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Focus on: Linguistic fieldwork
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Linguistic fieldwork: setting the scene

Abstract

Linguistic fieldwork is the backbone of an empirically-based science of linguistics. Firsthand information on barely known minority languages is essential for our understanding of human languages, their structural properties and their genetic relationships. ‘Immersion’ fieldwork as major ‘must’ is contrasted to ‘interview’ fieldwork as a less desirable option. We aim at an open-ended documentation of each language, intended for various audiences, being both accessible and user-friendly. This introductory essay introduces a number of issues concerning linguistic fieldwork, discussed in some detail by the contributors to this issue, each a highly experienced fieldworker and a recognised authority in their fields. This is what makes the issue special.

1. About this collection

Firsthand knowledge of diverse languages with their different structures is essential for our understanding of how human languages work. Linguistic fieldwork – which involves venturing into a community where the language is spoken, collecting the information, and providing a comprehensive analysis and written documentation of the language – is crucial for this. And also urgent: in just a few generations many small ‘exotic’ languages will have passed into oblivion, ousted by the encroaching national and other majority languages, which carry more prestige and economic advantages.

As FRANZ BOAS (a founding father of modern linguistics) put it, languages differ not in what one can say but in what kind of information must be stated: “grammar [...] determines those aspects of each experience that must be expressed” (Boas 1938: 132).

Linguistic fieldwork is the only way to ensure the progress of linguistic science, refining and expanding the paradigm of modern research through learning more about lesser known languages. For example, only through investigating languages from North and South America did linguists realise that information source – known as evidentiality – can be a crucial category in a language. A speaker of Central Pomo (Mrnhun, this issue) will carefully use an evidential enclitic which allows her to make sure the audience knows whether she witnessed the event herself, or knows it from somewhere else. And this would be a useful category in any language – as Boas (1942: 182) put it, “we could read our newspapers with much greater satisfaction if our language would compel them to say whether their reports are based on self-experience, inference, or hearsay!” This is just one example of a linguistic feature which would have remained unknown to us, linguists, if it hadn’t been for a steady tradition of linguistic fieldworkers, largely founded by FRANZ BOAS himself.

Empirically-based linguistic research relies on the “real-life language data” obtained as a result of fieldwork (Abbi 2001: 1). Field linguistics provides indispensable input into just
the issue of the contributions is why I think a few points which are particularly important in the introduction. The first issue - the need for more focus on how the work is done. In the first issue, I focus on how the work is done. This is especially important because the work is done in a specific context, and the context is what makes the work unique. The second issue - the need for more focus on the role of the researcher. This is important because the role of the researcher is what makes the work unique. The third issue - the need for more focus on the role of the participant. This is important because the role of the participant is what makes the work unique. The fourth issue - the need for more focus on the role of the institution. This is important because the role of the institution is what makes the work unique. The fifth issue - the need for more focus on the role of the community. This is important because the role of the community is what makes the work unique. The sixth issue - the need for more focus on the role of the policy. This is important because the role of the policy is what makes the work unique.
2. Fieldwork: immersion or interview?

Linguistic fieldwork ideally involves observing the language as it is used, becoming a member of a community, and often being adopted into the kinship system. One records texts, working one’s way through them, and at the same time learns to speak the language and observes how it is used by native speakers – ideally – of all age, and social, groups. This is what we call ‘immersion fieldwork’ (Dixon, this issue). And this is what all the contributors to this issue have done, on the languages of their expertise.

As previously undocumented languages move towards extinction, they may cease to be used by a community. They may not be spoken at all on a regular basis – just remembered by a few old people. Participant-observation – and with it ‘immersion’ fieldwork – then becomes almost impossible. We are forced to do what we can with the ‘rememberers’ through ‘interview’ fieldwork. This is what happens in many linguistic situations in Australia and throughout both Americas. Such studies, however useful, are bound to produce limited grammars, if compared to the output of fully fledged multi-faceted immersion fieldwork. Fieldworkers who have never had the opportunity of undertaking true immersion fieldwork ought to recognise their limitations, and refrain from teaching others ‘how to’ and making general pronouncements about the subject.

Many of the manuals of fieldwork and encyclopaedia articles on this subject have been written by people who have, at best, some experience of interview fieldwork. They have not lived in a community for a period of months, immersing themselves in daily life and in daily language use. Yet they have the impertinence to instruct students on how to do what they have not undertaken themselves.

