

Fieldwork in generative linguistics

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Overview

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- 3 The place of fieldwork in generative linguistics
- 4 Personal experience
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What is linguistic fieldwork?

Broad definition (Bower 2015: p.7)

Fieldwork is the collection of accurate data from language speakers in an ethical manner.

Is it fieldwork if you don't go to the field?

- Hyman (2001) writes that *fieldwork* is a 'state of mind'. There are certain properties of 'prototypical' fieldwork, and whether deviations count as *fieldwork* is a subjective assessment:
 - Distance: your home vs. a village in Kenya
 - Well-studied vs. understudied language: your language vs. an understudied language in Kenya
 - Duration: years vs. one meeting with a speaker

Does the definition matter?

- In general, it doesn't:
 - If you're conducting research in an accurate and ethical manner, it does not matter if you got your data from a Kipsigis speaker in Leipzig vs. a Kipsigis speaker in Kenya
- It could sometimes matter for 'official' purposes:
 - Obtaining funds for your research: there are specific grants for fieldwork and you have to meet the definition that they are using to obtain funds (that definition is usually close to Hyman's prototypical criteria)
 - Career: certain jobs may list 'fieldwork experience' as a prerequisite or a desirable asset. The hiring committee will probably be using a specific definition of fieldwork (the closer to Hyman's prototypical criteria, the better)

More thoughts on terminology

- (Some) terms used for the native speakers with whom researchers work: (native speaker) consultant/informant
- Please don't use the term 'exotic' for the language under investigation: terms like 'understudied' (or 'endangered' if the language has few speakers left) should be preferred. Other terms used: vernacular, minority language (but these also have political connotations).

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- There are many different ways to do fieldwork, and everyone involved (myself included) has strong opinions about what good fieldwork is.
- General good practices that most fieldworkers (should) follow:
 - **Consent**: a speaker/a community should provide informed consent to participate in a research study.
 - **Acquaintance with previous sources**: the linguist should read all available resources on the language under investigation (for virtually unstudied languages, this may not be possible, but unless the language is an isolate, it's usually possible to read materials from related languages).
 - **Whole language approach**: no linguistic phenomenon can be analyzed accurately if the researcher has no idea how the rest of the grammar works; human language is an interconnected system.
 - **Data handling**: the researcher should come up with a plan on transcribing data, organizing files, making them available to the linguistic community (but also the speakers' community) etc.
 - **Biases**: it's impossible to do fieldwork in the complete absence of bias (either from theory or from the researcher's native language), but an effort should be made to minimize biases.

A short note on ethics

- Fieldwork involves work with humans. Ethics are important.
- The researcher should always be honest and straightforward about their intentions with the consultant(s) and the community.
- An often overlooked aspect of the discourse on ethics is summarized in the following quote from Bower (2015:10): “Fieldwork is not like library research. You cannot simply ‘look up’ the answer in the brain of a speaker of the language. Whatever you call your consultants, remember that they aren’t simply data sources. They aren’t books, to be opened, read and returned when finished.”

Methods: targeted elicitation

- The most common type of methodology (esp. among generative linguists) involves targeted elicitation: the linguist asks the consultant specific questions aimed at unveiling a particular aspect of the language's grammar.
 - **Translation tasks:** 'How do you say [insert phrase in metalanguage] in your language?' or 'How would you translate [insert phrase in the object language] in [the metalanguage]?'
 - **Grammaticality judgments:** 'Is sentence X a grammatical/natural sentence (or a sentence that a native speaker would utter) in your language?' 'What would you change in the sentence to make it grammatical?'
 - **Felicity judgments:** 'Would sentence X be a natural sentence to utter in this context?' (picture tasks are also often used for semantic fieldwork)

Methods: short stories and spontaneous conversations

- It is usually impossible to get a good grasp of the grammar of a language via elicitation only. Spontaneous conversations and/or narratives of short stories etc. should also be recorded whenever possible.
- If there are available texts (or videos/recordings etc.), they should be collected and studied.

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Different traditions in linguistics

- There is a perceived divide in linguistics between ‘theory’ people and ‘data’ people. The divide is also often associated with the generative vs. functionalist distinction.
- Descriptive work is not always valued in theoretical (esp. generative) linguistics. There is often an implicature that descriptive linguists cannot do theory (which is ‘superior’).
- Fieldwork is associated more with descriptive or functionalist traditions, but it is becoming more and more popular in generative linguistics (e.g., in 2019 there were 9 tenure-track positions in theoretical syntax in North America; 6 of them were filled by people whose research is almost entirely based on data from fieldwork).
- Generative linguists doing fieldwork are often seen as bad fieldworkers by functionalists (this view is implied, for instance, in Hyman’s 2001 paper).

