

**Data – but data from what?
Or, I'm no longer sure what counts as language, or how and by whom it
should be documented**

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As an anthropologist with a background in classical studies rather than a linguist I am aware of my lack of expertise in the context of this workshop, so will merely try to air some questions that have confronted me during my personal experience of working over the years with a range of interdisciplinary issues to do with oral performance, verbal art, musical practices, 'orality' and literacy. Studying story-telling performances during fieldwork in West Africa challenged my earlier literate and text-based presuppositions about language, extended by later reflections first on the 'oral' and auditory features of performance (a contrasting model of language, it seemed) and then on the multisensory and multimodal qualities of communication and expression more generally. I end up unsure of where within this great spectrum of human art and action 'language' is located: what are its boundaries (with gesture for example? music? material signs?) and what ideologies are we invoking in drawing the lines? Added to that set of uncertainties my experience of considering verbal arts in Africa, written and oral, with all the practical (and moral) problems, of, for example, recording, writing, transcription, translation, dissemination and reception, has left me unclear not just about what 'a' language is but how and by whom it can or should be captured and analysed.