

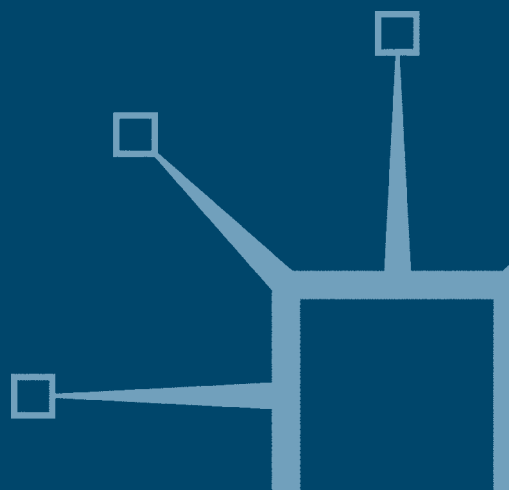
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# Linguistic Fieldwork

A Practical Guide

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Claire Bower



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## A Practical Guide

Claire Bovern  
*Rice University*





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*For my parents*



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# 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 About this book




This book describes methods for doing fieldwork on language. It grew out of a need for a text which would be useful both to new fieldworkers in linguistics and linguistic anthropology and to students in field methods classes. Although elicitation strategies and data processing are the focus of a field methods class, in the field there are many more skills needed than just data collection, and it may well be that linguistics is the least of the fieldworker's worries. Therefore here I cover not only linguistic data recording, but also grant-writing procedures, ethics and living in the field.

What does fieldwork involve? What is the relationship between the data that we collect, the theory that shapes our research questions and guides our data collection, and the speakers of the languages we are working with? What biases do we introduce by collecting data in a particular way? How do we go from the 'raw' data to a research paper? And what are the rights and responsibilities of the linguist and the consultant in the process? These questions form the core of what fieldwork entails and the framework for this book.

Some may feel that I concentrate too much on archiving, metadata and ethics to the exclusion of what have been traditionally thought of as 'core' fieldwork – that is, elicitation and working out the features of the language under study. I disagree. We do not have the luxury of working in a discipline with limitless funding, and students do not acquire extensive ethical training by osmosis alone. Ethical practice is just as much a part of fieldwork as finding out about the language, and organizing data is just as much a part of fieldwork as analysing it and writing up the results. It is impossible to do the one well without also

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taking care of the other. We cannot afford to think of these topics as non-core.

When using this book for a field methods class, the early classroom chapters will be of most use at the beginning of the course, for example when discussing recording devices and preparing for the first elicitation session. But the ethics sections should also be read early on, as notions of informed consent and the appropriate treatment of consultants are very important in ethical fieldwork. Chapter 13 should be read early on if you are going to the field; I've included it towards the end of the book because in most field methods classes students do not look at previously recorded materials on the language, but if you are going to the field you will want to prepare as thoroughly as possible.

### 1.2 What is 'the field' and what is 'fieldwork'?

#### 1.2.1 First principles



Our discipline's stereotype of the fieldworker seems to be some rugged individual who spends large amounts of time working with speakers of 'exotic' languages spoken in remote areas. The fieldworker lives a life of deprivation and austerity, comforted and nourished by weird insects and by the satisfaction that they are preserving a knowledge system for humanity. Rubbish. Fieldwork (not just linguistic fieldwork) is about collecting data in its natural environment. It's not about how tough the linguist is. When biologists go to the 'field', they go to observe the behaviour of the species they are studying in its natural environment rather than in cages in the lab. When archaeologists go to the 'field', they are going to where the bones and ruins are, as opposed to studying something that's already been dug up. And likewise, when linguists go to the field, they too are going to study the natural environment for their object of study – that is, they go to study a language in the place where it is spoken, by the people who usually speak it.

Of course, it's not quite that easy. Linguists don't just 'dig up' the grammar of a language to put it in a grammar book. We work with real people, and become part of the data collection process ourselves (cf. Hyman 2001).

#### 1.2.2 What do fieldworkers do?

Fieldwork is not just about linguistic data. A fieldworker wears many hats. One hat *does* involve data collection – that is, there are established techniques for obtaining linguistic data (which are discussed in this book). The fieldworker doesn't only collect data as it falls from

the sky, though. There is more to data gathering than just asking questions. Decisions need to be made as to what to record, what to collect, and what to write down. Then data must be interpreted. How do you know that your data answers your original research questions? Is a sentence ungrammatical for the reason you think it is? How will you decide between the three possible hypotheses that explain a particular data point? This is where your previous linguistic training comes in.

