

Tools and Technologies of Language Documentation
Prof. Bornini Lahiri and Prof. Dripta Piplai (Mondal)

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

IIT Kharagpur

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Lecture-20

LECTURE 20 : Best Practices in the Field: Dos and Don'ts

Welcome to the 20th lecture of the course, Tools and Technologies of Language Documentation. So today, we will not deliver any lecture. We will share our experiences today and this is more like a story, but from this story, I hope you will learn a lot because these are our own experiences and we ourselves have already learnt a lot from these experiences and that is why today, we want to share these experiences with you. So when we talk about field, there are lots of things which are related to it like, there are difficulties in reaching the field. So, do you remember how we reached Totopada when we were working on Toto? Yes, yes. So, it was quite difficult because Totopara is an isolated village and when we were travelling from the nearby station, before reaching Totopara, there are some stretches where there is no road.

So, we had to cross some forests and rivers to reach the village, the Totopara village. So, when once we went to a small town nearby and while coming back, the river started overflowing and we were stuck for some time. So, we had to remember all these difficulties; this is not a very easy task. And I think, you also remember the incident of our Purulia field trip, where when we were coming back from the field, there were no public transports available.

So, we had to request a truck to take us to our base station at Purulia town. So both the incidents can tell you that it is not very easy thing to go to a field; there are.. I mean can you also recall some more experiences? I actually had a very similar experience when I was visiting Hatigisha village in Darjeeling district for collecting data in Dhimal. So, it is a very nice, beautiful village at the foothills of Himalayas, but then there were no roads during that time.

So, it is like 7-8 years old experience that I am sharing, and then there was no roads and I had to actually travel in a open 'thela' type of thing, which you can call like, van, which actually people peddle and drive. So, this was totally open; there was nothing to hold and I was travelling through this broken path, which was not even a road and beside me, I could see another 'thela' was there, where a dead animal was being carried. So, that was the only means of travel there. Like humans also traveled in that; any luggage, any dead animals, they also traveled through that cart only. So that's how we actually traveled in Dhimal village.

And you can imagine with all the equipments that we carry, like recorder, tripod stand, camera, everything with us there. So I remember this because I was actually scared, that I might fall in the mud and all those muddy roads. But still, it was actually a learning experience. I could actually learn that how people travel daily like that in that area. And I could experience their lifestyle little bit, but I could experience that.

And that, I think is very, very important for us to actually know. And in the evenings, we were also scared that there will be elephants. So our sessions were limited. We could not collect data after 3 p.

m. So, like we could collect till 1, 2 and then we had to return back to our hotel because otherwise, there will be elephants and no one actually travels after 3 pm there. So in North Bengal, you can see lots of villages where there is a similar problem. Yeah, and probably this is the reason for which, many people do not visit the field area, instead they send questionnaire to some people. So, we should tell you that this is somehow unethical, you have to visit the target field area by yourself. Maybe you are sending your team members later for collecting some data, but it is important for you to visit the village even if there are difficulties, like the difficulties that we have shared, travel, etc.

So, you have to consider them and you have to accept the difficulties and travel to this field area. So, you have to observe a lot when you will go to the field, you have to observe experience like the locals and then collect your data. So, when we are talking about field visits, we are of course, emphasizing on the importance of field visit because it is not only about going, conducting sessions and coming back, it is also like for maybe for few days, you are experiencing the way the community lives their life, how they lead their life, and that can tell you a lot about their world view, how they are perceiving their environment. But do not confuse it with remote data collection, which is another method. It has its own methodology, so both are different methods and both can be combined together as well.

In many documentation works, in many NLP related works, only remote data collection

is there, but when we are talking about documenting a language, totally we cannot depend on remote data collection. Of course, it can be a major part of it, but if we are thinking about overall documentation of a particular language, field visits are very very important, as it is not only about the sessions, but also as Professor Dripta mentioned, it is also about observation, what you are observing. So, that is very very important. In the field, what can happen is that, you experience their lifestyle, what food they are eating, how they are living their life. So those food, you may not like, but you will know about it, what they are eating, what are they actually consuming and other various features of the local environment, which is important to observe and learn.

So at times, we also remember some incidents like you remember when we had to collect data at 6 am in the morning. So, we actually went for the data collection before brushing our teeth, we just woke up and went to meet the language experts to get our data. So, it is very important for you to respect the schedule of the community members. You should not design your or plan your data collection according to your schedule. It is very important to consider the expert's schedule.

