2 Ethics in linguistic research

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1 Introduction

All one can hope to do in a chapter on research ethics is raise issues, for the burden of resolution falls to each of us in dialogue with those who stand to be affected by our work. Different kinds of linguistic research raise very different ethical issues. And inasmuch as linguists encounter an enormous variety of cultures, people, and situations in the course of their research, we need to recognize that our own system of ethics may not be the same as that of the people we are working with (see, e.g., Holton 2009). So no discussion of research ethics can be comprehensive and no formal set of guidelines can anticipate unique actions or circumstances. For this reason, I will not attempt to set out specific actions one should take while doing research, but I will discuss a number of areas that every researcher should consider carefully when embarking on work with human participants.

Most of the readers of this volume will be subject to government regulation and university ethics review, which can be both a help and a hindrance in fostering ethical practice. A central purpose of this chapter is to encourage researchers to step back from the bureaucratic process and examine their own practices more generally. They might then step back into the bureaucratic process and engage in it intelligently and actively. For researchers who do not have such institutional oversight, this chapter can be a starting point for reflection about their practices and their potential consequences. In some cases, particularly in communities that have been disenfranchised in other ways, communities may wish to control who does what with their language (see Bowern 2008 and Holtan 2009 for a thorough discussion of these issues). In some cases, particularly in communities that have had a history of exploitation (such as native communities in North America), there is formal community review of research proposals. But in other cases – and even once one has passed this review – the researcher must take into consideration the interests of others in the community. The common focus on the primary individual or individuals we work with often distracts us from a consideration of how linguistic work affects others in the community.

A discussion of research ethics in linguistics perhaps best begins with the 1992 book by Deborah Cameron et al. entitled Researching Language. This book puts power at the center of the discussion, challenging researchers to consider power
relations not simply between themselves and their “subjects,” but in the more general web of power relations that constitute the social, including the academic, world. The very decision about what to study and how to study it emerges in a web of power relations within academia and in society at large. Parties such as the media, government, and publishers have their own interests in language, which may be at odds with those of the research participants (or researchers), and can have a considerable effect on visibility, public attitudes, and funding. For a single and reasonably subtle case, see Simpson (2012). In keeping with this broader view, one might consider that research ethics comes into play not only in social relations, but in relation to regimes of knowledge. What kind of knowledge is linguistic competence? Is it intellectual property? And what kinds of knowledge are we generating when we study it?

2 Ownership, patrimony, and intellectual property

A thorny starting point is the basic question of the relation between language and those who use it. Linguists, particularly those working on endangered languages, generally feel a responsibility to the language itself, as a living, and all too often a dying, practice. This sense of responsibility is often shared with the communities who speak (or spoke) the language, opening possibilities for fruitful collaborations. But linguists’ dependence on, and commitment to, linguistic diversity also leads us to a view of language and languages as the property not just of their speakers, but of humankind more generally. The analogy between linguistic and biological diversity intensifies this view, putting the linguist in the position of righteous activist. But closer to home, linguistic diversity is central to the health of the scientific endeavor. There is an awkward distinction between the interests of speakers and those of science, and it is one that linguists often ignore. And this can open the possibility for subtle and not-so-subtle abuse when linguists put the importance of the scientific record before the preferences of the speakers.

The United States regulations for research with “human subjects” defines human subjects as follows:

(f) Human subject means a living individual about whom an investigator (whether professional or student) conducting research obtains (1) Data through intervention or interaction with the individual, or (2) Identifiable private information. (Sec. 46.102)

