

Course project — Ling 110

☞ I adapted this project description from one used by Mary Beckman at Ohio State University, which I think was adapted from the project that she did when she took Ling110 at Berkeley with John Ohala in the mid 80's. KJ

A large part of the coursework for Ling 110 is a small field project. This project is intended as a practicum for using traditional methods of observation in fieldwork in conjunction with the laboratory methods introduced in this class. A detailed description of the project report is described below in Section 4 of this handout.

1. Finding a language consultant.

The first section of your report is a description of your project language and language consultant. You need to find a language consultant with whom you will work throughout the semester.

Here are some characteristics of the ideal language consultant. He or she:

- is a native speaker of a language that you don't know. (By "native speaker" we mean someone who learned the language as a child and still actively uses the language in everyday life.)
- is willing to work with you at least 1-2 hours per week throughout the semester.
- is willing to let you record his or her speech.
- is interested in, and maybe even proud of, his or her language and will want you to get it right.
- is patient and willing to repeat the same word over and over while you try to learn to pronounce it.

One approach to finding a language consultant is to pick a language that you are interested in and seek a speaker of that language. Some ways to find a speaker of a particular language include:

- check for student clubs, grocery stores, or churches in the phone book or among computer discussion groups.
- post a flyer in the graduate student dorms or community centers.
- use word-of-mouth advertising with course instructors, classmates, and friends.

Another approach is to check among your classmates, friends, and family for a potential consultant, regardless of what particular language they speak. If you speak a language other than English as a native language, you might make an exchange with a classmate who speaks a language other than English. Or, if you speak only English natively you might arrange with a classmate who does not speak English natively, to exchange weekly proofreading or other language help for language consulting sessions.

☞ Many people command more than one language natively. In such cases, you

probably will find it more rewarding to ask the person to work with you on a description of the least well-studied language. (Your fieldwork might even lead to a paper that becomes a valuable supplement to the paucity of published research books and articles on the language.) However, first make sure that the speaker did learn the language as a child and has continued to use it. For example, a person from Taiwan may speak both Taiwanese and Standard (i.e. “Mandarin”) Chinese as native languages. Unless the person stopped using Taiwanese after learning to read and write Mandarin, choose Taiwanese as the less studied language of the two.

2. Finding useful information about the language

In order to interpret some of your consultant’s comments and metalinguistic behavior, you will want to find out basic background information, such as the language contact situation. Also, to make maximum use of your consultant’s time in elicitation session, you probably will want to glean as many suggestions as you can readily from the literature about vowel and consonant contrasts and prosodic phenomena to look for in your consultant’s speech (see point 8 in Section 3).

For either sort of information, the following references are invaluable:

- Grimes (1992) *Ethnologue* (see <http://www.ethnologue.com/>)
- Voegelin & Voegelin (1977) *Classification and Index of the World’s Languages*
- Maddieson (1984) *Patterns of Sound*
- Ladefoged & Maddieson, *The Sounds of the World’s Languages*

Some of these references will not actually give you the information that you are looking for, but they will list grammars and language descriptions (including articles in linguistics journals) which you can consult.

To find information on the phonetics of a language you can also look for articles in phonetics journals (including *Journal of Phonetics*, *Phonetica*, *Language and Speech*, *Journal of the IPA*). Also there are journals devoted to specific language groups such as: *International Journal of American Linguistics* (American Indian languages), *Journal of African Linguistics*, *Journal of East Asian Languages*. To find articles in these journals you can leaf through the table of contents, or check the subject headings in the *Social Sciences Index*.

☞ When using published sources such as those described here, keep in mind that language descriptions are frequently based on the speech of only a few speakers (sometimes only one speaker!), and given that all languages have varieties based on regional, social, or even just idiosyncratic differences, the variety of the language spoken by your consultant will inevitably be at least somewhat different (and possibly very different) from the variety described in any published study.

3. Working with a language consultant.

1. Set up a time for weekly meetings with your consultant. To complete each section of the project report during the course of one semester it is crucial that you meet with your consultant each week.

2. Exchange phone numbers with the consultant. You and your consultant need to be able to get in contact with each other, to reschedule meetings if time conflicts arise, etc.

3. Record your phonetic transcriptions in a notebook, preferably a bound notebook, with numbered pages, and date all material for easy reference later. Always write down the English glosses (translations) of the words you write in phonetic transcription. Don't erase apparent mistakes (rather strike out lightly and write the correction above). It may turn out that you were right the first time, and the speaker vacillates between two pronunciations.

4. You may want to start by eliciting tool phrases such as words for greetings, 'Thank you', 'How do you say ____?', etc.

5. Elicit common words such as those listed in Samarin's 200-word list (reproduced in Section 6 below). Abstract words and very culture-specific concepts probably will have no simple one-word translations.

