

# Methods of Studying ciTonga Gestures in Everyday Activities

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## 1. Introduction

This paper details some practical and ethical methods necessary for studying spontaneous and natural gestures in Malawi. The process of collecting video recordings of natural interactions presents unique challenges and opportunities that differ from those faced by researchers conducting elicitation-based or audio-based documentation. Recordings of spontaneous activities can provide a glimpse of how language is used naturally in everyday settings, by speakers who are acquainted with the local social conventions. Over the past three years that we have gathered and analyzed video recordings of Malawians speaking and gesturing in ciTonga<sup>1</sup>, we were constantly reminded of the fact that, first, while many subjects will be interested in getting video-recorded, the best recordings are those where subjects are not paying direct attention to the camera. Second, the contents of the videos must involve subjects carrying out communicative tasks. This requires the researcher to have a deep knowledge of the daily routines of the subjects so that she can set up her cameras at the right times and places to acquire useful content that can be analyzed months later. Finally, while all anthropological research must follow particular ethical guidelines and local expectations, this is a particularly acute concern for research activities in which a non-local researcher is pointing a camera at subjects engaging in the most intimate details of their personal lives. In order to obtain optimal quality data and respect the privacy of research subjects, we argue that additional preparations must be considered for doing video-based recordings on natural interactions. In addition to surveying scholarship on key logistical issues common to many forms of fieldwork, we argue that it is vital for a researcher to take the time to become fully immersed in local daily activities at the site in order to gain the trust and assistance of not only research subjects, but also foreign researchers who can evaluate the videographer's work from an insider perspective.

Section 1 of this paper is devoted to an overview of relevant literature on carrying out video-based fieldwork in rural areas. In section 2, we outline the institutional clearances and permissions that a researcher must obtain before beginning the research in Malawi. In section 3, we offer convenient and effective settings for recording natural and spontaneous interactions with the permission of subjects. In this section we also present the equipment and software that is currently the most appropriate for fieldwork in Malawi. In the final section we with a summary of topics addressed in the paper.

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<sup>1</sup> The "c" in ciTumbuka and ciTonga is pronounced /ʃ/, an alveolar fricative. The representation of Malawian languages in this paper follows the orthographical convention adopted by the Department of African Languages and Linguistics in at Chancellor College, University of Malawi.

### 1.1. *Why video-based data collection?*

An important question is why is video documentation crucial in gesture fieldwork? Video-based data recording can provide detailed information on the organization and operation of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural human communication. The presentation of visible movements such as eye gaze (Streeck 1993; Goodwin 1980), spatial organization of bodies (Enfield 2009) and gesture (Kendon 1995; Kendon 2004; Streeck 2009, *inter alia*) are significant bodies of evidence for showing that social interactions are rule-based (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974) and culturally-governed (Haviland 2006; Ameka 2009) actions. Not only do they reveal how meaning is surfaced through the cooperative actions of participants (Goodwin 1995), but they also reveal how implicit cognitive frameworks underlie the shared linguistic behaviors (Haviland 2000).

Focusing on African gestures, although there are only a handful of African language-based gesture studies, the existing descriptions reveal a range of interesting patterns. First, African gesture presents regional similarities (Creider 1977); second, there exhibit language and ethnic-specific conventions (Brookes 2004; Orié 2009); third, some gestures are constructed based on social-cultural-driven parameters (Kita and Essegbey 2001); and fourth, they display universal characteristics (Brookes 2005). In order to fully understand the rich diversity of gesture patterns on the African continent, additional research is needed more-so because African languages make up close to a third of the world's languages. As noted by Hyman (2003), studies on the structure of spoken African languages have proven important to every aspect of linguistic theory. In the same vein, a better understanding of gesture typology and theory requires bringing African gestures into consideration.

In sum, a detailed documentation and description of how gesture works in context with other bodily actions in African languages will undoubtedly add to existing data and provide new insights on how human interactions work. In order to accurately capture visible bodily actions, video-based data recording is important. Without video recording, some subtle but significant body actions may be missed. For example, small but intentional movements such as nose and eye pointing (Orié 2009).

