4.2.1 Preparing to use data management technology in the field

Technology has always been a part of fieldwork. Clifford (1990: 63) notes that the typewriter, once used by many anthropologists in the field (he cites Clifford Geertz, Margaret Mead, Colin Turnbull, and Gregory Bateson as examples), allowed researchers to reorder and enhance the day's handwritten notes. He suggests that typing notes dislocates the researcher, who writes for a distant professional ↳ readership, from the
p. 99 field: 'Facing the typewriter each night means engaging these 'others', or alter egos. No wonder the typewriter or the pen or the notebook can sometimes take on a fetishistic aura' (Clifford 1990: 64).

The fetishizing of technology is not surprising, nor is it necessarily a problem. We adopt the best tools for the job at hand, and typewriters have given way to laptops, which are now commonly taken to the field, as are various handheld devices, e.g. PalmPilots (cf. Gibbon 2006), iPods, iPads, and the like. If you can use a computer in your fieldwork situation, it can help you stay organized and allow you to query data that may otherwise have to await your return.

The use of computers for managing field data could be seen as exemplifying the technological distance between the linguist and the people we work with in the field. Carrying costly equipment in a cash-poor community is incongruous and potentially dangerous (if you are likely to provide a target for theft). This is something that you need to seriously consider before departing for fieldwork; trust your knowledge of the field location to guide what you think it is appropriate to take with you (cheap netbooks are quite inconspicuous, and it's not the end of the world if they break). Unlike lugging a typewriter into the field, the laptop, recorder, camera, GPS, and video camera are not so robust and need special care (see Margetts and Margetts, Chapter 1 above, on recording). You may decide that a laptop is not going to survive your field environment, but that you will access a computer in a nearby location where you can organize your material away from the field.

Digital data is very fragile, so avoiding its loss has to be integral to your planning. Ironically, analog cassette tapes are in some sense hardier than digital files: a tape kept in a dry, temperature-stable filing cabinet can usually be played again a decade later, but digital files stored on a hard disk are unlikely to last that long. Also, accidents can happen—your field materials could be burned, flooded, eaten, stolen, or lost, despite your best efforts to keep your data backed up. Backing up your digital files can be done in one of several ways depending on the details of your field situation. Taking an extra external hard drive or two with you and copying your files to them on a regular basis is a good solution (one author who works in a region that is prone to forest fires takes two external hard drives to the field, copies files to both of them daily, and stores one in her cabin and the other in her car). You may also investigate online storage that can be accessed when you have an internet connection, perhaps on a regular visit to a town if that is an option. If you are not bringing a laptop to the field and plan to use multiple memory[11] cards to hold your recordings, a USB 'On-
p. 100 The-Go' (OTG)[12] storage ↳ device is a compact solution for backing up those recordings (but leave the original recordings on the memory cards during your trip so that you have multiple copies, rather than reusing the cards).

Having sufficient power to run the equipment is no small undertaking if there is no electricity supply in your field site. Choosing devices that run on ordinary batteries makes life easier, and chargers that run off car batteries, generators, or solar panels are also an option (see McGill and Salffner n.d. and Honeyman and Robinson 2007 on the use of solar power and portable generators for fieldwork, and also Margetts and Margetts, Chapter 1 above).