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Enhancing data collection through linguistic competence in a field language: Perspectives from rural China

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Although some critics consider it time-consuming and demanding, proponents of the monolingual approach for field research (i.e., learning to speak a target field language as part of the research process) argue that it can provide a unique insight into its structures. However, this claim remains largely unsubstantiated in the available literature on field methods. The present paper sets out to achieve a twofold objective: First, it reviews prior observations about the monolingual method in documentary-linguistics publications, highlighting important gaps in research. Secondly, based on qualitative data from the author's fieldwork context in rural, indigenous China, it contributes to addressing one such gap by demonstrating how, when, and why basic to intermediate communicative competence can enhance the documentation, description, and analysis of a field language, in ways that complement and sometimes outperform other approaches such as bilingual and stimuli-based elicitation.

1. Introductory remarks^{1,2,3,4}

After a long cognitivist hiatus where contemporary linguistics was mainly aimed at using inductive reasoning to glean theoretical insights on the nature of human language, linguistic fieldwork has returned to prominence in the past three decades (Thomas 2020: 266). This renewed interest stems from the recognition that the majority of the world's languages are on an accelerated path towards extinction (Hale et al. 1992; Nettle & Romaine 2000; Brenzinger 2008) and that their disappearance comes at a very high cost in moral, socioeconomic, and scientific terms (Thieberger 1990; Maffi 2002; Evans 2010). Against this backdrop, field linguists have sought to establish a framework for best practices in endangered language documentation along epistemic, methodological, and ethical dimensions (e.g., Himmelmann 1998; Newman & Ratliff 2001; Gippert et al. 2006; Himmelmann & Ladd 2008; Chelliah & de Reuse 2011; Sakel & Everett 2012; Mihas et al. 2013; Yu 2014; Bower 2015; Filipović & Pütz 2016; van Driem 2016; McDonnell et al. 2018; Seifart et al. 2018; Lahaussais & Vuillermet 2019; Cruz Cruz 2020).

Based on my own fieldwork amongst the Pholas in rural China, this piece hopes to contribute to these endeavours by tackling a specific procedural aspect of linguistic fieldwork, namely the advantages of learning to speak the target language as part of documentation and description projects. It is shown how doing so can not only enhance analytical practice but also contribute to Himmelmann's (1998) envisioned project of advancing the collection and preservation of high-quality language data that may be of use not only to theoretically minded linguists but also to the speech communities themselves, as well as researchers across the human and social sciences.

To this end, the paper is structured as follows. §2 provides a succinct introduction to the Phola language and its speakers. §3 reviews previous work on the monolingual approach to linguistic fieldwork, with a focus on the current gaps in research that the present paper addresses. §4 provides a detailed analysis of researcher–speaker interactions showing exactly when and how establishing unmediated communication in everyday settings with community members can yield more and better language data. Finally, §5 summarises the key points and discusses directions for further research towards a full-fledged methodology for monolingual fieldwork.

The Phola data presented in this article are part of the Phola Collection (December 2018–January 2020) archived in PARADISEC. Individual speakers and the Luodie Village Council have given informed consent to sharing these materials. Throughout fieldwork, research goals and priorities were ongoingly communicated and negotiated with Phola speakers. The speakers who are featured the most in the present article are amongst the ones who showed an explicit interest in linguistic and metalinguistic discussion and hence took an active personal interest in helping me understand how the Phola language works. In the course of fieldwork, I developed a theoretical interest in the deictic and dimensional paradigms of Phola, which naturally emerged from an explicit interest on the part of some Pholas to not only use these grammatical systems but also engage in metalinguistic talk about them. The structure and content of recording and language discussion sessions were largely open-ended and collaborative, and the areas most deserving of transcription, comment, and elaboration were jointly decided upon. Work in progress towards community materials includes the production of a Chinese-language sketch grammar of the language alongside a small collection of local stories to be reviewed by a number of consultants who have volunteered their interest in taking an increasingly active and autonomous role in the documentation of Phola.

¹ My eternal gratitude goes out to the Phola speakers of Luodie Village, who accepted my presence and supported my language-learning and research endeavours. There are too many names to mention, but my primary language teachers Li Jiafu, Li Tieshun, Yang Yinghui, Bai Tili, Bai Luwu, Ma Sinu, Bai Yinna, and Li Huiming will always be dear to my heart. I also remain forever indebted to my Chinese research sponsors Prof. Bai Bibo (白碧波) and Prof. Xu Xianming (许鲜明), who made my fieldwork possible, as well as to the entire team of Yuxi Municipality Council (玉溪市委员会), Yuanjiang County Council (元江县委员会), Wadie Township Council (洼垵乡委员会), and Luodie Village Council (罗垵村委会). Finally, this piece of research would have not been possible without the nurturing influence of my PhD supervisor Nick Evans who always inspired me to “bring the language to life.”

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³ The author states no conflict of interest.

⁴ The recordings reported in this study are freely accessible in the PARADISEC repository as a digital collection under the ID YPG1 ‘Recordings of Phola’: <https://catalog.paradisec.org.au/collections/YPG1>.

2. The Phola language and its speakers

Phola is a minoritised Tibeto-Burman language belonging to the Ngwi subbranch (Bradley 2005), which is spoken by farming–herding communities in the rural mountains of south-central Yunnan Province of China, within the area highlighted in Figure 1 below.



Figure 1. Location of Phola-speaking area within the broader geographic context

The variety under study is that of Luodie Village, natively known as $la^{33}e^{33}$ or, more traditionally, $la^{33}u^{33}$, which is located north of the Yuanjiang River at a latitude of 23.459077 and a longitude of 102.285383. The map in Figure 2 below shows the location of Luodie, highlighted with a yellow star, within the Phola-speaking area.

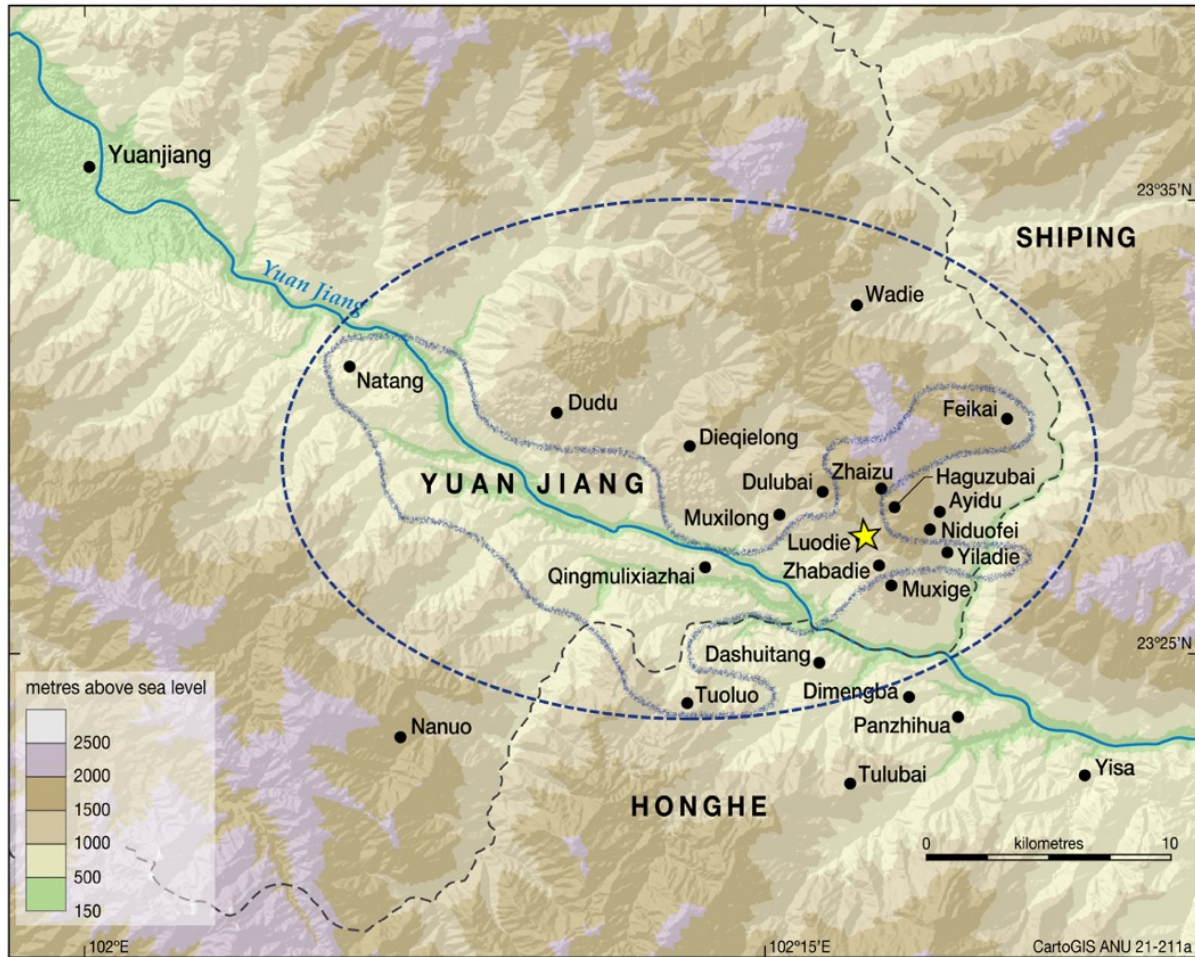


Figure 2. Location of Luodie Village (yellow star) within the broader Phola-speaking area (dashed oval). A hard line has been drawn around the core Phola-speaking villages.

Luodie villagers are in close linguistic and cultural contact with other Phola dialects from within Yuanjiang County, especially the Phola varieties spoken in Yiladie Village (called $t_u^{31}t_i^{33}$ in Luodie Phola), Zhaizu Village ($k^h i^{55} t_s u^{22}$), Natang Village ($n a^{55} t^h a^{33}$), Qingmulixiazhai Village ($q a^{33} n t a^{22} l i^{33}$), and, very particularly, Zhabadie Village ($t a^{22} p u^{33} t e^{33}$) shown in Photo 1 below.



Photo 1. Zhabadie Village as seen from the eastern part of Luodie Village

Through trade and cultural exchange, Luodie Pholas are also in very close contact with speakers of other Ngwi languages, especially Phala (known as $p^h a^{31} l a^{33} \eta i^{33}$ ‘the language of the Phala’), which is spoken across the river from Luodie in the villages of Yisa and Dashuitang (both called by their Chinese exonyms by Luodie villagers); Alo ($a^{55} l o^{31} \eta i^{33}$ ‘the language (of those who make) earthenware’), which is spoken in the outskirts of Yuanjiang County Seat (known as $l a^{31} p u^{33} n t e^{33}$ in Luodie); and, very particularly, Southern Nisu, whose speaking populations reside in Wadie Township as well as the neighbouring villages of Haguzubai ($t e^h e^{55} n t e^{33}$), Muxige ($\eta o^{31} g i^{55} k e a^{33}$), Dulubai ($n t e a^{33} t o^{31}$), and Muxilong ($m i^{22} l u^{33}$). Although farther afield, the Nisu variety spoken in Wadie Township Centre (called $\gamma o^{31} n t e^{33}$ in Luodie Phola) is influential because younger males from Luodie spend long stretches of time there for the purposes of trade and, in earlier stages of life, primary education, which is delivered in a mixture of Nisu and the local variety of Southwestern Mandarin. The latter is referred to by locals as 元江话 *Yuánjiānghuà* ‘the speech of Yuanjiang’ in Chinese and as $t i^{22} \eta i^{55} \eta i^{33}$ ‘language of the Han’ or $l a^{31} p u^{33} n t e^{33} \eta i^{33}$ ‘language of Yuanjiang’ in Luodie Phola.

There are some mixed households in Luodie involving in-married Nisu women from within Wadie Township and, to a lesser extent, Phala and Hani women from across the river. The language of the latter is known in Luodie as $v a^{33} \eta i^{31} \eta i^{33}$ ‘the language of the Hani’, and about one in six Luodie Pholas reports being able to understand and speak some of it as a result of sustained contact through trade and guest labour in Hani villages south of the Yuanjiang River. Nisu, Phala, and Hani mothers pass on their linguistic varieties to their children, which contributes to the overall patterns of multilingualism in Luodie Village. More marginally, some Luodie Pholas have had some contact with speakers of Tai-Kadai varieties, such as Dai, known as $p i^{31} t e^h a^{33} \eta i^{33}$ ‘the language of the Dai’, which is prevalent in Yuanjiang County Seat.

Yuanjiang Mandarin is widely used throughout the county as a lingua franca alongside various Nisoid varieties (collectively known as $a^{33} t e^{33}$ in Luodie), whose speakers are ethnically dominant. While Standard (i.e., North-Eastern) Mandarin plays on TV on a daily basis in many households in Luodie Village, only some educated younger speakers can understand and speak it, especially those who have experience working as public officials or those have done guest labour in urban areas. Official meetings and public address announcements in Luodie Village are routinely conducted in Phola. If there are distinguished guests from outside the village, information is relayed bilingually or trilingually in Phola, Mandarin, and Nisu.

As a result of these sociolinguistic configurations, the majority of Luodie villagers have at least a passive understanding

of Yuanjiang Mandarin and Southern Nisu, and at least half report to be able to speak either or both with some degree of fluency. Moreover, about a third has various degrees of linguistic competence in a fourth linguistic variety, especially Phala and North-Eastern Mandarin, or, more rarely, Alo, Niesu, Hani, and Dai.

Beyond these varieties, an archaic form of Nisu is used for ritualistic purposes (e.g., during funerals) by three active shamans in Luodie Village, including LJJ, one of the main speakers within the framework of this project. Beyond ritualistic drawings (Photos 2–3), shamanistic practices involve highly elaborate sacrificial rites, songs, and prayers performed in a mixture of archaic Nisu, present-day Southern Nisu, and Phola.