### 1.2. *Methodology literature*

Effective methods of research are informed by approaches that focus on collecting natural interaction and social behaviors in context. This enterprise is challenging, particularly, in language communities where (i) just a few speak the language of the fieldworker, (ii) power source is unreliable, and (iii) local bureaucratic practices differ from those the fieldworker is familiar with. Flexibility is important in such dynamic contexts. Several studies address the importance of staying flexible when situations are out of control (Dorian 2001; Hyman 2001); other important practices involve making sure informant selection is fair (Dimmendall 2006, Rice 2006), and immersing in the local community by speaking the language and participating in everyday activities (Everett 2001). While techniques for entering into a community through a local connection follows the traditional “friend of a friend” method (Meyerhoff et al. 2012), other approaches to gathering natural videos come from recent works from studies focusing on studying language as a multimodal phenomenon (Brookes 2004; Haviland 2006; Enfield, Kita, and de Ruiter 2007; Dingemanse 2011). Methods of collecting natural bodily interactions (Enfield et al. 2007) and tips on videography (Seyfeddinipur 2012) are extremely fruitful for gesture researchers untrained in filming.

### 1.3. *Approach chosen*

While bearing in mind the effective practices outlined above, the specific method chosen in this paper is what is referred to as the “trap-laying” method, where the fieldworker sets up the camera “trap” at situations where desired interactions might take place (Enfield, in press). This method differs from many documentations of gesture in Africa, which usually favor documentations of elicited responses (Creider 1977; Brookes 2004; Orié 2009). Unlike its counterpart, the “hunter” method where the researcher chases after a target linguistic phenomenon, trap-laying involves recording as much video as possible and going back afterward to examine what has been “caught”. There are three approaches to maximize data collection in the “trap-laying” method. First, the researcher can set up the

camera on a tripod directed at a frequent gathering spot. Second, a researcher can seek local assistance to record. Third, the researcher can complete her own recording while present with the subject. Preparation methods discussed in this paper are mostly related to this third methodology, where the fieldworker attempts to camouflage into local interactions in order to catch natural exchanges. This may be accomplished by acquiring and using the local language so that the fieldworker does not attract additional attention by having a translator. Investing a large amount of time carrying out everyday activities with local residents could also normalize the fieldworker's presence. The fieldworker may also combine a mixture of the three aforementioned approaches, for example, carrying a video camera frequently so that the locals will get used to seeing the recording equipment, or having multiple cameras set up at different corners of a space that hosts regular interactions.

## **2. Preparations before entering the village**

Malawi's growing tourist industry has brought massive spurts of development, including an increasingly stable electric grid, Internet access and paved roads. However, though the country is making enormous strides to catch up with the developed world, the foreign researcher should not expect it to have all of the amenities that she might be used to. Instead, some preparatory work, though time consuming and occasionally exhausting, will protect the fieldworker from experiences that she might not be used to, including unexpected fees from local law enforcement agents, duties at custom inspections and requests for arbitrary monetary contributions at immigration offices.

### *2.1. Preparing visa, permit, clearances*

Research clearance must be obtained from the National Commission for Science and Technology, which requires submission of information similar to what the Institutional Review Board at North American institutions requires. To fulfill this institutional requirement, one must contact the Centre for Language Studies in Malawi or the Department of African Language and Linguistics at the University of Malawi. Establishing a local connection early in the project will pave a smooth road for future bureaucratic procedures, including, for example, the vital process of visa renewal.

Ideally, one would arrive at the Kamuzu International Airport in Lilongwe with a long-term research visa. However, without a local connection in the immigration office, this process can be frustrating and unfruitful. Additionally, obtaining a short-term landing visa with the hope of extending it into a longer stay is risky (Dimmendaal 2001) though, possible with good local connections. A researcher should arrive at the immigration office in Mzuzu or Karonga with government stamp sealed research clearance, University of Malawi affiliation and an approval letter from the District Assembly, one of the local administrative bodies, similar to a city council in the United States. Further, attempting to leave the country and re-enter at the border in an attempt to gain a second short-term visa as a "short-cut" to visa renewal is highly unadvisable. It is not uncommon for immigration officers at the border to threaten to incarcerate tourists in the hopes of extorting money.

