How do linguistic anthropologists actually go about conducting research? This question can be broken down into the following sub-questions, which are best addressed sequentially:

• What kinds of research questions do linguistic anthropologists formulate?
• What kinds of data do linguistic anthropologists collect, and with what methods?
• How do linguistic anthropologists analyze their data in order to find answers to their research questions?
• What sorts of ethical issues do linguistic anthropologists face?

Since methodological approaches vary greatly within linguistic anthropology, none of these questions will have a simple answer. Often, scholars in the field will make use of several different kinds of methods in order to obtain varying perspectives on the issues at hand. Many of these methods are also used by researchers in other fields, especially cultural anthropology. While linguistic anthropologists frequently borrow from methods closely associated with cultural anthropology, however, the reverse is not often the case – though maybe it should be. With greater familiarity with the tools and perspectives of linguistic anthropology, perhaps more cultural
What Kinds of Research Questions Do Linguistic Anthropologists Formulate?

All research starts with one or more questions. Sometimes these questions are rather inchoate in the mind of the researcher; other times, they are clearly articulated in grant proposals. At the outset of research, however, a scholar must be curious about something – and in linguistic anthropology this “something” usually concerns how language reflects and/or shapes some aspect of social life. Indeed, as noted in chapter 1, this focus on language in real-life settings distinguishes linguistic anthropologists from many other scholars in fields such as linguistics or psychology who might be interested in language. As a result, the types of research questions linguistic anthropologists ask differ from those of most linguists, sociolinguists, cultural anthropologists, and other researchers.

The specific formulation of any scholar’s research question may change as the research gets underway. This is also true for linguistic anthropologists because, as will be described below, many linguistic anthropologists conduct long-term fieldwork, often in very different cultural and linguistic settings than the researcher’s own, and such fieldwork ends up challenging the researcher’s initial assumptions. Like researchers from other fields such as cultural anthropology, linguistic anthropologists incorporate insights from their fieldwork into their research questions so that they more accurately reflect the way that the research subjects themselves talk or think about a certain topic. The research question can therefore often be a work in progress.

In chapter 1, I summarized six ethnographies written by linguistic anthropologists. What follows is a list of some research questions these books and several others address:

- How do place names and their use in conversations both illustrate and reinforce important Apache social relations and cultural values (Basso 1996)?
What do the arguments, storytelling episodes, and gossip of African American girls and boys tell us about the gendered nature of conversations and the ability of children to create rich, complex social worlds (Goodwin 1990)?

How does the use of Spanish and English among Puerto Ricans shed light on unequal racial, ethnic, political, and economic relations in New York City (Urciuoli 1996)?

In what ways does the presence or absence of a particular grammatical marker in Samoan political speeches and everyday conversations strengthen existing power relations (Duranti 1994)?

How do language ideologies regarding French and Corsican on the island of Corsica both reproduce and reshape cultural identities, influence the outcomes of Corsican revitalization efforts, and reinforce economic and political power (Jaffe 1999)?

What are the multiple meanings of “troubles talk” and complaints, including the special genre of laments, in Bangladesh, and how do they shed light on people’s conceptions of illness (especially mental illness), emotion, and gender (Wilce 1998)?

How does the use of “Mock Spanish” (such as “hasta la vista, baby,” or “mañana”) by native English speakers both directly and indirectly index the speakers’ attitudes about Spanish speakers (Hill 1998, 2005, 2008)?

How do African American hair care professionals establish authority and reinforce their professional identities through the use of particular linguistic forms (Jacobs-Huey 2006)?

What are the causes and implications of the almost complete eradication of a form of Irish Sign Language that used to be used solely by women (LeMaster 2006)?

How does a new literacy practice such as love-letter writing contribute to changing marriage practices, shifting gender relations, and other social transformations taking place in Nepal (Ahearn 2001a)?

Of course, these might not have been the questions these researchers entered the field to study, since in many cases, the insights that linguistic anthropologists gain from their initial fieldwork redirect their inquiries in unanticipated ways – a process that some sociologists call “grounded theory.” Nevertheless, the list demonstrates the extent of the diversity
in topics researched by linguistic anthropologists. Such a wide range of foci requires a correspondingly broad array of research methods in order to collect the appropriate kind of information for answering particular research questions.