So, when we had to go, I mean plan our data collection very early, we learnt about it beforehand. We knew that the community members start their day very early and accordingly, we planned our sessions. So, it is very important for us. Yes, we should not hurry. Sometimes what we do is that, we are there for a limited period of time, maybe 2 days/3 days.

So, what we tend to do is that, we are in hurry of collecting more and more data. So, like we have to finish a questionnaire and in that process, we make the language experts very tired. So for one day, they are sitting whole day through and giving us data. That can hamper their daily routine and at the same time, they can be very tired of that session. And what happens in those cases, when they get very tired they don't return to you next day.

So they will run away, they will escape, they will hide, they will not come in front of you. So those type of experiences can be there. So it's always good to take shorter sessions and always let them maintain their routine or they can stick to their routine and then, when they have leisure time, they can give you the time. And sometimes, there can be harsh climates as well. So it's always good to know your field prior your visit.

Know about the climate conditions. Sometimes you can't avoid it. Like you remember in Totopara, it was always raining. So we were in the habit of wearing raincoats. So every time we went for dinner, we three were there and then every time, we used to wear our raincoats before going out.

And it is a very beautiful village on the hills. So it's also dark at night. So what happened was that, one day as per our habit, we all wore our raincoats and we were out for dinner. We were walking through the path and then we realized that, there was no rain actually. But it had become our habit and that's why we all wore raincoats.

So, you have to actually adapt to the situation and it is very enriching, and also like an adventure. You get to learn lots of new things in the whole process. It is a new life that we can actually lead in the field. So, that is very very important. And as you have rightly mentioned, we should not hurry.

We need longer stretch for our data collection. So, if you are planning a field visit, do not plan a visit for only 2-3 days. You keep some time in hand, so that, you get some time to explore the area, explore the lifestyle of the people, observe from different domains. I hope you remember when we talked about observation. For example, we also observed the village markets.

So village markets are very important for language data collection, because you also get to know the inter-community languages that they use. So from market, we try to focus on language use, we go there and see how different people are talking to each other. If there are people from different communities coming to one market, we try to see how they are talking to each other, what is the choice of language. So, if you are in a hurry, you cannot do these things. If you make a plan for a few days, then you can go and see all these different domains and explore the language use.

And also, you can see new things, like if you remember in Mahali village, we used to see different types of baskets that we have never seen before; small, big and different types of beautiful baskets, made of bamboo. So that, you also get to see new one and you remember, we also bought some of these baskets, which are very nice looking one. So, you can experience all those and at the same time, you can ask them what do you call these, what are they made of. So, you will also get lots of information and at the same time, you also have your own experience of learning things. People become friends to you and they offer you lots of things to eat.

So things which might be very new to you. So maybe some local liquor, which you might not like to consume or some fruits, which you might not like. But what happens is that we should always accept what they are offering. We may not consume it, or we can politely refuse, but then, in most of the cases, we should accept their hospitality, like we offer tea, coffee when someone is there in our house. So that, that feeling, that should be respected.

Sometimes, I remember in one field, I actually got habituated of eating beetle nuts, because in every session, they would offer me and I used to like it and after some time, when they didn't offer me, then also, I asked for it because i was in the habit of consuming beetle nuts in that field. So these are actually very interesting experiences that we had in our fields. Will you also talk about the jackfruit incident? Yes. So in one of the fields, we were offered a big jackfruit. So I went early in the morning session to collect data and there was this very sweet old lady.

They were old couples and they offered me a big jackfruit and they said, "You can consume the whole." And it was big and it was too much for me. So slowly, I started eating it and then Dripta Ma'am joined me and together, they were bringing another one for her and I said, "No, let us share this one". And we started eating slowly and they were also talking, we were recording and it was a friendly session. It was not very professional but it was very friendly; they were offering, we were eating and we were also recording.

So at the same time, everything was happening. I will also remember one incident, where in Purulia, we were recording data and then there was an incident of fire. Yes, yes, I remember that.

So, in the fire.. So, there can be situations which are very unexpected. So, suddenly there was fire. So when we are talking about planned sessions, of course, there can be planning of the sessions but due to certain incidents, you should be flexible with your plans. You should not say like, "I have to finish this part of the questionnaire today, so by anyhow, I will finish it." It can't be like that, so if there was some emergency in the village, you should actually support them.

