# Module 2— The Research Process in Linguistic Anthropology

## Before You Read

In this module, we are going to learn about the ways in which linguistic anthropologists conduct research. Last module, we considered our object of study: the “what” of our course. This week, we are focusing on the “how” of linguistic anthropology. Particularly, we will be discussing 1) the formulation of **research questions**, 2) different **methodologies** for gathering data, 3) data **analysis** processes, and 4) the **ethics** of linguistic anthropological research involving human subjects. In the f2f component of our class, we will consider the research questions submitted by you as part of your weekly assignment and discuss appropriate research methodologies for answering them.

This week, you have two assigned readings. The first, Ch. 2 of your textbook, outlines the research process in linguistic anthropology, presenting basic information about the process beginning with the formulation of a research question through the collection of data and its analysis and finally, some ethical dilemmas faced by linguistic and cultural anthropologists.

The second reading, ["IRBs are the tip of the iceberg,"](http://www.anthrosource.net/Abstract.aspx?issn=0094-0496&volume=33&issue=4&doubleissueno=0&article=234743&suppno=0&jstor=False&cyear=2006) by Gustavo Lins Ribeiro, is a short commentary on a special issue of the journal [American Ethnologist](http://www.aesonline.org/) devoted to university Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), which regulate human subjects research at all American Universities. In his commentary, Ribeiro poses some challenges faced by anthropologists and other social scientists facing research with human subjects and compliance with IRBs.

This module is meant to guide your reading –you should read this and the Focus Points section of the module before you begin reading. This module focuses on the most important aspects of the material covered in this week’s class. It does not replicate the information in your textbook; rather, it highlights and enhances important information and provides supplementary materials to further your understanding of the subject matter.

Don’t forget that words that have been **emphasized** require special attention and should appear in assessments such as our graded group discussions, or in tests or quizzes. The supplementary materials in this module are meant to better illustrate the concepts and ideas discussed in the reading.

## Focus Points

As you read, pay special attention to the following themes, concepts, and issues:

* What makes a good **research question?**
* Data collection **methods**
* **Conversation Analysis**
* **Ethical** quandaries in anthropological research.
* AAA **code of ethics**
* **IRB**compliance and its shortcomings.

## Formulating a Research Question

All research starts with one or more questions. These questions may change somewhat as research progresses and circumstances change; the research question serves as the guiding foundation of the research process itself. For linguistic anthropologists, these questions usually concern how language reflects or shapes some aspect of social life.

On Page 32 of your textbook, Ahearn presents 10 examples of **research questions** posed by linguistic anthropologists. Take a moment to read them over. The research studies that addressed these questions appear in Ch. 1 (pgs 13-16). Based on these examples, can you create your own linguistic-anthropological research question?

## Research Methodologies

### Participant observation (pg. 35)

Participant observation is, in many ways, linguistic and cultural anthropology’s “signature” research methodology. Anthropologists must reside in the community they are researching for an extended period of time and participate in community life. Observations are recorded in **fieldnotes** which are later **coded** and **analyzed**.

### Interviews (pg. 35-37)

Interviews are frequently used by linguistic anthropologists to gather information. These can be **structured**, **semi-structured**, or **open-ended**.



It is important to remember that linguistic anthropologists **do not treat interviews as transparent**. What does this mean? Why would this be the case? Remember **Jakobson’s model of multifunctionality**? How do you think it applies in this case?

### Surveys and questionnaires (pg. 37)

These are usually used to collect demographic information or when the linguistic anthropologist wants to collect data that can be analyzed quantitatively. Almost always, this method is used in conjunction with other methodologies. This is due to some shortcomings inherent in the method:

1) respondents often lie

2) our population sizes are often small, making the collection of statistically significant samples difficult

3) surveys cannot account for many nuances of lived experience in everyday life

### Naturally occurring conversations (pg. 37-39)

Linguistic anthropologists often record many hours of naturally occurring conversations. Although having a conversation knowing there is a tape recorder in the room may not seem at all “natural”, anthropologists note that:

1) all conversations are “natural”

2) people forget about the recording device after a while

3) the researcher can give the tape recorder to his/her informants and they themselves can control the recording

4) researchers can obtain consent from informants to be secretly recorded at a later date



All naturally occurring conversations must be **transcribed.** Usually, one hour of conversation takes about 6 hours to transcribe.What kind of knowledge can we gain from this kind of data?

### Experimental methods (pg. 39)

Not all linguistic anthropologists use experimental methods. However, some, particularly those interested in cognition, childhood language acquisition, or language socialization, may use them. A good example (which we will be discussing in more detail in module 4) is the [False Belief](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8hLubgpY2_w) test, which tests for theory of mind.

### Matched Guise Tests (pg. 39-40)

Listen to this [story](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1128513) for an example of a matched guise test method used to study “linguistic profiling.” Next, skip forward to page 46 of your textbook, and read the section on ethical issues. Then, read Ribeiro’s commentary on IRBs and the regulation of ethnographic research. What are some ethical issues that may be faced Stanford linguist John Baugh in his research methodology? How might this test be conducted in a way that insures IRB compliance?

### Written texts (pg. 41)

Literacy practices are an important part of linguistic interaction in literate societies. Becoming literate also has a profound impact on people’s lives. The analysis of written texts from a linguistic anthropological perspective can be profoundly revealing of a society and the intersections between texts and contexts. We will be exploring this in more detail when we study literacy and literacy practices in module 7.

## Analysis

We will be discussing data analysis in more detail during the f2f component of our course.

## Ethical Considerations

Most anthropologists consider the guidelines outlined in the [AAA Code of Ethics](http://www.aaanet.org/issues/policy-advocacy/Code-of-Ethics.cfm) to be the most appropriate to follow when conducting ethnographic research. However, all American Universities and most funding agencies require that any scientist –including anthropologists and other social scientists—conducting research with human subjects obtain IRB approval prior to conducting ethnographic research. Take some time now to review Gustavo Ribeiro’s article, “IRBs are the tip of the Iceberg.” From what you have learned so far about the qualitative research methodologies used by anthropologists, what are some of the limitations of IRBs regarding this kind of research?