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THE METHODOLOGY OF FIELD INVESTIGATIONS IN LINGUISTICS

(Setting up the Problem)

by

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FOREWORD

This study 1* is devoted to one of the most traditional and at the same time one of the most neglected branches of linguistics—field linguistics. In field linguistics the linguist is in the position to describe a language which, at least to begin with, he does not speak and to observe the speech of native speakers in what is usually a natural speech environment.

The tradition of field investigations is especially strong in American linguistics; practically all the theoreticians of American linguistics have studied lesser (or as they are sometimes unjustifiably called "exotic" or "primitive") languages: F. Boas, L. Bloomfield, E. Sapir, B. L. Whorf, G. Trager, B. Bloch, M. Swadesh, K. Pike, E. Nida, H. Gleason, J. Greenberg. Many Russian linguists have also made contributions to field linguistics: M. A. Castrén, P. K. Uslar, V. G. Bogoraz, L. Ja. Šternberg, J. Baudouin-de-Courtenay, N. A. Jakovlev, E. D. Polivanov, A. N. Genko, I. I. Zarubin, L. I. Žirkov, L. V. Ščerba, P. S. Kuznecov and others.

In fact practically all investigations of lesser unwritten languages and dialects as well are carried out under field conditions. On the basis of field investigations in the 1920's and 30's alphabets were created for more than forty nationalities of the Northern USSR, Central Asia, and the Caucasus and voluminous grammars are being written for the unwritten and newly created literary languages of Soviet nationalities. In addition there have been a number of detailed examinations examining particular questions of insufficiently studied languages. The scope of dialectological investigations, especially of Russian, but of other languages as well, is broad.

The comparative-historical and typological study of languages without a written tradition is also carried out with the help of field work.

In spite of the large amount of accumulated experience in practical field work there is really nothing in the Soviet literature devoted to the technique of field investigation. Likewise almost no general works of this kind have been written abroad. The present work was to a certain extent written to help fill this gap. But the author by no means claims to present a complete and comprehensive description of all problems of field linguistics. This is impossible due to the volume of work and the insufficiency of the author's experience. This work is basically a generalizing survey of the author's personal observations made during several linguistic expeditions on languages spoken in the USSR: Lak (1967), Archi (1968, 1971), Shughni (1969), Xinalug (1970, 1971) Koryak (1971). The aim of the paper is first to define the place of field linguistics in the general linguistic pattern, after it has been shown that field linguistics is closely related with many other disciplines and to what extent it needs the help of these other disciplines and to what extent the results of field

investigations are important for general theoretical investigations (Chapter 1); secondly, to sketch the contours of the problems which arise before the field investigation has been started and to show, in a fragmentary manner, how they may be solved (Chapter 2); finally, to describe the components of field work in itself; its basic steps, interaction with native speakers, and the collection of linguistic facts (Chapter 3).

Certain complicated and undoubtedly important questions which have to do with the final description of the language based on the results of the field investigations were deliberately left out, since these questions go beyond the bounds of field work itself since they define the general linguistic world view of the investigator.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the heads of the Faculty of Philology of Moscow State University and the Departments of Structural and Applied Linguistics who sponsored the field investigations in which I took part; and to all my numerous colleagues on these expeditions—co-workers and students of the Departments of Structural and Applied Linguistics of the Faculty of Philology at Moscow State University, without whose creative assistance the present work would have been impossible; and also to all the informants with whom we worked in gaining a practical understanding of the nature and difficulty of field work. I wish also to express my gratitude to all those who have read the manuscript and have helped me to eliminate a number of shortcomings, in particular B. Ju. Gorodeckij, V. A. Zvegincev, V. V. Ivanov, S. D. Kacnel'son, G. A. Klimov, S. V. Kodzasov, and V. I. Cincius.

