

ETHICS IN LINGUISTICS

CLAIRE BOWERN

- Background
- Ethics in research and in linguistics: rights and responsibilities
- Hypotheticals

1. BACKGROUND: VIEWS OF ETHICS

- The broad view: code of conduct (the “right” way to behave in a particular set of circumstances)
 - culturally specific
 - changeable over time
- The narrow view: what must be done (and seen to be done) in order to satisfy an ethics commission (e.g. in research, in politics, etc)

2. ETHICS IN (MEDICAL) RESEARCH

- There is broad agreement in some areas that some actions are unethical:
 - Research shouldn’t kill people.
 - Potential benefits don’t necessarily justify causing undue harm (risks and benefits don’t cancel each other out).
 - Must cite sources. (plagiarism is unethical (and illegal))
 - Must not fabricate results. (fraud is unethical (and illegal in many circumstances))
- Illegal \neq unethical (e.g. it’s not illegal for me to prevent a student from graduating by refusing to accept that any of their PhD thesis chapters are good enough, but it is unethical; it is not illegal for me to invent a language and spend the rest of my career working on it).
- Research *is* subject to specific legislation, though.
- Research involving human subjects is regulated.

2.1. Human subjects.

- **Nuremberg Code:** 1949, formulated in response to Nazi medical experimentation in concentration camps and sets out requirements for ethical experimentation.
- World Medical Association – Declaration of Helsinki (1964), last updated (2000) (<http://www.wma.net/e/policy/b3.htm>)

2.2. General principles.

- Informed Consent (and documentation of same)
- Safety (qualifications of researcher, appropriate procedures, documentation of procedures)
- Value of research (not random experimentation, potential of benefits to participants)
- Protection of rights of subjects (anonymous participation, appropriate protection of information)

2.3. Regulation/Legislation.

- USA: Title 45, overseen by Internal Review Boards (university level)
- Canada: Canadian Institutes of Health, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (2005). Tri-council policy statement: Ethical conduct for research involving humans, 1998 (with 2000, 2002, 2005 amendments).
- Australia: National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC).

2.4. Medical research procedures.

- Design experiment
- Write up protocols
- Gain ethics clearance
- Conduct experiment (following protocol)
- write up results and publish

3. ETHICS IN LINGUISTICS

- At some point (early 90s?), the rules for medical experiments on human subjects were extended to all research involving human subjects
- Professional ethics statements (e.g. ALS statement)
- Clearly there are ethical issues in linguistic research, but not the same ones that Human Subjects Boards are used to dealing with from medical experiments.
 - **research**: e.g. Folklorists successfully argued that what they do is not ‘research’ under the legislation, and their work is not subject to human subjects review. How is folklore different from collecting narratives in fieldwork?
 - **human**: e.g. Syntacticians who argue that they study patterns of language, not the speakers themselves.
 - **subjects**: e.g. Community-based linguists who view their work as a collaboration with speakers, not as experimentation.
- Perception of needless admin (reinforced in some cases by horror stories)
- Professional ethics governs behaviour in conducting research, but fieldwork is an extremely complex interplay between the personal and the professional.

Stakeholders in ethical questions:

- The researcher and the language community (and vice versa)
- The researcher and other researchers
- Supervisors and students
- The public/taxpayers/funding bodies

3.1. The fieldwork community.

- Experimentation guidelines apply to researchers in linguistics (e.g. no defrauding, no causing of harm, no exploitation)
- Do linguists have an obligation to make all their fieldnotes and recordings available to the community?
- Do they have an obligation to help with school programs, revitalisation programs, etc?

- Do linguists have a right to conduct research anywhere, on any topic? (The bottle of sulphuric acid doesn't dictate the chemist's research agenda, so why should language speakers have a say in what a linguist does?)
- Do they have an obligation to work primarily on endangered languages?
- Given that fieldwork isn't just a professional commitment to a community, what are the obligations, requirements, and ethical procedures for a linguist beyond linguistics (e.g. in health work, education, advocacy, or elsewhere)? [See hypotheticals]

3.2. Other linguists.

- Obligation to make materials available? To what extent?
- Obligation to publish in a timely fashion? (ie not sit on data for years)?
- What is the status of projects where the community wants their language to be described but does not want to make the results available to others?
- Ethics of documentation of collections: what are the ethical implications of making recordings without documentation, so that someone else has to spend hours and hours working out what materials are there, in what languages?

3.3. Of the community to the linguist.

- What obligations do a community have when they agree to have a linguist work with them?

3.4. Supervisors and Students.

- Is it ethical to send a student to a risky field site? That is, how much responsibility does a supervisor have for their student(s) when they are in the field, and where the student may have a better knowledge of local conditions than the supervisor?
- How much support should supervisors give their students in the field?
- How much ethical training should we do?

3.5. Ethical responsibilities to the public and to grant bodies.

- Do linguists have an obligation as public intellectuals? e.g. do linguists working on Indigenous languages in Australia have an ethical responsibility to lobby on behalf of the people they work with, especially when the linguist might be in a powerful position and their consultants might be powerless?
- Do linguists have a professional obligation to follow through with results (Inethical to ask for money for a grammar of X and work on Y instead)?
- For linguists that have public funding, how accountable to the public are they for what they do?

4. HYPOTHETICALS

- (1) You won a \$350,000 grant to work on a comprehensive description of Xish, a highly endangered language spoken in the desert beyond the Black Stump. One of the conditions of the grant is that you put all materials you collect on the internet. However, when you get to your field site, you discover that there is no electricity or running water, and your consultants have never seen a computer.
 - Is it ethical to proceed as planned?
 - How will you get informed consent to work on the language and distribute your results?

- If not, how might you modify your proposal so that everyone is happy?
- (2) Your supervisor thinks it'd be great for you to work on Csángo (a variety of Hungarian spoken in Romania). You're an atheist/Jewish/Baptist/Muslim, but everyone in the area is Catholic, and anthropologists have reported that non-Catholics have been unable to work in the area. What do you do?
- (3) You're working with a minority group in a small village in a remote part of Southern Tajikistan. The area has a very high incidence of goitre (hypothyroidism) due to a lack of available sources of iodine. In most parts of the world goitre is easily prevented by using iodised salt, which is very cheap, but not locally available. You could easily arrange for supplies to be delivered from the capital the next time MSF visits the area.

- Is this something you should do? How will you go about it?

In the process of talking to people in the village about this plan, you discover that they're heard of iodised salt. The village council received reports from India that led them to throw out the last group of people who brought iodised salt to the village. You discover that there is a widespread belief that iodised salt causes infertility, and is being used as a means of population control by the government and army, who are the main distributors. Furthermore, reports have emerged from India that AIDS rates in remote areas skyrocketed in 2000 after UN health workers distributed iodised salt (and, coincidentally, conducted an AIDS survey, the first in many regions).

- What do you do at this point?

- (4) You find out that a close friend of your parents is a fluent speaker of Ngarigo (an Aboriginal language of the Canberra region). As far as anyone knew, no one had any knowledge of this language anymore. She would like to work with you to make a record of the language, however your Ethics Board rejects your human subjects proposal on the grounds that you have not documented your procedures for informed consent.
- You revise the proposal but they reject it again because you do not have a grant to pay the speaker for her time. They indicate that they will not review this project further.
 - Your supervisor suggests that you could work with the speaker anyway.
 - What would you do? What are the ethical implications of not working on the language? What are the implications of working on the language when the ethics board has said that you don't have approval?

5. CONCLUSIONS

- Practical ethics is extremely messy.
- Don't fulfil the narrow view at the expense of the wide view.
- Thinking through potential outcomes is important.