Taiwan Sign Language and Beyond. 2009.
Edited by James H-Y. Tai and Jane Tsay. Chia-Yi, Taiwan: The Taiwan Institute for the Humanities, National Chung Cheng University. Pages 1-19.

Sign Language Field Methods: Approaches, Techniques, and Concerns[1]

Susan Fischer
Center for Research on Language, UCSD

Abstract. Doing sign language fieldwork has a lot in common with doing fieldwork on other languages, particularly stigmatized languages, but there are also issues unique to sign languages. Ethical considerations are paramount: obtaining truly informed consent is key, as is the issue of maintaining confidentiality when using video data. Also important is the establishment and maintenance of rapport with consultants. I discuss practical issues such as the setup for recording, types of video to use, and transcription options. Finally I discuss elicitation protocols, with an emphasis on monolingual techniques, and share some ideas that have worked well for me over the years.

0. Introduction

In this paper I shall discuss my ideas about doing fieldwork on signed languages. I shall address three primary topics: ethical concerns, technical issues, and elicitation techniques. Some of the topics on which I shall touch apply to any type of fieldwork; others apply especially, though not exclusively, to the study of stigmatized or marginalized languages; and some apply almost exclusively to issues in the study of signed languages. These observations are based largely on my extensive experience in over 35 years of fieldwork on several different sign languages. My original training in fieldwork was under the late master Kenneth Hale, who also directed my dissertation on language acquisition (collecting data from children presents many problems parallel to those related to working with a language one doesn't know!). For over 35 years I have worked on American Sign Language (ASL), but I have also worked for the last 15 years on Japanese Sign Language (JSL), and have conducted workshops where the languages under scrutiny were British Sign Language (BSL), Ugandan Sign Language, and

[1] I would like to express my gratitude to the many Deaf consultants from whose insights and patience I have learned about how to elicit sign language data. Thanks to audiences at National Chang Cheng University, the University of Central Lancaster and the Center for Deafness, Cognition, and Language at University College London for stimulating discussions. Thanks also to Gladys Tang for permission to reproduce some of her Hong Kong Sign Language data. I also owe a debt of gratitude to the late Kenneth Hale, an inspiration to any fieldworker. Some of my JSL data were collected under a senior research grant from the Japan Foundation.

Brazilian Sign Language. I have also taught sign language field methods at two summer linguistics institutes.

1. Concerns about stigmatized languages

Signed languages have historically been stigmatized; especially in the past, users were often ashamed to admit that they even knew the language. This is true not only of users of sign languages but also of those who speak nonstandard dialects and creole languages (see, for example, Fischer, 1978). Such stigmatized languages or dialects help to define a community, and are often a marker of ingroup solidarity. What this means for fieldworkers is that in protecting the language from outsiders, users of the language may not let the fieldworker see the real language. In the case of sign languages, a fieldworker may get signing that is colored to a greater or lesser extent by the surrounding spoken language, e.g., signed English rather than “real” ASL or BSL. This can occur for two reasons: first, as just mentioned, users of the language want to protect it from outside scrutiny; second, since the language is stigmatized, users of the language may wish to prove or even show off to the investigator that they know the matrix spoken language. See the work of Labov (1966) and many others for examples in stigmatized dialects of English. Many of the ideas below are intended to get around this obstacle.

2. Choosing consultants

When studying an endangered language, a fieldworker may not have the luxury of being able to pick and choose among consultants; sometimes there are only one or two speakers of the language left. In the case of sign languages, the ideal consultant will come from a Deaf family, having been exposed to the native sign language from birth by parents or at least older deaf siblings. This restricts the possible number of informants. It has been estimated that about 0.5% of the population of the US are prelingually deaf (Schein & Delk, 1974f). Of that number, only about 8-10% have even one deaf parent. So only one in at most 2,000 people will be a deaf native signer. There are, of course, many hearing native signers, called CODAs (children of deaf adults), but there is a wide variation in the sign language abilities of hearing children of deaf parents (the eldest will often be highly skilled, but younger hearing children may not be), and their signing may be more influenced by the spoken language, not only because of exposure in school and on the playground, but also because deaf parents of hearing children may sign more like the surrounding majority spoken language in order to give their children a linguistic leg up.

Still, there is often more choice of native signers than among native users of endangered languages.[2] That said, not all native signers make good linguistic consultants. This includes some sign language teachers. The rise of sign language

[2] Trevor Johnston (personal communication) suggests that Auslan may soon be an endangered language, as close to 100% of deaf Australian children are receiving cochlear implants.

textbooks has also given rise to a certain amount of prescriptivism among sign language teachers, who will, for example, say that a particular structure is not used and in the next breath use that very structure. What should one look for in a good sign language informant? Most important is a metalinguistic skill, the ability to distance oneself from a particular situation and focus on form rather than content. A lot of linguistic elicitation involves introspection; ideal consultants should be able to think about what is grammatical and what is not. They should also have the temperament to "stand up to" the researcher when the researcher is barking up the wrong grammatical tree. A sense of humor and the ability to play with the language are an asset, as this also demonstrates metalinguistic skills. In my experience, some of the best consultants have some background in theater or are at least extroverted.

