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Anthropological linguistics and field linguistics

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16.1 Introduction

Anthropological linguistics and field linguistics form a natural synergism and have done so ever since their origins in the descriptive work of missionaries at the dawn of the colonial period in the early 1500s. For instance, the missionaries who followed in the wake of the conquest of Mexico set about learning the native languages and customs of the indigenous peoples in order to convert them more efficiently to Christianity, a motivation that continues down to the present day for many evangelical churches operating in developing countries. Still, it needs to be said that much of what we know about the languages and cultures of many human societies is due to the hard work of missionaries over the last five centuries, and much of what they have written is undoubtedly of high scholarly value. Indeed in my own area of research, New Guinea, I would estimate that over 80 percent of what we know about its languages results from the work of missionaries of one stripe or another. We may deplore many of their motives and lament the cultural loss that all too often followed in their wake, but our knowledge of the linguistics and ethnography of the world would be much impoverished without their efforts.

The colonial expansion of the European states from the fifteenth century was devastating for traditional peoples throughout the world. Missionaries only played one, if rather central, role in this plunder. Settlers and slavers were even more damaging. Through both European settlement and the transportation of African slaves into the Americas, the native peoples there were dispossessed of their lands. This typically occurred after massive demographic collapse due to introduced diseases to which they had no resistance, and the consequent depopulation hindered their attempts to oppose intrusions by European settlers. They were settled on reserves, where they were strongly discouraged from practicing their traditional customs or speaking their native languages, and often severely punished for doing so. As a result, by the late nineteenth century in the United States and Canada, much of the knowledge of traditional cultural and linguistic practices was on the wane among the indigenous peoples. This spurred the work of the founder of anthropological linguistics and modern linguistic fieldwork techniques, Franz Boas, as he and his students – like Edward Sapir –
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raced to document much of this knowledge before it was lost; more than a few of the
languages Boas and his students documented are now extinct, and their work is all the
documentation we will ever have of them. Boas and his students put anthropological
linguistics and field linguistics on a much more scientific footing than it had held before, and
in many ways the Boasian articulation of their synergism stills holds sway today. In order to
undertake truly deep ethnographic work, Boas and his followers believed that a thorough
grounding in the native language was indispensable, and for this the proper procedures of
field linguistics as propounded by Boas were necessary. Field linguistics is still largely
understood in the terms articulated by Boas and his students, although, of course, the
technological resources available have developed exponentially since then, as has a reflexive
concern with the ethical dimensions of fieldwork. Still, the basic principles and procedures
are much the same. The chapter will provide a synopsis and illustration of these procedures.
It will also highlight the importance of documentary linguistics, the need to document the
full range of language forms, registers and styles used across as wide a range of genres and
contexts as possible. This is, of course, essential to any ethnographic study of a language,
which in essence is what anthropological linguistics is, but also provides a needed corrective
to normative pressures as a result of language description and documentation, unavoidable
as some might be.

16.2 Anthropological linguistics

While Boas never used the term ‘anthropological linguistics,’ as he believed linguistics was
properly just one of the subfields of anthropology more generally, the term has come into
general use over the last century as a point of contrast with structural or formal linguistics.
Structural or formal linguistics looks at language as a system of opposing formal categories
and their rules of combination. Linguistic analysis and description in structural linguistics are
largely system internal so to speak, as a language is seen as a structured body of knowledge
possessed by its speakers, in essence, a psychological endowment of competent speakers.
Anthropological linguistics, on the other hand, is concerned with the place of language in its
wider social and cultural context, its role in forging and sustaining cultural practices and social
structures. Anthropological linguistics needs to be distinguished from a number of neighboring
disciplines with overlapping interests, particularly its close sister, sociolinguistics.
Anthropological linguistics views language through the prism of the core anthropological
concept, culture, and, as such, seeks to uncover the meaning behind the use, misuse or non-use
of language, its different forms, registers and styles. It is an interpretive discipline, peeling
away at language to find cultural understandings. Anthropological linguistics studies how
humans employ communicative cultural practices or semiotic practices as meaning bearing
resources to forge and maintain large and small, transient or permanent, social groups.
Sociolinguistics, on the other hand, views language as a social institution, one of those
institutions within which individuals and groups carry out social interaction. It seeks to
discover how linguistic behavior patterns with respect to social groupings and correlates
differences in linguistic behavior with the variables defining social groups, such as age, sex,
class, race, etc.

