

Essentials of modern linguistic fieldwork

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...“modern linguistic fieldwork”?

- For many:
“linguistic fieldwork” \approx “language documentation / Descriptive Linguistics”
- Himmelmann 2006:1:
“a language documentation is a lasting, multipurpose record of a language”
- NOTE:
“linguistic fieldwork” \neq “I only want to collect primary data and have no other research goals”

A bit about me

- 2005–present SIL Int'l, East Asia Group, based in Nanning, Guangxi, China
- 2000–2005 near-weekly fieldwork sessions on a Uto-Aztecan language (Pima) as part of graduate study, UCLA
- 1992–2002 multiple short term (2 weeks to 2 months) aid trips outside the US (Mexico, CIS, South Africa)

Outline of the talk

- Why to do fieldwork
(or Language Documentation)
- How to do fieldwork, part 1:
technical and mechanical aspects
- How to do fieldwork, part 2:
personal and practical aspects

Why to do fieldwork (or Language Documentation)

- Himmelmann 2006: Why LD and why this way?
 - 1) Language endangerment
 - 2) Economy of research resources
 - 3) Accountability
- Other reasons:
 - 4) Community assistance

Why to do fieldwork (or Language Documentation)

- Himmelman 2006: Why LD and why this way?
 - 1) Language endangerment
 - About 7000 languages currently spoken
 - Many of these speech communities are endangered or threatened
 - Sapir: death of a language is like a museum burning to the ground
 - You (obviously) can't collect data on a language that isn't spoken anymore!

Why to do fieldwork (or Language Documentation)

- Himmelman 2006: Why LD and why this way?
 - 2) Economy of research resources
 - Funding, labor are relatively scarce in linguistics – don't waste anything!
 - Full availability of all data, for linguists, community members, government ...
 - So think: what format should your data be in, and what should it include, to be useful to others? (More on this later!)

Why to do fieldwork (or Language Documentation)

- Himmelman 2006: Why LD and why this way?

3) Accountability

- Amazing claims... unverified for lack of appropriate data!
- Making the entire set of your primary data available allows others to check your analysis, conclusions
- (Good science: experiments should be verifiable by others)

Why to do fieldwork (or Language Documentation)

- Other reasons: Why LD and why this way?
 - 4) Community assistance
 - Mufwene 2010: Linguistics is ill-prepared to help threatened language communities
 - Avoid “glass case” syndrome in LD
 - Related error: benevolent paternalism
 - Solution: work with communities from the start, to help in the ways they'd like help
 - Contra Mufwene, your skills *can* help!

How to do fieldwork: technical and mechanical aspects



- Today: only an overview!
- Outline
 - Before the field
 - While in the field
 - When you get home

How to do fieldwork: technical and mechanical aspects

- Before you leave for your field location
 - **Background** Learn all you can from others' work (publications, archived sources); find out about the community (leaders, interest)
 - **Collaborate** Establish cooperative relationships (OLAC, Linguist List, Google – not just linguists)
 - **Approval** Obtain needed permissions
 - **PLAN!** Know your hardware! Have Plan A, Plan B, Plan C, ...

How to do fieldwork: technical and mechanical aspects



- What to collect? All of it!
“a lasting, multi-purpose record of a language”
(Himmelman 2006)
spontaneous ↔ planned
monolingual ↔ group
high register ↔ low register
regional variation

How to do fieldwork: technical and mechanical aspects

- How should you collect your data?
 - Formats: working, presentational, archival
 - Aristar-Dry and Simons 2006: Best Practices digital resources are ...
 - 1) **Preservable** collection & archival formats have L-O-T-S of good qualities
 - 2) **Intelligible** complete, accurate metadata; documented data & methods
 - 3) **Accessible** others can find it & obtain it
 - 4) **Inter-operable** easily compared with others

How to do fieldwork: technical and mechanical aspects

- How should you collect your data?

- **Audio** (high quality!) recordings

Need to know about recorders, microphones, physical recording arrangements – what is best for recording one speaker, or two, or ten?