You also need some way to organize your data effectively. Unless you have a photographic memory and can do corpus searches in your head, you will need some method of categorizing, coding and storing the information you collect – that is, you’ll need a database hat.

Another hat the fieldworker wears is that of administrator and community liaison officer. Community-linguist interaction issues tend to consume a large proportion of a fieldworker’s energy. You will need to organize ways to pay your consultants for their time, you will need housing and food at the field site, you will need to administer your grant monies and keep appropriate records. Furthermore, you will need to arrange appropriate dissemination of your research results within your field community. Fieldworkers are also sound engineers and film directors. You will be making audio (and maybe video) recordings of your consultants, and you need to be able to operate your recording equipment effectively.

Fieldwork involves not just getting the data, but getting it ethically, without violating local customs. Fieldworkers need an ethics hat too – the process of going to a community to work on a previously undescribed language has non-linguistic implications. Could harm result from your working on the language? Does the community approve the writing of their language? Do speakers mind being recorded? Perhaps you are working with the last few fluent speakers of a language; do you have an obligation to provide teaching materials, learner’s guides and dictionaries, even if they might not be used and younger members of the community are not interested?

Fieldworkers have an anthropological hat (or pith helmet?) as well. It’s impossible to do fieldwork of any length without also (consciously or unconsciously) observing human interaction and cultural practices. Learning about the culture of the speakers whose language you are studying is vital, not only as a key to the language but also as a key to better fieldwork. For example, you are unlikely to get good data in a field session involving both men and women if the culture has strong prohibitions against men and women interacting!





#### 4 *Linguistic Fieldwork*

Fieldworkers have their own hats too. They need to be aware of their own behaviour in the field and how it reflects on them and their culture. They are also required to fit in with a new society and learn a new language, while retaining contact with their other lives as academics. Fieldworkers don't leave behind their own identities and culture when they go to the field. This is why there is much more to linguistic fieldwork than just turning up to record someone!

Fieldwork is not done in a vacuum. While it is good practice to rely only on your elicitation in a field methods class, in the field you need as much information about the language and culture as you can find. Make the most of available resources so you are not duplicating the efforts of others. There is further discussion of this in Chapter 13. Many fieldworkers also have an epigrapher's hat too.

##### 1.2.3 Why do linguists do fieldwork?

Many linguists do fieldwork in the first place because of the personal satisfaction they get from it; from the intellectual satisfaction of working out original complex problems, to use the language to research culture, to help gain political recognition for a traditionally oppressed community, or perhaps at a more personal level to make some old people very happy that their language will be recorded for future generations. Perhaps they go to the field because there is no other way to get the data they need. Any particular person's motivation to do fieldwork is probably a combination of motives. Whatever the reason, it's important that there be one (or more than one) – doing fieldwork you feel you have to is a bad reason. On the other hand, perhaps in the field you will discover reasons that you didn't know about before you went.

Fieldwork (and associated language description) feeds into many different areas of linguistics. On the one hand there is the descriptive element of field research – adding to what we know about the languages of the world. Recently (cf. Himmelmann 1998) there has been a movement to treat the documentation of languages as a subfield of linguistics in its own right. Then there's what we do with the documentation, such as producing reference grammars, dictionaries and other descriptive materials. Then there's what we do with those grammars, such as typology, theory, etc. Fieldworkers also conduct more specialized research in areas such as semantics, discourse, phonetics, phonology, syntax or morphology. Then there are all the ways that language research feeds into cultural theory, anthropology and the study of language in society. Fieldworkers have specializations in all these areas.



#### 1.2.4 Fieldwork and experimentation

There is more than one way of viewing the practice of fieldwork.<sup>1</sup> One is as a type of experimentation; the linguist conducts ‘experiments’ on language consultants to obtain data. The questions asked by the linguist form the sole means of data gathering and shape the form the record of the language will take. Abbi’s (2001) manual of linguistic fieldwork focuses on this type of fieldwork, as does Bouquiaux and Thomas (1992).

Focusing on this view of field linguistics allows us to treat linguistics on a par with other experimental disciplines. For example, when psychologists do research, they design the experiment first, recruit the ‘subjects’ and run the tests, without the subjects necessarily knowing why the experiment is being conducted or having a say in its design. The experimenter has sole control over the data flow. Traditional ethnographic and linguistic fieldwork also follows this model, where the researcher goes to the field, makes their observations and conducts their experiments, and then leaves to write up the results.

