

Ethical Tools, Not An Ethical Standard

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The discussions concerning ethics that have preceded this conference, and the presentations here today, have made it very clear that the determination of what constitutes ethical behavior is hard to pry apart from the specific political and cultural contexts in which linguistic research and the archiving of the products of such research takes place. In addition, these contexts are themselves not stable, but rather change over time, and change in response to actions and events not necessarily directly involved with the linguistic work in question.

This means, as many of the panel members have suggested, that considerations of ethics must be both ethnographically sensitive, and sensitive to the particularities of local situations. I suggest that this renders ethical standards, of the type, for example, conceived for metadata, i.e. uniform community-wide norms, both inappropriate and impractical. I suggest that any ethics standard applicable to all situations would be so vague (and perhaps platitudinous) as to be unhelpful to both language researchers and the peoples from whom language materials and data are obtained.

I propose then, that instead of formulating ethical standards, we may wish to consider creating ethical tools. By this I mean creating multiple sets of standards and protocols from which database-management entities will be able to choose positions in specific ethical domains, that can be combined to create an ethical position that addresses all the major areas for which ethical concerns are significant. The goal would be to facilitate thinking through the range of principled ethical positions for a particular situation, and to facilitate the design of ethically-sound procedures for the acquisition, analysis, and distribution of linguistic data by and through linguistic databases. In this way, it would be possible to create well-defined ethical positions that are sensitive to the local political and cultural setting, as well as the specific needs and desires of language researchers and the people with whom they work. Thus, instead of subscribing to one vague ethical standard, researchers will be able to choose from among sets of precisely specified ethical positions to take on, for example, informed consent, remuneration to consultants and communities, collaboration on analyses, review of uses of linguistic data by consultants or communities, conditions for access to on-line materials, long-term control over on-line language materials, etc. In this way, language researchers are encouraged to contemplate these matters in a flexible yet reasonably precise framework, and to make clear their positions to themselves, their consultants, and their colleagues.

For example, consider the ethical issue of what happens to language materials held by an on-line database after the death of the individual who provided them. The archive could choose to: 1. allow control of the materials to automatically revert to a) family members, b) the community government, or c) the indigenous federation; 2. have the control revert to the database management entity; 3. have control of the materials arbitrated by a third entity, etc. Similarly, imagine the number of ethically principled positions governing the conditions under which materials may be available through an online database. By producing a set of positions that database managing entities can take on these issues, this group can provide researchers with tools

to help them assess the ethical possibilities of the situations they are faced with, and also provide an easy way of characterizing the ethical positions at which they arrive.

While legal requirements set a certain minimum, legal requirements do not exhaust the set of issues, or the range of positions which might be considered ethical. At the same time, different researchers might come to different principled conclusions as to what may constitute ethical behavior in a given setting. Similarly, consultants and communities in different places and times will differ in their position towards language research. Rather than attempt to handle this diversity with a ill-fitting one-size-fits-all code of ethics, it might prove more useful to document, categorize, and organize this diversity, and use the resulting set of positions as ones that can be combined to form ethical codes appropriate to specific situations. In this way, we may be able to both recognize the complex, contingent, and constantly changing nature of ethical behavior, and at the same time provide a flexible, yet well-organized structure for language researchers to use in thinking about ethics and in carrying out their work in an ethical manner.