Linguistic fieldwork: A practical guide (review)

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Linguistic fieldwork: A practical guide. By CLAIRE BOWERN. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008. Pp. 260. ISBN 9780230545380. $35.

Reviewed by ANGELA TERRILL, *Radboud University Nijmegen*

This engaging textbook covers all conceivable aspects of fieldwork, from the preparation stage of writing grant proposals and obtaining visas, to the final stages of archiving the data. Fieldwork culminating in a descriptively based grammar has long been considered an apprenticeship for a life in linguistics (Dixon 1997, Samarin 1967:8). This book is designed both for students taking a field methods class, and for those undertaking fieldwork in a community other than their own. Students in a field methods class will be working with an informant chosen by the teacher, in structured sessions also organized by the teacher. For these readers, Chs. 5–9 on how to elicit different sorts of linguistic data and Ch. 4 on data organization and archiving will be the most relevant. For the researcher undertaking fieldwork in a remote location, this book covers just about everything that they will encounter.

To see what is special about Bowern's approach, it is useful to look at some of the other textbooks available on fieldwork, of which there are now several. All of these books on fieldwork reflect the personality of the writer, and indeed all fieldwork experiences are strongly, crucially shaped by this aspect. In perhaps no other field of linguistics is the personality of the linguist so crucial. It is no surprise then that this is reflected so sharply in these books.

Samarin 1967, comprehensive and authoritative, has been something of a standard textbook on field linguistics. Like B, Samarin focuses heavily on the relationship between the informant (his term) and the data to be collected. Samarin's self-proclaimed task is 'to prepare investigators of language for their confrontation with the source of their data—the living speakers of languages' (vi). He is faithful to this aim, detailing how to locate informants and establish and maintain good working relationships with them. It is an engaging book: early on, Samarin stresses that fieldwork can be fun (vii). In fact, in most of the works discussed here the pleasure of fieldwork is mentioned to varying degrees. And like most of these books, Samarin's brings out the intellectual excitement of the fieldwork endeavor.

Dixon 1984 is not a standard fieldwork textbook, but is nevertheless an extremely useful guide to working particularly with Australian aboriginal communities; it is a completely anecdotal but informative meander through fieldworking in Australia.

The table of contents of Vaux & Cooper 1999 reads like a grammar, with chapters on phonetics and phonology, nominal and verbal morphology, syntax, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, historical linguistics, and text collection. The book focuses on the type of data to be elicited rather than the social or political aspects of fieldwork. The rest of the book is heavily anecdotal: the authors themselves characterize their work as 'enlightening suggestions and entertaining anecdotes' (3).

A useful edited volume is Newman & Ratliff 2001, which covers the role of native speakers in fieldwork, the issue of learning the field language, the flexibility needed to carry out fieldwork as plans invariably change, and social/emotional aspects of the fieldwork experience (2).

Abbi 2001 is largely aimed at fieldwork in India, but it provides much useful information for researchers working in other regions. Abbi advocates elicitation (the interview method) as the best method of obtaining data, but also recommends a combination of all four of the methods she discusses. These include the observation method, sending questionnaires, and using existing material (84–85). In this respect her approach diverges from that of B, who assumes that the corpus will primarily consist of narratives and spontaneously occurring data like conversation, backed up with elicitation to confirm or deny specific hypotheses arising from the spontaneous data.

Crowley 2007 starts with our responsibility as linguists to document languages to prevent the human loss that the loss of languages entails, so that even when a language dies, at least it is still recorded somewhere. Crowley's account of fieldwork is warm and entertaining, a cheerful anecdotal romp through the vagaries and vicissitudes of fieldwork.

So this is the arena into which B's book appears. After the introduction, it contains chapters on technology in the field, starting to work on a language, data organization and archiving, fieldwork on phonetics and phonology, eliciting basic morphology and syntax, further morphology and syntax, lexical and semantic data, discourse, pragmatics and narrative data, consultants and field locations, ethical field research, grant application writing, working with existing materials, and fieldwork results. Thus, it covers both nonlinguistic matters (writing grant applications, choosing a field site, ethical fieldwork, choice and use of equipment) and purely linguistic topics (data gathering and organization, grammatical topics), as well as topics that straddle linguistic and nonlinguistic tasks, for example, working with archival material and presenting the results of the fieldwork. B avoids treating the fieldwork endeavor as simply a task in grammar writing. She organizes her book into subparts of the tasks rather than subparts of the linguistics to be described.

Unique to B's book are the chapter on grant application writing and the chapter on working with existing materials. The latter attempts to answer a number of difficult ethical questions. For example, she covers how to deal with unpublished field notes on the language, restricted access to language materials, and sensitive material from the past. These kinds of issues could become very important as languages continue to die out, which perhaps could lead to a situation in which we may be forced back to early archived data.

The appendices are useful. They contain metadata sheets, a suggested program for working on an undescribed language, a basic phonetics/phonology checklist, a basic morphology/syntax checklist (a simplified version of Comrie and Smith's *Lingua* questionnaire (1977)), a sample consent form, an equipment checklist, and a basic wordlist (207 items).

The book comes with an associated web page hosted by Rice University (http://www.ruf.rice .edu/~bowern/fieldwork/). Its aim is to provide updated information, which consists of detailed advice and description of audio equipment and further reading that supplements the information given in the book, as well as class discussion topics. Further information on the website associated with later chapters includes fonts and software, with links to where they can be downloaded, links to archives, and links to the Leipzig glossing rules, funding bodies, and much more. The webpage is almost as comprehensive as the book.

