Fieldwork - consultation and elicitation methods

ELDP Training 2008
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Motivation for methodological considerations

Data and methodology

- "The major discovery of post-1957 “syntactic theory” is not “theoretical”, but methodological: That a huge amount of generalizations can best be found by adopting an “experimental” approach...What remains of the published body of research is the empirical part. So all the papers that are neatly divided into a "data/generalizations" part and an "analysis" part have a good chance of continuing to be useful". (Haspelmath 2006: Linguistlist 17.2304)

If its data that is central, how can we assure that our data are, and will be, relevant? ?

How can we reach maximal transparency and explicitness in providing information about how and why we collected our data?
What status for negative evidence?

- "With regard to the usual way of obtaining negative evidence (i.e. asking one or two speakers whether examples x, y, z, are "okay"), it is doubtful whether this really makes a difference in quality compared to evidence provided by the fact that the structure in question is not attested in a large corpus. Elicited evidence is only superior here if it is very carefully elicited, paying adequate attention to the sample of speakers interviewed, potential biases in presenting the material, and the like." (Himmelmann 2006: 23)

How much methodological and theoretical awareness can we expect in language documentation?

Which methods are robust and widely accepted?

Data resulting from elicitation

Data resulting from translational equivalent elicitation

“How do you say ‘bee’ in Dida?”

- PRO:
  - Are easy when starting work on an unknown language.
  - Give good data to work on phoneme inventory, basic lexicon, and for lexical comparison.
  - Are quantifiable and highly controlled.
  - Offer negative evidence.

- CON:
  - Yield phonologically odd utterances.
  - Can easily lead to misunderstandings due to the lack of context.
  - Translatable items are limited in number.
  - Hyper-cooperative consultants may create neologisms and produce calques to be helpful.
Data resulting from acceptability judgements

“Can I say ‘this book’ when the book is lying over there?”

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<th>PRO:</th>
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<td>- Are controlled and quantifiable.</td>
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<td>- Can give results for domains that are difficult to cover otherwise.</td>
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<td>- Give comparable results for many fields.</td>
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<td>- Offer negative evidence.</td>
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<th>CON:</th>
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<td>- Very often do not test acceptability of the utterance, but rather of the context provided for it.</td>
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<td>- Can therefore very often be contradicted by the same and/or different speakers.</td>
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Summary

- Elicited data that are inspected in a qualitative way allow to
  - Get the full distributional range of a given item/construction.
  - Test the semantic properties of that item/construction.
  - Provide negative evidence, i.e. information on unattested structures/uses, ungrammaticality, etc.

But: these data are often influenced by the metalanguage/elicitation method and not naturalistic at all.

Your turn

- Please take five minutes to think about other data collection methods you use, in particular about stimuli-based data:
  - Which media do you use if you collect data based on non-verbal stimuli?
  - How do you rate the quality of the data obtained with stimuli?
  - Have you encountered any problems when working with stimuli?
  - Do you have recommendations to make regarding specific stimuli that worked well?

- We will compare your observations in the plenary.
Data resulting from staged communicative events

Staged communicative events based on nonverbal stimuli

Types of stimuli
- Static stimuli:
  - Comics
  - Picture books
  - Photos
- Dynamic stimuli:
  - Acted videos
  - Animated videos
  - Staged life events
- Interactive stimuli:
  - Puzzle tasks
  - Map tasks
  - Matching games
Static stimuli
- Picture books
  - Topological relations picture book
  - Frog story
- Photos
  - Positional verbs picture book
- Comics
  - Calvin & Hobbes
  - Tintin
  - Asterix & Obelix

Dynamic stimuli
- Acted videos:
  - Staged events
  - Cut & Break
  - Pear film
- Animated videos:
  - Fish film
  - Event triads
  - ECOM clips

Interactive stimuli
- Matching/sorting games
  - Basic colour terms Munsell chips
  - Men and tree
  - Cluedo
- Puzzles:
  - Eisenbeiss/Matsuo puzzle
- Map tasks/route descriptions:
  - HCRC map task
  - Table top route description task
Data resulting from static stimuli

**PRO:**
- Are highly controlled, quantifiable and comparable.
- Yield phonologically, semantically and syntactically accurate data.
- Are free from linguistic interference of the metalanguage and from misunderstandings of context.
- Can be used for nonlinguistic categorisation tasks.

**CON:**
- Validity of the data depends on coverage of the domain under inspection by the stimulus.
- If gaps in parameters, data can be severely flawed.
- Cross-cultural applicability can be limited.
- Use is limited to visually depictable scenes.

Data resulting from dynamic stimuli

**PRO:**
- Yield phonologically, syntactically and semantically quantifiable and comparable data etc. (See previous slide).
- Can be used for nonlinguistic categorisation tasks.

**CON:**
- See previous slide and:
  - Require the use of high-tech, which is complicated if not impossible in many field settings.
  - Depending on the abstractness of the stimulus and the purpose of the elicitation, misunderstandings can occur.

Data resulting from interactive stimuli

**PRO:**
- Allow controlled interaction of two or more speakers.
- Yield quantifiable and comparable data.
- Can be used for nonlinguistics categorisation tasks.

**CON:**
- May create culturally inappropriate or strange situations.
- Since the true purpose of the interaction is normally not known to the consultants, misunderstandings occur easily.
Examples for the use of static stimuli

Posture verbs in stative positions (Ameka, de Witte & Wilkins 1999)

English/Dutch: The bottle is standing on the rock.
Jalonke: Binir-ee doo-xi gem-xi lari.
‘The bottle is sitting on the rock.’

