

TERRY CROWLEY. 2007. *Field linguistics: A beginner's guide*. Edited and prepared for publication by Nick Thieberger. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press. 216pp. ISBN:978-019-921370-2, paperback.

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Field linguistics: A beginner's guide is a compendium of sensible and practical words of wisdom from a veteran linguistic field worker to novice researchers in the field. The book represents one of the last publications of Terry Crowley, who was a vigorous contributor to field linguistics in Australia and Vanuatu until his untimely death in 2005. Crowley's publications include fieldwork-based studies of at least eighteen distinct languages of Australia, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea, including full grammars of seven languages of Australia and Vanuatu, and two creole languages (Bislama and Cape York Creole). At his death he was Senior Lecturer in Linguistics at Waikato University, in Hamilton, New Zealand. The book under review was being revised by Crowley at the time of his death, at which point the project was taken over by Crowley's colleague, Nick Thieberger, who finished the revision and prepared the book for publication. In the acknowledgements, Crowley dedicates the book to Don Laycock, another field linguist of considerable standing in Papuan linguistics, who passed away unexpectedly in 1988.

The book is divided into seven chapters that take the reader from the question of "Why bother to do field linguistics?" (Chapter one) through ethical issues (Chapter two), to the details of elicitation of word lists, isolated examples, and texts (Chapters four and five). Along the way, Crowley provides a checklist for pre-field preparations (Chapter three), including self-examination, choosing a language and field site, background research, planning for the field, funding, equipment, permissions, and suggestions on how to approach a community. Finally, Crowley describes some potential cultural and analytic problems and pitfalls one might face (Chapter six), especially if one is an outsider to the community where the language is used. The book concludes with a chapter on "salvage linguistics" (Chapter seven), in which the special issues pertaining to linguistic work among seriously endangered languages are highlighted.

This is not a book on how to analyze a language or write up a grammatical description or dictionary. Rather it is about the challenges and methods of doing linguistic research in a field situation. Throughout the text, the tone is relaxed and conversational, one might even say "parental," with first and second person pronouns used throughout. There is neither point to prove, nor theory to defend. Rather, Crowley simply provides down-to-earth counsel on how one goes about the practical work involved in documenting and describing a language in the field. Though Crowley often frames the discussion with narratives based on his own experiences, the book is not at all self-aggrandizing or overly idealistic. Crowley is quick to describe his own mistakes, and things he would have done differently had he known better. For example, on pp. 26-27, Crowley relates how he once recorded, edited and distributed a story that turned out to constitute evidence for one family's position in a land dispute, without realizing that the story was considered slanderous by the other family in the dispute. Such concrete examples enhance the user-friendliness of the text for novice

researchers by giving them a vicarious “taste” of the realities of linguistic fieldwork. In so doing, Crowley dispels any lingering myths that fieldwork is a glamorous adventure, filled with exotic experiences and discoveries. Rather it is a very human, frustrating, confusing, challenging, yet amazingly fulfilling endeavor.

Chapter one, in which Crowley describes the motivations and benefits of field linguistics, centers on the story of Truganini, the last speaker of one of the several Aboriginal languages of Tasmania. Truganini’s story is particularly poignant in that she was born in 1803, shortly after the first European settlement in Tasmania, and grew up in a thriving monolingual Aboriginal community. She died in 1876, before her language, folklore and other unique cultural knowledge were recorded for future generations. To this day her language is known as “South-Eastern Tasmanian”, since there is no record of what the people themselves called their language. Thus Truganini’s lifetime spanned the entire period from language and culture vitality to total extinction. Crowley powerfully describes the process of disinheritance of the homeland of Aboriginal Tasmanians as “one of the great tragedies of colonial history” (p. 2) and “early ethnic cleansing” (p. 3). He then powerfully warns of similar catastrophic consequences in contemporary situations in various parts of the world.

Ethical issues in linguistic fieldwork are explicitly discussed in Chapter two, though they pervade the rest of the book as well. Most linguistic fieldworkers have responsibilities to multiple “stakeholders,” and often these responsibilities seem to conflict with one another. In particular, the fieldworker is usually involved in an academic research project, often a PhD dissertation, and so has a responsibility to produce quality research that addresses current academic issues and contributes to academic discourse within a certain scholarly community. On the other hand, such research is not possible without the co-operation of speakers of the language, who have more pragmatic interests and concerns, such as education, cultural preservation and economic opportunities. These very different orientations make different demands on a fieldworker’s limited time and energy. While Crowley realistically acknowledges the importance and legitimacy of the academic side of a linguistic field program, he sets responsibility to speakers on a par with responsibility to academic research. No one can read this book without coming away with a profound sense that service to communities of speakers is as much a part of field linguistics as is academic research.

