
Reviewed by Claire Bowern

The Handbook of Descriptive Linguistic Fieldwork is a manual for linguists (students and others) who travel to the “field” to obtain data about a language other than their own. The book’s 13 chapters cover a very broad range of topics, from finding a field site and consultants to techniques for eliciting different types of data. Highlights include a chapter specifically dedicated to preparation for the field (both academically and mentally) and, as is unusually the case for books of this type, information about the history of fieldwork. Unfortunately, the price tag puts this book out of the reach of most students (USD179). The people this book will be most useful to (and for whom it was presumably written) are also those least likely to afford it at this price. Its size also makes it cumbersome to take on a field trip, except perhaps in the digital edition. Given its cost and size, one must assume that it was published for the library market.

Overall, however, this is a very useful book. It appears to have been designed to teach all the information that students in the past were expected to discover for themselves, or that they were taught by advisors and peers if they were lucky enough to attend a university with a strong field tradition. Macaulay (2004) points out that field methods classes, while excellent preparation for eliciting (and to some extent managing) data, do not usually prepare students for the myriad of other activities and pressures which arise from work on-site. My own impression is that acquiring such information has been viewed as one of the apprentice fieldworker’s rites of passage, and linguists have tended to view such topics as either involving common sense—things that can be easily figured out for oneself—or as things that are not easily taught because they require too much specific local knowledge. Chelliah & de Reuse (henceforth C & dR) have done a good job of providing a guide to these aspects of fieldwork.

After two introductory chapters, the reader is led through language choice (Chapter 4) and field preparation (Ch. 5), ethical considerations (Ch. 6), and a chapter on “speakers” (7, entitled “Native Speakers and Fieldworkers”) that covers a broad range of material connected to choosing speakers, obtaining relevant information about them, and interacting with them. The last six chapters cover lexicography, phonetics and phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. The book is somewhat didactic in tone: there is plenty of concrete advice as to how to go about various tasks in the field (such as finding consultants). Sections within each chapter give different options for how to proceed; in “Choosing a Language” (Chapter 4), for example, each section leads the reader through a different way in which field languages may be chosen. The early chapters include summaries of “lessons learned,” though this is not carried through into the later parts of the book.

C & dR have deliberately pitched their manual to a broad audience. They state (p. 2) that they are trying to write a manual for a worldwide audience, pointing out that some other fieldwork manuals have a more regional focus. In part they succeed. The focus of the book is fairly generic, and I can imagine most of the advice applying (to some extent) in most places fieldworkers might go. However, this also limits the usefulness of the book. After all, local knowledge is crucial in preparing for a field trip. I was left feeling that
although the reader is offered a variety of methods for tackling a particular problem, they won’t always know which one is appropriate in any specific area, and the reader is not given the tools to work out which solution might be most applicable. While it may be true that forewarned is forearmed, there is still plenty of scope for the beginner to make mistakes. Moreover, the characterization of some previously published field guides as overly regional (especially Crowley 2007 and Bowern 2008, but also Abbi 2001) is somewhat misleading. Every writer of a fieldwork book draws on their own personal experience to give advice, and in most cases, that experience is specific to a particular region. Further, it is misleading to imagine either that C & dR do not do this themselves, or that regional specificity immediately makes such manuals useless to those who work in other areas of the world. Abbi’s (2001) manual, for example, contains a lot of material which generalizes beyond India, even though the book was written specifically for an Indian audience.

This is a fieldwork manual rather than a language documentation manual. It tells the reader how to go about doing fieldwork, not how to document a language, though the last five chapters do focus specifically on how to obtain data of various types. Those chapters, too, are focused on methods rather than content. Readers who are looking for suggestions for data management plans or advice on elicitation sequences would be better served by one of the other manuals (such as Thieberger 2012), or by the older questionnaires from the Lingua Descriptive Grammar Series. Some suggestions for model grammars are given for different regions, though areal specialists may disagree with them; for example, the most recent listed Australian grammar is from 1995, and some wonderful grammars have been published for Australian languages in the intervening years. I was very sorry to see only four grammars listed for Papuan languages and five for Africa, given the extent of the linguistic diversity of those regions. Other areas of greater familiarity to the authors receive more extensive treatment. For project management, I would refer readers to chapters in Austin & Sallabank 2011, which cover material not provided in C & dR.

