

# Teaching field linguistics techniques

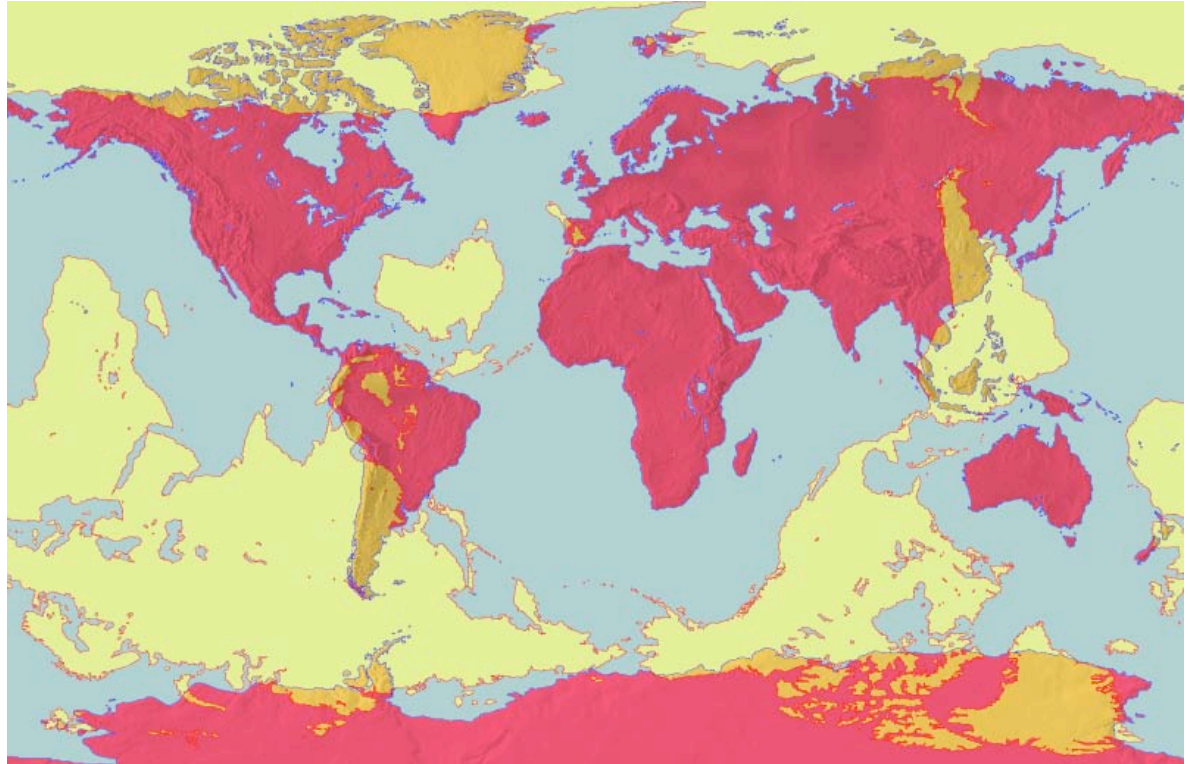


## Fieldwork in remote locations Examples from the Pacific and Africa

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## What makes a fieldwork location remote?

- Geographic distance
- Lack of transportation
- Inhospitable climate
- Cultural extreme
- Social isolation
- Lack of resources



## Long distance travel

- Long distance travel is expensive – most fieldwork locations are a long way from the UK and suitable travel costs need to be built into a funding application or budget.
- You need to plan in advance how you will get there, remembering that connecting flights to remote places may be expensive or infrequent and may not get you very close to your desired location.



Above: Fieldwork may involve travel to remote locations like this island in the Pacific.



## Planning and spontaneity

- All fieldwork trips will benefit from serious planning in advance but the fieldworker must also be willing to be spontaneous, and to cope with difficult or unforeseen circumstances.
- Fieldwork in remote locations means that you need to be realistic about how much equipment you can take and carry and what you will need in the field in case you can't buy it there.
- If you don't have it or can't carry it, you will have to improvise.



