FIELD METHODS
Elicitation Techniques


I. Three Questions on Grammar Gathering

Answers to three main questions define a researcher’s position on how and why data is gathered for linguistic analysis. To choose the methods of data gathering, these positions must first be understood. These questions are:

- Should data gathering be theory-driven or data-driven?
- Is data gathering performed in a predictable linear fashion?
- What data should be gathered?

No linguist is a theoretical “tabula rasa”, nor is it desirable (or even possible) to be one. Thus each fieldwork data-gathering endeavour has some theoretical underpinning. In addition, theory-driven research can be useful in determining what data to collect, especially with regard to more nuanced grammatical points.

For the fieldworker, it is better to observe and describe linguistic facts regardless of whether or not they fit into someone’s formal theory. “Paying attention” does not mean that the fieldworker can or should try to pay attention to all morphosyntactic features of a language at the same time.

A fieldworker first begins to examine and analyze smaller morphosyntactic structures, and then moves on to examine and analyze larger morphosyntactic structures; however, this does not mean that there is a directionality in fieldwork. There is nothing wrong in adopting this method, as long as one understands that the resulting documentation and description will depend on a simultaneous study of all aspects of the phonology, morphology, and syntax of the language.

II. Data Gathering: How to...

The term “elicitation” is vague. For some researchers, elicitation implies the use of questionnaires and questioning-without-context; it excludes data from texts. For others, elicitation potentially covers any sort of questioning methodology. Another problem with the term “elicitation” is that it seems to imply data gathering without linguistic analysis. But there is no such thing as data gathering separable from analysis. Some analysis in the field is unavoidable.

II.1 Schedule-Controlled Elicitation: The fieldworker has a schedule or questionnaire of material to elicit, prepared by the fieldworker or by another linguist, and asks the questions in the order of the schedule. Elicitation schedules or questionnaires focusing on specific language families or language areas are usually more useful than those covering “the languages of the world”. It is important that both the consultant and the fieldworker understand that the schedule is just a guideline; it can be modified or even set aside if need be. And even though the fieldworker is the ultimate guide, feedback from the consultant on how to best proceed with the elicitation is always welcome.

- A questionnaire asking the fieldworker analytical questions about the language is called an “analytical questionnaire”, and sometimes, rather redundantly, “question questionnaire. Examples of questions on such a questionnaire are “Does the language have a case marking system?” If yes, “Is the case marking system nominative/accusative, or absolutive/ergative?” and so on. These questionnaires, while useful, aids to memory, depend entirely on the skill and imaginativeness of the fieldworker in eliciting the answers to the questions.

- The most widespread type of questionnaire is the questionnaire with lists of sentences to translate into the target language. One problem with most such questionnaires is that they contain sentences out of context

II.2 Analysis-Controlled Elicitation: under this type of elicitation there is no schedule. The analysis (in the most informal sense of the word) controls the elicitation, although it is important to have some sort of “script” (or “protocol”). In choosing an approach to analysis-controlled elicitation, it is important to take into consideration the degree of obsolescence or endangerment of the language. As shown by Mithun, there are many sorts of analysis-controlled elicitation that cannot be used effectively when speakers are no longer dominant in the target language.

A. Target Language Interrogation Elicitation: This is elicitation where questions are asked in the target language. One should always record not only an answer specific to the situation, but a variety of appropriate answers as well. This tells the fieldworker about the real meaning of the question (Healey 1964:13). A more complicated type is to describe a situation and ask what the person might say in that situation at a given moment.

B. Stimulus-Driven Elicitation: In this type, the consultant is provided with some concrete objects, or pictures, video clips, or a movie, and is asked to comment on them. Several subtypes are distinguished here:

1) Prop-Driven Elicitation is particularly useful for the study of noun classification. The fieldworker will need a number of different types of objects varying in animacy, shape, size, surface, consistency, and paired or not paired, as well as objects contained in different ways: in a plate, cup, basket, bottle, or bag.

