Bowern, *Linguistic Fieldwork*, Chapter 11: "Ethical Field Research" (in folder, 20 pages—full book is there too)

Ethical linguistic fieldwork requires accountability to speech communities. This chapter focuses on the responsibilities researchers have toward speakers and their languages. What is acceptable in one community may not be in another. Linguists therefore need to navigate issues of consent, data ownership, and community expectations very carefully.

An issue, maybe even *the* issue, is control over the research process. Many minority languages are considered communal property, a reality that greatly complicates assumptions about permission and access. Researchers can't automatically claim the right to document, analyze, or publish materials without engaging the community. Ownership of recordings, transcripts, and dictionaries is a particularly sensitive topic, as linguistic documentation can have long-term implications for cultural preservation, education, and even legal rights. Some communities welcome linguistic work as a tool for revitalization, while others see outside documentation as extractive or even harmful. This needs to be handled sensitively and faithfully.

The perhaps other major issue is consent in linguistic fieldwork, which goes far beyond signing forms. Speakers must have a clear understanding of how their words will be used and whether they have the power to revise, restrict, or withdraw their contributions. The framework of ongoing consent is central. Researchers ought to consider how their work will be shared, who will benefit, and whether the project aligns with community goals. In some cases, returning knowledge to the community can help balance the power dynamics.

Ethical challenges in linguistic research don't have easy solutions. Dilemmas, such as conflicting perspectives within a community, really exist. The chapter ends by urging linguists to approach their work with humility, transparency, and a willingness to adapt. Fieldwork is about relationships—building trust, ensuring reciprocity, and recognizing that language is not excised from the people who speak it.

Hale et al. (1992), "Endangered languages: On endangered languages and the safeguarding of diversity" (in folder, 40 pages)

Hale et al. (1992) see language loss as a major problem, not just a natural shift. They push back against the idea of professional neutrality, arguing that to lose a language is to lose a

way of thinking. For them, languages contain unique and irreplaceable knowledge, traditions, and cultural insight.

They give real-world examples to show both the risks of language decline and ways communities have fought back. They talk about programs like the Hualapai Bilingual/Bicultural Program and the Rama Project, which have helped preserve and teach endangered languages. They also highlight the role of institutions in making sure languages have the support they need.

While Ladefoged (see below) argues that linguists should respect speaker choices, Hale et al. take a different view. They say speakers may not always see the full effects of language loss, and linguists should do more than just record languages before they disappear. Instead, they call for active support, working with communities to make sure their languages remain part of daily life. They end with a clear message: language loss is not just about words (as the videos also explain); it's about identity, knowledge, and cultural survival.

Ladefoged (1992), "Another View of Endangered Languages" (in folder, 3 pages)

Ladefoged's note challenges certain assumptions about language preservation, arguing that the loss of languages shouldn't be viewed as catastrophes by default. He provides a counterpoint to Hale et al. (1992), who strongly advocate for the preservation of *all* languages, and instead calls for linguists to respect the diversity of attitudes among speakers themselves.

He refers to his fieldwork to show that language preservation is not always a priority. In Tanzania, tribal languages are sometimes seen as a threat to national cohesion. Among the Toda, younger generations accept the decline as the price of admission to modern India. While some think of their community's language as sacred, others see it as a tool. Thus, researchers should not impose their own priorities onto communities. While acknowledging the importance of *documenting* linguistic diversity, he prioritizes professional detachment. Ladefoged concludes by arguing that the linguist's role is to provide an objective assessment of linguistic situations.

***Word Hunters* (2018) ed. Hannah Sarvasy**

Available here with NYU library authentication. No specific chapters are even slightly required, but we're providing this link in case you want to read about what fieldwork is like on the ground. Here's the publisher's overview of the book:

In *Word Hunters*, eleven distinguished linguists reflect on their career-spanning linguistic fieldwork. Over decades, each has repeatedly stood up to physical, intellectual, interpersonal, intercultural, and sometimes political challenges in the pursuit of scientific knowledge. These scholar-explorers have enlightened the world to the inner workings of languages in remote communities of Africa (West, East, and South), Amazonia, the Arctic, Australia, the Caucasus, Oceania, Siberia, and East Asia. They report some linguistic eureka moments, but also discuss cultural missteps, illness, and the other challenges of pursuing linguistic data in extreme circumstances. They write passionately about language death and their responsibilities to speech communities. The stories included here—the stuff of departmental and family legends—are published publicly for the first time.

[TedTalk](#) (15 mins)

April Charlo's talk begins with a simple observation: we don't remember entering the world, but we arrive as blank slates, learning concepts through experience and language. She illustrates this with a story about her niece, who, in a moment of discovery, picks up a bug and confidently declares it as hers—"my bug." This small, everyday moment reflects something profound: the way we absorb and test ideas, like ownership, within our social environments. Charlo initially affirmed her niece's understanding, reinforcing the concept just as others had done for her. But later, while working with a neighboring Indigenous language, she hit a linguistic roadblock: she was told she could not say "my water." This was not a grammatical issue—it was conceptual. In that language, ownership didn't extend to the natural world. The realization unsettled her. Had her ancestors even had the concept of ownership before colonization? Had she been unconsciously imposing an external worldview onto her own language?

