# Field methods: How to work with a consultant
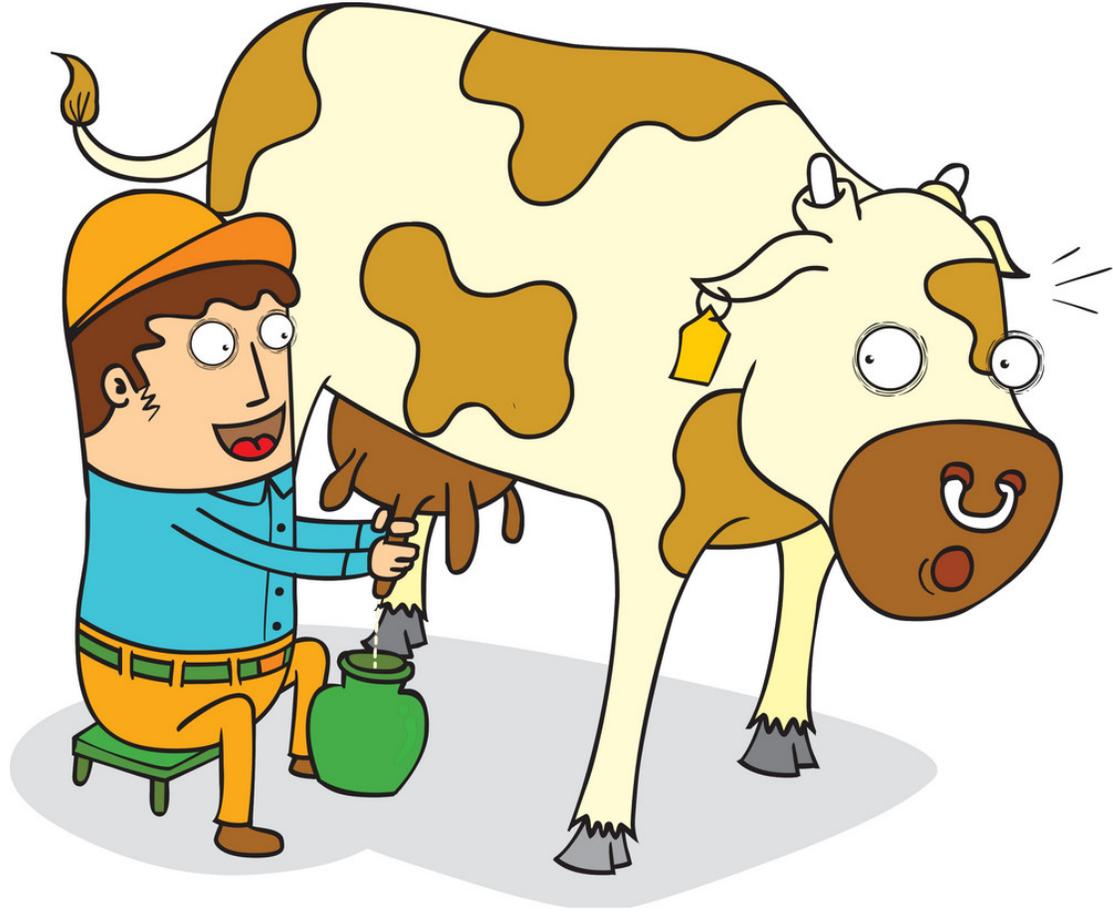
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LIKE field school, 9th Jan 2020

Tharaka University College

# What is linguistic fieldwork?

# Linguistic fieldwork: Two views

- **"Data milk"** – linguist gets data from consultants



- Working with a human subject - ethics, relationship building

# Learning objectives

▶ Students can explain the importance of skillsets beyond linguistic analysis for success in a fieldwork scenario (e.g. relationship building)

▶ Students can critically reflect on different fieldwork techniques (such as how to ask questions) and use these to minimise biases

▶ Students have resources they can turn to for further questions about field methods and ethics

# The consultant and the researcher

# Being a consultant

- ▶ Who had conducted linguistic fieldwork as an elicitor/researcher before LIKE?

- ▶ Who had been a linguistic consultant for someone before LIKE?

