

Linguistic Fieldwork: A Student Guide

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Preface

I have spent a large portion of my adult life in the Amazon, visiting over two dozen American Indian communities along the way. There have been times when I was so depressed, or so tired, or just so ill, that I wished I had chosen another area of linguistics, or even another profession (pizza delivery comes to mind). But only a few weeks after I return to my campus office, I am planning for the next field trip. Why? I don't like bugs, heat, humidity, cold, hunger, loneliness, or ridicule any better than *you* do. So my motivation is not masochism. I have two motives for doing fieldwork, people and science.

The greatest privileges of my life have been to get to know people like the Pirahã, the Kinsedji, the Banawá, the Wari, the Satere-Mawe, the Tzeltal, the Yarawara, and others I have visited in the course of my field research. These people's character, wisdom, humour and lack of pretension have challenged and enriched me deeply (and their demands and occasional impatience with me have helped me to 'grow' as a person). The many times I have had malaria, amoebic dysentery, infections, wounds, bruises, headaches, typhoid fever, even the half-dozen times my life has been threatened, have all been more than compensated for by the experience of getting to know these people. And from what I hear talking to field researchers around the world, this is a common conclusion.

The major reason I love fieldwork, though, is science. The excitement of discovery and analysis of facts that no other linguist has ever worked on before me is nearly addictive. As I review my curriculum vitae built up over these past couple of decades, each publication, each funded research project, each invited course and lecture on my fieldwork, recalls a fork in the road of my life, a place where I learned something new which altered my view of language in one way or another.

In this book, I hope to communicate some of this awe that fieldwork inspires. But I also plan to help the reader detour around the pits I have fallen into. My goal is that those who read this book will be better equipped for research than they would have been without it. Certainly, they will be better prepared by this book than I was when I first went to the field in 1977.

Suggestions on how to use this book are found in the introduction.

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the greatest linguist I have ever known, **Peter Ladefoged**. Perhaps no single linguist has ever done more for the documentation of the sounds of endangered languages than Peter. And no linguist was ever more caring, considerate, and respectful of their colleagues than Peter. He made many comments on this book as it was taking shape and I regret deeply that he could not see the final version.