The key phrase is “about whom.” While this leaves gathering information about a language, hence much of the work that linguists do, potentially immune to federal regulation, it should not leave it immune to ethical review. The American and European ideology that a language is not part of a whom is simply wrong in some of the cultures that linguists work in. For most people in the world, language is inextricable from personal and community identity. Some cultures consider their language to be a cultural treasure, not to be shared with others.
Research on language always involves human agents – speakers, writers, readers, or hearers of the language in question. Researchers may work with these people in physical proximity, over phones and other media, or examine their texts intended for others. They may seek basic linguistic facts, judgments, recordings of unreflective speech, or automatic responses. The relationship between the researcher and the bearer of language can range from intimate to anonymous, from collaborator to manipulator, and from open to deceptive. Depending on the nature of the research, one might call this person by a variety of names – a subject, an informant, a participant, a collaborator, a consultant, and no doubt others. Considering the use of these terms could be one place to begin a discussion of the relationships between researchers and the speakers who provide them with data. It has become increasingly common to use the term participant for a variety of roles, and one might ask if this is not often a form of political correctness – like using gender when one is really thinking biologically rather than socially. It is important to recognize that different kinds of research call for very different relations between researcher and speaker, and very different ethical considerations come into play in different research situations.

Cameron et al. (1992) distinguish three kinds of ethical traditions based in distinct research relations which, in turn, emerge from different epistemological traditions. I will not go into these three kinds here because the issues behind them are more complex than a quick overview can do justice to. But underlying the distinctions are three elements:

1. The researcher’s ownership and control of the research ideas, hypotheses, procedures, results and interpretation
2. The extent to which the researched are disinterested subjects of the researcher’s activity
3. The responsibility of the researcher to seek and use research knowledge for the benefit of the researched.

The three combine to describe a continuum from a model that is most suited to experimental work in which quite explicitly the researcher creates tasks for the researched to perform in relative ignorance of their purpose, and to work in which the researcher and researched collaborate to develop research that is in some way in the interests of the researched. Keren Rice (2006) argues that this last model is part of the ethical responsibility of people working on endangered languages. Indeed, quite early on, Ken Hale (1965, 1972) advocated working for the community in their revitalization activities, as they saw fit. He also advocated training speakers in linguistic analysis, which could be seen as simultaneously empowering the speakers and yielding superior research. He argued that by putting analysis in the hands of people with a direct interest in language documentation and
revitalization, the resulting analysis would be better and the research would continue long after the initial researcher had left the community. There is a good deal of territory between these two models, and while greater agency on the part of the researched is in general desirable, each research question calls for its own methods and its own division of labor. Regardless of which of these is appropriate, all parties to the research need to be in agreement about what is happening.

4 Consent

The history of research abuse tells us that consent is the cornerstone of ethical research practices. While such abuse is more dramatic in medical research (e.g., the Tuskegee study by the United States Public Health Service that studied the course of syphilis without informing subjects that they had the disease, or offering available treatment), linguists have been known to resort to such things as surreptitious recording and publication of cultural secrets. People may be willing to run quite significant risks as research participants if they feel that the research is important enough; some may prefer not to participate out of suspicion or fear; and some may simply not be interested in participating in research activities. Undergraduates in research universities may be quite happy to be deceived for the sake of the success of psychological experiments, while people in non-academic contexts may not have a good basis for understanding this enterprise. Fundamental to ethical research is ensuring that research participants enter into the enterprise knowingly and willingly, and gaining their consent should be a process of establishing and maintaining trust. A serious difficulty arising from the elaborate consent procedures involved in institutional review is that they commonly distract the researcher from the fact that consent should not be a matter of getting a signature on paper, but the establishment of an informed working relationship. And there is no question that often the signed consent procedures required by some review bodies works against the interests of both the research and the researched.

Depending on the kind of research – for example, whether it involves a 15-minute experiment or long-term residence in the community of speakers – consent may be a one-time event or an ongoing process. The importance of consent depends on the potential effect the research may have on the participant or the participant’s community. Completely anonymous observations of public behavior are arguably of no grave consequence to the people being observed. And one could say that by performing acts in public, an individual is giving implicit consent to having those actions observed and recorded. The actual anonymity, though, depends on the anonymity of the place, and the predictability of who would be engaging in activity in that place. The anonymity of the research setting itself can be important, since entire communities could suffer from observations that identify them even though they are anonymous with respect to individuals. This raises the issue of how we present our results, which I will return to below.
It is always important, though, to consider carefully how much detail about people and places is actually necessary to the presentation of research. We have a tendency to include detail for a variety of reasons, ranging from its potential for explaining the data to serving our vanity as field workers. It is up to each of us to limit ourselves to the former.

