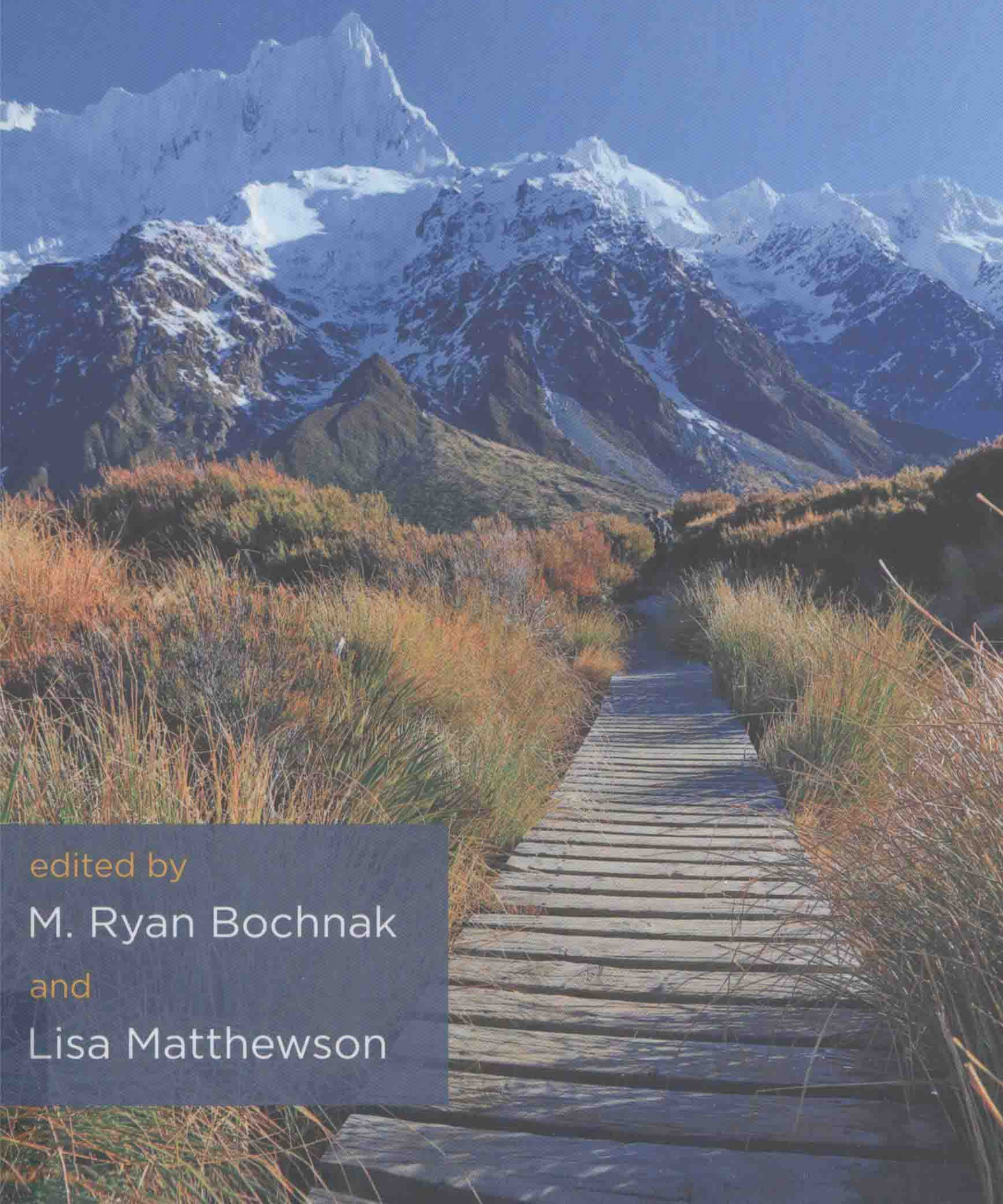
Methodologies in
Semantic Fieldwork



edited by
M. Ryan Bochnak
and
Lisa Matthewson

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Published in the United States of America by
Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Methodologies in semantic fieldwork / Edited by M. Ryan Bochnak and Lisa Matthewson.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-19-021233-9 — ISBN 978-0-19-021234-6 — ISBN 978-0-19-021235-3
1. Semantics—Methodology. 2. Field theory (Linguistics) I. Bochnak, M. Ryan, editor.
II. Matthewson, Lisa, 1968- editor.
P325.5.F54M48 2014
401'.430723—dc23
2014025382

