



# A Budding Linguist's Introduction to Field Notes

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*The structural rigidity of linguistic research can be combined with the people-centered research of ethnography to create the hybrid research field of linguistic ethnography. Data collection in linguistic ethnography should reflect both the linguistic and ethnographic spectrums of research to gain the most comprehensive information possible about the language features used in a community. Strategies that lead researchers to address both areas of linguistic ethnography in their research models include planning the study from both camps' perspective and organizing field notes into two categories: linguistic features and ethnographic features.*

# Introduction

It seems that in the world of endless college introductions, one question always comes up: “If you were stranded on a desert island, what three items would you bring?” My answer to this question would be especially revealing. I would take my laptop (equipped with a solar-powered battery charger), a pack of sharpened pencils, and as much paper as the asker of this question would allow me to have. My strategy would be, first and foremost, to contact the native indigenous people and begin to learn their language. Next, I would spend my days collecting data for a linguistic field study. Eventually, I would leave the island and publish the notes I had taken during my sojourn. If my field notes were disorganized, messy, and incomplete, my linguistic reputation would be forever ruined; however, if my field notes withstood the scrutiny of field experts, my name could be catapulted to linguistic-journal fame.

This story exhibits how taking effective field notes can make or break a research study. Field notes are a vital part of linguistic research because oftentimes the researcher is isolated. The researcher is the only person observing the linguistic phenomena and, if he or she fails to record it, that unrecorded data will be lost forever to the scientific world. In order to prevent such a loss of data, linguistic-ethnography studies must have a specific language feature of interest, which the researcher must keep track of through organized, calculated field notes. Taking effective field notes requires a firm grasp on the fields of ethnography and linguistics. With such understanding, researchers can take a structured analysis of a society’s language.

## The Field of Ethnography

Linguistic ethnography is hard to define since the borders of linguistics and ethnography overlap. Ethnography is generally viewed as a story told to an academic audience, with that story based on the reflections

of researchers when they experience a society firsthand (Goodall 2000). By this definition, it follows that researchers must live among the culture they are studying for an extended amount of time (Halstead 2008).

H. L. Goodall Jr., head of the Department of Communication at the University of North Carolina–Greensboro, has a four-step program for students who want to become ethnographers: “You have to learn how to do fieldwork. You have to learn how to write. You have to learn who you are as a fieldworker, as a writer, and as a self. And you have to learn how—and where—those activities are meaningfully connected” (Goodall 2000). Goodall includes learning about your “self” in his ethnography program because ethnography is all about people’s interactions with each other. One’s self comprises the background and biases the researcher inherently has. It is important because the research that has been conducted will be presented to the academic world from the viewpoint of the researcher.

By conducting fieldwork, ethnographers are able to see people’s interactions firsthand and then share their observations. Writing field notes in ethnography involves documenting precise details in the observed community so that generalizations can be made. A deeper analysis than the surface meaning of words can come by answering questions about overheard conversations. Such questions include “What is the story being told by this person?” and “How does the existing framework in cultural or social norms lend to its interpretation?” (Goodall 2000.). This in turn leads to a bigger picture of the society. In order to get to this deeper level of analysis, the researcher must record details about the dialogue, such as the person who is speaking and whether the researcher participated in the verbal exchange (Goodall 2000).

Once the minute details are recorded, the data will be better organized, lending itself to deeper interpretations. Angela Creese, professor of linguistic education at the University of Birmingham offers her thoughts on processing ethnographic data: “Analysis of the data

focuses on the identification and interpretation of regular patterns of action and talk that characterize a group of people in a social context” (Litosseliti 2010). Creese identifies the final goal of ethnographic studies as making generalizations about the people being observed. Goodall reiterates the importance of this deeper analysis and gives suggestions for how it can be achieved by “jotting down notes, or tape recording interviews, when possible; returning to our offices/homes/rented rooms to write out representations of field experiences; [and] engaging in armchair, after-the-fact self-reflection, analysis, and editing of the field notes into a narrative” (Goodall 2000). Ethnography focuses on the story behind the interactions, and this story manifests itself through patterns in the field notes of the researcher. Correct documentation of field experiences is vital if the researcher wants a smooth editing process in the creation of the ethnographic study.

