

*Footnote or Focus? Describing Language Variation in a Field Setting*

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Anyone who has researched a lesser-studied language in the field or in a Field Methods class has probably faced the eye-opening challenge of variation. Sometimes the same speaker gives a different pronunciation or different grammatical form just a few days apart -- or even a few minutes apart. Which variants should be included in the language description? Variability between speakers adds a vast range of complexities as well. Fieldworkers commonly encounter inter-speaker differences in pronunciation, grammaticality judgments, differing paradigms, differing views on which dialect variants best represent the language, and complex variation across age, gender, and many other social groupings in the community. What if this variability is crucial for understanding the structure of the language, the community, and even the future of the language itself? How should we handle all of this sociolinguistic complexity and language variation? Add a few footnotes to the grammar? Or focus on it as an exciting new research possibility?

Variation isn't just for sociolinguists anymore. Linguists in a wide range of subfields are increasingly focusing on variation, including language description and documentation (e.g., Rice 2013; Childs, Good & Mitchell 2014; Nagy 2009; Mansfield 2014). In fact, the growing connection between sociolinguistics and field linguistics is a promising topic for new research opportunities, collaborations, and publications across subfields.

In this workshop, we will examine how to identify a variable of interest, how to elicit data for variationist analysis, how to determine relevant social and linguistic factors, and how to analyze the data and model the results. The workshop focuses on practical, field-based approaches to variation in languages with limited prior documentation, especially non-Western languages like Sui (China), Hmong (U.S.), Maori (New Zealand), Murrinh Patha (Australia), Yami (Taiwan), and K'iche' (Guatemala), as well as an introduction to the key tools of variationist analysis across the levels of linguistic structure. We invite participants to bring their own field data for discussion and analysis.

Selected References

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