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

Methodologies in Semantic Fieldwork

LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

Scott AnderBois' primary research focus is on understanding the linguistic means by which speakers raise, resolve, and manage issues in discourse using the formal tools of semantic/pragmatics. Specific topics of interest include apposition, disjunction, ellipsis, evidentiality, focus, indefiniteness, topics, and questions. Prof. AnderBois has explored these issues in part through primary fieldwork on Yucatec Maya, an indigenous language of Mexico.

Leora Bar-el (PhD 2005, University of British Columbia) is an Associate Professor in the Linguistics Program of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Montana. Her research interests include aspectual systems (aspectual classes and grammatical aspect), verbal number, fieldwork methodologies, and more recently, dialectology, in particular, the documentation and analysis of varieties of Montana English. She has conducted fieldwork on Indigenous languages of North America, primarily languages of the Salish and Algonquian families.

Ryan Bochnak is a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley. His primary research focus is on the semantics of scalarity and gradability from a cross-linguistic perspective. His 2013 dissertation from the University of Chicago explored comparison constructions and gradability in Washo (Hokan/isolate) and Luganda (Bantu). More recently, he has been exploring issues related to modality and temporal and aspectual reference in those languages.

Elizabeth Bogal-Allbritten is a PhD candidate at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Her research focuses on semantic phenomena in Navajo (Diné Bizaad), including adjectives and comparative constructions, attitude verbs, and modals.

Jürgen Bohnemeyer is an Associate Professor of Linguistics at the State University of New York at Buffalo. He specializes in semantic typology, the crosslinguistic study of semantic categorization. He examines how different languages represent actions, events, space, time, and causality, with particular emphasis on Mesoamerican languages.

Strang Burton (PhD in linguistics, Rutgers University, 1995) is a linguist and multimedia developer specializing in documentation and revitalization work for severely endangered languages. His main job is working with elders and community

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members to document the Upriver Halq'emeylem (Halkomelem) language, working for a community-run language revitalization program, the Stolo Shxweli Halq'emeylem Language program, at the Stolo Nation in Chilliwack BC. He also works regularly on other endangered-language documentation projects as a trainer and consultant, and he teaches linguistics and language documentation at the University of British Columbia and the University of Victoria.

Rebecca Cover received her Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley and completed a post-doctoral fellowship at The Ohio State University. Her research has focused on semantics, language description and documentation, and Atlantic languages, including Pulaar and Badiaranke.

Amy Rose Deal is an Assistant Professor of Linguistics at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her research interests center on semantic and syntactic theory, the syntax-semantics interface, and the syntax-morphology interface. Much of her research is informed by studies of the Nez Perce language.

Carrie Gillon is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Arizona State University, where she researches the syntax and semantics of understudied languages. Her research in on the functional superstructure within nominals; much of her work has focused on the semantics of articles, especially in English and Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish; Salish). She has explored the syntax and semantics of bare nouns in Innu-aimun (Montagnais; Algonquian), Inuttut (Labrador Inuktitut; Eskimo-Aleut), and Lithuanian (Baltic), the mass-count distinction in Innu-aimun and Inuttut, plurality in Innu-aimun, pluractionality in Quechan (Yuman) and, most recently, m-reduplication in Turkish.

Robert Henderson is an Assistant Professor of Linguistics at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. His research is centered on Mayan languages, especially the K'ichean languages spoken in highland Guatemala. His theoretical focus in on the semantics of plurality, pluractionality, and related categories like quantification, distributivity, and lexical aspect.

Meagan Louie is a Ph.D student at the University of British Columbia. She began doing fieldwork on Blackfoot (Algonquian) in 2006 and her main research interests relate to the interaction between morphology and semantics/pragmatics. In particular, she has worked on modal-temporal interactions and conditionals.