There is, however, an alternative view, where the work is a collaborative effort between the linguist and the language speaker(s). Speakers have a much greater say in what gets recorded, what materials are produced, and what happens to the materials afterwards. The linguist in this situation is, in fact, a ‘consultant’ to the community – the ‘community’ has a problem to be solved and they bring in a person with expert knowledge.

This second type of fieldwork has more uncertainty and takes some of the power away from the linguist. If the community don’t like the idea of you making spectrograms, there is not a lot to be done about it – or if you go ahead and make them anyway, you run the risk of placing future research in jeopardy. The second view binds you to several ethical systems: your university’s (and your own culture’s) and the system of the community in which you’re working. The two will not always be in agreement (see §11.6). This type of fieldwork requires the negotiation (and renegotiation) of both the processes of fieldwork and the outcomes. Some argue against this view, saying that ‘the bottle of sulphuric acid does not have a say in the type of research a chemist does’ (Cameron et al 1992:14–15). The simple answer to this is that the chemist is not doing research involving a sentient being who has a vested interest in both the process and the outcomes of the research. Put simply, language scientists do not have *carte blanche* to conduct research on whatever and whoever they want, without regard to the wishes and wellbeing of their research participants and respect for the history of interaction between that community and science.

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Much of the resentment caused by linguists/anthropologists in the field is probably the result of the community expecting a ‘consultant’ who will help them (i.e., a ‘Type II’ researcher) and the linguist expecting to be a ‘Type I’ researcher or experimenter. A wholesale pursuit of the linguist’s aims at the expense of any community input will simply continue to promote mistrust of researchers. Academics are used to putting their research first, above other commitments, but not everyone shares the same set of priorities. Furthermore, many people do not know what linguists really do; the general public assumes that ‘a linguist’ is just someone who speaks lots of languages (or someone who will tell other people how to speak correctly), and they might be disappointed that what linguists actually do isn’t what they thought it was. Such views can be surprisingly difficult to dislodge.

Community negotiation does not imply that the data collection has to be less rigorous or that you cannot negotiate appropriate permissions for doing the type of research you want or need to do. It may take time to get started, and you may need to do some extra work, but there is no reason that you should not be able to do the academic work you want to.<sup>2</sup> Some fieldwork is bound to be ‘experimental’ in nature in that you have set up a project which aims to confirm or disprove a particular hypothesis in a way that is replicable. To do that you may need to record a particular number of people or extract information in a particular way. There is no reason to suppose that this is not possible with community consultation as well.<sup>3</sup> Of course, this discussion supposes that the community will be interested in such a collaboration. It may be that the community are happy that the linguist wishes to work on (or learn) the language and do not wish to shape the products of the research.

### 1.2.5 Field research and impartiality

It is part of the scientific method that the linguist/researcher is not personally involved in the experiment in a way that might influence the outcome. Part of the scientific method is removing potentially confounding variables (including experimenter-induced bias) in order to isolate the most probable cause of a particular effect. In most types of linguistic fieldwork, however, there is no such thing as a double-blind experiment. The researcher is actively involved in guiding the results of the fieldwork. The fieldworker responds to data as it is collected, re-shaping hypotheses and working out the next set of questions to ask. The fieldworker has a vested interest in getting the data in the first place; they may or may not also have an interest in getting a certain answer to a particular question.

Furthermore, the linguist will usually be personally involved in some way in the community. Fieldwork involves working closely with people and a better personal relationship between the linguist and the consultants will result in better data collection. Close collaborations produce better work. In some areas the linguist is adopted into the community, given a place in the kinship system and by being entrusted with linguistic knowledge is expected to make a commitment to that language and to the people who speak it. The linguist may also be involved in the non-linguistic lives of their consultants.

Even if you do your best to remain 'detached' and impartial and uninvolved in the research, your consultants probably aren't going to do the same. They are going to shape their responses based on their relationship to you; for example, how well they think you're going to understand what they tell you, or what they think you want to hear, or in some cases, what they think you don't want to hear. They might have an emotional or political stake in the outcome of the research (just as you do). They might have misunderstood the question you asked, or drawn a different interpretation from what you intended. So, completely 'impartial' fieldwork is impossible. But you can be aware of some of the potential biases and minimize them.