NOTE

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THE ROLE OF FIELD LINGUISTICS IN THEORETICAL AND APPLIED LINGUISTICS

1. The Problem of Investigation of Insufficiently Studied Languages.

The number of languages spoken in the world is fairly great. There are no exact figures but one finds approximations of between 2, 5 and 7 thousand 1* in the literature (within the boundaries of the USSR alone more than 100 have been recorded 2*). However the number of languages spoken by more than a million persons is only around 150 3*, and half the earth's population speaks one of the eight most common languages 4*, of which three 5* are the dominant languages for more than half of humanity. To these languages are opposed the far more impressive class of languages which serve small groups of people. But the major efforts of linguists have been directed toward the study of languages which have historical, political, and social prestige; not only that, all general linguistic conceptions are as a rule based on facts gathered from this handful of privileged languages (most of whom belong to the Indo-European language family), and the sea of linguistic facts abounding in the remainder of the world's languages has either gone entirely unrecorded or for all practical purposes has not been taken into account in the theory of language. The state of the study of these languages is such that they are fortunate to have had even a single investigator. It is not without interest to note that within the USSR alone, despite the great amount of work mentioned in the Foreword, there remain about 30 languages 6* which have so far not been the subject of even a single monographical description.

For a whole variety of social causes "lesser" languages are constantly being shoved aside by "greater" languages, which leads to increased destruction of the primary system of the "lesser" language under the influence of the socially more powerful language in contact with it (compare the influence of Azerbaijani on Xinalug, Tajik on Shughni), and several "lesser" languages are on the brink of extinction (for example, Livian, Itel'men, Kerek, Aleut, and several dialects of Eskimo). If from a general social point of view the disappearance of "lesser" languages is a positive phenomenon (linguistic fragmentation hinders communication and thus hinders the uniting of people into large social groupings - and here we constantly encounter the question of the feasibility of a single world language 7*), then from the linguistic point of view it is a disaster, since the disappearance of undescribed or insufficiently described languages is a loss of linguistic facts which might turn out to be priceless for future generations of linguists and cannot be made up. In addition, description of the present state of unwritten insufficiently studied languages which are not threatened with immediate extinction is also very valuable for linguistics; the fixation of the present state of these languages will be

important for succeeding investigators because of the unavoidable linguistic change that will take place.^{8*} Finally, the study of unwritten languages is important not only for the future of linguistics but, as we shall attempt to show, for its present as well.

As a rule unwritten languages do not have their own linguistic tradition and at the present time may be described only by linguists who are not native speakers of these languages.

2. Field Linguistics as a Branch of Descriptive Linguistics.

The complex of linguistic methods which is directed toward the independent creative (as opposed to the pedagogical - with grammars and textbooks) study and description of a living language which is not native for the investigator has been named field linguistics. Such a study may pursue very different aims: the language may be studied as a whole or as a fragment, theoretically or practically, by itself or comparatively, synchronically or diachronically, etc. No matter what the concrete aim the empirical basis of any field investigation is the synchronic state of the language. Therefore we may say that field linguistics by the subject of its investigation and often by the aim can be related to descriptive synchronic linguistics (not to be identified with Bloomfieldian taxonomic theory!), directed toward the study and description of concrete languages, that is, to the kind of linguistics which establishes a correspondence between the real language (or a part of it) and the grammar (model of the language) which is ascribed to it.^{9*} In any such investigation the language itself is not given to the investigator for direct observation, it is an ideal object of study. However, the concrete speech utterances which represent the realization of the linguistic competence of speakers and listeners who know the language can be observed.

The basic objects of any conceivable linguistic descriptive activity are: the subject of the investigation (the language), which we will call the target language, the object of observation (texts or, as we will call them, data ^{10*}), and the product of the investigation (the model of the target language, which is usually called grammar).

The different types of descriptive synchronic linguistics differ by the character of the interrelations of the investigator with the target language as shown in Figure 1.