While language documentation usually involves very straightforward understandings between researcher and speaker about the nature of the work (see Chapter 4), other kinds of research involve a certain amount of vagueness or even deception. Sociolinguists prefer to downplay their interest in language in order to elicit as unselfconscious speech as possible (see Chapter 6). This means that they may prefer not to inform speakers of the kinds of analysis they will be doing of their recordings. In the case of survey interviews, if interviewees are randomly selected and do not know each other, full disclosure could follow the interview. But in cases where the researchers are creating a snowball sample (see Chapter 5) or remaining in the community doing ethnography (see Chapter 10), they may prefer to remain vague about their analysis. If we tell participants that we are interested in language, allowing them to think that our research needs are satisfied by the reading passages and word lists we have them read at the end of the interview, are we being sufficiently honest? Ultimately, every sociolinguist will have to answer this question for him or herself. In my own research in Detroit-area high schools in the early 1980s, I presented my research as an ethnographic study of high school social networks, with little mention of my interest in language. The ethnographic interest was indeed central to my work, and the first book I published based on that research was an ethnography, which many of my participants read and commented on in draft form. But did that fulfill my responsibility to the participants? Recently, I have had occasion to discuss this research with some of them, now in their forties, and told them about my linguistic interests and results. They were surprised but not bothered by that aspect of the work, but the question remains whether they would have been equally unbothered when they were in high school. There is little question that the issue of linguistic study of this sort is increasingly sensitive to the extent that the speakers feel that their language or dialect is stigmatized. And once again, this enters into a societal discourse of linguistic deficit that can make vulnerable speakers feel that interest in their language is stigmatizing. At the same time, the relationships that sociolinguists are able to establish with participants even to elicit spontaneous speech often establish them as champions of the local way of speaking, thus potentially helping to reduce the feeling of stigma more generally.

Psycholinguists often need to go beyond vagueness to deception, misleading speakers about the purpose of an experiment in order to manage the bias in responses (see Chapter 7). The extent to which these practices are ethical depends on the potential harm caused by the deception, and the approach taken to debriefing after the experiment. Experimental “subjects,” particularly members of university subject pools, commonly go into the lab with the assumption that there can be deception, and accept this as part of the enterprise. There are cases in which the
deception itself can carry some risk – for example, work on stereotype threat, in which participants’ attention is drawn to their membership in some stereotyped group to see its effect on their performance in the experimental situation. In these cases, needless to say, complete debriefing is required afterwards. On the other hand, if the deception simply involves drawing a participant’s attention to one part of the task in order to distract them from the part that is really of interest, the only point of debriefing might be to educate the participant. However, too much debriefing of this sort arguably offers no benefit to the participant and has the risk of biasing the participant pool, as participants may begin to enter experiments with the expectation of deception.

Getting informed consent involves not only telling people what you are going to do, but what you are not going to do. Ethnographers can be mistaken for spies, but also for social workers. In the latter case, participants might reasonably expect them to provide kinds of help they are unequipped and unqualified to provide. In field situations in which researchers are likely to hear personal information, they must establish in advance how to handle cases in which, for example, someone tells them about abuse. In other words, they must make it clear at the time they establish consent what kinds of things will and will not be kept confidential. The increasing frequency of fMRI studies in linguistics (see Chapter 8) presents an entirely new set of dilemmas, as it is not uncommon for MRI studies to reveal brain abnormalities (see Borra and Sorensen 2011). Participants might reasonably expect that the research MRI is a diagnostic procedure and that they will be told of any abnormalities, but linguists have neither the diagnostic expertise to deal with these incidental findings, nor the means to pay someone who does. Informed consent, then, must be clear about the limited nature of these experiments.

