

## **Introduction: The Boasian tradition and contemporary practice in linguistic fieldwork in the Americas**

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The papers collected in this volume represent a cross-section of current linguistic scholarship in which authors share a common methodology: the analyses presented here have emerged directly from the challenges and felicities of linguistic fieldwork and language documentation. We take fieldwork to be the study of a language—often not the researchers’ own, and frequently conducted on site where the language is spoken—as a holistic system, operating within interdependent social, cultural, and historical contexts. While each contributor in these pages has narrowed his or her focus to one small corner of that system, the work here is informed by attention to the larger contexts of these languages, situated in the communities in which they are spoken, and of field linguistics as a discipline, situated in the community in which it is practiced.

The languages considered here are all indigenous to the Americas. Measured in degrees of latitude, they span nearly half the globe, from Alaska and the Northwest Territories in the north to Brazil in the south. The tradition of fieldwork in American linguistics in particular and in American anthropology more generally was established in large part by Franz Boas in the early twentieth century. Boas and his students, with Edward Sapir foremost among them, located fieldwork as the fundamental method for elucidating universals and variation in language. For even the earliest fieldworkers, gathering data in the field required collaboration with native speakers, the collection of diverse genres of data using a multiplicity of methods, and patience with the unfolding and sometimes chaotic nature of data gathered in the field. In the century since Boas conducted his iconic field trips to North America’s Northwest Coast, generations of Americanist linguists have carried forward this legacy, and the fifteen authors in the present publication carry forth this tradition. The articles coalesce around these same themes of community collaboration, attendance to a wide range of data types and methods, and the slowly unfolding nature of the process. Each paper highlights the methodological and theoretical contributions field-based linguistic research has made to our understanding of grammatical structure in American languages, and to the broader theoretical objectives of the discipline as a whole. To paraphrase Jean Mulder and Holly Sellers (chapter 3), contemporary linguistic theories can give insight into the underlying structure of field-collected language data in typological context, and the data themselves afford empirical means of testing and expanding our theories.

## COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

A general review of our ethnographic literature shows clearly how much better is the information obtained by observers who have command of the language, and who are on terms of intimate friendship with the natives, than that obtained through the medium of interpreters. (Boas 1911 [1966, 1991]:57)

A common starting point for a field linguist is a mutually beneficial relationship with the community of speakers with whom one is to work; whether a linguist is a member of the speaker community or a guest, a reciprocal and collaborative alliance is crucial to success. An exchange of skills and expertise between speakers and linguists has been integral to successful long-term fieldwork relationships since Boas collaborated with George Hunt to transcribe Kwak'wala (Kwakiutl) texts and produce ethnographies of Kwakwaka'wakw communities. Many fieldworkers see this type of exchange as a way of giving back to speakers who are sharing their linguistic and cultural knowledge.

However, a collaborative relationship between speakers and linguists is more than merely responsible procedure; it produces better data and can illuminate patterns otherwise inaccessible to researchers. In her 2001 essay reflecting on the roles of speakers and linguists in language documentation, Mithun observes that

[i]n many ways, the more the speaker is invited to shape the record, the richer the documentation of the language, and the more we will learn about the extent to which languages can vary ... If speakers are allowed to speak for themselves, creating a record of spontaneous speech in natural communicative settings, we have a better chance of providing the kind of record that will be useful to future generations. (Mithun 2001:51-3)

Several of the papers in this publication address how such relationships are established and negotiated, as well as the benefits to research, analysis, and theory deriving from close collaboration with speakers.

Jule Gómez de García, Melissa Axelrod, and María Luz García (chapter 2) present their analysis of the development and use of an Ixil Maya discourse particle against the backdrop of six years of collaboration with a women's weaving and agricultural cooperative in Guatemala. It is the dynamic of the group itself and the women's metatextual conversations about language work that generated the analysis presented here. In the midst of transcription session discussions, the event-sequencing function of the particle came to light as members of the group, unaccustomed to the picture book stimulus, realize the sequentiality of *Pancakes for Breakfast* and *Frog, Where Are You?*. "One of the most relevant facts of our fieldwork in Nebaj is the varying levels of literacy skills among the women and the correspondence of those skills with the differentials in experience the women have had with printed materials. This fact has determined how transcription and elicitation sessions will be arranged and now it is clear that it is also a factor in shaping how, and how frequently, the discourse marker *vet* is used by the women in their speech" (p. 29).

