Linguistic Fieldwork

A handy beginner’s guide, this textbook introduces the various stages of linguistic fieldwork, from the preparation of the work to the presentation of the results. Drawing on over forty years of fieldwork experience between them, in over two dozen languages, the authors pack the book with examples and anecdotes from their experiences, and include practical exercises for students to test what they have learnt. Independent of any particular perspective, the methods can be applied to a wide range of fieldwork settings, for projects with very different theoretical backgrounds, and without the need to travel too far. The book covers ‘traditional fieldwork’ such as language description and documentation, as well as less typical methods, including language contact and quantitative studies with experiments or questionnaires.

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CAMBRIDGE TEXTBOOKS IN LINGUISTICS


Linguistic Fieldwork
Linguistic Fieldwork
A Student Guide

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Contents

Preface xi
Acknowledgements xii

1 Introduction: what is linguistic fieldwork? 1
1.1 A definition of fieldwork 2
1.2 Overview: the following chapters 8
1.3 Summary and further reading 8

2 Fieldwork projects: two examples 10
2.1 Fieldwork project 1. Mosetén in Bolivia: text-collection, transcription, analysis and elicitation 10
2.2 Fieldwork project 2. Somali in contact with English: setting up a fieldwork project 20
2.3 Summary and further reading 25

3 The languages 26
3.1 Bilingual and monolingual fieldwork 26
  3.1.1 Bilingual fieldwork 27
  3.1.2 Monolingual fieldwork 29
3.2 Learning the language(s) 35
3.3 Types of language data 37
3.4 Types of languages 38
  3.4.1 Major languages and languages with many speakers 38
  3.4.2 ‘Small’ languages and endangered languages 39
  3.4.3 Well-described versus little-studied languages 40
  3.4.4 Working on a language that you speak 41
3.5 How to find a language to work on 42
3.6 Summary and further reading 43

4 The people 44
4.1 The speakers 44
  4.1.1 Speakers’ language use and proficiency 45
  4.1.2 Contacting a language community 49
  4.1.3 Selecting the speakers 50
  4.1.4 The main teachers 54
  4.1.5 Other speakers 54
4.2 The linguist 55
  4.2.1 The significance of the first day 57
  4.2.2 The role of the linguist among the speakers 58
Contents

4.2.3 Teamwork among linguists 60
4.3 Other parties 61
4.3.1 The language community 61
4.3.2 Organizations in the area or in related fields 62
4.3.3 Other researchers 64
4.3.4 Conflicting interests 65
4.4 Fieldwork ethics 67
4.4.1 Information and consent 67
4.4.2 Payment and working conditions 71
4.4.3 Training language teachers 73
4.4.4 Helping the community 74
4.4.5 Ethics for the dissemination of the data and the results 75
4.5 Summary and further reading 77

5 Fieldwork preparation 79
5.1 Linguistic prefield preparation 79
5.1.1 Research questions 80
5.1.2 Choose a mentor 81
5.1.3 Prefield literature review 82
5.1.4 Computers and tools 83
5.1.5 Financing your fieldwork 84
5.1.6 Funding proposals for PhD theses and beyond 85
5.1.7 Ethics application 86
5.1.8 The place and timing of fieldwork 87
5.2 Considerations for remote fieldwork 88
5.2.1 Culture and relations 89
5.2.2 Paperwork and bureaucracy 90
5.2.3 Vaccinations and medicals 90
5.2.4 Medical training 91
5.2.5 Basic fieldwork equipment 92
5.2.6 Additional equipment 93
5.2.7 Consumable study supplies 94
5.2.8 How long to stay 95
5.2.9 Accommodation 96
5.2.10 Travel arrangements 98
5.3 Summary and further reading 98

6 Fieldwork methods 99
6.1 Types of research method 99
6.1.1 Qualitative methods 100
6.1.2 Quantitative methods 100
6.1.3 Mixed methods 101
6.1.4 Cross-sectional and longitudinal studies 101
6.2 Metadata, recordings and field notes 101
6.3 Text data 104
6.3.1 Transcription 107
6.3.2 Translation 108
6.3.3 Glossing 110
6.4 Elicitation 113
## 6. Elicitation

6.1 Elicitation in the laboratory 111
6.2 Elicitation in the field 112
6.3 Elicitation and language documentation 113

### 6.4 Types of elicitation

6.4.1 Types of elicitation 114
6.4.2 Limits of elicitation 117
6.4.3 Ethical considerations for elicitation 120
6.4.4 Monolingual elicitation 121
6.4.5 Third-party interpreters 126
6.4.6 Group teaching, serial teaching and individual teachers 127

### 6.5 Quantitative questionnaires and structured interviews

6.5.1 Questionnaires 129
6.5.2 Structured interviews 132

### 6.6 Experiments and stimulus tests

6.6.1 Experiments and stimulus tests 132

### 6.7 Participant observation

6.7.1 Participant observation 136

### 6.8 Integrating ethnography and fieldwork

6.8.1 Integrating ethnography and fieldwork 136

### 6.9 Summary and further reading

6.9.1 Summary and further reading 137

## 7. The outcomes

7.1 The fieldwork corpus 139
7.2 Archiving 140
7.3 Presenting methodology and results
   7.3.1 Presenting the results of qualitative studies 143
   7.3.2 Presenting the results of quantitative studies 144
7.4 Grammars 145
7.5 Dictionaries 148
7.6 Language documentation 150
7.7 Summary and further reading 150

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*Appendix 1 Perspectives on the history of fieldwork* 152
*Appendix 2 Phonology questionnaire* 159
*Notes to chapters* 167
*References* 171
*Index* 176
Preface

This guide emerges from a combined forty years of field research in over two dozen languages of the Brazilian and Bolivian Amazon, Greenland and Europe, including immigrant languages in Europe. The authors have been teaching field methods courses and seminars in Brazil, the USA, the UK, Germany and Denmark. They have had the enjoyable experience of taking graduate students and seasoned linguists from Brazil, the USA, Israel, Germany and the Netherlands to the field in order to train them in fieldwork methods. The authors thoroughly enjoy the intense challenge of field research and the presentation of the lessons learned thereby to the international linguistics community. Many of the suggestions included within this guide are ones we wish someone had made to us before we began our field research careers.

This book is intended for upper-division undergraduates, graduate students and above. It can be used in class or for self study. The book presumes basic knowledge of most areas of linguistics. To lighten up the reading and make it more personal, we have added anecdotes from our own and others’ experience. Depending on what you are setting out to do (or learn), some sections will be more relevant than others, though generally all chapters should be of interest to the field researcher.

The major theme to be developed in this book is how to do fieldwork, independent of any particular theoretical perspective. Not just ‘prototypical fieldwork’ is considered, but other ways of working with first-hand language data are explored. The book’s major thesis is that linguistic fieldwork can be successful with proper preparation and execution, bringing deep personal and professional satisfaction for the researchers and their native-speaker teachers. The book’s purpose is to help linguists do, enjoy, and succeed at field research.

This book began with an invitation from Andrew Winnard to Dan Everett to write an introductory book on fieldwork. In 2006, while a visitor at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Everett completed the first draft. Subsequently, Everett began work on another book, Don’t sleep, there are snakes. In the meantime, it was recognized that the original draft of the book needed to take on a different focus, since Everett had conceived of the book as a manual rather than as a textbook. Sakel joined the project and made numerous and profound changes to the manuscript to bring it more in line with the objectives of a textbook. Her work has been sufficiently extensive to warrant our joint decision to list her as first author.
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Finally, Jeanette Sakel is forever indebted to Maya Thornhill, who shared her mum with this book during the first months of her life.