Language reports

From the syllabus: Students will study one aspect of an unfamiliar language through elicitation with a native speaker. Guidelines on possible topics will be given later. The language must be a language that (a) you are not a native speaker of and (b) cannot be English, Singlish, Mandarin Chinese, or Singapore Malay. Should be approximately ten pages. Due **Saturday, November 7th**.

1 Process

Two methodologies are used in *elicitation*:[1] *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 them. 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

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

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: 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 to them are often 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."

1.4 Writing

Your report is a (short) academic paper that describes a (small) corner of the grammar of this language. It should make claims and present data from your elicitation as evidence for these claims. It should not be just a list of examples elicited, nor should it be long uninterrupted prose with all supporting data in an appendix. Give examples in the text, where appropriate, to support your claims.

Two resources:

- **The best, clearest guide I know for how to write a paper in linguistics: Newmeyer 1998.**
  I keep a (slightly annotated) copy here: `https://mitcho.com/teaching/newmeyer1988.pdf`.

- The ELL Writing Center: contact Aparna Shukla `aparnashukla@u.nus.edu` .

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.

1. Basic clause structure:

    Apply our constituency tests (handout 1), 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. NP asymmetries:

    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. Unaccusativity:

    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 evidence in handout 5, but think creatively as well!

4. Case and agreement:

    This topic will only apply to languages that have case morphology on nouns and/or agreement on T or v/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 handouts 6, 7.)

    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. Negation:

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 (discussed in handouts 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?

3   Rubric

Your language report is graded out of 20 points, using the following rubric:

- Development (5 pts):

  Claims are clearly stated and evidence is used to support the claims. Negative data is used appropriately. Alternative generalizations or descriptions are considered and evidence is presented to argue against them.

- Proficiency (5 pts):

  The paper reflects appropriate understanding of concepts developed in class. Relevant tests from class are used. Derivations do not have significant errors.

- Expression and organization (5 pts):

  Information and ideas are clearly articulated throughout the paper. The aims of the paper and key points/findings are highlighted. The paper has a clear overall structure. The paper uses appropriate section headings and paragraphs are well organized.

- Mechanics (5 pts):

  The paper has no significant errors in grammar, punctuation, or spelling. Examples are formatted appropriately. If external references were used, they are cited appropriately.

References

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