LNGS 3905
Field Methods

Department of Linguistics, University of Sydney

Lecturer: Mark Donohue (room Transient 243B; phone 9351 7516; email: donohue@linguistics.usyd.edu.au)

Unit worth: 4 credit points

Prerequisites: Credit average in 24 points of linguistics, including at least 2 of LNGS 2001, LNGS 2002, LNGS 2003 or LNGS 2004

Textbooks: None, but lots of suggested reading.

Classes: Tuesday at 4.30 - 6.30 pm, and individual elicitation sessions in addition.

1. Goals

This course is meant to be a lot of fun; it will be a lot of work. Academically, it will introduce the basic techniques of eliciting, recording and analysing linguistic data solicited from a speaker of a language previously unknown to the class. We will develop skills in the elicitation of individual words and simple phrases. In thirteen weeks (in a major metropolitan centre!) we cannot hope to give a realistic field language learning situation, let alone cover the whole of the language. We can, however, look at and practise methods for doing field work on the phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics of Lani. This will include limited text-collection and lexical elicitation. Each individual will focus on some aspect of the phonological, lexical, grammatical or semantic system of Lani, and produce an original research paper based on data gathered during the course, and contributing to a shared data base useable by other scholars.

We will discuss practical, theoretical and ethical issues of doing fieldwork on a language. To emphasise the community-orientation of fieldwork, some of the assessment will be based on the production of useful materials in Lani. There will be a general class project, preparing on computer a basic dictionary of the language. Perhaps most importantly, we will learn something about Lani, about Language in general (with a big L), and especially about the relationship between data and theory.

WHO IS THE COURSE FOR?

The course is for people who want to gain experience in learning a language from the ground up. It is ideally for students with a knowledge of linguistics who want to learn about field methods or who want to learn something of a language that lacks a good grammatical description. You must be prepared to work each week on this course – it is not possible to pass by working very hard in the last couple of weeks. Part of the assessment will involve your continuing, week-by-week, cataloguing and archiving of materials you have elicited, for general use by the class.

I assume that students will already know how to use computers for basic word-processing, or else that they will acquire this knowledge on their own. We will demonstrate software on Macintosh computers, and compatibility with that platform will be required of any electronic work done for the class.
METHOD

Each week we will have one hour of general elicitation with the Lipiyus, the Lani teacher, and one hour of discussion of the data collected. As well each pair of students will have half an hour per week elicitation with Lipiyus. During the course, each student will:

- tape-record one of the class elicitation sessions, archive the tape, make copies for student use (everyone should maintain their own notes, but the official recorder will write up field notes on computer and have them ready for discussion at the next non-field session).
- choose a semantic domain, elicit vocabulary in that domain, record it on computer in a basic dictionary format
- work either alone or with one other student to record and transcribe a short text or dialogue using IT.
- choose a topic on any aspect of Lani, elicit material on the topic, check the elicited material against textual and any other available material, write an essay on the topic in the manner of a sketch grammar.

As an alternative to this assessment, you may choose to use one of the Max Planck Extended Field Manual projects, carry it out and write up the results.

PRELIMINARY WORK

Imagine you are going to a little known (warm) part of the world to do fieldwork. What can you find out about the place? What would you take with you? What questions would you ask before going?

2. Assessment

Split amongst a range of different tasks. You will get to choose the main language topic that you’re interested in investigating in detail, and the semantic domain of vocabulary that you want to work in, but a certain amount of work will be done in common. As mentioned, after we start individual sessions everyone will be responsible for archiving their work, accurately and regularly.

Everyone is required to write a short, descriptive paper on the phonology of Lani. This is not intended to be of great theoretical import, but to demonstrate that you can handle the sound system. All fieldwork begins with listening. We will also all transcribe a text from tape, and compare transcriptions. Finally, everyone will be required to produce some practical materials in Lani: this can be very basic, such as alphabet primers, or an illustrated mini-dictionary (either general or on a particular theme), but also includes illustrated texts and grammar lessons that focus on something we’ve found to be interesting or difficult.

15% Dictionary section due 5 October
15% Field notes to be available for general use the week after each session, in an organised and legible format
15% Phonology description due 20 August, 4pm.
10% Text transcription due 22 October, 4pm.
25% Language topic due 18 November (roughly 2,000 words of writing, excluding examples). This should have been frequently
presented in preliminary form in class, so there’s not too much chance of getting too off track.

10% Language materials also due 18 November (discuss with me by the end of October at the latest).

10% Class participation nebulous, but necessary. This includes little things like learning and using greetings appropriately (a very important skill in the field), interacting appropriately with the informant, paying attention to other people’s presentations, and of course always showing up when you have to.

So we’re dealing with a variety of different sorts of assignments, from the time-consuming to the creative, and with a fair amount of analytical and ear-straining stuff thrown in for good measure.

3. Syllabus

The following is a rough guide to the material that we’ll be covering. The middle part of the course is not described, as you’ll be dictating that with field reports and discussion of the material that we’ve been discovering.

Week 1 from July 26th

Week 2 from August 2nd
First field session, Names, greetings, basic questions, finding out about Lani, vocabulary elicitation of body-parts. Non-field session: Making sense of the week’s data, start on phonetic analysis

Week 3 from August 9th
Field session: Vocabulary and simple sentence elicitation. Non-field session: Making sense of the week’s data, phonetic analysis, choosing elicitation topics. Computer: entering vocabulary items into the computer, FOSF dictionaries

Week 4 from August 16th
Field session: Vocabulary and simple sentence elicitation actions, paradigms.

Non-field session: Making sense of the week’s data, phonetic analysis, Computer: FOSF dictionaries (2). Phonology paper due.

Week 5 from August 23rd

Week 6 from August 30th
Weeks 6 - 13 will be spent working on individual topics, and reporting the results to the class

Week 7 from September 6th
Week 8 from September 13th
Week 9 from September 20th

— mid-term break —

Week 10 from October 4th
Dictionary due

Week 11 from October 11th
Week 12 from October 18th
Text transcription due
Week 13 from October 25th
Non-field session: Comparing the transcriptions: Summarising, practical and ethical issues, doing more fieldwork

(Week 16) from November 14th
Everything due: morphosyntax assignment and literacy materials.

Reading
There aren’t any set textbooks; this is a course that’s good for your budget! There are, however, a whole lot of readings that might be handy. No, will be. If you can, get a look at some of the following. And anything on morphosyntax. I’ll make some random handouts on topics as they become relevant to the whole class.


[this one, edited by Alan Healey is highly recommended; I have a copy]
THIEBERGER, NICK. n.d. Notes for the computer assisted language worker. Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

Elicitation