Ling 117r: Field Methods¹
Spring 2018
Wednesdays 3-5 pm, Boylston 303, Department of Linguistics, Harvard University

Instructor
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Language: Oromo (Ethiopia; Cushitic Branch of Afro-Asiatic)

Course website: https://sites.google.com/site/harvardfm2018/home

Course Description

The science of language relies on the availability of dependable data. But how do we obtain dependable data? This course provides tools for the elicitation of phonological, morphological, and syntactic information from a native speaker of an unfamiliar language. By the end of the semester, participants will have become familiar—not just with the structure of an unfamiliar language—but also with the basic methodologies of linguistic fieldwork (elicitation and text analysis), the technology that is used for making and manipulating audio recordings, the electronic resources available for storing and organizing language data, and the ethical issues surrounding fieldwork, with the aim to prepare students for their own potential fieldwork.

We will start by working with the speaker as a group during class periods. Through basic word and phrase elicitation, we will develop an understanding of the language’s sound system and a shared transcription system. Then, we will immerse ourselves in the morphology, syntax, and semantics of the language by transcribing, translating, and analyzing a text that we have recorded. In so doing, we will realize that there are many aspects of the language that we do not understand. Then, class participants will embark on their own investigation of one aspect of the language’s grammar through one-on-one meetings with the speaker. Throughout this last phase

¹ This syllabus is greatly inspired by various components in Margit Bowler’s (2017), Maziar Toosarvandani’s (2012) and Jenneke van der Wal’s (2017) syllabi for similar Field Methods courses at Harvard and other institutions.
of the class, we will continue to meet together as a ‘workshop’ for participants’ independent projects.

Objectives
By the end of the course, students should:
- know about different elicitation techniques;
- be comfortable using these techniques to elicit data from a native speaker;
- be able to manage this raw language data, and analyze patterns (phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics);
- be able to make predictions based on the preliminary analysis and develop a way to test the predictions;
- be able to present the data, generalizations and analysis in a coherent, well-researched, well-argued way.

Prerequisites
Students taking this course must have
- knowledge of basic morphosyntax;
- knowledge of basic phonological concepts, including an active knowledge of the IPA;
  - and a general curiosity and openness to a new language.

Course Flow and Requirements
There are two components of this course you actively need to manage, and three phases that we will progress through.

Google Drive: We will be making heavy use of Google Drive. Make sure that you download it immediately, as the functionality of the course depends on it! Please let me know if there are any problems/concerns with this.

Website: I have created a google site for the course. This site has several components - for uploading recordings, elicitation transcriptions, discussion blogs etc.

Phase I, Group Elicitation: Discussing and getting used to the tools we will need. Getting a handle on the sound system/phonemic inventory of the language. Once we have done this, we will develop a practical orthography for the language. From the very beginning, we will be recording all our interviews with the speaker, and you will be responsible for adding all the
data from the elicitation sessions you direct to our online databases. Importantly, you will be asked not to consult any linguistic resources on our language until later in the term.

**Phase II, Text Analysis:** With a firm grasp of how to transcribe the language, we will record a text (a narrative, oral history, etc.) from the speaker. Over the following weeks, we will work to transcribe, translate, and analyze this text. Elicitation sessions will also center around understanding the puzzles posed by this exercise. Since we will know nothing about the grammar of the language, we will be confronted with many uncertainties. By this point, you will have started developing a collective bibliography of linguistic resources for our language. Some of the questions we have, we will be able to answer relatively easily by consulting the literature. Others will remain more mysterious. They will serve topics for your independent research projects.

**Phase III, Independent Research:** You will start your independent research project by presenting a question or set of interrelated questions that you have developed through analyzing the text. In the rest of the term, you will work to answer these questions through one-on-one elicitation sessions with the speaker outside of class. We will continue with subfield-based group elicitations in which you will be responsible for leading elicitation in your area of interest for part of each class. This will serve as a kind of ‘workshop’ for your independent research projects. Your peers will provide an outside perspective on the elicitation strategies you are pursuing. And, you will learn about other aspects of the language by observing your peers’ elicitation work.

**Day-to-Day Requirements**

**Elicitation and Transcription**

- We will be doing 1-1.5 hours of elicitation each week.
- After we have a good handle on the sound system of the language (phonemic inventory) and a shared, agreed-upon transcription system, we will aim for targeted elicitation, entering into Phase II.
- **2 students** from within each SUBFIELD groups will be responsible for the task each class: they will be the Lead Elicitators for that week.
- Responsibilities of Lead Elicitators for sessions they are leading:
  - **Preparing for elicitation:** devising questionnaires in your area of interest (with specific, concrete examples) which will have to be sent to me by Monday 3 pm. After I approve, it has to be uploaded as an elicitation plan on the Elicitation Blog by the midnight of the previous day.
  - **Managing files:** downloading and storing the recordings of the session on our Google Drive folder.
- **Transcription:** post the transcription of the ENTIRE session in the online database **within 24 hours of the transcription.**

- **In class:** one Lead Elicitator will be eliciting data from our Oromo consultant, and the other Lead Elicitator will transcribe their responses on the board (first in IPA, and later in an orthography that we agree upon).

  - In Phase III, you have to set up a **one-on-one meeting (~1 hour)** with Beekan outside of class to gather data on your independent research projects, whose topics will arise out of Phase II and the resources you will be allowed to consult eventually.

