

3.4 Linguists and Indigenous Consultants

The quality of the data for the morphosyntactic analysis of a previously unresearched language very much depends on the interaction between the researcher and the native speakers the researcher works with in the fieldwork project. In many publications these people are called ‘informants’ (Abbi 2001: 57; Samarin 1967: 20), but as ‘informant’ has the connotation of ‘informant to the police’, other linguists prefer the term ‘language helper’ (Crowley 2007: 85f.) or ‘consultant’ (Bower 2008: 10; Burling 1984). In the context of linguistic fieldwork, it seems useful to distinguish between consultants and local experts. While the consultants directly help the researcher with the collection and processing of field data, the local experts are people like storytellers, fishermen, healers, or architects who are interviewed on their specialized knowledge.

3.4.1 Selection of consultants

Most fieldwork guides contain a section on ‘Selection of informants’, ‘Choosing language helpers’, and the like, which lists the qualifications of the ideal consultant (Samarin 1967: 20–44; Kibrik 1977: 54–6; Vaux, Cooper, and Tucker 2007: 6). However, in practice matters can be quite different. The researchers coming as guests to the speech community are neither in a social position to choose people by themselves nor do they know the people well enough to identify their talents. Consequently they have to ask their hosts or the elders of the community to find the right people. These will have different interests and qualifications, so that it is the researchers’ task to adapt to their various talents and accordingly train them in tasks they enjoy and can cope with. (Dimmendaal 2001: 58–66; Grinevald 2003: 67–8; Rice 2001: 245–7).

p. 77 Recommendations like the following are not practicable and may be counterproductive. ‘Before hiring the reference speaker, we must test him. One day of work with the candidate will be enough for this purpose’ (Bouquiaux and Thomas 1992: 33). Grinevald (2003: 67) warns, ‘one should try never to turn away any member of the language community that expresses interest in working on the project...one never knows how things will evolve, and what contribution any particular person can make.’ Even semi-speakers or non-speakers may be helpful (Evans 2001).

3.4.2 Training of consultants

The training of consultants has several components and very much depends on their educational background, their standing within the language community, the personal relationship between researcher and consultant, and, of course, their talents and interests. As Healey emphasizes, ‘[a]lthough there are differences of aptitude from helper to helper, it is nevertheless true that good research assistants are not born, they are trained. And giving this training is one of the major responsibilities of the fieldworker’ (1975: 347) With respect to collecting data for a grammatical analysis of the language, this means that linguists should explain what needs to be done for which purpose and train the consultants on the job without any kind of patronizing attitude. Rather, the fieldwork project has to be understood as a joint enterprise in which the researchers from outside and the local experts and consultants share their knowledge and treat each other with the utmost respect.

Typically, linguistic field guides mention the possibility of training native speakers as consultants only in passing (Bower 2008: 200–201; Bouquiaux and Thomas 1992: 34–5; Healey 1975: 347–9; Samarin 1967: 41–4; Vaux et al. 2007: 29) or completely ignore this important aspect of research (Abbi 2001). There is a series of articles on capacity building in various endangered speech communities in Austin (2004). However, guidelines on how to train consultants in the field do not exist yet. Samarin’s remark that ‘the