Because anthropological linguistics seeks to uncover the meaning behind the uses of
language within culture, it also presents some overlap with semantics and pragmatics,
particularly the latter. Again, without insisting on sharp boundaries, I would like to
distinguish among these along the following lines. Semantics is that subfield of linguistics
that studies the meanings of signs, their interrelations and combinations, while pragmatics,
albeit a bit hazy in its own delimitations, investigates how speakers create meaning in context in ongoing acts of language use. In view of its definition offered above, anthropological linguistics can be contrasted with these two other fields by the central role that culture and cultural practices play in its descriptions. Consider a word *wampuŋ* from the Yimas language of New Guinea, which can be described semantically as polysemous, with the meanings ‘heart, care, desire.’ A pragmatic description will investigate its various uses in differing contexts to determine what extended meanings it can take on in appropriate contextual frames. But an anthropological linguistic description would go further and explore how this word is central in indigenous conceptualizations of morality and cultural practices of reciprocal gift exchange. Linguistic expressions and metaphors for culturally valorized practices related to generosity and exchange are built on this word. Finally, a detailed anthropological linguistic study will uncover the cultural beliefs and practices which account for why this word has the polysemous meanings it does; what, for instance, connects ‘heart’ with ‘care’ in indigenous ideology?

Duranti (2001) implies a contrast between anthropological linguistics and linguistic anthropology. While he denies that a true field of anthropological linguistics exists, preferring the term linguistic anthropology to cover this subfield, I regard the two terms as interchangeable. With some cogency, he argues that due to current concerns of mainstream linguistics with the explicit analysis of the formal structures of language in contrast to anthropology’s broader approach of looking at how humans make meaning through semiotic systems in cultural practices, this subfield is properly included within anthropology, rather than linguistics. However, I beg to differ, believing that the current historical divisions of academic turf are just that, historical and contingent, and subject to change, and I would be loath to institutionalize such divisions by insisting on rigidly labeled compartments. The current disciplinary concerns of linguistics do not reflect its earlier history in which it was firmly enjoined to anthropology. I expect that over time this more inclusive view will reassert itself, and hence my preference is to use both terms to cover this subfield, although, as titled, I will stick with the label anthropological linguistics in this chapter.

There is, however, a useful contrast in foci of research in anthropological linguistics that could be captured by Duranti’s (2001) implied opposition between anthropological linguistics and linguistic anthropology, namely, an investigation of the cross-linguistic variation of grammatical and semantic categories across languages and the implications of that variation for psychological processing and cultural practices (here the classificatory systems within the language provide the starting point for study) versus an exploration of how certain linguistic forms are used in ongoing cultural practices and social life to forge shared meanings (here observations of interactions in the ongoing flow of social action provide the point of departure for research). Obviously, these two approaches are not mutually exclusive, and many anthropological linguists are equally skilled in both, but they do represent different emphases in the project of understanding the role of language in sustaining cultural practices. The first of these approaches commonly goes under the name of linguistic relativity, and has a long pedigree in Western intellectual thought. But in its modern guise, it too traces itself back to Boas and the intellectual tradition that he founded. Boas emphasized the classificatory nature of language, and, in particular, how the differing systems of grammatical and semantic categories across languages forced speakers to attend to certain features of their environment when they constructed utterances. His classic example was the contrast between English and Kwak’wala. English requires tense and definiteness of nominal referents to be specified for all sentences, so that English speakers unlike, say, those of Indonesian, cannot say *man sick*, but must indicate all of these
categories as in the man is sick or the men were sick. Kwak’wala, on the other hand, does not require that speakers specify tense or number, but it does demand that they indicate the visibility or invisibility of referents and their proximity or distance from the speaker or addressee, so that man sick would be expressed for instance as something like (in translation) the man near me visible sick or the man not near me or you invisible sick. Boas’s foremost student, Edward Sapir, and his student in turn, Benjamin Lee Whorf developed such cross-linguistic observations into a full-fledged Principle of Linguistic Relativity, sometimes called the Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis, expressed most succinctly by Whorf (1956: 221) in the following:

the ‘linguistic relativity principle’ … means, in informal terms, that users of markedly different grammars are pointed by their grammars toward different types of observations and different evaluations of externally similar acts of observation, and hence are not equivalent as observers but must arrive at somewhat different views of the world.

Put more simply, this means that the categorical distinctions that the languages we speak force us to attend to will predispose us to cognizing the world in particular ways; the categories of our language have a shaping influence on the categories of our thinking.