The particular ethical issues that Crowley addresses in Chapter two acknowledge, but go beyond, the concerns of official “ethics committees” currently established by most universities. So, in addition to a solid articulation of the need and motivation for informed consent, privacy and avoidance of harm, Crowley deals with such knotty problems as salaries paid to language associates, production of materials usable by the community, use of terminology, personal and professional relationships with language associates and with other researchers. Crowley articulates much wisdom here that “rings true” to a reader familiar with linguistic fieldwork, but which is not often dealt with in the literature.

Chapters three, four and five describe the “nuts and bolts” of field research. How does one choose a language and field site? What preparations are needed? How does one begin recording data? What are the advantages and limitations of direct elicitation, elicited texts and spontaneous texts? What equipment is needed, and for what purpose?

Consistent with the pattern of the book, Crowley begins chapter three with a story from his own experience. He describes his initial fieldtrip as “linguistically speaking” not very productive (p. 57). Yet those initial experiences set the stage for a lifetime of satisfying and fruitful fieldwork. Crowley is quick, however, to assure readers that his experiences are not to be taken as the norm for everyone. He describes different kinds of attitudes toward fieldwork, e.g., for some it may be a “rite of passage,” a hurdle to be overcome in pursuit of broader academic goals, or it may be an “escape” for those who are not entirely comfortable in their own culture. There are many types of fieldwork situations, from sitting in a comfortable office with bilingual university students who speak an underdocumented language, to living for months at a time in a monolingual community, isolated from all familiar comforts. While there is no one type of field situation, so there is no one type of field linguist. Anyone contemplating linguistic fieldwork must look inward and realistically assess his or her own personal qualities in light of the potential field situation. One quality that all fieldworkers must share, however, is “a burning desire to do fieldwork” (p. 58).

Chapter four is all about how data is collected, organized and archived. The first section deals with establishing working relationships with speakers of the field language, beginning with a discussion of the terms one uses for language team members. While Crowley rightly eschews the term “informant” for obvious and well-known reasons, he ends up recommending the term “language helper.” To my ear this term, though much better than “informant,” still sounds a bit condescending. My personal preference is to use the terms “language associate,” “consultant” or “team member.” The important point of section 4.1 is that establishing an atmosphere of mutual understanding and respect is absolutely crucial to the overall success of the field program. Issues of relative age, gender and educational background are discussed frankly and insightfully. For example, in many cultures, it may be scandalous for a man and a woman to work together without others nearby. Furthermore, there may be taboo or simply embarrassing vocabulary or conversational topics that an associate of one gender will be unwilling to share with a researcher of the other gender.

Other issues may arise if there is a wide discrepancy between the ages or social statuses of the researcher and associate. While the researcher may expect to direct language sessions, an associate who is a teacher or respected elder may assume a frame in which he or she is the authority and the researcher is just there to take notes. This may be a useful way of conducting some language sessions, but one should also seek some associates who are willing to accept the program that the researcher sets. If, on the other hand, the associate is overly deferential toward the researcher, he or she may be too willing to agree with whatever the researcher says rather than correcting mispronunciations or awkward, ungrammatical constructions. The fact is that a linguistic research session is a rather peculiar social situation for most people. It takes time and effort to establish good, productive working relationships. Just as with researchers themselves, language associates each have different personal qualities, and therefore have different contributions to make to a language project. For this reason, it is important to work with a number of speakers, to know the strengths and proclivities of each, and to check data regularly from one speaker to another.

Generally, chapter four is about elicitation and handling of elicited data, beginning with phonology and grammar, and moving on to vocabulary. Not until chapter five is close attention paid to text work. While Crowley clearly articulates the fact that a language description needs to be based primarily on extended stretches of spontaneous speech, I would

describe his approach as rather “traditional,” in that it assumes one starts “from scratch” with elicitation and then approaches text work at a later stage in the project. This is clearly the kind of situation that he faced in his work in Australia and Vanuatu, and is still very common in many parts of the world. However, in some situations basic research may already have been done, and/or there may be a body of written or recorded texts available. In such situations, it may be reasonable to begin by reading, watching, or listening to a text together with a language associate, and eliciting information about phonology, grammar and vocabulary as part of the textual study.