- One can only talk about objects within sight, ideally objects on the table in front of the fieldworker and consultant.

- The deictic nature of props needs to be taken into account. So the sentence that the fieldworker thinks means ‘I pick up this knife’, might well mean ‘you pick up that knife’.

- Finally, as soon as something slightly abstract is pointed at, misunderstandings will occur. E.g., if the fieldworker tries to get the term for “mirror” by looking into the palm of her hand, she may get as translation something like ‘you are looking at it’, or ‘your hand.’

2) Pictorial Stimulus-Driven Elicitation involves the use of pictorial stimuli, including line drawings, photographs, and video-clips. In this method, the fieldworker shows a picture to the consultant and asks him/her to describe it, or to comment on it. This method can be used for eliciting quantifier facts (such as the notori-

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C. Target Language Manipulation Elicitation: In this type, some word structure of the target language is manipulated and the consultant has to react to it.

1) Word-list Based Elicitation: the fieldworker asks the consultant to make up a sentence using the word “X”, selected from a previously collected word list. A drawback of this method is that the consultant might use a sentence frame that works most of the time.

2) Paradigmatic Substitution Elicitation: The fieldworker writes a sentence on a blackboard or on paper. Then s/he deletes a word or constituent from the sentence, and asks for another word or constituent that can fit that slot. Asking for another word or constituent is preferable to suggesting one because it avoids the creation of artificial forms by the fieldworker.

3) Fieldworker-Driven Paradigmatic Substitution Elicitation: like Paradigmatic substitution elicitation, except that the open slot is filled with another word or constituent by the fieldworker him/herself. Useful for hard-to-define elements like evidentials, modal particles, or other elements that the fieldworker has noticed in conversations and texts. Care must be taken to ensure that just one or two elements of the sentence are changed at a time in order to keep close control over the data.

4) Appropriate Adjustments Elicitation: Useful for fine-grained grammatical analyses like tense, number or person, the fieldworker inserts a novel morpheme or phrase (by either replacing a similar category in the original or adding a novel one) into a sentence, and asks for judgements about grammaticality. If the output is ungrammatical, the fieldworker must note the adjustments that are needed to make it grammatical. One difficulty with this method is that the fieldworker and the consultant will have to agree on a transformational metalanguage.

5) Transformational Elicitation: In this method, the consultant is asked to transform a given sentence to some specified grammatical target – passive, negative, question, etc. in the fieldworker-driven version, the fieldworker begins with a sentence in the target language and modifies it in some way, such as moving a constituent. Then the fieldworker asks for a grammaticality judgment, or asks about the pragmatic situation where the “changed” sentence can be used, and asks about any socio-linguistic details. This method can be problematic if the resulting sentences sound too contrived. Also, speakers may have a hard time judging the grammaticality of the resultant constructions.

6) Corrective Elicitation: this method involves the fieldworker deliberately producing an ungrammatical sentence or using an incorrect form to test a hypothesis. The fieldworker produces the form and then waits for the consultant’s reaction. The method is useful in gauging how well the speaker is able to correct the fieldworker. Is the consultant accommodating, uncaring, or afraid to hurt the fieldworkers’ feelings?

D. Target Language Translation Elicitation: In this method, the fieldworker asks the consultant to translate target language text or other materials gathered during previous sessions.

Some consultants are very skilful translators, some can offer only a brief or inaccurate synopsis of what the text is about, some can only do word-for-word translations, and others are simply incapable of translation. Therefore the fieldworker needs to know the consultant well enough to be able to judge his/her abilities.

The consultant might offer ungrammatical English translations to indicate that the equivalent in the language is also ungrammatical. The accuracy and reliability of translations can be affected by differences in the variety of English (or any other contact language) spoken by the fieldworker and the consultant.

Translation is quite useless in some areas of morphosyntax.

