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Language Consulting is Standard Professional Practice

1. Purpose

To explain the Research Ethics Board exemption for Language Consulting, following the following suggestion (from *Giving Voice to the Spectrum* “Exemptions from Ethics Review for ‘Standard Professional Practice’” pg.25):

[...] the TCPS might recognize that a given set of social conditions – where a researcher gathers data from other citizens in social exchanges that everyone in that society has a right to engage in [...] – constitutes a routine activity and should not require ethics review ... REB involvement would be triggered only when the participants in the research are indeed in the relationship of researcher and ‘human subject’;

Language Consulting (LC) should be recognised as Standard Professional Practice not involving ‘human subjects’, and as such should be exempt from Research Ethics Board review under the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS). The purpose of this document is to explain Language Consulting and how it can pose no conceivable harm to participants.

Linguistic research is often a matter of observation with minimal interference or intervention. Opportunities for such observation may arise in unexpected and unpredictable scenarios: conferences, classrooms, amongst family, friends and/or colleagues, or in more expected contexts, such as during field consultations or data elicitation sessions. We will discuss such scenarios with examples that will demonstrate the ubiquitous and frequently spontaneous nature of Language Consulting.

2. Examples of Language Consulting

The goal of linguistic research is to describe a person’s competence in understanding and producing language. In order to study this competence, linguists use a number of methods, including for example, observation of spontaneous speech, sociolinguistic interviews and surveys, controlled experiments and grammaticality judgment elicitation. Grammaticality judgment elicitation is used to draw on linguistic intuitions that all speakers have about their native language or about any other languages of which they are a competent adult speaker. Linguists use these intuitions as a key to studying linguistic competence for the following reasons (among others): First, by eliciting judgments, linguists can examine sentence types that rarely occur in spontaneous speech. For example, for most English speakers, the first sentence below is acceptable, while the second is not (a ‘*’ indicates an ungrammatical sentence).

- (1) What did you file before examining?
- (2) *I filed the book before examining.

English speakers share this intuition despite the relative rarity of sentences such as (1). Second, we can obtain information that is never available in normal language use (or in written grammars) – negative information (forms that are not an acceptable part of the language). Thus, while speakers consistently reject (2) above, this information could not

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be observed without asking for a judgment. Third, when observing naturalistic speech it is difficult to distinguish between performance errors (slips of the tongue, incomplete utterances) and grammatical production.

Traditionally, linguists and grammarians have used their own linguistic intuitions about language. Grammaticality judgment elicitation has become more important since Chomsky's work (beginning in the 1950s) as a means of investigating a broader range of language data. Typically, grammaticality judgment elicitation occurs when a linguist is studying a language of which she is not a native speaker. In these instances, the linguist may work with a language *consultant* (sometimes called an *informant*, see Section 4.1 below). The role of the consultant is that of a competent language user; as such, the consultant will be a non-impaired adult speaker of the language in question. Like a teacher or translator, a consultant provides expert knowledge about her language. Similarly, a consultant is not interviewed about personal information nor is she subjected to experimental protocols.

In order to elicit grammaticality judgments, the linguist will present the consultant with sentences in the language under study and ask for the consultant's intuitions. Major types of intuition include:

- canonical grammaticality judgments, such as the contrasting examples in (1) and (2) above.
- intuitions about derivational morphological relationships among words, as in (3)
 - (3) to drive, driver, truck-driver, driving, truck-driving but *to truck-drive
- intuitions about correspondences among different utterance types, as in the active and passive pair in (4) and (5)
 - (4) The farmer killed the duckling.
 - (5) The duckling was killed by the farmer.
- identification of structural (6) versus lexical (7) ambiguity
 - (6) old men and women.
 - (7) Meet me by the bank.

Sometimes the linguist will ask the consultant to translate between English (or another language known in common) and her native language. One essential aspect of elicitation lies in its open-ended nature: the linguist may begin with a certain topic but soon discover that in the language this topic is not worth pursuing or leads to another area worthy of research. Or the consultant may spontaneously produce a sentence type that the linguist is unaware of and will decide to study. More commonly, the linguist will take a particular sentence and propose changes in the word order or sentence structure to see which of the various possibilities are grammatical or ungrammatical). Or she may substitute words of the same category or of different categories.