Photos 2–3. A village shaman making decorative drawings to accompany ritualistic verses in archaic Nisu

Additionally, Luodie Pholas use both archaic and modern Nisu for folk singing, alongside their native Phola and Mandarin Chinese. While many can read and recite Nisu songs, only the shamans are fully literate in archaic Nisu, which is a syllabary shared, in different versions, by many communities associated with the officially recognised Yi ethnicity (彝族 *yízú*) in Yunnan, Guizhou, and Sichuan Provinces. Because there are highly elaborate metric and poetic patterns, singing is considered an advanced cultural skill that many Luodie Pholas carefully hone, especially middle-aged women, such as the one depicted in Photo 4 below, who often lead group-singing sessions.



Photo 4. Phola woman in her late fifties leading a group singing session in traditional Nisu

Phola itself does not have a writing system as such. Some older, literate Pholas use a mixture of Chinese and Yi characters, as well as romanised Pinyin to transliterate Phola in rather ad hoc ways. For example, the red-font line in Photo 5 below is an approximate transliteration provided by the shaman LJF of a Phola sentence meaning ‘the main room facing west is our daughter in law’s dormitory’; the corresponding Chinese sentence is written in black font. The second and third characters in the Phola line are Yi characters, the fourth item is romanised Pinyin, and the rest are Chinese characters that sound, approximately, like the corresponding Phola syllable.

正房西边的那一间是儿媳的宿舍。
 通央○gei 听空轰播阿然呢期妈占。

Photo 5. Transliterating Phola

When it comes to younger Pholas, they increasingly communicate via audio recordings in Phola sent through phone apps like WeChat (微信), although mobile smartphones are somewhat of a luxury item not available in all households.

Flute-playing and dancing are also pervasive and often accompanied with singing. Reportedly, there used to be Phola songs specifically composed and sung to dancing events, but most danceable music now comes from outside of the village, including Mandarin tunes and some folk songs from farther afield, in Ngwi varieties from as far away as Northern Yunnan and even Sichuan Province. Traditionally, Luodie Pholas wear colourful garments to dance and celebrate (see Photo 6 below). However, the influence of Wadie Nisus has led to a partial adoption of dark blue and black clothing (see Photo 4 above).



Photo 6. A Luodie villager dressed in colourful garments for a traditional dance event

The incredible degree of multilingualism described above is accompanied by highly flexible sociolinguistic rules vis-à-vis language choice. Phola speakers seem particularly keen to learn and use outsider languages. This is particularly manifest during market days, which are highly popular events that tend to attract at least one member of each household. They are held on a weekly basis in several local villages including Luodie (see Photo 7 below), where Nisu, Phala, and Hani speakers are often present, alongside Chinese-speaking Hans and, occasionally, Dai and Alo speakers. Beyond shopping for vegetables and crafts, many Pholas skilfully integrate language learning and language teaching into their bartering and haggling activities, sometimes spending a considerable amount of time just talking or listening to languages other than Phola even if they end up not buying anything. Explicit language learning (e.g., asking for names of vegetables or metalinguistic commentary on aspects of pronunciation and grammar) has also been observed. This situation made Luodie Village an excellent field site to engage in language learning, since most people have generally positive attitudes towards and personal experience with second language acquisition and teaching. In line with Evans (2001), some of the best language consultants are gifted and lifelong language learners.



Photo 7. Market day in Luodie Village

3. The monolingual method

Simply defined, the monolingual method – variously known as ‘the monolingual approach’ (Cowan 1975; Thomas 2020) or ‘monolingual elicitation’ (Everett 2001; Sakel & Everett 2012: 121) – is the study of a target field language through that same language (i.e., without or with limited recourse to an intermediary contact language). While it is often traced back to Franz Boas ([1911] 1966) and Kenneth Pike (1947; 1948; 1975) amongst anglophone linguists, Christian missionaries and scholars from antiquity and specially throughout the age of European colonial expansion are well documented to have learnt to speak indigenous languages as part of their religious propagation endeavours. This is perhaps most clearly embodied by Spanish priests the like of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, who not only learnt to speak local languages like Nahuatl but also engaged in ethnographically based linguistic descriptions of indigenous languages of present-day Mexico

relying exclusively on the help of native speakers who spoke no Spanish (cf. Hymes 1963; Wonderly & Nida 1963; Dibble 1982; Evans 2010: Ch. 2).

While there is a significant number of contemporary linguists and anthropologists who actively practise a monolingual approach to fieldwork, systematic methodological research on its nature and foundations is largely lacking. Practitioners often limit themselves to rather generic appraisals such as Boas's insistence that "a command of the language is an indispensable means of obtaining accurate and thorough knowledge, because much information can be gained by listening to conversations of the natives and by taking part in their daily life, which, to the observer who has no command of the language, will remain entirely inaccessible" ([1911] 1966: 56).⁵ Even the few extant paper-length and book-length treatments of the method (e.g., Pike 1948; McLeod 1961; Healey 1975; Burling 1984; Everett 2001; Moore 2009) remain for the most part limited to an impressionistic patchwork of practical guidelines occasionally coupled to a few scattered anecdotes from the field. Such guidelines, which are sometimes delivered through live demonstrations in university settings (cf. Thomas 2020: 286–293), more or less converge on a series of basic steps including the following:

1. Point at body parts and common objects to elicit words
2. Perform or act out actions to elicit utterances
3. Listen to naturalistic conversations to formulate hypotheses about language usage
4. Emulate and permute utterances to test such hypotheses
5. Learn how to talk and ask about
 - a. Language
 - b. Basic social life
6. Become integrated into community life as a communicative agent

There seems to be widespread consensus that learning a field language serves the purpose of endearing the researcher to the members of a speech community, building solid relations of trust, and navigating the local culture and social universe insightfully (Sarvasy 2016: 473) because it shows that "outsiders not only have things to say to them, but that they are also capable of listening to them" (Dobrin 2008: 318). Beyond these rapport-related benefits, speaking the target language is also said to reduce the well-known risks of structural transfer, interference, and informational loss that arise when information is requested and relayed in a contact language (cf. Everett 2001: 185; Gil 2001: 115; Dixon 2007: 27; Moore 2009: 246; Grosjean 2011).

Perhaps most importantly, anecdotal remarks by practitioners suggest that becoming a speaker of the language provides a particularly deep-reaching insight into its structural properties and contextual underpinnings (Dimmendaal 2001: 72). Thus, we learn from Dixon (1984: 199) that joining an expedition of Dyirbal speakers trying to find a traditional site led him to discover a rare demonstrative term meaning 'that thing remembered from the past', while Everett (2001) informs us that active listening to naturalistic interactions amongst Pirahã speakers around him led to the discovery of relative clauses, which fourteen months of formal research had failed to elicit. Likewise, linguistically engaged observation of how Nungon speakers communicate in real life allowed Sarvasy (2017; 2018) to discover a morphological alternation obtained in "call-at-distance" scenarios (i.e., when speakers are far apart from each other). From a more anthropological perspective, Hanks (1990; 2005; 2009; 2011) insists that ethnographically informed participant observation, enabled by language fluency on his part, was crucial to the development of a solid understanding of the semantic, pragmatic, and sociocultural details of the deictic system of Yucatec. While it seemed like a mere spatial system based on bilingual renditions, it turned out to be highly sensitive to socio-cognitive perspectives when examined through monolingual participant observation.

The reasoning goes that practical language learning and language use on the part of the researcher can coalesce with theoretical linguistic analysis in a self-reinforcing feedback loop (Everett 2001; Moore 2009):

⁵ Other examples of such in-passing recommendations include Dixon (1984: 199), Duranti (1997: 110–112), Dimmendaal (2001: 72–73), Evans (2001: 263), Gil (2001: 112, 116–117, 122), Hale (2001: 81–82), Mc Laughlin & Sall (2001: 202), Crowley (2007), Dixon (2007: 21), Chelliah & de Reuse (2011: 104–106), and Mosel (2012: 79, 84–85).

[...] if one does not speak a language, one is working with a self-imposed handicap. Why should anyone want to turn down the clues, insights, intuitions, and constant grammar-learning and practice inherent in language-learning if one is genuinely concerned with a deep professional understanding of (aspects of) the language in question? Everett (2001: 170)

Importantly, historiographic research on linguistic fieldwork by Thomas (2020) has pointed out that there is a significant mismatch between heuristic protocols and idealised guidelines for monolingual research advocated by fieldworkers such as Everett on the one hand and the actual documentary practice and language-learning pathways of those very same researchers in the field on the other hand. This suggests that systematic empirical research is needed to assess what monolingual fieldwork actually looks like in real life and how and why exactly one might want to engage in it. This is especially relevant because, while fluency in a field language has sometimes been hailed as a gold standard in documentary linguistics (Himmelman 1998: 171), ethnography (Mead 1939; Hymes 1970), and linguistic anthropology (Duranti 1997: Ch. 4), it is no secret that linguists often “bridle at the suggestion that being a linguist means being a polyglot”⁶ (Everett 2001: 170). In fact, some theoretically minded linguists even reject language learning as an unscientific, sidetracking “serendipity” (Davis et al. 2014) that may be unfeasible to most (Gleason 1961: 290).

More to the point, opponents and sceptics have raised valid concerns about potential pitfalls of monolingual fieldwork, mainly invoking time constraints, individual differences in language-learning skill, researcher-as-addressee effects, and social mismanagement. Concerns around time constraints are underlain by the assumption that monolingual fieldwork requires more time and effort than bilingual fieldwork, a thesis that even prominent proponents of the method subscribe to. For example, Everett (2001: 182) claims that monolingual research adds six extra months of work. In light of this, some linguists argue that equally good results can be attained through other methods that are less time-consuming and put less pressure on researchers who happen to lack language-learning aptitude (cf. Bley-Vroman 1990). Regarding this latter remark, language-learning capability is often assumed to be (solely) determined by in-born talent, which would be unevenly distributed amongst linguists.

Another oft-invoked problem of the linguist’s communicative involvement in research sessions is that it may lead speakers to simplify the natural way they use the language in order to accommodate to the perceived level of competence and/or cultural knowledge of the researcher (cf. Nida 1981: 170–171; Moore 2009: 248–249; Sarvasy 2016: 475). Moreover, the very way that linguists use language can induce priming and dressage effects, whereby native speakers accommodate to or mirror the structures used by the linguist, even if they represent noncanonical ways of using the language (Chelliah & de Reuse 2011: 206; Nakayama & Ono 2013: 145). While these are serious concerns, which are generally in line with findings from psycholinguistics (e.g., Levelt & Kelter 1982; Chia et al. 2019), sociolinguistics (e.g., Weiner & Labov 1983), and corpus linguistics (e.g., Gries 2005), fieldworkers such as Nicholas Evans (2001: 263) have suggested that developing language proficiency may actually work as a corrective to so-called foreigner talk by encouraging speakers to think in their native language and correspondingly produce speech that is less influenced by other varieties in the local linguistic repertoires.

Finally, researchers such as Cowan (1975: 272) and Everett (2001) have pointed out that attempting to use a language that one barely knows increases the perceived risk of inappropriate or even hazardous interactions in the community. This may be because of inadvertent violations of taboos or moral norms and because of the incapacity to explain and justify one’s behaviour in a locally convincing manner.

All of these criticisms probably have some element of truth in them. However, an important gap in research involves a systematic assessment of the feasibility and efficiency of monolingual fieldwork, as well as potential ways to mitigate its disadvantages. Foundational research in the field of second language acquisition (Schumann 1978; Perdue 1993a; 1993b; Alcorso 2003; Piller & Lising 2014) does indeed suggest that naturalistic language learning through pure immersion may be exceedingly hard to achieve for a variety of cognitive and sociological reasons. However, at the same time, complementary research strongly suggests that given the right training and framework, linguistic immersion is conducive to optimal learning outcomes (Potowski 2016; Collier & Thomas 2017). For example, contextually grounded language learning for specific purposes (e.g., at German workplaces) has been found to proceed satisfactorily when targeted training is made available (Döhner et al. 2014). Some researchers have even argued that naturalistic language learning may be facili-

⁶ Even though this assumption seems commonsensical to laypeople, who famously ask “Oh, you are a linguist. So how many languages do you speak?”

tated through the implementation of ethnographic participant observation (Kawamura 2007). Preliminary evidence that this may also apply to language learning in the field is given by Sarvasy (2016), which is the single most important piece of empirical research available on monolingual fieldwork. Analysing the implementation of monolingual and bilingual elicitation techniques in a field methods course at the University of California Los Angeles, she showed that the former approach yields more and better data than the latter. This was true even during the very first research session on a field language and even at the level of academic skill typical of linguistics students. By quantitatively comparing the outputs of monolingual versus bilingual sessions, Sarvasy was able to operationalise and empirically validate the utility of monolingual enquiry in one particular context. Her findings strongly suggest that given the right institutional framework and methodological tools, monolingual fieldwork may actually be a rational and desirable approach. The present paper aspires to contribute to dissipating the reigning scepticism surrounding monolingual fieldwork by providing an account of how exactly language competence can be effectively harnessed in the field to advance language documentation and language description endeavours. In particular, the next section aims to complement Sarvasy's approach through a qualitative appraisal of transcripts from monolingual sessions in the field at a more advanced stage of language learning, roughly corresponding to low-intermediate proficiency, or B1 as per the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe 2001).

4. The utility of the monolingual method for research

This section contributes to Sarvasy's (2016) endeavour to substantiate the claim that monolingual research is indeed useful to theoretical linguistic research. The focus is however placed on a different setting, the actual field site, and a different stage of research and language learning, roughly corresponding to a low-intermediate level of fluency, which I reached around five months after my first ever interaction with the Pholas in Yunnan.

Contrary to Sarvasy, who claims that "monolingual elicitation is especially suited for the beginning stages of linguistic fieldwork on an undescribed language, when [...] there is little need to set up complicated scenarios involving nuanced modalities" (2016: 476), I attempt to show some ways in which monolingual research may be particularly suited as a strategy to gather rich data on complex scenarios.