Lisa Matthewson is a Professor of Linguistics at the University of British Columbia. Her research interests centre on semantic variation and universals, with specific attention on modality, tense, aspect, quantification, and presupposition. She has worked on St'át'imcets (Salish) since the early 1990s, on Gitksan (Tsimshianic) since 2010, and has recently begun investigating Niuean (Austronesian) and Tlingit (Na-Dene)

Andrew McKenzie is an Assistant Professor of Linguistics and Affiliate Professor of Indigenous Studies at the University of Kansas. He specializes in formal semantics of Native American languages, especially the Kiowa language. His work on switch-reference and other discourse-based phenomena focuses on discovering the often unexpected ways that the interactions between the semantics, syntax, and pragmatics give rise to surface effects.

Sarah Murray is an Assistant Professor of Linguistics at Cornell University. She received her Ph.D. in Linguistics with a Certificate in Cognitive Science from Rutgers University in 2010. Her research interests are primarily in semantics, pragmatics, and philosophy of language, with a focus on developing formally precise, crosslinguistic theories. Since 2006 she has been doing fieldwork every summer with members of the Cheyenne community on the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation in Montana.

Judith Tonhauser is an Associate Professor of Linguistics at The Ohio State University. She holds a Diploma degree in Computational Linguistics from the University of Stuttgart and a Ph.D. in Linguistics from Stanford University. The empirical foundation of her research in formal semantics and pragmatics is Paraguayan Guaraní, a Tupí-Guaraní language spoken in Paraguay. She has (co-)authored papers on a variety topics in Paraguayan Guaraní, including temporal and modal reference, presuppositions and other projective contents, evidentiality, contrastive topic, and the prosody of focus. In addition to exploring the nature and extent of cross-linguistic variation in meaning, she also has a vested interest in methodologies in research on meaning.

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Introduction

M. Ryan Bochnak and Lisa Matthewson

1 Context

With as many as half of the world's languages facing extinction within the next century (Harrison 2010), research on endangered languages is critical for the advancement of linguistic theory. However, the vast majority of these endangered languages remain understudied by linguists, and in particular there has been a general lack of systematic investigation of their semantic properties. Even for languages for which there is a tradition of documentation, most of this work historically has focused on phonology and morphology, and to some extent syntax, while detailed semantic information is typically largely absent (see Van Valin 2006 for similar comments). In claiming that semantics is the most understudied subfield when it comes to endangered languages, we in no way wish to minimize the excellent descriptive groundwork done on many languages, on which formal semanticists gratefully rely whenever possible. However, fieldwork specifically targeting semantics, and informed by a semantic theory with predictive power, is required to accurately establish the meaning of elements in a fieldwork situation.

Part of the reason for the relative paucity of semantic work on minority languages is that modern formal semantics is a relatively young subfield within linguistics, and many of the early advancements in this area were originally based on English and German (Partee 2005; von Fintel and Matthewson 2008).

Thankfully, over the past couple of decades or so, there has been an increased interest in documenting semantic structures in understudied languages, and linguists have become eager to test semantic theories against a broader range of languages. A couple of early examples include Maria Bittner's work on Kalaallisut (Eskimo-Aleut; e.g., Bittner 1987), and an edited volume on cross-linguistic quantification (Bach et al. 1995). A line of research investigating semantic universals and variation has greatly benefited from this work, which has introduced new empirical findings that must now be accounted for by our semantic theories.

Conferences such as Semantics of Underrepresented Languages in the Americas (SULA, which started in 2001) have helped elevate the status of semantic research based on primary fieldwork, particularly on indigenous languages of the Americas, where the rates of language endangerment are unfortunately dire.

Semantic fieldwork[1] poses a distinct methodological challenge in its investigation of the meaning of utterances, or parts of utterances, in the language of study. The fieldworker attempts to establish semantic facts that are often quite subtle and highly context-dependent. The semantic properties under investigation are often not consciously accessible to speakers, and are not necessarily reflected in translations into another language. Unlike with other areas of linguistics, language data collected usually do not contain direct information about semantics. For example, most utterances by native speakers provide some positive information about phonetics, phonology, morphology, and syntax—simply by providing exemplars of grammatical, well-pronounced constructions. But the same is not true of semantics. A semantically well-formed utterance, even if paired with a translation or a discourse context, provides the researcher with very incomplete clues about what that utterance really means.