What is special about B's approach is that for her, human factors pervade every aspect of the fieldwork endeavor and cannot just be put in a single chapter. B never forgets, even while com-

pletely absorbed in the minutiae of whatever morphosyntactic construction she is untangling, that it is people she is working with, and that these people are also having reactions and thoughts about her questions and are constantly evaluating her and her work. That is, none of this takes place in a social vacuum, and fieldwork will always be a product of social relationships. For example, asking a question twice may make the consultant think that you do not believe them or were not listening or do not trust them. Similarly, asking two different people the same question might suggest a lack of trust. This frequent running commentary on the social relationship between the fieldworker and the informant pervades the book and contributes to its strength.

Which parts of the information about fieldwork are likely to become outdated? In Samarin's book, the oldest of those discussed here, two main aspects have become dated. Most obvious are the technological aspects—from recording machines to data arrangement and storage, to basic management like how to keep field notes dry and safe. Samarin talks of magnetic tape as the essential recording medium, discussing how many feet of magnetic tape are needed for a field trip, bearing in mind the great expense. He also has suggestions on card files for data arrangement and storage, and recommends galvanized tin boxes to keep everything dry and safe from rats and dampness.

Perhaps less obvious is the observation that political relationships between the linguist and the language community have undergone subtle but important changes. Now we do not speak—or think—of the language community as simply a source of our data. In most or all of these books on fieldwork, the difficulty of choosing a term to refer to those who provide us with data (e.g. informant, subject, consultant, language helper, language assistant) is overtly discussed, and the choice justified (see e.g. Newman & Ratliff 2001:2–3). This uneasiness over correct terminology reflects a strong (and recent) engagement with changing ideology. Furthermore, one of the biggest changes affecting the task of field linguists is that ethics committees and funding bodies are now insisting that the linguist makes some real effort to provide a useful service to the community within which they work. This would consist at the very least of offering a collection of stories, word lists, and school materials such as primers, as well as making more long-term commitments like training and capacity-building efforts, rather than producing incomprehensible grammars kept in inaccessible foreign libraries.

So, what might become outdated in B's book? Of course the technological aspects of fieldwork will continue to improve. This does not just mean recordings of better quality, using video recording as standard, and so on. Free or easily accessible software has changed our expectations of fieldwork-based phonetic analysis (e.g. Praat and intonational analysis), morphological analysis (Toolbox), and time-aligned transcription (Elan), among many other examples. New technologies are likely to raise the bar still further in other areas of analysis. The chapter on data organization and archiving will probably require updated information. So far there are a number of small language archives, but perhaps these will be put together into a larger, more secure archive.

There is one topic in this book for which a full discussion may be lacking. More and more grant agencies are supporting interdisciplinary teamwork. A linguist may be part of a large team of researchers working together in a particular community. Working with an interdisciplinary team is potentially an enriching experience, but it could also bring its own problems. B could have included a discussion on this point, as in Crowley 2007.

Unfortunately, the book was poorly proofread, with many typographical errors that would have been caught by a spell-checking program. Some of these are picked up in the errata on the webpage.

In sum, this is an extremely readable, interesting, and useful book, which I would definitely recommend for anyone who plans to conduct linguistic fieldwork, either in a field methods class or in a field site for the first time. B's achievement is to have produced a book more systematic and comprehensive while less anecdotal than those we have seen so far. B's observation that 'Fieldwork is not done in a vacuum' (4) could usefully sum up her whole approach, and this serious attention to both social and linguistic factors is what makes this such a powerful book, and a worthy successor to Samarin 1967.

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Dying words: Endangered languages and what they have to tell us. By NICHOLAS EVANS. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. Pp. 309. ISBN 9780631233060. $34.95.

Reviewed by WILLIAM F. HANKS, *University of Texas at Austin*

This very well-written book examines the problems of language endangerment and death, and their far-reaching consequences for linguistics, anthropology, and several related fields. Drawing on an encyclopedic range of examples, Nicholas Evans establishes the basic link between linguistic diversity and population (Ch. 1), the diversity of recording technologies (from cuneiform to digital video, Ch. 2), the surprising diversity of grammatical systems (Ch. 3), the embedding of language in social cognition (Ch. 4), the role of linguistic evidence for understanding prehistory (Chs. 5 and 6), the light shed by spoken languages on ancient scripts (Ch. 7), the resurgence of research on linguistic relativity (Ch. 8), the expressive power and fragility of oral cultures (Ch. 9), and the challenges facing documentary linguistics today (Ch. 10). The treatment of these topics is brief but erudite and full of fascinating facts from comparative linguistics, the histories of languages, writing systems, and linguistics (from Pāṇini to the present). The tone is one of loss, given the stories of last speakers and lost languages. But this is always tempered by the excitement of discovery, a palpable respect for languages, their speakers, and the scholars who study them, and a passionate optimism that there is great work to be done. Overall, this is a book that should be widely read by linguists, linguistic anthropologists, and anyone concerned with language in its total context of mind, society, history, and nature. The extensive examples (from many scores of languages), excellent figures, index and bibliography, and consistently lucid arguments make this a superb book for graduate or upper-level undergraduate seminars.

In the opening chapter of *Dying words* (*DW*), E points out that roughly ten millennia ago (on the threshold of sedentism), about ten million humans spoke between three and five thousand languages (a number derived by estimating one language to each hunter-gatherer group of circa two thousand speakers, the rough upper limit of sustainability). The figure ten million represents 0.5% of today's global population, which speaks about six thousand languages. Even as rough estimates, these proportions make E's point forcefully: there has been a vast decline in the number of different languages relative to human population. Moreover, the distribution of languages to world regions is extremely uneven, with global languages spoken (in various forms) across areas