An Analysis of Elicitation Methods in a Field Methods Course

By: Leah Doroski
“The product of fieldwork will ultimately be shaped not only by the nature of the language, but also by the methodologies chosen, by the roles assumed by the speakers, and by the preparation and sensitivity of the linguist,” (Mithun 2001:34).

1 Introduction

Six other linguistics students and I spent a semester learning the Bulgarian language through elicitation with a native Bulgarian speaker, Y, a female from Sofia, Bulgaria who studied English and some French, and also knew some of the Serbian language. Our elicitations were based in a classroom setting, and our professor had us rotate acting as the point person for a thirty-minute elicitation session, in which the point person was in charge of eliciting the Bulgarian data. Our elicitation methods and technique were based on generally accepted methods of collecting linguistic data from an informant. Our goals were to: learn linguistic field techniques, learn the linguistic structure of the Bulgarian language, and reinforce understanding of linguistic concepts through direct application.

Typical linguistic field work most often involves a linguist traveling to a specific culture to work with several, or more, native speakers of the language found in that culture. The linguist would often dedicate long periods of time in the language-speaking region, and would culminate the work with either a linguistic sketch grammar of the language, or a more specific work on a particular aspect of the language.

In our classroom setting, we were denied some of the options provided by typical fieldwork, but we were able to test out many different elicitation techniques, work through and understand the benefits and drawbacks to various elicitation styles, and discover much of the linguistic structure of the Bulgarian language, a Slavic language
with roughly eight million speakers mostly located in southeastern Europe (Lewis, Simons, and Fennig). As Marianne Mithun discusses in the quote above, different methods of eliciting data and other aspects of the environment in which the data is being collected are hugely influential in the quality and quantity of the collected data. I plan to discuss the pros and cons of each major elicitation method that we tried and generalize the overall quality of the data collected from each method, and reflect on the importance of other aspects, such as tempo and preparation for the elicitation, in the quantity and quality of the data collected.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In section 2 I will discuss the benefits and problems of the simple-direct elicitation method; in section 3 I will examine the differences encountered in using a longer-text elicitation method; in section 4 I will assess the merits of introducing a novel language informant into the elicitation session; in section 5 I will evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of using a visual-stimulus based elicitation approach; in section 6 I will talk about learning the orthography of the language being elicited; in section 7 I will discuss other factors that lead to a successful or unsuccessful elicitation, and in section 8 I will provide overall generalizations.

2 Simple-Direct Elicitation

Direct elicitation was the main method we used throughout the semester; for almost all of our sessions, we used a simple-direct elicitation style of eliciting Bulgarian from our language informant. Our working language was English, and we would approach our sessions by asking Y for translations from our English into her Bulgarian.

In the first days of eliciting data, we started with collecting simple and universal
nouns and adjectives from a Swadesh word list. We focused on learning the phonetics of
the language and on building a relationship with our informant, Y. We collected entries
such as *gʷa*vi ‘head’ (13Jan-1.34-C.S.) and *dervo* ‘tree’ (20Jan-2.37-L.D.) from asking Y
“How do you say ‘X’ in Bulgarian”. We also spent some time talking with Y about
herself in English, and we quickly learned that Y’s fluency in the English language was
highly proficient.

Our collecting data by asking Y to translate our English stimulus into Bulgarian
seemed to work well with collecting simple words and phrases because of Y’s high
proficiency in English, and because it allowed us as linguists the time to understand the
general sound system of the Bulgarian language. As we asked Y for nouns and simple
phrases, we were able to spend more time in the session on checking our transcriptions
and trying to mimic the Bulgarian sounds. My notes from the second elicitation session
through around the fourth elicitation session include more narrow phonetic transcriptions,
marking unaspiration versus aspiration, the appearance of dentalized nasals and possible
apical nasals, and other specific phonetic information as I tried to collect most of the
phones that Bulgarian uses. I collected transcriptions such as (*p/b)*ɛ*ɛ̃dɤr.v(e/e).tə* ‘five
trees’ (20Jan-2.40-L.D.) with notes surrounding almost each phone.

