

Buried in history: rediscovering John M. Weatherby's Soo data for linguistics

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In the mid-20th century, Africanist historians who had turned to oral tradition as a source of evidence about the past began advocating for a project of oral data archiving. The stated goals of this project bore striking resemblance to those put forth in theorizations of the language archive emerging from the field of language documentation in recent decades. Both projects have posited that archives' main purposes are to make scholars' claims reproducible by providing access to the source material on which those claims are based and to provide a multipurpose record that could benefit scholars from disciplines beyond that of the original data collector. While these historians collected a great deal of oral data that could be useful to linguists, often including audio recorded and transcribed texts, this data was generally not accessibly archived.

This paper provides an account of why these collections of texts have been remained obscure and argues that they can nevertheless be of value for linguists. It focuses on the case of one particular corpus of audio recordings and field notes collected in the 1960s and 1970s. The corpus documents Soo (Uganda: Kuliak/Nilo-Saharan); collected by Makerere University history PhD student John M. Weatherby, it was intended to serve as the data underlying his doctoral thesis. Working as a historian and trying to make his work relevant to linguists and anthropologists as well, Weatherby repeatedly watched his work get lost in the interstices between disciplines; his data was nearly lost despite decades of effort to find an institutional home for it.

In sketching out the disciplinary trends that led to the near-loss of Weatherby's data, this paper also shows how the types of data (for example conversations, oral traditions, and other forms of naturalistic speech) are of greater interest for linguists today than at the time that they were produced. It contributes to theorizations of language archiving and to the study of the history of linguistics in Africa.