

The chapter first addresses some general points about what to record in a field situation, outlines the workflow of data processing, and provides notes on managing equipment. We then discuss audio and video recordings and touch on the question of energy supply and useful auxiliary equipment. Section 1.7 gives links to more information, and the appendix (§1.8) provides suggestions for a basic field equipment kit.

1.1.1 What to record?

The primary purpose of recordings for linguistic research is to record speech in order to analyse the structure of the language, rather than, say, documenting cultural practices, analysing the content of a story, or creating teaching materials. A good database for linguistic analysis should ideally allow for all of these things and be valuable for other parties than linguists, but it is this primary purpose which determines how the data is treated and processed.

The broader and more varied a text collection is, the more representative it will be of the language in terms of its grammar, the use of different registers, speech styles, and so forth. If possible it is therefore good to aim for recordings with a range of speakers, both men and women, speakers from different generations, with different educational background, with a variety of specialist knowledge and different standings in the community. A good text collection also includes a variety of text types. Besides narratives (stories, legends, etc.) and expository texts (e.g. describing how things are done), ideally the collection will include conversations. Conversations do tend to dry up when the recorder is on, they are difficult to transcribe and messy to ‘chunk’ for text-audio linkage; nevertheless they are worth the effort: there may be a whole range of grammatical features which only show up in conversation. The main point is that variety in the data is good.

One should therefore record ‘everything’, i.e. as much as possible, anywhere, anytime. For video recordings, having the camera running frequently can help people become used to being filmed, relax a bit and maybe, eventually, stop insisting on wearing their Sunday best as soon as the machine is on. There are two basic set-ups for doing this. The first one is to position the camera somewhere and let it record whatever happens to be within its frame. This can work quite well when people are sitting and chatting. The fieldworker can reposition the camera from time to time to catch different scenes but does not have to stand behind it all the time. The drawback is that there will always be speakers just outside the frame ↴ or just too far away from the microphone to be clearly audible. The second possibility is for the fieldworker to be behind the camera as much as possible. This may make for better recordings but speakers are less likely to forget about the camera. A second drawback is that extensive filming can be exhausting. The situation for audio-only recordings is similar if simpler. Having an extra person on the team to handle the recording equipment (and perhaps other technical tasks as well) is extremely helpful, particularly for video work. In this case one person can concentrate on the content (negotiating with the speakers) and the other on the context (wrestling with the lighting and acoustics).

While it is good when people relax and forget about the machine, this increases the chance that they will say or do things they may not want to have recorded, transcribed, or played in public. It is the responsibility of the researcher to be sensitive to such situations and, if this is called for, to delete parts of the recording.

Speakers sometimes prefer to plan and discuss what they will say during a recording because they want to deliver a polished performance. If speakers agree, such preparatory discussions should also be recorded. These sessions often constitute the most interesting data, as they can provide naturalistic conversational interaction and also useful supporting information that may be missing in the ‘official’ version.

Every recording should start with a spoken statement of some basic metadata: an ID for the recording or tape, the date, location, language, and the name of the principal speakers. If the content to be recorded is