Consent should be not only informed, but voluntary. Researchers need to be alert to potential sources of coercion. Does the individual feel obligated or pressured, in some way, to agree to participate? If the researcher relies on a statusful insider to help recruit participants, such as a doctor, teacher, or official, will people feel an obligation to that person? In a community study, the knowledge that others are participating could create social pressure. And looking at it from the other perspective, if a researcher’s presence creates the expectation of participation, is it the researcher’s responsibility to include all comers whether he or she actually uses the resulting data or not? There are situations in which participation in research may carry some kind of status, and non-participation may create feelings of rejection or exclusion. The importance of these effects will vary tremendously from community to community, but researchers should be alert to the fact that there are cases in which the consequences can be important. This concern is of course magnified when payment is involved.

The researcher’s responsibility is to make sure that participants understand what they are being asked to do, and what the implications of doing it will be. This may involve explaining to people who have never seen the internet what it means to have recordings of their speech made publicly available online. Informed
consent assumes the ability to grasp the implications of participation in the research and to make decisions for oneself. People with undeveloped or diminished reasoning capacity (such as children or people with mental illness or dementia), or in socially vulnerable positions (such as prisoners, employees, or students), require special consideration. Institutional review boards (IRBs) dictate practice in many of these cases, but it is up to the researcher to consider the many sources of problems with informed consent. The fundamental issue in these situations is whether the individual is sufficiently aware of the implications of participating in research, and sufficiently free to determine their level of participation. An additional threat to consent is the fact that interviews tend to be not just about the interviewee, but about that person’s acquaintances, friends, relatives, enemies. We need to ask ourselves at what point third parties become inadvertent research subjects, and when they do, we need to find a way to gain their consent.

Very small children are commonly inadvertent research subjects, particularly in early acquisition studies, with their parents or guardians providing consent on their behalf. As they mature and develop the capacity to understand the implications of participating in research, they are in a position to decide whether or not to participate. However, children are less likely to understand the research enterprise, to recognize potential risks, and to understand the roles and relations involved. They may, for example, confuse the researcher role with that of a teacher or social worker, or some other role that entails specific responsibilities. (Indeed, researchers should determine in advance what they will do if they learn that a child they are working with is abused or otherwise in danger.) For this reason, while minors must ultimately determine whether or not they participate in research, they can only give assent (verbal agreement to participate) and must also have the consent of the adults who are legally responsible for them. There are cases in which an IRB can waive the requirement of parental consent, but they do not generally apply in the case of linguistic research. The age of legal majority varies considerably across cultures, as do the conditions under which a person below that age can be emancipated. And it is up to researchers and review boards to determine whether the legal minors they are recruiting as participants have the maturity to give assent.

Documentation of consent is a sticky issue, and one of the magnets of hostility toward IRBs. Technically, in the United States, documentation of consent (signed consent) can be replaced by verbal consent in most cases of linguistic research. In many cases – for example, in research carried out in societies in which people are averse to signing official documents, or with populations with low literacy – a requirement of signed consent can stand in the way of recruiting participants and can threaten the peace of mind of those who do participate. Some IRBs recognize this and waive documentation in these cases, but if one’s review board is overly conservative, it is the responsibility of the researcher to push back with explicit references to the governmental guidelines. Bowern (2010) provides information about some universities’ IRB practices that could be useful in appealing to one’s own IRB.
Institutional oversight of research involving human subjects is both a benefit and a problem. A major benefit is that human subjects review obliges us to think through the implications of our research procedures in advance, and can point out problem areas that we might not have anticipated. But while there is no question that institutional review has helped eliminate a number of abuses that have plagued research in the past, it has also attracted a certain amount of hostility on the part of the research community. Government-mandated human subjects review imposes a considerable bureaucratic burden on the university and, in turn, on the researcher. Any form of bureaucratic regulation is going to be unwieldy, and this is increased to the extent that human subjects protections are primarily designed for medical research. Even when universities have separate boards to review non-medical research, they often lack research experience in the areas they are reviewing. These are familiar problems, but perhaps the more serious consequence is that institutional oversight has also invited researchers to give over their ethical considerations to an external body that almost certainly knows less about the research and the conditions than they do. Rather than drawing back and openly or covertly refusing to comply with regulation, researchers might consider it part of their responsibility to become part of the solution by joining the review board and improving its practices from within, or providing the IRB with well-documented information about issues specific to their discipline.

