

Fieldwork on an Unfamiliar Language: Some Preliminary ‘How To’ Notes

The primary skill this class seeks to develop is the simple one of asking questions, a skill that has two principal components:

(1) The Two Principal Components of Skillful Fieldwork

- a. Manners
Asking questions in a way that keeps the speaker feeling comfortable (doesn't make them *uncomfortable*); generally keeping the whole experience a bearable one for the speaker
- b. Methodology
Asking questions in a way that yields information of maximal value to the linguistic study.

Note:

These two sides to the interview process are *not* in competition with one another. Indeed, one cannot hope to accomplish (1b) without continually maintaining (1a).

Although this is a ‘learn-by-doing’ class, it doesn't hurt to start off with some general notes and pointers. The notes below follow our general two-way division in (1).

1. On ‘Manners’

“It may be something of a cliché, but all it takes is a little sensitivity and a willingness to learn.” (Crowley, *Field Linguistics: A Beginners Guide*; p. 172)

While so-called ‘fieldwork’ these days can take a lot of forms, the one absolute, invariable, *sine qua non* is that you are working one-on-one with an actual person, a speaker of the language.

- Thus, a good portion of the art of the craft is ‘interpersonal social intelligence’, or just plain getting along with people and making them feel comfortable.
- While there are many little tips that are good to keep in mind here, they all find their source in the following general, over-arching principle:

(2) **Respect** Treat the speaker with (friendly) respect.

Keep in mind that they are a human being, an essential collaborator in the project, whose time is valuable (and who probably has better things to do than answer your questions)

From the general principle in (2) springs many smaller pieces of advice, which can also be organized according to various subheadings:

(3) **Friendliness**

- a. Always maintain friendliness and cheerfulness during meetings.
 - This can be difficult if you tend to be shy, in which case, you simply must do your best to overcome your inherent shyness/awkwardness.
- b. Always maintain your own engagement and enthusiasm during meetings.
 - Never be detached or perfunctory with the speaker.
- c. Always be appreciative of the speaker's contributions.
 - (i) *Greet all data appreciatively and interestedly, even if -- it's off the subject you want to talk about (after all, all data is useful!) -- it contradicts a 'pet analysis' of yours*
 - (ii) *Always thank the speaker for their time (even if you are also monetarily compensating them).*
- d. Never, in any way, be aggressive, challenging or confrontational with the speaker!
 - (i) *Never get visibly upset (disappointed) if the data from the speaker challenge a pet hypothesis of yours!*
-- "Oh crap! I thought it would be X! Too bad, I guess!"
 - (ii) *Never challenge the data given by the speaker.*
-- "But, earlier you said X! That's weird!"
 - (iii) *Never tell the speaker, in any fashion, that their judgment is 'wrong'*
-- "But, the grammar says that the way you say it is X!"

"One of the first basic lessons in elicitation should be 'Never tell your [speaker] that he/she has given the wrong answer.'" (Crowley, *Field Linguistics: A Beginners Guide*; p. 96)

(4) **Comfort**

Always strive to keep the speaker comfortable; strive to keep this from being a negative experience for them.

- a. Keep things friendly! (*cf*(3))
- b. Be careful not to overwork the speaker.
 - (i) *Always be mindful of the attention- and interest-level of the speaker.*
 - (ii) *Always be prepared to stop, take breaks, or move on to other things if they seem like they would appreciate it.*
 - (iii) *Don't heap question-upon-question on the speaker. Keep the intensity of the interview nicely paced.*

(5) **Courteousness and Sensitivity**

Don't treat the speaker as a piece of furniture, or as some kind of 'query machine' that just shuts off when you aren't talking to it.

- (i) Direct all questions about the language to the speaker
 - (ii) Look the speaker in the eyes when asking a question.
 - (iii) Avoid having extended (or heated!) arguments with classmates in front of the speaker
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2. On 'Methodology'

The other, more specialized skill that fieldwork requires is knowing *what kinds* of questions / tasks yield the *best kind of information* about the language.

- Here, there are two very broad, fundamental points that apply...
- But before coming to those, it's also important to never forget the following:

(6) **Write Everything Down... *Everything!***

Everything, every little comment made by the speaker is valuable information.

Don't assume you can rely on the recordings or the transcriptions! Sometimes the recordings may be unclear, in which case your class notes will be of essential utility!

(7) **The Data Speakers Give Us Are Always (Merely) “Clues”**

The language consultant cannot themselves directly answer our linguistic questions.

- Rather, the data and comments that we receive from them should be viewed as *clues* or *evidence* towards the answer.
- As linguists, our job is to use these *clues* to arrive at a ‘best guess’ regarding the answer to the linguistic question we are interested in.

a. Consequence: Never Rely on Just One Data Point!

Suppose we want to know if the language allows the word order ‘Subject < Object < Verb’...