To this end, the section is broken down as follows. After providing in §4.1 a preliminary insight into my experience doing participant observation as a language learner amongst the Pholas, §4.2 frames the overall utility of monolingual competence in terms of theory-oriented data gathering in the context of both naturalistic interactions and constrained elicitation. Finally, §4.3 takes up Sarvasy's claim that monolingual fieldwork produces more and better data, but with a focus on more advanced stages of fluency and research. Throughout, a focus is placed on semantic and pragmatic research, which is where participant observation and the monolingual method truly shine.

4.1 Language learning as participant observation

Language is a window into a community's social, moral, and intellectual universe. Learning to speak the main language(s) used by a community allows the researcher to participate in everyday life activities and observe their workings from within. The recognition that such an insider perspective can bring about deep insights lies at the core of participant observation as a qualitative method in anthropology, ethnography, and linguistics (Duranti 1997: Ch. 4). It has also been noted to constitute an invaluable tool for the successful navigation of all kinds of practical obstacles to both research and interpersonal life in the field (cf. Everett 2001; Sarvasy 2016). Based on concrete examples from my own fieldwork context, the following paragraphs focus on aspects of researcher–speaker relations where language-mediated participant observation has been found to play a key enabling role.

To start with, it is worth mentioning that a minimal degree of monolingual competence helped me connect with some of the most gifted Phola teachers. Because of sociolinguistic ideologies favouring multilingual repertoires, most Luodie Pholas are, to some extent, used to teaching words and expressions to non-native adults. However, there is a lot of individual variation in terms of how patiently and insightfully a given Phola person will be able or willing to teach Phola to an outsider. Moreover, their willingness to teach only becomes fully apparent when faced with enthusiastic learners.

During my third field trip (April–June 2019), five community members invited me on a video-recorded tour of the fields

around Luodie Village. Language competence, more specifically knowledge of the grammar and pragmatics of minimal dialogues following a question-answer pattern, enabled me to be an engaged communicative participant and ask targeted questions aimed at speakers’ encyclopaedic knowledge about the world, such as “What is that animal?” in Example 1 below (cf. Schegloff 2007; Enfield et al. 2010; de Ruiter 2012; Evans 2012 on the centrality of this type of adjacency pairs in human communication).

While all speakers were willing to share their knowledge, one of them seemed remarkably pedagogical, patient, and genuinely interested in (meta)linguistic descriptions. Example 1 below illustrates his highly didactic, creative, and nurturing approach to teaching and explaining things to a Phola learner. Note that some speakers restricted themselves to just naming the animal, whereas BLW provided a functional description of its main features and behaviour, including sequenced repetitions of the main points and very rich multimodal cues. As shown in Photos 8–17, he picked up the grasshopper, showcased its various body parts, and acted out the way it hops.

- (1) ME: u³¹si⁵⁵ | a²²te^hi³¹=na⁵⁵ ||
 animal what=EV
 ‘What is this animal, guys?’
- MSN, LHM: vq³³tɛi²² | vq³³tɛi²² ||
 grasshopper grasshopper
 ‘It’s a grasshopper! It’s a grasshopper!’
- BLW: vq³³tɛi²² ma³³ ki⁵⁵ | si⁵⁵ khⁱ31 ma³³ ki²² || vq³³tɛi²² | vq³³tɛi²² |
 grasshopper NEG fear others bite NEG able grasshopper grasshopper
 vq³³tɛi²² || e⁵⁵ le³³ ma³³ ki⁵⁵=niæ³³ | khⁱ31 ma³³ ki²² || zi:²² ||
 grasshopper this TOP NEG fear=EP bite NEG able look.here
 e⁵⁵ khⁱ31 ma³³ ki²² || t^hu:²² || e⁵⁵ khⁱ31 ma³³ ki²²=niæ³³ ||
 this bite NEG able look.there this bite NEG able=EP
 ‘No reason to be afraid of a grasshopper. It won’t bite people. It’s a grasshopper (x3). Don’t worry about this one. It won’t bite. Look at this! This doesn’t bite. Look at that! It really does not bite!’
- u³³ khⁱ55 ti³³ | zi:²² || e⁵⁵ve³³=na⁵⁵ | e⁵⁵ve³³=na⁵⁵ | e⁵⁵ve³³=na⁵⁵ |
 3 leg grow look.here this=with this=with this=with
 i³³si²²=næ³¹ n^tɔ³¹ t^hi²²=li³³ pæ²²=xi⁵⁵ ||
 like.this=ADV kick RSLT=SEQ jump=REL
 ‘Look! It has legs! Using these, using these, using these, it can jump by kicking down like this.’
- zi:²² | e⁵⁵ve³³=na⁵⁵ pæ²²=xi⁵⁵=niæ³³ | zi:²² | zi:²² || zi:²² ||
 look.here this=with jump=REL=EP look.here look.here look.here
 mɔ³¹khⁱ22 p^ha³¹ khⁱ22 | tã::li: ni⁵⁵ m^pu²² ki²² || e⁵⁵ || vq³³tɛi²² ||
 evening COND twilight onomatopoeia ADV chirp can this grasshopper
 u³³ me²²tɛu⁵⁵ | u³³ khⁱ55 || u³³ khⁱ55=na⁵⁵ n^tɔ³¹=li³³ pæ²² || e⁵⁵ le³³
 3 tail 3 leg 3 leg=with kick=SEQ jump this TOP

u³³ k^hu⁵⁵ || ʔɑ³¹ ki⁵⁵ va³³ læ³³ || e⁵⁵ si⁵⁵ k^hi³¹ ma³³ ki²² ||
 3 horn release down COS Q this others bite NEG able

‘Look here! It jumps using these. Look at this! Look at this! Look at this! When the night comes, it can be like “tã::ri:”, this one, the grasshopper. This is its tail. These are its legs. It jumps by kicking with its legs. These are the antennae. Should I put it down now? This one won’t bite people.’

(YPG1-20190503_01-Q8: 00:16:21.45–00:17:10.66)



Photos 8–17. BLW picks up a grasshopper and explains its characteristics.

BLW turned out to be one of a few “language teachers in the truest sense” (Dimmendaal 2001: 63), or in the words of Pike (1948: 161), an “observer of items and talker of items,” who gladly and frequently “offer unsolicited information” (Chelliah & de Reuse 2011: 211). The more interest I showed in listening to Phola and the more confident my interactive cues prompting speakers to explain the world to me, the richer their explanations became, especially those offered by pedagogically inclined individuals such as BLW. As will be taken up in §4.2 and §4.3 below, the kind of highly contextually saturated speech from Example 1 above, characterised by naturalistic repetitions and additions, constitutes an ideal kind of data to study pragmatic phenomena such as deixis, which was the theoretical focus of my PhD thesis (González Pérez 2022: Ch. 7). This is because it provides a high density of loci at which slight changes in material and interactional context can be correlated with the choice of different context-sensitive linguistic forms, such as e⁵⁵ ‘this one’ versus zi:²² ‘look here’. While both of these forms place reference within the speaker’s sphere of physical engagement, systematic analysis of data such as Example 1 above led to the hypothesis that the former is used to refer to something presumed to be attentionally accessible, whereas the latter is a specialised form used to explicitly (and suddenly) draw visual attention to something (e.g., BLW’s gestural demonstration of how the grasshopper hops off the ground (González Pérez 2022: Ch. 7).

Communicative competence and engagement would also prove crucial to understanding what kind of linguistic work speakers are most comfortable doing. For example, BLW turned out to be more interested in one-on-one discussion sessions with me than in group transcription sessions because he felt frustrated about other speakers correcting him, as per the dialogue in Example 2 below.

(2) ME: ηɑ³³ nu³³ kʰi⁵⁵ ki³³si²² mpɑ³³ | e²²ⁿte⁵⁵ sɔæ⁵² | e²²ⁿte⁵⁵ tʰi³³ tæ²²
 1 2 on like.that say here learn here one CLF.while
 tʰi³³ tæ²² mɑ³³ vi⁵⁵ li³³ || nu³³ qʰɑ³³si²² li³³ ||
 one CLF.while teach cross come 2 how Q

‘If I told you like this: Let’s study here. Come over here just for a bit to teach. How would you react?’

BLW: e²²ⁿte⁵⁵ vi⁵⁵ li³³ | tʰe⁵⁵ ηɑ³³ le³³ li³³ niæ³³ | e⁵⁵-la²² le³³ [...]
 here cross come that 1 TOP come EP this-at TOP
 ηɑ³³ ni³¹ xɔ³¹ tʰɔ⁵⁵næ³¹ e⁵⁵-la²² nʰtsi²² qi²² ke⁵⁵ le³³ li³³
 1 two CLF.human alone this-at speak linger that.down TOP come
 mɑ³³ ki⁵⁵ || nɑ⁵⁵ ki²² tɛɑ³¹ ||
 NEG worry listen able TAG

‘If it’s coming over here, I’ll sure come, but here! No problem coming here if it’s just the two of us chatting/working/doing it. You understand, right?’

 si⁵⁵ zɔ²² ke⁵⁵ve³³ ke⁵⁵=æ²²si²² pʰɑ³¹ le³³ | si⁵⁵=næ³¹ kɔ⁵⁵
 others home that.down that.down=like COND go others=AG at.same.time
 nʰtsi²² tɛ³¹ || nu³³ mpɑ³³ qi³³ tʰe⁵⁵ mɛ³¹ ni⁵⁵=æ²² mpɑ³³ ki²²
 speak into 2 say NMLZR that NEG.correct ADV=also say able
 ηɑ³³ mpɑ³³ qi³³ e⁵⁵ le³³ xɛ³¹ | nu³³ mpɑ³³ qi³³ tʰe⁵⁵ mɛ³¹
 1 say NMLZR this TOP right 2 say NMLZR that NEG.correct
 mpɑ³³ ti⁵⁵ || tʰe⁵⁵ mɑ³³ mpɑ³³ nʰkɑ³¹ va³³ niæ³³ ||
 say though that NEG say like COS EP

‘As for other people’s houses, going there, people talk on top of you. And they can be like: “What you said is incorrect!” They go like: “What I say is right, what you say is wrong!” though... When it’s like that, it makes me not want to speak/work/do anymore!’

(YPG1-20191211_02-H2nb: 00:17:27.41–00:18:08.96)

Importantly, in Mandarin, which is his L3, he had restricted himself to simple polite refusals such as “I can’t see very well” or “other speakers know better than me,” and it would have been a significant loss for the documentation of the Phola language to miss out on the superb linguistic and metalinguistic knowledge and enthusiasm of this particular speaker.

Substantial research in the fields of cultural semantics, ethnopragsmatics, ethnography of speaking, cross-cultural communication, and cultural psychology suggests that different speech communities sometimes differ radically in their overarching communicative models (Ameka & Terkourafi 2019), leading some researchers to posit the principle of communicative relativity (Hymes 1964; 1974; Foley 1997: Ch. 13). Cross-linguistic variation has been reported for various pragmatic and sociocultural issues such as politeness and face (Matsumoto 1989; Mao 1994; Bravo 1999; Terkourafi 2012), patterns of turn-talking (Hill 2010; Eades 2013), speech act types and conversation structure (Wierzbicka 1985; Enfield et al. 2010), narrative styles (Eades 2000; Roberts 2013), and socialisation strategies (Ameka & Breedveld 2004; Will 2017; Keller 2018; 2021), among others.

This research is relevant from a language documentation and description perspective because some field linguists have reported how their role as language learners has helped them navigate and describe ethnopragsmatic conventions. Thus,

for example, we learn from Dimmendaal (2001: 73) that explicit requests are pragmatically appropriate in Turkana when addressing adults but not children, which he only became aware of when he was derided by onlookers for inviting a ten-year-old to follow him. Likewise, Mc Laughlin informs us that she became aware of how Wolof is sensitive to social gender through episodes of being mocked at the markets for using male-like speech (Mc Laughlin & Sall 2001: 203).

Although systematic ethnopragmatic research on Phola remains to be conducted, an important communicative pattern identified so far involves framing one's desires, needs, and plans in terms of things that are said, and then enquiring about how the addressee would verbally react, rather than using plain statements (e.g., with volitive or desiderative frames) or direct requests. While expressing wishes or preferences is not necessarily taboo amongst the Pholas, both mental directedness and actions are often metonymically and metaphorically expressed via speech act verbs like *ˈtsi*²² 'speak' and *ˈpa*³³ 'talk', which in context can also mean 'want, feel, decide, do, act, etc.' as in Example 2 above.

Having the opportunity to learn the language and use it for social navigation constitutes itself a kind of ethnographic research into communicative models and pragmatic norms. While there is a certain paradox in having to "learn a new language by communicating in that language and [...] achiev[ing] communicative goals while learning the new language" (Piller 2016: 104), there is also a contextually given overlap between practical learning and metalinguistic observation, which can be exploited by a pragmatically minded linguist.

Examples 1–2 go some way toward demonstrating that competence in the field language mediates human aspects of the research framework that can have direct consequences over the nature and quality of the data obtained. Speaking the language provides the researcher with access to linguistically and socially relevant information to make informed choices regarding the research setup (e.g., who to work with under which circumstances). On the other hand, it endows the researcher with greater social agency and interpersonal skills that can not only contribute to the success of the research project but also to identifying and managing potential loci of social conflict, particularly those linked to the symbolic functions of language (Fishman 1997; Joseph 2004; Bishop & Phillips 2006) and the innumerable pitfalls of intercultural communication in linguistically diverse settings (cf. May 2014; Piller 2016; 2017).

Making efforts to engage in locally meaningful communication on an everyday basis using the community's language can bootstrap language learning through social recognition (Nagy 2000: 149). In my specific field site, the village council came to be invested in aiding me progress in the acquisition of Phola and, for example, assigned me to households and dining tables where the most Phola speaking and language learning was likely to happen. Such arrangements only emerged as meaningful and widely accepted in the community once my truthful intent to become a speaker of Phola was convincingly established. The council even organised interviews and took me to regional events where the presence of an outsider speaking their language became a token of cultural pride and a source of social capital for the village. Adopting such a semi-institutional role as a language learner led to a generalisation and automatising of corrective feedback offered to me by the community on a daily basis.