E. Target Language Construction and Introspective Judgment Elicitation: In this type, the fieldworker constructs sentences in the target language. S/he simply relies on the consultants’ intuition and their ability to introspect, and asks them to judge if the constructed sentence is grammatical or not. This is, in simple terms, the “can you say this?” method, and the fieldworker is content with a simple “yes” or “no” answer.

Grammaticality judgements vary not only across dialects of different speakers, but even for a single speaker at different points in time. Judgments become blurry, if you are not sure whether a response of ‘yes, it’s fine’ means that the sentence is grammatical or simply that your consultant is being polite, a slightly better question to ask is ‘would a fluent speaker of the language ever say this?’. This is a good way to weed out sentences that are technically grammatical, but are not preferred. If you get the response ‘well, you could say it’, that almost always means that there is something wrong with the sentence somewhere. Asking someone might say a sentence like that can also produce interesting responses.

The notion of ‘grammaticality’ can very easily be confused with the speaker’s notion of ‘understandability’. It is not always easy to ensure that this kind of judgement corresponds to what people would actually say. So, you should avoid strategies such as the following in your elicitation sessions: Is X grammatical? Can you say X? Rather, you should formulate your elicitation sessions with questions more like the following: Would people say X? It is also very difficult for you to control for all possible variables when you present a sentence in isolation for a grammaticality judgment like this. A simple change in intonation—which you may be completely unaware of—may completely change the acceptability of an utterance within any particular real-world context. One way of giving grammaticality judgements greater reliability is to present people with two (or more) options and to allow them to indicate which they think is the better sentence. Thus, rather than any of the strategies above, it may be a better idea to ask somebody: Which is better: X or Y?

Suppose that a completely new use of a morpheme has appeared for the first time, and you want to ask your language-helper: Why did you say X rather than Y? Very of-
ten, the answer to this kind of question calls for much greater linguistic sophistication than any linguistically untrained language-helper is going to be in a position to provide. Find a way to get at the meaning through contrasting sentences.

- In addition to the fact that introspection is unreliable, there are a variety of other reasons why consultants cannot provide grammaticality judgments reliably. One, consultants aim to please the investigator, they may be guided by prescriptive correctness, factual (in)accuracy

F. Reverse Translation Elicitation: The consultant is asked to translate sentences from the contact language into the target language “How do you say X in your language?”

- Extreme caution is advised here, as most consultants will translate word for word. Even if one is lucky enough to work with a skilled translator, the results can still be odd, unnatural, and/or unidiomatic.

- If one has to use it, do so only late in the fieldwork and preferably through a written task, so that the consultant has time to think over a written translation

G. Review Elicitation: this procedure is used to check facts already elicited, and therefore presupposes some method of previous elicitation. The fieldworker reviews previous materials together with the consultant, and looks for agreements, disagreements, variants and “mistakes”. As a controlling device, it is useful to ask for a translation back into the target language of something previously elicited

H. Ancillary Elicitation: Also called Text-based elicitation. Texts are crucial for morphosyntactic elicitation. In this approach, the fieldworker starts from a previously recorded and translated text (ideally a text of naturally occurring discourse). S/he then elicits more information on the sentences of that text. It is best to start working with shorter sentences. For example, based on a text, one could develop a hypothesis about word order and constituent structure. The fieldworker could then change word order to see if it is strict or variable.

- Consultants might have completely different expectations of what the fieldworker is expected to understand or not understand in a text. Loanwords from English, which sound assimilated to the fieldworker, might be considered unassimilated by the consultant and therefore obvious to everyone.

- It is not unusual to come across speakers who cannot manipulate a text in any way. Needless to say, these speakers should not be relied upon for ancillary elicitation, but they might be helpful with other tasks.

I. Covert Elicitation: In this methodology, it appears that a particular elicitation procedure is being followed, but in fact, the fieldworker is actually paying attention to something else, and the consultant is not aware of this. Covert elicitation can be used when the speaker is bored by a repetitive or technical elicitation session, or when the speaker has strong feelings about what is important and interesting in their language. In such a situation, the fieldworker might try to build the sentences for elicitation around linguistic matters that generally interest or amuse the consultant.