3. Ethical Issues

American and European universities usually have standards for working with human subjects. This includes such issues as informed consent and guarantees of anonymity. In the case of sign languages, as with some indigenous languages, both informing and obtaining consent can be problematic. Providing information in the written or spoken majority language may be insufficient; if the investigator has inadequate skills in the sign language, an interpreter may be required. Similarly, a signer may be illiterate or unable to write their name. In these cases, what I usually do is obtain the consent right on the video. This leads us to the question of anonymity. Because sign language researchers must use video rather than audio, it is impossible to guarantee anonymity, if one is going to show videos of the signer. If a signer wishes not to have their video shown on the outside, what one can do is to have a "talent" re-sign the data in as exact a copy as possible. Another possibility is to simply transcribe the data and publish it without video. I have had the problem of having incomplete releases of old data (If I collected data 20 years ago, I wouldn't have thought to ask if I could use the person's data on a passworded Website, for example), and am thus forbidden to use it in any way other than the way the consultant specified.

I generally use a release form (written or signed) that specifies a number of possibilities. The first is to ask the consultant if they want to be thanked by name or remain anonymous. In my experience, about 95% of my consultants have wished to be thanked by name. I then specify (and provide places to sign or initial or assent/refuse) several levels of permission: for example, may I show the video to other researchers? May I show the video to my students? If I publish a multimedia article, may I include clips from the informant's data? May I post data on a passworded or unpassworded website? May I put it on You-Tube? (I haven't asked this yet, but might in the future!) Occasionally, a consultant will ask for a copy of the video that I make, and I am always willing to provide it.[3] One consultant I worked with in 2006 turned the tables and videotaped me talking about ASL!

Children constitute a special case for informed consent. In the case of young children, one must obtain the consent of the parents. However, with older children, it is important to get the child's as well as the parents' consent. Also, there can be complications depending on the situation. Suppose, for example, that one is taping a particular child in the classroom. In that case, it is important to obtain the permission of the person in authority at the school, such as the principal, as well as the teacher. If other children show up in the video, it is necessary to get the permission of all of their parents as well.

4. Gaining Trust

One of the most important things about working with a native consultant is building trust and developing rapport; from trust flow many advantages both to the investigator and to the consultant. The first piece of advice I have for gaining trust is to learn the language one is trying to investigate. Some researchers believe that they can do research on a language without learning it; such a tack may be possible with users of languages that are well-established in their own countries, but it works less well for stigmatized languages. There are a number of reasons for learning the language: First, it gives one credibility in the community and with the individual consultant. Indirectly, at least, it shows respect for the language and the culture. By so doing, it gains access into the community. Remember that users of stigmatized languages often "circle the wagons" to prevent outsiders from getting in. Learning the language makes one more of an insider ally than an outsider.

A second, more practical, reason for learning the language is that it is the best way to know whether the data one is collecting are valid and appropriate. It also helps one to figure out what the linguistically interesting elements of the grammar are.

In developing trust and rapport, it is important to avoid both the appearance and the actuality of exploitation. Exploitation occurs in a lot of language communities, and some people have been burned by outsiders and are rightly wary of them.[4] It is important to remember that without the consultant, we as linguists are nothing. Therefore

[3] Indeed, one of my consultants died tragically, and I gave the parents a copy of the videos of our sessions; it was the last pictures they had of the consultant.

[4] This is one area where informed consent becomes crucial. I once collected some data from a native signer. Another linguist wanted to see the data, and I asked permission from the consultant to make a copy for the other linguist. The consultant agreed to the copy, but the other linguist then used the data in a way that the consultant had not approved, resulting in the consultant's becoming upset. One gray area is the use of purchased commercial videos for purposes other than those intended, e.g., using a video designed to teach a grammatical point for the training of interpreters. I've even seen some deaf people use the term "linguist" as a pejorative, based on the attitudes of linguists they've met.

it behooves us to find ways to **give something back to the community**. Exploitation comes in several flavors: one is economic. Given that consultants are key to the success of our research, we mustn't treat them like convenient slaves; they deserve reasonable payment or equivalent for their time. In my work in Japan, I have often encountered consultants who refuse to accept money. In that case, I have bought them gifts, or done favors for them such as helping out in teaching an interpreting class or giving a talk to a group of Deaf women. Sometimes a struggling student may not have the wherewithal to pay a consultant; in that case there are many alternatives that may cost time but not much money, e.g., inviting them over for a meal, or exchanging information. For example, some of the consultants I've worked with in Japan wanted to learn some ASL, so we divided up the time of each session so that they got something out of it. Another example might be to help someone with the written or spoken language in exchange for help with the sign language of an area.

