Fieldwork   Katia Chirkova (CNRS)

Linguistic fieldwork refers to the activity of linguistic data collection through interaction with native-speaker consultants. Broadly speaking, it encompasses any collection of accurate data, regardless of: (1) the prior familiarity of the linguist with the language from which data are collected; (2) the whereabouts of the study—the original environment where the language is spoken or immigrant communities; and (3) the goal of the study—a comprehensive description of an entire language or an analysis of one specific phenomenon for typological and comparative purposes (cf. Hyman 2001:15, Chelliah and de Reuse 2011:7). In a more narrow sense, linguistic fieldwork refers to primary data collection on a previously undescribed language of which the linguist has no prior knowledge, in the natural environment where the language is spoken, for the purpose of documenting and describing the language (cf. Everett 2001:168; Aikhenvald 2007:5, Bowern 2008:2-7, Chelliah and de Reuse 2011:7-10). The discussion below focuses on fieldwork in this narrow sense.

In the context of global language endangerment and the ever-growing urgency of language documentation, linguistic fieldwork is steadily gaining momentum and scope worldwide. With its great variety and diversity of languages, China offers outstanding possibilities for fieldwork research, with features that distinguish it from fieldwork in other parts of the world. At the same time, linguistic fieldwork in China is subject to limitations, most crucially in data access, purpose, and scope, as outlined below.

General fieldwork guidelines

Descriptive linguistic fieldwork follows a set of well-defined and well-established guidelines, as outlined, among others, in Vaux and Cooper (1998), Newman and Ratliff (2001), Bowern (2008), Chelliah and de Reuse (2011). Once the language for study is selected, the essential stages of the process include:

(1) Preparation, both academic (including familiarization with existing descriptions and the cultural context in which the language is spoken) and practical (purchasing equipment, obtaining necessary permits, making travel and stay arrangements and so on).

(2) Search for language consultants, normally one principal language consultant or language teacher, who assists the fieldworker in daily linguistic work, and a circle of language consultants with a more sporadic input, such as recording of narratives.

(3) Collection, organization, and analysis of data in interaction with native speakers. This core part of linguistic fieldwork relies on elicitation. Elicitation can be divided into two types: controlled, and semi-controlled. Controlled elicitation refers to tests designed by the linguist for the purpose of prompting target response from consultants. It includes collecting isolated lexical items and sentences, eliciting paradigms, soliciting judgments regarding the acceptability of a given form, as well as conducting perceptual experiments, and working with stimuli (such as pictures, photos, videos). Semi-controlled elicitation refers to the collection and analysis of a corpus of narratives in the target language. Ideally, such a corpus includes texts of various genres, from traditional (historical

narratives, myths, legends, song lyrics) to nontraditional (such as procedural, expository or hortatory and spontaneous conversations). Combining both types of elicitation often yields better results in obtaining a comprehensive understanding of the language.

A standard technique is to start fieldwork by eliciting a basic vocabulary list. This allows researchers to familiarize themselves with the sound system and morphology and to start developing a feel for the language. A simultaneous process consists of collecting, transcribing, translating, and annotating a corpus of texts, with the help of the principal language consultant. In this process, more information and data are solicited to explore phenomena occurring in the texts and to find additional examples and explanations. Collecting a spoken corpus of texts is time-consuming but indispensable for gaining an understanding of the natural, everyday use of the lexicon and grammar. Ideally, researchers should be exposed to the language long enough to gain good proficiency, for one of the most reliable and successful discovery procedures in linguistic fieldwork is to learn the target language well (cf. Everett 2001).