Goemai: The stick is hanging on the tree trunk.
Jalonke: Tam-ee kiran-xi wurixuntun-na ma.
‘The stick is leaning against the tree trunk.’

Examples for the use of dynamic stimuli
Event segmentation: ECOM clips (Bohnemeyer & Caelen 1999)

English: The ball rolled from the square past the house to the triangle.

Yukatek: The ball is at the square, and it goes rolling, and then it passes the house, and then it arrives at the triangle.

Posture verbs in caused positions (Hellwig & Lüpke 1999)

English: She puts the bottle on the table.

Jalonke/Goemai/Dutch: She ‘sits’ the bottle on the table.

Differences between stative and caused positions:
Same posture verb used: Jalonke.
Different verbs with same extension used: Goemai.
Different verbs with different extensions used: English and Dutch.

Semantic differences:
In Jalonke and Goemai, objects with a base sit/are ‘sat’, even when their longest axis is vertical.
In English and Dutch, they stand, but are put (English) or ‘sat’ (Dutch).

Cut & break verbs (Bohnemeyer, Bowerman & Brown 2001)

English: cut (with scissors)
Dutch: knippen ‘cut with scissors’
Jalonke: cut-iterative (because cloth has already been cut).

English: cut (with knife)
Dutch: snijden ‘cut with a knife’
Jalonke: cut (because fish hasn’t been cut yet).
Examples for the use of interactive stimuli

The Puzzle Task (Eisenbeiss & Matsuo 2003)
- Children have to describe puzzle pieces in order to be handed the piece to be handed to them
- The pictures are selected in order to elicit descriptions of external possession and to ‘force’ the children to verbalise all the relevant contrasts

An Example of the contrasts involved
The HCRC map task (HCRC Edinburgh)

Crucial: landmarks on both maps are not identical in order to increase motivation to communicate.

The instruction giver’s map

The instruction follower’s map

The men and tree matching game (MPI Nijmegen)

- Two consultants, a ‘director’ and a ‘matcher’ have identical sets of photos with similar scenes.
- The director describes a photo to the matcher, who has to find the matching picture.
- The photos are selected to uncover the categories triggering the choice of the matching photos – in this case, intrinsic vs. absolute frames of reference.

Ad hoc stimuli
Ad hoc stimuli

- New technologies enable fieldworkers to create stimuli ‘ad hoc’ in the field:
  - Digital photos
  - Video clips
  - Animations

- Although generally not usable for cross-linguistic comparison, these stimuli can yield interesting data difficult to get otherwise.

Action descriptions (Lüpke 2005, ms.)

- Videos recorded in the field that are described by consultants.
  - PRO:
    - Yield fine-grained event descriptions difficult to obtain otherwise.
    - Can be used to cover semantic domains not attested so far in the corpus.
  - CON:
    - Don’t constitute a ‘speech event’ in the sense of Hymes.

Photos and Powerpoint animations

- Useful for ethnobotany
- Sequences of stills from digital video or ppt animations can be used to elicit stages of an event.
Potential problems

Ecological validity

- It is important to aim at culturally appropriate methods.
- However, total ecological validity leads to non-transferability.
- Therefore:
  - Elicitations and stimuli should replace the names of culturally unfamiliar items with more familiar ones.
  - Unfamiliar or uncomfortable settings (elicitation sessions with consultants of different rank/sex,... elicitation games, etc.) should be explained and negotiated beforehand and, if necessary, amended.

Procedure and analysis

- The familiarity or unfamiliarity of certain devices, techniques, or media in different cultures and groups should be taken seriously but need not rule out using them with caution and preparation:
  - Pilot studies determine whether a technique works and if not, give indications on what should be changed.
  - Consultant training is important for all kinds of data collection.
- Data resulting from one collection technique should always be checked against data from another technique.
- If the comparability of data is aimed at, collection procedure and analysis should not deviate from instructions or procedures given for the specific technique, questionnaire or stimulus.
My conclusion

Why all kinds of data?

Field-based corpora are relatively small. Thus:
- They don't show the full distributional range of a given item.
- They don't offer negative evidence.

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<th>Elicitations</th>
<th>Observed communicative events</th>
<th>Staged communicative events</th>
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Are highly controlled, but linguistically prompted. Thus:
- They are likely to be influenced by the linguistic input.
- Their 'naturalness' cannot be assessed.

A circle

Action description  Staged communicative events
Observed communicative events  BowPed picture stimulus
Demonstrative questionnaire  Elicitation
Useful links

- MPI Nijmegen Language & Cognition and Acquisition Groups:
  - Large number of stimuli on a range of topics; stimuli and manuals upon request: http://www.mpi.nl/world/index.html
- The MPI EVA Leipzig links to field tools:
  - http://lingweb.eva.mpg.de/fieldtools/tools.htm
- Russ Tomlin’s Fish Film:
  - Stimulus designed to uncover the motivation for voice contrasts, topicality, etc. http://logos.oregon.edu/tomlin/research_fishfilm.html
- Wallace Chafe’s Pear Film
  - Designed to compare narrative structure
  - http://www.linguistics.ucr.edu/faculty/chafe/pearfilm.htm
- Phillip Wolff’s animations on causality (upon request?)
  - Aimed at testing Talmy’s force dynamics model of causation
  - http://userwww.service.emory.edu/~peewolff
- Sonja Eisenbeiß’s elicitation games (upon request)
  - A variety of games and tasks for language acquisition studies, focusing on three participant events and external possession
  - http://privatewww.essex.ac.uk/~silasen/index.htm