## The Field of Linguistics

Though related to ethnography, linguistics—the study of how languages work—has different priorities in conducting research. Linguistics focuses on the language people use, not on the people themselves. Linguistic studies start when researchers identify a specific feature of a language that they want to study (O’Grady 2005). The use of this particular feature in a person’s or a group’s speech is observed, documented, and published.

Daniel L. Everett, research professor at the University of Manchester, has identified the three main aims of fieldwork from a linguist’s perspective: “I assume that the [objectives in fieldwork] will include: (i) discovery of new facts about human language; (ii) testing theoretical claims; and (iii) learning more about people” (Newman 2001). Notice that the third aim is the last aim of linguistic research, whereas this goal is the chief goal in ethnographic research. These three aims of

linguistic fieldwork work together as the linguistic researcher “acquires linguistic material *directly* from other speakers” (Newman 2001).

Field notes in linguistics can take several forms, depending on the researcher and on the nature of the language feature being observed. Roger Sanjek, professor of anthropology at Queen’s College, utilizes several types of field notes in his research. He uses forms such as scratch-notes (random jottings to later be typed), field notes proper (daily logs containing more in-depth information than scratch notes), journals, diaries, and texts (notes produced from transcriptions), as well as letters, reports, and papers written in the field (Sanjek 1990). By using so many sources and types of records, Sanjek tries his best not to miss any language trends in his observations.

However researchers decide to record their data, there are several key linguistic features that need to be noted for each entry. Nikolaus P. Himmelmann, linguistics professor at the University of Muenster, has a very thorough list of information that must be recorded with each linguistic feature noted:

Each session [linguistic feature] has to be accompanied by information of the following kind: a [unique] name of the session; when and where the data was recorded; who is recorded and who else was present at the time; who made the recording and what kind of recording equipment was used; an indication of the quality of the data; who is allowed to access the data contained in that session; a brief characterization of the content of the session; [and] links between different files which together constitute the session (Gippert 2006)

These features all help to identify the material and will later be crucial in identifying language patterns. By clearly documenting linguistic features, field notes in linguistics can be effective tools in research.

# The Field of Linguistic Ethnography

The two fields of linguistics and ethnography can create a symbiotic relationship when put together. Creese defends the idea that linguistic ethnography combines these two areas' best qualities: "Linguistic ethnography argues that ethnography can benefit from the analytical frameworks provided by linguistics, while linguistics can benefit from the processes of reflexive sensitivity required in ethnography" (Litosseliti 2010). Creese continues the comparison: "Ethnography is said to be enhanced by the detailed technical analysis which linguistics brings, while linguistics is said to be enhanced by attention to context" (Litosseliti 2010). Basically, linguistic ethnography works because the structureless becomes structured, and the impersonal becomes personable.

Since overlap frequently occurs between linguistics and ethnography, a researcher could take the research method of almost any ethnographic study and adjust the data collection to include linguistics and vice versa.

For example, Helena Wulff, an ethnographic researcher interested in dance companies, conducted a study with three ballet companies (Halstead 2008). Every night, she wrote her field notes in a diary where she recorded the key events of the day. While writing her field notes, Wulff "organized them around the theoretical, ethnographic, and indigenous themes of [her] study . . . such as transnationality, career, body and mind, gender, time, and culture, etc." (Halstead 2008). Whenever her notes focused on one of these themes, Wulff highlighted the mention so she could find it easily later. Wulff sorted her recurring themes into major and minor categories, which made going through her 120 journals manageable (Halstead 2008).