- **Video** (high quality!) recordings

Best practice now includes high-definition video recording in conjunction with audio recording

How to do fieldwork: technical and mechanical aspects



How to do fieldwork: technical and mechanical aspects

- How should you collect your data?
 - **Audio** (high quality!) recordings
 - Need to know about recorders, microphones, physical recording arrangements – what tools, setup is best for recording one speaker, or two, or ten?
 - **Video** (high quality!) recordings
 - Best practice now includes high-definition video recording in conjunction with audio recording
 - **Transcription** (IPA, and phonemic?), translation into a research language, annotation of these recordings
 - **Metadata** when you collect the data, not filled in later!

How to do fieldwork: technical and mechanical aspects

- After you return from your field location
 - **Archive** Make data available to others – linguists, community members, government
 - **Analyze** You *do* need to finish that paper
 - **Follow-up** Need more data? Confirm data?
 - **Report** Follow-up with your funder(s)
 - **Acknowledge** the contributions of others, maintain relationships established in the field

How to do fieldwork: technical and mechanical aspects

Austin 2008: What skills do you need?

- Project conception, design & management
- Grant application writing
- Fieldwork outside the classroom
- Media management
- Data & metadata management
- Mobilization
- Team-based research
- Monitoring, evaluating, reporting
- Advocacy

How to do fieldwork: technical and mechanical aspects

Resources for training

- E-MELD School of Best Practices
<http://emeld.org/school/>
- Funding sources (eg, ELDP events)
- *Language Documentation and Conservation* (journal), ICLDC (conference proceedings)
- Summer schools (eg, LSA Summer Institute)
- Visiting schools with this special emphasis (eg, U Hawaii at Manoa)

How to do fieldwork: technical and mechanical aspects

Resources for funding

- Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project (SOAS, U London) <http://www.hrelp.org/grants/>
- NSF/NEH Documenting Endangered Languages Project <http://www.neh.gov/grants/guidelines/del.html>
- DoBeS (Volkswagen Foundation, MPI) <http://www.volkswagenstiftung.de/index.php?id=172&L=1>
- Endangered Language Fund (Yale) <http://www.endangeredlanguagefund.org/>
- Many others: Foundation for Endangered Languages, The Genographic Project, ... Google is your friend

How to do fieldwork: personal and practical aspects



- Relationships
- Stresses
- Rewards

How to do fieldwork: personal and practical aspects

Relationships



Your fieldwork will succeed or fail based on *relationships* with

- local speakers
- the local community
- local linguists, government officials

Make these relationships a priority – doing this along with your own work takes balance, flexibility

How to do fieldwork: personal and practical aspects

Relationships (continued)

- Individuals have needs, language communities have needs
 - You can't meet every need – but what *can* you do?
 - Can your work, your voice, benefit the community?
- What do communities appreciate about linguists? (Austin 2008 blog quote):
 - Enthusiasm for work (“they keep showing up”)
 - Enjoyment of work (sign of good relationships)
 - Engenders trust

How to do fieldwork: personal and practical aspects

Stresses (and how to deal with them well)



- Transportation and infrastructure
- (Lack of) availability of research participants
- Partners' (?) differing goals & expectations
- Cultural differences—
you vs. lg. community

How to do fieldwork: personal and practical aspects

Stresses (continued)

- “Cultural adjustment map” (Elmer 2002:72)

