Notes on Elicitation


Some general comments on elicitation. Elicitation is an unnatural speech act!

• The utterances obtained are generally short, not longer than a single sentence, and are usually out of context.
• Elicited sentences typically have no real or logical relationship to each other, the way that sentences normally do in discourse.
• Elicitation is motivated towards some aspect of the linguistic system. The utterances have value to the extent that they further the linguist’s goals.
• Elicitation is defined by the intimate human relations established between the linguist and consultant, i.e., there’s a human element to it.

Scheduled and Analytic Elicitation

Samarin distinguishes two types of elicitation, scheduled and analytic. Scheduled elicitation starts with ignorance of the language being investigated, and uses some sort of formal elicitation instrument, i.e., a questionnaire. Analytic elicitation collects additional language on the basis of already (at least partially) analyzed data from the target language.

I. Scheduled Elicitation

Universal Questionnaires. A universal schedule, such as the Lingua Descriptive Studies Questionnaire, seeks to provide a fine grid encompassing all the possible kinds of grammatical and morphological variation that exist in human language. One of its chief values is its indexing system, which will be shared by all grammars based on the questionnaire. Since the grammars share the indexing system, it is easy to compare how a given grammatical concept is realized in the various languages. So, for example, if Section 1.11 deals with a certain kind of relative clause, by the shared indexing system, all derivative grammars will discuss relative clauses in section 1.11. The other advantage of a universal schedule is that it is presumably very thorough, based on a detailed study of the grammars of many unrelated languages. So the net which it casts over a given language can be quite fine, producing good results even with a minimally trained analyst. However, the fine grid is also a liability, in that any given language will only grammaticalize certain things, and not others, so there is much in the questionnaire that is not relevant to a given language.

Regional (Family) Questionnaires. There are also sometimes regional questionnaires, which focus on the grammatical features of the (related) languages in a region. To see how this might be useful, consider the following forms from Ojibwe:
Ojibwe is well-behaved as an Algonquian language, and so has a different set of inflections for indicating subject and object in main versus subordinate clauses. A questionnaire designed for an Algonquian language needs a separate question to generate each possible combination of subject and object in both main and subordinate contexts. English uses the same pronominal forms, so there would be no need for questions addressing the main/subordinate difference.

Samarin 1967:110 lists regional questionnaires for several areas of the world, including West Africa, India, Malayo-Polynesia, New Guinea, and Uto-Aztecan.

**Personally-Created Questionnaires**

In creating your own questionnaires, the following can guide you:

- a. Make certain that the number of sentences is large enough, at least 400 according to Samarin for most languages. Samarin suggests that sentences should not be simple, because this will unnecessarily inflate your corpus, but I find including simple sentences allows the consultant a bit of mental rest, and often simple sentences make for very good examples in write-ups, where they can be used.
- b. There should be different sentences (located at different places in the questionnaire) for eliciting each grammatical feature. The purpose of scattering the sentences is to give greater freedom to the consultant in the construction of the responses.
- c. Each grammatical construction should be elicited with different lexical items: ‘I told him to go’ and ‘my father is going to tell his brother to come,’ both elicit a verb (‘go’ or ‘come’) in a construction which is dependent on another verb.
- d. Each word should occur in as many different contexts as possible: such as ‘he entered the house,’ ‘they repaired the roof of the house,’ ‘the house is burning’, ‘the man ran from the house,’ and others. One reason for such repetition is that it facilitates analysis of the material when there is no consultant available, by limiting the vocabulary. But having the same noun in different semantic/syntactic contexts will also reveal features of grammar. Even if you do use a small set of nouns, make sure that they are semantically varied in useful ways, e.g., includes nouns for humans, animals, and inanimate objects; include male and female terms; include singular and plural; etc.
- e. Prepare the questionnaire in 2 or 3 languages, if possible.
f. Make an index of each item, lexical or grammatical, which is included in the questionnaire. One of its values is that it serves as a check on the number of occurrences of each item as well as its various contexts.

**Props** can be invaluable. Typical props include **pictures**, either general or specific. Remember that pre-literate people may not be able to interpret pictures, if the picture is relatively abstract. Another very useful set of props is **small figures**, e.g., Fisher Price people. They are particularly valuable for collecting paradigms.

