

Writing Panare – Portrait of a Linguist on Fieldwork (video). Camera/sound/direction by PAUL HENLEY. Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology, University of Manchester. 1996. 29 minutes. GBP£20/US\$32.

The film opens with a misty, idyllic view of the Amazon rainforest and the voice of a male Panare speaker telling a traditional myth peppered with animal sounds and other onomatopoeia. The camera pans to the storyteller, with cigarette smoke rising and flies humming as he continues his narrative, then to the main subject of the video, French fieldworker Marie-Claude Muller.

Muller works with the Panare, a native people of Venezuelan Amazonia. Her task is to learn Panare well enough to devise an alphabet and prepare readers with which literacy can be taught to the Panare in bilingual primary school programs. Previously, Muller explains, the Panare were taught only in Spanish, which neither the teachers nor the students knew well if at all. Muller also trains Panare schoolteachers to write and teach in Panare, something they find strange at first, since formerly all important tribal knowledge was passed on orally.

This video provides a firsthand introduction to the everyday realities of the Panare – what they look like, what they wear, and how they live; also how their environment is changing as the outside world forces itself on them in the form of roads, missions and bauxite mining, a process Muller calls “unstoppable”.

Muller discusses in impeccable Spanish the importance and broad implications of bringing literacy to previously isolated native peoples. Literacy is a multi-edged sword, she says; it brings in outside influences, both good and bad, but it can also mean access to modern medical care, which can help native peoples deal with imported diseases like malaria. Muller notes that it is mostly men who participate in literacy programs; the girls tend to give it up when they marry.

While the film does not go deeply into such issues as IPA transcription, it does include a scene in which Muller elicits vocabulary words for animals from a pair of shy teenage Panare boys (is a ‘worm’ called ‘fish-food’, or ‘hook-food’, as in another dialect?), and another in which she works with a Spanish-speaking Panare man to establish whether Panare has nominal plural marking. Three extended narratives of Panare myths enable the viewer to become acquainted with the sound and rhythm of the language; immediately noticeable are its plentiful clipped consonants, especially glottal stops, and its unrounded back vowels.

Toward the end of the film there is a striking scene of a Panare boy and his monkey kissing on the lips.

Though literacy education is the main theme of the video, it is an excellent introduction to linguistic fieldwork for almost any kind of linguistics or anthropology course. This film can unabashedly say of its message, like the Panare storyteller of his narrative, “How well I told it!”

The tape is available in English and Spanish with English subtitles, or with Spanish voice-over and subtitles; and in PAL (for Europe) or NTSC (for North America) format. [Karen Steffen Chung, *National Taiwan University*.]