Boas, Sapir and Whorf did not see this as a hypothesis, something to be proved or disproved by experimental procedures involving the usual distinction between dependent and independent variables. Rather, it was more like a mathematical axiom, a shared postulate or assumed background of understanding, within which significant questions can be asked and valuable research work proceed. However, later and current work has taken it as a hypothesis to be investigated by standard batteries of psychological testing, probing for cognitive effects, if any, of the differing semantic and grammatical classificatory systems across languages. Such testing has now been carried out for a wide range of semantic and grammatical domains, e.g. color, number, shape, gender, time, eventhood. Here I will illustrate the methodology with the most impressive recent work along these lines, the investigation of the cognitive consequences of the differing systems of specifying spatial location across languages, a long-term research project at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics led by Stephen Levinson. A fundamental distinction in this domain is between languages which employ absolute spatial reckoning systems versus those which use relative spatial reckoning systems. Relative spatial reckoning systems such as those in English and familiar European languages use concepts like LEFT, RIGHT, FRONT, BACK, which have no fixed designation and depend on the speaker’s orientation. If I am facing the house, the tree is on my left, in the space that extends from my left hand, but if I turn around so that my back is toward the house, then the tree is on my right; its spatial position is relative to my orientation. Absolute spatial reckoning systems fix the location of objects absolutely according to a fixed system of axes in geographical space, rather like our cardinal directions, north, south, east and west. A wide range of axes can be used in absolute systems. In addition to the cardinal directions, languages can use the direction of the flow of rivers, the direction of the winds, the coastline/seashore versus the interior of islands, or the vertical slant of the land. A particularly striking example of an absolute spatial reckoning system is found in Guugu-Yimidhirr, of northeastern Australia. This language employs four roots, corresponding roughly to the four cardinal directions, as in Figure 16.1.

Note that these spatial categories are absolutely fixed, due to the geography of Earth, and are not subject to variation according to the spatial orientation of the speaker. If something is to my north, it is to my north regardless of whether it is in front of me, in back
of me, to my left or to my right. Its spatial position is absolutely fixed with respect to mine, regardless of my relative viewpoint.

Levinson (2003) investigated the cognitive consequences of the absolute spatial reckoning system of Guugu-Yimidhirr speakers and contrasted them with a control group of Dutch speakers, whose linguistic system is the egocentric, relativistic equivalent of English. His experiments probed the cognitive consequences of this absolute system by systematically testing the recognition and recall of spatial orientation of objects for Guugu-Yimidhirr men. In one recognition test, speakers facing north were shown two cards, each with a red square and a blue rectangle toward an edge. On one card the red square was to the viewer’s left and the blue rectangle to his right; the other was reversed (of course, they were identical cards, just rotated 180°). The speaker was asked to choose one card and remember it. He was then led into another room, with another table with the same two cards lying on it, but now facing south. Note that Guugu-Yimidhirr speakers and Dutch speakers should behave differently here. If a Dutch speaker chose the card with the red square to his left (in the west quadrant), when rotated south he should still choose a card with the red square to his left (but this time in the east quadrant). The Guugu-Yimidhirr speaker should show no such switch; having chosen the card with the red square to the west, he should stick with this choice, regardless of the fact that the square is now on his right when previously it was on his left.

The results were exactly as predicted: nine out of ten Guugu-Yimidhirr speakers chose the card with the red square in the same quadrant regardless of whether they were looking north or south, demonstrating that they were clearly identifying the cards on the basis of absolutely aligned quadrants. All fifteen subjects of a Dutch control group contrasted in identifying the cards on the basis of a relativistic egocentric LEFT–RIGHT axis. These psychological tests do then support a claim of linguistic relativity in the domain of spatial reckoning; the variations in how space is categorized between Dutch and Guugu-Yimidhirr are systematically related to differences in cognition: Guugu-Yimidhirr speakers, whose language has absolute spatial reckoning terms, systematically and regularly perform differently in such psychological tests than do speakers of Dutch, a language like English with relative spatial reckoning terms.