Once in the country, a trip to the District Assembly that represents the field site is necessary to notify the District Commissioner (DC) of your presence. Even though the District Commissioner often is not a local of the District, and cannot assist you with linguistic research, introducing yourself and the intention of your visit will, in the long term, prove valuable if you need any forms of civil assistance. Possession of institutional permission and documentation is extremely helpful in the case of civil issues that require police involvement. Often a conflict with law enforcement can be settled by paying a small bribe or incentive tip, but possessing a government issued permit, or the phone number of your institutional host will reduce further, often unpleasant, financial negotiations.

Contact with other local affiliations such as the Mzuzu Regional Museum, a branch of the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, should be established early on. The cities of Mzuzu and Zomba are small enough that most government employees know each other and will provide assistance when the stranded foreign researcher is in trouble.

## 2.2. *Technical preparation*

When Margetts and Margetts's (2012) equipment suggestion was published, the authors suggested DV tapes for video recording because it is not limited by the recording file size and the fieldworker will not be subject to the "time-consuming" task of backing up the video files. When the fieldwork on ciTonga was carried out in the summer of 2012, a solid-state Sony camcorder (with 32 gigabytes built-in memory) has proven to work the best out of the three video cameras that were carried to the field, including a Sony mini-DVD camcorder and a Panasonic digital camera.

### 2.2.1. *Equipment*

Hand-held video camcorders are now widely available and come in portable sizes. Consumer grade camcorders from well-know companies can record in high definition, store large media files and boast sturdy exteriors. There are two considerations for choosing a camera for research on natural interactions in Malawi, particularly in rural areas. First, the camcorder must take removable and rechargeable lithium batteries. Second, the camcorder must collect high quality footage and have the capacity to capture large files. There are two ways to store the recorded footage. First, back up the internal memory every night. Second, have multiple copies of the removable memory disk. There are several reasons why one does not need to purchase a state of the art camcorder. First, cutting costs allows a researcher to buy more than one camcorder. There are many benefits to having more than one model of the same camcorder: they can share the same rechargeable battery and the same memory space. Having more than one also means that when you have a person eager to help you, you can let them use one of the cameras. And perhaps most importantly, when one is broken, the field researcher always has a spare. Having multiple cameras will also allow the researcher to capture the interaction from multiple vantage points, which is advantageous for observing detailed physical movements. In a worst-case scenario, if all cameras stop working, replacements can be purchased in Lilongwe and Blantyre. Modern digital camcorders can take still pictures, dispensing with the need to purchase an extra camera for stills. This is important because, though still picture cameras are nice, they typically have only a small amount of memory space to record high definition videos.

Another tip for Malawian fieldwork is to bring a cellphone that can receive an internet connection. Not only can these cellphones serve as "incidental cameras" (Margets and Margets 2012), they will allow you to correspond with people at home through inexpensive connection fees. Assisting local friends to set up an email or social-network account is extremely helpful for maintaining regular correspondences once the researcher returns to the home country.

### 2.2.2. *Energy supply*

The ease of accessing stable electricity is almost the most important consideration for picking a field site for video-based documentation. If possible, it is optimal to select a site in close proximity to power sources not only because video data consumes large amount of battery in a short time, but also because stable electric source is necessary for transferring media files from the camcorder to a laptop, which may take over three to five hours. Though Margetts and Margetts (2012) suggest importing a truck battery or generator, a large-scale operation like this is simply out of financial reach for most field researchers and could be counterproductive. Large and expensive pieces of technology could create a separation between the field researcher and her subjects, hindering the collection of recordings of natural and spontaneous interactions through local immersion. Instead, a supply of lithium batteries is sufficient. A 4400mAh lithium battery will last about two hours during continuous recording, meaning, if all goes well during the day, three such batteries are needed for one day of field recording. Since many under-documented languages are spoken in remote areas where electricity is out of reach, solar powered batteries for laptop or video recorders may be used as an alternative (Bowern 2007), though it may not provide enough power to multiple video recordings. In sum, extra batteries and equipment must be prepared for video-based recordings because the necessary equipment tends to consume power much faster than audio-based recordings. This powered home base is also crucial for uploading data from the camera to the computer.