It is smart practice for researchers to know the official regulations governing research, and to understand the intent behind those regulations. Federal regulations in the United States are administered by the Office for Human Research Protections, which is part of the Department of Health and Human Services of the federal government. These regulations were established with the intention that they should be flexible, giving local IRBs considerable discretionary authority. In the case of behavioral science research, the intention of flexibility is even greater, since it is recognized that these regulations were primarily developed with medical research in mind. Guidelines developed by professional organizations can be useful in negotiating with review boards, and should be drafted with this purpose in mind.

Not only are researchers responsible to their own IRB, they may be subject to review in the countries or communities in which they wish to pursue research. UNESCO keeps an international database on ethics in research, and while many of the entries are restricted to biomedical research, a number cover research in the social sciences and humanities as well. The Harvard School of Public Health is also developing a database of human subjects protections around the world. The number of review boards around the world is increasing, so before traveling...
abroad for research, linguists should familiarize themselves with the regulations in the countries they are going to work in. Below the national level, many communities, such as Native American tribes, also regulate research access. Others, such as minority communities near major universities, do not. The researcher should consider whether their presence and activities in these convenient locations constitute an undue burden on communities.

In an age of formal regulation of research, it is easy to become paternalistic in one’s approach to research participants, particularly since human subjects review is done prior to beginning the research. Ethical decisions may be made in advance of familiarity with the actual research situation and the people and cultures involved. It is imperative that researchers rethink these decisions as they pursue the research and, where necessary, change their practices and their contract with their review board.

6 Research locales

6.1 Field research

The opportunity to do research in the field is a gift. People allow us to spend time in their space and to participate in their lives. In the process, we use resources, we cause a disturbance, and we gather information that benefits us, our field, and our careers. What is in it for them? Before we consider that, we might step back and ask, who is this *them*? When we do fieldwork, we are not simply working with one individual, but with an entire community. And if we are working with a single individual who is away from the community, we need to consider the community nonetheless. The issue of what constitutes the community is anything but simple. A linguist may gain entry into part of a split community, or may know the interests of some segment of the community they are working with, but be ignorant of other members’ sentiments. There may be differences of opinion in the community about the value of the research, and about the proprietary status of language itself.

Communities, no matter how small, are always diverse. There are always differences in power and differences of opinion. And there are friendships, hatreds, alliances, and relations of all sorts that may affect people’s perceptions of us and our role in the community. And inevitably, the relationships that the fieldworker develops will reverberate in some way through the community. Our ethical responsibility in the community – whether it is an isolated village in a very different culture to our own or a high school or neighborhood in our own community – extends to the community as a whole. Inevitably we will be associated more with some people than others, and that association can have an effect on relations in the community. From payment to small favors to simple friendship or attention, we will be providing commodities. And at the same time, we may be objects of suspicion and pose social liabilities for some. Allowing one’s contacts to be limited to a subset of the
community also poses the risk of findings that are not representative of all segments of the community, which affects not only the value of our work, but the equity of any measures based on that work.