# Being a consultant

- Think about the recording exercise we did on Wednesday in the afternoon

- What was it like to be the consultant?

# Speaker vs linguist

- Difference between a speaker of a language and a linguist
  = conscious awareness of language features

- Just because someone speaks a language doesn't mean they can tell you what the linguistic features are!

# Working on your own language

- Some fieldworkers are from **outside** the language community, some are from **inside** (or from neighbouring communities)
  - There are advantages and disadvantages to both
  - Each have a different effect on your relationship with the consultant and what you will learn about the language

# The native researcher

Things to be aware of while working on your own language

# Discussion

In 5 minutes, discuss the challenges you may encounter when collecting data on your language or a language similar to yours. Are there advantages too?

# Introduction

► Carrying out a research of your own language or a language that share properties with your own can be both intriguing and counterproductive

► It is more interesting if you are motivated by the desire to discover the underlying properties of your language in a scientific way

► Researching your own language can become an hindrance if the researcher is loaded with pre-existing beliefs/ hypothesis about his/her language, thus, uses the research process to confirm the beliefs

# The pros

Being a native researcher gives you the following advantages:

▶ **You are able to easily discover inappropriate responses.** Consider the following:

Researcher:  I mbi hasa ákáandiré

'What did Haza bake?

Consultant:  Hasa n'ákáandiré mûgááté

'Haza baked a loaf of bread'  ☹

Corrected answer:  Hasa akáándiré mûgááté  ☺

'Haza baked a loaf of bread'

Answer for the question:
What did Haza do?

# The pros cont.

▶ You are able to easily detect a number of biases associated with the respondent, e.g:

a) The **acquiescence bias**/ the '**yea-saying**'- the respondent tend to answer to the positive especially when fatigued.

a) **Habituation bias-** the respondent tend to present similar answers to the questions worded the same way

a) **Sponsor bias-** the respondent tailor the answers to fit the perceived interest of the interviewer/ sponsor

b) **Social disability bias-** the respondents tend to avoid answers that portray them as socially unprivileged.

This is why the researcher needs to avoid giving explicit details of what s/he is looking for

# The pitfalls

► The native researcher should look out and avoid the following pitfalls:

a) **Confirmation bias** – happens when the researcher forms some beliefs/hypothesis and uses the respondents (not the data) to confirm the beliefs. This in turn results to (b):

b) **Analysis bias**- the researcher tends to remember the responses that confirm his/her hypothesis and forgets those that contradict.

c) **Leading questions** and **wording bias**- this happens when the researcher asks questions that seem to suggest the preferred answers, or when s/he elaborates the respondents' answers. It amounts to the researcher putting words in the mouth of the respondents.

# What to do

- ▶ Ensure you use a systematic method of data elicitation. Use a tool that will elicit similar responses whenever applied

- ▶ Avoid dismissing/ bashing off the respondent's answers even when you think they are inappropriate or incorrect. Instead, have a way of coming back to the question another time

- ▶ Avoid suggesting the kind of answers the respondents should provide by unnecessarily elaborating on the question

- ▶ Avoid giving the respondents options, unless where you want to seek clarification on an apparent variation on the responses

# What to do cont.

- Be open minded- continually re-evaluate the respondents impressions and challenge any pre-existing hypothesis

- Avoid summarizing what the respondents say. If you are taking notes try as much as possible to capture the words of the respondents and not what you think the respondent wanted to say

# I bwègá!

# Preparing for LIKE fieldwork

Thinking about our positionality as researchers and practical tips

# Exercise 1

**What should be keep in mind when working with a consultant?**

Come up to the board and write 1 thing that should be kept in mind when working with a consultant

Think about how fieldwork can go well – what does good fieldwork look like?

# What should be keep in mind when working with a consultant?

- ▶ Respect the consultant as a human being
- ▶ Respect the consultant's knowledge and knowledge ownership
- ▶ Collect informed consent for your research
- ▶ Show interest in getting to know the consultant and building up a working relationship
- ▶ Offer the consultant food/drink
- ▶ Pay the consultant fairly for the work
- ▶ Stop the session to take breaks as necessary
- ▶ Ask them how they find the fieldwork sessions to improve them
- ▶ …

# Recap of Wednesday:
# How to set up the space

- We have 6 groups at the LIKE
- Each group will be working with 1 consultant somewhere on campus
- Where will you work?
- When you have chosen the location, how will you set up the space?