A second type of exploitation is scholarly; many linguists make a name for themselves on the basis of their fieldwork. I have known linguists who did not even acknowledge the help of their consultants; this is taking anonymity too far, in my opinion. Part of giving back to the community is explaining to the consultant what one is doing and why, and providing training in linguistics and transcription that may help to further the consultant's career. Ultimately, the researchers with the best insights into a sign language are its native users; our goal should be to train native linguists, both formally (i.e., graduate degrees) and informally; this is true not only for sign languages but for indigenous languages as well, and the field as a whole will benefit. I see a path from consultant to co-author to full-fledged professional.

A third type of exploitation is what we might call cultural. It is all well and good to train a few linguists from the community, but the rest of the community may still feel exploited. It is understandably frustrating for users of a language not to understand an article about their own language. Part of giving back means making one's insights accessible to the community whose language one is writing about. This can take several forms. Probably the best is to provide enough training to native linguists so that they can in turn explain one's findings to the general population. A second way might be to work with native users of the language to provide materials to set up classes in the language; this is particularly important for endangered languages. I would like to emphasize that the issue of one's work going over the heads of the people one is working with is not at all unique to sign languages; Scholars of indigenous minority languages face the same issues (Leslie Saxon, personal communication). A third way is to become an advocate for the community, *if the community wants it*; otherwise, one can be seen as patronizing.

One of the factors in developing rapport with consultants, then, involves demonstrating respect for consultants, their language, and for their community. It is also important to show respect for the culture, both of the Deaf community and of the surrounding hearing community. Let me illustrate this by discussing the issue of how to find consultants in the first place. It helps to be vouched for by a respected member of the community; this will open doors that might otherwise be closed. Another avenue is through volunteering or otherwise participating in community activities, so that members of the community can see that the researcher is committed. It is natural and positive in such situations to form close friendships; in my own field experience, during the longest two periods of fieldwork, I was "adopted" once by an older Deaf woman and once by an entire Deaf family. We spent a lot of time together inside and outside the "research" situation. One word of warning: this friendship has to be genuine; consultants can spot a phony a mile away.

5. Technical issues

5.1. Observer's paradox

I would like to turn now to some practical technical issues that can influence how well the research will come out. The first issue is the so-called Observer's paradox: simply stated, being in the situation changes the situation itself. (Labov, 1972) In my earliest days of sign language research, I was in a group that was studying the acquisition of ASL. One child came into our lab and sat reading books with her mother, in the same way we had done this with other children. But this child didn't utter a word for weeks. It turned out that she associated going to the lab with going to school, and since she attended an oral school, she assumed she *wasn't* supposed to sign!! After we changed the dynamic and started playing with her more naturally, she opened up.

A second anecdote comes from an experience I had many years ago; I was working with someone who, though a college student, was older than I was. He came from a large Deaf family in Appalachia and had a really good sense of ASL. But he wouldn't sign ASL with me, because I was a professor and because the ethos of my university at the time was that one was supposed to sign English. One summer day, I was eliciting from him as usual and a terrible thunderstorm began; the sky got black, and lightning blazed from threatening clouds. This engendered a vivid recollection of a similar thunderstorm that the consultant had experienced many years before, and [finally!] a real ASL narrative came pouring out. Foolishly, I interrupted him with the observation that this was the kind of language I was after. Fortunately for my research, he told me to shut up and let him finish his story, which continued in ASL. As Labov points out, getting a consultant to focus more on content than on form gives us a form that is truer to what the consultant actually does in real life, rather than a veneer of what they think you want to hear or see.

How do we minimize the observer's paradox? There are three ways. First, just as it contributes to rapport, a more-than-basic knowledge of the language can tell the investigator when s/he is getting data that is, say, influenced by the spoken language. When I start doing fieldwork with a new consultant, I give them tasks that might lead to signing that is influenced by the spoken language. If it is produced, I then joke or tease the consultant, telling them that I already know the spoken language and that we should throw it out the window. But in order to do this, I have to know some of the language already.

A second way, which was used by Labov in his studies of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), is to use a Deaf person to elicit data rather than doing the elicitation oneself. This can be accomplished in several ways; one is to record two consultants at once; a second is to use a Deaf confederate (this can be part of their training as a researcher). As described in Fox (2007), even a Deaf researcher who doesn't know the language being investigated can sometimes obtain more reliable data than a hearing investigator.

A third way to avoid the observer's paradox is to use extremely small equipment in as naturalistic a setting as possible. When I first started doing sign language research, we had to use cameras much larger than a breadbox, connected to even larger reel-to-reel video recorders. Lighting requirements made the situation even more artificial. Now one can get camcorders just a bit larger than a pack of cards, which furthermore function extremely well in low light. A remote control permits one to control the camcorder without jumping up and down all the time to turn the camera on or off.

