Semantic Fieldwork

Based on Lisa Matthewson's article "On the Methodology of Semantic Fieldwork". In: *International Journal of American Linguistics*, vol. 70, no. 4, Oct. 2004, pp. 369-415
(The complete article is linked from the website.)

"Semantic fieldwork aims to establish facts about the meaning of utterances, and parts of utterances, in the language under investigation. These semantic facts are often subtle, are usually context-dependent and are almost never accessible by direct native-speaker intuitions (i.e., one cannot simply ask questions of the form "What does X mean?").

> Do not ask questions of the form "What does *X* mean?" Your informants can at best speculate. What would you reply if somebody asked you "What does *the* mean?"

"Instead, one must construct a range of example sentences, paired with particular discourse contexts, and ask the speaker whether in the discourse context provided, the sentences are (*a*) felicitous and (*b*) true.

Example: Investigating clefts
"[I]t is commonly believed that clefts in English (sentences of the form *It is X who Y*) introduce presuppositions. The sentence *It is Mary who wants fish* can only be felicitously uttered in a context in which both the speaker and the hearer already believe that somebody […] wants fish. Now suppose one is working on an Amerindian language that has a cleft construction, and one wants to find out whether the same type of presupposition obtains in this language.

> Do not ask the informant: "If I say [translation of *It is Mary who wants fish*], does this mean that we must already know that somebody wants fish?"
>
> - This is a leading question that might prejudice the answer
> - You are asking your informant to form a generalization and engage in the analysis of his/her own language.

What can you do instead?

Two main elicitation methods – ask for translations or match up scenarios and sentences.

Asking for translations can give you a first clue, and will be helpful in certain situations, namely

- when you don't know how to say the sentence in the investigated language.
- when you'd like to know what the preferred way of saying something is, (and then find out whether there are alternative ways).
- when you'd like to collect sentences to make up a context.

Asking for translations of individual words is much less preferred. If you do so, only ask for translations of the meaning of open class items in isolation: What's the word for "table", … ?
Ask for translations of all other items as translations of complete sentences that item appears in, for instance if you investigate determiners and quantifiers such as "the", "every", "all", "each", …

We've seen that *the dog* in English might refer to a particular dog or the species. You don't know which translation you'll get, or if the informant is maybe even only aware of one possibility.

Also think of the position effects we've see with Chinese NPs.

Recommendations when asking for translations
- Ask for translation of complete sentences only.
- Try to make the source string a grammatical interpretation.
- Assume that the result string is a grammatical sentence.

More examples (on ambiguity, more on what to do later)
(1) *The man has a book*.
(2) *John walks to the store*.
(3) *John can walk to the store.*

(1') a. The man holds a book.
(1') b. The man owns a book.

(2’) a. John walks to the store whenever he goes, because he likes to get exercise.

(2’) b. Listen to what happened yesterday. First, we realized we need some onions, so John offered to go get some. He walks to the store. He buys the onions…

(3’) a. John can walk to the store now his legs have healed.

(3’) b. John can walk to the store; him mother said he’s allowed.

(3’) c. A: I need some onions.
B: John can walk to the store and get you some.

Translations provide a clue, they don’t give you a result.

Matching scenarios with sentences

Without the use of a meta-language

Have pictures (here of two men doing the things indicated below) and ask for descriptions (which you can then check for indications on how contrastive focus is realized).

The man in the green shirt is filling a pipe.
The man in the brown shirt is eating a watermelon.

The man in the green shirt is filling a pipe.
The man in the brown shirt is smoking a pipe.

Drawbacks:

- time consuming / difficult
- limited
- there’s usually more than one way to describe a picture

Using a meta language

(no direct inquiry about “what does this mean” though)

Giving a context: A context might be needed anyway. Sometimes sentences sound infelicitous out of the blue. In such cases, cases of ambiguity, and cases where context-sensitive phenomena are explored, it is necessary to give a discourse context.

- Give the context first, then the sentence (otherwise your informant might have already imagined a context). - It’s ok to use your common meta-language to explain the context.

We assume that speakers of a language can make judgments about the truth of a sentence in an appropriate discourse context. (Remember our hypothesis – when we know the meaning of a sentence, we might not know whether it’s true or not, but we know what a situation has to look like for it to be true.)

For example when given a context like the one below, English speakers can make judgments about the truth of (4).

Scenario: Mary was out last night at a party. She danced a lot, and came back late. Now she’s asleep.

(4) *Mary danced.*

From this we can construct a elicitation question for an informant:

“Say Mary was out last night at a party. She danced a lot, and came back late. Now she’s asleep. Could I say ‘Mary danced’?”

Hopefully English-speaking informants would accept this sentence. We then can contrast this with scenarios about present dancing, f.i.

“Say Mary has never been dancing. Today is going to be her first time. She’s resting now, but she’s going to be dancing in an hour. Could I say ‘Mary danced’?”

Presumably English-speaking informants would reject this sentence.

This, in conjunction with more scenarios and elicitations, would hopefully confirm our hypothesis that *–ed* in English characterizes past events.

Assumptions about rejection and acceptance of sentences in a context.

If a speaker accepts a sentence *S* in a context *C*, *S* is true in *C*.
If a s sentence *S* is false in a discourse context *C*, speakers will reject *S* in *C*.

Unfortunately the reverse of the latter is not necessarily true – speakers might reject sentences that are true in a context for independent reasons, that is, if a speaker rejects a sentence in a context, we can't yet conclude that it is false in that context.

Scenario: There are two cats in the room, and they are both asleep.

(5) a. *The cats are awake*. Rejected since false.
b. *The cat is asleep*. Infelicitous.

Possibilities to distinguish infelicitous vs. false statements:

- explain the difference to the informant (not easy!)
- try to "feel out" how solid the judgment is. (Is it more like "No, you can't say that." or more like "Um, that doesn't seem quite right.")

Investigating Presuppositions – The "Wait a minute" task (watch out, not fool-proof)

My uncle brought his elephant.
Wait a minute! I didn't even know he had an elephant.
#Wait a minute! I didn't even know he brought it.

Dealing with ambiguity

Speakers do not have direct access to direct judgments about ambiguity, that is you can't ask "Is this sentence ambiguous?"

(6) *Yumiko didn't read three books.*

(6') a. It is not the case that Yumiko read three books.
b. There are three books that Yumiko didn't read.

Scenario 1: There were six books, and Yumiko read three of them.
Scenario 2: There were four books, and Yumiko read two of them.

Under which paraphrase is (6) true / false in which scenario? We can use the scenarios to test whether both readings are available. If a speaker accepts (6) in Scenario 1, paraphrase b. is available (Since paraphrase a. is false in this scenario. If it was the only one, the sentence should have been rejected.) If a speaker accepts (6) in Scenario 2, paraphrase a. is available. If a speaker accepts (6) in both scenarios, the sentence is ambiguous in (at least) the ways paraphrased in (6').

Problematic though might be that there is often a preferred interpretation, which might lead speakers to question the second interpretation.

You can create biasing contexts.

(7) Every woman loves her dog.
(7') a. Every woman loves her own dog.
b. Every woman loves that lady's dog.

(8) Every woman signed her card.

Scenario1: It was Mary's birthday. Every woman in the company signed a card for her.
Test Sentence: Every woman signed her card.
Check: Can the sentence mean that every woman signed Mary's card?

Scenario 2: It was John's birthday. Every woman in the company bought a different card for him.
Test Sentence: Every woman signed her card.
Check: Can the sentence mean that every woman signed her own card for John?