In Figure 1, 1A represents the situation where a type of "direct communication" between the investigator and the target language is possible, and the data as it were are absent. In fact what we have in this case is the "introspective" method of investigation based exclusively on self-observation. The target language is familiar to the investigator (it relates to his competence) who himself acts as a "generator" of data on the given language and constructs a linguistic description based on data so obtained. This method of investigation has often been attacked on methodological grounds especially under the prevailing influence of the descriptive approach to the study of language which did not recognize the objective value of linguistic self-observations.^{11*}

The most traditional method of descriptive linguistics is represented by 1B, where the investigator who speaks the target language has a

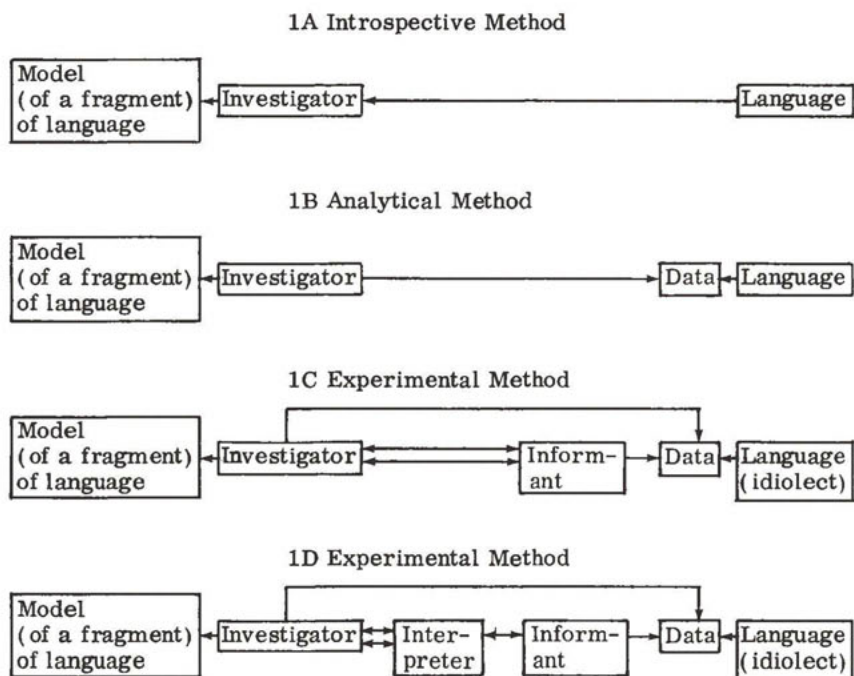


Fig. 1 Types of Descriptive Synchronic Linguistics

certain corpus of independently received data which can be subjected to study (This we will call the analytical method). In Soviet linguistics this is a common method, for example, in studies which use literary works as a basis for the analysis of a language. Bloomfieldian linguistics also postulated the possibility of studying a language unfamiliar to the investigator using only an accidental collage of texts, although we are not aware of any successful examples of this type of investigation and there are grave theoretical doubts as to its feasibility. 12*

One should keep in mind that in the case where the investigator is a native speaker of the target language he may combine the analytical method with the introspective, which is what is usually done, although as a rule no distinction is made between the facts drawn from a corpus of data and the facts obtained by introspection.

Among field linguists one encounters the opinion that a language can only be well described if the investigator knows the language well enough to be his own informant, in other words only a combination of methods 1A and 1B is regarded as a truly scientific method of studying the language (see the following for more details).

In 1C a native speaker (the informant) who is not the investigator is used as a "generator" of data on the target language. The informant serves as the basic investigative "tool" of the linguist, and when used wisely will provide the linguist with the facts about the target language that interest him. Here the informant is considered to be dependent on the investigator and rather than being an unregulated "generator" of data, he is a means of eliciting the kind of information the investigator has requested. This method might be called "experimental". 13* Within the framework of the experimental method as within the analytical method (but not introspectively!) two possibilities exist: 1. the target language is familiar to the investigator, and 2. unfamiliar. In the first case the linguist, as in 1B, can also use the introspective method as a supplement. The experimental method for studying a native language is well developed in psycholinguistics; moreover, if the self-observation is a precise and operationally formulated principle of investigation then such an introspective methodology can also rightly be termed experimental: the fact that the informant and the investigator are the same person is external to the nature of the experimental method itself. In the case when the investigator is unfamiliar with the target language beforehand, we have the kind of situation involved in field work. In some cases there is a third person - the interpreter who stands between the investigator and the informant, which is represented by 1D. This is necessary if there is no common language between informant and investigator by means of which the investigator can control and stimulate the data he is eliciting. In this case the interpreter is a translator between investigator and informant. The specific nature of field work demands a differentiation of the language in which the informant speaks and which is undergoing investigation (the target language) from the language of communication between the informant, the investigator, and the interpreter (the mediator language) and from the language which is used to describe the target language (the metalanguage). (One should remember that although the native language of the investigator usually serves as the metalanguage this is not always the case, especially if the investigator chooses to use