She set out to investigate and found that her own people's language had traditionally used "my" only in contexts of relationships—"my mother," "my child"—not possession. Then she learned something even more striking: the root of her community's word for water, sewlk, meant "to ask." Water wasn't something to own; it was something to request, to show respect toward. This discovery reframed not just her understanding of a single word but of an entire

worldview—one where land, water, and nature weren't commodities but relationships. And that changed everything. If language revitalization is about more than just words, if it's also about recovering ways of thinking and being, then it's not just a linguistic task—it's a way of restoring what was taken. In that moment, Charlo saw her work differently. It wasn't just about teaching people to speak again; it was about offering them a different way to live, one that didn't just inherit the colonial paradigm but actively reimagined what was possible.

[Revitalization Strategies Video](#) (90 mins)

Dr. X̱'unei Lance Twitchell begins his talk by proposing a shift in perspective: language revitalization isn't just about bringing back a way of speaking—it's rebuilding ways of living. He describes a moment that captures the weight of this work: an elder, after speaking in Tlingit for the first time in decades, goes, "I haven't spoken like this since my father passed." To Twitchell, this is the beating heart of revitalization—not just the mechanics of grammar and lexicon, but the restoration of memory and identity.

He explains: language loss doesn't happen in isolation. It's the result of generations of forced assimilation, colonial policies, and systemic devaluation of Indigenous knowledge. Boarding schools and government mandates ensured that children grew up without their ancestral languages, severing transmission. This, he argues, is why revitalization efforts must be more than academic exercises—their extinguishing was anything but academic.

In terms of strategies, Twitchell sees immersion as perhaps the most effective tools for rebuilding speakership. Language nests for young children, structured mentorship for adults, and everyday use in public space all help shift Indigenous languages from *studied* to *spoken*. He says it's critical to fairly compensate fluent speakers for their teaching, in order to create sustainable ways for elders to pass down knowledge. He also emphasizes that learners and new speakers alike need chances to use the language in real contexts, ones with stakes attached to them—whether through casual conversation groups, signage in public spaces, or digital platforms. Technology is a crucial tool, and he points to learning apps, social media engagement, and AI-assisted translation—but cautions that documentation alone won't accomplish a revitalization. Without active use, recordings and dictionaries risk becoming stale artifacts.

He further argues that policy change is essential for ensuring long-term sustainability, as oppressive doctrines is what led to the endangerment in the first place. He wants Indigenous languages to be recognized in schools—and to be not just elective courses, but core subjects. He pushes for funding that supports language teachers and develops curriculum materials. Visibility matters too—having Indigenous languages on street signs, in media, and in governance reinforces their presence in public life.

Twitchell also recognizes the deeper social and psychological barriers communities face, especially after generations of being told their languages were impractical, outdated, or inferior. He stresses the importance of normalizing Indigenous languages, celebrating them as vibrant, functional, and necessary for the future. He sees this work as healing—a way to reconnect people with their histories, their families, and themselves. His goal is clear: future generations shouldn't just remember their languages; they should live in them.

[Decolonizing Revitalization Video](#) **(120 mins)**

The speakers explore how colonization has reshaped not just Indigenous languages, but entire ways of seeing the world. Language, they emphasize, is a framework for understanding relationships, ownership, and existence.

The first speaker challenges the idea of fixed borders, explaining how Indigenous territories were traditionally shared spaces, shaped by movement and relationships. Colonial systems imposed new rules—mapped land into property lines, divided governance into external legal structures—and in doing so, disrupted their ways of life. April Charlo builds on this, tracing how colonial influence has seeped into Indigenous languages. She describes how English concepts like "ownership" have been mapped onto Indigenous words, shifting meanings in ways that reinforce individual possession. A word that once expressed a relationship—between a person and the land, between water and those who drink it—becomes something static, something owned. Confer her TedTalk for the moment of "my bug."

She digs deeper: some Indigenous languages, she notes, never had words for "ownership" in the European sense—or for concepts like "love" or "thank you." Not because they lacked emotion or gratitude, but because relationships weren't framed transactionally. Instead, these

languages reflected a different kind of social structure, one built on reciprocity, responsibility, and deep interconnection.

The conversation expands beyond language, turning to decolonization itself as a process of regenerating Indigenous knowledge systems. One speaker compares it to a forest slowly regrowing after destruction. Just as land restores itself in layers, so too does culture. They push back against modern legal definitions of Indigenous identity, arguing that these are colonial impositions that define people by bureaucratic categories.

Ultimately, the speakers insist that language revitalization cannot stop at words and grammar. They describe how language shapes not just perception, but physical and emotional well-being. Colonial languages impose limiting beliefs that weaken both individuals and communities. Through storytelling, cultural memory, and reclamation, they call for a shift toward Indigenous thought. The goal isn't just to bring back endangered languages; it's to restore them with their original worldviews intact—because to revitalize a language is to revitalize a way of life.