Doing fieldwork:
Some personal experiences

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Introduction

- General topics:
  - Descriptive linguistics
  - Linguistic fieldwork
  - Language documentation
- Experiences, tips and tricks
Introduction

• Personal background
  – Documentation and grammatical description of Takivatan, a dialect of Bunun
  – Altogether ± 1 year of fieldwork from 2005-2009
  – RCLT: numerous colleagues working in India, South America, PNG, …
(A) Ma-yuan, (B) Da-ma-yuan, (C) Dong-guang, (D) Qi-mei
Descriptive linguistics

- Description of linguistic phenomena as they occur in a natural context
- Functional linguistics:
  - (Systemic-)functional grammars
  - Cognitive grammars
  - Construction grammars
- Formalist linguistic models can also use descriptive methodologies
Descriptive linguistics

• Bottom-up approach:
  – From data to generalisations
  – As little a-priori theoretical assumptions as possible (but…)
  – Therefore, it is often assumed that language description is “theory-neutral”

→ WRONG!!!
Descriptive linguistics

• Goal:
  – Description of a language
    ➔ Writing a grammar
  – Documentation of a language
    ➔ Recorded and transcribed text
Language documentation

• Recording and transcription of texts
• Annotation
  – Morphological:
    interlinearization (LGR 2008)
  – Syntactic
  – Translation
• Result: language corpus
‘Thus, in that story, I have clearly told you that our life was like that.’
Language documentation

• Digitalisation:
  – Problems: format, metadata, accessibility, …

• Long-term availability:
  – books
  – language archives
Immersion fieldwork

- Why doing immersion fieldwork:
  - To understand a language, you have to live it
  - To study language in context, it is best to study it in its natural environment
  - To understand a language well, you have to understand the socio-cultural context in which it is used (e.g. delineation of semantic concepts, ideas about movement, deixis, …)
Immersion fieldwork

- Result:
  - Reference grammar
  - Word list
  - Collection of texts
  - Collection of transcriptions

- Problems:
  - Difficult and cumbersome
  - Necessary time depends on the complexity of the language
Ethics

• Important for your consultants
  – Protection of a vulnerable population group
  – Protection of people that help you and are your friends

• Important for you
  – People like honesty
  – If you don’t break the law, you can’t get caught/sued
Ethics

• Problematic:
  – Whose ethical standards?
  – In many cultures, people are distrustful towards legal documents

• In practice:
  – Some organisations ask you to prepare a written statements with rights and duties of the researcher, consultant and community
  – Oral agreement
Surviving in the field

- Food
- Disease
- Violence
- Environment
Methodology

• Practical RCLT working method for the description of a language:
  – Preparation (couple of months)
  – First field trip (9 months)
  – Write first draft of grammar (1 year)
  – Second field trip (3~4 months)
  – Write up grammar (1 year)

• But…
Methodology

• Problems:
  – Time necessary depends on complexity of the language.
  – Unless your language is very uncomplicated, you can’t write a comprehensive grammar in three years
  – Schemas like this assume that things always do not go wrong
Methodology

• Preparation:
  – Read literature on language and culture
  – Define a field site, possibly by going on a preparatory field trip
  – Write a research plan
  – Deal with visas, bureaucracy, ethics approval
Methodology

• Fieldtrip 1:
  – Elicitation of vocabulary
  – Define the phonemic system
  – Recording texts
  – Transcription, translation, interlinearization
  – Some grammatical elicitation
Methodology

• Writing-up:
  – Analyze and interlinearize texts
  – Work on a word list
  – Use the texts and the elicitations to discover syntactic patterns
  – Write parts of the grammar
  – Remember the gaps in your grammar
Methodology

• Fieldtrip 2:
  – More of fieldtrip 1
  – Grammatical elicitation to fill up the gaps in your grammar
Methodology

• Write up your grammar:
  – Text analysis and word list
  – Add new information to the grammar
  – Write up the grammar in presentable format
  – YIPPIE, DONE!!!
Recording

• High-quality digital recording
  – Analog recording is still used, but many language archives demand high-quality digital data

• General rules:
  – Quality as high as possible
  – No compression, no alteration
  – Useability in the field (batteries, shock and water resistance, …)
Recording

• Recorder:
  – Digital
  – Bit depth: 16 or 24 bit
  – Sample rate: at 44 kHz or above
  – No compression
    ➔ always use .wav or .bwf, NEVER .mp3
Recording

- High-quality digital recording
- Microphone:
  - Wide dynamic range, at least same as the human voice (20 Hz – 20 kHz)
  - Noise-tolerant
  - No destructive hardware processing (noise-reduction, equalisation, flattening, …)
Text analysis

Recorded text
↓
Transcription
↓
Interlinearization
↓
Morphological tagging
↓
Translation
Elicitation

• General rules:
  – Try not to translate
  – Try not to force outcomes

• Three broad types:
  – (Phonetic elicitation)
  – Vocabulary elicitation
  – Grammatical elicitation
Elicitation

- Vocabulary elicitation
  - You will probably have to do a reasonable amount of translation

  But better options are:
  - Working from examples in real life
  - Working from texts
  - Working with semantic fields (see SIL 2006)
  - Working with pictures, videos, … (e.g. Max Planck recordings for verbs of movement)
Elicitation

• Grammatical elicitation
  – “Should be avoided”
  – Translation/interpretational biases
  – Not objective: researcher chooses questions and has influence on the answers

But…
  – You cannot wait for all relevant grammatical phenomena to turn up in text
  – Fast
Elicitation

• Problems with helper language to target language translation:
  – Translation biases: calques
  – Cultural biases (e.g. ‘crime’, ‘murder’)
  – Many concepts are culturally determined
Elicitation

• Example of translation bias:
  Bunun VAO ↔ AVO calques from Mandarin

• Example of a cultural bias:
  Eng. *together* ↔ Bunun *uskun*
      *hamu*
      *hasul*
Elicitation

• Example of culturally determined concept:

Bunun *samu* ‘taboo’

  – Marrying relatives till the 3rd degree
  – Transgression of traditional religious rules (e.g. related to hunt, farming, death, …)
  – Transgression will bring bad luck (illness or death)
Elicitation

• Conclusions:
  – Use elicitation judiciously
  – Try to avoid helper-to-target translations, except for initial elicitation sessions
  – Be aware of limitations of the results you get from elicitation
  – Best practice: combine elicitation with naturalistic sources; use a wide variety of sources to come to a conclusion
Conclusion

• Fieldwork is difficult:
  – Much time
  – Much effort
  – Little recognition

• Fieldwork needs:
  – A clear plan
  – Methodological rigour
Conclusion

• Fieldwork is rewarding:
  – Realistic data of language in use
  – Unique insights in language and culture
  – Boldly go where no one has gone before
Bibliography


Thank you!