

# Report on Language Analysis Workshop Winter Storm 2013

## Summary

### Goals

The goal of this workshop was to give participants (particularly non-linguists) some experience with an unfamiliar language, focusing on methods of eliciting data to investigate the structure of a language. We had 35 participants who worked in 4 groups, each focused on a particular domain: Phonology, Pronouns, Word Order, Tense/Aspect/Mood. Each group had five 30-minute sessions working with a native speaker of Zazaki Kurdish to elicit data. Participants were also encouraged to consider and discuss the possible contributions of different subdisciplines in the language sciences to language analysis of this type.



### Outcomes

- The workshop was successful in providing some brief, intensive field methods experience to both linguists and nonlinguists.
- Giving participants some initial information about the language and allowing them to use existing resources and descriptions of the language enabled them to examine a range of different topics.
- All groups worked effectively with the consultant and made significant progress in describing linguistic features of Zazaki.
- Groups devised varying approaches and methods for eliciting data.
- Some groups were successfully able to incorporate interdisciplinary experience and methods in their work.

### Recommendations

- More observation and interaction between groups would be beneficial and can easily be incorporated in future.
- Different elicitation methods should be modeled more explicitly at the beginning of the workshop.
- Advertising and presentation should be re-considered to encourage more participants from outside Linguistics.
- The experience of the most successful interdisciplinary groups can be taken as a model for future workshops; capitalizing on the interdisciplinary nature of UMD's language science community is an important goal.

# Workshop Planning and Preparation

The organizers had several meetings starting a month before the workshop. The three organizers were all linguists with experience doing fieldwork (and/or elicitation) on different languages.

## 1. Selection of a language and possible topics for investigation

### Language choice

In selecting a target language, we took into consideration the following:

- availability of a language consultant
- availability of documentation on the language (see below)
- appeal of the language to participants with different interests; (should be interesting enough to attract participants but feasible to work on in a very short time period—no complex tone systems!)

Under-documented languages have both advantages and disadvantages. The availability of at least a basic grammatical description is important for being able to design materials and elicitation plans, and allows participants to make use of the grammar if desired; on the other hand, if the language is heavily documented, it may be too easy for groups to answer their questions without really focusing on elicitation sessions (unless they are instructed not to use outside materials), and groups may feel that their work is less useful since the “correct” answers are already out there in published materials. In addition, even very basic work on an under-documented language is potentially valuable beyond the workshop. Zazaki is under-documented but there are a range of online resources available, and it worked very well as the target language for this workshop.

### Topics

We considered which topics would be interesting and feasible for both linguists and non-linguists. We selected topics and questions for our elicitation plans after reading a grammatical description of Zazaki (Todd 1985). Topics covered (what we expected to be) a range of degrees of complexity. Some topics were specifically designed for “linguist” groups and others for “non-linguist” or “mixed” groups. We selected features of the language which appeared to be interesting but not excessively complex, particularly for “non-linguist” groups.

We decided on Pronouns, Phonetics/Phonology, Tense-Aspect-Mood, and Word Order. We also considered other possibilities, such as deixis, negation, scrambling, case and gender, and number.

## 2. Resources and elicitation plans for participants to use

We created a Google folder for storing documents and resources. We used this initially to allow collaborative creation of workshop resources, and then later to share the materials with participants.

Since each topic area is potentially very large (e.g. Phonology!), organizers created an **elicitation plan** for each topic so that participants could have some clear ideas of questions they could attempt to answer and how they might approach elicitation. Participants were told they did not have to follow the plan closely, but could use it as a starting point for their elicitation. An example (*Phonology elicitation plan*) is attached. In each elicitation plan, we included the following sections: goals, some interdisciplinary discussion questions, potential tasks for each day, and further questions to think about.

We also created “**cheat sheets**” to clarify basic linguistic concepts and terminology for non-linguists. These contained explanations and simple examples. For example, in order to investigate whether two sounds are contrastively different in the target language, participants need the concepts and vocabulary to discuss phonemes and allophones. An example (*Phonology cheat sheet*) is attached.

Finally, we put together a **participant guide** that contained the following information:

- General schedule
- Elicitation time table
- Guidelines for elicitation (designing questions, posting an elicitation plan, selecting a leader, selecting a note-taker)
- Information about what to include in the final presentation

We made use of the following resources in preparing elicitation plans and cheat sheets:

Max Planck, Typological tools for field linguistics  
<http://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/tools-at-lingboard/tools.php>

Useful basic books about field methods and language description and analysis:  
Thomas Payne (1997). *Describing Morphosyntax*  
Claire Bowern (2008). *Linguistic Fieldwork: A Practical Guide*

### **3. Introductory material for the first workshop session**

We created a powerpoint presentation for the first day to give an overview of the plans for the workshop and to introduce basic word order, phonetics/phonology and orthography of the language. Given time limitations, carefully selecting what background information about the language would be most helpful to participants is important. This depends on the chosen topics and the organizers’ understanding of the grammar of the language. For example, in Zazaki, the case system interacts with tense, so we judged that participants in the Pronouns and Tense-Aspect-Mood groups would need some basic information about case.