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Since the interest of the linguist lies in grammatical phenomena, the “content” of the sentences under discussion is immaterial. The linguist therefore does not ask the consultant for personal information nor does she ask the consultant to discuss sensitive issues. In fact, if the linguist were to inadvertently stumble into a sensitive area with a particular sentence, she would immediately ask the consultant to ignore the sentence and move to a different topic.

Quite often, very informal techniques will suffice, especially for preliminary observations which may or may not form the basis of subsequent, more detailed research.

Some further examples might help to clarify some of what linguists do.

- It has been reported that speakers of some varieties of English (especially British) find a sentence like *I gave it him* to be perfectly natural, while in other varieties, this sentence is considered unnatural (compare: *I gave it to him*). The theoretician may have reason to expect that judgements on this pair of sentences should be correlated with judgements on corresponding passives, such as *It was given him*. The test scenario is straightforward—by e-mail, or in informal face-to-face situations (for example in the classroom or hallway), a researcher might therefore ask native speakers of various varieties of English for their judgements as to the relative acceptability of these few sentences. Depending on the importance of this point in the larger investigation, and on the clarity of the results, this issue may or may not require deeper, more systematic investigation. Often, it does not require investigation beyond a simply asking few speakers for their intuitions in this manner.
- Similar examples, again from varieties of English, can be drawn from pronunciation and lexical elicitation. One standard description of English compound stress used to be that compound words such as *gréenhouse* and *blúebird* have primary stress on the first noun. A linguist may overhear a pronunciation that differs from this, for example, someone ordering a [ham sándwich] rather than a [hám sandwich]. The linguist may then have an interest in asking different speakers which pronunciation they use, and reporting these observations which challenge the received wisdom.
- Undergraduate students might be instructed to ask their friends and family for the word for “dog” in a variety of languages, e.g., in order to illustrate the arbitrary nature of the pairing of sound and meaning, or to canvass their fellow students as to who says *soda* and who *pop* (in order to illustrate dialect variation)
- At a linguistics conference abroad, a researcher might state a theoretical hypothesis, for example, that no language will have four distinct pronouns corresponding to the four logical senses of English “we” (=the speaker and the hearer together; the speaker and others not present; the speaker the hearer and others; and a plurality of speakers as in a chorus). An audience member raises a hand and says “In the language I speak, this is not true—we have four different pronouns.” While a faculty member might presume that a review board will be reasonable regarding the importance of being able to act spontaneously when a

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situation of this sort presents itself, such a situation raises a difficult proposition for a graduate student, who may risk having their degree refused if they report this audience member's remark in a dissertation without having obtained informed consent. (We invite you to consider as well a modified version of the above scenario at a dinner party with non-linguists where the interchange happens over dinner with a guest whose presence the researcher could not have predicted.)

In the above examples, the experts consulted do not constitute "human subjects", nor is there any conceivable potential for harm to the participants. In activities of these kinds, which involve normal professional exchanges between consenting persons, consultants need to be treated with respect, and interactions need to follow professional standards, but no ethics review is required.

3. Implementation and review of LC exemptions

Giving Voice (p. 26) raises the tricky question of 'onus' (i.e. who decides if a given research project is to be exempt or not?) but remains agnostic as to the possible answers. The procedure is as follows:

1. Each faculty researcher in Linguistics whose research may involve LC shall review this document, including the LC Diagnostics included below (Section 4), and determine for herself if her research falls within the LC exemption.
2. Graduate students in Linguistics whose research may involve LC shall review this document, including the LC Diagnostics included below (Section 4), with a Linguistics faculty member familiar with these issues, and determine together if their research falls within the LC exemption.
3. Following either 1. or 2. above, the faculty or graduate student researcher shall write to the Chair of the Arts and Humanities sub-REB stating that they have reviewed the exemption criteria and registering that their research falls within the LC exemption. In the case of a student, such a statement will be co-signed the faculty member with whom she reviewed the issues and diagnostics.
4. The sub-REB Chair may contact the Linguistics faculty member involved for clarification, if necessary, but the exemption declared by a researcher shall not be denied without substantive reasons. Cases of disagreement as to whether this exemption applies shall be referred to the appropriate REB.
5. If a researcher changes her methodology significantly or embarks on a new research area, language family or speech community, for example, she shall review the criteria and determine whether her original exemption still covers her research.
6. For language consultation involving e.g. children, First Nations communities or vulnerable populations, special attention must be paid to the possibility of power differentials between researchers and consultants.

