

Conducting Linguistic Fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan

Joshua Meyer

Department of Linguistics, University of Arizona

This piece is intended for the social science researcher, especially the graduate student embarking on a new project. If you are planning to conduct fieldwork in a country where you are a foreigner, I hope you will find some of the following useful.

No matter how thorough your Institutional Review Board (IRB) form is, no matter how many contacts you have on site, no matter how familiar you are with the language and the culture of the location, you will always run into problems when you are conducting social science research as a foreigner. This may seem obvious, but I want to reflect on one of the less conspicuous sources of these problems: politics. This essay is a reflection on some of the issues I encountered when conducting research as a foreigner in Kyrgyzstan and how I navigated them.

Before I go on, I'll give some background on my research. From the beginning of July to the end of August 2015, I collected audio recordings of people in conversation in five of the seven administrative regions of Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyz is a language with high dialectal variation around the country, which is why I tried to sample as many varieties as possible. My plan is to make this collection of recordings available as a resource for other linguists and researchers.

During the research, Kyrgyz-speakers sat down for an hour with either a friend, family member or a research assistant and were asked to have a normal, everyday conversation about anything they wanted. This is an awkward activity for anybody. Knowing that you are being recorded makes it difficult to talk normally, especially when you know linguists are going to analyze what you say afterwards.

Under these conditions, sometimes participants didn't know what to talk about. Anticipating this, I provided a list of conversation-starter topics. These topics related to Kyrgyz food, culture, and language. For example, one question was:

Talk about besh barmak (a common national food). How is it made? When is it usually eaten? Is it linked to any tradition or ceremony? I made sure to make these questions as innocuous and unoffensive as possible, checking them many times with native Kyrgyz speakers as well as other social scientists.

Before a recording session started, each participant was given an overview of the research. During this briefing stage, I highlighted the fact that I was not looking for answers to questions or opinions on issues. I informed participants that I just wanted natural speech sounds, and I wanted to record different dialects from around the country. As such, my research did not have any direct ties to political, religious, or other sensitive topics, and I made sure participants understood that. Originally, I thought that since I wasn't asking people to talk about sensitive topics, I would have no problem finding participants. However, that wasn't the case.

Before I arrived in the capital, Bishkek, I had done everything I needed to do. I secured an official affiliation with a prestigious local university, my IRB was approved, I knew where I was going to live, and I had top quality recording equipment. I had three months in the country, and I was ready to hit the ground running.

I planned to spend the first month in the capital collecting recordings at the university in addition to a week of recordings in Talas (the North-Western province). I wanted to be in the three southern regions (Osh, Batken, and Jalalabad) during the second month of my visit, and then the third month I planned to be in Issyk-Kul (the North-East).

When I arrived in the capital, I sent out an invitation to former participants in my research (university students) who had provided an email address and permission to contact them. From these former participants (and through them inviting friends and family), I had more than enough Kyrgyz-speakers to record in the first month. Participants came to the university with a conversation partner, and we were able to record in a sound-isolated recording studio from the journalism department. Given that these were mostly former participants in my research, they already knew who I was and what

kind of research I was doing. I think this in turn made people much more at ease. Overall, this first month of research went very smoothly. The participants were comfortable, the location was perfect, and I had no major issues with equipment. The issues first appeared when I went to the southern part of my research area.

After leaving the North, a local research assistant and I first went to Batken (the southern-most province). The South of Kyrgyzstan has been politically unstable in recent history. Bordering Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, Batken was established as a province in 1999 as a reaction to military incursions across the Tajik border from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). More recently in 2010, the capital of the Osh province (which borders Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China) experienced violent riots which many characterize as ethnically charged (between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz). Many people in both regions were killed or displaced during these separate events. A suspicion I often encountered when speaking to people in these regions was that these events were influenced by international actors outside of Central Asia. In particular, the 2010 May-June Osh events were preceded by the 2010 revolution in April, and some residents suspect that the unrest was instigated by the American government. In the North I was used to people joking about me being a spy, but it never felt like more than a joke. When I arrived in the South, it seemed like a more serious concern.

I had been put in touch with prospective research participants via former participants from the university, but nevertheless, people were hesitant. In the North, when I was looking for participants, university students from my host institution spread the word quickly. In Batken, even those I had been put in touch with seemed reluctant. Even though I had been vouched for, people did not show interest in recording conversations. I was repeatedly asked (1) what I planned to do with the recordings, (2) whether or not I would put the recordings on the Internet, and (3) who was paying me. The second question I heard more from people who didn't have Internet access, and the last question was in particular a common one.

I informed people that the recordings would only be available to other linguists and researchers who had received permission. Still, there was mistrust. One person asked me, "What if your government wants to take the recordings from you?" This was a question that I never thought of before. I responded with, "They can't just take my recordings for no reason, that's not legal." The person responded with, "They can still *force* you!" In no way had I anticipated these kinds of questions, and it didn't seem like any reply I gave was adequate.

The suspicions continued. I had only planned on being in Batken for a few days, but after the third day without any recordings, it looked like things were not going to work out. I considered leaving the province altogether to find participants in Osh. Then, I decided to contact one more former participant who had said if I was in the region that I should let them know. It just so happened that they were also in town. We met and talked, and they told me that no one would trust me unless someone vouched for me. They said that ideally, the person who was vouching for me should accompany me to the recordings. Luckily for me, they offered to do just that.

