18.1 Introduction[1]

In the past decade or so, there has been a resurgence of attention to ethics in linguistic fieldwork. When I was asked to speak on the subject of ethics in fieldwork in 1999, I was surprised to see how much literature I could find on the scholarly aspects of ethics in fieldwork—namely the imperative for fieldwork on endangered languages in order to have records of the languages. I was equally surprised to learn that, with rare exceptions, very little had been written on the relationships between the linguistic fieldworker and the people with whom she or he engages. Over the past decade there has been an increasing amount written on ethics in fieldwork, focusing on responsibilities not only with respect to languages but also with respect to individuals and communities, and to knowledge systems. This surge of interest around ethics in linguistic fieldwork is likely closely related to the impact of changes in social science research more generally on linguistics, where there has been increased interest in participatory action and community-based research in ↳ recent years, as well as to the developing influence of indigenous methodologies on linguistic fieldwork. Many linguistic fieldworkers, like others in social science areas, are attempting to move away from an 'expert subject' model to more collaborative types of research. At the same time, the situation of language endangerment, and the development of documentary linguistics as a field, have led to a call for recording and archiving a broad range of language materials, in an attempt to capture the speech of a community. Tensions can arise between these different developments in linguistic fieldwork.

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In this chapter, I examine ethics with respect to ethics codes, individuals, communities, languages, and knowledge systems, setting out questions to be considered with respect to each. I begin in §18.2 with a dictionary definition of ethics, and then introduce some ethics codes and how they develop what ethics means with respect to research with people. Following this (§18.3) I narrow the focus, providing an overview of some of the ethics codes that are of relevance to fieldworkers. I then address ethics in linguistic fieldwork, focusing on fairly traditional questions (§18.4). Following this I turn to a different type of question, examining ethics with respect to language (§18.5.1) and ethics with respect to knowledge systems (§18.5.2) —areas that raise additional questions, especially concerning the responsibilities of the linguist in the field.

It is important to note from the start that there are no simple answers to ethical questions. Ethics is the substance of centuries of debate by philosophers and others, and anyone entering a fieldwork setting where they are living in a different culture with different norms will have to think deeply about many issues, many of them with ethics at their core. Different individuals, settings, and times lead to different decisions about these complex issues.

18.2 What is Ethics? A Broad Perspective

What is ethics? A dictionary provides the following definition: 'the moral principles by which a person is guided.'[2] This definition includes terms that are not straightforward to understand—what is 'moral'?—and leaves quite open what these moral principles are.

Formal ethics codes attempt to make concrete what is meant by this rather abstract notion of moral principles. An important set of principles is set out in the Belmont Report, a 1979 report from the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare which attempts to summarize basic ethical principles and guidelines for ↳ research involving human participants and forms the foundation for many of the ethics codes that have been developed in the social sciences in the United States. The Belmont Report presents three basic principles for ethical research: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. The first of these principles concerns the protection of the autonomy of all people, treating them with respect and protecting those with limited autonomy. Consequences of this are notions of informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, and protection for vulnerable participants, among others. The second principle states that it

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