CLAIRE BOWERN

LINGUISTIC FIELDWORK

A Practical Guide

2nd Edition

Linguistic Fieldwork

A Practical Guide

2nd edition

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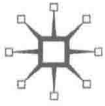

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First published 2015 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN: 978–1–137–34078–8 hardback
ISBN: 978–1–137–34079–5 paperback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bowern, Claire, 1977–
Linguistic fieldwork : A practical guide / Claire Bowern. – Second Edition.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978–1–137–34079–5 – ISBN 978–1–137–34078–8
1. Linguistics – Fieldwork. I. Title.

P128.F53B69 2015
410.72'3—dc23 2014038026

Linguistic Fieldwork

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For my parents

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Acknowledgements and Preface to the Second Edition

I have a huge debt to the Aboriginal people I've done fieldwork with in Australia, in Western Queensland, the Kimberley region, and Arnhem Land. Special thanks go to Bessie Ejai, Rayba Nyaŋbal, and Margaret Nyuŋunyuŋu for discussions on what they think about linguists working on their languages and feedback about ways researchers could do things better.

Several groups of students have been experimented on with this textbook: my field methods class at Rice University in 2005/2006; Masayoshi Shibatani's field methods class at Rice in 2006/2007; and the Fall 2005 classes at the University of Minnesota under Marianne Milligan, and at UC Berkeley under Andrew Garrett. Many thanks for the comments, which greatly improved the book. Thanks also to Barry Alpher, Robert Englebretson, Colleen Hattersley, William Hawkins, and Jane Simpson, who provided very detailed comments on parts or all of the manuscript. Many students, especially Linda Lanz, Josh Levin, Michelle Morrison, and Vica Papp, gave feedback that has resulted in a clearer and more interesting book. Thanks also to the people who've taught me about fieldwork in classes, by collaboration, and by example: Sasha Aikhenvald, Gedda Aklif, Barry Alpher, Bob Dixon, Ken Hale, Luise Hercus, Harold Koch, David Nash, and Jane Simpson, although I suspect that they won't all agree with all the advice in this book. Thanks are also due to Rice University for the award of a Humanities Faculty Writing Stipend for Summer 2005.

The second edition includes new information which reflects the changing field, such as a greater emphasis on experimental methodologies in the field, but the core of the book remains the same. I have revised the text considerably and updated the suggestions for further reading. I have also taken into account comments by reviewers of the first edition of the book, including Angela Terrell, Lameen Souag, Christina Eira, Chris Rogers, Lyle Campbell, and Patience Epps. Monica Macaulay and Ryan Bennett have provided very helpful feedback. I also thank Jelena Krivokapic for discussion of intonation research and Kate Lindsey for her typo list.

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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. This book aims to bridge the gap between the linguistics of fieldwork and the other tasks that lead to the smooth running of a project, such as grant writing procedures, ethics and living in the field.

What does linguistic 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? How can we make the best use of speakers' talents? And what are the rights and responsibilities of the linguist and the consultant? 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 has 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 organising 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 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.

In an effort to keep the size of this book manageable, I have kept discussion of topics intentionally short. This means that many areas of field research are treated in pages or paragraphs where they would warrant a book to themselves. Readers are encouraged to make use of the suggestions for further reading.

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 in remote jungles or on tropical islands, working with speakers of 'exotic' languages. 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 (and not just linguistic fieldwork) is about collecting data in its natural environment. It is 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 has 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). But the definition of 'fieldwork' should not come from

how tough the linguist is; rather, it comes from a) the linguist's interaction with speakers and b) the extent to which the linguist is able to engage with a speech community. By using such a definition, the difference between 'doing fieldwork' and 'working on a language' is made clearer.

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 organise your data effectively. Unless you have a photographic memory and can do corpus searches in your head, you will need some method of categorising, coding and storing the information you collect – that is, you'll need a database hat. Even if you do have a photographic memory, you'll want your collection to be useful to others, and so you'll still need a way to organise and catalogue your materials.

Another hat the fieldworker wears is that of administrator and community liaison officer. Community-linguist interactions tend to consume a large proportion of a fieldworker's energy. You will need to organise ways to pay your consultants for their time, you will need housing and food at the field site, and 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!

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, so they can decipher the handwriting of other researchers.

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 reasons to do fieldwork are probably a combination of motives. Whatever the reason, it's important that there be one (or more than one) – doing fieldwork because you feel you have to is a bad reason. However, perhaps in the field you will discover reasons that you didn't know about before you went.

Fieldwork (and associated analysis and documentation) 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 language documentation as a subfield of linguistics in its own right. Then there's what we do with the documentary materials, such as reference grammars, dictionaries and other primarily empirically descriptive materials. Then there's what we do with those grammars, such as typology, theory and so on. Fieldworkers also conduct more specialised 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 specialisations in all these areas.

1.2.4 Fieldwork and experimental linguistics

There is more than one way of viewing the practice of fieldwork.[1] 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, usually without the subjects 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 (often informal) 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 doesn't like the idea of your 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

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