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Working with Existing Materials

These days, there are few areas of the world where there is no previous work at all on the languages spoken there. There have been many anthropologists, missionaries, linguists and others searching out ‘uncontacted’ peoples for a hundred years or more. However, much of this material is unpublished and there is great variation in both quality and quantity.

You might feel that it is a waste of time to go looking for old materials when they are unlikely to shed much light on your main interest in the language. A wordlist from 80 years ago is unlikely to be accurately transcribed enough to be useful to a study of phonetics, and item by item wordlists are no help at all for work on syntax. Such materials, however, can help you. The community themselves may also be interested in them. You can use previously recorded materials to identify potential areas of interest. Materials recorded by another person may show differences from your own which are not due to mistakes in transcription or misunderstandings. You will want to make the most of your time in the community, and the most of the community’s resources. That includes not repeating the work that others have done. It wastes everybody’s time.

13.1 Published resources

The obvious place to start is by searching library catalogues and the internet for the language name (and variant spellings), noting down and reading what you find. Don’t forget inter-library loan or friends at other universities for the items that aren’t available at your own university.

Don’t confine yourself to linguistics books alone. Sometimes you will find linguistic information in non-linguistic publications, for example,
in ethnographies you might find the word for a cultural item along with a description of its use, which will help you with definitions. Reo Fortune's (1935) *Manus Religion*, for example, contains a considerable amount of specialized vocabulary in the ‘Manus’ language of Peri village. Traditional ethnographic literature is often a good place to look for vocabulary. Furthermore, a lot of early twentieth-century linguistic work is published in anthropological journals, such as *Man* and *Anthropos*.

Some areas have linguistic bibliographies or source lists. For Australia there is *Ozbib* (Carrington and Triffit 1999). Other good survey publications to get you started on sources include Mithun (1999) and Campbell (1997) for North America, and Carrington (1996) for Papua New Guinea. Suggestions for online archives (which include other parts of the world) are given on the web site.

### 13.2 Other people’s fieldnotes

Linguists seldom publish (or make freely accessible) the raw data they have collected, and it may be more useful to you to have access to primary fieldnote data than to work entirely from secondary sources. After all, linguists usually collect much more data than they publish. It might be possible to arrange to have a look at such materials, either through the researcher or through an archive if the materials have been deposited somewhere.

Try to find out who previous researchers have worked with, how they found the person, and what they were like to work with. This will give you an idea of who to work with and what the community structures for language work are. It may also give you an idea of who to avoid. It may be easier to work with someone who has already got some experience of linguistic research before; on the other hand it may mean that they have expectations about how you will work on the basis of your predecessor, and it may be more difficult to make progress if you don’t live up to those expectations. Everyone has different experiences so do not rely on others’ judgements alone.

Appropriate attribution of previous resources is very important. Do not ever place yourself in a position of being accused of plagiarism or stealing someone else’s materials. Always keep careful track of where your examples come from, especially if you are combining someone else’s work into your own database. If you know that you will be using a lot of resources from other people when you start your fieldwork, you should build this into your reference system. For example, part of the