

What is 'the field' and what is 'fieldwork'?

Source: Bowers (2008) and Abbi (2001)

1. First principles

The traditional view and approach for a fieldworker seems to give approval for someone who is a rugged individual and spends large amount of time working with speakers of some 'exotic' languages spoken in remote areas. AND

A fieldworker lives a life of deprivation and seems to be comforted with some weird insect bite and lives by the satisfaction that s/he has preserved a knowledge system for humanity.

However, a modern approach to fieldwork (not just linguistic fieldwork) is about collecting data in its natural environment. It's not about how tough the linguist is, rather the importance is given on the quality of work.

When biologists go to the 'field', they go to observe the behavior of the species they study in its natural environment rather than in working in some caged lab.

When archaeologists go to the 'field', they go to the place where the bones and ruins are, as opposed to studying something that is already been dug up.

And likewise, when linguists go to the field, they too go to study the language in a natural environment – that is, they go to study a language in the place where it is spoken by the people who usually speak it.

Of course, the job of a linguist is not that easy one. Linguists don't just 'dig up' the grammar of a language to put it in the mainstream but they also shape the life of people by getting some recognition to their language.

We work with real people, and become part of the data collection process ourselves.

2. What do fieldworkers do?

Fieldwork is not just about linguistic data. A fieldworker wears many hats.

One hat *does* involve data collection – that is, there are established techniques for obtaining linguistic data.

We will talk about it soon. This will help us in actual execution of the field-work later.

The fieldworker doesn't only collect data by just going to the field.

There is more to data gathering than just asking questions.

Decisions need to be made as to what should be recorded and what not, what should be collected and what should be avoided, and what and how much be written down in the field and what should be left to be completed later.

Then data must be interpreted. How do you know that your data answers your original research questions?

The field-worker must be equipped with the quick grasp of the patterns of grammatical constructs.

This help us to decide and to know whether we have got what we want and what is given to us by the language consultant.

A lot of time will be killed in the field doing actually nothing if we are not well prepared.

And if we don't have the co-referential grammatical parallels from at least our mother tongue to shape our direction. For example:

- Is a sentence ungrammatical for the reason you think it is?
- How will you decide between the three possible hypotheses that explain a particular data point?
- This is where your previous linguistic training comes handy and becomes the life-savior.

You also need a database hat. Meaning you need some way to organize your data effectively.

Unless you have a photographic memory and you can do corpus searches in your head, you will need some methods of categorizing, coding and storing the information that you have collected.

Another hat the fieldworker wears is that of administrator and community liaison officer.

Community-linguist interaction issues tend to consume a large proportion of a fieldworker's energy.

You will need to organize ways to pay your consultants for their time. You will need housing and food at the field site.

You will also need to help your teacher(s) who will administer your grant money and keep appropriate records.

Furthermore, you will need to arrange appropriate dissemination of your research results within your field community.

Fieldworkers are also sound engineers and film directors. You will be making audio (and maybe video) recordings of your consultants,

and you need to be able to operate your recording equipment effectively.

Fieldwork involves not just getting the data, but getting it ethically, without violating local customs.

Therefore, fieldworkers wear an ethics hat too. It can be the case that the process of going to a community to work on an un-described language may have non-linguistic implications.

Is there any harm that can result from your working on the language?

Has the community given approval for documenting their language?

Fieldworkers have an anthropological hat as well. It is impossible to do fieldwork of any length without observing human interaction and cultural practices.

Learning about the culture of the speakers whose language you are studying is very important.

This aspect is so vital that it not only functions as a key to the language but also as a key to a better fieldwork.

For example, you are unlikely to get good data in a field session involving both men and women if the culture has strong prohibitions against men and women interacting!

Fieldworkers have their own hats too. They need to be aware of their own behavior in the field and how it reflects on them and their culture.

They are also required to fit in with a new society and learn a new language, while retaining contact with their other lives as academics.

Fieldworkers don't leave behind their own identities and culture when they go to the field.

This is why there is much more to linguistic fieldwork than just turning up to record someone!

Fieldwork is not done in a vacuum. While it is good practice to rely only on your elicitation in a field methods class, in the field you need as much information about the language and culture as much you can find.

Make the best use of the available resources so that you save the efforts of others.

One can ask a question here as to **‘Why do linguists do fieldwork?’**

Many linguists do fieldwork because of the personal satisfaction they get from it; from the intellectual satisfaction of working out original complex problems, to use the language to research on culture, to help gain political recognition for a traditionally oppressed community, or perhaps at a more personal level to make some old people very happy that their language will be recorded for future generations.

