

Appendix 3

Data collection issues and procedures

1. Observation *versus* self-reported data

Observation, in which a trained researcher monitors an event and unobtrusively and systematically makes a record of some of its features, offers the possibility of collecting accurate and objective data; the data can be accurate if observers are trained and are assiduous, and is objective in the sense that two observers will produce the same record when observing the same event, within limits which are determined by the data collection design.

However, some events are difficult or impossible to observe, for example illegal, intimate or secret events, and in the case of others, if the event occupies a very large space, a single observer's record, made at a single point, may reflect not the event as a whole but only a portion of it. In yet other events the observer's presence may disturb subjects' behaviour, raising the possibility that the behaviour observed was provoked by the presence of the observer. This is the observer's paradox, a term coined by Labov (1970) while

investigating speech styles, and which in the original formulation states that systematic observation is necessary for good data, but that in the study of vernacular styles good data is not obtainable in formal settings such as experiments (Ellis 1994: 122).

At many public sites in Karenni northern camp, for example school classrooms and public events, observers can be relatively unobtrusive, sitting silently at the back of a room, having little or no effect on the behaviour being observed; on the other hand an observer at a small shop or stall in a camp may become an object of curiosity by customers and passers-by. This obtrusiveness of observers is likely to be even greater in people's homes and other private places, and is the reason such sites were excluded from the current study.

Although the possibility of observer interference effects was taken into account in the design of the current study, there was no special planning for observer reports relating to observer effects, and they have been ignored in this dissertation.

Self-reported data, for example asking individuals to list the languages they know, although usually easier to collect than observations, are prone to subjectivity and distortion, including memory effects. These include the fact that respondents may not have previously thought about the topics they are asked about, and were not previously conscious of them as objects to be considered or measured, and they also include distortions brought about by individuals' emotions about the things being asked. Memory effects are especially likely to occur in complex bilingual and multilingual settings 'where language use does not necessarily fall into neat little patterns of complementary distribution across domains' (Martin-Jones 1991: 50, cited in Shameem 1998: 87), or when the languages concerned are preliterate and

there are status issues (Nicholas 1988, cited in Shameem *op cit*: 87). Shameem reports Nicholas's comments on a British Creole study where 'the quality and reliability of the data had unavoidable limitations because ... Creole has an uncertain political and social status, lacks standardization and is referred to by the speakers themselves as "broken"'. Shameem however claims that self-reported data in non-face-risking situations can be reliable, and in the same paper describes a proficiency test she developed in order to demonstrate this.

Although the above comments on multilingualism and preliterate languages refer to work in western urban contexts, there is reason for caution in the Karenni context too. Of the ten or so languages in daily use in the northern Karenni refugee camp, at least three are preliterate, and status issues for these languages have not so far been studied by researchers.

2. Approach to sampling

The research assistants (RAs) were given the target hours for each site type. The researcher trained the RAs in the use of a set of printed random number sheets, which used the current time in minutes and seconds as a seed. The RAs in turn trained the observers in their use.

Observers were given daily observation or interview assignments by the RAs, usually two per day. For each assignment, the RA randomly chose a site type (eg a middle school) and a location (eg the middle school in a certain section of the camp). If the site type was a school, the observer, once at the school, would use the random number sheets to make a list of classrooms to observe in. They would then spend one period in each classroom on their list, omitting any classrooms not in use for any reason.

Sundays were used only for observing acts of worship, and a similar

randomised assignment of observers was used.

When the target number of hours of observation was reached for a site-type, that type was removed from the list of assignments.

3. Data collection by community members

Access to refugee camps in Thailand is strictly controlled, although the degree of control varies from time to time and from camp to camp. The researcher had worked for some years with displaced people from Burma, including those in refugee camps in Thailand, but at the time of the research he had no formal entitlement to enter refugee camps. It was useful therefore that the data collection part of this project could be developed as a collaboration between the researcher and the Karenni refugee community. This involved the use of two refugee research assistants, one of whom was a key facilitator within the community, and a further four refugee observers. Although education levels remain low overall in Karenni camps, there is no shortage of intelligent people and increasingly there are people with some tertiary education and experience of community needs analysis and data collection. The main challenge of using a team of refugee data collectors is the need for a system to ensure the consistency of the data: this requires good initial technical training, a thorough orientation to the project's purpose and needs, and good monitoring and communication systems.

There are theoretical arguments for using researchers or research assistants who are members of the community and culture being investigated. These include more accurate linguistic predictions in multilingual settings, and better clarification of answers during interviews (Shameem 2002, section *Research methods*; Edwards 1994, cited in Shameem *op cit*). In the present

study, there was a further argument: the need for an observer to be able to recognise, if not understand fully, all of the 10 languages used in Karenni northern camp, made the use of local observers virtually unavoidable.

The researcher gave the two research assistants a detailed theoretical and procedural orientation, in English, which they then used to create practical training sessions for the five observers, in Burmese, one of the camp lingua francas.

The training, which took 11 days, consisted of 15 hours of classroom work plus a further 64 hours of practice observations per observer, usually done in two groups. The training process consisted of an iterative process of jointly observing and recording, in a group and in silence, at an observation site, followed by a comparison, discussion and analysis phase. The approach was not unlike the training of oral language examiners in the use of criterion scales (McNamara 1996), and the aim was to bring the observers to a broadly common understanding of exactly what and exactly how to record. The training phase was concluded by a test in which the research assistant's completed observation sheet acted as the key.

Five trainee observers were recruited, in the expectation that one of them might fail the final test, leaving the required four observers, or in a worst case, three. However, the research assistants indicated to the researcher that none of the trainee observers should be failed, as their education levels were equal and failure would lead to loss of face. All the observers were therefore employed, and a later analysis of inter-observer reliability was used to assess the quality of work of each observer, with the aim of excluding inconsistent or variant work (see section *Quality of the data*, below). The observers were from a spread of ethnicities in an attempt to correct for possible ethnic bias - three were Kayah, two Kayan, and one Manaw.

Filling in the fine administrative detail on each observation form, designed to ensure that forms out of order or lost could be recombined, was a hurdle. In addition, trainees reported that observations using 3-minute slices, for example in schools and meetings, were more demanding than other kinds of data collection, for example observations in shops or interviews with patients outside clinics, where periods without customers or patients allowed the possibility of a rest.

Observation forms were not modified as a result of the training.

During the data collection phase, which lasted 19 days, it was planned that each working observer should be visited once a day, at a time unannounced, by a research assistant who would observe in parallel for 15 minutes or more. Cross-checking of this parallel data would then be one of the bases of quality control. Observers met their supervising research assistants once a day to return completed forms and to receive instructions for the following day's work, and at this time research assistants discussed the day's work with observers, focusing on any problem areas or possible tiredness.

Observation forms, in Burmese and also in the original English, together with English-language checklists used in training, are collected in Appendix 5.