

What is Field Linguistics?

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Contents

- Introduction
- Why Field Linguistics?
- Field Linguistics and other branches of Linguistics
- The Object of study
- Theory-Neutral
- Basic Linguistic Theory
- Equipment in the field
- Basic Word List and Basic Sentence List
- Methods of Elicitation
- Conclusions

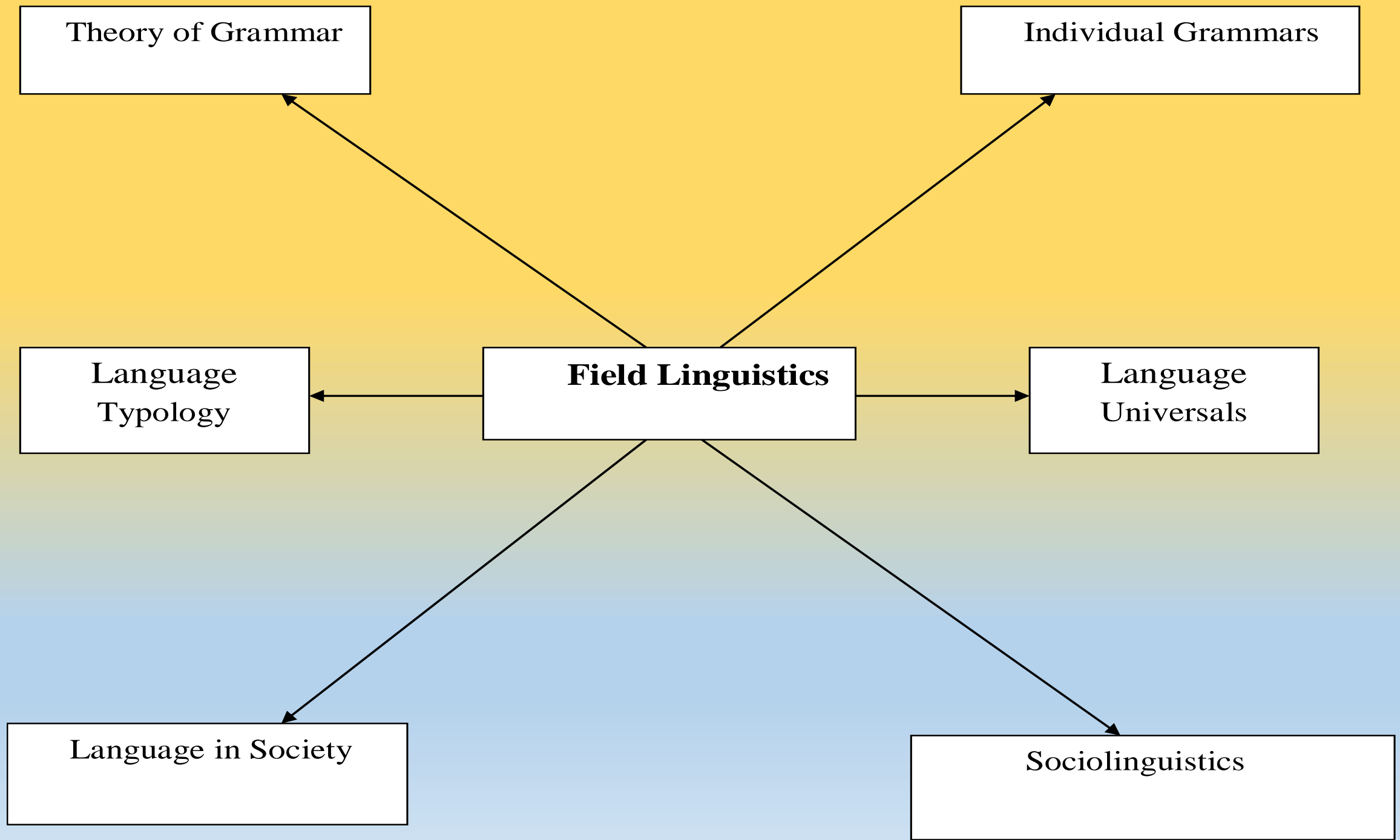
Introduction: What is Field Linguistics?

- This is a branch of Linguistics which introduces students the methodology of elicitation, transcription, organization, and analysis of linguistic data of a language for which no first-hand knowledge is available to students.
- The emphasis is to explore the characteristic features of the language on the basis of the first-hand collected data and to determine how different or similar the language is to the language/s generally known to us. This is achieved by using structured questionnaires, and by analyzing oral texts as well as if university facilitates, by spending sometime in the community.
- Students are trained to prepare small grammatical sketch and dictionary of the language by working on individual topics.

Why Field Linguistics?

- To capture the losing linguistic diversity across the globe.
- To document various aspects of language, not only grammar but also indigenous knowledge system.
- The inductive method that is employed in Field Linguistics help us understand why and how languages differ from each other and how some may not fall in the prototypical theoretical framework.
- To explore and discover what has not been explored yet. Every language has a unique lexicon and specified meaning which is appropriate to the society that the language is used in. It exposes us the real Life Science, i.e. language in its all manifestations situated in real world.

- It connects us to the origin of language and its historical development throwing light on contact between communities.
- Social and cultural information are contained in language structure which in turn informs us of the social patterns and hierarchical organization of a society, both at vertical and horizontal axis.
- Since most of the languages are unwritten, oral tradition that is encapsulated in language informs us of various myths, traditions, cultural beliefs and above all, various genres of oral literature.
- It is a data-driven research and very scientific in nature.
- Today we stand much more informed about tribal and lesser-known languages because many linguists have engaged themselves in conducting field work.



How does Field Linguistics add to our knowledge?