After a few weeks of collecting as many unique sounds in the Bulgarian language
as we could, we then formally and informally analyzed and classified the phones into
phoneme groups. Some students formally wrote working papers on the sound system of
Bulgarian, but we all mostly began to transcribe the data using a more phonemic
transcription of the data. As we increased our efficiency of transcribing Y’s Bulgarian,
we were able to focus on longer and more complex sentences. By session five, we were able to gather complete sentences in Bulgarian, such as is shown in table 1.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>[kuʃ.ɪ.to e ka.fi.a.vo]  ‘The dog is brown.’</td>
<td>5.35 (1Feb-5.35/40-C.S.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>[kuʃ.ɪ.to.tə se ka.fi.a.vi]  ‘Dogs are brown.’</td>
<td>5.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>[tu.va kuʃʃə e ka.fi.a.vo]  ‘This dog is brown.’</td>
<td>5.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4)</td>
<td>[te.zi kuʃʃə sa ka.fi.a.vi]  ‘These dogs are brown.’</td>
<td>5.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>[nʲi.ɑ.kʷi kuʃʃə sa ka.fi.a.vi]  ‘Some dogs are brown.’</td>
<td>5.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>[tu.va kuʃʃə ne e ka.fi.a.vo]  ‘This dog is not brown.’</td>
<td>5.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Initially, our bilingual approach to eliciting Bulgarian from Y worked well, but as we began searching for different verb tenses and eliciting more and more complex sentences from Y, we started to experience difficulties in a few areas.

The first main problem we experienced in using this method of elicitation was in setting and controlling the context of the utterance we were seeking as each utterance was isolated, instead of observed in connected speech. In looking for various verbal aspects and moods, the point person eliciting the data would be required to set up the utterances in the corresponding context so Y would be more likely to give the Bulgarian equivalents matching what we were asking. In session 15, two other students and I set up a birthday party theme to give context for our data collections. In asking for the utterance ‘(yesterday) he said he wanted to eat that cake’, I set-up the phrase by giving the context
that my mom was theoretically asking me if we’ll eat the leftover cake, and that I responded to my mom by saying that I thought it would be because yesterday, my brother had said that he wanted to eat that leftover cake. I would then ask Y how to say ‘(yesterday) he said he wanted to eat that cake’.

Y then would supply the Bulgarian: (16Mar-15.61-L.D.) ft/'era toj kaza tfe iska da iade onazi torta. However, it was sometimes ambiguous if the forms we were collecting were matching the verb tense and aspect we were trying to examine, as the forms were isolated and it was difficult to be sure that the set-up context was understandable.

The second main problem we experienced was in collecting anglicized forms. It sometimes felt that the forms we were collecting were anglicized and less naturally Bulgarian. As we were priming Y with the English before asking her to speak the Bulgarian, it seems likely that many forms we collected were anglicized in syntax or perhaps less natural or uniquely Bulgarian than we may have collected in a more Bulgarian setting.

The third main problem we experienced was a limitation into our look of Bulgarian. Because we were prompting Y in English, we were inherently limited in our collection of Bulgarian from our style of approach. Each form that we were collecting relied on our asking the right type and style of question. It was difficult to stumble into interesting data because we were systematically trying paradigms that only changed in one aspect. We reached a breakthrough in session thirteen when I asked Y for the Bulgarian for “(tomorrow) you will be hungry” and she responded with two forms: ti fte o guadeʃ and ti fte badif guadin (2Mar-13.95/96-L.D.). Y mentioned that the first form
has the essence that maybe you will be hungry whereas the second form means that you
will definitely be hungry. This distinction seems commonplace in Bulgarian, but we had
not before encountered data that would lead to this distinction.

Overall, this method of elicitation was most useful in that we were able to collect
a large amount of data that specifically proved or disproved our many theories about the
Bulgarian language throughout the semester. As we were asking for individual utterances
one after the other, we were able to quickly collect relevant data in systematic paradigms
that were easy to analyze and generate working theories about the language. However,
using a working language, such as we were using English to ask for Bulgarian phrases,
was problematic in three aspects. It was possible that the collected Bulgarian forms were
not expressing the exact meaning we were expecting from the prompted English.
Additionally, the Bulgarian data collected through this method was most likely anglicized
due to having been primed by English. Furthermore, our reach into the Bulgarian
language was inherently limited to words and phrases that existed in English.

3 Longer-Text Elicitation

Toward the end of the semester we began trying new methods of elicitation. Longer-text
elicitations are useful in bringing out novel structures in a language because they more
closely resemble the flow and use of real speech than do simple-direct elicitations in
which the gathered data are mostly isolated.

