

20.1 Introduction

The goal of this chapter is to make a very simple point: that we, as linguists, need to rethink our training of graduate students for fieldwork. While we generally do a very thorough job of teaching them how to elicit and analyse data, we often forget to tell them that there is a personal and practical side to fieldwork that can very well derail their research if they are not prepared for it.

A case in point is my first field trip to work with Mixtec speakers in Chalcatongo, a remote village in the mountains of Oaxaca, Mexico. The account I present here is quite personal, in order to provide the reader with an example of just how unprepared *this* student was for the practical and psychological aspects of being a fieldworker in another culture.

The anthropological and sociological literature on fieldwork is vast. Yet as a graduate student in theoretical linguistics, it never occurred to me that such a literature would exist, nor that such a thing would be useful to me. We might well ask why this literature on fieldwork has been so invisible to (at least some) field linguists. I think the answer lies in the history of our field. With the generative revolution we cast off the Structuralists, and with them, our ties to anthropology. For someone like me, raised in the generative tradition, those ties were simply a part of history. In the generative tradition, language, of course, is studied apart from culture and society. This is feasible for those whose data come from their own native speaker intuitions, but it can lead to an odd schizophrenic existence for those who believe in the generative approach yet gather their data in the field.

On my first field trip, in my ignorance, I thought that since I was just studying language I had no need for any of that anthropological ‘stuff.’ I had no interest in Mixtec culture: I wanted to know about Mixtec morphology and syntax. But this attitude, I now realize, was the cause of many of my problems on that first trip.

In fact, I still think that I was right that I could do morphological analysis without knowing anything about Mixtec culture. But this is not the issue. The issue is that there I was, living among a group of people that I knew very little about. My awkwardness and confusion would have been greatly lessened if I had simply taken the time to learn more about them. At the same time, had I read up on what fieldwork is like for the fieldworker, I might not have felt so much like I was losing my mind while I was there, nor that I was a complete failure for not loving every second of it.

Now, obviously different fieldworkers have different backgrounds, different training, and different personalities. I am sure that many linguists have gone into the field for the first time with a solid knowledge of both the cultures they were visiting and what the fieldwork experience might be like. But plenty of stories indicate that others of us go into the field for the first time without such preparation.²

This chapter provides an example of how such ignorance can result in a miserable (even if productive) first field trip. It is designed to provide the reader with three things: a feel for the environment that I found myself in; a sense of the practical things I dealt with on my first field trip and my reactions to them; and finally, some suggestions on how we can make the experience somewhat easier for others. To accomplish this, I include some artifacts from my trip, primarily excerpts from my field journal and quotes from the anthropological and (limited) linguistics literature illustrating the ordinary and almost predictable nature of my experiences and reactions.³ These are set off from the text in boxes, such as the one immediately below.