11
Ethical Field Research

11.1 Preliminaries

11.1.1 What is ethical research?

How can we define ethical research? A broad definition might be ‘a way of working that you, the research community and the language community think is appropriate’. We can consider the question of ethics broadly, or more narrowly, in the sense of ‘what type of research is approved by university ethics boards?’

We are comfortable with the idea that ethical considerations are inherent in medical research. For example, most people would agree that it is wrong to try out a new, untested treatment on patients without warning them of the fact and receiving their consent to participation in advance. There are ethical considerations in linguistics too, including recording research participants, the potential for inflicting harm, gaining permission to work on a language and observe people, and identifying research participants.

Since linguistic elicitation by nature involves working with humans, many linguists are accountable to overseers – grant agencies, university ethics boards and academic advisors. In some countries, including the United States, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, Israel, Scandinavian countries, Japan and many other countries in Europe, most linguistic research is subject to approval by a University ethics board (in the US, this is called an Internal Review Board or IRB). Many grant organizations require certification that your University’s ethics board has approved or exempted your proposal before you are funded.

The topics raised in this chapter will still be relevant to your research whether or not you are legally required to obtain ethics approval. All linguistic fieldwork has ethical consequences and there are ethical
issues which require thinking about. Ethics aren’t just an issue when working on endangered languages either. You are not exempt from ethical issues because you are working on a language with many speakers. This chapter discusses a range of ethical considerations in linguistic fieldwork, ranging from the broad ‘what is the right way to behave’ to ‘how does my research fit into the legislation?’

11.1.2 What can be researched?

Like other social researchers, [anthropologists] have no special entitlement to study all phenomena; and the advancement of knowledge and the pursuit of information are not in themselves sufficient justifications for overriding the values and ignoring the interests of research participants.

(American Anthropological Association 1998: §3.6a)

The same comments apply to linguists. We do not have a special entitlement to study any language we want to. This can be hard for speakers of major languages to appreciate. We don’t really care who learns English; it’s a global language. The language itself is not anyone’s cultural property in particular. Common words aren’t owned by particular groups. But that view does not apply to many of the world’s languages, particularly highly endangered languages. For example, in 2005 speakers of Mapudungun in Chile threatened to sue Microsoft because the group had not been consulted about the development of a local version of Microsoft software.

11.1.3 Who decides what’s ethical?

Compare the previous quote to the following:

[i]n ethical research...there is a wholly proper concern to minimize damage and offset inconvenience to the researched, and to acknowledge their contributions. ...But the underlying model is one of ‘research on’ social subjects. Human subjects deserve special ethical consideration, but they no more set the researcher’s agenda than the bottle of sulphuric acid sets the chemist’s agenda.

(Cameron, Frazer et al. 1992:14–15)

The people being researched may not agree and they may not take kindly to having no say in the research agenda. It may be perceived as disenfranchisement if they have undergone land or rights dispossession