The ‘whole language’ approach

- The criticism towards generative linguists doing fieldwork is summarized in this quote from Hyman’s endnotes: “They don’t care about the language”.
 - They care about theory and are only interested in getting specific data that can inform the theory.
 - They try to make data from understudied languages fit the theory (which is based on a couple of European languages).
- This is not unreasonable criticism; I share with Hyman the view that when studying an understudied language one **MUST** study the whole language (e.g., one cannot simply ignore phonology).

Should you learn the language?

- Bown (2015) argues that it is beneficial to try to learn the language of study. While I do not think this is absolutely necessary, an important point that she makes (and that is related to Hyman's 'whole language' approach) is that by learning the language you start developing intuitions. In other words, you get a better feel of the language.

Coming back to the criticism

- Even though generative linguists who ignore the rest of the language exist, they do not represent the majority. There are good and bad fieldworkers irrespective of theoretical inclination.
- As Bowerman (2015: p. 11) writes “the theory/data divide is at best unhelpful and at worst dangerous”.
- One problem with the divide is that there isn't much discussion between the two traditions, even though collaboration would benefit everyone.

More on the relationship between data and theory

- In reality, atheoretical/theory-neutral linguistics does not exist.
- There is no theory-neutral linguistic description; as soon as a metalanguage is used to talk about language, theory is involved.
- For example, why do you decide to call a certain morpheme a past tense morpheme? Or even call it a morpheme?
- A theoretical framework is needed to:
 - know what questions to ask
 - know how to interpret observations
- But what a theoretical framework should not do is make you narrow-minded. Open-mindedness is crucial in fieldwork!!

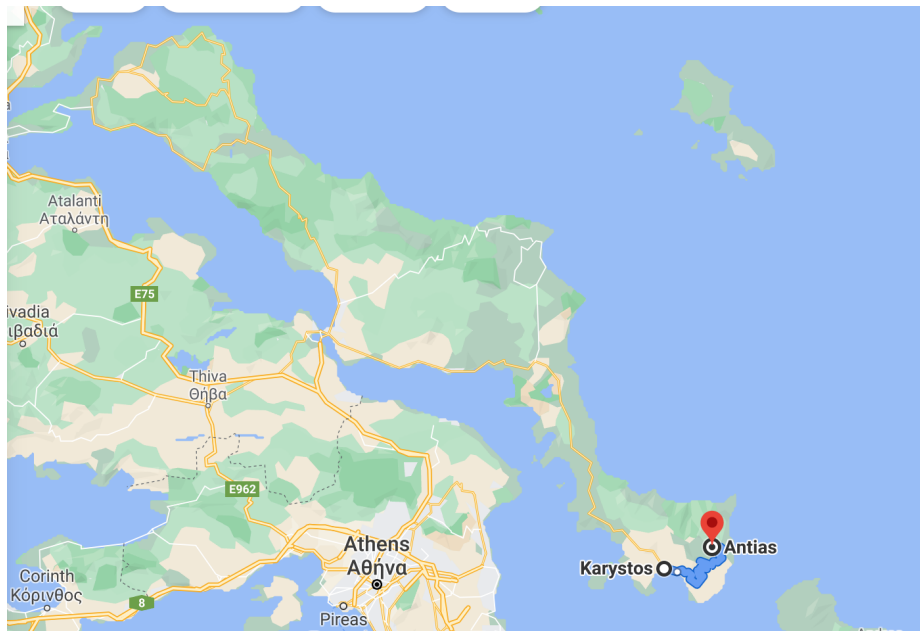
How can academia change in order to make 'whole language' approaches to fieldwork easier?

- The pressure to publish (and to always go after specific results) does not make 'whole language' approaches to fieldwork easy.
- In generative linguistics, there is the additional pressure of only doing fieldwork that actually leads to a theoretical paper.
- Professional organizations like the LSA (Linguistic Society of America) have recognized the problem, and are trying to change the situation.
- <https://www.linguisticsociety.org/resource/resolution-recognizing-scholarly-merit-language-documentation>

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Whistled language of Antia



Whistled language of Antia

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/pals/research/linguistics/linguistics-research/laboratory-language-and-speech-diversions/lisd-projects-2>



Field Methods class in New York: Ewe



Online Field Methods class in Leipzig: Kikuyu

Field Methods



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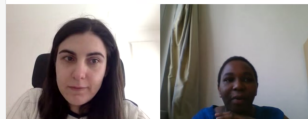
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- Most of my fieldwork experience comes from my work on Kipsigis, a Nilotic language spoken in Kenya. I have had 5 field trips to Kenya (ranging from 3 weeks to 4 months in duration). In one of the trips, I also worked with speakers of Endo-Marakwet, Nandi, and Didinga.
- How did I get started?
 - As a student at NYU in 2016, I took a class on number and got interested in singulatives.
 - Nilo-Saharan languages have singulatives, but there was no theoretical study in any of them.
 - One of my best friends from my BA at Yale University was a native speaker of Kipsigis, and had moved back to Kenya.
 - He helped me organize a field trip to study number in the language (this work made it to my dissertation, and later a published paper).