**What Kinds of Data Do Linguistic Anthropologists Collect, and with What Methods?**

Linguistic anthropologists draw upon an eclectic mixture of research methods. In order to answer one type of research question, it might be necessary to videotape or tape-record hundreds of hours of conversation, while another might require sorting through all of a government's language policy documents over a period of decades, and yet another might require nothing more (or less) than a Google search of the word “mañana” – though in the latter case, there is almost always a deep background of ethnographic and linguistic fieldwork preceding the collection of data in the form of a Google search (cf. Hill 2005). Most linguistic anthropologists end up collecting many different kinds of data through many different research methods.

The type of information collected by linguistic anthropologists might be quantitative or qualitative – or often both. Quantitative data can be counted; the researcher is investigating the quantities of something. A researcher might, for example, conduct a survey about people’s opinions and count how many feel strongly about a particular subject. Qualitative methods, on the other hand, do not involve counting anything. Instead, a researcher who uses qualitative methods is interested in looking in-depth at some aspect of human behavior without quantifying it in any way. For instance, linguistic and cultural anthropologists often live for long periods of time in the communities they are studying in order to observe and participate in daily life, thereby learning and absorbing as many of the details of cultural norms and social practices as possible.

Many linguistic anthropologists advocate using multiple methods in order to gather different kinds of data in an attempt to obtain a fuller picture of the phenomenon under study. Some of the most commonly employed research methods in linguistic anthropology are described below. This is just a partial list of the many different research
methods used by linguistic anthropologists. Whatever methods lingu-
istic anthropologists draw upon, however, their main goal is to gather
information about language use in actual social contexts.

**Participant observation**

One of the most widely used research methods in linguistic anthro-
pology is known as “participant observation” and is shared with
cultural anthropology as well as other fields that engage in ethn-
ographic research. In fact, most linguistic anthropologists consider
participant observation to be an essential method for their research.
(The reasons why this is so should be evident after reading in chapter
1 that linguistic anthropologists consider language to be inextricably
interwoven with social practices.) Participant observation requires
linguistic anthropologists to spend months or years residing in a
particular community (or set of communities, in the case of multi-sited
ethnographic research), during which time they become fluent in the
local language(s), if they are not already, and become extremely
familiar with local social norms, cultural meanings, and linguistic practices.
Scholars who conduct participant observation take copious notes,
called fieldnotes, while participating in an event or taking part in an
interaction, or as soon as possible afterwards. This sort of intensive,
in-depth immersion in the group or groups being studied can provide
essential insights and build important rapport with research subjects.

**Interviews**

Linguistic anthropologists, like many other social scientists, not to men-
tion journalists, public opinion pollsters, market researchers, social
workers, and others, often make use of interviews to gather information.
The types of information requested vary widely, as does the format of
the interview, which can be structured (with a list of questions asked
of all research subjects in the same order), semi-structured (with a list
of general areas the researcher would like to discuss, but no strict
order or wording), or open-ended (informal conversations designed
to elicit topics of importance to the research subjects themselves).
Sometimes all of these types of interviews are used at some point
during a research project.
Linguistic anthropologists may use interviews to gather general background information about cultural norms and social practices in their research communities, and/or they may conduct interviews to ask people’s opinions about various linguistic usages. Linguistic anthropologists might also seek out individuals to help them understand the meanings of particularly important and complex words and concepts. Those scholars working on endangered languages that have never before been studied or perhaps even written down must work closely with speakers of these languages to document as much of the grammar, vocabulary, verbal art, and social contexts of language use as possible before the languages become extinct.5

No matter what the content or format of the interviews conducted, however, most linguistic anthropologists do not treat interviews as transparent – as linguistic data they can reach “through” to get to the “facts.” Instead, they recognize the importance of analyzing the interview context itself. Linguistic anthropologists strongly maintain that meanings emerge in specific social interactions, and interviews are no exception. As Charles Briggs (1986, 2007) has repeatedly reminded us, the interviewer is a co-participant in the interaction, and this can have an enormous effect on what is said, how it is said, and why it is said. For a scholar to gloss over or omit entirely this aspect of the interview when writing about it is at best to miss an opportunity to enrich the analysis and at worst to fail to understand the significance of what the interviewee was (or was not) saying.