Despite these challenges, there are vanishingly few resources available on methodological issues for obtaining semantic judgments in fieldwork situations. For instance, Chelliah and de Reuse's (2011) fieldwork textbook devotes one chapter (chapter 13) to "Semantics, Pragmatics, and Text Collection," with a special focus on lexical semantics, discourse structure, and pragmatic phenomena (including deixis, implicature, presupposition, and speech acts). Only one subsection is devoted to briefly outlining the notions of entailment and acceptability judgments on the well-formedness of complete linguistic utterances. Likewise, Bowern (2008) contains one chapter (chapter 8) describing elicitation techniques for gathering lexical semantic data, and one chapter (chapter 9) that focuses on the elicitation of texts and discourses. While these two resources serve as excellent references on general fieldwork techniques and practices, neither contain any sustained discussion on eliciting data on functional semantic categories, which form the "bread and butter of working semanticists," as von Fintel and Matthewson (2008) put it.

Recognizing the special challenges of semantic fieldworkers, Matthewson (2004) describes a methodology for collecting semantic data from linguistically untrained consultants. She argues that the fieldworker must take advantage of several modes of data collection to arrive at the most complete empirical picture possible. The methodology argued for includes direct elicitation techniques, including translations and judgments on felicity and truth conditions, and a system for how

[1]We use the term "fieldwork" as it is most commonly used in linguistics, referring to research conducted on a language of which the linguist is not a native speaker, typically involving one-on-one interviews with native speaker consultants.

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to interpret the results of such tasks to arrive at the semantic facts. Importantly, the methodology must allow the researcher to probe for negative data: contexts where a well-formed utterance is not acceptable. Matthewson furthermore claims that using a contact language (such as English) for presenting discourse contexts is unlikely to affect the results of a given task. While certain linguists have recently argued against gathering elicited data from fieldwork, or asking native speakers to judge "invented" data (e.g., Mithun 2001; Himmelmann 2006), we follow Matthewson (2004) in maintaining that these forms of data-gathering are indispensable for the semantic fieldworker.

Many semantic fieldworkers are using techniques similar to those advocated by Matthewson (2004) in their work on understudied languages, and the growing number of semantic fieldworkers means that techniques are being refined and new techniques are being added. (See for example Tonhauser et al. (2013) for excellent recent methodological discussion.) The advantage of using commonly accepted methodologies is that the tasks can be systematically replicated by researchers working on diverse languages, in order to allow for fruitful cross-linguistic comparison. Nevertheless, each field situation is unique and presents its own set of challenges, and so the fieldworker must adapt methodological tools to meet the challenges encountered in the field. Furthermore, different semantic domains (e.g., definiteness, modality, comparison, etc.) demand nuanced elicitation techniques to gather the range of data and contrasts that the theoretical literature has identified as crucial for cross-linguistic comparison.

The goal of this volume is therefore to expand the discussion of methodology for semantic fieldwork with contributions from researchers who have investigated a variety of topics, representing a diverse array of languages. The chapters in part one explore general elicitation techniques, while those in part two discuss techniques for investigating particular semantic topics. The chapters in part three consist of case studies in using language-internal evidence to guide semantic elicitation. In each case, the methodological discussions are supplemented with examples from the authors' own fieldwork, showcasing the successful application of the techniques. In all, 11 language families are represented, spanning four continents.

In the remainder of this introductory chapter, we first provide a brief defense of fieldwork in general, in response to some recent attacks on the premise that one-on-one work with a small number of speakers is a valid way to conduct empirical research. We will then give an overview of the topics that are and are not covered in the volume, and will end by briefly previewing each chapter.

2 Experiments Large and Small

In recent years there has been a welcome increase in the frequency with which experimental methods are applied to semantic questions. Recent years have also seen lively discussion in the literature about the methodologies linguists should be using in their research. One of the issues of debate is whether it is better, or even necessary, to obtain large-scale experimental evidence for empirical proposals. For the claim that large-scale experiments are the way we must go, see for example Edelman and Christiansen (2003), Ferreira (2005), Wasow and Arnold (2005), Featherston (2007), Gibson and Fedorenko (2010a, 2010b) and Gibson et al. (2013). For defenses of methodologies involving small numbers of speakers, on the other hand, see den Dikken et al. (2007), Fanselow (2007), Grewendorf (2007), Haider (2007), Weskott and Fanselow (2008), Phillips (2010), Sprouse and Almeida (2012a, b, 2013) and Sprouse et al. (2012); see also Featherston (2009).