In turn, Jean Mulder and Holly Sellers's paper on classifying the uncommonly wide range of clitics found in Sm'algyax (Coast Tsimshian; chapter 3) shows how Anderson's 2005 constraint-based account of clitics provides a framework for understanding the com-

plex behavior of Sm'alyax clitics. In addition, the Sm'alyax clitics provide insight into the applicability of the theory. Many of the examples cited come from texts that have been painstakingly edited by a collective of Sm'alyax speakers and writers. "This is a case where not only does linguistic theory help sharpen our understanding of fieldwork data, but also where field linguistics has consequences for linguistic theory," they write, "... [t]he motivation for approaching fieldwork and theoretical linguistic analysis in this way is to work toward enabling knowledge of the language to be constructed not only for and with, but also by community-members" (p. 34-35).

Logan Sutton (chapter 4) tackles the role of collaborative fieldwork in historical and comparative linguistics in his reconstruction of noun class and number in Kiowa-Tanoan languages. At the same time he acknowledges the duty field linguists have toward respecting a language community's desire for privacy. Pueblo communities have a long history of protecting certain aspects of culture and tradition, including language, from academic research by outsiders. Sutton, whose research involves collaboration with several Native American communities of the southwest United States, justifiably limits his historical analysis here to data already in print. He writes that in a publication about the relationship between fieldwork and analysis, it may "be surprising that I base the hypothesis and the conclusions of this paper on data collected by somebody else. ... However, with all the virtues of fieldwork—indeed, most linguistic work is ultimately owing to native speakers sharing their languages—there are restrictions that must be recognized and respected" (p. 58). The sensitive and often emotionally-charged issue of privacy is a daily reality for many language workers in the Americas and elsewhere.

#### A DIVERSITY OF RESOURCES

To plumb the depths of a language, all sources are of value—elicitation, texts, casual speech, stories, and conversations ... diversity must be allowed to suffuse fieldwork. (Rice 2001:240-1)

When linguists go to the field to gather data, the kinds of data they collect, the manner in which they are collected, and the way in which these data are processed are primary considerations with far-reaching theoretical implications. Fieldworkers must decide when to collect data through elicitation or recording of spontaneous discourse; what paradigms, texts, and lexica they seek; which orthography or orthographies they will choose for transcriptions, and whether recordings are edited or left in their original state. A diversified approach to linguistic data, and faith in the long-term theoretical promise of such data, is also part of the Americanist tradition. Mithun points out that in addition to direct elicitation, "[a] second kind of methodology, the recording of connected speech, formed the core of much linguistic fieldwork over the past century, particularly in North America. The tradition of text collection arose in part from a desire to document the rich cultures of the speakers, but it was also seen as a tool for understanding languages in their own terms, rather than through European models. The texts served as the basis for grammatical description" (Mithun 2001:35). She quotes Boas' introduction to the inaugural volume of the *International Journal of American Linguistics*, in which he presents a mandate for a new era in the study of American languages and language in general: "While until about 1880 investigators

confined themselves to the collection of vocabularies and brief grammatical notes, it has become more and more evident that large masses of texts are needed in order to elucidate the structure of the languages” (Boas 1917:1, quoted in Mithun 2001:35).