Fieldwork done in the community brings together research and personal everyday interactions in a way that is often ambiguous – indeed, the personal and the professional are inseparable under these conditions. Particularly for the sociolinguist or linguistic anthropologist, every interaction may provide linguistic data or inform the social analysis. It is up to the researcher to make sure the members of the community recognize this, and to set up some kind of modus vivendi to accommodate it. In an ethnographic situation, participants should be able to say at any time that what they are doing or saying cannot be research material. In my own ethnographic work with elementary school kids, part of the consent process was to settle on, and practice, a special gesture that tells me that they want privacy. That said, anyone who has worked with children knows that they trust too easily, and the fact that after the first day nobody ever made that gesture in 3 years is an indication that children are not thinking about the potential consequences of allowing an ethnographer in their midst. In such cases, the ethnographer must take on the responsibility of picking and choosing what to record, and what to publish. Ethnographic research raises a variety of questions and dilemmas, but it also provides continuous opportunities for working out common understandings. It is important that the researcher establish with the community a shared set of principles.

Researchers are becoming increasingly familiar in communities around the world. There is still plenty of room for misunderstanding, though. It is not uncommon for linguists to be seen as spies or agents of external authorities. In a high school, the linguist runs the risk of being seen as a teacher’s spy or an undercover narcotics officer. But it can work the other way as well, and create a kind of inappropriate trust. A linguist working with a vulnerable population may be seen as having powers or resources that he or she does not have (or does have but considers it inappropriate to provide). People might view the linguist as a social worker and may expect advocacy or protection of some sort. Fieldworkers must know from the start how they will create an unambiguous role, and how they will deal with unexpected problems if they should arise. Outside of the fieldworker’s culture, there are many possible sources of misunderstanding about the fieldworker’s nature, resources, capabilities, and responsibilities. Only some of these can be predicted, and it is up to the researcher to recognize at all times the possibilities for misunderstanding.

The researcher working with groups of children is likely to witness meanness, bullying, acts of racism. These are not just data, unaffected by the fieldworker’s presence, for the presence of an adult introduces external moral authority, and a lack of response could be taken as approval. It is no longer considered that the researcher can maintain detachment, particularly in the eyes of research participants, so researchers need to establish in advance how they will respond to situations like this. In the case of children, it may be a good idea to establish
this as part of the ground rules at the beginning of the research, but to remind them as situations arise. In the case of working in schools, the proper ethical thing to do can be judged within the fieldworker’s own culture, but what if this takes place in a completely different culture? What if a fieldworker witnesses someone beating their child? These are dilemmas to which there is no single answer, but dilemmas that the individual fieldworker needs to work out as much as possible in advance.

6.2 Institutional locations

Doing research in institutional contexts raises an additional level of control. Research in prisons is highly restricted precisely because inmates are in a powerless position and unable to give completely voluntary consent. Federal regulations limit research in prisons to projects that are directly concerned with prisons or potentially of direct benefit to the inmates. In other words, prisoners can no longer serve as a convenient sample of the general population. This follows on years of abuse, in which prisoners served as subjects in medical research and drug trials. While prisons are a special case under US regulations, the dangers of captive research populations extends to a wide range of institutions. Schools, refugee camps, workplaces all require institutional permission, and the ethical pursuit of fieldwork in these settings begins with the understanding carved out with the gatekeepers.

The researcher needs to keep in mind that there are often conflicts of interest between those with authority over the institution and the people the researcher seeks to work with within. Administrators may want researchers to provide them with information about the populations under their control. They may, even inadvertently, impose in these populations a sense of obligation to participate. A school principal may inform teachers that they must let researchers into their classrooms, or teachers may inadvertently pressure students to participate by, for instance, offering to collect consent forms on the researcher’s behalf. If they feel that a particular research project is in the company’s interest, company executives may inform workers that they are to participate as part of their jobs. The researcher’s first task in establishing a relationship with an institution is to come to a clear agreement guaranteeing that all participation is voluntary, and that an individual’s participation or non-participation will have no effect on their status in the institution. This may often involve not letting those in charge know who actually participates. This extends to the university classroom and laboratory as well. It is difficult for employees to refuse to participate in a research activity when asked by their bosses, and for students to refuse when asked by their professors. As a result, using the classroom as a participant pool is highly problematic. Students can certainly be valuable resources when one is trying out ideas – polling students for intuitions can be useful both to the researcher and to the students. But instructors need to be sensitive to the fine line between trying ideas out with one’s students and involving them involuntarily as research subjects. Laboratory experiments often use students from departmental subject pools set up specifically to add
a layer of confidentiality between students, their professors, and experimenters. A properly run subject pool provides a non-experimental activity as an alternative for those who prefer not to participate, and maintains confidentiality about which option individual students choose.