There is much good, practical advice in chapter four regarding elicitation methods. For example, elicitation in coherent semantic fields and discourse contexts is preferable to eliciting random, out of context examples. This is one way of addressing the fact that elicitation forces speakers to imagine a hypothetical world in which they may conceivably want to communicate some thought. Such hypothetical utterances are the mainstay of linguistic research, since the *content* of linguistic communication is not as central to a linguist as is morphological, syntactic and lexical *form*. However, most “normal” people (in contrast to linguists!) are much more concerned with thoughts, ideas and feelings than with the linguistic forms used to express them. Hypothetical situations are awkward at best, and potentially confusing. Therefore it is usually best to try to work within a particular hypothetical context, rather than jump randomly from one context to another. For example, when eliciting transitive clauses Crowley suggests using sequences of sentences such as the following:

I saw a dog. The dog was eating meat. The dog ate the meat. The dog swam across the river. I saw the dog in the river.

These may be followed by expansions on these sentences, and further exploits of this hypothetical dog, meat, river, etc. This is preferable to random sequences like:

The dog ate the meat. The student booted up the computer. The man spoke to his son. . . .

The question of grammaticality judgments is also dealt with in some detail. Because speakers cannot help but imagine elicited examples as representing potentially real situations, there are any number of reasons why a speaker might reject a particular sentence. Again, the linguist is focusing on form, so rejection of a form might be automatically taken as an indication of ungrammaticality. However, a speaker is more likely to be responding to meaning. Crowley describes a situation in which he was using the verb meaning “to divorce” in an elicitation session. He was having a very difficult time, until one speaker thoughtfully commented “we don’t get divorced.” One feature Crowley does not mention, but which I have found problematic in more than one situation is sociolinguistic register. When speakers say “no, that’s not a good sentence,” they may mean “that’s not the way we would say that in a formal context like this one,” or “that’s not the way I would say that to you, an outsider to the community,” or if one is dealing with written material, the speaker may mean “that’s not the way we would write it.” On the other hand, there may be situations where strictly speaking “ungrammatical” utterances are perfectly acceptable

and communicative in context. For example, in the film *Titanic*, the captain says to his first mate “How many on board, Mr. Murdoch?” This utterance omits *people are*, which is not an “omissible constituent” in any linguistic theory I am familiar with. Yet, I can fully imagine that if I were a language associate and a researcher asked me if this was a “good” sentence or not, I would probably say “yes.”

Beyond a solid discussion of elicitation techniques, chapter four also draws the reader’s attention to how to organize sessions, record data, file data, and use a computer data base. Crowley typically describes various methods, and presents the advantages and disadvantages of each and the circumstances under which one method may be more appropriate than another. Again, this is all vital information for those who are contemplating their first fieldtrip.

Chapter five specifically addresses issues relating to collecting, transcribing, translating and analyzing text. True to form, Crowley begins by outlining the history of text collection in linguistic research, reasons for working with texts, methods of text collection and lastly potential problems and pitfalls in dealing with text. Among the reasons for using spontaneous and elicited texts in linguistic work are recording oral tradition for future generations, and filling out the range of grammatical constructions possible in the language. This section reminded me of a situation I encountered in my own early fieldwork in Yagua. If one deals strictly with material elicited via Spanish, one could come to the conclusion that Yagua is an SVO, and strictly nominative-accusative language. However, after working with an extended body of texts, we realized that SV/SVO order hardly ever occurred in natural materials. Furthermore, there was a particular intransitive construction in which the S argument was expressed grammatically as an O. This construction would never have arisen in elicitation, as it occurred only at particular discourse junctures in narrative texts.

Fully one-half of chapter five alerts the reader to potential problems in text collection and analysis. Fundamental problems such as the difference between unplanned (spoken) and planned (written) discourse, and the consequent difficulty in converting a spoken text to writing, native speaker error, and “tunnel-vision,” i.e., holding a preliminary hypothesis too firmly, are presented clearly and engagingly. Crowley is particularly candid in pointing out situations where he mistranscribed, misanalyzed or mistranslated data in published material, and also situations where he “smugly” pointed out such errors in the work of others. I cannot help but think that Crowley was remembering situations in which he was the target of such smug correction on the part of others, but with typical magnanimity expresses the issue with himself as the culprit. The main point of this discussion is that text work is fraught with areas where “errors” may be made, and multiple perspectives or analyses may all reasonably be valid. Researchers should give one another a bit of “slack,” and remember that all research is imperfect, but all is valuable in its own way. If we demand perfection in our own language documentation work, or in the work of others, very little would ever be accomplished.