Kipsigis





Sample elicitation: causatives

- I recently got interested in causatives, and found out that Kipsigis has a causative morpheme:

- (1) a. Ø-rì:r-é là:kwè:t.
3-cry-IPFV child.NOM
'The child is crying.'
- b. Kà-í-rì:r-sì Kíbê:t là:kwé:t.
PST-CL2-cry-CAUS Kibeet.NOM child
'Kibeet made the child cry.'

Some questions

- According to a prominent line of research in generative linguistics, causatives cross-linguistically come into three types (Pylkkänen 2008 and subsequent work):
 - root-selecting causatives
 - verb-selecting causatives
 - phase-selecting causatives
- Each type comes with different properties.
 - Question: does the Kipsigis causative fit into this typology?

Testing Prediction 1: verbal modifiers

Verbal modifiers should have 2 readings for verb- and phase-selecting causatives, but only one for root-selecting causatives.

- (2) a. Mary woke up **grumpily**.
- b. Bill woke Mary up **grumpily**.

Agent-oriented modifiers (e.g., *on purpose*) should only have 2 possible readings with phase-selecting causatives.

Testing Prediction 1 in Kipsigis

- 1 Find a verbal modifier that makes sense for the verb under investigation.

- 1 Q: *How do you say 'loudly' in Kipsigis?* A: é:n tʊ:ge:t né ò:'in a big voice'
2 Construct the sentence in (3). I ask: Is this a correct sentence in Kipsigis?

(3) Ø-rì:r-é là:kwè:t é:n tʊ:ge:t né ò:.
3-cry-IPFV child.NOM in voice REL.SG big
'The child is crying loudly.'

- 2 Construct a sentence with the verbal modifier in the relevant causative construction. Check whether the sentence is grammatical.

(4) Kà-í-rì:r-sì Kíbê:t là:kwé:t é:n tʊ:ge:t né ò:.
PST-CL2-cry-CAUS Kibeet.NOM child in voice REL.SG big
'Kibeet made the child cry loudly.'

- 3 Describe two contexts to the speaker and ask if the sentence is felicitous in that context (one at a time): a) *Kibeet did something that made the child cry loudly*, b) *Kibeet made the child cry and he did so loudly*

Testing Prediction 1 in Kipsigis

- Repeat this process with different verbs (besides *cry*) and different modifiers (besides *loudly*) with the same speaker.
- Test the same sentences with other native speakers.
- Repeat the process for agent-oriented modifiers.
- I often conduct this type of elicitation with two or three speakers simultaneously (there are often interesting exchanges between the speakers).
- It's also a good idea to record elicitations (at least audio), and to write down all comments made by the consultants (in addition to the Kipsigis sentences).

Testing Prediction 2: interaction with applicative morphology

- In my fieldwork, the above tests showed that constructions with *-si* behave like verb-selecting causatives, in allowing verbal modifiers like 'loudly', but not agent-oriented modifiers like 'on purpose'. If Pykkänen's (2008) analysis is correct, there is the following prediction:
 - the causative morpheme should always precede the high applicative morpheme in the language

Testing Prediction 2: interaction with applicative morphology

- The language has a high applicative morpheme *-tʃi*. We first construct a sentence in which the morpheme follows the causative, and we ask if the sentence is grammatical and if so, we ask for a translation into English.

(5) Ka-Ø-i-ri:r-si:r-tʃi Kíbê:t Tʃè:r:bê:t là:kwé:t.
 PST-3-CL2-cry-CAUS-APPL Kibeet.NOM Cheebeet child
 ‘Kibeet made the child cry for Cheebeet.’

- Next, we construct a sentence with the opposite morpheme order, and we ask if it is a natural sentence (irrespective of what it means at this point).

(6) Ka-Ø-i-ri:r-tʃi:r-si ...

- Turns out this sentence is ungrammatical.

Common challenges

- Elicitations do not always go as smoothly.
 - It is not uncommon for the same consultant to give conflicting judgments for the same sentence on different occasions. Double-checking with multiple speakers might help.
 - Speakers often disagree. It's the researcher's job to figure out how much of this indicates variation in different speakers' grammars or something else.
- Things to avoid:
 - Sentences should always be appropriate for the context in which the language is most commonly used; otherwise unnatural sentences are constructed (e.g., sentences about reading newspapers in a language without a writing system).
 - No leading questions (e.g., This sentence is wrong, right?).
 - Make sure the consultant is comfortable and/or not bored. Using names of people known to both of you and/or funny sentences (as long as the humor is appropriate) might help.

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- Many of the languages spoken in the world today are going to be extinct in the next decades.
- It is more important than ever to study endangered languages.
 - Linguistic fieldwork should be encouraged.
 - Documentation work should be appreciated.
- It is also important, however, to include members of the community in linguistic research.
 - For example, the African Linguistics School aims at training African students and is run mostly by volunteers.

- Bowern, Claire. 2015. *Linguistic Fieldwork: A Practical Guide*. Palgrave MacMillan.
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