So, during in the Purulia village, which was very very dry, there was fire and whole, all of the villagers, they went to actually look at it and tried to put off the fire. So, we could not ask them then to sit with us and we cannot collect data. But what we could do was that, there was a little girl and she was talking to us. We tried to collect terms related to 'fire' from her. She was narrating the whole incident in the language to her mother.

So, with their permission, we actually recorded that. So, we got the real free discourse. So, it was the free narration that we got, we also got lots of terms related to 'fire'. So, you should know how to actually use the situation, without disturbing the speech community. Yeah, and it is very important for us to know about the community in detail and know about the situation and prepare accordingly.

For example, in some villages, there is no electricity. So, you have to get some backup

for that, like for Totopara, we knew beforehand that there are problems of electricity. So, we carried extra power bank and batteries, etcetera, because you know our data collection may get hampered because of this issue. So, you have to do some prior studies and get the information related to the locality, before you go to the field trip. And another thing you should remember that, you should never complain about it to the community members.

Like you are having difficulties and you are complaining it. No, you should not do. You are visiting their place and you should get all the backup for your own work instead of complaining. Yes, that is very important. Actually sometimes, people, when they do not get their home comfort, they tend to actually complain a lot about it.

Like I am not getting food of my choice, I am not getting proper beddings and all. So, or the bathrooms are dirty. There can be different types of complaints that we see. But when we are in the field, we need to adjust like the community members. As they are staying, we should learn to stay like that.

And in the process, you will learn lots of new things. You will learn their lifestyle. Like in Totopara, initially when we went, there was a very beautiful homestay where we were staying. We had equipments which were, of course, not our personal one; it was the University's equipments. They were very costly recorders. We had camera, video camera, tripod stands, lots of equipments.

And those were costly equipments. But when we were staying in the house, we came to know that they don't lock rooms. There is no system of locking. They don't have the concept of lock. They don't have the concept of lock, so we were asking initially, about how do we lock the doors or how do we latch the doors and they could not give us any answer because there is no concept of that. So initially, we were little scared to keep our things like that, because that is the effect of our own community, where we stay.

We are used to like where things get stolen and all. But in that community, they don't have a word for 'thief' or 'steal', because there is no concept of 'thief' or 'stealing'. So you can keep your things as you want and no one is going to look at it or touch it. If they touch, they will inform you that, "Okay, I touched it. I took it, I saw it, I kept it there". So it was a very new thing for us because we didn't have that concept.

And eventually, we came to know it. And we were so relieved that it's so good that you don't need to actually be very careful with your things. You don't need to always worry. You don't need to always lock and keep the keys safely. There is no need of these worries.

And we could just keep our things like that in the house. We could go out and nothing will happen. Nothing happens. Slowly, when we also explored the language, we came to know that they don't have a word for 'stealing', for 'thief', for 'dacoit'. For 'lock'.

So, these concepts are not their part of the language. So, they do not know what is actually stealing, why were we scared initially. So, that was actually a very good learning experience for us. We also, sort of, developed a very good relationship with the community gradually, when we start working with a community, working on a community and working with a community. This is very important. So, because I work with school teachers and children, I often get connected to them over phone calls.

I receive phone calls from the teachers of communities regarding the kind of difficulties that they are finding in schools. Also students, who ask for suggestions. So, this is a very regular incident because I have suddenly, I mean it is not very sudden. I visited this village for Rajbanshi language for years and gradually, developed this relationship with the community. So it is important that, you develop a rapport and also a good relationship with the community.

So at times, we see that they also invite us for non-academic occasions, like family functions and we go there. So, this is beyond academic. So, you need to maintain a friendly relationship and develop it gradually with the community. Yes, and that can actually help you at different level.

So now for many of our projects, we include the community members. They can come here to validate data, to tell us what is wrong with our data or what is right there, to correct us. They are there also to be part of our various academic and non-academic programs. And with their help, we can also know a lot about our approaches. How should we approach data collection? How should we improve our methodologies? So, they can help us also in designing our questionnaires. So for one of the projects, we have actually involved a Toto community member.

She was there to help us design the questionnaire and her inputs were very valuable, which we have incorporated in our process. So, when there is a relationship with the community members, that can actually help you the overall work of language documentation because they can be the best guide to help you with their language. Yeah, also for the pedagogical materials that I develop, the community members constantly give input and also, we include the voices and suggestions of the community members, so that we can develop better materials. So, I will tell you another important aspect of data collection, which is when you are traveling to the field, you have to be aware of the

gatekeepers of languages. So, what do we mean by gatekeepers? I also explained it in one of the lecture.