6. Soon after each session review your notes. Have you run across any consonants or vowels that didn't occur in previous sessions? Was the speaker unsure about any of the pronunciations? Are you unsure about any of the transcriptions? What should you ask about in the next session? A short self-debriefing session like this after each meeting with your consultant will help you use your limited elicitation time effectively.

☞ Keep a written record of this debriefing, either directly on a page in your field notebook, or as a separate sheet that you can staple into your field notebook (see the description of the stages of preparation for the project-related lab assignments in Section 5 below).

7. Try exploratory elicitations, where you present a hypothetical form like one you've already elicited or that was mentioned in a published description and ask if it exists — e.g., 'You have a word [fa:s], is there a word [va:s]?' This is a good way to find minimal pairs and sets.

8. Also, scour the literature for examples of minimal pairs and sets. In searching for such example words in your language you may find the published research on the language to be very helpful, but you should **never** simply reproduce a minimal set that you find in a reference. Rather, you should elicit the words from your consultant and report your own transcriptions of his or her

speech, which may be substantially different from the pronunciations reported in a source. One strategy that we recommend is to take down the glosses of a minimal set from your source and elicit those words from the speaker. Then after the session you can compare your transcriptions with the transcriptions listed in the source.

9. Always imitate words as accurately as possible until the consultant is satisfied that you are reproducing the form correctly.

10. If you have access to a tape recorder you can record your consultant's pronunciations as an aid to your memory and for discussion in class. For a good quality recording you will need to have the microphone close to the consultant's mouth without directly blowing on it and you will need to be in a quiet room. One strategy is to spend 45-50 minutes eliciting words and then in the last part of the session to make a recording of the words covered in that session.

☞ To make acoustic displays, you will need to record tokens of the relevant examples. Preface each recording session with a spoken "label" in which you state the date of the recording session and the lab assignment or project section to which it is keyed (or the relevant pages in your field notebook).

4. The project sections

These should be as short as you can make them and still get in all the information you want to report. They can be handwritten, if your handwriting is neat and legible, or prepared on a word processor, if you know you can insert symbols easily using a font such as IPA-Doulos. You can also download IPA fonts from <http://scripts.sil.org>

Section 1 — The language and language consultant.

This report should be no more than a page, introducing the language and describing your consultant's language background. Consult the sources listed above under "Finding information about a language" to find out (1) where the language is spoken and how many people speak the language [is it an "endangered language"? or widely distributed, with many regional varieties?]; (2) the historical relationship of the language with other languages [what is its "family tree" and/or important "Sprachbund" neighbors?]; and (3) the current language contact situation [are speakers of the language generally monolingual? or are they bilingual or trilingual, and if so in what languages?]. From your consultant, find out such information as (1) where he or she grew up and whether this provided a relatively homogeneous dialect background, or command of several varieties, (2) what other languages he or she speaks, and at what age these languages were learned.

Section 2 — The vowels.

Provide a vowel chart, showing the "simple" vowel contrasts — i.e. all the vowel types that contrast in height and backness/rounding — observed the best you can using classical

transcription techniques. Present the chart in the same format as on the IPA table in the Course Project. That is, the dimensions of the chart should be the same specification of impressionistic distances according to the “cardinal vowels” principle. Provide short word lists organized in such a way that the reader can see clearly your basis for claiming the contrasts on the chart, and a tape of sample tokens of these words. (Hint: you may find it easier to start by making the word lists, to see what contrasts emerge.)

Provide a version of your vowel chart for the simple vowel nuclei, plotted in acoustic and auditory distances. (Again, by “simple vowel nuclei” we mean that you should make the inventory as complete as you can without worrying about diphthongs or length contrasts, and while ignoring contrasts in phonation type and tone). Choose a set of words or morphemes that includes one example of each vowel in your inventory, make a clear recording of your consultant producing these examples, and provide a series of spectrograms of the tokens produced. Measure the first and second formant frequencies at the middle of each vowel token, so that you can plot the values using the Hz and Bark spaces.

Section 3 — The consonants.

Provide a consonant chart, showing all of the manner, place, phonation, and airstream contrasts for consonants in word-initial position. Justify the chart by providing word lists organized into tables that make it easy to see the contrasts illustrated in the chart. What consonant clusters do you find?

Choose a set of consonants that are of particular interest, record example tokens, and provide an annotated series of spectrograms with accompanying spectra and/or amplitude curves, as appropriate for bringing out the points of interest. This set could be the place of articulation series with the richest set of contrasts in manner, or manner series that were the most difficult to pigeonhole in terms of their place of articulation, or a phonation type contrast that exhibits interesting allophonic variation between word-initial and word-final position, or just an unusual contrast set, such as a contrast between voiced versus voiceless nasals or laterals.

Section 4 — Prosody.