Several papers here address the value of collecting and drawing on a diversity of resources, from legacy materials in (and out of) archives to newly recorded speech, and the importance of bringing fresh interpretation to the data and theories we may inherit from others. The chapter by Spike Gildea, B.J. Hoff, and Sérgio Meira (chapter 5) is also a historical reconstruction, this time of the proto-vowel *ō* in Cariban languages. Here, however, the focus is on how the modern collection of reliable field data can help answer questions remaining in the fieldnotes of our academic predecessors. Special attention is paid to how modern linguists can benefit from the intervening years of professional and methodological growth the field has seen since the early days of documentary work. “Early sources of data from Cariban languages were vexed with poor transcription, especially of vowels. As a result, early attempts to compare Cariban wordlists resulted in inconsistent correspondences. In our own fieldwork, we have found that old word lists are rarely confirmed by our modern transcriptions” (p. 93). “This paper illustrates the importance of good modern fieldwork in two ways: first, after collecting reliable modern data, many inconsistencies in cognate sets disappear and previously unseen patterns become clear; second, reliable modern data can provide insight into previously opaque transcription systems used by older sources, thereby enabling us to make better use of language data recorded several hundred years ago” (p. 92).

The importance of looking to a combination of connected spontaneous speech and elicited data is addressed by Fenton, Lovick, and others, in particular the way in which multiple types of data examined together can illuminate the rich complexity of a linguistic system. Olga Charlotte Lovick builds on the vast body of work on clause-level syntax in Athabaskan languages in her analysis of several discourse markers in Dena’ina (chapter 8). She invokes a range of data sources—e.g., fieldnotes and texts she has collected and those collected by her predecessors—and methods to uncover the functions of particles that, according to speakers, “‘have no meaning’ or ‘mean something else in every sentence’” (p. 174). The difficulty of pinning down the functions of discourse particles before lexical and syntactic analyses are available is clear from the fieldnotes of previous researchers Lovick consulted, which are teeming with particles that are either variably glossed or not glossed at all. In her chapter, Lovick advocates a flexible approach for revealing the connective and cohesive functions of each of the particles she examines, and allows both direct elicitation and analysis of narrative to be her guide. “To define the meaning of one of these discourse markers, simple elicitation is not sufficient . . . Direct questioning about the meaning of the particles considered here may or may not yield a useful answer” (p. 174). She continues, “only discourse analysis can show that [the particles] have different functions corresponding to their position within a narrative unit” (p. 174).

In their chapter on middles and reflexives in Yucatec Maya (chapter 7), Israel Martínez Corripio and Ricardo Maldonado also advocate a multi-pronged approach to fieldwork-based linguistic analysis, including elicitation, text analysis, and, most importantly here, heeding speaker intuition as a clue to the semantic features of the constructions under investigation. Despite the seemingly arbitrary distribution of middles and reflexives in Yucatec Maya, the authors show that middles are limited to *absolute* events (i.e., those in

which no energy is expended), a typologically unusual motivation among languages with middle systems. An essential component of their methodology was the incorporation of speaker intuition in the analytic process: “[o]ur data collection began with direct elicitation and the analysis of oral narrative, but these—whether alone or considered together—were not sufficient to fully illuminate the behavior of the YM middle system. As our analysis grew, we found it necessary to invent ways to investigate speaker intuition as well” (p. 148). By trusting speakers’ intuitions about subtle semantic differences between hypothetical language-use situations, Martínez Corripio and Maldonado are able to illuminate and confirm a coherent semantic domain governing the use of middles and reflexives in Yucatec.

Another paper highlighting the role of multiple methodologies in fieldwork is Donna Fenton’s study of determiners in Teotitlán del Valle Zapotec (chapter 6). The determiners have a number of temporal, discourse and spatial functions, the details of which only became apparent through text analysis and elicitation, each method revealing a different set of subtleties of use. “The texts, which owing to the circumstances of my work in Teotitlán del Valle were collected and transcribed in the early stages of the research, revealed temporal and discourse functions of the determiners. Elicitation, which was informed by the analysis of the texts, brought out the expected spatial distinctions and enabled me to refine my analysis of the temporal extensions of the determiners. Neither method on its own would have provided a complete picture, and it is possible that the ‘backwards’ order of data collection allowed for a better insight into how speakers actually used and thought about the system of determiners” (p. 126).

