2.1 Introduction[1]

Fieldwork is the collection of primary data outside of the controlled environments of the laboratory or library, and is the province of many scientists: biologists, geologists, anthropologists, as well as linguists (see also Senft 2009). Traditional linguistic fieldwork has relied heavily on elicitation and observation, with a view to producing a grammar, dictionary, and texts. The linguist might use a word list or questionnaire and ask a consultant, 'How do you say X?', probe for grammaticality judgements, or solicit translations. This is often accompanied by mining texts, i.e. narratives by speakers, for naturalistic examples. This sort of
p. 55 data can fruitfully ↳ elucidate lexical and constructional resources within a language, their formal properties, the kinds of expressions that occur, and so on. In recent years, with the widespread availability of cheap and portable recording technology, more and more field workers rely on audio or video recordings. This has made it easier for linguists to include a wider variety of linguistic materials in their repertoire, most notably to encompass everyday conversational data. Recordings make it possible to listen to speakers' utterances again and again, thus improving the quality of final transcripts and making it possible to update and refine analyses. Nevertheless there are limitations to these techniques, especially when it comes to understanding semantics, the topic of this chapter. As a result, there is a move—which has gained new momentum in recent years—towards using non-linguistic stimuli for elicitation as a means of exploring semantics.

The bulk of this chapter sets out a guide to the various stages of constructing a non-linguistic stimulus set in order to investigate semantic categories within a language. This should furnish a novice to this field with some of the key concepts and issues so that they can construct their own study. There are, however, many existing resources already available—off-the-shelf-materials, as it were (see §2.8 below). Stimulus sets have been developed for spatial and event categories, the language of perception and emotion, and more. These materials can be invaluable tools towards fulfilling traditional linguistic fieldwork goals, as well as serving as worked out examples of this approach.

As previously stated, the focus in this chapter is how to use non-linguistic stimuli for a more thorough investigation of local semantic categories. Semantics is at the heart of linguistic description. The field linguist attempts to identify the sound units that convey distinctions in meaning—the lexical and grammatical classes that can be grouped together and distinguished for function, and so on. Individual forms will be provided with glosses in translations. Some will receive fuller descriptions in dictionaries, and ideally will also be contextualized with respect to local cultural practice and knowledge (see Hellwig 2006 and Evans and Sasse 2007 on rich semantic description in linguistic fieldwork). This chapter aims to provide some basic tools and methodology to inform semantic analyses. But the methods discussed are not limited to the exploration of semantics by any means. The 'pear story' (Du Bois 1980) and 'frog story' (Berman and Slobin 1994) studies, which utilized picture and video-based stimuli, have led to key insights into morphosyntactic packaging and discourse construction. Creative use of non-linguistic stimuli could, without doubt, benefit linguistic analysis of most language phenomena.

This chapter also assumes a qualitative orientation to data analysis (§2.6), but the use of stimulus materials does not require such an approach. Stimulus-based elicitation can be used in conjunction with traditional data collection methods to increase the amount of primary linguistic material available and thus provide further information for qualitative description.

p. 56 Before embarking on the how-to guide, it is worth considering what the benefits of a stimulus-based approach are, and how it overcomes some limitations of conventional methods. Consider traditional field linguistic techniques, for example translation: find a consultant who speaks a contact language and ask them to translate word lists, simple sentences, etc. This can be an effective way to get into the linguistic system, but there are limitations. Using a specific formulation of a statement or word can 'prime' speakers