Perhaps they go to the field because there is no other way to get the data they need.

Any particular personal motivation to do fieldwork is probably a combination of motives and whatever may be the reason, it is important that there has to be one or more than one reason in doing the fieldwork.

However, if you feel that you have to do it, is certainly a bad reason.

On the other hand, perhaps in the field you will discover reasons that you didn't know before you go to the field.

Fieldwork or any such associated language description feeds into many different areas of linguistics.

On the one hand there is the descriptive element of field research – adding to what we know about the languages of the world.

And recently (cf. Himmelmann 1998) there has been a movement to treat the documentation of languages as a subfield of linguistics in its own right.

Also what we do with the documentation, such as producing reference grammars, dictionaries and other descriptive materials, typological grammar and theory driven correlational studies of languages in the world.

Fieldworkers also conduct more specialized research in areas such as semantics, discourse, phonetics, phonology, syntax or morphology.

Last but not the least is that language research feeds into culture studies, anthropology and the study of language in society. Fieldworkers have specializations in all these areas.

Is there any relationship between **Fieldwork and language-experimentation** ?

There is more than one way to examine the practice of fieldwork.

One is as a type of experimentation; the linguist conducts 'experiments' on language consultants to obtain data.

The questions asked by the linguist form the sole means of data gathering and shape the form that the language will take.

Abbi's (2001) manual of linguistic fieldwork focuses on this type of fieldwork (Thomas 1992).

This view of field linguistics allows us to treat linguistics on a par with other experimental disciplines.

For example, when psychologists do research, they design the experiment first, recruit the 'subjects' and run the tests, without letting the subjects know as to why the experiment is being conducted.

They also do not have any say in its 'battery-design'.

The researcher has sole control over the data flow. Traditional linguistic fieldwork also follows this model, where the researcher goes to the field, makes the observations and conducts the experiments, and then leaves the field to write up the results.

There is, however, an alternative view, where the work is a collaborative effort between the linguist and the language speaker(s).

Speakers have a much greater say in what gets recorded, what materials are produced, and what happens to the materials afterwards.

The linguist in this situation is, in fact, a 'consultant' to the community – the 'community' has a problem to be solved and they bring in a person with expert knowledge.

This second type of fieldwork has more uncertainty and it takes some of the power away from the linguist.

If the community don't like certain idea such as recording the religious rituals for example, or any such dis-approval to the some aspect of documentation, there is no way one can do these things in the field.

If you go ahead and make the recording of such dis-approved items anyway, you run the risk of placing future research of the language in jeopardy.

The second view binds you to several ethical systems: your university's rules, your own ideology and the system of the community in which you are working.

The two will not always be in agreement. This type of fieldwork requires the negotiation of both the processes of fieldwork and the outcomes.

Some researchers argue against this view. To put it in simple way, language scientists do not have total freedom to conduct research on whatever and whoever they want, without taking their research participants in consideration.

They have to respect the utility of interaction between that community and researcher.

Community negotiation does not imply that the data collection has to be less rigorous.

Or that you cannot negotiate for appropriate permissions to do the kind of necessary research you want or need to do.

It may take time to get started, and you may need to do some extra work, but there is no reason as to why you should not be able to do the academic work you want to!

Can the **Field researcher be impartial?** This is big question to address!

It is a part of the scientific research or method that the linguist/researcher should not personally get involved in the experiment in a way that might influence the outcome.

Part of the scientific method is to remove the potentially confronting variables (including ideology-induced bias).

In most types of linguistic fieldwork, however, there is no such thing as a confronting variables in the core grammar of the language.

The researcher is actively involved in guiding the results of the fieldwork. The fieldworker responds to data as it is collected, reshaping hypotheses and working out the next set of questions to be asked.

So, in simple, we follow the procedures that make the research scientific, and thus we should not worry much!

However, fieldwork involves working closely with people and a better personal relationship between the linguist and the consultants will result in better data collection.

Close collaborations produce better work. In some cases the linguist is adopted into the community and given a place in the kinship system as well.

Even if you do your best to remain 'detached' and impartial and uninvolved in the research, your consultants probably aren't going to do the same.

They are going to shape their responses based on their relationship to you; for example, how well they think you're going to understand what they tell you, or what they think you want to hear and what you don't want to hear.

They might have an emotional or political stake in the outcome of the research (just as you do).

So, completely 'impartial' fieldwork is impossible. But you can be aware of some of the potential biases and minimize them.