Note that the standard Whorfian interpretation of the Principle of Linguistic Relativity and that of ongoing work in this mold, such as Levinson’s discussed here, is concerned with the denotational symbolic properties of language and their consequences for cognition: taking the semantic and grammatical categories of various languages as axes of classification for how the things of the world can be referred to or talked about, these are then investigated for the consequences for how these things can be known or remembered. In two classic
articles, Silverstein (1976, 1979) extended the idea of linguistic relativity to the indexical pragmatic properties of languages, and this brings me to my second main topic: how certain linguistic forms are used in ongoing cultural practices and social life to forge shared meanings. Indexes are signs whose interpretation is dependent on the immediate context, as smoke is an index of fire. Languages are shot through with vital indexical signs that require context for interpretation, such as pronouns I and you, temporal words like now, then and tomorrow; spatial words like here and there; and so forth. Silverstein points out that there is a crucial distinction between types of indexical signs in languages, a contrast he labels presupposing versus creative, and this contrast is central to a great deal of work done in anthropological linguistics. The contrast is not absolute, but more of a cline. Presupposing indexes are those whose use requires a prior context to be realized in order for their usage to be felicitous. Good examples of these are deictics like now. Now cannot be used to index the time of an event when the presupposed context, i.e. co-occurrence at the moment of speaking, cannot be satisfied. For another example consider the avoidance languages of Australian Aboriginal languages, special registers of these languages mandated for usage when speaking with one’s in-laws. Note that the use of these registers presupposes the context of one’s in-law as the addressee. Yet another example are gender deictics like kap and khá in Thai; these presuppose a male and female speaker respectively.

More interesting are the more creative indexes; these are legion and the stock in trade of much work in both anthropological linguistics and sociolinguistics. Very obvious examples are the markers of genre types, such as once upon a time. The very fact that a text begins with this formulaic expression immediately calls into mind a context in which the following text is to be interpreted as a fairy tale; they trigger the interpretive context which construes
the text as a fairy tale. For another, consider the phenomenon of code switching, in which bilingual speakers switch between languages. In very many situations, it is the choice of the language that creates the context in which the interaction is carried out between speakers. Consider the situation of a Yimas villager, bilingual in Yimas vernacular and Tok Pisin. If the villager chooses to speak Yimas to a fellow villager, he is creating a context of relaxed non-formal interaction about village or domestic matters, but if he chooses to speak Tok Pisin, immediately this raises a more serious tone to the conversation, likely to be about business or politics or other extra-village matters. The choice of the language itself creates the context within which the verbal interaction will be interpreted. The phenomenon of covert prestige provides another example, as in this case study from the English dialect spoken in Norwich, East Anglia (Trudgill 1972). In the local dialect spoken there, the pronunciation of the final vowel in *ear, idea, here* varies from the standard pronunciation [ɪə] to a local pronunciation which makes *ear* rhyme with *air*, and *here*, with *hair*. The investigator Peter Trudgill tape recorded interviews and noted the actual distribution of pronunciations for each interviewee. He then asked each of them how they thought they pronounced these words, noting that some self-reports were accurate, some overestimated their use of the standard varieties (over-reporting) and some underestimated it (under-reporting), and these were the results for male speakers:

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<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Over-reporting</td>
<td>22 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under-reporting</td>
<td>50 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accurate</td>
<td>28 percent</td>
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Note that half of the men claimed to be using the local, more working-class rhyming variant when, in fact, they were using the standard. It seems the local speech forms typical of working-class speech have an appeal to middle-class men, associated, as it seems to be, with masculinity and toughness, reflecting clear articulations of gender understandings in British culture. Hence we can expect that when a middle-class man uses the working-class variant he is creating a context in which his gender role is being constructed in a particular way and through which his verbal interchanges need to be interpreted quite differently from when he uses the standard pronunciation. For a final more complex example, consider the elaborate speech level phenomena of Javanese. In this language the social relationship between speaker and addressee is marked by the choice of language register: *ngoko* or low register for a solidary relationship of equals and when a higher ranked person speaks to a lower one, and *krama* for non-solidary relationships or when a lower ranked person speaks to a higher one:

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NGOKO: apa kowé njupuk sega semono
KRAMA: menapa panjemenjan mendhet sekul semontem
Q you take rice that much
‘Will you take that much rice?’
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All the words in these two sentences are distinct in the two registers; this is a much more elaborate system for the signaling of social relations than that of the contrast between *tu* and *vous* in French. But the function is similar. The choice of *ngoko* versus *krama* actually defines the social relationship between speakers in the verbal interaction; they make explicit the terms in which the interlocutors will regard each other. Although other semiotic markers can be taken as a wider context to indicate relative rank, such as dress or demeanor, the
choice of register is not presupposed by that context; speakers can always refuse to recognize the status of such markers. But when a register has been selected, the relative status of the interlocutors and therefore the context for the ongoing verbal interaction is set. These cross-linguistically variable systems of indexical signs are a second source of linguistic relativity. Because they commonly create the context within which ongoing discourse must be interpreted, differing indexical systems across languages will set up quite different contextual frameworks for the interpretation of utterances. Because these contexts constitute the actual life worlds in which verbal actors make sense of signs, different cultural interpretations of these signs arise, and this can lead to much misunderstanding.