5.2. Video setup

We have just mentioned the use of a camcorder. This leads us to the general question of video setup. How and where one sets up the camcorder is determined by a variety of factors. One is exactly what one is investigating. If, for example, one is investigating the grammatical use of facial expression, it is important to be able to see the face. This may even entail using two cameras, one of which shows a closeup of the face and the other of which shows the general conversation. The use of two cameras would then require a special-effects generator in order to put both pictures in one frame; this could also entail using separate cameras and video recorders. Just as focusing on facial expression might require close-ups, recording a group of people requires a wide shot.

The next question that many people ignore is handedness. For various reasons, one may not wish to record with the camera straight on; it is therefore important that the signer's body not block visibility of their signing. For a righthanded signer, that would mean a setup such as that in Figure 1. I include the researcher in the figure because if the researcher isn't on camera, one can't always figure out what the signer is responding to. The researcher is slightly ahead of the signer so that when the signer looks at the researcher, s/he doesn't have to turn to the side, and thus the signing is more visible. For a left-handed signer, a mirror-image setup from Figure 1 would be used.

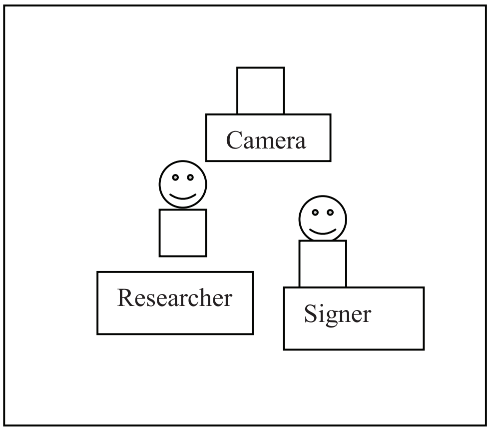

Figure 1: Video setup for right-handed signer

Lighting is another important factor. Fluorescent lights can cause video flicker, this this is less of a problem than it used to be. There is always a tradeoff between good lighting and naturalness. It is important that the consultant be as comfortable as possible and not feel overwhelmed or overheated by equipment. At the same time, a certain amount of shadow provides definition that makes a two-dimensional image significantly clearer. If the signer wants to wear a baseball cap or sunglasses, this is an indication that the lighting is too bright.

5.3. Transcription systems

For now we shall elide the big question of how to conduct an elicitation session. Let us assume for now that we have collected some data. How shall that data be transcribed? As with the issue of how close up we want the camera to be, the purpose of the elicitation will determine the amount of granularity required in the transcription. If, for example, one is interested primarily in phonology, one will want to use systems such as those described by Liddell & Johnson (1989) or Sandler (1989). Stokoe's notation system (Stokoe, Casterline, & Croneberg, 1965) is also useful as a rough and ready way of notating signs, and many people are now using Sign Writing (Sutton, 1995) or Hamnosys (Prillwitz et al, 1989). If one is interested more in syntax, one will use a broader transcription system. The latter two systems are enabled for computer input, but both have serious drawbacks in my opinion.

Whether one is looking at phonology or syntax, it is important to realize that because of the degree of simultaneity in sign languages, notation in ***tiers*** is ideal. There are three systems that I know of for notating in tiers, one of which was explicitly designed for use with sign languages. They are the SIL Linguist's Toolbox, SignStream, and ELAN. Of these, only ELAN is cross-platform; SignStream is Mac only, and Toolbox is PC only. Both SignStream and Elan permit the coordination of video with transcription; that is, one can see transcription move along with the playing of video. ELAN is free, downloadable from the Max-Planck website in Nijmegen; SignStream requires a nominal payment. In neither system can one export what one has transcribed and put it into a text. The practice of transcribing in tiers predates these systems by many years, however; see Baker & Padden (1978) for an early example.

As in work on nonlinear phonology, tiers are used for degrees of freedom, though in practice depending on what one is looking at, one will in all likelihood use fewer tiers than there are degrees of freedom. So, for example, the angle of the head is independent of the degree of closure of the eyes, which are at least partially independent on the position of the eyebrows. Other degrees of freedom include the shape of the mouth, the shaking or nodding of the head, the position of the tongue, and the direction of the eyegaze. At the phonological level, the number of hands used, extension of each finger, opposition of the thumb, position of the hand with respect to the body or another hand, point of contact, orientation of the fingertips, orientation of the palm of the hand[s], local movements such as wiggling or nodding, and type of path could all have their own tiers.

One important reason for using tiers is that they permit one to show the scope of both nonmanuals and handshapes; for handshapes, this is particularly important if the handshape changes during the execution of a sign. For nonmanuals, this is important especially in the case of signals that overlap or have different scopes.

Below is a simplified example from Hong Kong Sign Language (HKSL), courtesy of Gladys Tang:

(1)	head angle:		______fwd
	head movement:	neg.	
	eyes:	___________open	
	eyebrows:	______________________________up	
	hands:	INDEX2	BUY BOOK
	'didn't you buy a book?' (HKSL)		

In example (1), note the partial overlap among the four nonmanual signals.

5.4. Video recording and compression

Just as audiotape is an essential tool for the field linguist working on spoken language, so video is essential for a field linguist working on sign languages. Budget will determine the exact type of equipment one can use, but there are a few general guidelines.

