Overview

This course addresses the question of how to document a language (that you do not know) through interaction with a native speaker of it. Roughly 6000 languages are now spoken in the world. Most are poorly described or else undescribed. Many may never be described, for it is widely estimated that about 80% will be extinct by the year 2100. Therefore, documentation is an urgent necessity. Such work is crucial for our general thinking about language: at present our theories still perform poorly, or else are silent, when asked to make predictions about new languages. It is also crucial in a wider sense. Preservation of linguistic diversity is a necessary condition for the preservation of cultural and intellectual diversity, both because of the role language and speaking have as emblems of cultural identity, and because of the dependence of culturally significant linguistic practices (including verbal art) on lexical and grammatical details of individual languages.

The thrust of the course will be to consider comprehensive questions of language documentation. As such, we will survey the major morphological and syntactic structures and functions of human language as articulated in the rich literature on cross-linguistic typological studies. Topics treated will include criteria for defining word classes, case systems, sentence types (declaratives, interrogatives, imperatives, direct and indirect speech), subordination (including noun clauses, relative clauses, and adverbial clauses of time, manner, purpose, cause, condition, and result), tense/aspect sequencing, phrasal categories, coordination, negation, anaphora, reflexives, reciprocals, comparison, equation, possession, emphasis, and topicalization. These categories will be explored through application to the study of a particular language, working with a native speaker in a context very remotely approximating that of fieldwork. Students will learn procedures for recording, organizing and analyzing field data, as well as methodologies for carrying out syntactic and morphological research.

The format for each week will likely be as follows: we will discuss the contents of the week’s readings, in depth, on Tuesday, and come up with an elicitation protocol to use on Thursday, at which time we will ask our consultant for specific sentential examples. We will then incorporate these into our existing grammar as well. We will also elicit some textual materials, and integrate knowledge gleaned from them into our description of the language.
Evaluation

Typically, field methods courses such as ours require that a careful methodology be carried out in the collection and organization of data. Evaluation in this course will be primarily based on a thumbnail sketch of the grammar of the language being studied, and a beginning lexicon. You should be working on your sketch and lexicon throughout the semester; a preliminary version of both will be submitted some time (to be announced) during mid-semester.

Final Sketch & Lexicon 80%
Assignments (2) 10%
Class Participation, Attendance 10%

Text


There will also be copious materials available at our website, which will be up and running very early in the semester.

You will also need computer software to allow you to work with your language materials. Free linguistic database software is available from the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), at www.sil.org, for those who use some incarnation of Windows, called Toolbox. If you are a Macintosh user, see me.