Above: Improvising a boom for a microphone in Popoheo.

- Fieldwork in inaccessible locations means that your insurance policy will need to offer significant cover and that you will need to forge a contingency plan about what you would do in an emergency.
- Fieldwork in an isolated location may mean you are a long way from health professionals. Basic first-aid training, immunisation and anti-malarials are a must, as you might find yourself involved in hazardous activities, far from help.



Above: Engaging in everyday activities in the field like farming in the bush might put you at risk from mosquito bites and other dangers.

## Coping with bureaucracy

- Try to obtain your permits and solve any bureaucratic matters before actually arriving in the country.
- Find local contacts while you are still at your home institution as they may take a lot of the bureaucratic burden off you.
- Try to adjust to the local understanding of time and space. Be patient!
- Make sure you adhere to best practice in terms of ethics.



Above: Before you start your fieldwork, you will need to get appropriate permission from the government, community leaders and individuals.

- Take advantage of the waiting time: Use it to learn something that will benefit you later like the *lingua franca* of the region or/and one of the local vernaculars or learn how to live and to integrate into the community.
- When things take incredibly long to be processed, be insistent, be firm but at the same show the expected amount of respect.

Right: An Eleme girl demonstrates how to pick and sort leaves before cooking between fieldwork sessions.



## Forging local contacts

- Local contacts will be your biggest and most important resource when in the field. It is important to make key contacts before you leave home to get started.
- Useful academic contacts include teachers, linguists, and anthropologists at schools, colleges and universities close to your field site (or at home) who know the locale.

Right: Chief Dada Nwolu-Obele is a native Eleme speaker/linguist and author.



- Individuals working at non-government organisations (NGOs) or cultural centres will also be helpful in getting set up.
- Community leaders, elders, or chiefs (depending on location and community structure) will need to grant permission for you to work in their community and help you with your objectives.
- Ex-pats who speak the language living in the UK (or elsewhere) may help you forge contacts before you leave home.

Right: Chief Emperor Osaro-Mkpe helped with bureaucratic issues and non-linguistic support.



## So, you're ready to start...

- You've finally arrived in your field location, found a place to stay, acclimatised to the weather conditions, got the appropriate permissions to be conducting your research and made an appointment with a speaker...

## What about:

- Ethics
- Metadata
- Equipment
- Best practice
- Planning

**...ummm....so what do I do next?**

**Should I press the record button now?**

## Ethics

- Ethical considerations are a major part of getting permission from scientific bodies (e.g. a university) to conduct your research in the first place.
- Ethical issues include intellectual property rights and access to data.

### Resources on ethical issues:

[http://www.hrelp.org/languages/resources/orel/ethical.html#Documentation\\_ethics](http://www.hrelp.org/languages/resources/orel/ethical.html#Documentation_ethics)

- Recordings should be made with **informed consent** – this can be difficult in cultures where the concept of consent is less prominent than at home, or where language research is a highly politicised activity.
- Getting consent is part of the planning, recording and archiving stage of language documentation so must be fully understood before conducting fieldwork.

## Speaker metadata

- Metadata is **data about data**.
- Where possible, it will be helpful to know certain information about each consultant you work with.
- It will allow you to form hypotheses about variation within the community and form a better idea about linguistic practices.
- For the purposes of anonymity, it is usually considered best practice to give speakers unique identifier codes e.g. *GM20*, *EN4N*, etc.
- Age and gender are important variables for sociolinguistic variation.
- Languages they speak and in which contexts (home, school, market) and to whom (family members, children, strangers, colleagues, etc.).
- Language variety spoken.
- Place of birth and place of inhabitation are useful indicators when subjective information seems conflicting.

## Metadata of recordings

- It is easy to forget where you were or to whom you were speaking when you made a recording.
- Metadata is useful for this reason.
- Sometimes, more precise information about the orientation of the speaker or exact details about the location (e.g. upstream or downstream of village) are useful (especially when working on deixis and spatial location).