This debate is of critical importance for any linguist working on an endangered language, or indeed for any linguist who cares about endangered language data and believes that it should be collected. If large-scale experimental results are the only reliable results, what is the status of data collected from a language for which such experiments are impossible for logistical reasons (such as only having 10 speakers left, all over the age of 80)? Gibson and Fedorenko's answer (2010b:7) is that "the conclusions that can be drawn from [data from endangered languages] will be weaker and more speculative in nature than the conclusions based on quantitative data." Does this mean that we should not even bother collecting data from minority languages? Should we give up on linguistic diversity now, and only work on Indo-European and Sino-Tibetan?[2]

Our answer to these questions is "no." The current collection of papers is not intended as a direct contribution to the debate on whether large-scale experimental methods are a necessary part of empirical semantic research. The volume is primarily targeted at readers who are already convinced that one-on-one fieldwork is a viable linguistic methodology, and are interested in the theory and practice of such work as applied to semantic questions. Nevertheless, we believe that the volume as a whole serves as a counter-argument to those who believe that semantic questions cannot be fruitfully investigated via fieldwork. By providing explicit methodologies and examples of their use, we hope to demonstrate the rigor and success of the relevant techniques. Every paper in this volume discusses and provides data from a language that is either officially endangered or in decline: Badiaranke, Blackfoot, Cheyenne, Gitksan, Innu-aimun, Inuttut, Kaqchikel, Kiowa, Navajo, Nez Perce, St'át'imcets, Sḵwx̱wú7mesh, Washo, and Yucatec Maya. If the researchers in this volume (and many others working in the same way) had opted to work only on languages for which conditions allow large-scale experiments, the field would be vastly empirically poorer.

[2]To see what we are dealing with in terms of the bias against fieldwork on minority languages, consider these extracts from a recent anonymous review of a paper based on fieldwork: "This reviewer suspects that fieldwork done through another language is indeed pretty unreliable. The suspicion increases when the native speakers belong to a moribund language . . . How much should one, can one, believe an informant's metalinguistic judgments about a language no longer frequently used?"

It is important to emphasize that our defense of the small-scale experiments we know as "fieldwork" is not only motivated by practical considerations. On the contrary, we believe that fieldwork with small numbers of speakers is a robust, scientifically valid research methodology. As pointed out by Sprouse and Almeida (2012b), among others, the informal experiments carried out by fieldworkers are in many crucial respects identical to the experiments carried out in laboratories. Both methodologies involve the designing of a set of conditions to test the relevant minimal contrasts, and both attempt to rule out nuisance variables. Targeted, hypothesis-driven elicitation is designed to test the predictions of falsifiable hypotheses about language, and as such it meets the primary criterion for scientific research.

The results of small-scale fieldwork experiments are also reproducible, both within and across speakers. In fact, even the entirely non-experimental data-gathering technique of accessing the researcher's own intuitions can give results that overwhelmingly correspond to those given by large-scale experiments. Phillips (2010:53) gives examples showing that "carefully constructed tests of well-known grammatical generalizations overwhelmingly corroborate the results of 'armchair linguistics'." Similarly, Sprouse et al. (2012) randomly selected 146 two-condition phenomena from articles in *Linguistic Inquiry*, which were originally gathered using non-experimental methods. They tested each of these data points experimentally, and found a replication rate of 95% (with a margin of error of just over 5%).

Even if fieldwork data were not replicable across large numbers of speakers (and for minority languages this may never be testable), fieldworkers can still confirm *intra*-speaker reproducibility. That is, for any single speaker, the results of a variety of grammatical tests over a number of different stimuli should converge on the same results. Intra-speaker reproducibility is sufficient, given that our object of investigation is the grammatical competence of individual speakers. Given that different speakers of the same language have similar but not necessarily identical grammars, using large numbers of speakers doesn't necessarily lead to clearer results, since averaging results over 200 different grammars can be more misleading than investigating one or two different grammars in depth (see den Dikken et al. 2007, Fanselow 2007, Grewendorf 2007, Phillips 2010, among others).

