3.2 Obtaining Information on Languages and Their Morphosyntactic Structures

More than any other linguistic discipline, fieldwork requires intuition and emotional intelligence, but this does not mean that the prospective fieldworker can neglect the study of general linguistic theories or the findings of linguistic typology, which explores the diversity of language structure. All fieldwork guides emphasize the importance of careful preparation. Here we will distinguish between the essential ↳ prerequisites of any kind of linguistic fieldwork (§3.2.1), sources that help fieldworkers to inform themselves on the languages of a particular field site (§3.2.2), and sources that are useful to consult while working on the morphosyntactic analysis of the target language and planning further fieldtrips for supplementary elicitation (§3.2.3).

3.2.1 Basic information on diverse language structures

Many linguistics departments all over the world offer courses on the phonological, grammatical, and semantic analysis of languages from a typological perspective, but there are also departments that focus on linguistic theories and only use secondary sources for examples from 'exotic' (i.e. other than standard European) languages, or departments of regional studies that offer courses on particular languages and cultures without giving the students some background in general linguistics or linguistic typology. It is the latter two groups for whom this section is written. Anthropologists and researchers who are not primarily interested in morphosyntax, but nevertheless want to collect data that are useful for linguists, are referred to §3.3.

Assuming that they have some education in the grammar of English (if not, Biber, Conrad, and Leech 2002, Blake 2008, and McGregor 2009 are recommended for a start), prospective linguistic fieldworkers must be fluent in transcription and skilled in analysing the phonological and grammatical structure of words and sentences of structurally different languages. The more researchers know about the structural diversity of the world's languages, the better they will understand the structure of the target language and the less they will be unconsciously influenced by the contact language or their native language. Good introductions into the theoretical background and the methods of morphosyntactic analysis are found in various students' textbooks. The list below recommends books which also offer ample exercises, and selects those chapters that in my experience are absolutely necessary for a basic training in morphosyntactic analysis.

Morphology:

    Aronoff and Fudeman 2005 (chs 1−6; suitable for beginners)

    Bauer 2003 (ch. 1−4, 6; suitable for beginners)

    Booij 2007 (chs 1−5; difficult for beginners)

    Haspelmath 2002 (chs 1, 2, 4, 5; difficult for beginners)

Morphology and syntax:

    Kroeger 2005 (chs 1−8, 10−16)

    Payne 2006 (chs 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10)