II. **Analytic Elicitation**: Begins with data in the language, which stimulates research in particular directions.

- There may be a need to get **more examples** of a particular morpheme or particular construction.
- A.E. can also be a **probing** device, e.g., you may have an expression such as ‘Aanapii ge-biboong, enendaman?’ and know that it means ‘When do you think winter will come?’ and ask about other seasons. You might change the tense, change the person, as ways of discovering which part of the expression signals which meaning.
- A.E. can also be used to **test hypotheses**, e.g., you may have a hypothesis that a particular element or structural slot serves a particular function, and you can test it with analytic elicitation.

1. **Reverse Translation Elicitation**. This is a very common form of elicitation. You start with forms in the contact language and translate them into the target language. One must be careful because of the possibility of the stimulus affecting the result. For example, if you use English stimuli to collect sentences from a language with freer word order, the response forms may reflect English word order more than natural language actually would.

   - Another difficulty with this mode of collection is that it is language-external— it cannot anticipate the grammatical importance of the material being collected. Some elements of grammar exist only in syntactically complex constructions, not the type of construction to occur in typical reverse translation elicitation questions.

   - A significant problem is that your sentences are mediated by the translation skills of whoever you’re working with, as well. If your consultant speaks imperfect English, s/he may not fully understand what you want translated. Often people are unwilling to show themselves incompetent, and so will not evidence uncertainty to you.

2. **Substitution Elicitation** (also called ‘paradigmatic’ or ‘frame and substitution technique’). This technique involves manipulating items in frames.

   Example from Nyanja, an African language:
We have a pair of sentences

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Mazila onse ndi abwino?} & \quad \text{‘Are the eggs good?’} \\
\text{Ena ndi abwino.} & \quad \text{‘Some are good.’}
\end{align*}
\]

We then ask, ‘What happens if we substitute

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{cimanga} & \quad \text{‘corn’} \\
\text{zinthu} & \quad \text{‘things’} \\
\text{nyama} & \quad \text{‘meat’} \\
\text{cakudya} & \quad \text{‘food’}
\end{align*}
\]

These are the responses:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Cimanga cone ndi cabwino?} & \quad \text{‘Is all the corn good?’} \\
\text{Zinthu zonse ndi zabwino?} & \quad \text{‘Are all the things good?’} \\
\text{Nyama yonse ndi yabwino?} & \quad \text{‘Is all the meat good?’} \\
\text{Cakudya yonse ndi cabwino?} & \quad \text{‘Is all the food good?’}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Cina ndi cabwino.} & \quad \text{‘Some (corn) is good.’} \\
\text{Zina ndi zabwino.} & \quad \text{‘Some (things) are good.’} \\
\text{Ina ndi yabwino.} & \quad \text{‘Some (meat) is good.’} \\
\text{Cina ndi cabwino.} & \quad \text{‘Some (food) is good.’}
\end{align*}
\]

- This method can also be used to determine the limits of distribution of an element. For example, having obtained

\[
\text{‘That’s a childish thing to do.’}
\]

We can try to substitute other words in the frame

\[
\text{‘That’s a ___ish thing to do.’}
\]

and try putting other words into the frame. What you will discover is that there is a lot of uncertainty. For example, *snobbish* and *piggish* are probably fine with most speakers of English. But what about *dilettantish* and *fogyish*? Some constructions will be universally accepted, some universally rejected, but there will be a large area where there is uncertainty in individual speakers, and variation across speakers.

- This method has a risk in that it invites the question

\[
\text{‘Can you say ___?’}
\]

There are several problems with this question. 1. The linguist may not control pronunciation well enough to be understood, or may be understood to be saying something else. 2. The test sentence may be
acceptable, but with a different meaning than the linguist intended. 3. The consultant may reject the sentence because it doesn’t make cultural sense, even though it is grammatical. 4. The consultant may consent to an outlandish sentence in order not to embarrass the linguist, who is viewed as an expert.

If the consultant answers, ‘No, this cannot be said,’ always ask for a correction.

