
Reviewed by William J. Samarin, University of Toronto

This volume is the English translation of the second edition of a 1976 work that had first appeared in 1971. Suitable indeed for those who are working in languages throughout the world under the auspices of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (Société Internationale de Linguistique in French, retaining the well-known abbreviation SIL), it is understandable that it should have been published by them. But does it have value for any others who are anticipating working on or learning languages for which there are no or only inadequate grammars? And can it be used in courses in field linguistics? Without knowledge of the present publication, one of my colleagues, Paul Newman, had called the edition of 1973 a “superb, but poorly known” work (Fieldwork and Field Methods in Linguistics. California Linguistic Notes 23(2): 1-3-8. Fullerton: Department of Linguistics, California State University, 1992). Its publication in English, along with this review, will make it better known. Whether or not one agrees that it is “superb,” one may ask, Can it be used with profit today? My answer is yes.

The major part of the book (548 pp.) is devoted to what the authors call questionnaires—that is, what should be elicited, which will be discussed below. (Because some of the chapters are authored by others, it is curious that only two names appear on the title page. The collaboration of the other authors is, of course, fully acknowledged.
elsewhere in the book.) General matters are treated in only two chapters ("Introduction to Fieldwork," pp. 3-95, and "Concepts of Linguistic Analysis," pp. 95-174), which can be supplemented by Newman's Fieldwork and My Field Linguistics (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967). Because this is a translation and not an updated version, it is in many ways as outdated as my own work. For example, there is no discussion of the use of computers, which have changed not only linguistic fieldwork but also the teaching of field linguistics in universities. (One of my colleagues at the University of Toronto requires that his students go immediately from their class transcriptions to a Macintosh.) Even in 1976 the authors were recommending (p. 93) the use of carbon paper instead of mechanical reproduction! (The translator might have noted that in France a carbon paper especially for handwriting is still produced, which I used to great advantage in the seventies and eighties for my research on the origin of Sango in the Central African Republic. Indeed, it is surprising that the authors and translator could not have agreed on some such editing either in the text or in footnotes.

If technological advances are absent in the book, so are linguistic innovations. At the time of the original publications the authors had not adopted transformational-generative grammar in any form (nor have they since), and they acknowledge their indebtedness as linguists only to André Martinet, André C. Haudricourt, and Émile Benveniste—scholars, it should be added, with unimpeachable reputations. For this reason the section on grammatical analysis is written from a "descriptive" and "French" point of view. It should not, however, prove daunting, even when the reader finds words like moneme, synthetemic, functioneme, and syntaxeme. One could, of course, condemn this book for its not having been updated but simply translated. Whether or not a book on field linguistics should be based on contemporary theoretical linguistics of one or another, readers would have profited from what has been learned in the last six decades. Since the authors discuss the analysis of one tone, that topic alone could be cited because technology and theory have both contributed to understanding the use of pitch in language. (It is curious that an SIL publication does not mention SIL's CECEL hardware and software for analyzing pitch in the field.)

But as old cameras—with all the latest technological advances—can still take good pictures, this book has much of value in it. Students taking Field Linguistics (or Field Methods, or whatever the course might be called) should be required to consult it, and even though it weighs nearly two pounds, it should be included in the novice fieldworker's baggage—if only for the "questionnaires." Contributed by a number of people and tested over a period of several years, they will stimulate the researcher to go deeply into the language (both in its grammar and lexicon) and culture. The latter concept must be stressed, as the authors do: "... language is equally an instrument of communication and an expression of a social reality. One cannot stand without the other, and neither of these two aspects may be neglected" (p. viii). For this reason this book is not only a tool for the linguist, who is interested in the language for itself or for what it may reveal about the nature of human language; it is also a tool for any anthropologist who works with linguistic data. Therefore, in spite of its title, I would consider this a tool for linguistic anthropology. There are, for example, questionnaires for eliciting information about traditional technologies, ethnobotany, ethnozoology, and so forth, in many cases accompanied by line drawings. Given the language-in-culture-and-society orientation of the authors, it is surprising and disappointing, however, that readers are not guided more systematically in the ethnography of speaking, which, because it covers topics like child language, baby talk, gender differences, expressivity, and so forth, might very well have been dealt with by some of the book's contributors.

So much space is devoted to the questionnaires, that one wonders at the purpose of some of them—or parts of some of them. For instance, what kind of person "studying and describing" some unwritten language would be interested in eliciting words dealing

with the fetus in the uterus (p. 588): placenta, amniotic fluid, cervical opening, and so on.

One criticism I have of the book is that it is based primarily on one method of obtaining data: elicitation. Moreover, it depends heavily on someone who is called a "reference speaker" (who used to be called an informant), the preferred one, according to the authors, being educated at least to the level of Certificate of Primary Studies. As they describe this person, one gets the impression that he or she is a research associate or collaborator playing an important role in the research. When that happens, the researcher is very fortunate. But it is well known that such an assistant is not available in many places in the world. In any case, there are—or may be—problems in relying heavily on an "educated" assistant. Working recently with such persons in the Central African Republic, I was amazed at how poorly they sometimes followed instructions. With luck a field worker, of course, might find just the right person. In any case, he or she ought to count on a considerable amount of time in training the assistant and in supervising the person's work.

A corollary of the authors' methodology is that they do not appear to consider extemporaneous discourse (in tape-recorded form), certainly important for certain matters. Having recently seen how influenced by French the elicited material from Central Africans can be in Sango or what they consider their ethnic languages (in which they might have less competence than a rural person), I am convinced that elicitation by translation must be used with great circumspection. For example, every person who translated for me from French into Sango the sentence "I don't know if my wife is going to arrive before me [before I do]" put the negative marker apo after the first clause, which violates the syntactic rule of negation: it must occur at the end of the sentence. Constructing a sentence according to this rule has always been a challenge to me. The authors, incidentally, do not use the analysis of tone, which they might have less competence than a "French" speaker present. In those cases where a translator's assistance is needed, I would recommend carefully selecting an assistant who has been very, very carefully trained in the art of translation. I would certainly count the cost before I asked a French-speaking Gbaya to translate (to take just one of the authors' suggested sentences) "He has a youthful enthusiasm..." In criticizing this book one must point out that because the authors' field work was done mostly or exclusively in Africa, there is a bias throughout for that continent.

The translation is commendable, and typographical errors are rare.

No matter what aspect of language a person may be interested in and no matter what theoretical orientation that person may have, he or she ought to get all the help there is in making fieldwork successful and enjoyable. (In my book I said that fieldwork was fun, and that is part of the reason why, almost forty years later and in "retirement," I am still going back to the Central African Republic.) Therefore note should be taken of Newman's valuable contribution, cited above. He deals with health, children, gender and sex, professional and personal ethics, and money—topics that I had overlooked discussing, and cites some works in anthropology that are also helpful.

In sum, while dated in many ways the book under review contributes significantly to the meager literature on field linguistics. This is true partly because many aspects about attempting to study and describe unwritten languages have not changed and will not change in the years to come. For all the changes that have taken place and for those that will take place, another book will have to be written. May all veterans, wherever they are, cease to lament the need of fieldwork, the best ways to carry it out, and the pleasure (not without risks) of "working in the laboratory."