First, even on a limited budget, it is important to use digital video, for several reasons: first it is necessary in order to interface well with a computer. Secondly, it is lossless; with previous video technologies, every copy generation resulted in loss of signal; but with digital video, even if one copies a tape, no signal is lost. Third, in purely practical terms, once the video signal is transferred to DVD or CD, the medium is much more stable than tape and takes up far less space. The decision to whether to go with HD video or regular digital is probably to be determined by budget more than anything else. Camcorders have a variety of storage formats (mini-DV, hard drive, mini-DVD, etc.), and it is important to choose a storage format that is compatible with one's computer and software.

Digital video can be is also relatively lossless with regard to compression; once copied to a computer, there are a variety of ways that a video can be compressed. Again, it is important to make sure that the resulting compression is compatible with video playing and editing software. One can play with different parameters for compression, but it is important to keep the frame rate as high as possible; otherwise the video will look jerky and especially fingerspelling can be lost. This is true even it must be at the expense of overall picture clarity (Kamata et al, 2002). The bitrate is also important to keep high; a minimum of 1600 kbits/second is key, according to a Sorensen technician with whom I consulted. More is better, but will drastically increase file size, as will the actual size of the video frame.

Choosing a computer for text processing is more a matter of "religion", temperament, and personal preference; however for manipulating videos and other graphics, even people in PC labs have told me that the video manipulation software available for Macintoshes is cheaper, better, and far easier to use than that available for PCs, both for low-end (iMovie, Quicktime Pro) and high end (Final Cut Express or Pro) software. When I go to a sign language conference, I have noticed that the vast majority of presenters will use Macs, precisely because of the ease in producing videos. That said, when converting video to DVD, it is important not to actually "produce" a video that can be shown on a DVD player. The reason is that once a DVD has been produced, it is then extremely difficult to extract clips from the resulting video. One might want to use clips in, for example, a multimedia article. Instead of producing DVD, one can compress the video to, say, mpeg4 format and copy the mpeg4 files to DVDs, to view on a computer in Quicktime[5].

Whatever computer is chosen, for extensive work it is good to have the fastest computer possible. Video rendering is highly processor-intensive; a desktop machine will therefore generally work better than a laptop. Having two monitors (one for viewing video and the other for transcribing), while not absolutely necessary, ends up being more efficient.

Note that when compressing videos, it is necessary to have about twice as much free space on one's hard drive as the resulting video will require. A large external hard drive is thus very convenient. Future technological developments may make the contents of this section obsolete, so the reader should check for them.

---

[5] Quicktime is again cross-platform; Windows Media Player is no longer being developed for the Mac.

6. Elicitation pointers and techniques

In this section, I will discuss things that I have found to work and not to work; the cautions are for almost any field environment, signed or spoken. We begin with general pointers and then continue to specific elicitation techniques for specific kinds of structures.

6.1. Dos and Don'ts

It is just as important to know what ***not*** to do as to know how to proceed positively. The examples below are no-no behaviors I have observed in some fieldworkers.

6.2. Don'ts

6.2.1. Don't translate from spoken language.

Except perhaps for vocabulary, I strongly believe in ***monolingual*** elicitation. Thus my first pointer is, whenever possible, ***not*** to use translation from the spoken language, especially in the case of stigmatized languages such as sign languages or creoles. There are several reasons for this caution:

- The consultant may not know the spoken language that well. Especially when in sophisticated grammatical territory, therefore, what you think you are getting may not be what you are actually getting. Basic vocabulary is the one exception I would permit, though even there, pictures or videos may work for at least some words.
- It is natural, particularly in the case of sign languages, for the signer to adjust to the language of the interlocutor. Using translation makes it more likely that the consultant will be influenced by the grammar of the spoken language. In the case of a stigmatized sign language, the consultant may be trying to show they know the spoken language. They may also think that that is what the investigator is aiming at.

6.2.2. Don't try to push the consultant into a particular judgment or try to get them to change their mind.

The interplay between data and theory can be extremely delicate. I believe that theory is valuable in that it helps us to know where to look for interesting data; however, when that theory becomes a set of blinders that doesn't let us see or accept data that might contradict the theory, good science does not result. Even the best consultant can get confused or feel pushed into a particular judgment. Obviously, when training a consultant in linguistics, we want to let them in on where we're going, but it's best to do so after the elicitation session is complete.

That said, if a consultant comes up with an utterance or a judgment that seems wrong, it is of course permissible to probe, but it is important to do so without browbeating the consultant. Attention must be paid to the degree of certainty that the informant displays; if they are absolutely certain, back off; if they hesitate, a probe or clarifying example may be in order.

6.2.3. Don't have a closed mind.

There are several ways in which this admonition is important. The first harks back to the previous paragraph; if we get data that goes against our theory, the problem may be with the theory, not the data. A second is that an avenue of inquiry may turn out to be a dead end. This is when it is important to cut one's losses and either move on to another topic or go back to square one and figure out an alternative way to ask the same question.

