

The Language Journal

1. Determine what language you want to work on and find materials and a speaker.

a) If you don't know anything about the language, teaching grammars are a reasonable place to start. A teaching grammar can give you a good start on building a vocabulary and understanding the basics of sentence formation. However, lots of teaching grammars have lessons based on faulty, partial or vague generalizations. Just because a book tells you something, don't necessarily believe it. Try to find ways to test the generalizations just as you would test any other hypothesis.

b) Find a descriptive grammar of the language. A descriptive grammar will have more linguistically oriented information, but generally will be sort of sketchy. Lots of stuff that you want to know will not be there, or will only be touched upon. Descriptive grammars are good to use as a check to see whether your informant is giving you reliable data. A descriptive grammar is also good to help you make sure that you're testing the right construction or whether a sentence that your informant judges to be ungrammatical is ungrammatical for the reason that you are testing for. It's easy to make an error in the question you are asking and get led towards a bad hypothesis, so be careful.

c) For many languages, you will be able to find a theoretical literature as well. This may or may not be useful to you. Theoretical work is good because it probably uses vocabulary that you are familiar with and tests things systematically. On the other hand, reading theoretical work could close your mind to possibilities that you haven't yet considered (and which might be worthwhile) because such work appears to have an analysis developed.

d) Find a speaker of your language. You will probably want to plan to meet this person about once a week for the whole quarter, so you will need to find a way to make it worthwhile for this person to spend so much time with you. One strategy that has worked well for others in the past has been a kind of trade of services (e.g., they help you gather data and you be their English conversation partner; or you take them to lunch; or you help them with their linguistics homework; etc.). Graduate students in other departments often make good informants (especially students in the sciences), but remember that they are probably just as busy as you are, so be careful not to take advantage.

2. In your initial meeting with your informant, fill them in on what you are doing. Make sure that you tell them and that they understand that you are a scientist gathering data. If they think that you are trying to find out about "proper grammar" (in the prescriptivist sense), you may get all kinds of weird responses to your questions. You should probably spend about 10 minutes explaining to them the difference between descriptive and prescriptive grammar and telling them that you want to find out how people talk, not how "scholars" tell people that they should talk. For some people,

you will have to remind them over and over again throughout the quarter. After a while you'll be able to tell when somebody is giving you a prescriptive judgment.

In this first meeting, you want to ask simple questions that you already have some idea of the answer to (from your grammars). If you don't know much about the language, try starting out by building up a list of verbs and nouns that make good arguments to those verbs. What is the word order? SVO, SOV, something else? Do nouns precede adjectives or vice-versa? What about pre-/post-positions? If there is an inflectional system, try to build the entire paradigm of agreement and tense markers. Find out what embedded clauses look like (e.g., is there a finite/nonfinite distinction). How are yes/no questions formed? *Wh*-questions? These kinds of questions are easy and are important for two reasons. First, they help you get acquainted with the basics of the language. Second, they help your informant get comfortable with the kinds of questions that you are interested in. As the quarter progresses, you will start asking very hard questions about structures that your informant will not have thought about before so it's a good idea to get them comfortable with the style of questioning.

The journal entries that you will turn in will be more narrowly focused. That is, you will be asked to find out about particular properties of particular constructions. However, you should be sure to get started in building a general knowledge of the language (as described above) as early as possible so that you and your informant will be ready to deal with more difficult structures as this becomes necessary.

One thing to beware of is translation. You don't want to ask your informant to translate English sentences word for word. Even if you think you are not asking him to do this, he may be doing it anyway and this could lead to your getting data that is unnatural in some way. Once you have a reasonably good sense of the sentence structure of the language, try to construct your examples in the language under study directly rather than asking your informant to translate. The risk of making up your sentences before you meet your informant is that things that are ungrammatical may be ungrammatical for a reason unrelated to the phenomenon that you are trying to test. Try to find out how to express the idea that would be expressed by the ungrammatical sentence.

3. If you think something is not working with your informant or if you are confused about the data you are collecting, come see me.