

# Elicitation

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The technical term 'elicitation' is derived from the classic Latin verb *elicere* (to coax, entice, call forth, summon, extract, induce, provoke). In linguistics (as in sociology, social psychology, and other social sciences) elicitation is the general term for describing various methods of directed data collection and thus for corpus construction.

With the rise of the interest in dialects, and thus in spoken languages, linguists had to develop means for gathering their data. One of the first, and classic, means they came up with were questionnaires with sentences written in the standard language that had to be translated (in general by teachers and priests) into the local language. The pioneer for this kind of research was probably Georg Wenker with his 40 'Wenker-sentences' which he started to send off in the German Rhineland in 1876 (Knoop et al. 1982: 47ff). Comrie & Smith's famous *Lingua descriptive studies: questionnaire* (1977) and other comparable publications can well be regarded as continuing in one way or another this tradition of data gathering. However, although questionnaires can be extremely helpful, at least for starting data gathering procedures, they are of little use if the linguist is interested in how the language is really spoken in co-present interaction. Already 40 years before Wenker, Johann A. Schmeller emphasized the relevance of what we now call participant observation and field research — the interaction between linguists and their informants — for the collection of speech data (Schmeller 1855).

These two types of data collection — asking questions (or just a question) following a questionnaire on the one hand and participant observation together with intensive field research on the other hand — mark the two extremes in linguistic data elicitation. However, this does not imply that these extremes are mutually exclusive. Fieldworkers have to use as broad a variety of elicitation procedures as possible in their linguistic field research.

It goes without saying that scientific data are always collected according to specific research interests and purposes. Linguists must decide on

- what kind of speech data they want to elicit
- in what group(s) of informants
- in which situations and settings
- within which speech communities and cultures.

The respective interests then are the guidelines for choosing the adequate elicitation method(s) and for defining a sample of informants that should be (as) representative (as possible).

Another basic decision that has to be made is whether the linguists informants may or may not all the time be aware of the fact that their speech and their speech behavior is being observed.

If linguists want to learn something about the (inflectional) morphology and the syntax of a language they have to start with the (sometimes tedious) elicitation of the respective morphological and syntactic patterns (see e.g., Foley 1991). This kind of elicitation is quite similar to other kinds of data elicitation that rely mainly on questionnaires.

If linguists are interested in, e.g., the lexicon of color terms in various languages, they just can confront their informants with the 329 color chips provided by the Munsell Color Company — as Berlin & Kay (1969) did — and ask them to name the colors of the chips presented as stimuli in front of a tape recorder.

If linguists are interested in formal styles of articulation they may ask their informants to read a wordlist (of minimal pairs) or a text out to the researcher in front of a microphone which then even helps to mark this situation as being formal.

If linguists with special interests in pragmatics want to investigate the realization of speech act patterns such as requests and apologies crossculturally, and if they also want to investigate similarities and differences between native and non-native speakers' realization patterns in these speech acts, they can devise controlled elicitation procedures like discourse completion tests — as Blum-Kulka & Olshtain in their cross-cultural study of speech act realization patterns' project did. The discourse completion tests used in this project consist of incomplete discourse sequences representing socially different situations. Before relatively brief discourse sequences in the form of incomplete dialogues are presented to the consultants, the situative context of the dialogue is outlined so that the setting, the social distance between the interlocutors and their status relative to one another is specified. The consultants are then asked to complete the dialogue, thereby providing the speech act aimed at in the given context (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1984: 198) — in this case a request and an apology. The consultants' answers to these discourse completion tests allow for inferences with respect to preferences speakers have for realizing requests for action among persons of the same and different social status on the one hand and for inferences with respect to the appropriateness of apologies in the given situation on the other hand. Moreover, the cross-cultural design of this study also allows for answering the question whether there are differences in the types of strategies speakers choose to realize the respective speech acts under the same social constraints across languages and what these differences actually look like.

If researchers want to find out how spatial relations are encoded in various languages, they can confront their informants with a kit of stimuli such as the one

developed for this purpose by the Cognitive Anthropology Research Group at the Max-Planck-Institute in Nijmegen. This kit contains, i.a., two sets of identical photographs together with the objects actually photographed, drawings, and toys. With these stimuli researchers can ask their informants to play matching games in front of video camera and microphone. In these games, one informant (the director) describes what is shown on a photo in such a way that the other informant (the matcher) can either find the same photo within a series of similar photographs or reconstruct the described spatial configurations with toys. The game situation asks for verbal interaction that centers on the spatial conceptualisations and their expressions in the lexicon of the various languages that are investigated (see e.g., Levinson 1992).