6.3. Things that help

Below are some general tips for successful elicitation. Some may perhaps seem obvious to experienced researchers, but nonetheless bear repeating.

6.3.1. Have an idea of what you're looking for.

Although it is important not to get stuck in a rut, it is equally if not more important to be involved in *directed* elicitation. Otherwise, one risks wasting one's own time as well as that of the consultant. If one is interested in, say, relative clauses, one should prepare materials designed to elicit relative clauses. (see, however, section 7.3. below)

6.3.2. Overprepare!!

Elicitation sessions can go in unpredictable directions. One can prepare many pages of prepared material counting on the idea that one has "enough" for an hour, only to have it dismissed or rejected by the consultant in a few minutes. Another thing that can occur is that a particular task one has thought of trying turns out to be opaque to the consultant. It is thus important to have a plan B, or at least more stuff in Plan A than one thought necessary.

6.3.3. Take breaks and change the pace

It is important to avoid consultant fatigue. I often alternate between form and content in order to break the session up. For example, again using the relative clause case, if I ask a question related to a relative clause, I might then pick up on the content of what the consultant has uttered and have a "real" conversation about it. This increases the rapport by showing that I'm interested in the consultant as a person and not just a language machine.

There are other ways of changing the pace. In any case, recall that elicitation materials that are too ordered can unduly influence grammatical judgments. Obviously, when writing up data, they need to be organized, but mixing things up in elicitation is a wise direction to take; not only does it avoid fatigue, but it may help to disguise what one is really looking at.

One way to change the pace is to work in pairs. The idea of working in pairs was born of necessity when I was teaching field methods and we had half the number of hours per week as we had students in the class. There turn out to be a few advantages to working in pairs:

- As mentioned, if two people are working on different topics, it is a natural way to change the pace of elicitation.
- One person can take notes while the other person is eliciting.
- One person may notice signals or data that the other overlooks.

In this situation, there must be a spirit of good will between the field partners; time should be divided equally, unless a different division of labor is agreed upon in advance. I try to encourage cooperation rather than competition. If one partner notices things that are relevant to the other's research topic, they should yield some of their time. Give information about yourself. Be prepared to make a fool out of yourself.

6.3.4. Be ready to switch; embrace serendipity

As in other scientific pursuits, one may make a discovery while investigating at an entirely different topic. A number of years ago, a few of us were involved in a psycholinguistic study on the role of inference in ASL narratives (see Brown, Fischer, & Janis 1991). However, while collecting data for that project, the two linguists noticed a structure that was occurring frequently. When we investigated further, we realized that this was a structure that had not previously been described (Fischer & Janis, 1990). When something strikes you as interesting, it usually is, and may be more interesting to pursue than what you were originally interested in!

7 Materials and techniques

As discussed above for lighting and camera placement, what kinds of materials and techniques one uses will depend in large part on what one is trying to investigate; in particular, much depends on the level one wishes to investigate.

7.1. Phonology

This will be the shortest subsection; I must admit upfront that I haven't done a lot of research on sign language phonology, having been more interested in morphology and morphosyntax. What I have done suggests, however, that the important factor in doing phonology research in the field is to be systematic and meticulous. In concrete terms, this means laying out possible variations in advance and coming to the elicitation session with big lists of possible things to try. One of the major things we want to find out in phonology is what counts as the same, and what formations are different. So we learn some signs and then try minute variations on formational degree of freedom at a time to see if the consultant accepts them as variations, rejects them, or sees them as different signs. For example, possible variations in handshape could include tense vs. lax, fingers spread or closed, number of extended fingers, degree of bending of fingers, and at which joint[s], or opposition of the thumb. For location, we could again try small changes in placement and ask the consultant if they make a difference or only look funny. With orientation, one could try different angles of the hand with respect to various planes. Another way of getting at acceptable variation is to ask the consultant to repeat signs, and look for changes in pronunciation which should not count as different.

Similarly, in looking at phonological processes, we would go up a unit and look at possible effects on preceding and following context on the pronunciation of a sign. So, for example, we could give the consultant two signs and ask them to put them together, in either order. It is important to make clear to the consultant that we are interested in form rather than content.

7.2. Morphology

When looking at word structure, having a plan ahead of time is crucial. One could make a grid, for example, and plug different verbs (or other parts of speech) into a grid of morphological processes to see what restrictions there might be in the use of those processes. To get ideas for which verbs to use in which processes, I highly recommend Levin (1993) as a reference resource.