For sessions 20a and 20b, we asked Y to prepare a short, commonly-known
Bulgarian story/folktale. The plan was to use a story that would take roughly five minutes
to recite. Y chose a story called Болен Здрав Носи, which directly translates to ‘Sick
Healthy Bears’, loosely translating to ‘the Sick Bear the Healthy’, and which is commonly known and is told to Bulgarian children.³

Table 2
Interesting forms collected from a Bulgarian folk story

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Bulgarian Phrase</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Вървяла си лиса по пътя.</td>
<td>Lisa walks down the road.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Отишъл до нея дядото.</td>
<td>The grandfather went to her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Озърна се и почнала тихичко да хвърля рибата.</td>
<td>She looked around and quietly began to throw the fish.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Рибка по рибка – всичката риба изхвърлила и избягала.</td>
<td>Fish by fish – all the fish were thrown and she ran away.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We first asked Y to read through the story as we recorded her, then we went back through each sentence carefully with Y repeating the sentence, then providing English translations of the sentence. This procedure worked well, but required more time than we were comfortable giving, so for the second session of the elicitation we only asked Y to focus on providing the English translation of the story and we used the Bulgarian orthography to transcribe the remaining sentences.

As shown in table 2, we used copies of the story broken into smaller sentences and phrases to work alongside the Bulgarian as we collected the pronunciation and the
We collected many interesting forms from these two elicitation sessions. Most notably, we observed VOS word order, such as is shown in: (8) otiʃəw do neja diadoto, and VSO word order, such as is shown in: (7) vrvviə si lisa po pɔrtia. In storytelling, it seems that the subject of the verb is often inferred from the context of the story and from the verbal inflection marked on the verb, such as is shown in: (9) ozrnɔwa se i potfnawa tixitʃko da xurla ribɔta. The subject of the verb, Lisa, is mentioned in the previous sentence (4Apr-20a.10-Y) lisitsɔta tova i tʃakɔwa. ‘the fox (Lisa) waited for this’, and the following sentence infers its subject from this previous sentence. Storytelling seems to prefer verb-initial phrases, perhaps to put emphasis on the verb in creating the storyline, and thus allows for some interesting syntax structures to allow for verb-initial forms. This interesting aspect of the Bulgarian language was discovered due to our using a story to elicit Bulgarian data.

We also collected some idiomatic expressions from the story. Y explained to us that (4Apr-20a.38-Y) koʃ s kakfɔto mu popadne ‘with whatever they had’ is a common idiomatic expression in Bulgarian. Y also told us that (4Apr-20a.35-Y) breʃ means something like ‘wow’ and is used to express excitement. Another interesting expression was (6Apr-20b.40-Y) a prez tova vreme which directly translates to ‘while during this time’, but Y explained that this means something more like ‘meanwhile’, and is used idiomatically.

Importantly, Y, and we as well, appeared to enjoy these sessions. The change in procedure seemed to reinvigorate the elicitation sessions; our eliciting Bulgarian felt
more fresh and novel as we uncovered more about the Bulgarian language that we would most likely not have discovered had we not tried this elicitation method. These sessions provided a pleasant variance from our normal elicitations, from which we had grown so largely accustomed that the elicitations sometimes felt dry. For some students, these sessions were highly useful in that they examined more of the cultural aspect of the language and they provided natural usages of some of the linguistic elements being examined by a couple students.

These sessions on longer text elicitation, however, were not always useful in collecting specific data and in testing out preconceived hypotheses. For some of the students who were writing their papers on specific topics in Bulgarian, these data did not correlate to their discussions and thus these sessions were less productive for their individual papers. The sessions also required more time than was previously assigned for the longer text elicitation. Originally, one class period was allotted for the elicitation, but we had only reviewed roughly half of the phrases in the story by the end of the first period and thus continued the second half for the following class period. It was also sometimes difficult to collect the data during these sessions because we needed to maintain a faster pace in order to finish the story. I would have enjoyed spending more time to distinctly collect the word-for-word translations from the Bulgarian into English versus the overall meaning of the sentence for each sentence we examined in the story as it seemed that in collecting the story, it was often the word-for-word translation that provided insight into the syntax and morphology of the phrases.

Overall, these two longer elicitation sessions were useful in a few ways. We
discovered the use of VOS and VSO word ordering in Bulgarian and we examined the purpose of the allowed syntax forms in relation to storytelling. We also learned a few commonly used idiomatic expressions in Bulgarian. Aside from the data-collection, we also invited more energy into our elicitations, which can prove to be highly useful in data collection. If we had been able to spend more time on these elicitations, I would have found it useful to compare the word-for-word translations to the generalized meaning of the sentence.