A well-established fact in the language sciences is the need for negative evidence to understand the boundaries of grammaticality (Davis et al. 2014; Bohnemeyer 2018). Researchers learning the language are much more exposed to timely feedback as their incorrect or odd utterances get corrected or rephrased by the community (Bower 2015: 9; Sarvasy 2016: 473). As illustrated in Example 3 below, simple language-specific metalinguistic prompts can be learnt to invite feedback, such as asking "(What happens/what does it mean/how would you react) if I say it like this...?" after offering a language form or a full utterance. In interactions like Example 3, the speaker was already aware that I was testing for the validity of different lexico-grammatical expressions and knew to interrupt to correct me, which does not infringe any rules of politeness in Phola society (cf. Bower 2015: 42). Once the researcher-as-learner role is socially established, language feedback may be offered even when attempting to communicate for practical purposes. In Example 4, speakers cared to ensure I learnt how to properly construct a complex conditional clause I used as my exiting line before leaving them alone for a self-managed recording session. Metalinguistic feedback was provided here both directly and indirectly. In the latter case, speakers tentatively rephrase or complete structures when I stutter or pause, such as YYH's first utterance. This kind of response is known in second language acquisition research as IMPLICIT FEEDBACK and is generally acknowledged to be conducive to good language acquisition results (e.g., Li 2010). It serves the *prima facie* function of clarifying communicative content and intentions but also the pedagogical function of showcasing a more grammatically or pragmatically conventional expression to the language learner.

- (3) ME: $n\text{æ}^{55}=\text{ɕe}^{33}$ $t\text{ɔ}^{22}$ | $i^{33}\text{si}^{22}$ $p^h\text{a}^{31}$ $m\text{p}\text{a}^{33}$ le^{33} ||
 INTF=distance.EXT have like.this COND say TOP
 ‘‘It’s very far [intended, ungrammatical]’’ ... Saying it like that...’
- MSN: $n\text{æ}^{55}$ vi^{31} | $n\text{æ}^{31}$ $m\text{p}\text{a}^{33}$ $t\text{ɔ}^{22}$ $m\text{p}\text{ɔ}^{55}$ ||
 INTF far ADV say must MP
 ‘Nah! You have to say: ‘‘It’s very far [conventional expression].’’’
 (YPG1-20190511_05-ext1H5: 00:04:28.78–00:04:32.68)
- (4) ME: $sui2bi\text{æ}4$ $t\text{ɕ}^h\text{a}^{55}$ || $p^h\text{a}^{31}$ $t\text{ɕ}^h\text{a}^{55}$ $n\text{ka}^{31}$ le^{33} | $t\text{ɕ}^h\text{a}^{55}$ le^{33} | $p^h\text{a}^{31}$ $n\text{tsi}^{22}$ |||
 casually sing COND sing want TOP sing go COND speak
 ‘Just sing as you please. If you want to sing, sing! If you (want to) talk...’
- YYH: $p^h\text{a}^{31}$ $t\text{ɕ}^h\text{a}^{55}$ $n\text{ka}^{31}$ $t\text{ɕ}^h\text{a}^{55}$ | $p^h\text{a}^{31}$ $n\text{tsi}^{22}$ $n\text{ka}^{31}$ $n\text{tsi}^{22}$ qi^{22} ni^{55} $\gamma\text{ɔ}^{33}$ ||
 COND sing want sing COND speak want speak linger ADV TAG
 ‘So you’re saying to sing if we want to sing, and to talk away if we want to talk, right?’
- ME: $p^h\text{a}^{31}$ $t\text{ɕ}^h\text{a}^{55}$ $n\text{ka}^{31}$ $t\text{ɕ}^h\text{a}^{55}$ | $p^h\text{a}^{31}$ $n\text{tsi}^{22}$ $n\text{ka}^{31}$ $n\text{tsi}^{22}$ $n\text{ka}^{31}$ ||
 COND sing want sing COND speak want speak want
 ‘Sing if you want to sing. You want [sic] to talk if you want to talk.’
- BCC: $p^h\text{a}^{31}$ $n\text{tsi}^{22}$ $n\text{ka}^{31}$ $n\text{tsi}^{22}$ qi^{22} || $n\text{æ}^{31}$ $m\text{p}\text{a}^{33}$ me^{55} ||
 COND speak want speak linger ADV say MP
 ‘Yo! ‘‘If you want to talk, talk away!’’ is what you say.’
- LHY: $p^h\text{a}^{31}$ $n\text{tsi}^{22}$ $n\text{ka}^{31}$ $n\text{tsi}^{22}$ $n\text{ka}^{31}$ $z\text{e}^{33}$ || $p^h\text{a}^{31}$ $n\text{tsi}^{22}$ $n\text{ka}^{31}$ $n\text{tsi}^{22}$
 COND speak want speak want QUOT COND speak want speak
 qi^{22} | ni^{55} $m\text{p}\text{a}^{33}$ $m\text{æ}^{22}$ ||
 linger ADV say need
 ‘‘You want to talk if you want to talk,’’ he said. ‘‘If you want to talk, talk away’’ is what you have to say.’
- YYH: $p^h\text{a}^{31}$ $n\text{tsi}^{22}$ $n\text{ka}^{31}$ $n\text{tsi}^{22}$ qi^{22} ||
 COND speak want speak linger
 ‘‘If you want to talk, talk away!’’
- ME: $p^h\text{a}^{31}$ $n\text{tsi}^{22}$ $n\text{ka}^{31}$ $n\text{tsi}^{22}$ qi^{22} ||
 COND speak want speak linger
 ‘‘If you want to talk, talk away!’’

YYH, BCC, LHY: xæ²² ||

yes

‘Yes!’

(YPG1-20191229_04-ext1Q8; idem-ext2Q8; idem-intQ8: 00:04:10.14–00:04:21.82)

As soon as I was around, some speakers were frequently coming up with something to teach me, and even quiz me, as in Example 5 below, to keep track of how much I understood and what new things I may have learnt since they last saw me. This ensured I learn about things that Phola speakers consider worth teaching and talking about, which includes a wide range of issues that I would not have thought of asking but which have often enriched my theoretical pursuits and, very particularly, contributed to the compilation of a broad cross-sectional corpus shaped by the communicative agency and priorities of community members.

(5) BLW: ɣi³³pɔ³¹ nu³³ na⁵⁵ ki²²=va³³ ni³³ | a³³tɛ^hi³¹=na⁵⁵ mpa³³=e⁵⁵ ||
 bear 2 hear able=PFV Q what=with say=ADR.ASYM

‘Did you understand “bear”? What does it mean, you!’

(YPG1-20191202_02-ext1Q8: 00:06:28.79–00:06:30.67)

Beyond community engagement and language exposure benefits of adopting a language learner role, I have found that monolingual competence can systematically enhance data collection in four major ways. First, it enables the collection of a large amount of high-quality non-planned language data in a short period of time. Second, it turns transcription and discussion sessions into goldmines of semantically and pragmatically rich data. Third, it allows the researcher to identify research-relevant speech events and explore their linguistic and metalinguistic features in situ. Fourth, it makes it possible to harness communicative context to elicit research-relevant data in everyday interactions. The first point was indirectly illustrated through the detail-rich description of a grasshopper in Example 1. §4.2 and §4.3 below turn to a more systematic review of how language competence has variously enhanced the collection of language data in my field setting.

4.2 Enhancing data quantity and quality through monolingual competence

We saw in the previous section how some speakers readily provide encyclopaedic explications about unfolding events and offer corrective feedback when faced with lexicogrammatically unusual utterances. We also saw how metalinguistic prompts can be used by the researcher to trigger explanations and feedback when these are not offered spontaneously. Metalinguistic resources are specifically helpful to engage the encyclopaedic knowledge of speakers because they allow the researcher to ask questions about states of affairs and relate them back to language forms. In my first field trip, I used Mandarin to elicit and compile a sizeable “metalinguistic toolkit” – Phola sentences useful to talk about Phola and to ask basic metalinguistic questions (González Pérez et al. 2018a; 2018b) – and began implementing it progressively.

From a language documentation viewpoint, metalinguistic competence enables monolingual transcription and discussion sessions from early on. This makes it possible to not only incorporate detailed metalinguistic commentary and paraphrasing as an in-built component of most recording sessions, which is generally acknowledged to enhance the value and usability of recorded language data (Himmelman 1998), but also to endow speakers with agency in explaining their language in their own terms. To illustrate, consider Example 6 below, where metalinguistic prompts result in a speaker providing more details on dimensional properties of big cats after he had spontaneously touched on the topic while describing a photograph of a tiger. Simply by requesting a more precise explanation about what BLW meant when he said that a tiger’s tail is not “big,” the monolingual method yielded a stream of highly versatile data variously including lexical, semantic, phraseological, grammatical, pragmatic, cultural, and metalinguistic information. Such data can be

propositionally informative – that is, shed light on the original object of enquiry (i.e., the denotational range of *zæ³¹* ‘big’ as applied to a tiger’s tail). They can also be pragmatically and metalinguistically informative (i.e., illuminate new issues, which can be interpreted against the backdrop of the previous conversational turns), provided their locutionary and illocutionary content is clear to the researcher. In the case of Example 6, asking “how come?” yielded evidence that *zæ³¹* ‘big’ referred to the diameter of the tiger’s tail and simultaneously generated conversationally grounded data on various lexico-grammatical structures, including a shape ideophone for thin things, a form expressing distributive degree and aspectual uses of motion verbs (bolded below).

(6) BLW: u³³ me²²təu⁵⁵ le³³ qh⁵⁵ ma³³ zæ³¹ ||
 3 tail TOP INT NEG big

‘(The tiger’s) tail is not very big.’

ME: a²²təh³¹ zi²²si³³ || qh⁵⁵si²² tə²² ni³³ ||
 what mean how have Q

‘What does that mean? How come?’

BLW: lq²² ke⁵⁵ u³³ me²²təu⁵⁵ ts^hi⁵⁵xu⁵⁵æ⁵⁵næ³¹ || e⁵⁵ve³³ γi²² qa⁵⁵=lɔ³¹
 tiger that.down 3 tail **thin.IDEOPH** this CORREL go.down=away
 γi²² i⁵⁵=lɔ³¹ ||
 CORREL **small=away**

‘As for the tiger, its tail is **veeery thin**. This is... it **gets smaller** the further you go down.’

ME: e³⁵ ||
 INTJ

‘Mmm?’

BLW: a²²khi⁵⁵ ke⁵⁵-la²² th^hiæ⁵² zæ³¹ | u³³ tɔ²²pi³³ e⁵⁵-la²²=na⁵⁵ || a²²khi⁵⁵ tɔ³³
 above that.down-at a.bit big 3 buttocks this-at=from above come.out
 lɔ³¹=xi⁵⁵=t^hq³¹ th^hiæ⁵² zæ³¹ | qa⁵⁵=lɔ³¹ γi²² qa⁵⁵=lɔ³¹ γi²² i⁵⁵
 away=REL=time a.bit big go.down=away CORREL go.down=away CORREL **small**
kɔ³³=lɔ³¹ || ts^hi⁵⁵xu⁵⁵æ⁵⁵næ³¹ t^hq³¹ kɔ³³=lɔ³¹ || th^hiæ⁵² p^ha³¹ tɔ³³=lɔ³¹ |
return=away thin.IDEOPH change return=away a.bit COND out=away
 i⁵⁵ **kɔ³³=lɔ³¹** ||
small return=away

‘At the top, it’s a bit bigger, from the buttocks here. As it comes out at the top, it’s a bit bigger. The more it goes down, the **smaller it turns**. It reverts into a delicately thin shape. As it comes out, **it turns small**.’

ME: th^hiæ⁵² p^ha³¹ tɔ³³=lɔ³¹ | i⁵⁵ kɔ³³=lɔ³¹ ||
 a.bit COND out=away small return=away

‘As it comes out, it turns small...?’

BLW: xæ²² || a²²ki³³ e²² p^ha³¹ qa⁵⁵=lɔ³¹ i⁵⁵ kɔ³³=lɔ³¹ || t^hi³³=xjæ³³
 yes downhill here COND go.down=away small return=away one=size.EXT
 pa⁵⁵ me³¹ || e²²=tɔ³³ ni³³ e²²=tɔ³³ t^hi³³=xiæ³³ pa⁵⁵ me³¹ ||
 evenly NEG.right here=side with here=side **one=size.EXT evenly** NEG.right

‘Yeah! When it gets down here, it turns small. It’s not like it’s evenly big!... This side and this side **are not evenly big!**’

(YPG1-20191211-01-H2nb: 00:05:40.73–00:06:42.14)

Beyond open-ended questions geared at eliciting general encyclopaedic knowledge, language competence can be strategically deployed to elicit lexico-grammatical features of particular theoretical interest to the linguist, whilst keeping the conversation flow relatively natural. Example 7 below shows how content-based discussions in the target language can help investigate the forms and functions of structurally rare forms, in this case a set of EQUATIVE constructions indicating equal degree along a qualitatively defined dimension, on which data were at the time very patchy. Consider in particular how inviting BLW to react to my utterances on size differences resulted in the usage of forms such as t^hi³³=xiæ³³ ‘equally big’. This strategy is similar in spirit to what Chelliah & de Reuse (2011: 370–373) call target language manipulation elicitation. This usually involves the researcher saying something ungrammatical to elicit a correction. However, in this case my utterance was not ungrammatical but simply ambiguous or provocative in terms of its truth value and thus pragmatically likely to lead up to the production of language forms of theoretical interest. The general principle here is that using metalinguistic knowledge and a language-internal logic to question various aspects of a scene invites rich, contextually embedded replies. Such replies in turn allow the researcher to ground the analysis of lexico-grammatical structures, such as t^hi³³=xiæ³³ ‘equally big’, by pitting them against related structures and concepts whose meanings and functions are pragmatically established in context or already known. Consider, for example, BLW’s usage of ηa⁵⁵ (in the last line of Example 7), which at that point in the documentation project was already well understood as a device used in exclusive disjunctive interrogatives (i.e., ‘either/or (but not both)’). Its usage constitutes pragmatic evidence that the form t^hi³³=xiæ³³ ‘equally big’ is semantically complementary to the comparative structure of superior degree (i.e., zæ³¹ xa²² ‘bigger’) and that it should hence be characterised as a marker of identical degree indeed.