Hymes (1972) offers yet a third nexus of linguistic relativity. He argues that the actual range and types of uses of language vary widely across the speech communities of the world. Different cultures often impose quite different conventions for the use and form of language in comparable social situations, and appropriate linguistic practices in line with these conventions is a required characteristic for a speaker’s membership in the linguistic community as a competent member, what Hymes has called communicative competence. Because linguistic practices are the primary human communicative behavior through which humans sustain sociocultural life, different systems of such practices entail different sociocultural worlds. Cultural values and beliefs are in part constitutive of linguistic reality. The field of study which has grown out of Hymes’s insight is called the Ethnography of Communication. Work in this tradition has very much focused on the performance of language, on how various genres are performed and evaluated in differing cultures and in turn how these are related to wider sociocultural frames of practice. The performance of speech acts or verbal arts are favorite areas of study. For instance, Rosaldo (1982) contrasts the performance of the speech act of directives or orders between speakers of English and Ilongot of the Philippines. Directives in English are commonly issued with a good deal of redress, to avoid affronts to the recipient’s negative face, their right not to be imposed upon. This is a right highly valued in English speaking culture, tied as it is to notions of individualism, privacy and autonomous choice of action. But Ilongot speakers typically issue them baldly with no redressive action, but they do not regard these as an affront to their equality and dignity, because they are viewed as expressing reasonable social expectations, relationships nurtured in continuing social interactions, rather than impositions of the other’s prerogatives of action. The Ilongot do not regard speech acts as the achievement of individualist selves coding their intentions in linguistic expressions, but most prominently as ways of invoking cooperative bonds among people, and cooperation is fundamental to social interactions in this egalitarian society.

The construction of genres, diverse types of texts, is another favorite stomping ground of ethnographers of communication. Genres consist of historically transmitted, relatively stable frameworks for orienting the production and interpretation of discourse. While strongly conventionalized and grounded in the social practices of language production and understanding in the community, they are still nonetheless flexible and open to creative manipulation by performers. It is creative flexibility that allows them to be molded to diverse and changing cultural needs. For example, the telling of a fable may be to entertain, but it also may be used to instruct children about proper moral behavior, as in Aesop’s Fables. The choice of which fable to relate may be prompted by a particular child’s misbehavior earlier in the day, so that the performance of the fable indexes both wider sociocultural beliefs about proper moral behavior as well as a currently relevant social relationship between the performer (the father) and the audience (the naughty child). Bowen (1989) describes how a traditional poetic genre among the Gayo of Sumatra has been recast now as a propaganda
tool of modern Indonesian nationalism. In traditional egalitarian Gayo society these poetic
duels were mainly individualized; they resembled formal oratory which involves turn-taking
between two virtuoso orators representing different villages. The text of these duels was
highly formulaic. Turns during the duel consisted of fixed two-line proverbs of high
parallelism. Since the late 1940s the Gayo have been part of the Indonesian nation state, a
large centralizing and modernizing political entity. In order to propagate its nationalist and
modernist ideology, the local government administration has off and on encouraged a new
type of performance of poetic duels. Unlike the traditional individualist approach, these
performances involve teams, consisting of between ten and twenty men and boys, each led
by two to four head orators. Each team composes songs, many of which provide religious
advice or commentary on economic development or current politics. These performances
are staged for local entertainment, but with a clear wider political aim by the ruling elites.
Literacy practices too exhibit great cross-linguistic variation in how they are practiced and
understood. Kulick and Stroud (1993) show that literate practices among the Gapun of New
Guinea, while introduced through westernization via schooling and missionization, have
been taken up in a particularly indigenous way: written texts, especially those of the New
Testament or other religious tracts, can be used to intercede with God to realize desired
outcomes. This tallies very closely with their traditional ideological understanding of
language. Certain words uttered in certain contexts have the power through supernatural
sanction to bring about desired outcomes. Hence, what is most striking about Gapun literacy
practices is how much they have taken on as norms the uses of language associated with oral
discourse, particularly oratory.