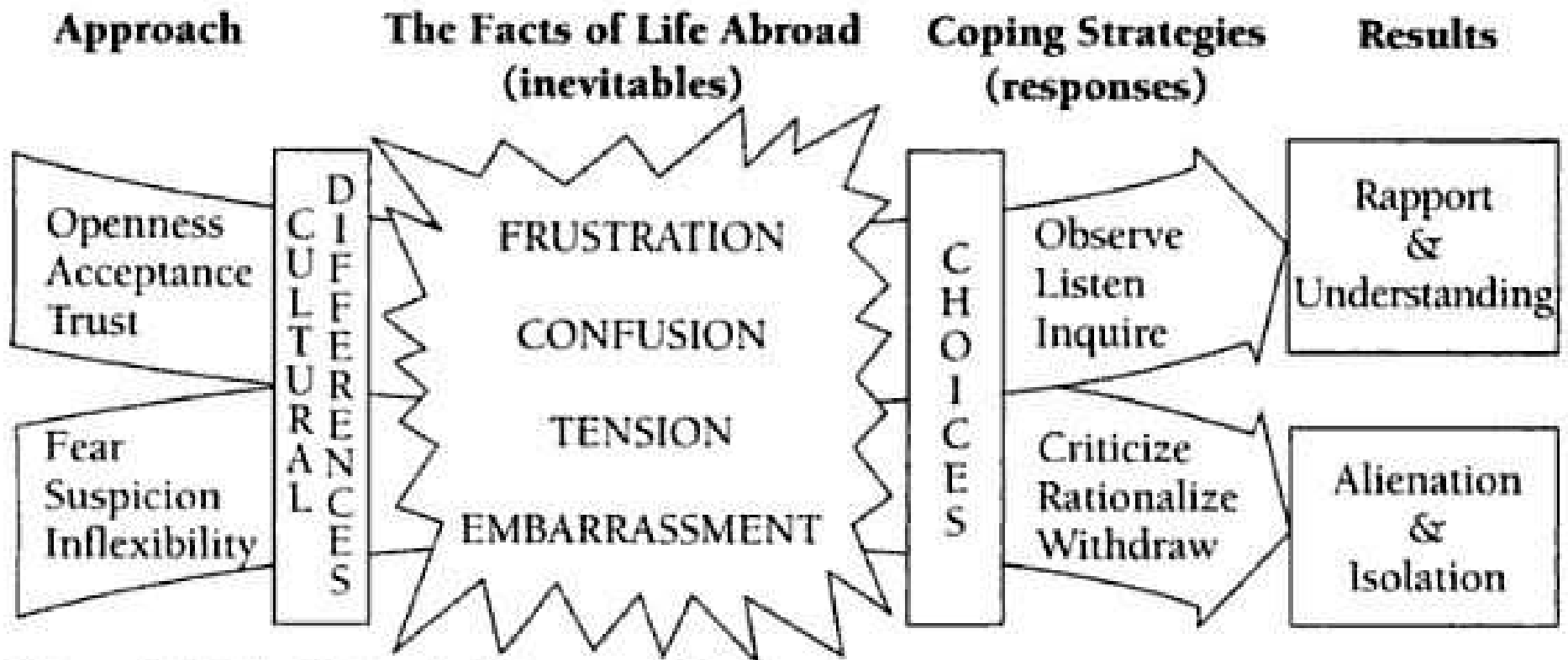


Figure 8.1. The Cultural Adjustment Map

How to do fieldwork: personal and practical aspects

Stresses (continued)

- Dealing with stress, practically
 - Plan “space” into your schedule (and relax!)
 - Maintain good attitudes & constructive choices: openness, acceptance, trust, flexibility; observing and listening, not criticizing and withdrawing
 - Do what you need to do in order to maintain your “hardiness”: planned escape from times/situations of cultural stress

Fieldwork isn't normally a “sprint”, it's sometimes a weeks-long prospect; make sure you can finish!

How to do fieldwork: personal and practical aspects

Rewards

- Professional: improve your analysis / theory
- Personal: new relationships
- Community: advance the field overall by promoting analysis by trained native speakers
 - Ken Hale & North American linguistics
 - Your relationships (!) can encourage the development of trained linguists from this community
 - Better analysis → better for linguistics as a field

Conclusion

Fieldwork is

- *difficult* – requires broad range of skills, work in challenging situations
- *beneficial* – for individuals, for language communities, for linguists
- *rewarding* – personally, professionally, beyond just you

An electronic version of this presentation is available for download from <http://SIL.Academia.edu/EricJackson/Papers>

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