(7) ME: lq²² | u³³ me²²tɕu⁵⁵ | zi²² me²²tɕu⁵⁵=xiæ³³ ma³³ tɕɔ²² ||
 tiger 3 tail leopard tail=size.EXT NEG have

‘As for the tiger... Its tail is not as big as that of the leopard!’

BLW: zi²² me²²tɕu⁵⁵=xe³³ ma³³ ηɔ⁵⁵ || zi²² me²²tɕu⁵⁵ ηɔ⁵⁵ xa²² pe⁵⁵tɕɔ²²||
 leopard tail=amount.EXT NEG long leopard tail long more probably

‘(The tiger’s tail) is not as long as the leopard’s. The leopard’s tail is probably longer.’

ME: me³¹ || zi²² me²²tɕu⁵⁵=xe³³ zæ³¹ ma³³ zæ³¹ ni³³ ||
 NEG.right leopard tail=amount.EXT big NEG big Q

‘Nah! Is it as big as the leopard’s tail?’

BLW: z_i²² me²²tɕu⁵⁵ t^hiæ⁵² le³³ ma³³ zæ³¹ niæ³³ || ma³³ zæ³¹=ve⁵⁵ | t^he⁵⁵ le³³
 leopard tail a.bit TOP NEG big EP NEG big=BRIDGE that TOP
 ŋɔ⁵⁵=tɔ³³=nɑ⁵⁵ ŋɔ⁵⁵ niæ³³ || z_i²² me²²tɕu⁵⁵ ||
 long=side=from long EP leopard tail

‘But the leopard’s tail is not big at all! And not being big, in terms of length, it is long, hey! The leopard’s tail.’

ME: mɛ³¹ || z_i²² me²²tɕu⁵⁵ ni³³ lq²² me²²tɕu⁵⁵ ni³³ | q^ha⁵⁵ve³³ zæ³³ xa²² læ³³ ||
 NEG.right leopard tail with tiger tail with which big more Q

‘Nah! The leopard’s tail and the tiger’s tail, which one is bigger?’

BLW: q^ha⁵⁵ve³³ zæ³³ xa²² m^hpa⁵⁵ || ŋi⁵⁵ || tɔ³³ li³³ qi³³ ke⁵⁵ve³³ lq²²
 which big more QUOT.ADR INTJ exit come NMLZR that.down tiger
 me²²tɕu⁵⁵ t^hiæ⁵² zæ³³ xa²² qi³³e³³ || ŋa³³ ka³³ q^ha⁵⁵ ma³³ tɕu²²zi³³ ||
 tail a.bit big more perhaps 1 also INT NEG pay.attention
 q^ha⁵⁵ ma³³ tɕu²²zi³³ || t^hi³³=xiæ³³ ŋa⁵⁵ t^hiæ⁵² zæ³¹ xa²²=xi⁵⁵ ma³³ si²² ||
 INT NEG pay.attention **one=size.EXT or a.bit big more=REL** NEG know

‘Which one is bigger, you ask? Pffff! The ones that appeared there, maybe the tiger’s tail is a bit bigger... It’s not like I was paying attention. Didn’t pay a lot of attention... Don’t know if they **are the same size or it’s a bit bigger...**’

(YPG1-20191211_01-H2nb: 00:07:31.17–00:08:13.53)

Con conversationally grounded language-internal evidence enhances the quality and reliability of descriptive and analytical choices. By comparison, as found in Sarvasy (2016), bilingual explanations of forms tend to be significantly less rich than monolingual ones. As beautifully illustrated in Example 8 below, the latter are communicatively embedded explications linked to encyclopaedic knowledge about the world (e.g., the similarity between tiger tails and cow tails), whereas the former are usually restricted to literal equivalences, which tend to be purely schematic, short, and, often, too simplistic.⁷ Compare the minimalistic Chinese translation, which fails to convey the distributive sense of the original Phola utterance, to the more encyclopaedic cluster of interwoven scenarios and details in the ensuing monolingual explication made up of a conceptual paraphrase followed by an analogy.

- (8) ME: t^hi³³=xiæ³³ pɑ⁵⁵ mɛ³¹ || q^ha³³ m^hpa³³ ni³³ ||
 one=size.EXT all NEG.right how say Q
 ‘‘Not evenly big’’... What are you saying?’
 BLW: t^hi³³=xiæ³³ pɑ⁵⁵ mɛ³¹ | *shi4 bu4 yiyang4 da4 de yi4si* ||
 one=size.EXT all NEG. right COP NEG **same big NMOD meaning**

⁷ One must take, of course, individual differences into account. This specific speaker, while decently proficient in the local Mandarin vernacular, is always much more eloquent in his native Phola.

th³³=xiæ³³ pa⁵⁵ me³¹ | th³³ γo²²=ɬo³³ le³³ i⁵⁵ | th³³ γo²²=ɬo³³ le³³
 one=size.EXT all NEG.right one CLF.side=side TOP small one CLF.side TOP
 zæ³¹ || ju³¹ me²²təu⁵⁵=æ²² ni³³ ki³³si²² təo²² ||
 big cow tail=also with like.that.down have

“Not evenly big” means “not equally big” (in Chinese). “Not evenly big”: one side is small and another side big. The cow’s tail is also like that.’

(YPG1-20191211_01-H2nb: 00:06:58.41–00:07:19.20)

The overall quality of monolingual explications is such that they constitute an excellent source of data in the target language (Sarvasy 2016). This has momentous implications for the field of language documentation and description because it turns translation and transcription sessions, which are notoriously time-consuming, into valuable and direct sources of interactionally grounded linguistic knowledge, rather than merely a means to the end of accessing the original primary data. In particular, monolingual transcription sessions are a goldmine of information on cultural schemata as reflected in speaker’s intuitive and spontaneous interpretations of both the world around them and how their language is used to represent it. To illustrate, consider Example 9 below, where BLW offers a monolingual paraphrase of ^mpa³³ ɛiæ³¹ ‘to quarrel’, which gives some form of (indirect) access to aspects of the speaker’s Weltanschauung, conceptual depictions, and local understandings. In this case, ‘quarrelling’ is paraphrased as something that happens at the levels of beliefs (i.e., ‘being right’) and at the level of speech acts, as revealed by the adverbialising complementiser ni⁵⁵, which is used after quoted (or hypothetical) utterances. Monolingual paraphrasing consistently shows how Phola speakers talk about meaning and concepts as something that belongs in the realm of orality. Thus, the conventional way to express the notion of “meaning” is X=na⁵⁵ ^mpa³³ lit. ‘it says (with) X’. As already hinted in the discussion of Example 2, this can be interpreted as a reflection of a general ethnopragmatic model where private thoughts, social relations, and problem solving are intimately and explicitly linked to speech as a primary tool for understanding and handling societal structure (cf. Wierzbicka 1991 on the culture-specific nature of speech act verbs across languages).

(9) BLW: nu³³ le³³ nu³³ qh³¹ | ηa³³ le³³ ηa³³ qh³¹ ni⁵⁵ mpa³¹ ɛiæ³¹
 2 TOP 2 right 1 TOP 1 right ADV quarrel RSLT.spill
 qi³³ ke⁵⁵=na⁵⁵ ^mpa³³=xi⁵⁵ niæ³³ ||
 NMLZR that.down=with say=REL EP

‘You (say) you are right, and I (say) I am right. That’s what ^mpa³¹ ɛiæ³¹ (i.e. ‘quarrel’) means.’

(YPG1-20191220_02-ext1Q8: 00:32:14.56–00:32:17.45)

In line with Dingemans’s (2015) work, culturally embedded folk definitions can directly advance semantic analysis in general and the study of semantically obscure structures in particular, which other traditional methods fail to elucidate. This is important because, as some researchers have pointed out, fieldwork on lexical and semantic structures has been historically neglected and methodologically underdeveloped (Evans & Dench 2006; Haviland 2006; Hellwig 2006; Sasse & Evans 2007). Moreover, culturally embedded explications and the ethnopragmatic models they shed light on have broad implications for the field of language documentation in terms of methodology and ethics (Dobrin & Sicoli 2018). Last but not least, native paraphrases have direct applications for lexicography (an idea explored in Mosel 2011) and can be incorporated into dictionary entries, literacy booklets, and digital materials aimed at both in-group and out-group learners. Regarding the latter, research in the field of second language acquisition suggests that monolingual dictionaries for learners, which rely heavily on paraphrasing, enhance language learning, especially at an intermediate and advanced level (Florin 2010; Runte 2015; Köster 2017). This suggests that exposure to and practice with paraphrasing has the potential to speed up and consolidate the language-learning process of both the researcher and, should the need arise,

community members (e.g., in-married villagers and youths who partly grew up outside of the village).

By blurring the boundaries between primary-data gathering and data analysis, the monolingual method makes the research process maximally recursive (i.e., language learning and linguistic research directly feed into and reinforce each other) (cf. François 2019: 159–160 for a similar observation). Over time, as the researcher becomes increasingly integrated into the community as an established social agent and viable communicative partner, monolingual explications become a routine part of naturalistic interactions. Thus, recording spontaneous conversations between myself and speakers with whom I have forged and nurtured interpersonal relations became a way to gather high-quality data on various semantic, cultural, and pragmatic issues. To illustrate, consider Example 10 below taken from an unplanned afternoon conversation with PYNA, which offered valuable insights into the ethnopragmatics of speech acts, kinship relations, and the interaction between the two. The speaker in question, a classificatory aunt of mine in whose household I had by then spent countless hours, is trying to encourage me to come back to Luodie Village after the end of a field trip. Crucially, she does this by appealing to and discursively establishing our social kinship relationship, which she characterises in terms of what we say to each other. Note in particular how, in line with the discussion of Examples 3 and 9, the speaker draws on the verb *m̥pa³³* ‘to say; to call (a kinship term)’.

- (10) PYNA: $\eta\alpha^{33}=\text{ntse}^{22}$ e^{22} $k\text{ɔ}^{33}$ li^{33} $m\alpha^{22}$ $t\text{ɔ}^{33}li^{33}$ $se^{33}=\text{xi}^{55}$ $m\text{pa}^{33}$ na^{55} $t\epsilon\alpha^{31}$ [...]
 1=among here return come want COS still=REL say EV TAG
 $\eta\alpha^{33}$ $j\alpha^{55}$ $\text{ntu}\alpha^{32}$ | $\eta\alpha^{33}$ ka^{33} || $\eta\alpha^{33}$ ka^{33} ni^{33} | nu^{33} $\eta\alpha^{33}$ $z\alpha^{31}\text{ntu}^{33}$ $\text{nti}^{22}\text{va}^{33}$ |
 1 INTF think 1 also 1 also with 2 1 nephew UCG

‘Turns out you will still come back here amidst us, you said, right?... I really hope so myself. Myself I (call/consider) you my nephew, you see?!’

- $\eta\alpha^{33}$ $z\alpha^{31}$ $\text{nti}^{22}\text{va}^{33}$ [...] nu^{33} ka^{33} $i^{55}\text{m}\text{ɔ}^{33}\text{m}\text{ɔ}^{31}$ || $i^{55}\text{m}\text{ɔ}^{33}\text{m}\text{ɔ}^{31}$ $p^h\alpha^{31}$ $m\text{pa}^{33}$ ||
 1 son UCG 2 also aunt aunt COND say
 $x\alpha^{22}$ | $p^h\alpha^{31}$ $m\text{pa}^{33}$ le^{33} | nu^{33} $\eta\alpha^{33}$ $z\alpha^{31}$ $\text{nti}^{22}\text{va}^{33}$ ||
 yes COND say TOP 2 1 son UCG

‘Indeed, my son! And you yourself, since **you say**, “Aunt! Aunt!” and **I say**, “Yees?” that makes you my son, as things are!’

(YPG1-20190512_07-ext1Q8: 00:23:46.80–00:24:05.25)

So far, we have been looking at how some speakers adopt the role of language teachers and share a wealth of expository linguistic material containing contextually grounded explanations about the world (e.g., animals or kinship). As a cooperative speech member within the community, speakers will also ask the researcher to do things with and for them rather than just present expository prose. Speaker–linguist interactions anchored in naturalistic communicative contexts and goals can form the basis for documenting and analysing pragmatically sensitive aspects of language use that take into account presuppositions about shared knowledge, mental states, attentional access, and the like. In particular, participant observation has emerged as especially well-suited to the study of social cognition phenomena and its various linguistic correlates in domains such as deixis and engagement (cf. Evans et al. 2017a; 2017b). To illustrate, consider Example 11 below, where PYNA was asking me to turn the lights on because she was wired up with the microphone and couldn’t stand up herself. However, in order to succeed, I first needed to find and pull a cord hidden behind a mirror, and so she provided detailed instructions to help me in the task. Just like BLW referring to the grasshopper in Example 1, this excerpt contains multiple demonstratives, in this case anchored to the addressee (e.g., *t^{he}55* ‘that close to you’ and *t^{hu}.22* ‘look there by you’). Prior research on demonstratives suggests that addressee-anchored deictics can be sensitive to various factors, including spatial proximity, attentional and visual access, discourse-epistemic familiarity, and shared knowledge (cf. Özyürek 1998; Burenhult 2018; Knuchel 2019; González Pérez 2023). Thus, analysing deictic usage requires saturat-

ed descriptions and analyses of material, social, discursive, and multimodal aspects of the speech situation (Küntay & Özyürek 2006; Hanks 2009). Being a communicative participant helps streamline the process of tracking mental states and common ground across interactional events. For example, the addressee (i.e., myself) was in this case previously unaware of the existence of the referent, and the speaker (i.e., PYNA) probably knew that this was the case. This is important because it is notoriously hard to determine and operationalise to what extent shared knowledge and attention obtain in a given situation (cf. Burenhult 2003: 367). A reviewer pointed out that speakers do not necessarily always keep track of, accurately estimate, or wish to express their addressee’s mental states even when they use addressee-relevant language. However, the key point here is not that the linguist’s involvement helps them determine in absolute terms what the main motivation is for the speaker’s choice of one form over another, but rather that active participation gives a more direct access to a wider range of potentially relevant parameters, including the linguist’s mental states and gaze direction, and thus contributes to reducing analytical uncertainty when triangulating these variables. Note that because the camera was directed at PYNA, none of my switch-finding endeavours got video-recorded, but I made notes and took pictures of the setting a few minutes after the fact, thus minimising the risk of misremembering any relevant details, a luxury that would have been significantly impeded if I hadn’t been personally involved.

