

WHY FIELD LINGUISTS SHOULD PAY MORE ATTENTION TO APPLIED LINGUISTIC RESEARCH

Full presentation

Cindy Schneider

University of New England; RCLT, La Trobe University (Honorary Research Fellow)

Linguistic fieldworkers undertake the highly challenging task of entering a new language community, often one with which they have no previous experience, and attempting to learn that community's language so as to produce a grammar, dictionary, and literacy and other educational materials for that community.

There is a good deal of discussion in the literature about the various issues related to fieldwork: choice of field sites and language teachers; being culturally sensitive; research ethics; understanding the larger sociopolitical context; avoiding Eurocentrism; fieldwork methodology; organisation of data; and use of technology, to name just a few (Bowern 2008; Newman and Ratliff 2001).

Much less lip service is paid to the actual process of language learning. This is an interesting point to contemplate when we consider that the primary task of most fieldworkers is to learn a second language, at least to the point where they can adequately describe it. There is a wealth of literature on second language acquisition and teaching/learning, yet most field linguists have little or no training in, or awareness of, this area. It is if applied linguists and field linguists each operated in separate spheres, and "never the twain shall meet".

Some experienced field linguists who have never formally studied second language acquisition and learning may nevertheless have figured out for themselves, while undertaking their own research, strategies for self-directed language learning. This may have occurred through a process of trial-and-error or through talking to other linguists on their own learning strategies. However, formal tuition in language learning principles, learning styles, language attitudes and other factors that affect language acquisition deserves much more attention and discussion. The Summer Institute of Linguistics does have a website that deals with precisely these issues (www.sil.org/lglearning/preparing.htm); in academia, a knowledge of the strategies and pitfalls involved in language learning could make all the difference between a field trip that is enjoyable and rewarding, as opposed to one that is more stressful and less productive than it needs to be. An understanding of the basic principles of language acquisition and learning is particularly important for less experienced field linguists, especially those who are basically monolingual and have only limited experience with learning a second language.

The question is, why don't field linguists pay more attention to theories on teaching and learning, and why aren't the basic principles of second language learning and acquisition included as the standard part of the syllabus in a course like "Linguistic Fieldwork"? Indeed, if field linguists were equipped with this knowledge, how could they benefit? This paper will reflect upon these issues.

References

Bowern, Claire. 2008. *Linguistic Fieldwork: A Practical Guide*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd.
Newman, Paul and Martha Ratliff (eds). 2001. *Linguistic Fieldwork*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Keywords: linguistic fieldwork, fieldwork instruction, language learning, self-directed learning

Contact details: Discipline of Linguistics, School of Behavioural, Cognitive and Social Sciences, University of New England, Armidale NSW 2351; Phone (02) 6773-2483; Fax (02) 6773-3748; cindy.schneider@une.edu.au