3. Diagnostics – What is LC?

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3.1 Crucially, LC involves conferring with experts rather than observing human behaviours (as might be done in e.g. Psychology) or interviewing people on potentially personal topics (as perhaps in Anthropology or Sociology). An important research methodology common in (if not particular to) linguistics consists of asking individuals who are competent speakers of the language in question (though they may or may not be native speakers) to offer an informed opinion about the naturalness of given expressions in their language.

This is considered *consultation, collaboration and/or teaching*. Some people have shifted from using the term *informant* to *consultant* or may use other terms such as: *speaker, teacher, interlocutor, source, or assistant*.

This distinction is raised in *Giving Voice* ('When is Someone a "Human Subject"?'):

Individuals also can be involved in the information gathering activities without becoming either researcher or human subject. This is the case when those individuals are involved in basic consultation tasks with no conceivable potential for harm. Examples include the following situations:

- A librarian is asked to identify useful reference materials or resources.
- A linguist overhears an unusual phrase or pronunciation in a day-to-day encounter and asks where the speaker is from.
- [...]
- Researchers at a university are asked to identify what they believe are problems with the administration of the TCPS. (*Giving Voice*, pg. 21-22)

For linguists, many day-to-day encounters include the discussion of languages and their grammars.

- LC may occur in the classroom when for example a professor, seeking to illustrate linguistic ambiguity, asks students to give their interpretation of a sentence or a pronunciation in a language of which they are all competent adult speakers.
- Linguists often consult each other as experts in their field to elicit grammaticality judgement (in hallways, by e-mail, in social situations, while attending conferences, etc.).
- At conferences, having given a paper, a researcher may invite other linguists to comment on and often offer their opinions as to the grammaticality of data presented.
- As well as these routine encounters, linguists may solicit the participation of expert consultants (competent adult speakers) that they meet anywhere for LC, either on a once-off serendipitous basis, or as part of ongoing research contacts.

In all of these cases, the three criteria summarised below allow scholars to distinguish expert language consultation from research on human subjects: absence of a power differential between researcher and other participants, the information sought is grammatical rather than personal or sensitive, and no protocols or experimental conditions are used.

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Some “information gathering activities” which may be called “Grammaticality Judgement” will not necessarily be exempt as LC. Some research (e.g. in L2 acquisition) may ask subjects to perform “Grammaticality Judgement” tasks as part of an experimental protocol (e.g. survey or questionnaire). Despite the name, these are clearly not LC under the definition as described here: they are part of a set questionnaire, subject to statistical treatment, and there is a clear power differential between the researcher administering the tests and the human subjects responding to them. These activities would be required to undergo an REB review (albeit at an expedited or sub-REB level if the risk to participants was minimal).

Regardless of the name applied to a data-gathering activity in a research protocol, a determination has to be made on the criteria outlined herein as to whether the LC exemption applies in each case.

To summarize, in the case of LC the exception criteria are three-fold:

- 1) the relationship between the researcher and the person assisting with the research is not that of researcher-human subject but rather that of researcher-consultant (assistant). Note special care must be taken when the power ratio between the researcher and consultant is not equal e.g. teacher/student.
- 2) the data gathered relate to grammatical phenomena not the content of the discussion, i.e. the consultant is not asked for personal or sensitive information.
- 3) the data collection is not part of a protocol involving formal surveys, questionnaires or experimental conditions.

Based on a document presented to the NMREB September 12, 2005 and revised and approved October 7, 2005.

Reference:

"Giving Voice to the Spectrum." Results of the Interagency Panel on Research Ethics Social Sciences and Humanities Working Committee Consultation Organized on Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Issues Related to the TCPS March 2004