**Date:** *10-May-2003*

When the recording took place

**Location:** *GM20's compound, Ebubu, Eleme*

Where the recording took place.

**Contributor:** *GM20*

Those involved in the producing the recording or performance.

**Description:** *Story of the Parrot and the Tortoise*

An account of the content of the resource

**Type:** *Traditional story*

The nature or genre of the content of the resource

## Metadata for archiving

For archiving, a minimal amount of data might include:

**Identifier:** *eleme1.wav*

A means to uniquely identify each item in the deposit.

**Directory:** */recordings/may2003/*

Where the item can be found in your project archive.

**Format:** WAV

File format (e.g. WAV file, txt file, XML file)

Character encoding format

**Creator:** Oliver Bond

Entity primarily responsible for making the content.

**Subject language:** *Eleme*

The language(s) which is/are described or documented.

**Language:** *English*

The language in which the content is expressed or introduced.

**Rights:** *Open access*

Information about rights held in and over the resource.

NB. Rights to the archive should be established at the recording stage.

<http://www.hrelp.org/archive/depositors/metadata.html>

## Equipment

- Before heading off to a remote location you will already have had to get hold of suitable equipment.



Above: A marantz solid state recorder.

This might include:

- A solid-state recorder and flash cards;
- Microphones and a boom;
- Headphones;
- A laptop;
- A video and stills camera with a tripod (+ video tapes);
- A minidisc or mp3 player + headphones for use by consultants for play-back.

## Set up

- Before going to the field, you should feel comfortable with the equipment you will use.
- It will be more difficult to get expert advice while in a remote location.
- You may lose key recordings if you don't know what you are doing from capture to backup.
- You cannot teach someone to use it if you don't know yourself.



Above: Setting up equipment is time consuming and can appear daunting to consultants who are not used to technology. Take the time to make consultants comfortable with the equipment.

## Best practice vs. reality

- The advice you will be given before going on fieldwork will often relate to best practice, not reality.
- Best practice is a set of guidelines, often of a technical, not necessarily practical nature.

Recording best practice:

<http://e-meld.org/school/>

It is usually not a good idea to:

- Unplug a consultants fridge because it makes too much noise;
- Hang sheets and towels up in your consultant's home to create a better environment for your recording;
- Only record if there is absolute silence around you – you will probably leave with no recordings.

## Order of work and planning

- The order in which you conduct your linguistic fieldwork and the amount of time you spend on different aspects of a language will vary from project to project.
- What can and needs to be done is partly based on the availability of existing resources on the language, accessibility of language consultants, areas of linguistic complexity.
- Planning fieldwork involves thinking about the outcomes you want and how you will get them by:
- Making sure speakers are in the right place at the right time.
- Ensuring that you have materials to prompt you in directing a session.
- Being aware of the existing literature on the subject of interest.

## What first?

- Collecting greetings and word lists are a useful starting point for conducting fieldwork.
- Standard word lists (e.g. Swadesh word list) provide the basis for comparison with other languages.
- Cultural word lists (e.g. the SIL Africa comparative word list) provide the basis for targeting culturally specific lexical items.
- Lexical items provide the springboard for investigating the phonetic and phonological properties of the language.
- Contextualised lexical items provide a starting point for morphological and syntactic analysis.