16.3 Field linguistics

The methods of field linguistics vary somewhat depending on one’s research interests. If the
researcher’s interests are descriptive or theoretical linguistics, the methodologies required
can be more circumscribed than if they are engaged in anthropological linguistic pursuits.
Because of very rapid technological change, I will not be addressing equipment needs for
the collection of data in the field here at all; potential fieldworkers should check with
knowledgeable experts about current best practice before departing for their field site. For
reasons of space limitations, I will also not be dealing with the matter of ethical issues
surrounding fieldwork besides stating the golden rule: treat others as you yourself would
like to be treated. This is not because I regard them as unimportant, to the contrary they are
vital, but they require much more than the few paragraphs I could devote to them here; the
reader is invited to consult the relevant chapters of Bowern (2008), Chelliah and de Reuse

The best way to investigate the language of a community is in situ, living within the
village and learning as many of the social customs of the people as possible. This is
indispensable if the goal of research is a topic within anthropological linguistics, such as the
performance of specific genres or how spatial terms are used in everyday navigation. But
even if the goals are squarely within descriptive linguistics, like writing a grammar or
preparing a dictionary, where it could be conceivable to carry out this task while working
with one or two language consultants in the comfort of one’s own office or home, it is still
highly desirable to spend long periods of time in a community where the language is spoken.
In many cases the social contexts in which the language is used daily will affect aspects of
its structure; for instance, the functions of discourse particles can hardly be understood in
any other way. Further, it is very important, if time and circumstances permit, for the linguist
to learn to speak the language she is studying, and again this is even a more pressing need if the research has an anthropological bent. The best way to do this is to live in the village where, hopefully, if the language is not moribund, one is surrounded by the language in constant use. This is not to say that valuable work cannot be done without a speaking knowledge of the language; many good studies have come from linguists who could not speak the language under investigation. Still, there will be many aspects of the language and its use which can only be properly understood, indeed discovered, with good active spoken competence. Normally, the researcher will not come to the field site with much knowledge, if any, of the language to be studied, and will need to rely at first on a contact language, typically the lingua franca of the region which she has learnt before arrival in the field site (monolingual fieldwork is so rare these days that I am ignoring this possibility, but see Sakel and Everett 2012). But it is important not to extend this reliance unduly, as this will seriously impede, perhaps even forestall, acquisition of the language under investigation. It is quite likely that the contact language enjoys higher prestige than the village language, and once villagers develop a habit of addressing the linguist in the contact language, it will become a habit very hard to break. It is strongly encouraged that the linguist start using as much of the village language as her competence will allow as soon as possible after arrival and continually expand this competence, even if her inadequate efforts are a constant source of amusement to the villagers (as I can assure you from my own experience, they will be). Few linguists will ever achieve anything like the full competence of an adult native speaker, but efforts in this direction are always appreciated by the community, and also failure to perceive improvements in the language competence of the linguist may be a source of discouragement for the language consultants and lead them to lose interest in the research project.

Social conditions will commonly constrain who can serve as language consultants. In many communities, such as some in New Guinea in which I have worked, it will be considered inappropriate for the consultants to be the opposite sex to the fieldworker. If the fieldworker is male, this can present special problems, for the men may commonly work away from the village during the day in gardens, hunting or paid work. But this can be a boon too, as elderly, physically incapacitated, village bound men often possess fuller and more accurate language information. Still, this can be frustrating, as, for instance, in New Guinea, it has commonly been my experience that older women are the most knowledgeable about their native language, but local mores exclude them from being possible consultants. A male and female team seems to make the best fieldworkers. In selecting language consultants, the linguist should look for people who are keen to teach the language, have an outgoing, communicative personality, and, most importantly, will not get bored with the often long and tedious hours of data elicitation. Be careful in your selection of consultants (that is, if there is a large choice; in situations of moribund languages, there will not be). Try working with a number of different people at first, because if a particular person turns out to be unsuitable to the task for whatever reason, but has been selected early as a main language consultant, for the linguist to discontinue working with them could be socially unacceptable, taken as a serious social rebuff. The fieldworker should be sure about the suitability of someone as a consultant before taking them on.

Before sitting down to serious work with consultants, the linguist will have heard the language being spoken around them for some days, but is unlikely to have made much headway, because long unbroken chains of discourse are simply too difficult to process at this early stage. When she now initiates formal data elicitation sessions with her consultants, her first task is to master the sound system of the language; only with this foundation can she go on to grammar and discourse. The best way to do this is with simple words. The linguist draws
up a list of some 200–500 basic words, largely nouns, but also pronouns, and a few common verbs, adjectives, adverbs and numerals. Mostly nouns, though, as they are both easy to elicit and commonly morphologically simpler than the other parts of speech, and they should include words for body parts, kin terms, animals and important plants, household and local cultural objects, and geographical and natural objects. The linguist should say the word in the eliciting contact language and prompt a response in the vernacular equivalent. The consultant says this twice, after which the linguist attempts to repeat it. The consultant will say if the attempt is correct or not. If correct, the linguist records the item in phonetic transcription in her fieldnotes. If incorrect, the consultant is asked to repeat it again, and the linguist attempt to imitate again. This can go on for a few more times, but in no cases should the consultant be badgered to repeat this process more than five times. If the word is too difficult for the linguist at this stage, skip to the next one and come back to it later. After transcribing about fifty words or so in this manner, they should be tape recorded for later, more detailed work.