- So, we construct a sentence with that word order and ask the speaker “would you ever say something like this”.
- Suppose the speaker rejects the sentence. *Does this conclusively show that the word order is disallowed in the language?*

○ **No!**

The speaker has only rejected one sentence on one occasion. There could be a million reasons why they offered a negative judgment here.

- However, after we collect more data, we may find that such word orders are consistently rejected by the speaker. Then, we can conclude that this word order is grammatically impossible.
- **Thus, the negative judgment alone doesn’t itself establish the answer to the question, but is ultimately just another ‘clue’ in the overall puzzle.**

b. Consequence: Never Rely on the Speaker’s Own Analysis of Their Language

Suppose that, in the course of the interview, the speaker says that some affix you’re interested in is a “past tense”.

- *Does this conclusively tell us what that affix means?*

○ **No!**

*We don’t necessarily know anything about **why** they think the affix is a “past tense”. Their reasons for saying that may actually be mistaken...*

- *Should we simply ignore this comment of the speaker’s?*

○ **No!**

The speaker might be on to something! We should follow up on this, but we should be careful to test it rigorously.

(8) **Never Ask Questions that Require the Speaker to Do Analysis**

- a. *What is a question that 'requires the speaker to do analysis'?*
One that requires the speaker to offer (or judge the truth of) **a generalization.**
- b. Examples of Such Questions:
- (i) Is that a noun?
 - (ii) When do you use that word?
 - (iii) Is that a focus particle?
 - (iv) When you say X, does it mean that the speaker already knows that Y?
- c. **Avoiding such questions can be very difficult, particularly if the consultant is someone who teaches or has studied the grammar of their language (e.g. a language teacher)**
- (i) A Real Example
When I was an undergrad, I did some work on Yoruba with a grad student in linguistics who spoke it. At one point, I directly asked this person "Does Yoruba follow *Principle B*?" The student rightly shot back "You tell me!"
 - (ii) Another Real One:
A friend of mine once took a field methods class where the language consultant was a visiting linguist, an expert on the grammar of their language. At one point, one of the participants asked the speaker directly "Is that word a *focus particle*?"
 - (iii) A More Common One:
You ask the consultant for the translation "I saw the bear". The consultant gives you a translation, but you notice that it doesn't contain a word corresponding to "the".
 - o You want to check that the sentence really does mean "I saw **the** bear." So you try asking "Does that sentence *mean that I already know there's a bear there*?"
- d. What's wrong with these kinds of questions?
In order to answer the question, the speaker must **in their head** concoct other (similar) sentences/contexts, and then judge the naturalness of those sentences/contexts that they've constructed themselves. *But...*
- (i) The linguist should do the work of concocting those sentences/contexts!
 - (ii) Since the crucial examples/contexts are created in the speaker's head:
 - o You can't know whether the speaker is truly considering the *right* ones
 - o If they *are* the right ones, you are failing to record some key language data!

2.1 Some Notes on Asking for Translations and Grammaticality Judgments

One major part of our ‘toolkit’ in this class will simply be asking the speaker for **translations** of English structures into their language.

(9) When to Ask for Translations?

- a. When you have no idea how a given proposition would be expressed.
(*What do relative clauses in the language even look like?*)
- b. **When you want to know whether a structure is acceptable or not.**
 - (i) The Procedure:
 - Start with a sentence that you *know* to be acceptable, one that the speaker has themselves given to you.
 - Change that sentence *minimally* to test whether the targeted structure is acceptable. (This is called ‘asking for a grammaticality judgment’)
 - (ii) Example: (Is SOV Order Possible?)
 - Assuming we know the words for “dog” “man” and “chase”, ask for the translation of “The dog chased the man”.
 - Ask whether *the speaker* would ever use the same set of words *in SOV order* as a translation.

(10) What *Kinds* of Things Can We Ask For Translations Of?

- a. **Well-formed, complete sentences of English**
- b. So-called ‘open class’ or ‘content words’ (e.g. “jump”, “table”, “dog”, *etc.*)
- c. Avoid Asking for Direct Translations of Anything Else
 - (i) So-called ‘closed class’ or ‘function words’ (e.g. “all”, “the”, “every”)
*These often can’t be translated into other languages.
Their meaning is often hard to intuitively identify.*
 - (ii) Anything below the level of the word (e.g. “-ed”, “-s”)
*Tons of problems with trying to do this...
At the very least, it has all the problems of asking about ‘function words’.*

Caveat: Even asking for single open-class words can be problematic.

- The language may lack the word in question (*cf.* English “go”)
- English is inflectionally poor, and the language may ‘translate’ the English word differently in different syntactic contexts (*e.g.* what is the Italian translation of “eat”?)

(11) **Could the Speaker’s Translation be Influenced by English?**

a. A Potential Worry

Could the speaker sometimes be ‘influenced’ by the grammar of the English sentence they are translating, and seek to copy that (instead of producing the most natural translation in their language)?

b. An Answer to the Worry

This could happen, and we should always be on the look-out for it, however...