4 Bringing in a Novel Language Informant

For session 18, a novel Bulgarian speaker, M, who was also a female native Bulgarian speaker from Sofia, joined Y for our elicitation. For every other elicitation with the exception of session 18, Y was our only language informant providing us with Bulgarian. Toward the end of the semester, however, we brought in a second Bulgarian speaker with the intention of collecting more natural speech. Our goal was to set up situations for our two speakers to act out, gather the data at real speed, and then transcribe utterances from each speaker at a slower speed better suited for capturing each individual sound. Exerts from this elicitation are shown in table 3.

We were able to collect roughly fifty items of data. For the first dozen or so items, we collected little conversations one might have, such as saying hello to a good friend (15-17). We then went on to collect some swear words in Bulgarian (18-20). We ended with collecting some commonly used expressions in the Bulgarian language (21-24).

At first, M seemed a little unsure of the general procedure of being a language informant, but Y set a nice example for M. Y explained that we would ask for some
repetitions and that we would be trying to produce some of the Bulgarian ourselves, to which it was helpful to be critiqued in order to help us with our transcriptions.

Table 3  
Examples of real speech between two Bulgarian speakers

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(11)</td>
<td>hey M, what’s up?</td>
<td>stravei M, kaksi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(12)</td>
<td>good, and you?</td>
<td>dubre, ti kaksi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(13)</td>
<td>it’s nice to meet you</td>
<td>priat no mi e da se zapozma em</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(14)</td>
<td>and for me</td>
<td>i na meg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(15)</td>
<td>(Excitement), M, how are you?</td>
<td>lele, M, kækfo prævi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(16)</td>
<td>I have the feeling that I haven’t seen you in a long time</td>
<td>imam tʃuʃtvu tʃe na sʌm dafitʃlova oʃ supi nogo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(17)</td>
<td>I have the feeling that I haven’t seen you in a hell of a long time</td>
<td>imam tʃuʃtvu tʃe na sʌm dafitʃlova oʃ atski nogo vreme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(18)</td>
<td>jerk</td>
<td>creten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(19)</td>
<td>idiot</td>
<td>idiot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(20)</td>
<td>bastard</td>
<td>kopele</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(21)</td>
<td>may you never see the sun (super mean)</td>
<td>da ne vidif swansa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(22)</td>
<td>smooth as water</td>
<td>katu po vuda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(23)</td>
<td>flow like honey and butter (goes well)</td>
<td>katu po meti maslo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(24)</td>
<td>once a cheater, always a cheater</td>
<td>vednɔʃ izmaonik vinagi izmaonik</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This session was ultimately successful in that we were able to collect many new Bulgarian forms. We were also able to compare Y’s and M’s personal phonetic systems, and generally what Bulgarian they would say from our prompt. The pacing of the session seemed to following the setting inherently, and the entire room seemed energetically involved with the session.

Overall, the session was remarkable in that we collected Bulgarian from a speaker other than Y. Before the session, I assumed Y’s Bulgarian would be more distinguishable
from a novel Bulgarian’s, but M and Y seemed to mostly agree with each other’s Bulgarian. It was also helpful to collect more commonly used words and phrases in the language, as in our other elicitations we tended to focus on the same vocabulary.

5 Visual-Stimulus Based Elicitation

Visual-stimulus based elicitations use pictures, videos, and props to prompt speech from the language informant. This method uses the monolingual approach, in that no working language is used to elicit the language, and is useful in removing translational effects from the elicitation.

A.H., for session 16, prepared a visual recipe to use as a prompt for his elicitation. He found a visual recipe for chicken noodle soup online and learned the recipe. For his elicitation, he displayed the recipe through a projector to the front of the room and went through each picture, asking Y to explain the recipe, what she saw in the pictures, in Bulgarian. Some examples of the type of data collected from this elicitation are shown in table 4.

In beginning his session, A.H. first explained the procedure to Y, then we elicited the ingredients list using the initial picture of the recipe displaying all of the ingredients, before going through the pictures in the recipe. We were able to collect procedural language in Bulgarian, with phrases such as: (32) slekato ‘after’, (33) dukato ‘while’, (21Mar-16.45-A.H.) prvvo ‘first’, and (29) sega ‘now’. We were also able to collect verb tenses in the first person plural imperative, such as: (29) dubavime, (30) osiovome, and (21Mar-16.53-A.H.) araskosfome. Through this session, we were also introduced to many novel verbs, such as those listed above, and were provided with a number of examples
showing the word order and syntax of procedural language in Bulgarian, expressed in examples (29-33) shown in table 4.

