18.6 Summary

I have surveyed some of the ethical issues that arise in fieldwork, framing them in terms of individuals, communities, and scholarship with respect to languages and knowledge systems. To talk in generalities, ethical behaviour can be said to be based in a number of 'r' words—respect, relationships, reciprocity, and responsibility. Being ethical means thinking about these. It involves people from different cultures, often with quite different ways of viewing the world, working together to try to understand one another, recognizing that what is considered appropriate for one may not be for the other.

In a paper on ethics in cooperative fieldwork, Dwyer (2006) sets out what she calls ethical principles for language documentation that summarize much of what I have written:

> Do no harm (including unintentional harm).
>
> Harm must be specified in the local context.
>
> Reciprocity and equity.
>
> Establish consultative, continuously negotiated, respectful relationships.
>
> Do some good (for the community as well as for science).
>
> Obtain informed consent before initiating research.
>
> Archive and disseminate your data and results.
>
> (One might add to this final statement 'if this is approved by relevant people'.)

Doing ethical research is a challenge. It involves thinking and learning and being willing to adapt and to change. It involves not just treating people well, but also respecting their knowledge and learning to see something where you might have thought that there was nothing. It involves reconceptualizing ways of viewing the world. In many ways engaging in long-term fieldwork is like engaging in a long-term relationship such as a marriage. There are good times and difficult times; there are times when one or the other is ready to give up. There is a difference, however, in that the researcher is often an outsider to a community (there are, as one might imagine, many ethical issues that arise for a researcher who is an insider in a community), and generally from a dominant culture in global terms. This places a responsibility on the researcher to try to understand the different ethical systems, and to respect and honor the cultural values in the broadest of senses. When there have traditionally been major power differences between the culture of ↳ the community of the researcher and that of the community where the research is being done, there may be sensitive issues, and trying to understand what those are and find ways of working to overcome the power differentials is very important—part of what equal moral status is all about. For both parties involved, there can be struggles in overcoming the historical imbalances, and reconfiguring them. Fieldwork is not for everyone; among those who take it on, especially in a cooperative framework, many find it to be highly rewarding, and engaging with the complex ethical issues is one of the rewards.

18.7 Appendix

This appendix collects a number of references of interest for their discussion of various aspects of ethics in linguistics fieldwork.

General sources on ethics in linguistic fieldwork include textbooks on field methods, ranging from the older books by Bouquiaux and Thomas (1992), Kibrik (1977), and Samarin (1967) to the recent texts including