- (i) Any (English-like) structure the speaker uses in their translation is unlikely to be one that’s *entirely ungrammatical* in their language.
 - Suppose someone asked you to translate the Spanish *te amo*.
 - Would you ever translate it as “You, I love” or “You love I”
- (ii) If there are other, more natural translations, those can be discovered by using other methodologies.
 - E.g., asking the speaker to narrate a ‘storyboard’, presented without English translation. (More on this later...)

Another key part of our ‘toolkit’ will be asking the speaker for **judgments** of structures we make

(12) a. Grammaticality Judgment:

Asking whether a form that we’ve constructed is at all meaningful (or ‘natural’) in the language; whether there’s *any* kind of situation where the speaker would say it

- Grammaticality judgments test the *structural* well-formedness of something

b. Felicity Judgments

Asking whether – given a particular context/scenario – a structure *already known to be grammatical* could be used truthfully / felicitously.

- Felicity judgments test the *meaning* of something

(13) **Some Fundamental Problems in Interpreting Judgment Data**

*Speakers can sometimes accept or reject a sentence for reasons **other than the linguistic ones the linguist is interested in.***

a. Reasons Why a Speaker Might Accept a Sentence

- (i) The sentence is well-formed and/or felicitous in context (yay!)
- (ii) Although the structure isn't *really* well-formed or felicitous, **the speaker is just giving the linguist a break (after all, they're just beginning)**
- (iii) Although the structure isn't really well-formed or felicitous, **the speaker is tired and isn't attending to the problematic parts of the sentence.**

b. Reasons Why a Speaker Might Reject a Sentence

- (i) The sentence is ill-formed or infelicitous in context (yay!)
- (ii) Although the structure is *actually* well-formed and felicitous, **the speaker is objecting to some other aspect of the linguist's sentence (e.g., pronunciation or word choice)**
- (iii) Although the structure is actually well-formed and felicitous, **the speaker is tired, and has misapprehended some aspect of the sentence or the context...**

(14) **The Upshot**

While (13a,b) are indeed potential issues, they are not necessarily insuperable or fatal methodological flaws. *The linguist must simply be careful to:*

- a. Make sure to ask the speaker "would *you* ever say X" rather than "would it be OK for *me* to say X"? (This way, they won't be too easy on you)
- b. Ask for judgments on a variety of sentences/contexts exhibiting the structures of interest. Ask a variety of speakers on a variety of occasions.
- c. As with all their data, remain skeptical, and be prepared to revise your views! (Remember the 'slogan' in (7): these data are 'clues', not answers!)

3. Some Further, General Points of Advice

(15) Try to Learn the Language You're Studying!

Not only is it fun, it greatly aids your own work in the language.

At the very least, try your absolute best to pronounce and comprehend the sounds!

“[I have worked on] as many as eighteen different languages, though I never tried to carry out even a basic conversation in most of these.” (Crowley, *Field Linguistics: A Beginners Guide*; p. 155)

(16) Don't be Afraid to be Wrong!

- No matter how much we learn about a language, some part of our overall analysis is going to be *wrong!*
- This knowledge that we are all definitely going to be wrong about *something* should be liberating!
- a. *Never be afraid to (provisionally) leap to a generalization or hypothesis, even though you've only looked at a small set of data!*
- b. *On the other hand, always be ready to revise your assumptions – any assumptions! – about the language, on the basis of further data.*

“Any linguistic description is in reality going to exhibit certain kinds of theoretical biases, many of which may be implicit.” (Crowley, *Field Linguistics: A Beginners Guide*; p. 17)

“A careful fieldworker... will also be constantly questioning the reliability of his or her own representation of that data, as well as his or her interpretation of what has been recorded.” (Crowley, *Field Linguistics: A Beginners Guide*; p. 134)

(17) Don't Be Afraid to Be Wrong, Even About *Phonology!*

Sometimes, languages make use of phonological contrasts that take the average English-speaker *months* to detect reliably.

- *Thus, in a class of this sort, don't worry about getting the transcription 'wrong'.*
- *Always go with your 'gut instinct' about what you're hearing on the recording!*

“There is probably no linguistic researcher alive, nor will there ever be, who can write down at first hearing everything which is linguistically significant...” (Crowley, *Field Linguistics: A Beginners Guide*; p. 131)

“Even if you have managed to work out the phoneme inventory, it is often possible to mistranscribe individual words containing sounds that you would never have imagined you would find any difficulty with.” (Crowley, *Field Linguistics: A Beginners Guide*; p. 135)

(18) **Some Tips on the Final Project**

- The earlier you choose a topic, the better!
- Choose something you are interested in, and *keep it narrow!*
- Don't be discouraged if in the end you have 'no clue' about how the phenomenon works. Rather, present a particular analysis (or set of analyses), and discuss any potential problems they might have!