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(25) onion</td>
<td><em>wuk</em></td>
<td>16.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(26) carrot</td>
<td><em>markaf</em></td>
<td>16.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(27) celery</td>
<td><em>tselina</em></td>
<td>16.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(28) chicken meat</td>
<td><em>pilef ko meso</em></td>
<td>16.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(29) now add carrots celery and onion</td>
<td><em>sega dubavime maorkovi tselina i wuk</em></td>
<td>16.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(30) raise the temperature to max until it boils</td>
<td><em>osiovome temperaturata na mæks du kato nez avri</em></td>
<td>16.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(31) ?</td>
<td><em>islet tuva na malame temperaturata za tridasot minoti</em></td>
<td>16.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(32) after it’s cooled down, get out the chicken meat from the pot and put it onto the plate</td>
<td><em>slekato ęstinawo izvazdome pilefku ko meso oį tenzerata i go pustavime ęfinia</em></td>
<td>16.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(33) while it’s cooling, again return the temperature to max</td>
<td><em>dukato pileto se uxwazda oį novo ovelitfavame temperaturata na mæks</em></td>
<td>16.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A.H.’s goal in trying a visual recipe elicitation for our class was “to elicit terms in a manner closer to a monolingual method by attempting to, whenever possible, not supply any English forms and use only visual cues for the elicitation items,” (A.H., personal correspondence).

He was mostly successful with his goal, but as he explains, “much more preferable would have been a traditional Bulgarian recipe or a southeast European recipe that might have been more familiar to Y,” (A.H., personal correspondence). During the session, it was necessary for A.H. to use some English at some points to clarify the picture that was being presented to Y, as the pictures were sometimes difficult to interpret, and Y did not seem to know what she was supposed to
say for some of the recipe. It seems likely that using a more traditional Bulgarian recipe, or using a recipe with which Y confirmed to be generally more familiar, would have eased the pacing of the elicitation and would have allowed for a more monolingual elicitation.

Further difficulty during this elicitation was due to the altered positioning of the room and the alternating pacing of the elicitation. Y would normally sit in the front of the room, and we would surround her in a somewhat half-circle. This elicitation required the room positioning to change to allow Y along with the linguists to see the board in the front of the room. We moved Y to the back of the room, facing the front, and we moved our chairs to the sides of the room in order to see both Y and the recipe images. This new setting introduced difficulty in hearing Y as she was farther away and positioned such that she could only speak to one side of the room at a time. It was more difficult to hear and transcribe the Bulgarian from Y when she was speaking to the other side of the room, and thus I was less sure of the Bulgarian I collected from this session. Also, as I spent more time trying to gather the Bulgarian, I often did not catch her English translation of the phrases because I was still writing the transcription. In such instances, I placed a “?” in my notebook (31). The new setting of the elicitation was a huge hindrance to my data collection and transcription.

For session 21, I prepared an elicitation using a clip from the Canadian silent comedy show Just for Laughs. The scene was a little over a minute long and portrayed two children selling soup to passersby. Before starting the clip, I explained to Y the procedure for the elicitation: a short bit of the clip would be played, then it would pause
and she would produce a sentence illustrating what had just happened in the video.

Examples of data collected from this elicitation are shown in table 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Examples of data elicited from a silent video clip</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(34)</td>
<td>to the kids came a client</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(35)</td>
<td>one woman was releasing steam underneath</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(36)</td>
<td>the bigger child scooped ladle with steam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(37)</td>
<td>at that moment, the female customer saw that the kids put a cat into the soup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(38)</td>
<td>she is shocked</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We gathered some interesting forms, such as (11Apr-21.52-L.D.) _da teto swadži kotkata ftenzarata a zenata odowo irze ijarze_ ‘the child puts the cat in the pot, (thus/so that) the woman below takes her’, which shows an example of the usage of _a_ which means something like ‘thus, so that, and therefore’. We were also able to collect a form that used the phrase (37) _ftozi mument_ ‘at that moment’ and a form with the phrase (11Apr-21.53-L.D.) _i pak_ ‘and again’.

