Elicitation with verbal and nonverbal stimuli in language documentation
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The presentation addresses two questions: (i) the role of non-verbal representations in linguistic elicitation; and (ii) the role of elicitation with verbal and non-verbal representations in language documentation, understood in the narrow sense of Himmelmann (1998). Bohnemeyer (2014) develops a classification of seven types of linguistic elicitation techniques based on an analysis of the principal components of elicitation: a stimulus, a task, and a response. The stimulus may be a target language utterance, a contact language utterance, a linguistic representation of some state of affairs, a nonverbal representation of some state of affairs, or a combination of any of the above. The response may consist of a target language utterance, a judgment of wellformedness, truth conditions, etc., or again a linguistic (e.g., paraphrase) or nonlinguistic (e.g., demonstration, acting out) representation of some state of affairs. Possible tasks can be defined as mappings between stimulus and response types.

In the context of this classification, nonverbal stimuli serve to control or constrain the content of linguistic utterances. They can be used in production tasks, but also in judgment tasks. For the latter purpose, they are paired with utterances that can then be assessed for how well they represent the nonverbal stimuli. The presentation will illustrate with examples from the author’s field research.

Language documentation prioritizes the collection of corpora of speech samples that are maximally diversified in terms of their coverage of speech event types and genres of discourse. However, documentary corpora should also maximize the amount of information about the grammar and lexicon of the language that can be recovered from them. While elicitation stimuli and tasks are inherently designed to address research questions that go beyond documentation, there are elicitation tools that permit the rapid collection of rich, multi-faceted, and multi-purpose information about large swaths of the lexicon and grammar. Three examples will be discussed: the Tense-Mood-Aspect (TMA) Questionnaire of Dahl (1985); the Topological Relations Picture Series (Bowerman & Pederson ms.); and the Cut & Break Clips (Bohnemeyer, Bowerman, & Brown 2001). It is argued that speech samples collected with the help of such tools permit the induction of lexical and morphosyntactic patterns in a more systematic fashion than speech samples that draw exclusively on spontaneous and ‘staged’ discourses. This systematicity is at least in part owed to the tools’ (semi-)systematic coverage of certain conceptual domains.

Bowerman, M. & E. Pedersen. (Ms.) Cross-linguistic perspectives on topological spatial relationships. Manuscript, Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics.