Elicitation[1]

Two methodologies are used in elicitation: *translation* and *judgment* tasks. An effective strategy is to go back and forth between them:

1. Translation → receive sentence that we know is acceptable
2. Change the sentence *minimally* → ask for judgment
3. Repeat 2 or go back to 1

In general, start simple, make sure you understand what you're getting, then build on it. Elicitation is not just a process of collecting data to analyze later; it is most effective as an *interactive* process where you are continuously building, testing, and refining hypotheses as you go.

We need active hypotheses to understand what exactly happens in these tasks.

(1)   **Two starting hypotheses about translation and judgment tasks (Deal, 2015):**

   a.   Equivalent translations hypothesis (ETH):
        The input to translation and the output of translation are equivalent in meaning.

   b.   Equivalent judgments hypothesis (EJH):
        In a particular context, speakers accept/reject sentences expressing the same range of propositions regardless of what language they are speaking.

These hypotheses are not always true. We want to conduct elicitation in ways that will maximize the chances that the ETH and EJH (1) are true, thereby maximizing our data's reliability and interpretability.

1   Translations

We ask for translations of *well-formed sentences* of English and individual open-class words. Avoid asking for anything else:

- sub-word units
- function (closed-class) words, e.g. "all," "the," "every"
- ungrammatical sentences of English
- (sub-sentential phrases)

Note that English sentences can also be ambiguous, which we would want to control by constructing explicit contexts. Imagine asking a translation for "Mary washed her car."

(2)   a.   Mary's car was dirty, so she wanted to wash it. You are Mary's neighbor and you see her outside washing her car. Later you tell a friend, "Mary washed her car."

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[1]Based on handouts by Seth Cable and Jessica Coon.

b. Sue was very sick and Mary went over to help her with her chores. Sue's car was dirty, so Mary washed it for her. Later you tell are telling a friend about Sue and say "Mary washed her car."

2   Judgments

Judgments are our valuable source of *negative data*.

(3) **The exhaustive list of judgment tasks (Matthewson, 2004, p. 399):**

a. Grammaticality judgments

b. Truth value judgments

c. Felicity judgments

(4) **Reasons a speaker might accept a sentence made up by a linguist:**

a. The sentence is well-formed and pragmatically natural in the language.

b. Although the sentence isn't completely correct or natural, but...

- the speaker misheard:
  It's best to ask the speaker to repeat the sentence we constructed. Sometimes we will learn that the speaker actually has a slightly different sentence in mind.
- the speaker is trying to be cooperative and helpful:
  Ask "would *you* ever say..." rather than "can I say..."

(5) **Reasons a speaker might reject a sentence made up by a linguist:**

a. The sentence is either ungrammatical or pragmatically unnatural given the context.

b. The sentence is well-formed, but:

- the speaker can't think of a context where it would be appropriate or true
  It's the linguist's job to supply contexts to test. See below.
- there were other issues, such as the pronunciation of words, its cultural appropriateness, or that it seems to be false currently
  Try again with different open-class words. Your claim of grammaticality (the claim you report) should reflect the construction, not an individual sentence.

"Never build an analysis on just a few sentences. Incorporate redundancy into your elicitation. Use what you expect to be the same structure, with different words." (Bowern, 2008, p. 76)

3   The linguist, the speaker, and the data

It is important to keep in mind that **the data speakers give us are "clues."** We have to interpret these clues (a) against the backdrop of particular theoretical hypotheses and possibilities and (b) with an understanding of the ways in which our methodology may be fragile.

- The speaker's job is to answer your questions as best they can, based on their knowledge of their language.
- Coming up with sentences or contexts to test, especially in order to test a particular hypothesis, is hard work! It's hard work for the linguist, not the speaker.
- There are many other questions we might be tempted to ask, but require *analysis* in order to answer:
    - "Is that a past tense verb?"
    - "Is that the same *dei* as in this other verb?"
    - "Is there a way to turn this verb into a noun?"
    - "Are there masculine and feminine nouns?"
    - "Can you think of a situation where this might be true?"
- Sometimes the speaker will also start to come up with their own hypotheses and volunteer them. Listen, take notes, and thank them. However, this too is just a "clue."

References

Bowern, Claire. 2008. *Linguistic fieldwork: a practical guide*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Deal, Amy Rose. 2015. Reasoning about equivalence in semantic fieldwork. In *Methodologies in semantic fieldwork*, ed. M. Ryan Bochnak and Lisa Matthewson, chapter 6, 157–174. Oxford University Press.

Matthewson, Lisa. 2004. On the methodology of semantic fieldwork. *International Journal of American Linguistics* 70:369–415.