Thinking back to Jakobson’s model of the multiple functions of language, the “referential” function – that which communicates information about the world – is just one of six functions of language. Interviews should not, therefore, be reduced to this function alone. Briggs also warns that in many societies, the interview is not the preferred way of communicating information – if it is a speech genre familiar to the interviewees at all. A researcher who attempts to use interviews in such a society will either obtain mistaken information or no information at all. For this reason, Briggs (1986:93) strongly encourages researchers in all fields (not just linguistic anthropology) to “learn how to ask” in culturally appropriate ways by paying close attention to how people in the community use language in all sorts of situations. Briggs (2007) also urges us all to become more aware of how the ideas people express in interviews circulate
in many different venues – in scholarly articles and books, informal conversations, and the mass media, for example.

In sum, as important as the interview is as a research method, it is often mistakenly assumed to provide a simple, straightforward path toward “the facts” or “the truth.” Interviews can indeed provide rich insights, but they must be appreciated as the complex, culturally mediated social interactions that they are.

**Surveys and questionnaires**

Closely related to interviews are surveys and questionnaires, which are often employed to collect demographic data such as age, education level, languages spoken, income, and so on. Sometimes respondents fill out the survey or questionnaire themselves; other times, the researcher or a research assistant goes through it with the respondent item by item. These research instruments can be used to collect information about opinions, experiences, or beliefs. Respondents might be asked, for example, “On a scale of 1 to 5, how much do you agree with the following statements?” Or, “How many hours per day on average do you watch television?” Or, “List the first five adjectives that come into your mind when you think of your wedding.” Many of the same caveats that apply to interviews also apply to surveys and questionnaires, but they can provide valuable perspectives on some topics.

**Naturally occurring conversations**

Linguistic anthropologists often record hours and hours of “naturally occurring” conversations in order to study actual utterances produced by speakers in their everyday interactions. Researchers also often record folk tales, political speeches, rituals, songfests, performances, and other speech events. Of course, introducing a tape recorder or video recorder frequently makes the context something other than “naturally occurring,” but linguistic anthropologists are well aware of this and have responded in several ways. First, they have noted that every context is “natural,” and as long as the various aspects of the context are noted and brought into the analysis, some very interesting insights can be obtained. Second, they note that people often lose whatever self-consciousness they might at first feel as they get used to
being recorded. Third, some researchers have removed themselves from the immediate conversational context by giving tape recorders to the participants themselves to control, or by setting up video or tape recorders that run for long periods of time without the researcher’s needing to be present. Finally, some researchers have recorded interactions surreptitiously – though this raises ethical issues that will be discussed at greater length below. One way some linguistic anthropologists have attempted to abide by the standards of ethical research is to obtain informed consent ahead of time to record people surreptitiously at some point in the future. Then, once the recording has been made, these researchers play it back for the participants to make sure that they still consent to the recording.

As important as recording naturally occurring conversations can be for many linguistic anthropologists, there are nevertheless several drawbacks to this method. Transcribing such conversations takes an average of six hours of transcription for every hour of conversation – often more. Recorded words can become detached from their social contexts, thereby making the meanings even more indeterminate than usual. And finally, the amount of data that can be analyzed in a single short conversation is enormous, so hundreds of hours of recorded conversations can quickly become overwhelming to analyze. Despite these disadvantages, however, there is an important benefit to recording as many interactions as possible: it allows the researcher to study linguistic practices in greater detail, thereby avoiding the tendency to draw conclusions based on faulty memories, received notions, or one’s own language ideologies.

It is important to remember, however, that transcriptions are never neutral written records of what was said but instead are always selective, theory-laden, and inevitably partial in both senses of the word (cf. Bucholtz 2000; Duranti 1997:122ff.; Duranti 2006a; Ochs 1979). There is no perfect or final transcription of any linguistic interaction. Instead, researchers must choose which features to include, omit, or highlight in their transcripts depending on the focus of their analyses. Should they time pauses in tenths of a second, for example? How, if at all, should they indicate overlapping speech or nonverbal gestures – with brackets of some sort, or by using a format similar to a musical score in which an utterance spoken at the same time as another appears right above or below it? What sorts of emphasis or intonation
should be included in the transcript, and with what symbols or fonts? How should nonstandard variants be represented — exactly as pronounced using the International Phonetic Alphabet, through standardized spellings of the words that misrepresent the exact spellings but might be easier to read, or some other alternative? How should speech translated from another language be represented in writing? These issues are difficult intellectually, logistically, ethically, and politically, but all linguistic anthropologists who transcribe naturally occurring discourse must grapple with them, and the more explicit they are in their texts about the decisions they made while transcribing, the more illuminating their analyses are likely to be.