- There is an ethical problem here. At worst, the fieldworker can be perceived as deceptive, or at best, hurting the consultant’s feelings.

J. Meta-Elicitation: at later stages, once the fieldworker is sure of a particular consultant’s linguistic sophistication, s/he can ask for simple types of analysis. For instance, the fieldworker might ask the consultant what the two clauses are that make up the sentence. Or it might be reasonable to ask the consultant directly if there is a semantic difference between two constructions. Usually the consultant cannot tell the fieldworker, but it is worth seeing if s/he has a take on it.

- It is important for the fieldworker to keep analytical questions simple, and not base them too heavily on theoretical concerns.

III. Data Gathering: What to... in MORPHOSYNTAX

As discussed, you will each be individual topics for research. The following list of topics areas must be covered in every individual field report, and will be elicited in class.

Open class content words (exist in all languages)
1. Nouns
2. Verbs
Open or closed class content words (language dependent)
3. Modifiers
   3.1. Adjectives (modifying nouns)
   3.2. Adverbs (modifying adjectives)
   3.3. Adverbs (modifying adverbs)
   3.4. Adverbs (modifying clauses or sentences)
Closed class function words
4. Noun adjectives
   4.1. Adpositions
   4.1.1. Prepositions
   4.1.2. Postpositions
   4.1.3. Circumpositions
   4.2. Case “particles” (i.e., not morphological affixes)
5. Verb-adjectives
6. Conjunctions
   6.1. Coordinating conjunctions
   6.2. Subordinating conjunctions
   6.2.1. Complementizers
   6.2.2. Relativizers
6.2.3. Adverbializers
7. Pre-forms
   7.1. Pronouns
   7.2. Preverbs
   7.3. Pre-adjectives
   7.4. Preverbs
   7.5. Pre-predicates
   7.6. Pre-clauses
   7.7. Pre-sentences
8. Other, or residue
11.2 Grammatical Typology and Terminology

Three-way distinction, e.g., tomorrow/today/yesterday, but there are also many languages that have only one word for both 'tomorrow' and 'yesterday'; that is, a system contrasting 'today' with 'a day away from today', either plus or minus.

Spatial deixis is further surveyed and studied in Levinson (2003), and Levinson and Wilkins (2006).

It is also useful to distinguish between anaphoric deixis, in which the deictic element (in bold) points backwards, as in … and John said the same thing, from cataphoric deixis, in which the deictic element (in bold) points forwards, as in The winners are the following: …

Another useful distinction is that between absolute deixis versus relativized deixis. Relativized deixis typically occurs in indirect speech. An example of absolute temporal deixis is He was sick, where the past tense of was refers to a time prior to the moment of speech. But in John will say he was sick, the past tense reference of was is not absolute, but relative to the event John will say (Anderson and Keenan 1985:301). The issue of relativized deixis is further discussed in Anderson and Keenan (1985:301–307).

Deixis can be encoded morphologically, through cliticization, or syntactically by the use of Modifiers and Pro-forms.

Grammatical Categories Characteristic of Verb Phrases

The following is a list of the grammatical categories that are characteristically indicated on verbs or verb phrases:

- Tense
- Aspect
- Mood/Mode/Modality
- Voice
- Valence
- Polarity
- Control/Noncontrol
- Subject person and number
- Object person and number
- Associated motion

All of the above can be encoded morphologically, though cliticization, or syntactically by the use of separate words (Adjuncts such as auxiliaries, or Pro-forms) or through constituent order.

Grammatical Categories Characteristic of Noun Phrases

The fieldworker should be prepared to look for the following characteristics of nouns or noun phrases:

- Semantic Role
- Pragmatically Marked Status
- Case
- Possession
- Number
- Noun class or gender
- Noun classification
- Deixis

Grammatical Categories Characteristic of Clauses or Sentences

These include the following:

- Valuation
- Evidentiality
- Negativity
- Polarity
- Speech act distinctions