### 2.3. Language preparation

While it may take time to learn the local language that you are studying, especially since there are few study materials and no courses on it taught in domestic universities, possessing conversational fluency will not only speed up the progression of field research, but also help the researcher gain respect from the community of interest (Everett 2001). Outside of Malawi, *Intensive Chicheŵa* (Salaun 1969) can provide a foundation for conversing in chiCheŵa, the *lingua franca* of the Central and Southern Regions. In Malawi, the CLAIM Bookstore in Zomba District has several books published in local languages such as ciYao, ciTumbuka, and ciTonga. Since many locally published books are not available outside of Malawi, a stop at Zomba will greatly benefit the research process.

### 2.4. Clothing and physical comportment

Dressing appropriately is regarded very highly in Malawi. Though many local residents understand that foreign travelers have alternative clothing preferences, a field researcher should establish an image that distinguishes them from other tourists. At the least, dressed in a way that respects local customs and perceptions, but if possible, a researcher should present herself in a way that shows she highly regards her local hosts. Even in the rural areas, locals make themselves very presentable in public. Shorts and dirty or shabby clothing show lack of respect to the local community. Women should cover their thighs, considered to be private parts in Malawi, with a long skirt or a wrap known as a *chitenje*, a patterned fabric, around their trousers. A half-slip must be worn with skirts made with thin material that may become see-through in the sun. Showing any part of the leg above the knee or the silhouette of the thighs is considered disrespectful and ignorant of local customs. The best and most appreciated clothing for women are traditional style outfits that can be made to measure very quickly in the *boma*. Men should be prepared to wear “business casual” style attire such as polo shirts, button-down shirts and long trousers, even in the summer. While it cannot be helped that the non-local researcher stands out, dressing and physically behaving like local residents will minimize physical discrepancies and the presupposed differences between an *azungu*, or a person of European appearance, and everyone else<sup>2</sup>.

## 3. Preparing to record in the village

The fieldworker should arrange many interactions prior to recording. Several initial meetings should be scheduled where the research intention and procedures explained. It is useful for the researcher to arrive with *chibwaila*, or a token of appreciation that typically include gifts of food items such as meat, fish, and cooking oil.

Since recording equipment and laptop are very popular items for theft and difficult to replace in Malawi, the researcher should take extra precautions about selecting a residence. One option is to stay in a residence with private security. This might require, as mentioned above, that the researcher stay in a city, rather than a village, and venture forth into the villages to collect research. Another option is to stay in a small, tight-knit community where everyone in the village knows the researcher and can provide safety. The latter method is more beneficial for integrating into the local community, but if security may be an issue, selecting a well-protected home will prevent the stress of losing equipment through theft.

### 3.1. Obtaining permission from local authorities

The first person that a fieldworker should meet with is the village headman (VH). The village headman is a local elected tribal leader who has both official legal duties to settle disputes and informal authority over other aspects of village life. Meeting with the headman can be arranged by an appointment and can be helpful as a step toward immersion into village life. Even if one already has selected a household subject for recording, meeting the village headman is still essential and shows

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<sup>2</sup> When asked what the counterpart of an *azungu* is, locals tell me *wantu*, ‘person,’ suggestions the social distance between the two groups according to local perception.

respect for the traditional authority. The presence of a foreigner in a rural village is such a significant disturbance in the community's routines that the VH will quickly learn of the researcher's presence and may doubt the visitor's respect for local authority if an introductory meeting has not been arranged. Thus, it is preferable to take the proactive step of an introduction to this local leader. A written message can be delivered to the village headman with a future meeting date and is usually more reliable and accurate than a verbal message.

During the meeting with a VH, the fieldworker may request for a village crier or messenger to make a village-wide announcement that someone is here to do field recording. If a designated village crier is not available, the fieldworker should make arrangements to attend village-wide meetings in order to make the announcement. The fieldworker should schedule to meet with other nearby VH or the group village headman (GHV) to ensure that a fair distribution of field time is provided for the maximum number of people. This is very important for carrying out village-based research to reduce inter-village jealousy and for spreading the news of the work.

In addition to attending functions hosted by the traditional authorities, the fieldworker may also visit the local primary and secondary schools to announce her research goal or need for assistance. Teachers are generally very helpful with visiting researchers because they can provide demographic information about the students and families that they serve. Such information can be crucial for the selection of research subjects. Additionally, they often have maps of the school zone and information on other government and non-governmental agencies in the area.