6.3 Information media research

The explosion of information and communication technology in recent years has opened up all kinds of resources for linguistic research. And each of these brings with it new ethical dilemmas. The internet puts what might be considered private communication into a mass-available sphere. At the same time, it provides a platform for intentionally public communication. Determining, therefore, what kinds of internet communication are intentionally in the public domain is a complex problem. It is not always clear whether writers on the internet consider their texts to be private or not, and researchers should hold no illusions about their ability to provide anonymity for data culled from the internet. The internet is a goldmine for research on discourse, but such research commonly involves the publication of fairly large stretches of text. And while the internet provides access to apparently anonymous data, it also facilitates tracing those data and identifying their sources. As the threats that the internet poses to privacy increase, users are becoming increasingly aware of the dangers and hopefully are becoming more circumspect in their use. And, increasingly, internet sites are establishing explicit research guidelines. By the time we have come to the Twitter age, it is pretty clear to all users that their communications are not private. Nonetheless, if a person sends a message to a limited list, one can assume that they do not intend for it to go beyond, even if the sender recognizes that it might. In the end, it is up to researchers to be sure that they are not gathering and publishing data that the speakers intend to be private, or that can be traced to their origins if the data in any way pose a threat to the originators.

The ethical considerations in using any texts, of course, depend on the nature of the research. As Susan Herring (1996: 157) points out, “A speaker is unlikely to feel concern at being represented (anonymously and out of context) as having said, ‘I was there for about uh six... six years...’” On the other hand, it is not uncommon for linguists to cite more personal or even incriminating stretches of speech. In such cases, if the speech shows up on an in-person recording, one would have to be in possession of the recording or a transcript to begin to identify the speaker. On the internet, on the other hand, the speaker’s identity is far less secure.

7 Payment, ownership, advocacy, empowerment, and “giving back”

Many linguists emphasize the importance of “giving back,” but what actually constitutes a contribution to the community is a complicated
issue, and certainly not one that the researcher can resolve on his or her own. The understandings of research arrangements need to be built into the relationships that researchers enter into in the course of their work; otherwise there is potential for “giving back” to be paternalistic, and/or to serve the interests of some segments of the community at the possible expense of others.

The prototypical, and original, linguistic work involves a linguist working one-on-one with the speaker of the target language. In this case, the speaker-participant is not a research “subject,” but a collaborator or consultant, and in some cases a co-author. The obligations of the researcher toward this speaker may vary considerably. In some cases, the researcher may be paying the speaker in exchange for their knowledge. The appropriateness of this depends on whether the community considers the language to be general knowledge that is anyone’s to share. Paying consultants may involve a long-term financial arrangement or a one-time payment, and may involve payments in kind, such as locally valued commodities or help or expertise. Particularly in long-term fieldwork, this kind of compensation may blend seamlessly with the give-and-take of personal relationships – offering rides, helping with tasks, and so on. Since the line between the professional and the personal is often blurry in these situations, it is up to the fieldworker to consider the implications of each action carefully. Important ethical issues involve balancing fair payment against the potential for coercion, and adversely affecting relations within the community. In many cases, it may turn out that some kind of compensation to the larger community is more appropriate – to schools or other organizations. This should be established in cooperation with the participants and the community. Once again, this raises the question of what actually constitutes the community, which may better be determined on the basis of ethnographic work (see Chapter 10).