- New data in a particular language helps refine existing grammar and large data-base obtained by Field Linguists help understand typology of languages--the sameness and differences among them leading to identify language universals.
- The language structure obtained in Field Linguistics helps us to answer basic questions in sociolinguistics, viz., who speaks what to whom and why.

The Object of study

- It is the living language as a socio-semantic system, as a means of communication, as a means of identity marker, as well as a means of psychological behavior.
- Language is a living organism and thus should be studied in its live form, the way it is used in the society with all its variation and nuances.

Theory Neutral

- Theory-dependency more often binds the fieldworker's hands and restricts his/her vision.
- Theory should 'emerge' in the field.
- Dependency of a particular kind of a grammar should be avoided.
- In the past, Latin and Sanskrit grammars have been the role models, which are not appropriate for analysing tribal and lesser-known languages.

- Adopting Sanskrit and Latin grammars to describe Modern Indian languages may conceal several unusual features of the languages.
- For instance, [a] duplication of a word may indicate 'aspect' as attested in Tibeto-Burman languages. Or, [b] V2 phenomenon is the only way to indicate 'aspect' as in Modern Indo-Aryan languages, or [c] the distinction between 'word' and 'sentence' is almost non-existent in many Munda and Tibeto-Burman languages such as Santali and Meithei respectively. Or, [d] Noun and Verb categories may not be distinguishable in a clear-cut way as in Munda and Great Andamanese.

Basic Linguistic Theory (BLT)

- The theory of linguistics as a natural science—consists in study and comparison of the grammatical patterns of individual languages.
- The theory is based on the cumulative knowledge and insights of descriptive linguists; and any new description of a previously unanalyzed language could potentially modify the theory.
- Languages must be analyzed in their own terms.
- Investigator should possess basic knowledge of grammatical categories and their operation.

- Dixon argues that linguists should proceed from language data to description, and from the descriptions of many languages to theory. The theory is based on the cumulative knowledge and insights of descriptive linguists; and any new description of a previously unanalyzed language could potentially modify the theory, if some previously unidentified feature is found or if a feature is used in a previously unrecorded manner.

- Linguists maintains that no two languages are precisely the same in any feature, so that the theory must always be provisional. As a preliminary example, consider the ways languages have of marking possession of ‘knife’ (an object), ‘mother’ (a kin term), and ‘foot’ (a body part), ‘ailment’ (inside the body) ‘love’ (a psychological state), or ‘sweat’ (a body product)—all symbolized by ‘of’ in English but differently in Great Andamanese and many other tribal languages of Australia. This is the reason why we propose that languages must be analyzed in their own terms; descriptive labels and terminology may be derived from the theory and applied to phenomena in the language under analysis that are sufficiently similar to those in other languages.

Basic Word List (BWL) and Basic Sentence List (BSL)

- Since Sarah Gudschinsky introduced it in 1956 , this has become the sole reference word list by linguists to acquaint oneself to the sound system and word formation process of the target language.
- It gives information about the ecology of the location (land, jungle, mountains) where language is spoken.
- BWL is considered to be resistant to change through time and thus is used to test the hypothesis of various kinds as well as to establish the old forms of the language.
- There are equal number of nouns, adjectives and verbs. Some adverbs and quantifiers are also given, ensuring all parts of speech to be covered.

For Indian context

- Consult BWL specially designed for Indian languages by Abbi (2001: 246) by the name of 'The 300 Basic Word List'. This list is noun heavy as many Indian languages do not distinguish between noun and verb as stated earlier.
- Since it is easier to elicit nouns than verbs one can relate the elicited nouns to the activities to elicit associated verbs.
- One should add on to the list according to the local environment and social system of the speech community.

- Try to avoid eliciting prepositions ‘at’, ‘in’, and words such as ‘because’, ‘blow’, ‘dull’, ‘if’, ‘smooth’, and ‘turn’ given in the BWL. Some of these words cannot be elicited till the stage of eliciting phrases.
- Indian languages are very rich in describing locational positions of the object in question (for instance, for Santali locatives see Abbi 2001:90) and thus, English equivalent of ‘in’ should be waited till later stage.
- Basic sentence list (BSL) as designed by Abbi (2001), helps in writing a grammatical sketch. There are only 160 sentences but are framed in a way that the list covers all the typological features of Indian languages.

Methods of Elicitation

- Observation Method.
- Interview Method (the best method)
- Sending Questionnaire Method
- Documentary Source Method
- Videoing of unstructured events
- Audio recording of unstructured events
- Combinations of two/several methods

Challenges of Documenting a Dying Language and How to Overcome them

Challenges for a linguist in documenting such languages

- **INTERNAL**

- Denial syndrome**

- a) No one claims to speak the language
 - b) Each and every member will like to reinforce the lack of knowledge or memory about the heritage language.
 - c) No one considers it worth to speak, or help in documentation
 - d) The young generation is happy to lose the heritage language
 - e) No one considers that it is economically viable to revive the language
 - f) The small population forces the absence of verifiability across speakers

EXTERNAL

- g) Heterogeneous speech community increases the possibility of phonetic, lexical, semantic and syntactic variation.
- h) The administration considers the exercise of documentation a waste of time, efforts and money.
- i) The determination to give back to the society in the form of the intangible assets.

Solutions

- Make the whole **exercise attractive to the native speakers** by:
 - (a) educating the people about the importance and beauty of their heritage
 - (b) making the exercise of documentation participatory in nature.
The native speakers should be key players in this mission.
 - (c) giving them small economic help.

Conclusions

1. Field Linguistics is an important course to obtain the first-hand knowledge about those languages which are less studied, or to confirm the analyses of those which have already been studied.
2. We must proceed with Basic Linguistic Theory rather being trapped in a particular kind of grammar-pattern or a theory.
However, this does not preclude a thorough knowledge of Linguistics and Linguistic Theory.