several metalanguages). The different possible combinations of using languages in various functions in field conditions are represented in Figure 2 (using examples of the differing use of Russian, Avar, and Archi).

Thus the emergence of field linguistics as a method of investigation is due not to internal (depending on the conditions which exist in the investigative situation). Briefly, we understand field linguistics in the wide sense of the term to be a specific investigative situation where the investigator is not linguistically competent in the target language ^{14*} and the only source of information about the target language is a native speaker of the language. The term "field linguistics" may also be narrowly interpreted: the term arose due to the fact that such linguistic activity usually takes place in the field far from the linguist's normal place of work and what is more important, in the natural linguistic environment where the given target language is used as the basic means of communication between people. Henceforth we will regard the narrower interpretation of field linguistics as the more valuable (although we do not in any sense repudiate the wider interpretation): everything that is applicable to the wide understanding of field linguistics is also applicable to the narrow; the reverse is not true.

3. Methods of Field Linguistics and Its Relation to Other Linguistic Disciplines.

Thus field linguistics owes its existence to the fact that there are situations where a language is not described by a native speaker but by an investigator who, as a rule, in the early stages of his acquaintance with the language knows little or nothing of its characteristics. In the linguistic literature distressingly little attention is paid to field linguistics even though it is one of the oldest and generally speaking one of the most essential branches of linguistics. The investigator who decides to study a language he does not know in order to describe it scientifically runs into an unexpected problem - the lack of clearly formulated principles of how to do so. In addition to this the investigative situation where the linguist does not know the target language and the only source of information about the language are native speakers is a very specific one. The situation specifies at least five clearly formulated basic principles to be necessary for a complete investigation:

- (1) Methods for describing the target language.
- (2) Methods for discovering grammatical facts.
- (3) Hypotheses about the properties of language in general.
- (4) Methods for eliciting linguistic information from an informant.
- (5) Methods for the practical learning of the target language.

Though these questions ought to be subjected to independent study and rethought in terms of the particular problems of field linguistics, it is clear that they are common to the problems faced in neighbouring linguistic domains and for this reason field linguistics should take advantage of the results of research in these domains. We have represented