After recording some 500 words or so, the linguist can perform a provisional phonemic analysis. This will permit them to move on to the elicitation of morphological structures. Some languages like Vietnamese or Hawai‘ian have little or no morphology; others, like polysynthetic languages such as Yimas or Pawnee, have a great deal. In language with little morphology, syntactic structures take up its functions, so in field linguistics it is impossible to insist on a strict demarcation of elicitation procedures for morphology versus syntax. Furthermore, both ultimately need to be studied as they are used in actual spontaneous discourse; only in textual discourse will the natural morphological and syntactic patterns of the language emerge. But, at this early stage, with only a basic knowledge of the phonology, the linguist is just too ignorant of the basic morphosyntax of the language to make much sense of the running discourse of texts. It is necessary to do some basic elicitation work to construct an understanding of the fundamental morphological units and syntactic constructions, but it is absolutely vital to bear in mind that elicited data in morphosyntax will probably give quite an artificial view of the language. A language description of any sort should never be based principally on elicited data, for these may reflect the contrived situation of the elicitation session or the morphosyntactic patterns of the contact language used in elicitation. The primary data for any description must be the natural spontaneous data of narrative, expository or conversational texts, collected in a variety of contexts. Also, only if a reliable primary grammatical description already exists can projects of a more anthropological bent proceed, such as investigation of the performance of specific genre types or the use of indexical forms to enact social hierarchies.

In building up a basic profile of the morphosyntax of a language, I suggest the following procedure:

1. Elicit basic infl ecational categories for nouns, such as number and possession, e.g. one house, two houses, many houses or my house, your house, etc. If nouns exhibit varying inflectional patterns, this is probably indicative of a gender or noun class system. Basic noun phrases can also be elicited at this point: three black pigs, two tall men, etc.
2. Elicit basic infl ecational categories for verbs: i.e. tense, she walked, she is walking, she will walk; aspect, she is eating now, she has already eaten. The fieldworker should elicit these with third person subjects, as first and second person often get hopelessly garbled in translation, so that a prompt I am listening often comes back as you are listening and vice versa. The researcher should choose verbs denoting simple actions like walk, hit, run, jump, eat, sleep, talk, break, a mixture of transitive and intransitive verbs, to investigate whether there are significant conjugation differences.
3. Now proceed to eliciting full paradigms for verbs, again using a mixture of both transitive and intransitive verbs, e.g. I run, you(SG) run, he runs, she runs, and so on, and I hit you(SG), he hit me, she hit me, you(SG) hit me, you(SG) hit him, you(SG) hit her and so forth, in all combinations of person and number for both subject and object, constantly bearing in mind the common confusion and switch in first and second person pronouns. The paradigms for transitive and intransitive verbs should be elicited in all three basic tenses and then in the negated forms for all three.

4. The linguist is now in a position to elicit basic clauses with the two principal parts of speech, noun and verbs. Simple clauses can be elicited both with intransitive verbs, e.g. The woman is cooking, the sick man will die, two old trees fell down, and transitive ones, the woman is cooking meat, the man cut down the tree, the two tall men will eat the meat, and so forth. Various combinations of nouns, noun phrases and verbs should be tried to see if these link to systematic differences in the clause structure, such as case marking being determine by choices of different verbs. Phrases specifying temporal or locational notions can also be added to these eliciting clause prompts. These elicited clauses may provide information about the word order of constituents, but this must be treated with caution, as it may simply reflect the word order of the prompting language of elicitation.