Importantly, as noted by Mithun, a multiplicity of approaches will “permit ... us to notice distinctions and patterns that we might not know enough to elicit ... this material is in many ways the most important and exciting of all. Linguistic theory will never be moved ahead as far by answers to questions we already know enough to ask as it will by discoveries of the unexpected” (Mithun 2001:45). As our work as linguists now finds application among communities eager to maintain and revitalize their languages, the need for a diversity of data is especially pressing.

#### EVOLUTION OF THE ANALYSIS

Fort Rupert, September 22, 1886

The material overwhelms me. I am very curious about the story I am to get today. Each day brings so much that is new and so many surprises. (Boas, in a letter to his parents, from Rohner 1969:24)

Ladners Landing, August 17, 1890

With what I am getting now and what I got before, I can see that I have learned a great deal. Much of the confused knowledge I had then is being straightened out now. (Boas, in a letter to his wife, from Rohner 1969:65)

Often, what turns out to be the most valuable data may only reveal itself as such after the fieldtrip is over and the researcher has returned home. This revelation may eventually lead to another trip to the field—and another. In all cases, though, data gathered through fieldwork is chaotic, messy and full of surprises. Understanding it may happen only slowly or in fits and starts, often over multiple field seasons. This facet of linguistic fieldwork requires patience, curiosity, flexibility, and a focus on the process of discovery.

In many of the essays gathered here, like Fenton's analysis of Zapotec determiners discussed above, the analysis evolved over time through multiple visits to the field site. This theme is also present in Lynda Boudreault's description of dependent verbs in Sierra Popoluca (chapter 10). The author describes dependent verbs in the language and examines the particular constructions in which they appear. The analysis presented here began with a careful look at previous work and developed by means of recurrent text transcription and elicitation that took place over multiple fieldtrips between 2004 and 2007. It is the inherently cyclical nature of field-based linguistic analysis that Boudreault highlights: "text transcription, data mining, post-hoc analysis, and controlled elicitation ... is a cyclic process that looks to data to corroborate predictions driven by linguistic theory and that in turn bear on theory" (p. 256). Her goal here is to show "the interdependent processes of data collection and analysis by addressing how different observations emerge at different stages of the analysis" (p. 226).

Alessandro Jaker, in his paper on gemination and tonal feet in Weledeh Dogrib (chapter 9), also focuses on linguistic analysis as a process that develops over time, but in this case the evolution is across generations of linguists. Each new linguist to tackle an issue inherits the assumptions and traditions of his or her academic predecessors, but at the same time brings something uniquely personal to the analysis. It is up to the resourceful linguist to draw upon his or her own experiences to move the field forward. As Jaker notes, American structuralists have inherited from Bloomfield the notion that consonant length is a phonemic issue and therefore must be a feature that can distinguish between utterances. Consonant length in Athabaskan languages is often seen as phonetic, not phonemic (see Jaker for references). In Dogrib, however, the picture of consonant length is more complex. Jaker shows that in light of the Optimality Theory analysis presented here, "the key generalizations about morphophonemics in Dogrib require reference to syllable weight, which in turn requires reference to consonant length—we would miss important generalizations if geminates were not included as part of the phonology" (p. 204). Jaker brings his intuitions as a native speaker of another language with contrastive consonant length, Italian, to his fieldwork, which he calls "a process of unraveling layers of unstated assumptions, both others' and my own. Relying on descriptive statements made by others means adopting their assumptions about what facts ought to be included in the description and what should be thrown out. Fieldwork with speakers of Weledeh Dogrib enables me to go back to the original speech signal and decide for myself what is structurally important and what is not" (p. 204).

This collection takes its place alongside several recent publications in which field linguists share expertise and anecdotes about the particular methodologies that make fieldwork, and the scholarly analyses based on field-collected data, so compelling (Bouquiaux & Thomas 1992; Vaux and Cooper 1999; Newman & Ratliff 2001; Gippert et al. 2006; Crowley 2007;

Bowern 2008; Thieberger forthcoming). We offer the current discussion to readers with interests in the languages of the Americas and beyond. The themes considered in these papers are in many ways pertinent for field linguists worldwide.

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