This session felt more comfortable than A.H.’s previous session, likely because Y was more prepared for this style of elicitation and it was closer to the end of the semester and the environment of the room felt less strained. Also, the video was comedic and entertaining, and everyone seemed to enjoy the session, which probably helped everyone relax, feel comfortable asking for repetitions, and livened up the general atmosphere of the room.

Overall, it would have been interesting to pursue more visual stimulus based
elicitations in that we were able to collect more natural speech from Y and we were able to hear Y produce Bulgarian at a normal speaking pace, but the data we collected wasn’t as helpful in so far as testing hypotheses about the language to gather specific data and sometimes it was difficult to catch and transcribe the data from the session.

Perhaps if we were to have tried another visual stimulus based approach, we could have used a storyline in which we integrated more of our hypothesis about verb forms and syntax structures to connect the elicitation style more with the general outline of the course.

6 Learning the Orthography

For session 7, Y taught us Bulgarian orthography. The Bulgarian language is written using the Cyrillic alphabet. Y prepared a small lecture and printed out Cyrillic alphabet guides made for children, which she passed to each linguistics student. Y went through each letter on the board and wrote and pronounced examples of each letter within words.

Learning the Cyrillic alphabet was helpful in later sessions for sounds that were difficult to transcribe. When sounds appeared that we were unsure how to transcribe, we were then able to ask Y to write the orthography for the word on the board, which would hint toward the sounds Y was producing. This technique was helpful because Bulgarian orthography is generally representational of the corresponding sounds in that each Cyrillic letter generally corresponds to one phoneme in the Bulgarian language.

Later in session 7, A.H. elicited the Bulgarian for ‘I hold the big bird’ from which I transcribed (10Feb-7.85-A.H.) as *derڦa go.la.mɑ.to petiʦa*. It was difficult to conclude on the presence or absence of a vowel sound between the first two consonants of *petiʦa*
'bird'. We asked Y to write the word on the board, <Птица>. From the orthography, it appeared that my transcription was likely representative of the sounds that Y was producing, as the letters directly correlated to the IPA symbols I had used in my transcription of the word, and did not include a vowel between the first two consonants.

Learning to interpret the orthography was also useful in understanding the phonology of the Bulgarian language because we could compare the spelling of the utterance with Y’s pronunciation of the utterance to understand the distribution of allophones to phonemes. In session 8, we gathered the orthography for (16Feb-8.72-L.D.) ko.ten.si.tu ‘the kitten’ as <Котенцето>. The last vowel of the word as it is spelled in the orthography would indicate [o] to be pronounced, which indeed Y used half the time in producing the word. When Y was producing the word with a more normal stress patterning, and not in emphasizing each syllable of the word for our benefit in transcribing the sounds, she tended to pronounce [u] as the final vowel sound. This data provides evidence that [u] and [o] could be allophones to the same phoneme, and that perhaps [o] is more representative of phoneme, thus /o/.

Overall, spending a session learning the orthography of the Bulgarian language was useful in allowing us to analyze more into the phonological system of Bulgarian; learning the orthography of the language gave us another tool with which we could use in understanding the linguistic nature of the language.

7 Pacing and Other Factors of the Elicitation

Many factors in the environment and in running the elicitation sessions also crucially affect the quality and quantity of collected data. In these elicitations, it is important to
remember that data is being collected from a native speaker of a language, thus the relationships of the linguists with the language informant are important and as we slowly built a relationship with Y, we developed our own personal styles of elicitation.

One of the most important factors that affects the data transcription and collection during an elicitation is the set tempo of the elicitation. A faster elicitation can help collect more items, which can fulfill more paradigms that can lead to revelations in the data. However, a too fast tempo can ultimately hurt the data collected in several ways. Firstly, in a session with multiple people transcribing the elicited data, a faster tempo may be too fast for some of the linguists, which may ultimately lead to too many questions for clarifications and repetitions, otherwise the data collected may not be complete or accurate. Secondly, eliciting material too quickly can lead to ambiguous data or miscommunications in the data collected. Thirdly, in moving through an elicitation plan too quickly, it is possible to miss important data that would complete the paradigm being collected and analyzed, which would lead to holes in the analysis.