Over the long term, significant day-to-day exposure to forms such as addressee-anchored deictics in speech directed at the linguist increases the empirical evidentiary basis exponentially, thus maximising what Hale (2001: 82) calls ADEQUATE COVERAGE and minimising the risk of overgeneralisations and undergeneralisations. For an example, while *th^{e55}* in Example 11 below looks like a mere spatial deictic insensitive to epistemic considerations, consider Example 12, where a speaker uses it to refer to my room, even though she was physically closer to my room than I was myself. In this case, the place referred to is within the addressee’s sphere of habitual engagement (i.e., my abode is by definition my zone), which is what motivates addressee-anchored deixis (i.e., ‘there by you’), even when the speaker is actually closer. Likewise, participating in conversations where I had privileged access to the conversational subject and discursive agency to co-shape it, heuristically led to the insight that addressee-anchored deictics, such as *thⁱ³³si²²* ‘like that way (that you are describing)’ in Example 13, were the unmarked choice when referring back to discourse elements (referents, whole topics, etc.) introduced into the conversation by the addressee. That is, Pholas would routinely refer back to things I had just mentioned using the *th^{e55}* deictic set, even if those things were nowhere near me or even locatable in space at all (cf. González Pérez 2023 for a fuller discussion).

- (11) PYNA: *th^{u:22}* | *th^{e55}=na⁵⁵* *tci³³* *thⁱ²²* | *th^{u:22}* [...] *th^{u:22}* | *th^{e55}=yɔ²²tɔ³³* *u³¹*
look.there **that=from** pull RSLT **look.there** **look.there** **that=behind** be
tɛa³¹ [...] *zi:²⁵zi:²²* | *na³¹tci³³* *khi⁵⁵* | *ɔ⁵⁵* || *th^{e55}=xɔ²²* *th^{e55}* *tci³³* |
TAG look.here.EMPH mirror on INTJ **that=in** **that** pull
th^{e55} *tci³³* *thⁱ²²* | *tci³³=lɔ³³=na⁵⁵* *tci³³* *thⁱ²²* *tɔ²²* ||
that pull RSLT pull=side=from pull RSLT must

‘**Look there!** Pull it on using **that** one. **Look there by you!** **There by you!** It’s behind **that** thing **there by you**, isn’t it? Look at me!!! Above the mirror. Yeah! **In there**, pull **that one by you**, pull it down! You have to pull it from the pullable side.’

(YPG1-20190512_07-ext1Q8b: 00:08:21.67–00:09:18.57)

- (12) MSN: *lɔ³¹si³³ta³³* *th^{e55}-la²²* *ta²²* *ma³³* *ki⁵⁵* || *nu³³=ntse²²* *th^{e55}-la²²* ||
screwdriver **that-at** leave NEG worry 2=among **that-at**

‘You can leave the screwdriver **there**, at your place over **there**.’

(YPG1-20191128-fieldnotes_YPG5AA)

- (13) ME: $\eta\text{æ}^{55}=\text{ge}^{33}$ $t\text{ɔ}^{22}$ $m\text{ɑ}^{33}$ $m\text{p}\text{ɑ}^{33}=\text{e}^{55}$ [...] $t\text{h}i^{33}$ $x\text{ɔ}^{31}=\text{æ}^{22}$ $m\text{ɑ}^{33}$ $m\text{p}\text{ɑ}^{33}$ ||
 INTF=distance.EXT have NEG say=ADR.ASYM one CLF.human=also NEG say
 ‘‘It’s very far [intended, ungrammatical]’’ is not said? No one says it (?)’
 MSN: $\eta\text{æ}^{55}=\text{ge}^{33}$ $t\text{ɔ}^{22}=\text{p}^h\text{ɑ}^{22}$ | $t\text{ɔ}^{22}\text{pu}^{33}\text{te}^{33}\text{p}^h\text{ɑ}^{33}=\text{n}\text{æ}^{31}$ $m\text{p}\text{ɑ}^{33}$ | nu^{33} $m\text{e}^{22}$ |
 INTF=distance.EXT have=FOC Zhabadie.person=AG say 2 only
 $\eta\text{ɑ}^{33}-\text{zi}^{33}$ le^{33} | $t\text{h}i^{33}\text{si}^{22}$ le^{33} $m\text{ɑ}^{33}$ $m\text{p}\text{ɑ}^{33}$ $\text{ni}\text{æ}^{33}$ ||
 1-PL TOP **like.that** TOP NEG say EP
 ‘‘It’s very far [ungrammatical].’’ Zhabadiers say that. Other than you, we don’t say it **like that**, boy!’
 (YPG1-20190511_05-ext1H5: 00:04:47.92–00:04:56.43)

A comparison of Examples 11–13 suggests that addressee deictics are anchored to the addressee’s sphere of engagement, which may be defined in terms of current spatial position or a more socio-epistemic construal of space including discourse space (cf. Hanks 1990; Enfield 2003; Naruoka 2006; Johannessen 2020; Khachaturyan 2020; González Pérez 2023).

It goes without saying that hypotheses formed through participant observation can and should be further validated by analysing interactions between speakers other than the researcher as well as by other forms of evidence such as gestures (cf. González Pérez 2023). My main claim is very simply that communicative involvement systematically catalyses the process of hypothesis generation and testing. Very particularly, a firsthand understanding of a given communicative act allows the researcher to focus attention on how the choice of language forms (e.g., deictics) correlates with various aspects of the context of use. For example, having recognised the interaction in Example 11 above as being research-relevant, I not only filled in my conversational turns with communicative prompts such as ‘‘Where is it? I can’t see it’’ but was also systematically focusing on PYNA’s gaze (Is she looking at my eyes, my hands, or the location of the hidden cord?), gestures (Is she pointing? Is the pointing co-timed with the deictic forms? Does it ever stop and resume?), and mental states (Is her visual access to the relevant area optimal? Is she giving signs that she understands that I don’t know where the referent is? Did she overtly acknowledge noticing when I found the referent?).

The video-recorded gestures of PYNA offer additional external evidence that PYNA was indeed tracking my mental states. Photos 18–19 show how PYNA’s addressee deictics are systematically coupled with directed pointing until the moment I found the switch, at which point she ceased pointing even as she kept referring back to the referent with addressee deictics such as $t^h\text{e}^{55}$ ‘that one (by you)’. This strongly suggest that she was indeed actively and accurately assessing my eye-gaze and mental states (cf. Bangerter 2004; Stevens & Zhang 2013; Stukenbrock 2015; 2020) and that usage of $t^h\text{e}^{55}$ does not categorically depend on such an attentional assessment.



Photos 18–19. PYNA produces addressee deictics while pointing at the cord before I find it. Pointing, but not deictic reference, stops once I have successfully found the cord.

While the analysis presented above does not strictly speaking depend on the linguist being involved, linguist involvement does provide an additional line of evidence that would otherwise not be available. At any rate, participant observation appears to me to be superior to other methods for the documentation and description of semantically obscure language forms that are pragmatically sensitive, such as deictics, which are notoriously elusive and tend to map very imperfectly across languages (cf. Levinson et al. 2018). For example, in line with Bradley (2007), I found bilingual translation and discussion sessions to yield rather unsatisfactory results. Mandarin Chinese only has two deictic terms 这 *zhè* ‘this’ and 那 *nà* ‘that’, which contrasts with the five deictic terms of Phola, *e*⁵⁵ ‘this (by speaker)’, *t^he*⁵⁵ ‘that (by addressee)’, *ne*⁵⁵ ‘that up(hill)’, *ke*⁵⁵ ‘that down(hill)’, and *qə*⁵⁵ ‘that across (the hill)’. This results in all Phola demonstratives being unsystematically equated with either Mandarin term, especially 那 *nà* ‘that’ (cf. Bradley 2007 for a similar account of fieldwork on Gong and Lisu demonstratives). Moreover, because deictics are semantically underspecified and heavily dependent on complex and ever-changing aspects of the speech act context (cf. Enfield 2003; 2009; 2018), speakers are not necessarily always metalinguistically aware of why one form is chosen over others in a particular case and often come up with ad hoc, inconsistent explanations, even when using Phola in metalinguistic discussions about deictics (cf. Knuchel 2020 for a similar observation based on her fieldwork on Kogi demonstratives and engagement marking).

The pitfalls of describing context-sensitive language are well-known in the field of linguistics, and researchers have resorted to more or less constrained elicitation tasks, such as matching games (Burenhult 2003; Knuchel 2020), storyboards (San Roque et al. 2012), neuroscientific methods (Peeters et al. 2015), eye-tracking (Stukenbrock 2018), and even optical illusions (Gawne 2020) to isolate and assess contextual parameters such as attention, cognitive access, and shared knowledge. While I have found stimuli-based methods useful indeed, the following section explores how linguistic competence in the field language can complement and even enhance the utility of such methods.

4.3 Language competence and selective data collection

While several documentary linguists have urged practitioners to be holistic in their approach to data gathering (e.g., Rice 2001: 230; Crowley 2007: 109; Dixon 2007: 23; Aikhenvald 2007: 5–7; Grenoble 2007: 148), a commonly raised issue in the field is the need for strategically selective data collection ensuring enough information is gathered on aspects of the language that may emerge as particularly worth delving into from a given theoretical perspective (cf. Rice 2001; Chelliah & de Reuse 2011: 358–360; François 2019: 155). To this effect, various dedicated techniques are commonly used, such as questionnaires, props, and stimuli-based elicitation, which have proven efficacious for obtaining principled information on a speech community’s lexicon (Bowerman 1992; Paperno & Ryzhova 2019), phonology (Caldecott & Koch 2014), morphosyntax (Dahl 1985; Hengeveld 1991), semantic categories (Levinson 2001; Hellwig 2006; Majid 2012), pragmatic principles (Wilkins 1999; Levinson 2018; Lovick & Tuttle 2019), narrative structure (Du Bois 1980; Berman & Slobin 1994), dialogic structure (Levinson et al. 1992; Enfield et al. 2010; François 2019), multimodal patterns (Stivers 2004), reasoning and philosophical schemata (Levinson 1995; Senft 2003), and social cognition (Burenhult 2003; San Roque et al. 2012).

An active command of the language has an obvious potential as a tool to direct the kinds of data gathered during a research session. I’d like to exemplify this by showing how language proficiency can interface with stimuli-based elicitation to redirect the focus of the interaction towards the core of the linguist’s research questions.

In order to conduct research on the grammar and semantics of dimensional extent (cf. Bradley 1995) in Phola, I crafted a set of 126 videos and pictures, showcasing dimensional properties and contrasts so as to prompt speakers to produce dimension-related language in video-description and picture-matching tasks (cf. González Pérez 2022: Ch. 2). However, despite all efforts to make the relevant topic salient, speakers often chose to focus on completely unrelated aspects of a scene. For example, having watched a video showing me and a Chinese colleague trying to reach for an object placed high (Photos 20–21 below), LJF and BTL decided to focus on trying to guess the scenes’ whereabouts (e.g., whether it was showing my village). Crucially, even when they did address the topic of interest, as in Example 14 below, they did not initially use dimensional words. Identifying an easy bridge between the failure to reach up and the height dimension, I intervened by asking why that was the case, which, as shown in Example 15 below, finally prompted the speakers to set up explicit comparisons using dimensional vocabulary.

- (14) LJF: e⁵⁵=æ²² me²² ma³³ tɛ^{hɔ}⁵⁵ || e⁵⁵=æ²² me²² ma³³ tɛ^{hɔ}⁵⁵ ||
 this=also reach NEG able this=also reach NEG able

‘Neither this one nor this one can reach!’

(YPG1-20190423_07-ext1H5, idem-ext2H5: 00:12:06.28–00:12:09.27)

- (15) ME: e⁵⁵ve³³ | q^ha³³si²² tɛ^ɔ²² ni³³ | me²² ma³³ tɛ^{hɔ}⁵⁵ ||
 this how have Q reach NEG able

‘So this one, how come he can’t reach?’

- LJF/BTL: xɛ̃³¹ || me²² ma³³ tɛ^{hɔ}⁵⁵ ||
 right reach NEG able

‘Exactly! He can’t reach!’

- ME: a²²tɛ^h³¹ nku²²=na⁵⁵ me²² ma³³ tɛ^{hɔ}⁵⁵ ||
 what do=with reach NEG able

‘Why can’t (he) reach?’

- BTL: u³³ mɔ²² nti⁵⁵ ||
 3 body short

‘His body is **short**.’

- LJF: mɔ²² ma³³ ŋɔ⁵⁵ mɔ²² me²² ma³³ tɛ^{hɔ}⁵⁵ ||
 body NEG high because reach NEG able

‘Because his body is not **tall**, he can’t reach up.’

