

Doing fieldwork: Some personal experiences

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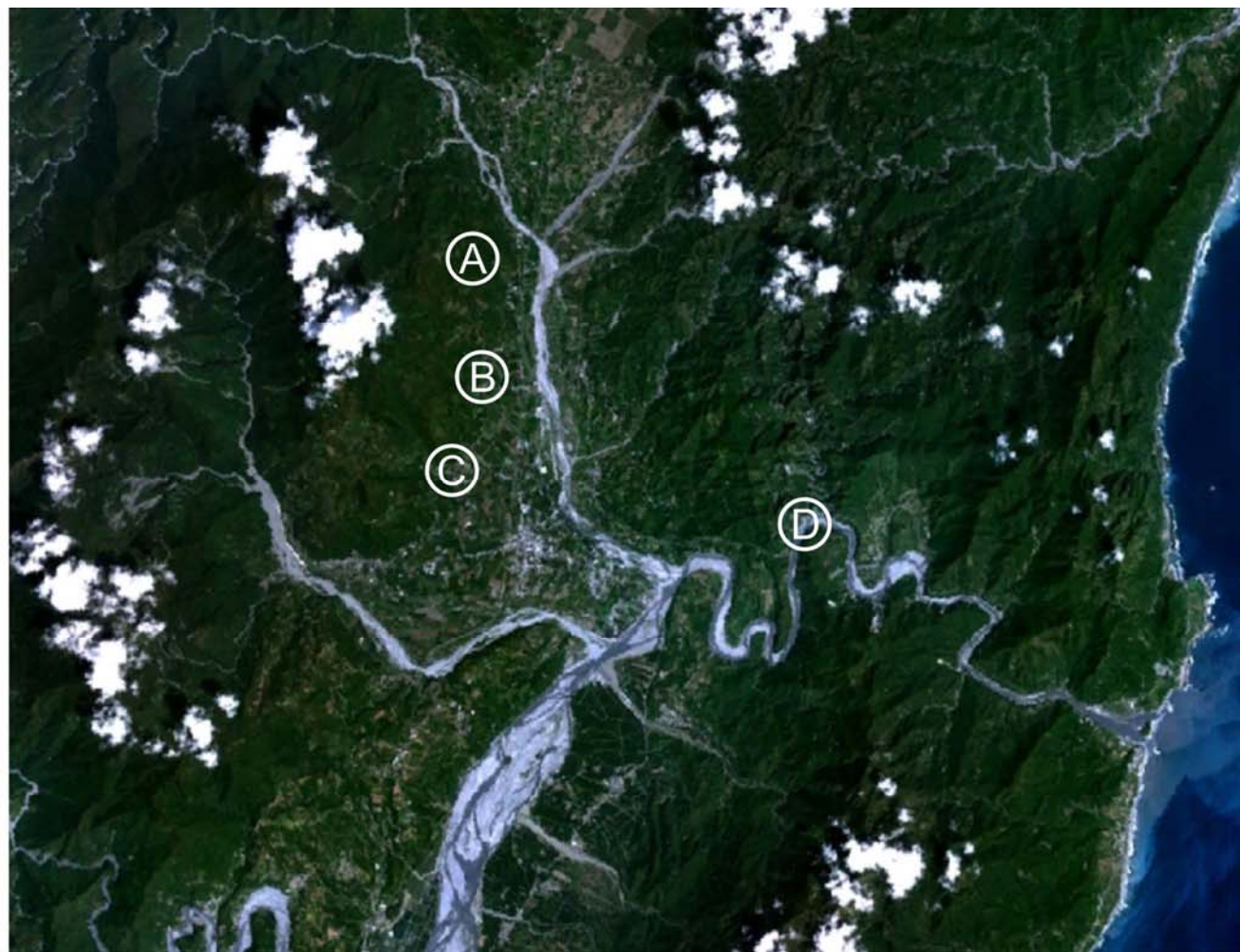


Introduction

- 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

Language documentation

- (1) Aupa, siatia matqasak taqu tu maupata siniqumis.

Aupa,	sia-ti-a	matqas-ak	taqu	tu
thus	ANAPH-DEF.REF.PROX-LDIS	clear-1 S.F	tell	COMPL
maupa-ta		sin-iqumis		
like-DEF.REF.DIST	RES.OBJ-life			

‘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





STEREO 4CH MTR

00:00:01:037

(96/24) STE-000. wav



SD 005:09:10

FOLDER FILE SPEED WAV/MP3

TRACK

1 2 3 4

INPUT

MIC

1

2

REC

Handy Recorder
H4n

1

2

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 \leftrightarrow AVO calques from Mandarin

- Example of a cultural bias:

Eng. *together* \leftrightarrow 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

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Thank you!