#### 1.2.6 A definition of fieldwork

So, after all that, what is 'fieldwork'? My definition is rather broad. It involves the collection of accurate data in an ethical manner. It involves producing a result which both the community and the linguist approve of. That is, the 'community' (the people who are affected by your being there collecting data) should know why you're there, what you're doing, and they should be comfortable with the methodology and the outcome. You should also be satisfied with the arrangements. The third component involves the linguist interacting with a community of speakers at some level. That is, fieldwork involves doing research in a place where the language is spoken, not finding a speaker at your university and eliciting data from them (see also Hyman 2001:16–22).

There are several underspecified concepts in my definition. The first is the 'community'. Minimally, the community is the group of people who are affected by your data collection; they are the people to whom you are responsible. For some languages, this *community* may simply be the people you are working with. In other areas it may also include their families; it may even include most (or all) of the people who own or speak the language. In general, the more endangered the language and

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the smaller the group, the greater the proportion of the community you will need to consult.

The second ill-defined concept is the 'language'. No language is without variation and even languages with few speakers may be very diverse (cf. Dorian 1994). Therefore which variety or varieties of the language you describe will also be important, and may require negotiation. One variety might be more prestigious than another, or lects might differ greatly depending on the age, class or gender of its speakers. Jeff Good (pers. comm.) has introduced the term 'doculect' to refer to the variety of the 'language' that ends up in the documentation.

Thirdly, 'approving of the outcome' might mean quite different things in different communities at different times. It might mean that the 'community' has no stipulations regarding your research. Or it might mean they want copies of the results, such as an offprint of articles or a copy of your PhD Dissertation. Alternatively, they may want to be active participants in the process of deciding what the final products of your research are. Producing final products that everyone is happy with is important; making a good impression can have positive results for other linguists in neighbouring communities, and negative impressions can hamper the research of others and reduce the possibilities for your own fieldwork in future. People are also more likely to help you if they have a genuine stake in the outcome.

Part of how we define fieldwork also depends on what methods are used. In this book I discuss a model which balances elicitation (i.e., asking questions *about* the language) with data collection by other methods, including free conversation, narrative recording and interviewing. There are other types of linguistic fieldwork. Some fieldworkers don't use a contact language and work in the fieldwork language from the beginning. Others gather most (if not all) of their data through elicitation. Some people stay in the same village for 20 years, while others visit one a week and survey an entire region.

There is some disagreement in the field about the extent to which quasi-ethnographic fieldwork on previously undescribed languages is similar to, for example, sociolinguistic interviewing, the acquisition of discourse data and 'qualitative studies' in anthropology. There are more similarities than people sometimes think. Whether you are working on variation in Quebecois syntax or writing the first description of Xish, you will need to be conscious of ethics and the way your data collection methods influence the results of your research. You will need to be familiar with your equipment (which is likely to be similar) and you will need to be aware of how your place in the community influences

your data. Moreover, the differences in field sites in various parts of the world probably dwarf the differences between intra-linguistic methods. Fieldworkers have a lot to lose by defining their activities too narrowly and there is a lot to learn from other data-rich linguistic fields (although, for a different view, see Crowley 2007:ix).

### 1.2.7 Fieldwork and language learning

Learning a language is a little different from analysing a language in order to write about it. One can attain functional fluency in a language without ever consciously mastering the morphology and syntax, and likewise one can have an excellent understanding of the workings of a language without being able to make use of that knowledge to put a sentence together in real time.

Spending time learning your field language to speak it might seem like a waste of time. After all, linguists spend a great deal of time telling people that linguistics is not the same as language learning. Shouldn't you be working on your paper/article/dissertation, rather than memorizing vocabulary? However, for fieldwork there are numerous advantages to being fluent in the language you are studying. One is that in order to write a grammar of a language you have to construct sophisticated theories about how the language works, and in order for you to make yourself understood in the language you have to put those hypotheses into practice. I've also discovered many things about the languages I've worked on through the mistakes I've made while talking, and through making guesses that turned out to be right!

Speaking the language increases your control over the data. You will have a larger vocabulary, a better idea about social factors of language use, and therefore a better conception of why particular sentences might be infelicitous. You will develop intuitions about the language which you can then test. Hale (2001:81–2), along with several other authors in Newman and Ratliff (2001), makes the point that becoming fluent in the field language produces a richer and more accurate description. Hale's way of putting it is 'do whatever you can in order to learn the language.' Being a 'language learner' can be a community role, as Nagy (2000) points out; she was often introduced to new potential consultants as 'the American who wants to learn Faetar'. Being a language learner can be a role in the field community that others can relate to and help with.