3. Corrective Elicitation. This method is used when you know what linguistic elements you’re dealing with, but you don’t know how they function. The idea is to give examples to the consultant to correct. How the consultant restructures the input, and what comments are made in the course of making corrections can be valuable clues to grammar.

Example: Language: Ata. There are two clause-marking particles, ka and ko. The goal is to figure out the meaning/function of ko and ka. To do so, three text sentences with ka were found (1, 2, and 3 below), to show the consultant the item in focus. S/he was then given three test sentences (4, 5, 6), with instructions to correct them. The (a) members of 4, 5, 6 are the uncorrected, and the (b) members the corrected.
1. Madoqot ka quqodok to homoy.
   bad the plant the rice

   ‘Using it to plant rice is bad.’

2. Pila ka imboli sikan?
   how.much the buy that

   ‘How much did it cost to buy that?’

3. Soquoyoq ka inautan
   There the mountain

   ‘There’s the mountain.’

4a. Nakologon si Boyboy ka tanoq.
   Able.to.lift the Boyboy the earth

   ‘Boyboy was able to lift the earth.’

4b. Nakologon si Boyboy to tanoq.
   Able.to.lift the Boyboy to the earth

   ‘Boyboy was able to lift the earth.’

5a. Baagad ka mananoy kid ogquliq
   never.mind if slow we.now return

   ‘Never mind if we’re late in returning.’

5b. Baagad ko mananoy kid ogquliq
   never.mind if slow we.now return

   ‘Never mind if we’re late in returning.’

6a. Woy nowgbayadi ka ogquliq kid
   before you.pay if return we.now

   ‘Wait until we get back before you pay them.’

6b. Woy nowgbayadi ko ogquliq kid
   before you.pay if return we.now

   ‘Wait until we get back before you pay them.’

From these corrections, it was determined that ko marks a subordinate clause to which it is phonologically bound, and means something like ‘if, when.’
4. Ancillary Elicitation.

- This type of elicitation works best with texts. One elicits from the consultant supporting sentences, more sentences of the kind that are found in the text.

Example: Language Gbeya

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te ́ wesé kofe nã  a  dé, ne  gan  a  rem
body  day  in-law  and  he  do  and  not  he  can
o  in  kooi  na  a  dé  koféai  ná
sleep  with  the.girl  and  he  do  the.in-law  not
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‘While he (the young man) is doing the bride-work, he cannot sleep with the girl for whom he is doing the bride-work.’

1. While he is working, he cannot eat.
2. While he is building a house, he cannot go hunting.
3. When he eats, he sits on the ground.
4. When he goes hunting, he takes five men with him.
5. He cannot speak to the girl for whom he is doing bride-work.
6. He cannot eat the animal which he killed.
7. He is afraid of the man whose gun he stole.
8. He is doing the bride-work for the girl.
9. He slept with the girl for whom he was working.
10. During the time that he was working for the girl, he slept with her.

If these sentences were elicited by reverse translation, the consultant would find that instead of the occurrences of wesé + N where the English has a temporal dependent clause, there are other ways of expressing this idea, such as wesé nã  a  dé (literally ‘day and he do house’), and bã  a  de  tuwa, both of which translate ‘when he builds the house.’

5. Paraphrasing. This is simply the act of restating something in an alternative way. The idea is to gather a set of sentences that are related in meaning and share a basic lexical set. This technique may make the analyst aware of syntactic constructions s/he had not been aware of.

Here’s an example from English:

*Although Ben’s a smart person, he’s not a very good student.*

which might produce these paraphrases:
Even though Ben’s a smart person, he isn’t a very good student.
Despite the fact that Ben’s a smart person, he’s a poor student.
While Ben may be a smart person, he’s not a good student.
Ben may be smart, but he’s not a good student.
Although Ben’s a clever guy, he’s a lousy student.

6. Covert Elicitation

• Here the idea is simply that the consultant is stimulated in a way that appears to be outside the context of work, e.g., if you were studying English, you might say, in the presence of a consultant, under your breath, ‘My stomach hurts.’ The consultant might then say something such as: ‘What’s wrong with you?’ or ‘Are you alright?’ or ‘Does it hurt alot?’ or ‘What did you have for breakfast?’ If you were to study English interrogative sentences, you might find these examples useful.