Toward Understanding Grammar through Conversation

Toshi Nakayama (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies)
Yoshi Ono (University of Alberta)
Introduction

• **Goal:**
  • To illustrate the importance of studying natural discourse in language documentation

• **Main points:**
  • Discourse-centered data collection and analysis can alleviate major drawbacks of the elicitation method
    • Contextual effect in elicitation
    • Limited ability to imagine unexpected patterns (based on our experience as linguists)
About the language

• Miyako, Ikema dialect (Ryukyuan, Japonic)
• Spoken in the southern Ryukyus (Okinawa, Japan)
• Endangered:
  • 2000-3000 fluent speakers
  • Active use in generations above 60-65 years old
  • Daily lives are dominated by Japanese especially for younger generations
  • No children are growing up speaking it
Kyushu
Taiwan
Ryukyu Archipelago
Elicitation has an advantage?

• Allows us to collect structured sets of language samples, fast
• Allows us to collect context-free samples that are useful for generalization
Wait, let’s be careful …

- Elicitation is not immune from contextual effects
- Elicitation strongly shapes and limits the kind of language samples and intuitions we can collect
- Elicitation is highly destructive to natural use of the local language
Example form Ikema sessions

- Influence of elicitation context on grammatical intuition (Nakayama and Ono 2013)
- ‘animacy’-based ga/nu alternation
Example form Ikema sessions

• **Japanese** – the famous *ga*

  \textit{koko ni neko ga kita yo}
  
  here LOC cat NOM came FP
  
  ‘A cat came here.’

• **Ikema** – ‘animacy’-based (inanimate subjects consistently marked by *nu*)

  \textit{umankai mayu nu du ttai doo}
  
  here:to cat FOC came FP
  
  ‘A cat came here.’
Example form Ikema sessions

• However, in an elicitation session, ga was accepted:

\[ \text{umankai mayu ga du ttaido doo} \]
\[ \text{here:to cat FOC came FP} \]
‘A cat came here.’

• Our consultant volunteered later in the session that this example sounds like Japanese

• -- heightened effect of Japanese?
Japanese speaking context

• Talking with mainlanders
  • Especially with higher ranked people in the community such as shinshii ‘master’
  • Hierarchically structured society due to long exposure to Confucianism (though both China and Japan)
  • Japanese is a high language

• Sessions held in community centers
• Talking in Japanese about grammar
Elicitation can be destructive

• Elicitation tasks invoke a socio-cultural frame that strongly favors the use of the dominant language which can shape the type of samples and intuitions of the local language that we get
GO BEYOND OUR IMAGINATION
Problem of elicitation

• What cannot be anticipated cannot be elicited
Example from Ikema

• Quotative complementizer *tii*

  *anshii fau tii ajjuutai*

  this.way eat QT say:STAT:PST

  ‘(he) was saying that (one) eats this way.’

Ex. *tii umuii* ‘thinking that…’

  *tii baraii* ‘laughing by saying that…’
Unfamiliar use of *tii* in conversation

• Found in conversation data

[Talking about preserving fish on a fishing boat in the old days]

N: *mukashaa mm- kooryaa nyaan munuu mmE*
‘There was no ice back then.

*maasu  dara* ‘It was salt.’

G: *uraa tchaa kanuu mizInkai unu mijju tamiiutui*
‘Well then, you put water in (a container),’

-> *uinkai  du  maasuu maddii  tii*
there:to  FOC  salt:ACC  mix:CONT  QT
‘like mixing salt in?’

N: *aaaa  ‘ye==s’*
Unfamiliar use of *tii* in conversation

**uinkai du maasuu maddii tii**
there FOC salt:ACC mix:CONT QT
‘like mixing salt in?’

- Function: Used to check your understanding of the action: ‘do you mean …?’
- Form: *maddii* - continuative form (non-finite; non-final)
- Completely new to us
Unfamiliar use of *tii* in conversation

- Elicited more examples – seems pretty productive

- *hurii tii* ‘like shaking?’
- *anshii kirii tii* ‘like cutting this way?’
- *anshii ttii tii* ‘like coming this way?’
- *uinkai du sauyuu irii tii* ‘like putting soy sauce in there?’
Unanticipated findings in discourse

• There are unanticipated, unexpected uses in natural discourse
  • if you collect data only through elicitation, it is very likely that you would miss this type of construction/use completely

• Elicitation can limit our insight into what speakers do
FIND PATTERNS IN USE
Patterns in use

• There are fixed patterns in language use that cannot necessarily be anticipated
  • e.g. phonetic merger

• Such patterns seem to be difficult to identify through elicitation
Example from Ikema

• Phonetic merger involving the quotative *tii*

• Two types of phonetic merger
  
  • forward merger (with the ‘say’ verb)
    
    \[ tii \ ajjuu \rightarrow chau \]
    QT say:STAT
    ‘be saying that…’

  • backward merger (with the intentive suffix)
    
    \[ hu-di \ tii \rightarrow huddii \]
    do-INT QT
    ‘in order to do’
Forward merger: examples

• fuu hazl **tii** ajjuutai > chautai
come should QT say:STAT:PST
‘(someone) was saying that (s/he) is expected to come’

• vva nau **tii** ajjuu > chau
you what QT say:STAT
‘what are you saying?’
Forward merger

- The merger occurs only with *ajjii* ‘say’
- When merged, the meaning can be more abstract

```
ba ga kutuu hurimunu tii ajjuu / chau
I GEN thing:ACC stupid QT say:STAT
```

‘saying that I am stupid’ (unmerged)
‘thinking/saying that I am stupid’ (merged)
Backward merger: examples

- *tumi-di tii huritai* > *tumiddii huritai*
  search-INT QT dig:PST
  ‘dug to look for (something)’

- *baraahaddii buduitai* ‘danced to make (someone) laugh’

- *bakyaariddii katsltai* ‘wrote in order to separate (with someone)’

- *yaitchaddii haitslltai* ‘ran to get thin (lose weight)’
Backward merger

• Occurs only with the preceding intensive suffix

• Intensive + tii forms a construction that expresses purpose, intention, immediacy of event

• The meaning moves away from the quotative
Combined merger

- **bakyari-** _di_ **chautai** > **bakyari** _jjautai_
  separate-INT QT:say:STAT:PST
  ‘(s/he) was saying that (s/he) will separate (from someone)’

- **hu-** _di_ **chau** > **hu** _jjau_
  do-INT QT:say:STAT
  ‘is saying that (s/he) will do (it)’
Interesting things about these patterns

• Difficult to elicit -- occur largely, if not solely, in natural discourse

• Robust

• Local: they are restricted in interesting ways:
  • only with adjacent items
  • highly restrictive (cannot be explained easily on the basis of morphosyntactic structure)
CONCLUSION
To sum up ...

• Elicitation can affect the way the speaker behaves linguistically.

• There are uses and patterns in natural discourse that cannot be identified easily through elicitation.

• What is going on in language use is useful in documenting the grammar of actual speakers.
Elicitation first?

- Elicitation has played a major role in studies of grammar
- Elicitation first; text later -- as two separate and ordered (even hierarchical) steps
- Competence first; performance later
But …

• Maybe better the other way around
• Start with observation of natural discourse
• Elicitation should be guided by information about what speakers do in actual speech