**Experimental methods**

Some linguistic anthropologists, especially those interested in cognition and/or child language acquisition/socialization, conduct various experiments in order to be able to hold constant many of the variables in any given situation. For example, a researcher interested in whether different ways of expressing spatial relations in two languages correlate with different ways of perceiving space might set up an experiment that asks subjects to remember the ordering of a line of objects on a table, then to reproduce that ordering after being rotated 180 degrees (Levinson 2003b). Similarly, researchers interested in children’s language acquisition and socialization might conduct an experiment using a skit with dolls in order to ascertain the children’s language abilities and their understandings of others’ intentions (e.g., Villiers and Villiers 2003). We will explore some of the research involving experimental methods in chapter 4.

**Matched guise tests**

A researcher interested in language ideologies might conduct a matched guise test, a process that involves recording individuals as they read a short passage in two or more languages or dialects (“guises”). In other words, if four people are recorded, eight (or more) readings of the same passage might be produced. For example, a researcher interested in whether listeners judge people who speak African American English differently from those who speak standard
American English might choose four individuals who can code-switch fluently between these two ways of speaking. Each of these four individuals would record two readings of the same passage, one in African American English, the other in standard American English. These eight readings would then be shuffled up and played back to other people who do not know that there were only four readers instead of eight. The listeners would be asked to rank each of the eight readings, rating each according to how honest, intelligent, sophisticated, likable, and so on, they thought the reader was. By comparing the scores listeners give to the same speaker reading in African American English vs. standard American English, it is possible to hold a person’s other voice qualities constant and thereby determine how much influence simply speaking one or the other of these language variants has on listeners’ attitudes toward the speaker. In other words, matched guise tests can provide a measure of people’s unconscious language ideologies – which can be related to racial prejudices.6

One research project that used a matched guise test was Matthew Ciscel’s study of linguistic practices in Moldova (part of the former Soviet Union). Ciscel used four readers, each of whom spoke some variation of at least two of the following as either first or second languages: Moldovan, Romanian, Russian, or English. Ciscel found that while the listeners’ attitudes toward these languages were complex, the one clear tendency that came through in the results was that of all the variants the listeners ranked, they considered the accented, rural dialect of mixed Romanian/Moldovan to be lowest in status (2007:100; cf. Bilaniuk 2005; Booth 2009b; Urciuoli 1996). One of Ciscel’s speakers (whom Ciscel numbers “Voice 2”) recorded the same passage in standard Romanian, Russian, and English and was ranked by the listeners as more honest, intelligent, and so on, when she was speaking in these languages than when she was speaking the rural dialect of mixed Romanian/Moldovan. It must be remembered that the listeners thought that they were hearing four separate speakers, not the same speaker speaking in four different languages or dialects. In this way, matched guise tests can help reveal unconscious language ideologies – often a direct or indirect indicator of social hierarchies. While matched guise tests, like all methods, have their limitations, they can be quite useful, especially when combined with participant observation, interviews, and other ethnographic methods.
Written texts

Many linguistic anthropologists look closely at various written texts: historical documents copied from archives, personal letters (such as the love letters I studied – see Ahearn 2001a), newspaper articles, e-mails, or official documents. Researchers who are interested in studying literacy practices – the ways in which people produce, consume, or refer to written texts in their everyday lives – often analyze written texts as mundane as shopping lists or sign boards, drawing insightful conclusions about important cultural values and social relations. Even linguistic anthropologists who are not primarily concerned with literacy practices often find that paying close attention to the intersections between texts and contexts is not only beneficial but unavoidable in societies that are saturated by the written word.

How Do Linguistic Anthropologists Analyze their Data?

The logistics involved in conducting research in linguistic anthropology can be very challenging. Many scholars in the field employ a research assistant to help them collect data, whether by conducting a survey, distributing written questionnaires, or translating or transcribing interviews or conversations. Even when a translator is used, however, most linguistic anthropologists emphasize the importance of not relying solely on such an intermediary but instead being fluent enough in the local language(s) to carry out many parts of the research project themselves. Some linguistic anthropologists prefer to conduct every aspect of their research themselves without any help from a translator or research assistant, but this is not possible when the scope of the project is too broad for one person to handle, or when it is not considered culturally acceptable for the researcher to speak alone (or even at all) with a member of the opposite sex or of a different caste or other social group.

