

A Beginner's Guide to Field Work 24.900 Fall 2005

I. THE BIG PICTURE

A. Cultural Sensitivity

We all know that every culture is different. Please make sure you keep this in mind when collecting data. Here are some examples of issues you may encounter:

- People may be more shy and less likely to volunteer information.
- On the other hand, people may be more aggressive. Remember that "politeness" is different in every culture.
- There may be religious differences. If you are a woman interviewing a Hassidic Jew, you may not touch a man. If you are a man, you may not be able to work with a Muslim woman. If you are meeting over lunch with a Hindu person, make sure you do not order beef. These are only examples – in every situation, do your best to act without offense.
- In some cultures, it would be acceptable for a male consultant to sexually approach a female interviewer. Women, make sure you remain understanding *and* safe.
- Make sure your consultant understands that this research is not meant to be exploitative of their culture. No data will be shared unless permission is given, and even then it will only be shared with the teachers in the class. You might also want to explain how linguistic research and documentation of languages can help to preserve or even revive minority cultures.

B. Ethics

Please keep the following ethical standards in mind. If you do not follow these, there could be major disciplinary consequences for you and for the linguistics department at the university. Remember this is research *involving human subjects*, and is therefore subject to the same rules as, e.g., human medical trials.

- Please do your best not to impose your cultural standards on your consultant.
- Do NOT coerce your consultant in any way. If they do not want to answer a question, move on to the next question or find a new

speaker. If your consultant is not comfortable with giving you data and excited about sharing his or her language and culture, it may be best to work with someone else.

- Make sure your consultant knows that he or she may stop at any time.
- Show your gratitude! Make sure you thank your consultant and ask if you can do anything to make them more comfortable. If you are meeting in public, you may want to offer to buy your consultant coffee or tea. If you are at home, offer them a snack or a drink. Remember, they are donating their time to you.

C. Safety

If you do not know your consultant well, please exercise common-sense safety precautions. Meet in a public place like a coffee shop or a park. Be friendly and non-threatening. We don't foresee any problems for students working on this project, but if for any reason you feel unsafe, cut the meeting short and leave.

II. PRACTICAL STUFF

A. Useful Equipment to have:

- A notebook to write data and observations in. Maybe another book, or some paper, for your consultant to write in as well.
- Pens and pencils
- A tape recorder, tapes, and batteries *or* a computer with sound-recording software and a microphone. (Recording on your laptop is especially useful if you're doing phonetic/phonological analysis because you can go back and slow down the recording, making it easier to hear sounds.)

B. Organization:

- PLAN: Have a list of sentences and words prepared *before* your meeting, or you will end up wasting time (and boring your consultant!)
- ELICIT: As you get data from your consultant, jot down notes and ideas. Sometimes it's helpful to have your consultant write down the sentences and words. However, make sure you have a recording so that later you can go back and see how the orthography of the language differs from the pronunciation.

- TEST: If you come up with any hypothetical analyses while doing the elicitation session, try to test them by coming up with sentences of your own and asking for judgments (see below). If it isn't so easy for you to come up with analyses on the fly, do them at home and test them in your next session.

C. After the session:

- Listen to your tape. Correct your transcriptions or make notes on how the consultant's written sentences differ from pronunciation.
- Analyze your data and figure out how to test your analyses.
- Make a plan for your next session.

D. Order of Elicitation:

- Words and very simple phrases (like 'cat' and 'the cat')
- Simple sentences using the words/phrases already elicited
- More complex sentences (even if you are doing phonetics/phonology, it will be helpful to get complex sentences since they usually contain words that have a lot of morphology, which often changes pronunciation. Also, neighboring words can change other words' pronunciations.)

III. THE DATA

A. Types of Elicitation

- *Elicitation of forms* ("How do you say "X" in Welsh?")
This will be the main thing you are doing. Be careful, though: often, your consultant will give you a paraphrase instead of a direct translation. They may change the tense or structure. If this happens, try again. Sometimes it will just be *impossible* for them to do a direct translation – for example, many languages cannot have multiple-WH-questions ("Who put what book into which cabinet?").
- *Elicitation of judgments* ("Can you say "X" in Welsh?")
You will do this to test your hypotheses. Be careful, though! Often the consultant may say your sentence is ungrammatical for the wrong reasons – maybe it's prescriptively grammatical

but descriptively fine, or maybe you just pronounced it wrong. Do your best to get to the heart of the matter.

B. Collecting the Data

- Be careful HOW you ask the question.
- Ask the speaker to repeat everything – three times is a good standard.
- Try minimally contrasting forms (for example, try to find phonological minimal pairs or try to find the same sentence in present and past tenses.)

One of the most IMPORTANT things to remember:

Make sure your speaker knows that you want to know the way they *really talk*, for example when chatting with friends or family. It *does not matter* what people say is "proper" in the language. Without giving them an entire linguistics lecture, try to get them to understand the difference between descriptive and prescriptive data.

C. Factors Affecting Data Quality:

- Your mood and the mood of the consultant
- Nearby noise
- Issues of taboo and etiquette
- Education of consultant
- Social issues like language or dialect shame
- Misunderstandings/mistranslations/paraphrases
- Your skill as a transcriber and analyst
- The language may not lend itself well to the things you've decided to study. For example, you may have decided to study morphology but it turns out that your language has little complex morphology. If this happens, change your focus or come talk to the professor or your TA.