- Things to bear in mind:
  - Comfort (especially if you have a long session)
  - Background noise
  - Microphone placement
  - Light levels (for video)
  - Power sockets

# Using a metalanguage

▶ The language the consultant speaks and you are investigating is called the **target language**

▶ The language you use to communicate with the consultant is called the **metalanguage**

▶ **Monolingual fieldwork** = using same language as metalanguage and target language (e.g. asking questions in Kĩĩtharaka about Kĩĩtharaka)

▶ **Bilingual fieldwork** = using a metalanguage that differs from the target language (e.g. asking questions in English about Kiembu)

# Metalanguage and asking questions: External researcher(s)

▶ Example where it seemed that the consultant was giving present tense Gujarati translations of past tense English statements

▶ To work with this without saying the consultant's answers were incorrect, the researchers added temporal adverbs ('yesterday') to make sure it was a past tense

| | |
|---|---|
| Vaux: | How do you say 'I gave my wife her book'? |
| Informant: | *mari pʌtni-ne teni tʃɔpri apū-tʃ'ū.* |
| | my wife-to her book I-give |
| | 'I give my wife her book'. |
| Vaux: | How do you say 'yesterday'? |
| Informant: | Today...uh...yesterday, *gʌikale.* |
| Vaux: | Can you say *gʌikale mari pʌtni-ne teni tʃɔpri apū-tʃ'ū?* |
| Informant: | (correcting Vaux) *gʌikale mari pʌtni-ne teni tʃɔpri api-hʌti.* Means 'was'. *apū-tʃ'ū* means 'now'. |
| Vaux: | Ah. |
| Cooper: | So how do you say 'I gave my wife the book' in the past? |
| Informant: | *mari pʌtni-ne (teni) tʃɔpri api-hʌti.* |
| | my wife-dat. (her) book gave-I.was |

Vaux & Cooper (2003:107)

# Exercise 2

We need 2 volunteers: 1 elicitor, and 1 consultant

▶ **Consultant:** Leave the room, enter as if you are entering a fieldwork session

▶ **Elicitor:** run a mini fieldwork session (a few minutes) on the topic of basic greetings

▶ **Rest of class:** Observe the fieldwork session and make notes on what went well / what could be improved. Think not only about the linguistics, but the session as a whole

# Planning your sessions

▶ You will need time to check things (during session or in another session)

▶ Pay attention to the energy levels/motivation of the consultant – having different types of exercises will make it less likely for them to get bored

▶ If you tell them "I am looking at verbs with *ni*" you risk effects of **priming** and **biases**. It is better to mix up the questions a bit so the consultant answers naturally, rather than them guessing what you want to know (sponsor bias)

▶ Types of data

  ▶ Elicitation helps you get **negative evidence** (check what is not possible) and collect more data on one topic

  ▶ Semi-spontaneous and spontaneous data are more natural

# Resources

- Bowern, Claire. (2008). *Linguistic fieldwork: A practical guide*. Palgrave.

- Rice, Keren. (2011). "Documentary Linguistics and Community Relations." *Language Documentation & Conservation*. 5: 187-207.

- Sarniak, R. (2015). 9 types of research bias and how to avoid them. Quirks: Washington DC. Available at https://www.quirks.com/articles/9-types-of-research-bias-and-how-to-avoid-them

- Vaux, B. & J. Cooper. (2003). *Introduction to Linguistic Field Methods*. Lincom Europa.
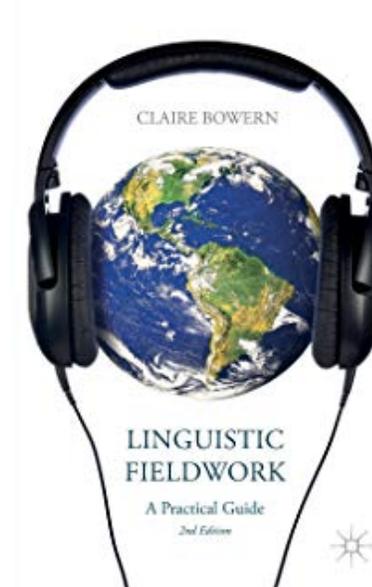
# Summary

