

Direct Lexical Elicitation: Notes from the Field

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Direct lexical elicitation has its limitations, but it also has an important role in language documentation. Despite the often-necessary role that it plays, the academic study of the methodology of lexical elicitation is still in its infancy, leaving field workers to figure things out through experience and common-sense. Here, I will talk about some of my own experiences, discussing some techniques I have learned along the way. Lexical elicitation with speakers of Khoisan languages who have little or no formal schooling presents challenges not anticipated in most surveys of linguistic field techniques. I will discuss the methods used in eliciting vocabulary in #Hoan, a Khoisan language related to the Ju (!Xun and Ju|'hoansi) languages. This includes the preparation of wordlists of targeted lexical areas, based on a database of comparative Khoisan lexical items arranged by semantic field, and African language wordlists (designed largely with Niger-Congo languages in mind). By eliciting and translating lexical items in semantic groupings (which provide a semantic context), one can compare and contrast items which may have similar or identical meanings, reducing the number of mistranslations. I will discuss the use of props, field guides and playacting in lexical elicitation. I will also discuss the benefits and drawbacks of monolingual elicitation, a technique we used to elicit #Hoan bird terms and plant terms.