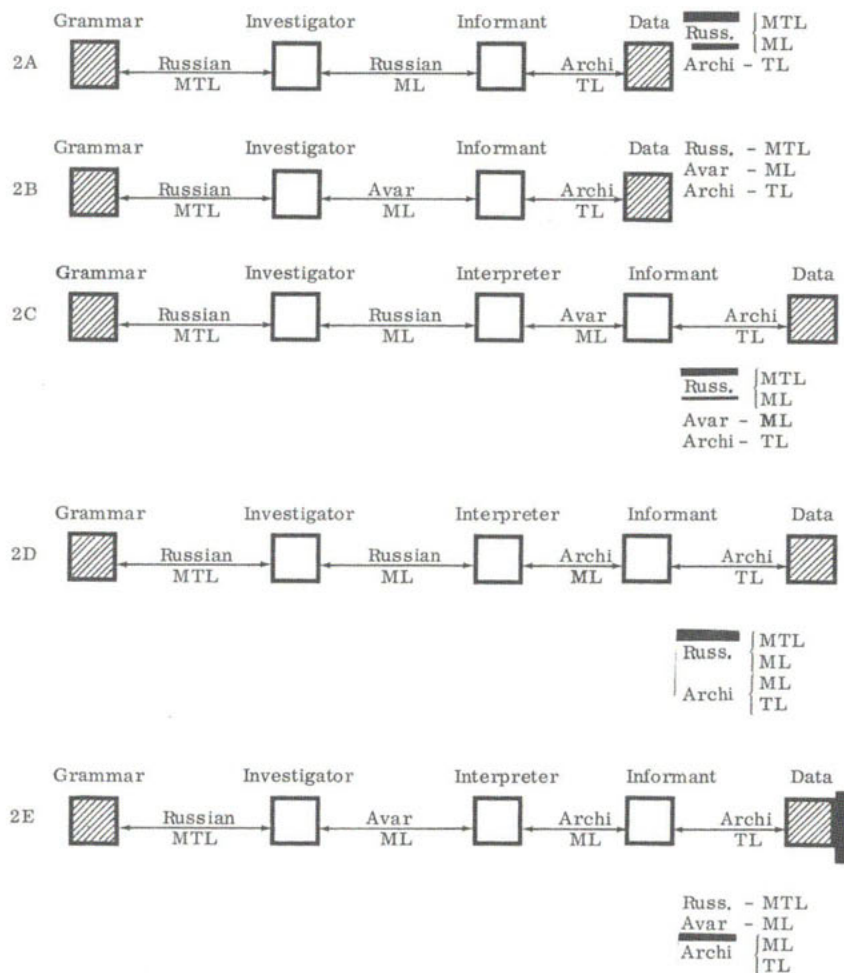


Fig. 2. Interrelations of Mediator Language (ML), Target Language (TL), and Metalanguage (MTL) in Field Work

the relationship (and it is possible that our representation is far from complete) of field linguistics with other linguistic disciplines in Figure 3 (Note that the relationships between disciplines are very close in certain cases and this we were not able to show on our diagram).

As we see, field linguistics intersects many of the disciplines which are in principle important for the modern theory of language but does not coincide in its aims or methods with any of them. It is revealing that almost all the linguistic disciplines which share similar methods with field linguistics were given scientific status only quite recently (pedagogy and the theory of grammar are exceptions, although the latter is undergoing very serious changes). Thus it is not surprising that the theoretical foundation of field linguistics has received so little attention: although field linguistics and all its methodological questions have existed for a long time, these questions have not only not been resolved, they have not even been clearly stated, since the other linguistic disciplines with a similar problematic had not yet been reinforced and formulated nor could they have been formulated from the general theoretical point of view.

Let us briefly examine the similarity in methods between field linguistics and other areas of linguistics.

(1) Methods of describing language. The point of studying an unfamiliar target language, naturally, is to describe it scientifically.

The methodology of language description is the prerogative of the theory of grammar 15*, and one must admit that the state of grammatical theory has had a very telling effect on the results of field investigations. But one may also assert the contrary - that is, that field linguistics has in various periods in the development of linguistics stimulated a radical review of linguistic theory. A striking example of this is the influence of the work on Indian languages on the formation of a fruitful structural trend-descriptive linguistics. 16* We could also note the outstanding, but unfortunately too little known pioneering works of other field investigators who were forced by the practice of their field work to depart from the accepted views on language which were held by the linguistic theory of their own day and create their own descriptions based on a different theoretical platform which corresponded more closely to the problems at hand. Among such outstanding field investigators was P.K. Uslar, who provided brilliant descriptions of a number of Caucasian languages 17* which after almost a hundred years have not only not lost their scientific value, but have not been superseded in detail, precision, and completeness by anything that has come since.

The close relationship between field linguistics and the theory of grammar comes about because the main aim of the theory of grammar is the formulation of demands applicable to the grammar of any language and the creation of a descriptive apparatus which will fulfill these demands. 18* Field linguistics offers a clear opportunity to test such an apparatus since the linguist, who is not a native speaker of the language he is investigating, cannot construct a description based on his own linguistic intuition and is forced into a stricter application of the criteria of correspondence between the linguistic objects in the language which are under investigation and the concepts which belong to the theory. Thus all the formal weaknesses of the theory soon become evident. Consequently