We went to the house of some of their friends. We sat down, drank tea, and talked. I gave my usual overview of the research, what its scope was, who would have access to the recordings, and other main points. I had rehearsed this explanation many times, and I was sure to give all the relevant information. As such, I would speak with participants for 15-20 minutes before even looking at the informed consent form.

We drank some more tea, I talked, and the hosts asked questions. The questions they asked, however, were not about my research. They asked how old I was, what my education was in, who my parents were, and whether or not I was married. I answered them all, and we continued to sit and chat about various things. After a while, my hosts brought up the recordings. They had agreed.

I was thrilled. After the first pair of conversation partners finished recording, they told the others that it was nothing scary, and soon the neighbors came pouring in. At the end of that day, I had a total of 5 hours of conversations recorded from 10

different people. After 3 days of waiting, a major breakthrough! Afterwards, I talked to the former participant who made it all possible. I expressed my thanks to them and frustration with how difficult it had been to find participants. They said, "When you're explaining the research, you talk too much." I was genuinely surprised.

I thought that the more I explained the research, the more people would trust me. If I covered every relevant piece of information, I would be showing them how I had thought of all the possible risks and taken all the possible precautions. Instead, the more I talked, the more I was perceived to be untrustworthy.

After that, I talked less. I gave a quick overview of the project, answered any remaining questions, and then read the official informed consent document. This helped a little, but it didn't assuage everyone's fears of me being a spy or having an ulterior motive behind my research. I found out that the only way to truly make people more comfortable was by having others (locals) vouch for me. I am and will always be an outsider. An outsider potentially has some malicious intent, and as such I cannot vouch for myself, no matter how much talking I do.

Earlier in the summer a participant made the comment that it was nice that my research assistant and I had known each other for as long as we have. I didn't think much of it at the time. Now, after reflecting on the summer as a whole, I think that in a way my research assistant was vouching for me in the North. They are a Northerner themselves, so there was more mutual trust. However, I think in the South their vouching did not hold as well.

At first participant's suspicions seemed unfounded to me, but after reflecting on the political climate of the past few years (the Ukraine crisis, US sanctions against Russia, US spying unveiled in Germany, WikiLeaks, Assange, and Snowden's NSA whistle-blowing), these concerns now don't seem at all far-fetched to me.

Furthermore, after returning to the states and preparing this piece, I spoke in depth with my former research assistant about the reluctance of some participants. It became clear that there were more factors that I had not considered when trying to understand the situation. As they pointed out

to me, there are two different concerns that may be causing people to be reluctant.

The first concern is immediate personal safety. The recordings I collected were not particularly sensitive, but they were very personal. Some people retold their entire life history for me, and I recorded it all. If someone else (whether it be a spiteful neighbor, or the Kyrgyz, Uzbek, or US government) wanted to use that information against the participant, it might be possible. This is why I instructed participants to not use any names.

The second source of concern relates to indirect, long-term consequences for the participants and other citizens of Kyrgyzstan. While I am primarily interested in these recordings because of the information about the phonetics of the Kyrgyz language, other interested parties might find information which could be used against the country or the people.

Not only could anthropological information be misused from these recordings, but devices could be engineered and used against the country. My current research aims at developing automatic speech recognition for the Kyrgyz language. I see this as one step towards a Kyrgyz-speaking smart-phone, but this technology could also be used for mass spying similar to what we've seen from the NSA in the United States and abroad.

I learned (after I returned to the states) that there was an official US government program affiliated with the US Army which used anthropologists and other social scientists to gain operationally relevant information about citizens of foreign countries. This program was called the Human Terrain System (HTS), and it was active in Afghanistan and Iraq during US presence of both countries. After discovering the existence of the HTS program, I do not see anything irrational about people's reluctance to participate in my research.

These concerns for many of us may seem ridiculous, but the participants in our research may not think that way. We need to be prepared to think about what consequences our work could have. Western researchers often go to a foreign country for a summer, get their data, leave, and write their articles sitting in some nice coffee shop back in the West. It's easy to be removed from the concerns of the people who gave up

their stories, their thoughts, their opinions to you. However, that shouldn't be the case.

Practically speaking, I now know what to expect next time I do this kind of research. In terms of what to do about it, the only conclusion that I've come to is that you need to know people, and the longer you know them, the better.

I know that there will always be people who think that I'm suspicious, and for many there's just nothing I can do to change that. To be honest, I can't blame anyone for that. Given the history of American espionage (both recently and during the Cold War), it's not absurd to be suspicious of an American running around Kyrgyzstan collecting recordings.

While Bishkek, Moscow, Kiev, and Washington DC are thousands of miles away from each other, the decisions of their politicians have ramifications for me when I'm trying to get people to talk about their favorite foods. This sounds absurd, but it's true. Many of us social scientists think our research has nothing to do with politics, but it always will. While we may not think so, our research can have an impact on people's lives. We have an obligation to seriously consider the negative repercussions of our work, and do all that we can to mitigate them. The IRB will help get you a stamp from your university, but there's much more you need to do before your research is ethical. The sooner we as researchers acknowledge that, the better.