In sub-areas of morphology, charts and pictures can be useful. One technique used by Ulrike Zeshan in her cross-linguistic project on possession is the family tree; this is a great tool for getting kinship systems. Such charts and pictures can also be useful in studies of lexical semantics. Just to remind the reader, the techniques and materials I am discussing are designed to minimize translating from or even thinking in the spoken language in the community. The one area where translation from the spoken language does little harm is at the level of the individual word; however, as cautioned above, it is important to make sure that the consultant actually knows the meaning of the word one is trying to translate, and here, too, it is a good idea to stick to very specific kinds of words; for example, if the consultant is new to the game of acting as a consultant, and one asks, say, for the sign for "take", rather than asking "which 'take' do you mean?" the consultant may simply give one sign, ignoring all of the sundry meanings of the word "take". Since semantic overlap between languages is never total, the reader is cautioned to remember the ambiguity of many words in many languages.

7.3. Syntax

In the case of syntax, here too we need to change our elicitation materials and/or methods depending on what kinds of structure are of interest. That said, how can we structure monolingual elicitation materials to maximize the amount of useful data we obtain? We want to avoid translation but at some level also channel the response. One powerful tool I have used extensively is the deceptively simple task of using a sign in a sentence. The choice of signs is planned, of course, but one is not determining the response so much that the data become contaminated. Suppose, for example, that one is interested in wh-questions. One can then prepare a list of wh-words and ask the consultant to use them in sentences. It is important to have fillers and changes of pace so that the consultant doesn't become fatigued. After a sentence with a wh-word in it is produced, it is then possible to probe and ask if other orders are possible and if so, whether they change the meaning.

Sometimes it is difficult to get the idea of this task across. In such cases it helps to take turns. That way one can model the length of sentence one wants and at the same time get the consultant more involved in the process; it also breaks the monotony. Another technique to exploit in taking turns is to deliberately make errors and ask for corrections. This is a good monitoring device to make sure that the consultant is willing to correct the researcher. Criticizing someone of perceived higher social status is frowned upon in many cultures; the sillier and more egregious the error one makes, the easier it is to overcome that taboo. I have had consultants in both ASL and other languages who will try to trip me up with a slang word that they think I don't know. They enjoy laughing at my ignorance. This often results in very fruitful exchanges. If I don't know the sign, I'll ask for an explanation. After the explanation I'll try again to use the sign in a sentence, and if it doesn't work, I get further clarification with examples.

If the consultant produces several variations, or if by this time the investigator suspects that other orders are possible, s/he can ask for preferences: does A feel better than B or vice versa? When asking for preferences, order is important as there is a tendency to choose the second of two choices.

An extension of the "use a sign in a sentence" task is to use two signs. If, for example, one is interested in negations and interrogatives, this technique can produce interesting scope phenomena. Again, it is a good idea, once a sentence has been produced, to ask about other possible orders.

Another technique, which is useful for complex sentences, is sentence combining. For example, if one is interested in relative clauses, the two sentences to be combined can share a noun phrase. If one is interested in the expression of cause and effect or temporal sequence, the two sentences can have that relationship (try two different orders). If long-distance dependencies are the topic du jour, the two sentences can be structured so as to guide, but not overdetermine, the consultant into demonstrating such dependencies.

One way to elicit questions is to give a sentence, then specify one word to be omitted with a question word or phrase substituted for it. In my experience, this is a difficult concept to get across, so examples help.

For a variety of structures, it can be useful to use video clips or series of pictures. While this is a powerful tool, it has its limitations; specifically, only activities or objects that can be pictured are conducive to this task. If you are interested in comparing, say, two systems of justice, such materials may not work; in those cases, a conversation about real topics is often more productive.

7.4. Discourse

In sign languages, there are some grammatical processes that occur most frequently above the sentence level. If only for that reason, it is important to collect narratives and other structures above the sentence level. As in any ethnographic study, narratives (or their lack) can provide a rich insight into both the language and the culture of the community. For example, the kinds of bedtime stories most middle-class American children experience daily are infrequent in mainstream American Deaf culture. However, there is a lot of folklore and storytelling that is prized within the adult Deaf community. So-called ABC stories are not to be expected in a sign language such as that used in Hong Kong, but I found that instead they have number stories.

As in the technique of using signs in sentences, to partially control the content of a narrative, one can ask for a story about a particular topic; this is useful, for example, if one is interested in eliciting classifiers. Asking about dreams can help us to tap irrealis structures such as counterfactuals. Of course, Labov's old standby of asking for the scariest thing that ever happened to a person is also useful. However, since in some cases, retelling the story of one's scariest experience can be traumatic, one alternative is to ask someone instead for the funniest experience they ever had.

Discourse can be dialogue as well as monologue. If one is fortunate enough to have two consultants at once, this opens up a number of possibilities. For example, one person could teach the other how to play a game or give the other person directions to a particular place. Other communication tasks can be used as well, such as picking out a particular configuration of figures in a set of pictures.

Let me re-emphasize here that just collecting texts can be a valuable source of information. Things that one notices in a narrative can be explored later in more structured elicitation sessions. For linguistic purposes, just collecting texts is insufficient, for a couple of reasons. First, there can be gaps in paradigms that simply do not show up in a narrative. Secondly, without at least having another native user look at the narrative, one doesn't always know if the consultant might have made some kind of performance error while telling the story.