Interview fieldwork is justified if there is nothing else to be done. It is a very poor option if a speech community is available – but some researchers opt to concentrate on interview fieldwork with a few speakers conveniently placed in a city or in a township. A grammar of a language spoken by a few million people which is based on the work with one consultant in an urban environment could be interesting, but is unlikely to be comprehensive and fully reliable. A prime example is Owens’ (1985) grammar of Oromo (notwithstanding the fact that Owens’ research on Arabic dialects is of good quality). Working with immigrant communities – if a language is well spoken in a home country – is also hardly advisable: many grammatical features are extremely prone to contact induced change and are likely to shift under the impact of introducing new – and losing old – cultural practices. Opting to study Burmese, Hmong, or Serbian – each spoken in their home countries – within the comfort zone of Greater Melbourne, London or Los Angeles may be good for understanding the subtle influence of the Anglophone environment on a smaller language. But it is bound to give a skewed picture of the language’s structure.

Of course, in some cases, the area where the language is spoken is ‘off-limits’ to the researcher, due to a civil war or whatever other political problems. It is hardly feasible for researchers nowadays to venture into the terrorist-infested Caucasus. One then has to postpone planned fieldwork until such time as the political situation improves. Meanwhile, there are several thousand other languages where one can undertake immersion fieldwork.

In some traditions, ‘interview’ fieldwork involves a whole group of people going to a location for a short time, hastily interviewing the same set of consultants on the principle ‘one researcher one problem’. There is no time to establish any true rapport between a linguist and a consultant. The relationship is that of ‘paid help’ rather than of intellectual
...
Different audiences value different types of output. Most speakers value dictionaries above grammars. But this is not to say that reference grammars are useless to no one but linguistic scholars. On the contrary. Jovino Brito, the President of the Association of the Tariana and a highly competent speaker of the language, said to me, contentedly, after having received a copy of the Tariana grammar, and other materials: “Good, my older sister. Now we have a real language, with a grammar book, a dictionary, a manual and a book of stories”.

That is, in Mithun’s words, proper language documentation involves “documenting the language as it is used for speakers in various settings from everyday conversation to formal oratory”. And, as she puts it in §4, “particularly in the case of endangered languages, what is documented now will be utilised for purposes well beyond those we can imagine at the present time”. The Native American communities Mithun has worked with vary. In some, the language is still actively spoken; in others it survives in the mouth of a handful of elders. And in the Barbareño Chumash community, only descendants of the last speaker survive. Now that they are interested in learning more about their extinct language as an identity mark they do their best to try and recall conversational routines and other ways of using the language. But these, unfortunately, have not been captured by the existing materials, however copious. For languages which are still spoken, a linguist is instrumental in providing an ‘open-ended’ documentation – the more we document now, the fewer unanswered questions will come up in the future.

The modern technology, especially recording equipment, which allows us to “record spontaneous, unscripted speech in real time” (Mithun, §4), is a great help. Thanks to technological advances, our data and our analyses are more precise. Video clips used alongside more established traditional methods allowed Hellwig (this issue) to refine her understanding of property expressions in Goemai, a previously undescribed Chadic language from Nigeria.

However, technology should be seen as an accessory, and not an end in itself. If overused, and overtrusted, technological marvels may become a mixed blessing. As Dixon (§9) puts it, “computers are a valuable aid once one leaves the field and works on materials back at base”. Having a computer in the field may be helpful – but is fraught with danger: Looking after a computer will plainly take time which would have been better spent analysing the language. In a humid tropical environment – such as north-west Amazonia and the Sepik area, with no electricity supply – a computer may become an incumbrance. And same for video-recorders. We should also recall that speakers of previously undocumented languages, in remote locations, may feel intimidated by the flashy gadgets. A constant presence of a video recorder or a computer may do nothing but alienate the fieldworker from the community where they are trying to establish themselves.

Even a tape-recorder can be an unwelcome intruder. Some of the Mennonites discussed by Burridge (§3) “are clearly uncomfortable with the idea of recording of any kind”, and then the best course is not to “push the issue”. In Burridge’s words, “participant observation is best accomplished without the intrusion of recording equipment”, especially when “the setting is such that technical trappings appear so out of place”. We will be able to better “take in the social and cultural context for the linguistic structures”, when we do not have to constantly keep an eye on the equipment.