▶ We are working with humans, so we should think about relationship building, ethics, and practical needs (e.g. comfort)

▶ It's important to reflect on what it's like to be a consultant, the positionality of the elicitor(s) (e.g. outsider vs speaker of the language), and how the elicitor(s) can ask questions well

▶ At the end of the day: everyone is different, so adapt the techniques dependent on your relationship with your LIKE partner and the consultant
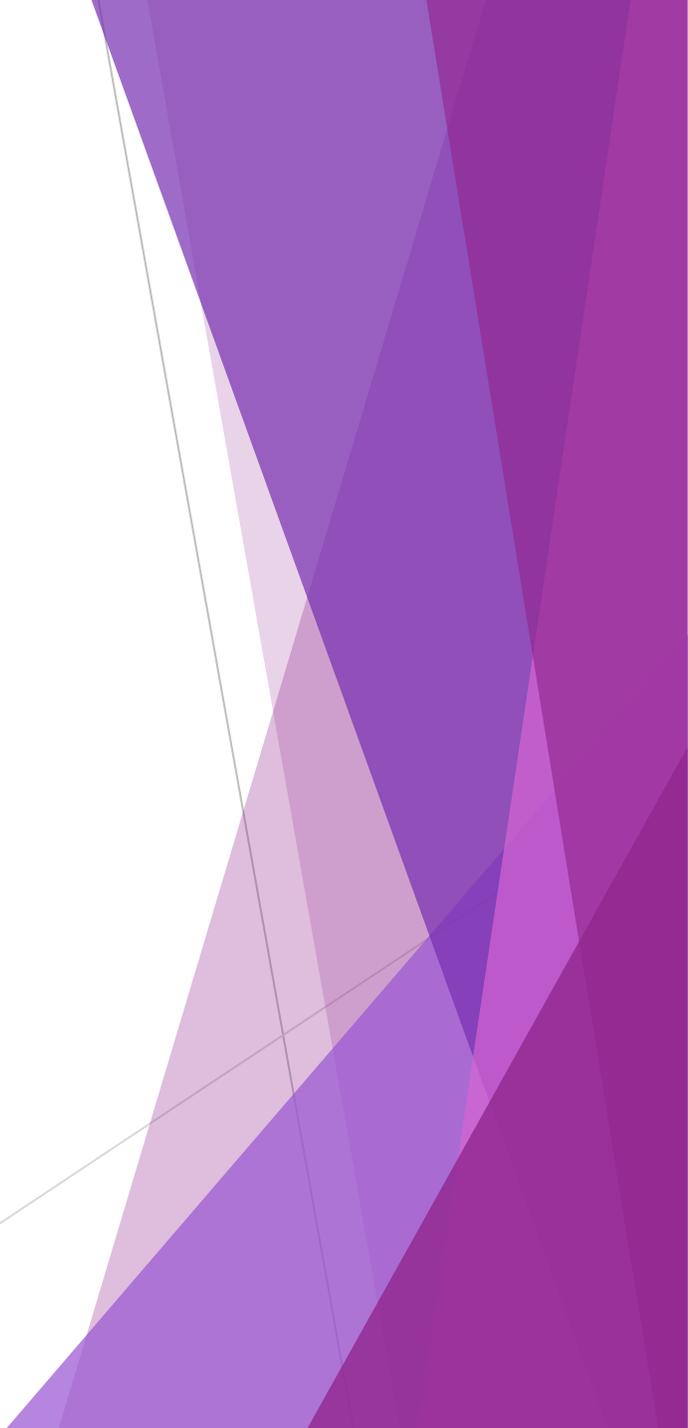
# I bwègá!

Thank you!

# Exercise 3

▶ Discuss with your LIKE partner how you plan to conduct the fieldwork sessions next week

▶ E.g. will both of you be eliciting? Will you split tasks between you?

▶ How do you think your background (personal + linguistics training) will influence how you approach the project?

▶ Is there something your partner should be aware of (e.g. "I get in a bad mood when I haven't eaten")?

The way you work can (and should!) adapt as the project develops