In some cases, people engage in research with the expectation that the results will be used in some way to benefit the community of speakers. This may involve documentation, preparation of pedagogical materials, and/or advocacy (see Rickford 1997). In all these cases, the form that this reciprocity takes is best determined by the speakers themselves rather than by the researcher’s whim. In some cases, participants may not even want language-related support, but rather more general professional assistance (e.g., advice about resume-writing, job interviews, or other practical matters). Some communities are more concerned with “payback” than others. Most particularly, oppressed communities, and communities whose languages are disappearing, have a strong need and sense of need, and it is up to linguists to establish a clear understanding about their responsibility from the start. In his comparison of quite different situations, in Alaska and Indonesia, Holton (2009) points out that the issue of potential profit from the publication of language materials can create resentment in the community. There is also concern about communal profits as opposed to pay given to an individual consultant.
The issue of advocacy is quite explicit in the American Anthropological Association’s ethical guidelines:

Anthropologists may choose to move beyond disseminating research results to a position of advocacy. This is an individual decision, but not an ethical responsibility. This becomes an ethical issue if the conditions under which the research is given access to the language include an assumption of advocacy.

8 Data management

While our fieldwork may be fairly short-lived, we generally maintain the data from that fieldwork for a long time, if not for the rest of our lives. People who provide speech samples need to control the fate of those samples – to determine where their voices will go, who will have access to them, and for how long. When we collect large amounts of material, we may have data to work with for the rest of our careers. Do the speakers agree to us using their speech samples well into the future, and for differing purposes? The issue of future use of data has been particularly highlighted in recently publicized medical cases such as the successful Havasupai lawsuit against Arizona State University, and the best-selling story of Henrietta Lacks (Skloot 2010). In the case of the Havasupai, researchers at Arizona State University drew DNA samples for the purpose of finding the cause of widespread diabetes among tribe members – a project that was clearly in the interests of the tribe. This project yielded no beneficial results, and the samples were retained for use in research, without the donors’ consent, that was not in their interests, most notably investigations of the tribe’s origins. Henrietta Lacks was an African American woman whose cancer cells were used, without her knowledge or consent, to create an immortal cell line for cancer research.

From the outset, we need to establish with our speakers what will be the fate of data they provide us with, and this requires thinking well into the possible future. Some may want to pass their data on to others or contribute them (or a subset of them) to a widely available corpus. At the current historical juncture, a number of linguists are facing the ethical dilemmas associated with establishing corpora of recordings of people with whom they no longer have any means of contact. People differ in their feelings about this, and clearly each case must be decided on the basis of what the recordings are like and how possible it is to anonymize them. The reader is referred to Chapter 12 on anonymizing transcripts, and Chapter 13 on anonymizing corpora. Nowadays, it makes sense at the outset to establish levels of consent – whether speakers want their names associated with the data, whether they want the data to be available only to the researcher, the researcher’s team, all researchers, or the general public, and whether they want the researcher to play samples of speech from these recordings at academic conferences.
Management of data may be far less of an issue for linguists than it is for other social scientists, since there is normally nothing risky about the potential disclosure of linguistic information. But this can lead linguists to be sloppy about the maintenance of personal information, from contact information to income data to pseudonym assignments. Whenever any researcher gathers personal information about speakers, that information needs to be protected. File encryption is a simple bottom line for data stored on computers. And of course many of the vehicles for speech that linguists elicit are intended to be private, such as interviews and personal narratives.

9 Regimes of knowledge

Finally, we should consider not just what happens to the speakers we work with, but what happens to the knowledge we generate. Individual linguists are not necessarily equipped to change society, or to “apply” their work. But it is a linguist’s responsibility to understand the potential effect of research results and conclusions on wider regimes of knowledge. Am I making the best use of the data I have gathered? Can my study of the speech of underclass children feed a discourse of cultural deficit? Can my work on gender differences contribute to sexist discourses? If so, what can I do to usher this work into the world in a constructive manner? What do I need to do besides simply put the results out there? Whom should I be talking to about this research, and how? Ultimately, we are engaged in a meaning-making enterprise, and our ethical responsibility involves not just behaving well as we gather data, but doing what we can to make our participants’ cooperation worthwhile.

References