### **4. Meeting with the language consultant**

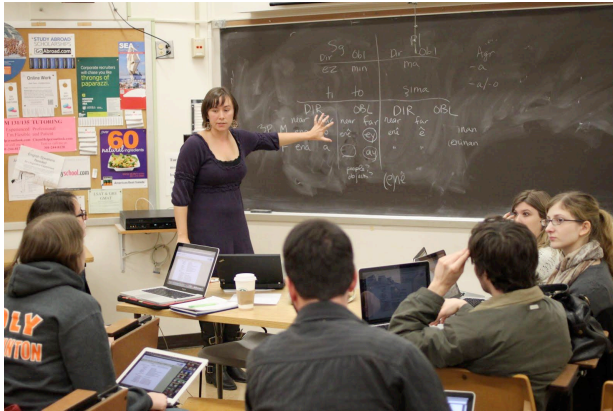
We had a meeting with the language consultant a week before the workshop. This was important for a number of reasons: to orient him to the structure and goals of the workshop; to learn a little more about his background in the language and his level of experience as a language consultant; to complete pre-workshop paperwork; and to get a sense of how comfortable he would be answering elicitation-type questions. We also obtained some additional benefits from this meeting: our consultant recommended some other resources on the language and provided us with a word-list and some articles about the current status of Zazaki in Turkey.

### **5. Payment for the language consultant**

Some basic paper work had to be done prior to the workshop to arrange payment for the language consultant. This should be started well ahead of time (with the help of whoever administers the funding) so that the agreement with the consultant is clearly established before the workshop.

### **6. Online announcement of the workshop**

A brief description of the workshop was posted for potential participants. (This is discussed further below in Outcomes and Recommendations.)



Pronouns group hard at work.

## Evaluation and Recommendations

### Evaluation of the Basic Model

One way in which this workshop was experimental and differed from traditional field methods classes was in providing participants with some basic information about the structure of the language plus optional access to further documentation. For the most part, this was successful and effectively avoided the problem common to traditional field methods classes of having phonetics and phonology take an entire semester.

However, it was also definitely challenging for the participants NOT working on phonology to deal with a very incomplete knowledge of the language's sound system, particularly since the consultant's dialect did not fully match published descriptions. On the other hand, this worked out well for the phonology group: they had some reasonable expectations about the sound system but there was plenty for them to discover. Finding a balance here is challenging, and this problem cannot be completely avoided.

We do think this model is useful because it allowed for participants to work on a range of topics, but our experience also suggests that when choosing a language for an intensive field methods workshop, the complexity of the language's phonetics/phonology is something to bear in mind.

Participant feedback generally supports our assessment of this model as effective: 14 of 19 survey respondents agreed that they learned new skills for working with unfamiliar languages; 15 of 19 felt that they were able to contribute effectively to their group; and 13 of 19 agreed that they would like to participate in similar activities in future. Comments were mostly positive, though one respondent found the workshop *"too broad to be useful"*. Some representative comments:

- *"I was a bit disappointed that non-linguists did not participate more, but I was very impressed with how much the workshop managed to do in just two weeks. I think it was very well organized...."*
- *"I think this went very well especially given the inherent difficulties in this sort of work. There was enough structure provided by the organizers that if your group needed help, there was scaffolding there to assist them. There was also enough leeway for unique approaches [to] the problem to emerge."*
- *"It was occasionally hard to follow and understand the complexity and importance of the topics that my group mates bring forth; however, because I tried to follow the Zazaki informant's response to my group's questions, I still learned a lot about my group's topic...."*

### **Recruiting and engaging different participant groups**

Recruitment is clearly an area to consider carefully in planning a similar workshop in future. One of our main problems was in recruiting the full range of participants for whom the workshop was intended. We were prepared for and would have liked to have included more people from outside of Linguistics. Addressing this in the advertising and recruitment for a future workshop would be essential, particularly because the intensive nature of the session meant that anyone who missed the first day had a hard time catching up and participating.

The workshop seems to have suffered from some PR issues. The session was planned to address two main perceived issues in the IGERT program: (1) that there was a chasm between linguists' and others' knowledge of language and languages; and (2) that there were missed opportunities to truly discuss and think about linguistic diversity at events like Winter Storm. Initial conceptualizations of this workshop seemed to go against moves to make the language science community less centered around the Linguistics department. A field methodology-focused Language Analysis workshop was considered to be a more suitable alternative to a basic course in linguistic theory. Winter Storm organizers thought that a hands-on approach to analyzing an unfamiliar language would serve as an object lesson in linguistic diversity. Additionally, the committee thought that allowing the participants to "discover" certain linguistic features would be a way to introduce terminology or concepts from linguistics without presupposing any kind of analytic or theoretical background. It is possible that the previous perception of the Language Analysis Workshop as an imperialistic move made by the Linguistics department may have repelled some participants. Some participants reported that the brief online description of the workshop sounded very linguistic.