No matter which methods are used, it is important to remember that all research, even the most “objective,” number-crunching sort, involves interpretation. From the formulation of a research question through the data collection stage, all the way through the data analysis process,
all scholars, including linguistic anthropologists, knowingly or unknowingly engage in interpretation. If they are not careful, this interpretation process can involve the imposition of the researcher’s own culturally specific categories, which can prevent the researcher from gaining a deep understanding of the topic being studied. The research process therefore requires constant reassessment by the scholar.

A painful but extremely instructive example of the unwitting and inappropriate imposition of a researcher’s own categories comes directly out of my own fieldwork. At the outset of my dissertation research, which was about the shift away from arranged marriage toward self-initiated, or “love marriage” in Junigau, Nepal, I decided to conduct a quick survey of all the adults in the village. I asked each person whether his or her marriage was either self-initiated or arranged by parents – assuming that these were the only two types of marriage. As I went along, I would occasionally receive a response that confused me, as it sounded to my ears as though the person were saying the equivalent of, “My marriage was just like jabar.” Now, jabar by itself is not a word in Nepali, so when people mentioned the actual word jabarjasti (violently, by force), I heard jabar (which I did not understand) and jastai (“just like”). I had spent years in Nepal by that point and was fairly fluent in Nepali after spending three years in the country as a Peace Corps volunteer, but I had never heard the word jabarjasti. This was partly because my fieldwork occurred before the violent Maoist insurgency that began in 1996 and partly because forced capture marriage (jabarjasti chhopeko) was a stigmatized practice in the village, spoken of openly by very few people. So, whenever I heard what I thought was “just like jabar” as an answer to what kind of marriage a person had had, I asked, “Just like what – self-initiated or arranged?” The person would then usually choose either the self-initiated or the arranged category. One day, however, in discussing the village’s marriage practices with my Nepali sister-in-law, I mentioned the problem I had been having understanding jabarjasti, and she explained to me that there was a third category of marriage in Junigau: capture marriage, a forceful kidnapping of the bride and sometimes of the groom as well that was common in the village decades before. Since all of the responses to my initial question about whether people’s marriages had been self-initiated or arranged were potentially tainted by my incorrect assumption that there were only these two types of
marriage in the village, I had to start all over again with the survey. As a result of this eye-opening mishap, I eventually came to reformulate my research as a study of marriage narratives in which Nepalis talked about their involvement (or lack thereof) in the decision-making processes surrounding various types of marriage.

Once linguistic anthropologists have all of their data, interpretation becomes a process of searching for patterns in order to find answers to the research questions that inspired the project—or to answer questions that emerge during analysis of the data. For many linguistic anthropologists, this involves reading and rereading fieldnotes and other documents, transcribing interviews and naturally occurring conversations, and statistically analyzing survey responses. Some scholars then go on to conduct a micro-level analysis of conversational data, while others focus on data concerning language policies or ideologies at a broader scale.

One approach to the micro-level analysis of linguistic data is known as Conversation Analysis (CA). Developed in the 1960s and 1970s partly as an outgrowth of ethnomethodology, a school within sociology that seeks to uncover the ways in which people work to establish and maintain taken-for-granted social structures in their everyday activities (Garfinkel 1967), Conversation Analysis is both a tool within disciplines such as linguistic anthropology and a discipline in its own right. Practitioners of CA in this latter sense include the founders of the approach, Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson, who analyze talk-in-interaction without resorting to contextualization, interviews, or any ethnographic methods (Sacks et al. 1974; Schegloff 2007). Instead, they look closely at ordinary conversations for the patterning inherent within them. One of the most important and widespread patterns, they suggest, is turn-taking. Each utterance provides a context (and for some CA practitioners, the only relevant context) for the utterance that follows. Utterances, CA scholars have shown, often appear in what are known as “adjacency pairs”—questions and answers, for example, or greetings and responses (“Hi, how are you?” “Fine, thanks, and you?”), compliments and disavowals (“You look great today!” “Oh, no, I’m just slogging along as usual…”), and so on. Certain responses are socially preferred, while others are dispreferred, and much can be understood about cultural norms and social relationships by paying close attention to these clues.
As valuable as the insights that have emerged from work in CA have been, however, most linguistic anthropologists view CA much more as a methodological tool to be used in conjunction with other methods, especially ethnographic ones (Moerman 2007). Alessandro Duranti (1977:266) identifies three main criticisms leveled at researchers who use only CA: (1) they are uninterested in the “larger contexts” of the conversations they analyze, even such basic aspects as the relationship between the people who are talking, or where or when the conversation took place; (2) their transcripts indicate a very narrow view of “speech,” omitting nonverbal interactions, changes in intonation, and the like; and (3) they are completely uninterested in what the speakers themselves might say to explain or interpret their own utterances. For these reasons, when linguistic anthropologists do use CA (and many do consider it an extremely valuable approach), they combine it with other methods and contextualize the conversations they analyze far more comprehensively than strict CA practitioners do.