While C & dR have made a valuable contribution to the literature on fieldwork, the book is not without some weaknesses. Most importantly, lost in all the detailed advice is emphasis on some of the most important skills a fieldworker can have. First among these is the ability to think on one’s feet, to be flexible, and to be ready to chuck out all the planning if things are not working—or if something better comes along. This is one of the ways in which fieldwork is unlike lab work, and no amount of planning and preparation can prepare a new fieldworker for this. Secondly, it helps to have a split brain, with one side working on the task at hand, and the other providing a meta-analysis as you go along. (This turns out to be an extremely useful general life-skill.) Some ability to analyze one’s own work while in progress is absolutely essential. Thirdly, it’s imperative not to take oneself too seriously—that’s a recipe for disaster, especially in areas of delicate cross-cultural work.

This book is a manual for how to take control in the field. But any appearance of full control in the field is likely to be illusory; there are too many things going on, and too many factors that an outsider either cannot or should not attempt to control. The authors say little about being a guest in a community, and how to work out appropriate ways of behaving there. The only relevant discussion I found amounted to less than half a page (p. 120) in the section addressing psychological preparation. There is some discussion of dress codes and behavior, particularly constraints on women’s behavior. More nuanced discussion of cross-cultural interaction would have been helpful, particularly for students whose fieldwork is

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their first opportunity to interact intensively with a new culture. After all, observing local customs is not at all straightforward for an outsider, especially before one knows what the customs are. Further, there are times when outsiders are expected to behave differently. Many of the situations the authors talk about can be fairly easily solved by asking the locals what they think is best. In my experience, this has been far more productive than trying to figure out the “right” way to behave. Yet “asking the locals if you’re stuck” doesn’t feature as one of the solution strategies.

While the book aims for generality, its message is still very much embedded in a certain approach to fieldwork. The default fieldworker here is a foreigner going to an “other” place to do fieldwork alone, rather than as part of a team. Fieldwork, however, is increasingly conducted in teams (including community members) and such work has its own logistics. Here, too, assumptions about control come into play, and lead to a less general guide than one might expect. C & dR assume mostly warm-climate fieldwork; see Lanz 2009 for specifics regarding cold-climate work, which isn’t covered in most handbooks.

C & dR assume that the fieldworker will be in a position to make choices about many aspects of their work, from choosing speakers to work locations and schedules. This is definitely not my experience, nor is it likely to be so for the many fieldworkers who work either partly or entirely under the auspices of community bodies. The lack of recognition that so much of the logistical planning might ultimately be beyond the control of the fieldworker is a bit unfortunate. One example I found particularly stark was the list of ideal characteristics of speakers (p. 189). Fieldwork is not very often like interviewing students for research assistant positions, where a checklist is helpful. Ultimately, enthusiasm for language work is the only really crucial trait for a consultant; most of the rest can either be learned or done without, though obviously some people are better at language work than others. So many languages would not be documented at all if the linguists could only work with speakers who conformed to the characteristics in this list! This attention to ideal working conditions also goes against my feelings about important fieldwork skills: work with who (and what) is available and make the best of it. One can’t continuously go looking for hypothetical better speakers or conditions, because one will probably never find them. Making the best of the available resources is a very important skill for anyone working on languages in a situation where the fieldworker is not a free agent. A valuable addition would have been some guidance in how a new fieldworker might negotiate existing local bodies to discuss how to meet the project’s needs while working within the constraints of the area.

C & dR have conducted an excellent literature survey. They have read everything that’s been written in linguistic fieldwork and provide a nice synthesis. This results in good coverage of the materials that already exist, along with attention to areas that tend to get overlooked. I was please to see discussion of the history of field linguistics (and approaches to fieldwork (Ch. 3)) here, along with philological work (Ch. 5), though the discussion of other aspects of historical linguistics was unfortunately simplistic. The focus on the importance of archiving (Ch. 8) is also good to see, since the field has been stressing this in recent years and it is pleasing to see a handbook like this reinforce new standards.