As mentioned earlier, switching back and forth between focusing on form and focusing on content can help to hold the consultant's attention. And even when one is ostensibly focusing on content, one can try to use the form one is targeting to see how the consultant responds. An example of such a ploy is given in. The situation is as follows: I have been invited to the home of a native JSL signer along with another native JSL signer for elicitation, tea, and cookies. I am really interested in wh-questions, including covert wh-questions (Lillo-Martin & Fischer, 1992), which consist of a regular sign with a wh-facial expression that turns it into a wh-word. For simplification, in the example below, I'm using WH-KAU as a shorthand for KAU ('buy') with a wh-facial expression added to it:

(1) HONTOU SITUMON. INDEX$_a$ KOPPU$_a$ *SUKI* KEDO NIHON MI-NAI. WH-KAU?
Really question That mug love but Japan see-not wh-buy
'This is a real question: I love this mug, but haven't seen any like it in Japan; where did you buy it?'

The native signer responded appropriately by indicating that one has to go to a specialty shop to buy such a mug. This suggests that she accepted the structure as well as the content of my question. Obviously, it is necessary to follow up with structured elicitation, but this device permits more naturalistic data to occur.

8. Admonitions and concluding remarks

It is of course important to treat the consultant with the respect and dignity that they deserve and to protect their privacy insofar as is both possible and requested. It is important to establish one's "street cred" in terms of knowing enough of the language to recognize interesting evidence when one sees it. It is important to be well-prepared for as many possible contingencies as one can imagine. And it is crucial to give something back to the community. For me personally, collecting data is a challenge, but an extremely enjoyable one. Viewing the session as a game lightens the mood and helps the consultant to relax. It is therefore important to have fun!! Teaching, joking, and playing with signs adds immeasurably to the experience and furthers the goal of figuring out how language works.

References

Baker, C. & C. Padden (1978) Focussing on the nonmanual components of ASL.

Brown, P., Fischer, S., & Janis, W. (1991) Pragmatic and linguistic constraints on message formulation: A cross-linguistic study of English and ASL. *Journal of Speech and Hearing Research 34*: 1346-1361.

Fischer, S. (1978) Sign language and creoles. In P. Siple, ed., *Understanding Language through Sign Language Research*. New York: Academic Press: 309-331.

Fischer, S.D., & Janis, W. (1990) Verb Sandwiches in ASL. In S. Prillwitz & T. Vollhaber, eds. *Current trends in European sign language research.* Hamburg: Signum Press: 279-294

Fox, M. (2007) *Talking Hands.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Kamata, K., Fischer, S., et al (2002) Relation between playback rate of signing picture and perception. Institute of Electronics, Information, and Communication Engineers, (Denshi-Joho-Tsuushinn Gakkai) Yokohama, Japan.

Labov, W. (1972) *Language in the Inner City*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Labov, W. (1966) *The social stratification of English in New York City*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics (republished in 2006 by Cambridge University Press).

Levin, B. (1993) *English verb classes and alternations: A preliminary investigation.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Liddell, S. & R. Johnson (1989) American Sign Language: The phonological base. Sign Language Studies, 64, 195-277.

Lillo-Martin, D., & S. Fischer (1992) Overt and covert Wh-questions in American Sign Language. Presented at the 5th TISLR conference, Salamanca Spain.

Prillwitz, S., R. Leven, H. Zienert, T. Hanke, & J. Henning. HamNoSys version 2.0: Hamburg Notation System for sign languages. An introductory guide. *International studies on sign language and communication for the deaf 5*. Hamburg: Signum.

Sandler, W. (1989). *Phonological Representation of the Sign*: *Linearity and Nonlinearity in American Sign Language*, Dordrecht: Foris.

Schein, J. D. & M.T. Delk (1974) *The deaf population of the United States.* Silver Spring, MD: National Association of the Deaf.

Stokoe, W. D. Casterline, & X Croneberg (1965) *Dictionary of American Sign Language based on linguistic principles.* Washington: Gallaudet University Press.

Sutton, V. (1995) *Lessons in sign writing.* La Jolla: Deaf Action Committee For SignWriting.

手語的田野調查：方法、技術、和考量

蘇珊・費雪

語言研究中心
加州大學聖地牙哥分校

摘要

手語的田野調查與其他語言，尤其是與那些被認爲較弱勢的語言有許多相同之處。但手語的田野調查也有它獨特的地方。採集語料時最重要的是學術倫理的考量，首先一定要取得顧問的同意；使用影像資料時，一定要保護顧問的隱私。另外，與手語顧問建立並維持良好的關係也是很重要的。本文探討的範圍著重在實用的層面，包括如何設置攝影器材錄製語料，各類影像格式與播放軟體的使用技術，以及各種手語語料轉記的方式等。最後本文探討語料調取的通則，尤其强調使用單一語言（研究對象的語言）來調取語料的技術，並分享一些對我非常受用的田調經驗與方法。