Some linguistic anthropologists who analyze conversations draw on the theories of Erving Goffman, a sociologist who rejected many of the most common language ideologies regarding the ways in which conversations allegedly take place between speakers and hearers. Goffman suggested a much more complex participation framework and production format for even the simplest of conversations, arguing, for example, that the seemingly unified role of speaker in any interaction could actually be separated into three different roles (Goffman 1981:144):

- **Animator.** The person who serves as the voice box; the person who animates the words being spoken, whether they are the speaker’s own words or not.
- **Author.** The person who composed the words.
- **Principal.** The person who stands behind what is said; the person whose opinions are expressed.

Goffman also helped to disambiguate the hearer role, distinguishing among ratified and unrated hearers. Some hearers are addressees (those to whom the speaker addresses an utterance), but some are bystanders, overhearers, or even eavesdroppers.
Sometimes all three speaker roles are inhabited by one person, but sometimes they can be distributed across several people. So, to give a hypothetical example, President Obama might give a speech written by a speech writer who totally disagrees with the President’s policies but writes eloquently and convincingly enough to keep the job. As President Obama delivers the speech, he would be considered the animator (the voice box) and, presumably, the principal (the person whose opinions are being expressed), but the speech writer would be the author. Even in ordinary conversations, these roles frequently shift, especially when reported speech is used. Goffman called these instances shifts in footing:

A change in footing implies a change in the alignment we take up to ourselves and the others present as expressed in the way we manage the production or reception of an utterance. A change in our footing is another way of talking about a change in our frame for events. … Participants over the course of their speaking constantly change their footing, these changes being a persistent feature of natural talk. (1981:128)

Such shifts in footing are important to study closely, as they offer scholars clues about the multifunctionality of even the most mundane of utterances. Changes in footing also often index various social identities, cultural values, attitudes, stances, or relationships. Conversation analysis, in conjunction with other ethnographic methods, can therefore provide valuable insights into many different kinds of linguistic and social practices.

Whether the information a linguistic anthropologist collects consists of recorded or transcribed conversations, written fieldnotes, survey results, or other types of information, once it has been collected the next step facing the researcher is to analyze what usually amounts to mountains of data. Some scholars use index cards or sketch out flow charts to organize their thoughts and their data, while others turn to computer software to help them do this. There are many computer programs available to help researchers sort through their data, whatever form the information takes. Some programs allow the user to identify themes or codes in text files, graphics files, sound files, or even video files, then organize those themes in whatever ways
Other programs help the investigator conduct a statistical analysis of quantitative data or analyze aspects of speech such as pitch or pronunciation. Even with the help of the most sophisticated computer programs, however, researchers ultimately have to discover patterns, make connections, and draw conclusions themselves.

What Sorts of Ethical Issues Do Linguistic Anthropologists Face?

The ethical issues facing any social scientist can be daunting. Ever since the reflexive turn in anthropology two or more decades ago, however, linguistic anthropologists have given a great deal of thought to the micro-politics of personal relations in the field and the ethical dimensions of representing in scholarly or popular articles, books, and presentations the people and communities they study. There is often unequal power between the researcher and the people s/he studies – though this relationship can be extremely complex, so all the power may not reside in the researcher alone. Still, researchers frequently have more money than research subjects, and they often create an entire career out of the information gathered from the people who live in their fieldsites. When genuinely close relationships of trust, friendship, or fictive kinship develop, complicated questions can emerge regarding mutual obligations, betrayal, and confidentiality. Many anthropologists have written about the theoretical, ethical, and personal implications of these issues.