Provide a preliminary description of the two most salient word-internal prosodic or “suprasegmental” phenomena in your language. Types of phenomena to look for include:

- the existence of vowel phonation-type or tone contrasts
- the existence of vowel and/or consonant length contrasts
- a rich inventory of diphthongs that seem to contrast with heterosyllabic V-V sequences, or an apparent contrast in onset versus coda position for medial intervocalic consonants, or a contrast between syllabic and non-syllabic values for sonorant consonants next to vowels
- striking secondary articulations on consonants or unusual consonant clusters, which interact with vowel phonotactics in a way that makes it difficult to specify the syllable structures of the language
- a strong impression of something like English “stress”

If the phenomenon is amenable to the standard word list and table arrangement (e.g., if it is an inventory of tone contrasts or contrastive vowel or consonant length), use that method for presenting your examples.

If the phenomenon is something like tone or contrastive length, represent it in your lists and tables using the symbolic devices and diacritics proposed by the IPA, but also provide narrow- or wide-band spectrograms to support your descriptions.

On the other hand, if the phenomenon is more difficult to shoehorn into the IPA model, don't force it, but try to state the nature of the difficulty. For example, if the phenomenon is a strong impression of something like the "word stress" contrasts of English, rather than simply choosing among IPA diacritics for "emphatic stress" versus "primary stress" versus "secondary stress" and listing forms in the standard table arrangement, try to figure out what is causing the impression. Is it a striking positional allophony for consonants, or some severe distributional restrictions for a subset of vowels, or by a fixed tone pattern on a particular syllable in each word, or some combination of these? Similarly, if the phenomenon is a seeming contrast between onset and coda position for medial consonants, rather than simply representing it with the IPA symbol for syllable hiatus, try to determine what the distinction is in terms of the physical signal or phonotactics. Again, rather than forcing these phenomena into the standard table-like arrangement, you may find it easier to just provide lists of striking example pairs with accompanying spectrograms, or lists of forms in a chart that highlights the distributional holes, etc. — whatever format makes it easiest for the reader to follow your description of the phenomenon.

Extend the description of the word-level phenomena by looking at what happens to these patterns when the words are produced in fluent sequence in phrases or short sentences. Types of phenomena to look for include:

- salient tone sandhi patterns, or a tendency to downstep within a phrase versus pitch range "reset" between phrases (if your language has a lexical tone contrast)
- a word-initial consonant length contrast where there was only a word-medial contrast in the isolation form utterances elicited for Report 6
- an apparent reduction or suppression of the impression of "stress" for all but one of the words in a phrase
- neutralization of the contrast between diphthongs and heterosyllabic vowel-vowel sequences when the words exemplifying this contrast are placed in certain positions in the phrase

☞ Turn in an audio tape (not dictation tape please) or audio CD with this report. The tape should contain the examples listed in the project report, in the order that the examples occur in the report.

6. Word list — from Samarin, William T. (1967) *Field Linguistics*. Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

You can use this word list as a starting point for elicitation sessions with a language consultant.

| | | | | |
|----------|------------|------------|-----------|--------|
| all | eight | if | rightside | — |
| and | eye | in | river | tail |
| animal | — | — | road | ten |
| ashes | fall | kill | root | that |
| at | far | knee | rope | there |
| — | fat/grease | know | rotten | they |
| back | father | — | rub | thick |
| bad | fear | lake | — | thin |
| bark | feather | laugh | salt | think |
| because | few | leaf | sand | this |
| belly | fight | leftside | say | thou |
| big | fire | leg | scratch | three |
| bird | fish | lie | sea | throw |
| bite | five | live | see | tie |
| black | float | liver | seed | tongue |
| blood | flow | long | seven | tooth |
| blow | flower | louse | sew | tree |
| bone | fog | — | sharp | turn |
| breast | foot | man/male | shoot | twenty |
| breathe | four | many | short | two |
| brother | freeze | meat/flesh | sing | — |
| burn | fruit | moon | sister | vomit |
| — | full | mother | sit | — |
| child | — | mountain | skin | walk |
| clothing | give | mouth | sky | warm |
| cloud | good | — | sleep | wash |
| claw | grass | name | small | water |
| cold | green | narrow | smell | we |
| come | guts | near | smoke | wet |
| cook | — | neck | smooth | what? |
| count | hair | new | snake | when? |
| cut | hand | night | snow | where? |
| — | he | nose | some | white |
| dance | head | not | spear | who? |
| day | hear | spit | — | wide |
| die | heart | old | split | wife |
| dig | heavy | one | squeeze | wind |
| dirty | here | other | stab/ | wing |

| | | | | |
|-------|-----------|---------|----------|--------|
| dog | hit | — | pierce | wipe |
| drink | hold/take | person | stand | with |
| dry | horn | play | star | woman |
| dull | how | pull | stick | woods |
| dust | hundred | push | stone | work |
| — | hunt | — | straight | worm |
| ear | husband | rain | suck | — |
| earth | — | red | sun | ye |
| eat | I | right/ | swell | year |
| egg | ice | correct | swim | yellow |