If linguists are interested in narratives, they can ask their informants — be it children or adults — to look, e.g., at a book of 24 pictures with no written text that presents a story (e.g., the so-called 'frog'-story) and then tell this story to another person while being video-filmed and tape-recorded (Berman & Slobin 1994). Linguists may also ask their informants to watch a movie (like e.g., 'the pear film') and then, after even telling the informants that the researchers are interested in studying how people talk about things they have experienced, ask the informants to tell about the movie to people who have not seen it in front of a video camera and/or a tape recorder (Chafe 1980). Both elicitation methods permit verbal interaction between the informants.

However, if linguists do not like the idea that their informants are always aware of the fact that they are being observed and that their speech is being recorded, they have to find some ways of overcoming what Labov so aptly called the observer's paradox: "The aim of the linguistic research in the community must be to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed; yet we can only obtain these data by systematic observation" (Labov 1972a: 209).

Linguists may get the permission to just leave a tape recorder somewhere in a room in their informants house for a whole day and to record whatever is being said there. Of course, the tapes have to be renewed every hour or so and the risk is quite high that nothing is said in this room for a long time, but — as Ruoff (1973: 116) reports — the chances to document "how people talk when they (think or forget that they) are not systematically observed" are not too bad. However, the data gathered in this way are more documented by chance than elicited in the strict sense of the term.

Labov developed and described a number of techniques to overcome the observers paradox. One of these techniques is the use of rapid and anonymous observations (see also Labov 1972b: 117) which Labov applied in his study on *The social stratification of [r] in New York City department stores* (Labov 1972a: 43-69). In three stores with different social prestige the interviewer approached an informant asking for directions to a department on the fourth floor. The informant normally responded to this question with the (elliptic) utterance 'fourth floor'. The interviewer then pretended to have not

understood the informant and thus elicited a second utterance, this time spoken in careful style under emphatic stress. After this encounter the interviewer noted down some information about the informant and the use of (r) in preconsonantal and final position in casual and emphatic styles of speech.

However, even if linguists decide to elicit speech data in interviews, they can prepare and structure these interviews in such a way that they not only result in the elicitation of comparable speech data but that they also provide situations that more or less guarantee the documentation of data that are as 'natural' as possible. These interviews are usually called structured intensive interviews, and they are best prepared on the basis of the linguist's participant observation (Senft 1982: 17-70). In periods of participant observation linguists — like anthropologists — should attempt to immerse themselves into the daily lives of their informants in a kind of field research situation. On the basis of their experiences in this situation the researchers cannot only get acquainted with their future informants, they also have the chance to get a better understanding of what they are asking their informants about. This understanding and the fact that there is already a certain kind of relationship established between interviewer and informant may transform the structured interview into a talk between acquaintances where it does not really matter whether there is a tape recorder running or not. If linguists want to elicit 'the natural speech data' they should keep Labov's general advice in mind:

A field worker who stays outside his subject, and deals with it as a mere excuse for eliciting language, will get very little for his pains. Almost any question can be answered with no more information than was contained in it. When the speaker does give more, it is a gift, drawn from some general fund of good will that is held in trust by himself and the field worker. A deep knowledge implies a deep interest, and in payment for the interest the speaker may give more than anyone has a right to expect. Thus the field worker who can tap the full linguistic competence of his subjects must acquire a detailed understanding of what he is asking about, as well as a broad knowledge of the general forms of human behaviour. (Labov 1972b: 114ff; see also Ruoff 1973: 83)

In linguistics, elicited data certainly help to answer a number of specific questions; however, as Duranti (1981: 9 and 162ff) points out, elicitation sessions are speech events that as such influence the kind of language used. Therefore, it should go without saying that linguists aiming at describing the language and speech behavior of a certain speech community as completely as possible just cannot do without additional data that document their informants' daily verbal communication in face-to-face interactions.

For additional information about elicitation I would like to refer the interested reader to Ammon et al. (Eds) (1988) (vol. 2, Chapter 8 on 'Elicitation methods'), Craig (1979), Dixon (1984), Malinowski (1922), Mayntz et al. (1976), Samarin (1967), Shopen (Ed.) (1979), and Whyte (1943).

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