes.cnpq.br/8040703338651756>), also known as Towmalaka Fulni-ô. This is the third indigenous person who is enrolled in our post-graduate program, what we consider to be an important action both for the academic and the indigenous communities. He was trained to collect, store and annotate linguistic data following the most recent practices for language documentation.

After some discussion regarding the equipment that was needed for data collection, we decided that it was better to invest the grant in a single, but powerful equipment, rather than buying three different equipment with mediocre specifications, as initially planned. Since, as a student in our academic program, Elvis could borrow some equipments for data collection, such as

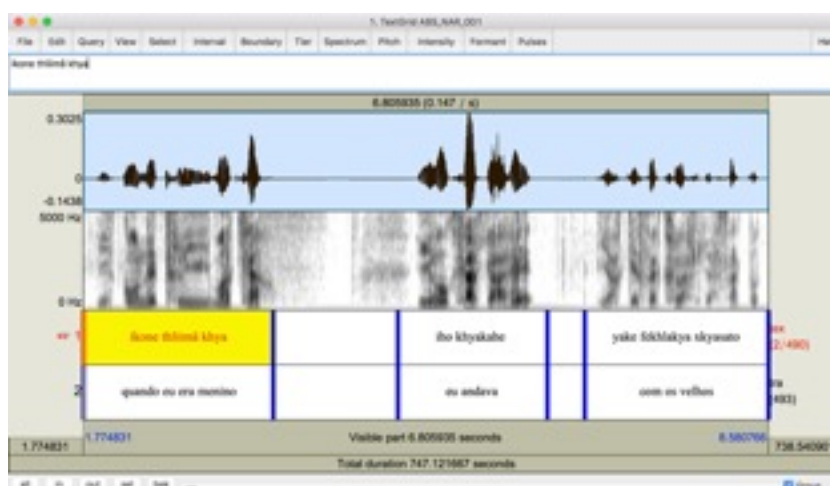


Elvis Ferreira de Sá, Fulni-ô

digital audio/video recorders, microphones and headphones, we decided to buy only a computer. Our choice fell on a MacBook Pro computer, due to its hardware configuration that is suitable for video and audio editing. The computer was immediately donated to Elvis' community.

Data collection was made in different periods of time. Elvis was responsible for data collection, under my supervision. We discussed all the details of the recording procedures and, after the recording, we discussed the best way to edit and annotate the material. Data were collected, stored, translated, and annotated following the E-MELD School of Best Practice⁴, which is being adopted in documentation projects internationally.

The transcription, translation, and annotation of all the data is demanding a considerable amount of time. We are using Praat and (Boersma & Weenik, 2007) and ELAN (Sloetjes, H., & Wittenburg, 2008), programs that offer considerable advantages for annotation and alignment of transcriptions. After the annotation of the entire data is finished, all the material will be archived at *The Language Archive* (<https://corpus1.mpi.nl/>).



Example of a narrative annotated in Praat

Elvis assembled some of the narratives he collected and created a video documentary with the help of Panorama Cultural Film Production: *Ihiato – Narrativas dos Anciãos Fulni-ô* (<http://panoramacultural.com.br/trailer-de-ihato-narrativas-dos-anciaos-fulni-o/>). The film acknowledges GBS for the support and was screened in several ethnographic film festivals in Brazil. A trailer of the film can be viewed here: <https://youtu.be/4i7w4GczNvc>. A link to full documentary can be sent upon request.

Right now, Elvis is also working on his Master's thesis, that should be defended on April 2017. The thesis will be on aspects of traditional narratives in Yaathe. He is also working on a book containing several narratives in Yaathe, translated into Portuguese. The book should be ready by the end of 2016.

⁴ E-MELD School of Best Practice (<http://www.emeld.org/school/>).

All of this: the movie, the book and the dissertation could not be possible without the kind support of GBS.

References

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Rodrigues, A. 1996. As línguas gerais sul-americanas. *Papia*, 4(2), p. 6-18.







Elvis collecting data with the Fulni-ô