(YPG1-20190423_07-ext1H5, idem-ext2H5: 00:12:36.37–00:12:44.48)



Photo 20. Chinese research partner acts out inability to reach up.



Photo 21. I act out ability to reach, thus highlighting the height difference between the two actors.

This intervention, arguably a minimally invasive one, prompted speakers to actually talk about what the stimuli tried to highlight in the first place, namely dimensional properties from a comparative perspective. Of course, prompts may not always yield the desired linguistic output. The first time I tried to elicit a why-response, it only triggered a repetition of the original declaration.⁸ However, as can be seen in Example 16 below, both insistence and small permutations are bound to be fruitful on a trial-and-error basis. Indeed, insisting on the same question on a subsequent pass of the video is what finally elicited the desired comparative structure. As Chelliah & de Reuse put it, one should “record not only an answer specific to a situation, but a variety of appropriate answers as well” (2011: 368). Example 16 substantiates Everett’s (2001) praise for simple content questions as a key data-gathering tool. Indeed, asking ‘why’ at the right moment can be decisive to whether the desired or suspected structures (e.g., the grammatically alternating forms $\eta\text{ɔ}^{33}$ ‘tall to an unspecified extent’ and $\eta\text{ɔ}^{55}$ ‘tall’) surface or not in speech. Crucially, communicative competence can enhance and channel the utility of stimuli, props, and questionnaires because a monolingually engaged linguist has the capacity to apply simple yet targeted quality controls ensuring that the unfolding speech aligns with the research questions.

- (16) ME: e⁵⁵ve³³ me²² tɛ^{hɔ}⁵⁵ me²² ma³³ tɛ^{hɔ}⁵⁵ ||
 this reach able reach NEG able
 ‘Can this one reach?’
 BTL: me²² ma³³ tɛ^{hɔ}⁵⁵ ||
 reach NEG able
 ‘Can’t reach.’
 ME: a²²tɛ^{hɪ}³¹ n^{ku}²²=na⁵⁵ me²² ma³³ tɛ^{hɔ}⁵⁵ ||
 what do=with reach NEG able
 ‘Why can’t (he) reach?’
 LJF: mɔ²² n^{ti}⁵⁵ m^{pɔ}⁵⁵ || nu³³= $\eta\text{ɔ}$ ³³ ma³³ tɛɔ²² m^{pɔ}⁵⁵ ||
 body short MP 2=height.EXT NEG have MP
 ‘He’s **short!** He is not as **tall as** you!’
 (YPG1-20190423_07-ext1H5, idem-ext2H5: 00:12:59.96–00:13:05.32)

⁸ Speakers may have decoded an involuntary hesitation pause on my part after the question particle *ni*³³ as a syntactic pause, yielding an overall interpretation along the lines of ‘So how’s it happening? He can’t reach!’

A basic communicative understanding of speech act types complemented by a focused knowledge of research-relevant linguistic forms can also allow the researcher to identify theoretically relevant communicative events on the spot without having to wait for transcripts and translations. This is relevant because field linguists variously report that it may take up to 100 or even 150 hours to transcribe 1 hour of spoken language (Seifart et al. 2018: 335; Himmelmann 2018: 34). Because of this transcription bottleneck, grammars are often based on about ten hours of transcribed data. However, linguists spend several hundred or even thousands of hours in their field sites, and there is a strong likelihood that some of the most interesting and relevant examples just happen not to surface in the available transcripts.

Metacommunicative resources can be used to invite speakers to recreate spontaneously unfolding communicative acts that are relevant to a research question, before their contextual relevance expires. For example, early on during my field research, it emerged that expressions of dimension and degree were composite utterances following culture-specific gestural patterns worth investigating (cf. Enfield 2009). As soon as gestural tokens were produced around me, I would use monolingual prompts to re-enact the original communicative act so I could record⁹ the same or a similar type of gesture while at the same time capturing the original communicative context in which it was embedded. Example 17 below illustrates this procedure.

(17) ME: nu³³ q^ha⁵⁵-t^ha³¹=a²² ni³³ | nu³³ | e⁵⁵=x^e³³=a⁵⁵n^a³¹ q^ha³³si²² n^{ku}²² |
 2 what-time=also with 2 **this=amount.EXT=DIM** how do
 nu³³ la³³ pi²² ||
 2 hand compare

‘Just now (as) you (said), “**Barely this little,**” how did you do? Gesturing with your hand!’

LJF: ŋa³³ ɣo³³ ||
 1 TAG

‘Me, right?’

ME: xa²² ||
 yes

‘Yes!’

LJF: nu³³ n^qa³¹ q^a⁵⁵ ma³³ t^ho⁵⁵ | ɛ²²ta³³ɛ²² xo³³t^ɛ³¹ e⁵⁵=x^e³³=a⁵⁵n^a³¹
 2 swallow RSLT.down NEG able +1.morning rice **this=amount.EXT=DIM**
 me²² ma³³ t^ɛ²² va³³ ||
 only NEG feed COS

‘Since you can’t finish it up, tomorrow morning, I will then **only** give you **this little** rice.’

(YPG1-20191127_05-MIUI: 00:00:00.75–00:00:09.30)

⁹ Several speakers were happy for me to record them outside of official research sessions by briefly turning a recorder on and asking contextually relevant questions such as “Where is it?”



Photo 22. LJF reenacts a communicative act and concomitant gestures at my behest.

Although this need not apply to all research topics nor to all field settings, I found that a bilingual approach was unsatisfactory when it came to gathering data on the semiotic coupling and temporal alignment of speech material with embodied gestures. A common occurrence in my field setting was for dimensional and deictic gestures to become simplified or disappear when dimensional and deictic properties were addressed in Chinese (metalinguistically or naturalistically). This likely responds in part to the fact that Phola makes more fine-grained categorical distinctions than Chinese in these domains, but also to a potentially weaker cognitive association between the linguistic and multimodal channels in a second language (cf. Gullberg 2010 for a review on L2 gestures).

Beyond waiting for fortuitous communicative acts to take place, the field linguist can adopt a more agentive role by designing and using routinised prompts to gather copious amounts of data of certain kinds that are systematically tied to performance context (i.e., to systematically occurring speech acts). A prime example of this from my fieldwork involves the study of deictic reference. Having a five-way demonstrative paradigm structured along a four-way morphosyntactic grid (cf. Table 1 below simplified from González Pérez 2022: 208), it became obvious early on that a large dataset would be needed to tease apart the various meanings, functions, and contexts of use of these forms. I thus set out to capture as much detail about naturalistic usage of deictic expressions throughout everyday situations by using very simple, yet targeted prompts. For example, when speakers around me referenced objects, places, and people I would automatically ask where/what/which these were, as a way to trigger deictic language and pointing. Similarly, when speakers spontaneously talked about the deictic location of a referent or a destination, I made a habit of automatically asking where, what, or which one, as shown in Example 18 below.

Table 1. Phola deictic system (simplified from González Pérez 2022)

Deictic base	Nominal deictic	Adverbial deictics		Disjoint deictic particle
		Locative	Manner	
Speaker	e ⁵⁵ (ve ³³) 'This by me'	e ²² (n ^{te} ⁵⁵) 'Here by me'	i ³³ (si ²²) 'Like this by me'	zi: ²² 'Look at this by me!'
Addressee	t ^h e ⁵⁵ (ve ³³) 'That by you'	t ^h e ²² (n ^{te} ⁵⁵) 'There by you'	t ^h i ³³ (si ²²) 'Like that by you'	t ^h u: ²² 'Look at that by you!'
Down(hill)	ke ⁵⁵ (ve ³³) 'That below'	ke ²² (n ^{te} ⁵⁵) 'There below'	ki ³³ (si ²²) 'Like that below'	ku: ²² 'Look at that below!'
Up(hill)	ŋe ⁵⁵ (ve ³³) ŋo ⁵⁵ (ve ³³) 'That above'	ŋe ²² (n ^{te} ⁵⁵) ŋo ²² (n ^{te} ⁵⁵) 'There above'	ŋi ³³ (si ²²) ŋo ³³ (si ²²) 'Like that above'	ŋu: ²² 'Look at that above!'
Across/Beyond	qo ⁵⁵ (ve ³³) 'That across'	qo ²² (n ^{te} ⁵⁵) 'There across'	qo ³³ (si ²²) 'Like that across'	qo: ²² 'Look at that across!'

(18) PYNA: nu³³ ʒo³³ qa⁵⁵ ko³³ le³³ || ŋa³³ ka³³ ŋa³³ ʒo³³ vi⁵⁵ ko³³
 2 home go.down return go 1 also 1 home cross return
 nti²²va³³=næ³¹ mpa³³=niæ³³ ||
 UCG=ADV say=EP

‘Go back **down** to your house. I’m also going back over to my place, anyway, it’s what I’m telling you.’

ME: qa⁵⁵ ko³³ le³³ næ³¹ mpa³³ | mɛ³¹ ||
 go.down return go ADV say=EP NEG.right

‘You said to **go back down**, didn’t you?’

PYNA: xɛ³¹ ||
 right

‘That’s right!’

ME: q^ha²²ntɛ⁵⁵ ||
 where

‘Where?’

PYNA: nu³³ ʒo³³ ke⁵⁵ na⁵⁵ | ku:²² ||
 2 home that.down with look.down

‘I mean **that** house of yours **down there**. **Look downhill!**’

(YPG1-20191228_03-MIUI: 00:00:17.35–00:00:30.15)

Example 18 above was a decisive piece of evidence for the topographic characterisation of elevational deictics in Phola. As noted in Forker (2020), truly topographic deixis needs to be proven by looking at cases where vertical height and hill gradient are not aligned. For example, in a true topographic framework of reference, location A in Figure 3 below should count as downhill when looked at from location B even though A is vertically higher than B. As Photos 23–24 show, this perfectly describes PYNA’s act of reference. Although she is pointing at a location higher than herself, she uses the verb qa⁵⁵ ‘go down’ and low-altitude deictics such as ke⁵⁵ ‘that down’ and ku:²² ‘look downhill!’ to refer to it. Crucially, the relevant location was downhill from her as shown by the yellow arrow indicating the direction of PYNA’s gesture towards the valley, co-timed with ku:²² ‘look downhill!’.

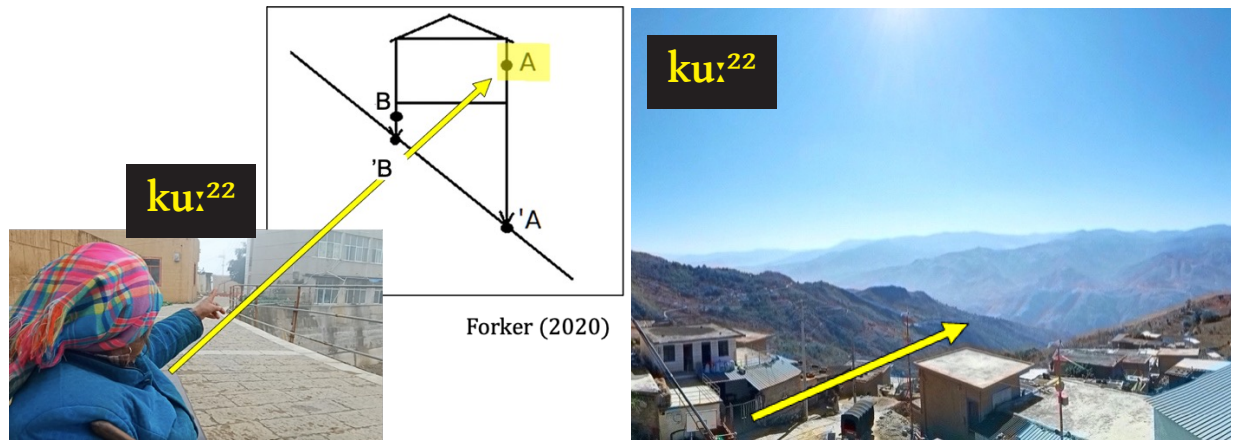


Figure 3 & Photos 23–24. PYNA points towards the second floor of the building, which is higher than her but is downhill.

Likewise, the interrogative form of dimensional extensives (e.g., $q^{h\alpha^{55}xi\alpha^{33}}$ ‘how big (is it)?’) became a helpful metalinguistic resource to elicit dimensional descriptions and gestures, which ultimately yielded a wealth of data on the meaning, function, and pragmatics of the many different types of constructions available for dimensional lexemes in Phola (cf. Bradley 1995; González Pérez 2022: Ch. 6).

As pointed out in §4.2, language learning and participant observation make the research process recursive. Indeed, making a systematic habit of asking content questions increases exposure to linguistic descriptions and commentaries and thus enhances the evidentiary basis to document, describe, and acquire language structures and functions. A methodological practice worth noting involves consciously modulating micro-level aspects of communicative context, such as the relative positions of speaker and addressee across various acts of reference to the same entity. For an example, I investigated whether the addressee’s position and gaze direction were relevant criteria mediating the usage of the semantically obscure demonstrative $q\alpha^{55}$. To this end, I gathered visually saturated data on how Phola speakers referred to something (e.g., a mountain in Example 19), whilst I was occupying various positions (e.g., facing the same vs. the opposite direction) (cf. Photos 25 and 26 below). This was a way to explore if the speaker’s assessment of the addressee’s position and visual access had an impact on demonstrative choice, as it has been described for languages like Jahai, which has a dedicated addressee-inaccessible demonstrative $t\ddot{u}n$ ‘that by your side which is invisible to you’ as well as an addressee-exterior form $t\ddot{u}i?$ ‘that by your side which is unreachable’, which contrast with an addressee-accessible form ton ‘that which you can see/reach’ (Burenhult 2003; 2018). Crucially, linguistic competence allowed me to prompt MSN to index the referent multiple times by asking $q^{h\alpha^{55}ve^{33}}$ ‘which one?’ while I moved into different positions.