So, this is something like you will find some community members, who are kind of self-proclaimed leaders or self-proclaimed gatekeepers of languages. So, you have to keep this in mind for different communities, that you have to avoid this. Because if one person is asking you to collect data from a particular area, from particular people, there can be some propaganda behind it, which you may avoid. So, I will tell you one particular aspect of it. If you are collecting data from one selected village, maybe the community has started developing a very new standardization process, maybe you will miss the linguistic varieties in other villages.

So, you will be focusing data from one village as the gatekeeper suggested you and you will not get the variation which exists in other areas of the same field. So, this is very important. Yes, and sometimes, what you will see is that some people, especially in some communities, you will see men, they might not allow you to talk to their wives. Or children, they might say you that no, they don't know anything about the language. So that way, your data can be biased because there are ideal situations which some of the members will talk about.

So, how they perceive the language? It might not be the real scenario. It is their perception or it is what they want to spread or it is their notion of ideal concept. When we are documenting a language, we want to cover all the aspects of the language. Only focusing on the so called, standard form or only focusing on the ideal notion is not helpful for us. So, they might say that, "Don't talk to my ladies of the house, don't talk to my wife, she doesn't know the language".

She is not formally educated. She is not formally educated. That is very important. Yes.

So they can say that. Or "Don't talk to the older people. They are not literate". But that doesn't matter. If they are speaking the language, that means they can help us. So sometimes, those type of influence, we need to avoid and that is actually very common that we have found. Sometimes there are members, which are again like those self-proclaimed leaders, who want to act as a leader and try to save their community, when they think you are a threat to the community. So in those cases, you need to actually explain them that you are not a threat, rather your outputs can help the community to maintain their language or revitalize the language.

So, I remember one of the incidents, where we were on the field, we were collecting data and then suddenly, a young man appears and he says that, "No, no you people cannot do

these things". So basically, "What are you here for?" And we were asking them to sign the ethical forms, so I have talked about the ethical forms. So now, when they were signing the ethical forms, this person says "Don't sign, they are actually here to take all our properties".

So and in fact, he came with the bamboo sticks and all. He would have beaten us. So he wanted us to leave the village. But then, we sat with him and we made him realize, that we are not here to take their properties or harm the community. We are only researchers, who want to work on the language. And that way, he actually got convinced thankfully, and we could proceed with our work. So, you can face certain situations like this, where you need to actually tap them very carefully.

So, you cannot make them angry, because they might influence the community members and then community members will not talk to you. You can make them understand what is the whole process and sometimes, as Professor Dripta told you, that some people, they might try to take you towards some other people or they might lead you towards something. So, they might lead you towards a particular village, they might ask you to talk only to the teachers of the community and say "Do not talk to the students, they do not know anything or they are from different backgrounds." So, there can be cases like that, but we need to avoid those situations and try to document overall aspect of the community, not focusing on any one particular aspect as much. So, we hope that you have learnt or at least, received some clue about how to go for a field trip and what are the do's and don'ts that you have to remember.

We talked about the ethical concerns. So, you have to keep the ethical concerns in mind; what you should do and what you should not do, while collecting the data. You should think about a well planned session. And of course, you need to do rapport-building with the community members, before you start collecting the data. You just cannot suddenly go and start collecting the data.

You have to develop some rapport and then collect the data, which you should maintain also. Yes, you have to maintain that. It is not that your data collection is done and then the rapport is of no use. And as Professor Lahiri already mentioned, you should not make very long sessions because long sessions can be tiring and also, you should have respect for the schedule of the language experts and plan your sessions accordingly. And we have to avoid certain propaganda, that we always find on different fields and rather stick on the variation that we find in terms of area, in terms of different layers of the community. And we have to accept the hospitality that the community offers to us and we should not refuse if they are offering something to us, we have to accept it.

And finally, we have to adjust to the situation, whatever it is; maybe there is some electricity issue, maybe there is excessive rain or excessive heat. I remember collecting data in excessive heat in Purulia last year, so we had to prepare ourselves. And also, you have to accept that there are different kinds of lifestyle among the different communities. You have to learn from them and then you have to plan accordingly. So, I hope this session is useful for you as we shared some of our experiences from the field and please try to use them when you collect data. Thank you! Thank you!