Finally, quite apart from the personal satisfaction that comes from learning to speak another language well, knowing the language is very useful for the non-linguistic aspects of fieldwork. In some parts of the

world it's polite to talk to other people in 'their' language, especially when you are a guest in their country. I found an excellent Bardi teacher this way. She had heard that someone was learning Bardi, but she didn't believe it. No one has learnt Bardi as a first or second language for 50 years. So, she came up to me in the community shop one day and started testing me. I was able to respond, and we soon became friends. We worked together a lot after that. Another example of why learning the language is important involves less happy circumstances. In 2004 my main Bardi teacher had a stroke and I called her in hospital. We were speaking Bardi because she couldn't communicate in English.<sup>4</sup>

### 1.3 The term 'informant'

There are various opinions as to what to call the person who is teaching you their language. Some are happy with the term 'informant'. Others feel that this term carries unnecessary overtones of 'police informer' and moreover downplays the role and importance of the language teacher. Fieldwork is not like library research; you cannot go and simply 'look up' the answer in the brain of a speaker of the language.

In this book I am using the term 'consultant(s)'. This term has the connotation of an expert who is consulted for specialized information about a particular topic. In some areas, consultant has negative connotations (it's equivalent to 'highly paid blow-in'). Others (e.g., Hinton 2002) use 'teacher'; another term is 'language helper' (although to be honest I find this a bit patronizing). 'Research participant' is another useful neutral term.

### 1.4 Fieldwork and 'Theory'

For every view of the field, there are also opinions on the place of fieldwork in linguistics and its relationship to other branches of the field. Opinions appear to cluster around a dichotomy between theoretical (or theory-oriented) and empirical research. This division is not at all confined to linguistics; it's a point also made in Barnard's (2000) history of anthropology, and one finds it too in 'pure' versus 'applied' disciplines such as mathematics and physics.

For various reasons, the theoretical/empirical (fieldworker) divide in linguistics is also broadly correlated with the formalism/functionalist divide these days. There are many formalist fieldworkers (as well as functionalist theoreticians). The most famous formalist fieldworker was probably the late Ken Hale, from MIT, but Sapir, Boas and Bloomfield

were also ‘theoreticians’ in their time as well as documenters of Native American languages.

We also find a rather unhelpful set of comments from prominent fieldworkers along the lines of, ‘the data speak for themselves, theory is useless, spend enough time with the data and you will come up with the right answer’. Abbi (2001:3), for example, writes that ‘theory binds the fieldworker’s hands’, and Dixon (1997) draws a firm line between the armchair formalists and the field linguists. There seems to be a competing feeling that linguistic fieldwork is like library research and requires no special training. My view is much closer to Rice (2001). The theory/data divide is at best unhelpful and at worst dangerous. In short, it prevents empirical people from asking the best questions of their data, and it encourages theory people to model what they like without adequate testing.

The most common argument is articulated in Abbi (2001:3) – theory ‘binds one’s hands’ and that the only way to write an unbiased description is to be theory-neutral. This argument is specious. ‘Theory’ is inherent in research. As soon as anyone uses a metalanguage for natural language description, they are making choices, categorizing and labeling their data. That is, describing linguistic behaviour cannot be done without forming hypotheses about how the language works. A phoneme is a theoretical construct, as is a lexical category. There’s no such thing as a theory-neutral or atheoretical linguistic description.

The next argument concerns a quotation from Sherlock Holmes (i.e., *A Scandal in Bohemia*) – ‘it is a capital mistake, Watson, to theorize before one has data.’ That is, like Holmes, proponents of this argument dislike purely theory-internal motivations for analyses or assumptions based on very little evidence. However, Holmes makes several comments about method and evidence. For example, he states (in the *Hound of the Baskervilles*, ch. 6), that Watson’s task is just to observe and not to draw conclusions; Holmes claims that Watson won’t be able to make any sense of what he sees because he has no theory to structure the facts on. That is, trying to model reality in the absence of data is not very likely to produce a good model, but a framework is needed to interpret observations. Elsewhere (in the *Silver Blaze Story*) Holmes talks about constructing a theory on the initial data and being ready to alter it as necessary, as more facts come to light. This is, I would argue, the sense in which ‘theory’ is most relevant to fieldwork.

Rather than ‘tying one’s hands’, ‘theory’ provides ideas on where to look for data and what to test. Using a coherent theoretical framework of any sort will allow you to make testable predictions. Here is an example



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