However, moving too slowly in a session can drop the energy of the session, and lead to the linguists or the informants losing focus on the material, which could also lead to incorrect or incomplete data, or dropped data that would have led to new discoveries of the language. As we moved into more complex sentences, we started encountering imbalances in tempo. In her first elicitation report, K.K. mentions her frustration in balancing the collection of enough data to fulfill her queried hypothesis while maintaining a decent tempo while pausing for students to ask Y to repeat a difficult Bulgarian utterance a few times in order to check the transcription. After her session as
the point person, she felt disappointed in how few utterances she was able to collect, and frustrated with the constantly changing tempo (K.K., personal correspondence).

Finding the right tempo that moves through the data while maintaining an upbeat and energetic pace, while still taking the time to properly collect and transcribe the data, is essential for a successful elicitation session.

The general attitude of the room is intrinsically connected to the quality and quantity of the collected data: “one subtle attitude on the part of the researcher can have a particularly important effect in shaping the record,” (Mithun 2001: 49). Toward the middle of the semester, we had reached a rut in our elicitations. We were constantly collecting verb paradigms, a necessary venture, but which led to the attitude and energy in the room to dwindle. When collecting these more structured and more repetitive paradigms, some students were able to lighten the attitude with some jokes and some funny situational context. These sessions felt more lively: we were able to collect more data, we spent more time checking our transcriptions and side hypotheses, and we left the sessions feeling more excited. The added positivity to the session helped the process of data collection and transcription. Without the pick-up in mood, the pace would often drop, and thus students were less likely to ask for data clarifications or repeat utterances, which led to the collection of fewer and less accurate utterances.

In an extra session with Y toward the end of the semester, I asked for her opinions and general feelings from our sessions over the course of the semester. We discussed what she found helpful or confusing during our elicitations. Y mentioned that the point person’s level of preparedness would often be reflected in her willingness to offer data
during the elicitation. Y explained to me that the more prepared she felt the elicitor was, the more she would want to help the elicitor collect data during the session. Y told me that she often understood our pathways in our data elicitations, and she could often tell what information we were trying to collect to test and analyze. Further, if the point person seemed to have prepared for the elicitation, she would supply more information that could help our analyses. What Y explained to me was an important aspect in collecting elicited data from a language informant, that “[the linguist’s] response can convey more forcefully than words the value [that is] placed on each kind of information offered, and, in turn, determine what will be volunteered in future work,” (Mithun 2001: 49). Generally, the effort, attitude, and energy supplied by the linguist is often mirrored and matched by the language consultant.

8 Overall Generalizations

Our Field Methods course was successful in that we were able to gather data that led to a general linguistic analysis of the analyzed language, Bulgarian. We mostly worked using the simple-direct method of elicitation, which allowed for specific hypothesis testing and for the collection of data organized neatly in paradigms. We also tried several other methods of elicitation. We were able to collect more natural and commonly used phrases and expressions in Bulgarian from bringing in a novel language informant, М. We also uncovered interesting syntax formations and idiomatic expressions from working through a longer-text elicitation of a common Bulgarian folk story. From a couple of sessions using visual-based stimuli to elicit Bulgarian, we experienced expressions used in procedural language and in relaying a story. Lastly, we spent some time learning the
Cyrillic alphabet, which enabled us to look more closely at the phonetic and phonological system of the Bulgarian language.

It was most beneficial for us to have worked mostly using the simple-direct elicitation method because it was important that we use our limited time to gather the most relevant data to our working hypotheses. The time spent on other methods of elicitation was beneficial in randomly collecting data that we would not have seen in working inside of the simple-direct elicitation method, but was ultimately less efficient in gathering specific data surrounding our working hypotheses throughout the semester.

In future endeavors in classroom-setting field methods work, I would propose more time to be spent in these extra sessions away from the simple-direct method of elicitation in order to gather more of the unique and specific linguistic characteristics of the language. Generally, however, I would propose that if only given a short amount of time to collect data, the simple-direct method of elicitation is the most efficient and useful method of elicitation for analyzing and testing the overall linguistic system of the language.

9 References


Online version: http://www.ethnologue.com/language/bul

1For the sake of anonymity, the Bulgarian language informant is referred to as Y and the classmates are referenced by their initials.

2The (date-elicitation session.data number-elicitor) format was used in maintaining organized notes throughout the class and was used for reference when data was not listed in table form. Readers can generally ignore these internal reference numbers. Please email doroski.1@husky.neu.edu for full sets of data transcriptions.

3In some cases the informant gave the Cyrillic orthography of the collected data; in those cases the Cyrillic is given.

4Please contact Northeastern University for copies of elicitation reports. Please contact author for copies of data.