Much of the research conducted by academics on human subjects must be reviewed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of their university or research institute. The IRB review process grew out of some horrific abuses of research, mostly in the biomedical field. As a result, many anthropologists and other social scientists consider IRB oversight of their research to be unnecessary and/or focused on irrelevant matters (such as providing access to experimental medicines in an ethical manner). The American Anthropological Association has developed its own ethical code, and many anthropologists consider these guidelines to be more appropriate for their research – and sometimes even stricter – than the policies enforced by IRBs.
Even the AAA’s Code of Ethics, however, is intentionally vague in some places and controversial in others. For example, it makes the following seemingly straightforward statement: “Anthropological researchers have primary ethical obligations to the people, species, and materials they study and to the people with whom they work.” But if anthropologists are studying, say, child abusers or corrupt politicians (and some do study such groups), should these anthropologists’ primary ethical obligation be to their research subjects or to the victims of their research subjects? What does it mean to be “ethically obligated” to someone?

Both the AAA’s Code of Ethics and all IRBs across the United States advocate “informed consent.” That is, the researcher is expected to inform each research subject fully about the nature of the study and obtain consent from each participant. This process is fairly straightforward in studies that involve something like filling out a single questionnaire, provided that the study takes place in a society such as the United States, where most people are familiar with the concept of a research study. Research subjects merely read the informed consent statement at the beginning of the questionnaire, and if they want to participate, they sign the paper or otherwise indicate their consent. When the research takes place in a different society, however, one in which people are less familiar with research projects, and when the research involves long-term participant observation, resulting in the researcher’s living in a particular community for a year or longer, such a one-time informed consent process is usually inappropriate. When deep personal bonds are formed, it is often tricky for the researcher to determine which information is appropriate to use in the research and which is not. The informed consent process in such instances therefore needs to be ongoing and adapted to the particular setting in which the research takes place.

Other difficult ethical questions linguistic anthropologists (and other researchers) sometimes face include the following:

- Should research assistants be paid the going rate (if there is such a thing) of the country in which the research takes place, or a fair wage according to US standards?
- What constitutes appropriate reciprocity for all of the information, advice, and assistance researchers receive from people in their...
fieldsites? If a researcher is treated as a son or daughter, for example, does that mean that s/he should take on all the obligations of that role in that society, including, perhaps, keeping in touch regularly after leaving the field and taking on the care of parents in their old age?

- What are the ethical obligations of a researcher who is “studying up” (Nader 1972) in a community of individuals who are far wealthier and more powerful than the researcher herself/himself?
- Must a researcher provide medical or financial assistance to everyone who asks for such help? Only some people? No one at all? Why or why not?
- How should researchers behave when confronted by behavior they find morally repugnant? Should they respect different cultural norms or apply universal standards of human rights?
- Is “applied” or “engaged” research more ethical than so-called “pure” research? Does it avoid any of the ethical dilemmas facing non-applied researchers? What ethical issues are unique to applied research? Does all applied research involve the same kinds of ethical considerations? In other words, does a linguistic anthropologist working on preserving an endangered language face the same ethical quandaries as a linguistic anthropologist working as a speech writer for a politician?

Linguistic anthropologists interpret and answer these types of questions differently, and of course answering them in the abstract does not necessarily make it easy to decide what one should do in an actual situation, for the specific details of actual cases are usually extremely complex. Nevertheless, acknowledging the presence of thorny ethical issues in any research is often the first step toward resolving such issues satisfactorily.

The research process for linguistic anthropologists differs relatively little from that of other social scientists. They must formulate compelling research questions, and yet remain open to the revision of those questions as data collection and analysis move forward. They must also decide which methods will gather the right kind of information to enable the answering of their research questions. Along the way, they must resolve the ethical dilemmas that will inevitably emerge. Finally, linguistic
anthropologists must sort through the data that they have collected in order to detect patterns, interpret meanings, and write up results.

It is often said that research is partial in both senses of the word – partial as in only part of the full story, and partial as in biased. This absolutely applies to research in linguistic anthropology. What is less often appreciated, however, is that this is true of all experiences that we have in life. Nevertheless, for all its complexities, research in linguistic anthropology can be exhilarating.