1 Best practices in language documentation

1.1 Ideals

- **The minimum:**
  - A notebook and a pencil

- **The ideal:**
  - A notebook and a pencil
  - A way to make audio recordings

- **The deluxe ideal:**
  - A notebook and a pencil
  - A way to make audio recordings
  - A way to make video recordings

- **Working with what you have:** *it's not necessary to have all of the latest recording gadgets or the most expensive equipment or the most complicated software!*
  - Notebooks and pencils never break down
  - If your equipment is reliable and makes decent recordings, then this is what you need

1.2 Field notes for elicitation

- Preferred: a book with binding – no looseleaf or cards etc.

- Pencil, not pen

- Formatting:
  - Page numbering
  - Example numbering
  - Language data: either a three or four line format, plus the context and speaker comments and your notes
    1. Orthography
    2. Morphological break down (parts of words)
    3. Gloss
    4. Translation
  - Speaker
  - Date, location, time
  - Timestamp
  - Optional: only use one side of the page

(1)   Context: You and a friend are fishing. You're sitting on the rocks, cutting up bait. You notice blood on the rocks at your friend's feet.

     g̲otsinimahl   _'on̓in_
     k̲ots-i-n=_ima_=hl   'on̓-n
     cut-TR-2sg=MOD=CND   hand-2sg
     "You **might've** cut your hand."

     Comments (paraphrased): When you say _k̲'otsinimahl 'on̓n_, you're trying to say 'You might've cut your hand', or 'Maybe you cut your hand'. You're not totally sure because it could be fish blood.

(2)   Context: You and a friend are fishing. You're sitting on the rocks, cutting up bait. You notice blood on the rocks at your friend's feet.

     n̓agwimi   _g̲otsihl_   _'on̓in_
     n̓akw=mi   k̲ots-(t)=hl   'on̓-n
     EVID=2sg   cut-3=CND   hand-2sg
     "You **must've** cut your hand."

     When you say _n̓agwmi g̲'otshl 'on̓n_ you're saying 'It looks like you cut your hand . . . you must've because there's blood on the rocks.'

1.3   Elicitation plan

- If using the elicitation method, it's best to have all of your questions entered into your field notebook in advance of the session – this is actually a part of planning your elicitation!

- If using the observation method, you should make a record of the topic(s) (if you know them in advance) and any other details of the setting

1.4   Audio recording

- **The minimum:**

  - A device that reliably records audio: a laptop, smartphone, personal audio recorder, iPad, tape recorder, etc.

- **The ideal:**

  - A device that makes high quality digital recordings (a laptop, most smartphones, iPad/Phone)
  - An quality microphone (in order of ideal: headset, lapel, desktop mic on a stand, internal device mic)
  - A quiet, controlled environment

- **The deluxe ideal:**

  - A device dedicates to making high quality digital recordings (laptop, digital recorder, DAT)

  - A headset condenser mic (see below)

  - Sound booth (Saturday)

- **Common digital recording format specifications** (found on almost every digital recording device and software application now):

  - .wav PCM format MONO

    * This is the industry standard: it is open source, can be read by any device
    * Does not compress or alter the audio in any way
    * It also takes up the most memory (because it is not compressed)!
    * Only use other formats like .mp3 if you have space issues

  - 44.1k (CD quality)

    * This is called the *sampling frequency*
    * The default on most recording equipment and software
    * 48k is higher and becoming more common, but 44.1k is more than sufficient for language recordings (and it takes less memory)

  - 16 bit

    * The resolution of the sampling frequency
    * The default, and sufficient for language recordings

- Understanding how your recorder works

  - Do you know how to start and stop the recording?
  - Do you know where the files are on your computer/smartphone/iPad/Phone?
  - Do you know how to rename them?
  - Do you know how to copy or move them?

- Goals

  - Are you recording stories for a collection or for the language consultant's personal use?
  - Are you recording word lists for a talking dictionary or for a pronunciation guide?

2   A Direct Elicitation session

- Basic setup:

  - Recording device ideally on a stand (to prevent any knocking or vibrations in the table)
  - Check for sufficient memory (minimum two hours)

- Test levels: the golden rule for digital audio recording: *never go in the red!*

- The mic (if internal) should be pointed towards the speaker at a distance of around 3 feet (but this can vary)

- Make sure you and your language consultant is comfortable and has water

- Direct Elicitation using two methods: basic word lists – ideal if you know very little about the language

2.1   Direct Elicitation Method 1: *Through recording*

- The basic principles of *through recording*:

  - The entire session is recorded, breaks, starts, stops, and all resulting in one file for the session

  - Advantages: no details are missed – potentially interesting and spontaneous discussions, elaborations and speaker reflections are captured (also real-time corrections)

  - Possible disadvantages: recording memory intensive, and it can be hard to locate specific things later

1. Start recorder: introduce yourself, your language consultant, the date and time, and location

2. Record this same information in your field notes

3. Basic questions: *How do you say X?* or *What do you call (a) Y?*

2.2   Direct Elicitation Method 2: *Rehearsed recording*

- The basic principles of *rehearsed recording*:

  - The session is broken up into parts which are first practiced and then recorded

  - Advantages: organization, which makes for efficient memory use, retrieval, cataloging, and editing

  - Possible disadvantages: effects of rehearsed speech (it can sound clear, but unnatural)

1. Start recorder: introduce yourself, your language consultant, the date and time, and location

2. Record this same information in your field notes

3. Stop recorder and work through the following steps:

   a. Take three or four words or sentences

   b. Elicit these from the speaker and transcribe them

   c. Give the speaker a chance to practice them

    d. Restart the recorder and ask the speaker each of the words, pronouncing each one **three times** (the magic number in direct elicitation)

    e. Stop the recorder and repeat

PRACTICE! Eliciting parts of a Swadesh list

- The Swadesh list (1972): a classic compilation of basic concepts for the purposes of historical-comparative linguistics

- Chose one of the two Direct Elicitation methods above and elicit as many words as you can from the Swadesh list

- *Tip:* Instead of using the (slightly boring and pedantic) *How do you say X?* or *What do you call (a) Y?* questions, try taking the word and putting it into a sentence

3 An Observation Prompting session

- Although you could use either *through* or *rehearsed recording*, the latter works best

- Storyboards: an effective way of prompting naturalistic language with minimal interference

1. Start recorder: introduce yourself, your language consultant, the date and time, and location

2. Record this same information in your field notes

3. Stop recorder and work through the following steps:

    a. Chose a storyboard (either printed out or displayed as slides on a computer/iPad)

    b. Run through the story in English first (planning the story)

    c. Give the speaker a chance to rehearse the story in the language (maybe even a couple of times)

    d. Restart the recorder and ask the speaker to tell the story

    e. Stop the recorder and repeat with another storyboard

- You may chose to do the language transcription later while listening to the recordings rather than on the spot

PRACTICE! Eliciting a storyboard

- There is a very nice selection of storyboards for language elicitation at totemfieldstoryboards.org (or you can draw your own or adapt pictures)

---

4   Post-session

- Always review your recordings for quality or and malfunctions **as soon as possible** (i.e. the same day)

- Check your transcriptions and make the appropriate corrections and clarifications

- Fill in the timestamps for easy retrieval

- Identify questions for your next elicitation session