This is all common sense – but perhaps somewhat uncool and unfashionable. Recently, a number of linguists – none of whom has so far documented a living language in a proper sense, or perhaps, is even capable of doing so – have introduced a false dichotomy between
We often end up writing "eloquent" descriptions, as in, "to what end do we

The Frexes show in this piece in this issue’s a Hundred who chances to have a solid backgound in

the thrusts (examples included: introductions to DIXON and ARTENIAD 1999) and, as

These words are also deeply embedded in the grammatical language.”

To fully understand a language, a linguist has to more than just a scholar of languages.

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cult to remain the impartial observer”. How close can one have to allow oneself to be to the people whose language is being described? Being integrated into the Taraiana community of Santa Rosa in northwest Amazonia, and into the Manambu community at Avatip in New Guinea, has never been easy for me. The ‘adopted’ family ties impose moral and financial obligations, and may even hamper further research: I was severely criticised by my Taraiana family for wanting to work with a different group, who ‘do not speak right’. Yet, just like we live with our ‘real families’, no matter how bad they may be, we take our fieldwork environment as it comes, and make the best of it.

Close personal ties enhance a “priceless intellectual partnership” (in Dixon’s words, in his §7) with one, or more, consultants. As Burridge says about her consultant friend (in her §3.2): “She knows what I am about to ask, before I have even figured it out myself”. Such consultants are as good as co-authors of our grammars, and definitely co-analysts (Krishnamurti describes his ‘star’ speaker of Konda who “was so shrewd” that he was able to produce whole paradigms without being prompted by the researcher).

Learning the language, recording and analysing texts and conversations is a desideratum for a good fieldworker. We will never uncover the “special features of the [minority] language that distinguish it from the encroaching language” (Mithun, this issue) by “asking how to translate sentences from the lingua franca” (Dixon, §9). Limited elicitation (through the language itself) of paradigms is important for highly fusional languages—such as Dravidian. But if we wish to achieve the goal of “language documentation for future generations of both linguists and communities” (Mithun, §3.1), we need to learn special vocabulary and special grammar, which can only be discovered through “spontaneous, unscripted speech”—patterns which appear then may be lost in elicited translations. As Mithun (§3.2) puts it, “the elicitation of sentences translated from a contact language can facilitate direct comparison of languages”—but such comparison will not reveal anything much about the fundamental features of the minority language likely to be ‘lost’ in translation. We will not learn much beyond what we already know, and will hardly “gain insights into the ‘genius of the language’” (in Hellwig’s words, in her §5).

Field-based corpora cannot answer all questions. Further analytic tools may involve video stimuli, picture stories, and focussed elicitation through the language itself (see Hellwig, §4). But these remain secondary to natural texts and conversations — “the lifeblood of linguistic fieldwork” (Dixon, §9).

4. Consolidating the experience: an overview of this book

This issue is composed of six contributions, each by a highly competent and experienced fieldworker, and a prominent expert in grammar, linguistic typology and historical linguistics — areas in which Dixon, Mithun, and Burridge are household names. It centres on Field linguistics: a minor manual, by R. M. W. Dixon, outlining the main ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’ of linguistic field research, based on forty years fieldwork in three continents.

What role can a linguist play in a community which does not seem to need outsiders? In her account of fieldwork experience in the Old Order Mennonite community (A separate and peculiar people — fieldwork and the Pennsylvania Germans), Kate Burridge, an expert in Germanic linguistics, English and Pennsylvania German, tells a story of how she abandoned the “secure confines of written language, specifically medieval Germanic texts” to become part of “a living breathing community with actual native speakers” — and never
This issue provides an overview of recent problems relevant for all teleworkers.

Reliability, in an accomplished language, with only teleworkers benefited. Every coordination is highly

in different times, under different conditions, and on different conduits. Every coordinator -

which makes this issue so special. Every coordinator has done extensive telework.

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tool to better equip the people who are involved with this, to a great extent.

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language. This is a fundamental rest involving central areas of the economic change of any

language.

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His piece is, in the study of telephonic languages, multi-faceted grammar, and is one of the

most important things in the world of telework.

Krasnov's contribution is the most important thing in the world of telework.

Outcomes from North America.

An aspect of telework - which audience are we, in this area, and how best to

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looked back. Finding a role for a linguist in a meaningful community, defining a role
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This issue is not the last word on fieldwork; nor can there ever be one. By sharing our excitement and our experience, we hope that it will provide incentive for scholars to get out into the field and document languages in a proper manner, before it is too late to do so.

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Field linguistics: a minor manual

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