- (19) MSN: $q\alpha^{55}$ $t^{h}i^{33}$ $n^{t}i^{22}$ $k\alpha^{33}$ ni^{33} $z\alpha\epsilon^{31}$ ||
 that.across one CLF.clump also with big

‘That lump (refers to the shape of a mountaintop) over there is big too.’

(I move around to face the same direction as MSN (e.g., towards the mountains).)

- ME: $q^{h\alpha^{55}ve^{33}}$ ||
 which

‘Which one?’

MSN: qə⁵⁵ | qə²² ||
 that.across look.across

‘That one across, look all the way over there!’

(I move farther back, stepping out of MSN’s visual frame but facing in the same direction as her.)

ME: q^ha⁵⁵ve³³ ||
 which

‘Which one?’

MSN: qə⁵⁵ ||
 that.across

‘That one across!’

(YPG1-20191218_02-Q4b: 00:00:22.30–00:00:39.15)



Photos 25–26. MSN uses qə⁵⁵ both when the addressee looks in the same direction and in a different direction.

Although my current understanding of semantically challenging forms like qə⁵⁵ ‘that across or beyond (a contextually defined here)’ is by no means exclusively based on such conversationally grounded tests (cf. González Pérez 2022: Ch 9), the general principle here is that a communicatively engaged linguist can co-create the arrangement of contextual parameters without having to rely on artificially induced scenarios or without having to wait for the relevant parameters to be obtained fortuitously or for a recorded event to be identified as relevant much later as transcripts and translations become available. This procedure allows the linguist to directly probe language use in addition to speakers’ folk awareness of language use. While both are useful kinds of data, they sometimes ought to be dealt with separately and gathered independently from each other.

In summary, communicatively embedded fieldwork is an ideal way to examine the fluid relations between linguistic, performative, and material context, especially when it comes to aspects of language structure and language use that are sensitive to interpersonal knowledge and conversational structure, such as deictic reference, engagement, epistemicity, or evidentiality (cf. Evans et al. 2017a; 2017b), which are notoriously hard to examine in formal sit-down recording sessions (cf. Grzech 2020; Grzech et al. 2020).

In some cases, it may of course make sense to move back and forth between naturalistic language usage and metalinguistic probing, which takes us to the final way I have thus far identified in which language competence in the field language can enhance language documentation and description. This pertains to questions geared towards gathering information about people’s explicit perceptions of the material and social context in which their utterances are grounded in order to couple primary data with metalinguistic commentary provided by the relevant speakers on the spot. Consider how real-time metalinguistic commentary helped clarify the extent to which deictic reference through forms such as *ne*⁵⁵ ‘that up(hill)’, *ke*⁵⁵ ‘that down(hill)’, and *qə*⁵⁵ ‘that across (the hill)’, were potentially motivated by speakers’ subjective

perceptions and construals of distance and altitude rather than only by externally measurable facts. The excerpt given in Example 20 below follows from me asking YYH, “Is it higher here or at that place you are referring to?” which was uttered before I managed to turn the recorder on. In the case at hand, this was useful to establish that reference through $q\text{ɔ}^{55}$, whose Ngwi cognates (e.g., Lisu $g\text{o}^{33}$; Bradley 2003: 220) have been described as same-altitude deictics, can be used in Phola to refer to locations higher or lower than the speaker and that this is crucially not a by-product of the speaker misperceiving or remaining oblivious of altitude differences.

The heightened engagement and exposure that comes with being a communicatively active participant in village life means that unusual or unexpected linguistic structures and uses more readily stand out (cf. Sarvasy 2017; 2018). In the case of Example 20 below, the usage of $q\text{ɔ}^{55}$ appeared interesting because I had just heard and recorded someone referring to that very same location using $ne^{55}la^{22}$ ‘up there’ whilst standing in almost the exact same spot as YYH (cf. Photos 27–28 below). Real-time metalinguistic engagement was instrumental to clarifying that YYH was indeed referring to the exact same spot as the first speaker, namely the flat square under a big tree where the ambulant fruit market sets shop (cf. Photo 29), and that she did not have a diverging notion of altitude differences. The discovery that there is a genuine denotational overlap between $q\text{ɔ}^{55}$ ‘that across’ and ne^{55} ‘that up(hill)’ has been an important piece of evidence that, while $q\text{ɔ}^{55}$ may once have been a same-altitude deictic like its Lisu counterpart, it is decreasingly semantically interlocked with the high-elevation and low-elevation deictics anymore (see González Pérez 2022 for a detailed analysis). This goes some way towards substantiating Everett’s claim that monolingual enquiry is an epistemically ambitious method, which heightens the evidentiary basis for analytical claims (2001: 184–186) and micro-level decisions regarding glossing and translation.

(20) YYH: $q\text{ɔ}^{55}-la^{22}$ ni^{33} $e^{55}-la^{22}$ | t^he^{55} le^{33} | $q\text{ɔ}^{55}-la^{22}$ $\eta\text{ɔ}^{55}$ xa^{22} ||
 that.across-at with this-at that TOP that.across-at high COMP

‘As for here and over there (which you are asking about), it’s higher over there.’

ME: $q^ha^{22}n^te^{55}$ ||

where

‘Where?’

YYH: $q\text{ɔ}^{55}-la^{22}$ ||

that.across-at

‘Over there.’

ME: $q\text{ɔ}^{55}-la^{22}$ p^ha^{31} m^pa^{33} le^{33} | $a^{22}t^c^h_i^{31}$ na^{55} m^pa^{33} ||
 that.across-at COND say TOP what with say

‘When you say “over there,” what do you mean?’

YYH: $ki^{33}m\text{ɔ}^{33}zi^{22}xu^{55}=me^{33}$ ||

pond.road=below

‘Below the Pond Road’

GNM: $si^{33}tsi^{22}=q^hu^{55}$ ||

tree=under

‘Under the tree...?’

YYH: ki³³mɔ³³zi²²xu⁵⁵=me³³ | si³³tsi²²=q^hu⁵⁵ [...] si³³tsi²²=q^hu⁵⁵ qɔ⁵⁵-la²² ηɔ⁵⁵ xa²² ||
 pond.road=below tree=under tree=under that.across-at high more

‘Below the Pond Road, under the tree... It’s higher under the tree over there.’

(YPG1-20191228_02-MIUI: 00:00:02.25–00:00:14.95)



Photos 27-28. YYH (left-hand side) uses qɔ⁵⁵ ‘that (across)’ when pointing to a higher lying location across the water reservoir. BLW (right-hand side) uses ηe⁵⁵ ‘that up(hill)’ whilst pointing at the same location from roughly the same place.



Photo 29. YYH refers to the spot under the tree.

5. Summary and directions for future research

Based on a review of the extant literature on monolingual fieldwork, this paper has pointed out the most important gap in prior research, namely the lack of empirical studies substantiating its purported advantages and disadvantages as a documentary and descriptive methodology. Instead of the quantitative approach pursued in the only other study that specifically tackles this question (Sarvasy 2016), a qualitative strategy was adopted, offering an ethnographically grounded account of how and why exactly acquiring monolingual competence brings methodological advantages to language documentation and description. This was illustrated through a meta-scientific analysis of linguist–speaker interactions recorded by the author in Yuanjiang County of the People’s Republic of China between April and December 2019. Having set out to learn Phola since December 2018 through a dedicated learning pathway that shall be the subject of future publications, I had progressed to a low-intermediate level of proficiency by April 2019.

A command of the field language may not be so acutely relevant when it comes to gathering planned speech, such as traditional narratives, verbal art, and ritualistic chants, since these can be relatively easily collected through a contact language. For those kinds of data, the risk of structural or cultural transfer is minimised by the highly formalised, conventionalised nature of the data as well as by heightened pressure on the part of speakers to carefully control and

monitor their speech in order to meet a society-wide standard. However, when it comes to spontaneous, non-planned speech (e.g., conversations) (cf. Himmelmann 1998: 178–180), participant observation undoubtedly has advantages, especially if the researcher aspires to pursue a pragmatically informed description of language structures and language use grounded in conversational practices and in a community-specific ethnography of communication (cf. Grenoble 2007). Indeed, acquiring a low-intermediate command of Phola had a directly positive impact on the quantity and quality of the data that the Phola speech community shared with me as well as on the reliability of my descriptions and theoretical analyses. This is particularly relevant, but not restricted, to the study of semantic and pragmatic phenomena grounded in communicative context and thus particularly well suited to study through participant observation of a dialogic nature (Duranti 1997: Ch. 4).

This article has shown how monolingual fieldwork can complement and boost the effectiveness of widespread fieldwork methods, including bilingual translations and description tasks based on audiovisual stimuli. Moreover, it was shown how monolingual competence provides the researcher with a heightened agency to target and gather specific kinds of theory-relevant language data through on-the-spot enquiries and through the conscious utilisation of communicative context and communicative cues in ways that remain largely foreclosed to the researcher if they rely exclusively on formal sessions and community-allocated interpreters and mediators.

It is worth clarifying that while I have attempted to demonstrate why and how language competence enhances the quantity and quality of linguistic data, I am not necessarily advocating a strict monolingual approach to fieldwork. There is no a priori reason to pursue a quest for “pure” linguistic data. We know from sociolinguistic research (e.g., Sorensen 1967; Thurston 1987; Moore 2004; Wray & Grace 2005; François 2012; Walworth et al. 2021) that multilingualism is the evolutionary rule across human societies and that therefore the repertoires of linguistic practices and knowledge of most speakers often include not only colonial contact languages but also various local and regional varieties. Moreover, in some cases, a substantial proportion of users of a given variety (e.g., Swahili or Wolof) may speak said variety as a second language, but that does not mean that they are not competent users whose practices deserve being documented (Mc Laughlin & Sall 2001: 202). In fact, much of the world’s communication happens in languages that are not the speakers’ first or dominant varieties, which some authors have argued constitutes a challenge to the focus on native speech as an idealised norm (Kachru 1982: vii; Kachru 1992: 5). Moreover, experimental psycholinguistic research with multilingual populations has shown that multilingual speakers exhibit hybrid and flexible patterns of conceptualisation, perception, and categorisation (e.g., Athanasopoulos et al. 2010). As researchers interested in documenting human speech, we should use methods that allow us to account for and describe the reality of linguistically, cognitively, and culturally diverse repertoires without obsessing over “purity.” This is especially true of research on endangered languages as forcefully put forth by researchers such as Dorian (1994) and Evans (2001).

At the same time, however, overreliance on culturally dominant languages on the part of the researcher poses well-recognised perils to language documentation and language description. Thus, for example, Nakayama & Ono (2013) report that using Japanese during fieldwork on Ikema Ryukyuan had the undesirable effect of biasing the linguistic production of its speakers, while Chappell (2006) warns us about Sinocentrism in the description of languages in China. Empirical psycholinguistic work suggests that even short-term exposure to a specific language can significantly bias a speaker’s subsequent communicative and cognitive performance in the direction predicted by the patterns of that language (Bylund & Athanasopoulos 2014). Simply put, we do not want the bulk of our language data to be systematically subject to structural bias, especially of a kind that does not reflect the natural role of a given contact language in the speakers’ usual communicative behaviour.

Perhaps most importantly, documentary linguists have long emphasised the need for naturalistic data (e.g., Himmelmann 1998; Evans & Dench 2006; Lüpke 2009; San Roque et al. 2012; François 2019). From a documentarist viewpoint, focusing on unplanned speech is fundamental to compiling a representative corpus of cross-sectional language data given that “the large majority of communicative events taking place in a given speech community will be conversational” (Himmelmann 1998: 181). If, as I have tried to argue, language competence accelerates and enhances the collection of high-quality naturalistic data, then there is a strong case that language learning needs to be recognised as a key methodological tool in the field of language documentation.

Some important aspects that remain unaddressed include first and foremost the monolingual method’s drawbacks as well as potential strategies to mitigate these. Crucially, the combined findings offered by Sarvasy (2016) and the present paper open the door for the development of structured, methodological training in language acquisition for fieldwork purposes, including a dedicated metalinguistic toolkit for navigating real-life communicative scenarios. Future work

shall tackle this by offering detailed methodological insights into how to compile and use efficient metalinguistic toolkits for fieldwork routines such as monolingual elicitation, transcription sessions, participant recruiting, corrective elicitation, among other scenarios addressed in §4.

On a final note, this article was conceived in the hope of establishing a systematic discussion that puts language learning (back) at the centre of language documentation and description. At the very least, I hope that this piece has succeeded in highlighting the role that practical language learning can have in a field linguist's job, a premise that should ideally lead to a more intimate cross-pollination between the fields of language documentation and description on the one hand and second language acquisition on the other.

List of glosses and prosodic conventions

1	First person (speaker)	IDEOPH	Ideophone
2	Second person (addressee)	INT	Interrogative
3	Third person (non-speech-act-participant)	INTF	Intensifier
ADR	Addressee as epistemic authority	INTJ	Interjection
ADV	Adverb(ialiser)	MP	Modal particle
AG	Agent marker	NEG	Negation
ASYM	Asymmetric access	NMLZR	Nominaliser
BRIDGE	Bridging clausal marker	NMOD	Nominal modification particle
CAUS	Causative particle	PFV	Perfective aspect
CLF	Classifier	PL	Plural(iser)
COND	Conditional marker	PROH	Prohibitive marker
CONTR	Contrastive particle	Q	Question particle
CORREL	Correlative degree marker	QUOT	Quotative marker
COS	Change of state marker	REL	Relativiser
DIM	Diminutive	RSLT	Resultative verb
EMPH	Emphatic marker	SEQ	Sequential aspect
EP	Epistemic certainty marker	TAG	Tag question
EV	Evidential marker	TOP	Totaliser
EXH	Exhortative UCG	UCG	Updating common ground
EXT	Dimensional extensive		minor prosodic pause (<0.5 secs)
			Major prosodic pause (>0.5 secs)

All loanwords from Chinese are italicised in the examples.

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