Wulff had created a thorough ethnographic study. In order to research linguistic phenomena as well, only a few more considerations

were needed. To her major and minor themes, Wulff added linguistic features, such as special lexical terms for the foreign names of dance and stage terms. These language themes could be highlighted in a different color, thus contributing to the ease of analysis by better organizing the field notes. Wulff then conducted more formal interviews with the dancers, in which she observed language features such as syntax and phonology. By adding this structure and focus on language features, Wulff's ethnographic research was easily modified into a linguistic ethnographic study.

With this example comes the theory that, by looking at the two parts of linguistic ethnography separately, studies in this area of research can become more thorough. If a researcher were to first design an ethnographic study and then design the same study from a linguistic perspective, the researcher would discover more enhanced subject areas and a more advanced method of data collection. Techniques such as color-coding notes could be used to separate the two areas of study, creating highly accessible field notes (Halstead 2008). A third color could be used by the researcher to denote areas of crossover that could be used in the analysis of both areas of study. By viewing the linguistic ethnographic study as two separate studies—one in ethnography and one in linguistics—results would be more robust.

## Writing Field Notes

Across all fields of scientific study, there are researchers who forget that field notes are a type of writing and who, therefore, overcomplicate the production of field notes. For the beginning linguistics student, field notes can seem like a foreign language. However, writing field notes is comparable to writing classroom notes. Rena Lederman, professor of anthropology at Princeton University, reminds these researchers: “Produced and still smelling of There—musty, smoky, spicy, evocations of

people and places—field notes, like ethnography, are simply a form of writing” (Sanjek 1990).

Most data collection in the field of linguistic ethnography employs the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), which can cause headaches as students learn the ins and outs of transcribing (Vaux 1999). Linguists Bert Vaux and Justin Cooper suggest starting out slow if transcriptions are causing researchers trouble: “For at least the first few sessions, collect words in isolation. This puts off the problem of identifying word boundaries until you have a better grip on the vocabulary of the language” (Vaux 1999). Collecting words in isolation also helps the researcher discover allophones of phonemes, or linguistic features that lie at the foundation of a language’s phonetic system. By starting out slowly with language collection, students can gradually improve upon their IPA knowledge and language recording skills. Other suggestions for easing the newness of transcriptions are to look for items found characteristically at word boundaries, to become familiar with the phonemes of the language before data collection, and to frequently check transcriptions with informants and other linguists. These strategies can decrease the margin of error and can combat the stigma that field notes are hard to write.

Since the researcher of a linguistic ethnographic study can end up with hundreds of filled notebooks and recordings, a project-specific annotation system is vital to keeping field notes manageable. Good field notes typically contain annotations that include information from five different “general access resources,” or categories of documentation (Gippert 2006). Nikolaus P. Himmelmann developed this five-category plan to include the following:

1. A general introduction. This includes information on the field-work setting, the methods of recording used, and “an overview of the contents, structure, and scope of the primary data corpus and its quality” (Gippert 2006).



2. A brief sketch of the feature documented. By documenting a solid base of background data in the introduction, the researcher will have an easier time coding the data (assigning data tags to each entry for computer program sorting purposes) for future analysis (Bernard 2006).
3. A summary of the conventions being used. Examples of these conventions are abbreviations or special orthographic features (Bernard 2006).
4. An index of language features. This index also lends itself well to coding (Bernard 2006).
5. References to other sources from the study.

By organizing field notes according to these five categories, data collection will be eased due to the conciseness and focused nature of the note-taking process.

## Conclusion

By defining ethnography as a research method that studies the interactions of people and linguistics as the study of language, the field of linguistic ethnography becomes clear. Designing experiments for a linguistic ethnographic study can be made easier by separately designing a study for each area and then combining the two to make a comprehensive plan. In the same way, field notes can be made more concise by using separate color-coding methods and by using distinct categories so that both linguistics and ethnography are covered. The data collected will then be more extensive and better able to lead to conclusions.

If I were stuck on a desert island, I would definitely need to combine both linguistics and ethnography in order to accurately depict both the natives and their speech. In so doing, I would be setting myself up for success and linguistic fame because of my field notes. I wonder how much paper I would need.

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