Finally, there are advantages to one-on-one fieldwork as opposed to large-scale experiments; these derive from the time spent with each speaker, and from the fact that the fieldworker–consultant relationship is not fully parallel to the investigator–subject relationship. For example, we are better able to avoid problems such as those mentioned by Schütze (2005), having to do with whether speakers fully understand the tasks we are asking them to do. Speaker confusion about the task is likely to be noticed much earlier, and mitigated much more easily, in a context where one is sitting face-to-face with one speaker and assessing the success of the task in real time, and moreover when one has a long-term, collaborative relationship with one's speakers.

3 Coverage of the Volume

This volume grew out of a panel that took place at the 2012 Annual Meeting of the Linguistic Society of America in Portland, Oregon. The chapters in this volume are largely based on the talks and posters presented as part of this panel.[3] One of the goals of the panel was to bring together both younger scholars making new discoveries in their semantic research on understudied languages and more seasoned fieldworkers who have come to be seen as leaders in this small but growing field. The panel successfully generated much constructive discussion, the results of which we are proud to present in this volume.

Before previewing the individual chapters, we would first like to flag a few issues relevant to semantic fieldwork that are not covered in this book. First, this book is not meant to be a handbook on general fieldwork methodologies; our focus is only on the investigation of semantic phenomena. We refer readers to fieldwork manuals or collections such as Newman and Ratliff (2001), Bowern (2008) and Chelliah and de Reuse (2011) on linguistic fieldwork in other areas of linguistics, and also for discussion of practical issues such as fieldwork ethics, data organization and archiving, grant writing, and use of technologies in the field.

Second, while texts can serve as an important source of data for semantic investigations, we do not cover general methodologies for eliciting or working with texts or corpora. However, a couple of chapters do include discussion of the use of texts in semantic fieldwork: the chapter by Burton and Matthewson discusses the use of a targeted storyboard methodology to generate texts containing sentences with modals, and the chapter by Cover discusses the role of texts in the investigation of tense, aspect, and modality markers in Badiaranke. We refer interested readers to Chelliah and de Reuse (2011, chapter 13) for more detailed discussion on collecting texts in the field.

Finally, a note on the comprehensiveness of topics covered in this volume. While we made every attempt to include chapters on as wide a range of topics within semantics as possible, there are a few such topics not represented here. For instance, there are no chapters that specifically cover quantification or presupposition. In the case of quantification, we point readers to Benjamin Bruening's Scope Fieldwork Project (http://udel.edu/~bruening/scopeproject/scopeproject.html), which includes a visual stimulus kit and methodological discussion for collecting data on quantifiers and scope in the field. For presupposition and projective content, we recommend Tonhauser et al.'s (2013) article in *Language*, which discusses a methodology for setting up contexts to test varieties of projective content, with examples from Paraguayan Guaraní. We would also like to point out that every effort

[3]One exception is Judith Tonhauser's contribution to the panel, which discussed methodologies for investigating presupposition and projective content and has been published in *Language* (Tonhauser et al. 2013). We have replaced this contribution with the chapter by Cover and Tonhauser on theoretically informed fieldwork on temporal and aspectual reference.

was made to ensure that each chapter will be useful and interesting for fieldworkers who are not necessarily fluent in current formal semantic theories; however, in places where a certain amount of semantic sophistication is required, we have asked authors to flag these sections when they arise.

4 Overview of Contributions

Bohnemeyer's chapter discusses methods of linguistic data collection for revealing semantic information, which is often much more elusive than information on phonology, morphology, and syntax. He outlines several types of semantic elicitation techniques, where elicitation is defined as a data-gathering activity involving a stimulus, a task, and a response. His concerns revolve around the important questions of what types of evidence can be gained from elicitation activities with native speakers, and how researchers can gather such evidence in the field and interpret the data for semantic analysis. He illustrates the various techniques with examples from his own fieldwork on Yucatec Maya.