In chapters one through five, Crowley presents field linguistics as a pragmatic task, involving specific procedures, activities and problems to solve. Although not exactly an advertisement for field linguistics, Crowley unapologetically takes a positive stance, highlighting the importance of the task, and the personally rewarding aspects of the experience. Chapter six, then, is largely a “caveat emptor,” in which Crowley acknowledges the wider challenges of field work, warning readers about the physical and emotional dangers and the

very real possibility of failure. Again, Crowley uses his own experiences of culture shock (which he terms “going troppo”) to frame the discussion. The overall effect of chapter six is to provide a sobering short course in personal self-examination and cross-cultural adaptation. While good linguistic research does require a fieldworker to become an “insider” to the cultural system that gives rise to the language, it is unrealistic for an outsider to expect to fully integrate into the life of a community that is very different from what the fieldworker is used to. He recommends that fieldworkers who begin to experience symptoms of culture shock take periodic “breaks” from the community, returning to more familiar surroundings for awhile.

Finally, Crowley warns about the inherent paradox of “participant observation.” While all fieldworkers strive to describe the indigenous system from the inside, as though they have assimilated that system themselves and can describe it as it “really is,” the fact of the matter is that the mere presence of an observer inherently changes any situation. A rather extended discussion of Crowley’s experience in an area of Papua New Guinea, where the word for “European person” is the same as the word for “ghost” amply illustrates this fact. This story reminded me of a situation in Central America where I discovered that the word for “white person” was mysteriously homophonous with the word for “cockroach”! While such polysemy cannot be taken to mean that speakers necessarily equate all outsiders with ghosts or cockroaches, it does have much to say about past and present relationships between groups, and disabuses the reader of any sense that participant observation can be at all neutral.

Crowley concludes chapter six with a section on “linguists behaving badly” in which he describes situations in which linguists have jeopardized future research by failing to exhibit respect for the communities in which they work. Researchers can also impede scholarly progress by having a narrow provincial outlook on their work, and dismissing or even actively opposing the work of others. Crowley reveals his impatience with paternalistic attitudes among some outsider fieldworkers, as revealed in turns of phrase such as “my language,” or “my community.”

Chapter seven deals with the unique problems surrounding linguistic fieldwork in seriously endangered languages. Among the problems that Crowley mentions are the fact that the fewer speakers there are of a language, the more difficult it becomes to identify fully competent speakers as language associates. There is also the very real possibility that the last speakers of a language may not remember their language well, as in all likelihood they have spent a good portion of their lives speaking another language. Only in communities where a language is used on a daily basis to accomplish real communicative work are speakers likely to be fully fluent in all the grammatical and lexical resources of the language. Furthermore, languages on the brink of extinction typically exhibit unusually rapid syntactic and morphological changes due to close contact with languages of wider communication. Without a strong community of speakers to reinforce and limit changes, a high degree of variation from one speaker to another may result. While a language is never a monolithic structural system, a language in decline tends to be even more fragmented and variable than more robust languages. The role of the researcher in such situations may become complicated by different expectations regarding published materials. Any time material in a language is written down, the written form is likely to be construed as “authoritative” or “standard.” Such written materials are always likely to be controversial, but

in a situation of a seriously endangered language, such problems are potentially multiplied. Again, consistent with Crowley's pattern throughout the book, he describes a range of possible situations, problems, and potential solutions, and provides lists of advantages and disadvantages of various possible courses of action.

In conclusion, I wish this book had been written thirty-five years ago when I first discovered linguistic fieldwork. As an undergraduate, I couldn't get enough exposure to the methods, or opportunities to practice the art of linguistic fieldwork. At my university, field methods was an advanced graduate level course that students normally took after they had already chosen a dissertation topic, and which was one way of proving or disproving theoretical claims using an underdocumented language as "grist for the mill." I, like Crowley, learned by doing, and many of his words of wisdom ring true to me, though I would never have been able to articulate them as well or as thoroughly as he has in this book. I am pleased to note that in recent years, the profile of language documentation, description and linguistic fieldwork has risen in many linguistics departments around the world, and courses in field methods are now available in first year graduate and even undergraduate curricula. The book is destined to become a mainstay textbook for field methods courses at any level, and as a must-read for all graduate students and others who are contemplating doing research in one of the many underdocumented languages of the world. This book is a welcome addition to the literature on the methods of language documentation, and contributes significantly to the continued development of linguistics from being a strictly theory-driven to a more data-driven discipline.

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