Linguistic fieldwork in China

Descriptive linguistic fieldwork in China is characterized by the following three features. First, most work on both Sinitic and non-Sinitic languages (especially since 1949) has been carried out by Chinese scholars. Similar to other social sciences that rely on fieldwork (Heimer and Thøgersen 2006), linguistic fieldwork by foreign researchers in China is subject to limited access to the field, closed areas, and official control over data collection. The preparatory practical stage of fieldwork as outlined above (such as finding

a host institution or obtaining necessary permits for foreign researchers) often acquires particular importance in this context and requires considerable time and effort. As a result, in terms of the invested time and effort, the preparatory stage may outweigh the remaining and more essential two stages. While possibilities for fieldwork exist and have already led to important contributions to the exploration and documentation of the linguistic diversity of China (e.g. Haller 2000, 2004; Slater 2003; Lustig 2010), the actual involvement of foreign scholars is incommensurate with the potential and the needs of the field.

Second, most linguistic fieldwork by Chinese researchers to date has been oriented towards practical goals, which has an impact on data collection and published results. For instance, the important project of surveying and describing non-Sinitic languages in the 1950s was oriented toward developing writing systems for languages that had never been written and introducing systems of Romanization for languages that were being written with other scripts. The underlying rationale was to make the national minorities literate in order to hasten the spread of ideology and to quicken the pace of national integration (Deal 1979:198-208). Conversely, numerous surveys of Sinitic languages were conducted in China since the 1950s, but one of their main goals was to facilitate teaching and promoting the national language. For this reason, related fieldwork and publications concentrated primarily on the descriptions of phonological variations of the surveyed Sinitic languages and the contrastive studies of the given language in comparison with Standard Mandarin, *pǔtōnghuà* 普通話 (Yan 2006:24). In both cases, practical considerations inevitably influenced the collection and analysis of data.

Third, most fieldwork by Chinese scholars to date is limited to controlled elicitation, often in the form of a basic vocabulary list and a limited number of sentences. For example, standard materials used in surveys of Sinitic languages include the *Fāngyán diàochá zìbiǎo* 《方言调查字表》 [The Dialect Survey Character List] (3000 characters) for lexicon, and the *Hànyǔ fāngyán cíhuì diàochá shǒucè* 《汉语方言词汇调查手册》 (ca. 200 expressions and sentences) for grammar (e.g. Yóu 2004:56-59, see *Dialectology*). This limits the number of forms to be collected. In addition, the resulting organization and analysis of data appear to rely on a distinctly Sinocentric model for linguistic description. The unfortunate consequences of this approach is that (1) typological features absent in the Sinocentric model for description are occasionally overlooked in other languages (such as the category of irrealis in rGyalrongic languages, as pointed out by Sun 2007), and (2) important generalizations are obscured (such as the culminative nature of tone systems in Qiangic languages, which are traditionally described in terms of omnisyllabic tones, as pointed out by Evans 2008) (cf. Chappell 2006, Chirkova 2006).

The new reality of rapid language endangerment and obsolescence and the continued growth of academic exchanges among Chinese and non-Chinese scholars are likely to influence current practices of linguistic fieldwork in China, bringing them into closer conformity with general linguistic practice as described above. More precisely, there is general consensus in China as elsewhere, that greater attention should be devoted to the documentation of eroding linguistic diversity and the preservation of endangered languages. This emphasis on diversity further increases the demand for more detailed linguistic studies that would approach languages in their own terms, free of any particular language-based or theoretical model. Finally, academic exchange and awareness of

detailed linguistic studies in other parts of the world offer positive examples and practical inspiration for linguists doing fieldwork in China.

Indicative of this process of convergence in fieldwork practices is the inclusion of narratives for each language described in the recent series *Zhōngguó xīn fāxiàn yǔyán yánjiū cóngshū* 《中国新发现语言研究丛书》 [Newly Discovered Minority Languages in China Series]. This suggests that semi-controlled elicitation is steadily becoming a standard part of fieldwork in China.

To conclude, more fieldwork is needed on languages spoken in China. To date, only languages of officially recognized minorities and Southern Sinitic languages have been relatively well documented and described. In this context, documenting languages that are spoken by smaller communities (often without an official status of ethnic minority) and that are consequently more vulnerable to obsolescence has the highest priority. It is therefore to be hoped that the existing limitations and challenges faced by fieldwork researchers can be overcome, and that extensive linguistic fieldwork can be conducted in China in the coming years by Chinese and foreign scholars alike.

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