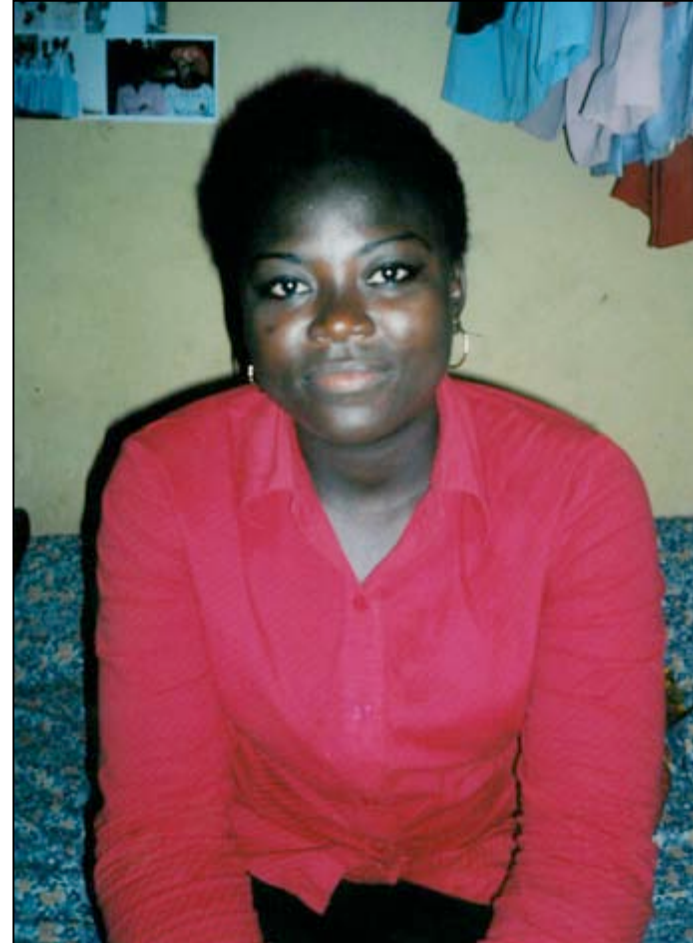
## Is elicitation next?

- Although elicitation through translation is a powerful tool to manipulate recording sessions to get data on specific aspects of language, it should not be the mainstay of data collection if possible.
- Stimuli and games may be more effective, especially if culturally sensitive.
- Collecting texts (e.g. person histories, procedural texts, conversations) will provide source material for translation.
- Working through texts as early as possible to ‘trigger’ elicitation (e.g. of paradigms, related lexical items) or directions for research is rewarding if the general grammar is being described.
- This is not possible in all situations – for instance you may be working with very elderly speakers who tire easily, or it may be difficult to access meanings through translation.

## Right-person for the job

- Some consultants have a great deal of patience and are excellent at providing paradigms and word lists.
- Some love telling stories, giving elaborate ‘conversation style’ explanations to linguistic points or providing cultural information.
- Some like translating the speech of others because it is more exciting than translating their own words.

Right: Owa Martha Osaro-Mpke, a highly accomplished Eleme language consultant.



## Coping with new surroundings

- Fieldwork in remote locations is likely to involve living somewhere with less infrastructure than we are used to.
- It is likely that you will not have the comforts of home such as electricity, fresh running water or even much to eat.
- Negotiating the problems of day-to-day living is often very time consuming.



Above: The toilet in Popoheo.

- Some issues can be dealt with: the lack of electricity can be eased by buying a generator in the field or rigging up some solar panels.
- Other issues might be less easy to solve: you might not like the food you may have to sleep in a room with many people and have no privacy, you may be subject to the uninvited sexual advances of community members.

Right: Solar panels provided power in Popohoe.



## Social isolation

- It is entirely normal when in the field to miss the comforts of home, to feel socially isolated and to miss your friends, family and loved ones.
- The first step to avoid social isolation is to make friends – have more than working relationships with people and have friends that you don't work with.



Above: It is entirely normal to feel isolated and lonely when conducting fieldwork in geographically and culturally remote locations like the Pacific or Africa.

- Try to integrate into the community as much as possible, without trespassing the boundaries imposed by them, to feel included.
- If necessary (and possible) retain some space and time for yourself.
- Think of how many beautiful things and experiences will compensate for the lack of comfort and familiarity.



Above: To combat social isolation, make friends and have fun, just as you would at home.

## Summary

- Fieldwork is a very rewarding experience that you will always relish and never forget.
- Fieldworkers in remote locations must have two conflicting skills: the ability to plan and the ability to improvise.
- Fieldwork involves engaging in more than just linguistic research – it requires cultural integration and flexibility and the ability to work with a wide range of people – who may be very different.
- For every discomfort, and every moment of homesickness, there is an amazing experience awaiting you with new-found friends.