Finally, now the linguist has acquired enough understanding of the basic building blocks of language to begin working with ongoing discourse and texts. A text is a body of language behavior generated continuously over a period of time by language consultants and recognized as an integrated whole. The texts the fieldworker is initially concerned with are conversations and narratives. The types of texts of much anthropological linguistic interest, such as songs, poems and other forms of oral literature, are usually too difficult at this early stage, with many archaic and stylized forms. Conversations, too, are likely to prove somewhat difficult because of their speed, the presence of multiple speakers, and reduced colloquial forms. But they are very important sources of information about the meanings of the indexical signs of the language so, difficult or not, they must be studied, especially if the linguist hopes to acquire fluency in the language. Narrative texts are of two types: personal experiences of the consultants and their acquaintances or traditional myths and legends. The latter are the most popular form of texts with many fieldworkers and are undoubtedly a rich source of data, but they are more difficult to work with than the former, for their status as myths sanctioned by tradition means their form may be heavily stylized and less typical of everyday language. In gathering texts, the full text should first be video recorded, and then the linguist works slowly through it section by section with consultants to transcribe it.

A crucial step in fieldwork is the analysis and expansion of textual material; this should in fact constitute the bulk of the primary data. Analyzing a transcribed text in the early stages of fieldwork will be difficult: word boundaries will be hard to identify, and many words and morphemes unknown. But with a gradually increasing corpus, as recurring forms are identified, things will become clearer. A very important role for texts is in their basis for supplementary elicitation. Many morphemes and constructions will only come to the fieldworker’s attention for the first time in transcribed texts, and she can then use these examples as a basis to collect further data so that enough material is available to describe the morpheme or construction.

Given the topics that they normally research, anthropological linguists typically need a further kit of methods beyond the ones already described here, because they are concerned with studying the language in its daily use across a whole range of genres and practices and across a wide range of speakers to determine the patterns of variation. For example,
anthropological linguists interested in the local genres of verbal art, such as divination chants or political oratory, will need to video record these in live performances, not rely on contrived staged renditions for their documentation. The researcher will have to keep a low profile in such live performances to minimize any effects the recording equipment or their own presence may have on its form. Documenting conversations across a wide range of contexts and with speakers diverse in age, gender and social rank are indispensable in any anthropological linguistic research, but recording natural conversations presents similar problems in the self-censoring effects that the recording equipment may have on the interlocutors. Surreptitious recording is of course unethical, so ways must be found to habituate speakers to the presence of the recording equipment; often, simple familiarity is sufficient to do the trick. There is an entire discipline, whose methodology is often used by anthropological linguists, called Conversational Analysis (Sidnell 2010) that investigates conversation as a central domain for the way speakers use ongoing indexical cues to construct shared social meanings.

Perhaps the core methodology used by anthropological linguists is the same as that used by social and cultural anthropologists more generally – participant observation, the observation of the ongoing social life of the members of the speech community. This entails being in the middle of things as they unfold in the community, being keenly observant of as many details as one can take in, and making copious notes of what one has observed. From these notes and observations one will gradually discern recurring patterns, and these will allow one to generate hypotheses about what the various linguistic behaviors she has observed actually mean, for, as I noted at the outset of this chapter, the goal of anthropological linguistic research is to uncover the meaning behind the use of language in its varying forms. Participant observation on its own cannot answer these questions about meanings. For that we need the testimony of native actors, and anthropological linguists generally use two methods to obtain that: interviews and testing. Interviews can be structured or open-ended, but the point of them is to get native actors to talk about how they regard or interpret the social behavior the fieldworker is interested in. Again, it is vital to interview a number of people drawn from a wide range of social roles about such topics to get a full understanding, as the behavior may carry different meanings for different people (if this is appropriate; in some cases, it may not be if the information is restricted to certain groups, such as esoteric clan knowledge or women’s business). It is important to bear in mind too that the understanding of interviews as a genre may vary quite widely across cultures; in some cases, it may be inappropriate for cultural outsiders or apprentices (and the anthropological linguist will quite likely find herself in one of these roles) to ask questions of an expert about their areas of expertise. In these cases one will have to find a rapprochement suitable to the community so that something akin to interviews can be conducted. Types of tests can be a useful supplement to interviews as a way of getting at the native construal of local linguistic practices. Based on the researcher’s hypotheses developed from observation, questionnaires can be developed presenting a number of differing scenarios or stimuli. Speakers are then asked for their reactions to these stimuli, and these can be taken as local interpretations or meanings for the linguistic practices the stimuli depict. Again care must be taken with such batteries of testing so that both the stimuli and the overall context of the situation in which the testing is administered are as close to experiences encountered in everyday life as possible, but they are very useful in collecting large amounts of data from many different people in a relatively short time.
Further reading

Agha (2007); Ahearn (2012); Duranti (1997); Foley (1997); Hanks (1996)

References

Hymes, D. (1972) Toward ethnographies of communication: The analysis of communicative events.