Some topics are inevitably given shorter shrift than others. For example, while methods for structuring individual field sessions are very well covered (Ch. 8), how to apportion time during a field trip is not. This type of time budgeting is just as important as carefully structuring a session, especially if things are unpredictable in the field site. While philo-
logical work on early materials is given good treatment, sociolinguistics receives scant mention (though there is brief discussion on pp. 429–430, under “Texts”). Also missing is a more general framework for dealing with variation in data. Variation comes up at numerous points in the text, but it is not treated consistently. The handling of language variation and change is rather weak in comparison to other areas of linguistics (such as syntax or morphology), which is a real shame given its importance to the field.

The amount of practical advice here is great, and I’m sure it will be appreciated. On a few occasions while reading this book, however, I found myself wondering if some advice was counterproductive, or whether books claiming such general scope should be in the position of giving advice on issues such as how to deal with local political unrest (p 122). At other times I found myself in outright disagreement with the authors. For example, advice on pp. 206–207 suggests retaining a poker face and suppressing excitement at finding a new construction or puzzlement at elicitation that isn’t revealing what was expected. I have found fairly consistently, even with speakers who have trouble with grammaticality judgments, that sharing in that part of the enterprise is a good way for speakers to participate. I have never found that speakers change their judgments to make me happy, but they have found alternative ways of explaining something that I haven’t understood, or searched for alternative contexts (and more illustrative sentences) to better elucidate a construction when they sensed that the true meaning hadn’t come out.

There is a full chapter (Ch. 6) devoted to ethics. The sections follow aspects of the Linguistic Society of America’s professional ethics statement (available from http://lsaethics.wordpress.com) and provide a useful summary of many important issues. The chapter includes a section on Christian evangelism (p. 153ff), which complements an earlier discussion (section 3.2) of missionary linguistics. Evangelism receives sympathetic treatment here, though both sides are represented. While C & dR rightly point out that secular fieldwork is no more ideologically neutral than its evangelical counterpart, some may feel the conclusion that “we must trust that indigenous communities can decide what is best for themselves” (p. 155) is unsatisfactory. There is little discussion of consent or coercion (or the appearance of coercion) which inevitably comes from associating much-needed medical care or linguistic work with a particular set of beliefs. This chapter will provide much material for class discussion.

Some areas of the book’s production, namely in its design and layout, deserve mention. The index is detailed, but difficult to use. I found the capitalization of all entries off-putting, since it makes all of them look like proper names. The content of the index is perhaps overly detailed and shows some signs of having been automatically generated from a frequency list; otherwise, why are words like certain indexed? The book’s structure is logical on the basis of its chapter headings, but these headings can be quite misleading as to what actually appears in the chapters. For example, metadata is discussed in Chapter 7, which the title indicates is about “Native Speakers.” Most of the ethics review material is not discussed in the ethics chapter, but in field preparation. Other material is scattered throughout the book (e.g., discussion of variation), which makes a good index vital.

Overall, this is a valuable addition to the literature on fieldwork, and one that provides a useful resource for new fieldworkers negotiating the maze of field preparation and logistics.
**References**


Claire Bowern
claire.bowern@yale.edu
This essential handbook provides the most comprehensive reference on linguistic fieldwork on the market. Based on the experiences of two veteran linguistic fieldworkers, it brings together all the reader needs to carry out successful linguistic fieldwork. The Handbook of Descriptive Linguistic Fieldwork is the most comprehensive reference on linguistic fieldwork on the market bringing together all the reader needs to carry out successful linguistic fieldwork. Based on the experiences of two veteran This book describes methods for doing fieldwork on language. It grew out of a need for a text which would be useful both to new fieldworkers in linguistics and linguistic anthropology and to students in field methods classes. Although elicitation strategies and data processing are the focus of a field methods class, in the field there are many more skills needed than just data collection, and it may well be that linguistics is the least of the fieldworker’s worries. Therefore here I cover not only linguistic data recording, but also grant-writing procedures, ethics and living in the field. Wha