Louie's chapter addresses a seemingly paradoxical challenge for semantic fieldworkers: on the one hand, semanticists often need to collect data of a paradigmatic and systematic nature; on the other hand, fieldwork consultants often become bored with paradigmatic and systematically planned elicitation sessions. She proposes a method for alleviating this problem, which involves embedding test sentences within an over-arching storyline. She furthermore addresses the question of how to deal with almost-minimal pairs of context-utterance pairings. Her discussion is accompanied by several entertaining examples from her fieldwork on Blackfoot (Algonquian).

Bar-el's contribution sets forth a proposal for a fieldworker's toolkit for examining aspectual classes in the field. She critiques existing questionnaires designed for eliciting aspectual contrasts, as well as existing classifications of predicates, which have been based mostly on better-studied languages. Using examples from Dëne Sųłiné (Athabaskan) and from her own fieldwork on S<u>k</u>w<u>x</u>wú7mesh (Salish), Bar-el outlines the essentials of a toolkit for documenting a wide range of aspectual features in the field.

Bochnak and Bogal-Albritten present methodologies for investigating degree constructions, comparison, and gradability. Using examples drawn from their fieldwork on Washo (Hokan/isolate) and Navajo (Athabaskan), they demonstrate how notions such as norm-relatedness and crisp judgments can be tested using visual, tactile, and verbal stimuli. The Washo and Navajo data they present reveal significant departures from what one might expect based on existing analyses of familiar languages.

Burton and Matthewson motivate the use of storyboards in semantic elicitation, which are targeted at investigating a particular construction or topic. They illustrate the technique by showing how storyboards have been successfully used to make and test hypotheses about modals in Gitksan (Tsimshianic), St'át'imcets (Salish), and Blackfoot. They argue that data obtained by the storyboard technique are as natural-sounding as spontaneous speech, obviating a potential drawback of data elicited verbally.

Deal's chapter addresses the status of translation and judgment tasks in semantic fieldwork, also taking the semantics of modals as a case study, this time in Nez Perce (Sahaptian). She makes explicit two hypotheses—the Equivalent Translations Hypothesis and the Equivalent Judgments Hypothesis—which form the keystones for reasoning about the outcome of translation and judgment tasks with native speakers. Deal discusses ways these hypotheses may be fruitfully exploited in field research, noting along the way certain flaws that may arise.

Gillon's chapter presents methodologies for testing the semantics of determiners, drawing on examples from her fieldwork on Sḵwx̱wú7mesh, Lithuanian (Indo-European), Innu-aimun (Algonquian), and Inuttut (Eskimo-Aleut). Some of these languages lack overt determiners, but Gillon shows how the presence (or absence) of null determiners can be detected through fieldwork. She argues that the semantics shared by all determiners is domain restriction, and that the different semantic possibilities for determiners are instantiated both in overt and null varieties.

AnderBois and Henderson address the question of which language to use when presenting discourse contexts to consultants. On the basis of two case studies—attitude reports and parentheticality in Yucatec Maya, and distributive pluractionality in Kaqchikel (Mayan)—they argue that both are viable, but that a complex array of linguistic factors determines whether the object language or the language of wider communication is a better choice. They present a best practices guide, according to which researchers should disclose what language was used to establish the discourse context, and the reasons for this choice.

Cover's chapter addresses the significant challenges involved in establishing the semantics of tense, aspect, and modality in a fieldwork situation. She argues that direct elicitation is a crucial part of such investigations, along with text collection and participant observation. She provides examples of all three techniques from her fieldwork on the imperfective and discontinuous past tense in Badiaranke (Niger-Congo).

McKenzie presents techniques for eliciting information about the discourse status of noun phrases, drawing on his fieldwork on this issue in Kiowa (Tanoan). He argues that the pragmatic factors that license noun phrase dislocation in Kiowa can be investigated without recourse to vague notions such as "aboutness." He demonstrates how the subtle discourse properties of these dislocated phrases can be detected using standard elicitation techniques such as the gathering of acceptability judgments in contexts.

Murray's chapter offers a detailed illustration of the bi-directional interplay between empirical findings obtained through fieldwork and formal theories of semantics. Her case study on the reflexive/reciprocal construction in Cheyenne

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