Field methods in linguistics (24.909)

Spring 2012, MW 2:30–4, 4-251

Instructors

Maziar Toosarvandani
toosarva@mit.edu
32-D860
(617) 253-4777
Office hours: M 1–2, T 2–3

Native speaker consultant: Gulcem Aktas
Gulcem@bonnerent.com

Teaching assistant: Ryo Masuda
masuda@mit.edu
32-D774
(617) 253-4429
Office hours: M 11:30–12:30, R 3–4

Course website: http://stellar.mit.edu/S/course/24/sp12/24.909/

Course description

In this course, we will explore the structure of a language previously unknown to us. We will do this by working with a native speaker consultant in the classroom—an experience that approximates in some ways what it is like to do fieldwork. By the end of the semester, participants will have become familiar—not just with the structure of an unfamiliar language—but also with the basic methodologies of linguistic fieldwork (elicitation and text analysis), the technology that is used for making and manipulating audio recordings, the electronic resources available for storing and organizing language data, and the ethical issues surrounding fieldwork.

We will start by working with the speaker as a group during class periods. Through basic word and phrase elicitation, we will develop an understanding of the language’s sound system and a shared transcription system. Then, we will immerse ourselves in the morphology, syntax, and semantics of the language by transcribing, translating, and analyzing a text that we have recorded. In so doing, we will realize that there are many aspects of the language that we do not understand. Then, class participants will embark on their own investigation of one aspect of the language’s grammar through one-on-one meetings with the speaker. Throughout this last phase of the class, we will continue to meet together as a ‘workshop’ for participants’ independent projects.
Course requirements

1. Small individual and group assignments throughout the semester
2. Readings from the literature on field methods and our language
3. Contributing to common class resources—i.e. bibliography and database
4. A final paper, due on May 16, with an oral presentation on the same day

General structure

Because of the nature of the class, there can only be so much advance planning. By and large, the frequency and size of the individual and group assignments and the number of assigned readings will depend on the class’ progress. But, the class can be divided roughly into three phases.

Phase I: Group elicitation  On the first class, we will discuss the kinds of tools we will need—field notebooks, digital recorders and microphones, audio software for manipulating audio recordings—and the basic ground rules for working with a native speaker consultant. After meeting the speaker in the second class, we will delve into the language’s sound system. You will lead the elicitation sessions of words and phrases directed towards understanding what the contrastive sounds of the language are. Once we have done this, we will develop a practical orthography for the language. From the very beginning, we will be recording all our interviews with the speaker, and you will be responsible for adding all the data from the elicitation sessions you direct to an online database. **Importantly, you will be asked not to consult any linguistic resources on our language until later in the term.**

Phase II: Text analysis  With a firm grasp of how to transcribe the language, we will record a text (a narrative, oral history, etc.) from the speaker. Over the following weeks, we will work to transcribe, translate, and analyze this text. Since we will know nothing about the grammar of the language, we will be confronted with many uncertainties. By this point, you will have started developing a collective bibliography of linguistic resources for our language. Some of the questions we have, we will be able to answer relatively easily by consulting the literature. Others will remain more mysterious. They will serve topics for your independent research projects.

Phase III: Independent research projects  You will start your independent research project by presenting a question or set of interrelated questions that you have developed through analyzing the text. In the rest of the term, you will work to answer these questions through one-on-one elicitation sessions with the speaker outside of class. (The speaker has agreed to be available by appointment in the afternoon and evening after the class periods.) In addition, we will continue to work with the speaker as a group during class. You will be responsible for leading elicitation in your area of interest for part of each class. This will serve as a kind of ‘workshop’ for your independent research projects. Your peers will provide an outside perspective on the elicitation strategies you are pursuing. And, you will learn about other aspects of the language by observing your peers’ elicitation work. As in the first phase of the class, we will be recording all our interviews with the
speaker, and you will be responsible for adding all the data from the elicitation you direct to an online database. This final phase will culminate in a term paper summarizing the results of your investigations, due on May 16, the last day of class, and an oral presentation on the same day for your peers, the native speaker consultant, and the instructors.

**Grading**

Your final grade for the class will depend on how you complete all the class requirements as well as your attendance and active participation. Generally speaking, the best way to get a good grade is to participate as much as you can in all aspects of the class. Because it is not a typical lecture-style course, you will not receive a letter grade for written work until late in the semester. You should, however, feel completely free to meet with the instructor throughout the semester to discuss your progress in the class.

**Useful books on fieldwork**


**Online resources**

- Information on linguistic fieldwork (Stanford University)  
  http://www.stanford.edu/dept/linguistics/cgi-bin/fieldwork/info.php
- Linguistic fieldwork preparation (University of Toronto)  
  http://projects.chass.utoronto.ca/lingfieldwork/
- Typological tools for field linguists (Max Planck Institute, Leipzig)  
# Tentative schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WEEK</th>
<th>DAY(S)</th>
<th>ACTIVITIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1    | 2/8    | Discussion of methodologies, transcription, recording, data organization, and ethical considerations.  
**Readings:** Hyman 2001, Bowern 2008:§1–2 |
| 2    | 2/13, 2/15 | Introductions with our speaker. Student-led elicitation of words and phrases. Identification of contrastive sounds.  
**Readings:** Bowern 2008:§3, §8, Vaux et al. 2007:§§2–3 |
| 3    | 2/20 | **No class (President’s Day).**  
**Readings:** Chelliah 2001 |
| 4    | 2/27, 2/29 | Transcription, translation, and analysis of text.  
**Readings:** TBA from the bibliography |
| 5    | 3/5, 3/7 | Transcription, translation, and analysis of text.  
**Readings:** TBA from the bibliography |
| 6    | 3/12, 3/14 | Transcription, translation, and analysis of text.  
**Readings:** TBA from the bibliography |
| 7    | 3/19, 3/21 | Presentation of ideas for independent research projects. Student-led elicitation. |
| 8    | 3/26, 3/28 | **no class (Spring Vacation)** |
| 9    | 4/2, 4/4 | Student-led elicitation. |
| 10   | 4/9, 4/11 | Student-led elicitation. |
| 11   | 4/16 | **no class (Patriot’s Day)**  
4/18 | Student-led elicitation. |
| 12   | 4/23, 4/25 | Student-led elicitation. |
| 13   | 4/30, 5/2 | Student-led elicitation. |
| 14   | 5/7, 5/9 | Student-led elicitation. |
| 15   | 5/14 | Student-led elicitation.  
5/16 | Presentation of independent research projects.  
**Work due:** Term papers reporting results of independent research projects. |
References


