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1.2 Audio recordings

Audio recordings constitute the core data for linguistic work (other than the study of sign languages) and for many purposes they are sufficient. But equally, in many contexts the addition of video is preferable or even necessary, particularly if the corpus aims to document more than just the language. With audio-only recordings it is especially important to record basic metadata about each session, because there are no visual clues to the identity of the speakers and the recording location or date. The following observations on audio recording techniques, standards, and ancillary equipment (e.g. microphones and headphones) hold for both audio-only and audiovisual recordings. Issues specific to video are discussed further in §1.3.

There are many different equipment settings that can become relevant depending on the circumstances, and we recommend taking equipment manuals to the field, at least as electronic documents.

1.2.1 Things to consider

It is becoming a standard assumption in linguistic research that data analysis involves direct access to the audio data and not just to a transcription. One should be in a position to verify, improve, or correct transcriptions at any time by checking the audio file (see Ochs 1979; Margetts 2009; Thieberger 2009: 402). For this to be possible, a linguistic text database needs to incorporate text–audio linking. This means that the audio (and possibly the video) which corresponds to a text chunk is accessible by a mouse click (the record for each chunk contains start and end time-code data) and this requires digital media files. So, if the master recording is analog it will need to be digitized. If the master recording is on digital tape, the tape needs to be captured to disk. Digitizing and capturing are both very time-consuming processes compared with simply copying a digital file (as is the case with solid-state recorders). These are points which may influence the choice of equipment.

1.2.1.1 Recording resolutions

High-resolution, non-compressed audio recordings are a good and practicable goal. They are a requirement for analysing phonetics, since compressed recordings severely compromise the acoustic quality of the data. In principle the data should be able to support such analysis even if the collector has no personal interest in phonetic research. Recordings should ideally be lasting records of a language, and be available and suitable for all kinds of different analyses and uses for future researchers and community members. This is of particular importance if the language is under threat. For such reasons non-compressed audio is the
p. 18 archiving ↳ standard for most language archives. This does not mean that all recordings need to have the same high quality, as long as a good proportion does. Section 1.2.2.1(iii) below provides some comments on the place for lower-resolution recorders.

1.2.1.2 Background noise

One must often choose between a noisier but naturalistic setting and a quieter but maybe less relaxed recording situation. The first might seem richer, but it is easy to underestimate the deleterious effect of background noise. There may also be a choice between recording with background noise or not recording at all. These are not easy decisions to make, but it does not necessarily hold that any recording is better than none. Making a recording in which the speaker is simply inaudible is useless, and may be worse than not recording because the speaker may not be happy to repeat the session.

Sources of problematic background noise include rain (particularly on tin roofs), wind, surf, animals (chickens!), and engines of all kinds. Humming insects right next to the microphone can also be