Language reports

1 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.

1.1 Translation

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

- sub-word units
- function words (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."

(1) 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."

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."

1.2 Judgment

Construct a new sentence in the target language by manipulating sentences that you know are grammatical. After a while, you will be able to get more creative with this. Ask your friend (a) whether it sounds natural or (b) whether they can imagine someone saying this.

Sometimes it will be helpful to provide a context that makes the use of the sentence more realistic and natural.

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[1]Parts of this handout derive from handouts by Seth Cable and Jessica Coon.

"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)

1.3 Data and theory

It is important to keep in mind that **the data that 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. It is not their job to help you think of how to test things.
- 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 *chik* as in this other word?"
    - "Is there a way to turn this verb into a noun?"
    - "Are there masculine and feminine nouns?"

    It is not fair to ask questions like this. (And answers could be unreliable!)
- 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."

2 Sample topics

The following are sample topics with some suggested starting points. You are not limited to these topics and you do not need to follow these specific questions. Feel free to talk to me about your projects.

Students registered for EL5101R/6880: If possible, work with the same language and speaker for both reports. I suggest you start with one of the first topics first, which will help you familiarize yourself with basic aspects of how sentences are organized in this language. Then try one of the last three topics (or similar) for your second report.

1. Basic clause structure:

   Apply our constituency tests, starting with simple transitive sentences. Is there evidence for a VP constituent (a constituent with the verb and object, without the subject)?

   What is the default word order in your language, and what other word orders are possible?

   How can you model the basic syntax of this language using the theory developed in class? What would trees for some basic sentences look like?

2. <u>NP asymmetries:</u>

We have seen a number of asymmetries between structurally higher NPs and lower NPs (handout 3). Do these show that subjects are higher than objects in your language? Or vice versa?

How about the direct and indirect objects of ditransitive verbs, like 'give'?

What do these diagnostics tell you about how sentences are built in your language?

3. <u>Unaccusativity:</u>

Many (all?) languages have two distinct classes of intransitive verbs: unaccusative and unergative (handout 5). Can you find evidence for two classes of intransitive verbs behaving differently in your language? Start by looking at the five types of evidence in handout 5, but think creatively as well!

4. <u>Case and agreement:</u>

This topic will only apply to languages that have case morphology on nouns and/or agreement on T or V.

If you have case morphology: What are the distinct case morphemes? What are their distribution? Are these nominative/accusative, ergative/absolutive, or something else? (See handout 6.)

If you have agreement: What is the morphology that you observe as agreement. What NP does it agree with? (Is it consistently subject agreement? Or something else?) What features of the NP does it reflect? (Number, gender, person are common...)

If you have case and agreement: Does the choice of agreement target always track NPs in a certain case?

Look at NPs in transitive verbs using the NP asymmetry diagnostics. Are higher NPs in a certain case or triggering certain agreement?

5. <u>Negation:</u>

How do you express negation in your language? Start with basic alternations between affirmative ('I went to school') and negative ('I did not go to school'). Does negation go on the verb? T? Is it an adverb? Where can it go?

How do you talk about about 'no one,' 'nothing,' 'no student,' etc.? Do you use the same basic negation word, or is there something special that's part of the NP, or both? Is the word order/position of negative NPs restricted compared to other NPs?

How do you make a correction? Examples: 'John didn't go to SCHOOL. He went HOME.' or 'John went HOME, not to SCHOOL.'

6. _Wh_-questions:

How do you form a _wh_-question with 'who' or 'what'? How about 'which student' or 'which book'? Does this word order differ from regular declarative sentences?

How about questions with 'how,' 'why,' 'when,' 'where'?

Are _wh_-questions island-sensitive (handout 9/10)?

How do you ask questions with an explicit choice. Example: 'Do you study syntax or semantics?' Do these questions use _wh_-words?

Are there examples where you use a _wh_-word but it's not a question?

References

Bowern, Claire. 2008. _Linguistic fieldwork: a practical guide_. Palgrave Macmillan.