  - These sessions will also be recorded.

  - You should maintain the same level of preparation for these sessions, in order to not waste the informant’s or your time, and to be able to make concrete progress towards your final paper.

**Elicitation Blog:**

Each Lead Elicitator should provide a brief overview of what they plan to elicit in a given elicitation session **by midnight on the day before the elicitation** (a more detailed version having being approved by me). Your name and the date should automatically be included when you submit.

To post to the blog, select your subfield group and make a new post under the appropriate subfield tab with your plans. Early on, these will just be word lists and can look roughly like this:

*Kinship terms: mother, father, aunt, uncle, etc.*

Later, they will be more involved, like the one below:

**Word Order Possibilities:**

I will check multiple sentences to determine whether the language has strict word order restrictions.

*John likes apples.*

*Apples John likes.*

*Likes John apples.*

*Likes apples John.*

Etc.

**Class Database:**

- On Google Drive, we will have ONE collective elicitation transcription folder. **Within** that folder, each student will have their own **individual** folder, which they are responsible for updating.
• Once you’ve written up your elicitation, save the .txt file (following the conventions below) to your Google Drive folder inside the database directory. Then use the “Add from Drive” option to add it to your group’s tab in the Class Database on the website. Elicitation writeups should be posted within 24 hours of the elicitation.

• We will be using a tool such as BBEdit to help us conduct multi-file searches within a directory to save us a lot of flipping pages back and forth.

• Filenaming conventions:
  • We will all be sharing files and it is important to make the names meaningful and uniform.

    • Individual elicitation write-ups: lastName_group_topic_RecordingDate.txt ex: bhadra_syntax_tense-asp-possess_07042017.txt

    • Class write-ups ex: bhadra_class_kinshipTerms-animals_06292017.txt

    • Audio files group_topic_RecordingDate.wav ex: syntax_tense-asp-possess_07042017.wav

• Note that corresponding elicitation write-up files and audio files should have the same group name and recording date. The purpose of this is so that you or others can cross-reference recordings with write-ups.

Structuring your elicitation write-ups (both in groups and in class):

Your write-ups should be uploaded as plain text files (.txt). You should do word-by-word glossing as best as you can, until we get to a stage of sufficient understanding for complete glosses. In these cases, you will have minimally an Oromo sentence and a translation. Sometimes you will also have notes, which are highly encouraged. Examples should look like this:

bu Uyghurche soz-ler. (single space between words, hyphenate morphemes within word)
"These are Uyghur words" (Put the English translation in quotations)
% I am not sure what the word bu means... (Use % to indicate you are adding notes/comments.)

< one line between examples > men soz-ler-ni yaz-iwat-i-men. (Same as first line above)
I word-pl-acc write-prog-nonpst-1sg (should have the same number of hyphens/words as line 1) "I am writing words."
% I am not sure whether the -i suffix is non past or present tense. I need to check future contexts next session.
**Discussion Blog:**

You are expected to post at least once discussion point per week on data that is not within your subfield. This is intended to make you look over other peoples’ data. Cite the source by providing the file name of the write-up you are addressing.

Example post topics:

- What does this morpheme mean?
- I think I see an example of place assimilation/allomorphy/etc.
- This is an unusual phonological process.
- This lexical item sometimes looks like an adjective, but sometimes looks like a noun.

My intention is to make this an active place where you can post any questions that come up (there will be many). Students who have opinions or answers to questions that are posted should provide them—comments are enabled!

**Weekly INFORMAL presentations in class (roughly 5 minutes):**

Every week, this is your opportunity to show the class any puzzles you have encountered, elicit questions about confusing data, or provide your ideas about how to make progress on solving some puzzles. Although this is going to be fairly informal, please create a brief handout for each presentation to help guide the discussion. These should not be .txt files, but in a pleasant, presentable format.

**Evaluation**

**Checklist component**

To do well in this course, make sure you strictly adhere to this checklist of items, summarizing all the requirements described in this document:

- As Lead Elicitator, send me a detailed questionnaire to me by Monday 3PM, and once approved, post a brief overview of it on the Elicitation Blog by Tuesday midnight.

- Upload a text file (.txt) with the transcription of the entire elicitation session to Google
Drive/Class Database within 24 hours of elicitation (the two member team can divide up the elicitation write-up in their preferred manner but both have to post something to the Class Database).

- Make one short post on the Discussion Blog about data that was not collected by you.
- Upload the recording of your elicitation to our recording database on Google Drive
- Make a brief (very informal) presentation of your weekly findings at the beginning of the class.

**Final Evaluation component**

Apart from learning the important skills of fieldwork, this course is also designed to help you become good analyzers/theorizers of your carefully gathered data.

Over the course of the semester, you will working towards solving a puzzle of your choice, and approved by me. Your outside-class elicitation sessions should be fully targeted to make concrete progress on this front. You can schedule meetings with me if you need help with making your questionnaires sharper. At the end of the course, we will have a poster session at a LingedIn meeting in which each student’s poster will be displayed for the department, the native speaker consultant, and the instructor. **This will be the final evaluation component of the course.** You can also view this work as something you submit to region-oriented conferences such as ACAL or general conferences such as NELS, WCCFL, etc.

**Useful Bibliography on Linguistic Fieldwork**