Moving forward, the relative success of the Language Analysis Workshop may have helped to changed the opinions of those who found the workshop distasteful. In particular, we hope that emphasizing the success of the workshop's most interdisciplinary group (the Phonology group) and trying to incorporate successful methods from this group in future workshops can help to address this problem. When planning this workshop, the organizers had ideas about how participants from different disciplines might contribute to fieldwork, but few concrete examples. Coming out of the workshop, we have some specific experience of how interdisciplinary groups might work together (see next section).

### **Effectiveness of mixed vs. linguist-only groups**

The most successful interdisciplinary group was the Phonology group. Although they were a fairly large group, they managed to take advantage of diversity of the group the most and each person contributed significantly to the elicitation sessions. For example:

- participants with more computational expertise wrote simple scripts to extract possible minimal pairs from the dictionary/grammar;
- participants with experience constructing and running experiments (incl. working with children) contributed to developing more elaborate elicitation contexts to obtain subtle judgements from the speaker;
- participants who did not have a background in linguistics listened more at the beginning and gradually contributed more in the elicitation planning over the course of the workshop as they were able to see how to apply their skills.



The phonology group being large yet effective...

The more linguist-centric groups accomplished a lot, but seemed to have relatively little interest in our prods to think about "interdisciplinary field methods". One non-IGERT linguist said he found the rest of the discussion about methodology and interdisciplinary approaches to be "pointless".

- Maybe having predetermined "linguist" and "non-linguist" groups allowed such attitudes to develop. Having more mixed groups may allow non-linguists to keep linguists more on task, and less free to simply pursue their own pet theoretical question. This would require adjustments to the elicitation plans and probably some imposed distribution of participants among groups to ensure a balance of members with different backgrounds.
- Alternatively, perhaps we should have allowed more of our scheduled time to be used for full-group discussion so that the linguists would have been able to hear others' points of view a little more extensively. Given the breakdown of participants, this was slightly challenging since linguists were in the majority. Again, pre-workshop advertising and recruitment would be essential to address this.

Ideally, in the future we would hope to convince more potential participants that the workshop is intended for and should be useful to people from all language science backgrounds, especially (but not only!) those outside of linguistics.

### **Keeping participants engaged**

The workshop would have benefited from some additional mechanisms for keeping group members responsible and engaged throughout the two weeks. One group (the TAM group) more-or-less disintegrated during the workshop, with 3 of the 5 members essentially disappearing (due only partly to schedule conflicts and illness)

- At the risk of adding more responsibilities to the groups, maybe some kind of intermediate "check-up" or mini-presentation would be a good idea.
- Alternatively, participant engagement might be increased by incorporating more opportunities for the groups to talk and observe one another and comment on one another's findings, thus making the entire workshop more of a group project. Since this is a change we have already suggested to address other issues covered in this report, we hope that increasing engagement might be a side-benefit.

### **Group size**

Related to the previous issue of engagement, group size seemed to be a tricky issue. TAM was the smallest group and did not fare well, and Phonology was the largest group and was perhaps the most successful; however, the two intermediate-size groups seemed to have one or two leaders who took responsibility for a large proportion of the work, so attitudes and personalities clearly played an important role. One possibility is to require that each member of the group



serve as an elicitation leader during at least one session, including assembling the elicitation plan (from other group members' suggestions). Dividing into smaller groups would give each participant increased responsibility; however, this could lead to the TAM group's situation with missing members, and would also increase the problem of limited time working with the consultant.

### **Elicitation methods**

One participant commented that she wanted to try new elicitation methods, but felt that she was overwhelmed with understanding her group's findings and staying abreast of the conversation. Although we think more opportunities for the different groups to communicate with and observe one another may help with this problem, perhaps modeling a few techniques at the beginning of the workshop might encourage participants to be more brave in their elicitations. Also, providing some "off the shelf" resources could help as well, such as making available some simple props or blueprints for skirts, or images for eliciting natural speech.

### **Time-scale**

The workshop was very efficient in that it gave a large number of participants a chance to experience some basic fieldwork in a very short time frame. However, given the number of participants, the time limitations were definitely challenging, and some people felt they were just getting into the swing of their topic when the workshop ended. Either a slightly longer time frame or smaller numbers of participants might address this source of frustration.

Another possibility is to plan for some ongoing opportunity to work on the language with a consultant. This, of course, depends on the availability of a consultant and funds; however, if participants had the option of treating their work during the workshop as a starting point rather than a self-contained project, the workshop experience might be more satisfying. One respondent to the Winter Storm survey said: *"I do think that people might have been more excited about the work if there had been some sort of possibility of continuing the research beyond the workshop. If such an opportunity were to arise, I would be very interested in participating with others who wanted to continue work on Zazaki."*



Everyone loves Zazaki!