### 3.2. *Learning everyday routines*

The quickest way to gain local acknowledgment and friendship is to participate and assist in daily routines. In many parts of Malawi, there are gender-specific activities that a researcher may participate to immerse herself in local activities. Instead of taking time away from busy local residents for data collection, the researcher should work together with her subjects on simple tasks such as drawing water from rivers or wells, preparing meals, and collecting firewood in distant forests. For male researchers, participating male-specific such as basket weaving, farm tool maintenance and playing local games such as football and board games will benefit the integration to the local community. Not only will language learning take place faster, but the researcher will also build respect from the residents of the village for her willingness to be a part of the community. While it may not be possible to record while residents are busy with daily chores, the researcher will nevertheless observe, understand, and discover the "windows of rest" where people gather for casual conversations. In Malawi, these are usually around the meal times and such times can be opportunities for future recording.

### 3.3. *Locations*

The ideal environment for recording everyday activities is at the hamlet of a large extended family. In northern Malawi where patrilineal polygamous partnerships are common, a family may have as many as ten households. If permission is granted, these hamlets are ideal for making video documentations because, first, everyone in the family will know you and the purpose of your visit; second, you will have privacy to carry out your work uninterrupted by curious passers-by; third, you will have access to observe social relationship based on age and kinship; and fourth, your presence will not be too much of a burden for any single family.

Permission can be obtained on the first or second visit so that one is free to record during subsequent visits. Family members will become used to your presence and their curiosity will quickly wane. Guests will feel comfortable to speak up regarding their preference of being recorded or not.

The domestic sphere in Malawi can be divided between the two genders. In large families, men and women adults carry out separate activities. Men in Malawi often rest in a regular part of the house called *mphala*. Women in Malawi have designated spaces as well, typically in the courtyard *khonde*, or within *ku kati* the cooking area. These are good places to record but the down side is that, while cooking; a woman's hands are always busy, which can make recording hand movements complicated. For a female researcher, ideal recordings occur in large households that have more women than man.

In these households, women occupy most places in the house and it is easier to join them when they are resting.

Plan to visit several times before obtaining spontaneous recordings in the village. During the first visit, it is best to bring a local escort who can explain the purpose of research in detail and give a personal background of who you are. Do not plan to collect recordings as many people are unfamiliar with the nature of your work. It is best to visit alone during the second meeting, so that the local hosts can spend time chatting with you alone. Begin recording only when informed consent is obtained from every adult in the hamlet and you have been invited to return.

Setting up at a public space, such as the market place or a wedding, has many benefits. The foreign ethnographer can set up in an inconspicuous corner and observe. Just like in the researcher's home country (the United States), permission for video recordings obtained at public gatherings such as weddings, funerals, church mass and outdoor markets must be granted prior to the event. An announcement must be made in front of the audience where you introduce yourself to everyone and state the purpose of your presence. This is not as easy as it sounds. One might imagine sitting and recording natural action-packed activities as they unfold around the researcher. This could not be farther from reality. As not only an *azungu* carrying a camera, but also probably the only non-African person in a community gathering, the researcher will become the center of attention. If recordings must take place, make an announcement at the beginning of the ceremony regarding your research intention and obtain signed consent before recorded subjects leave the scene. During these events, there will be many people who do not want to be on camera, even if you promise them that you will not record them. Scrupulously honor these requests.

## 4. Data Analysis

### 4.1. Local informant

Unless the researcher has access to a native speaker at the home institution, the majority of the transcription and translation should be done at site. As Everett notes, "data not processed in the field is almost completely useless when the linguist gets back 'home'" (2001:177). Identifying a suitable informant and assistant who is familiar with the orthography of the language and has strong metalinguistic intuition will be ideal. Plan to work with several assistants to give every interested individual a fair chance to participate in the project. This will also help you select the most helpful local assistant.

One of the ways to maximizing recorded footage is to seek assistance from a local. Since one would want as much recording done as possible during the field trip, hiring a local research assistant may seem like a good idea at first. It is often difficult, however, to find someone from the community who has the time and technical understanding of field research to assist you throughout the field trip. One of the major challenges is that since the research is not carried out in a laboratory, often people do not realize that the researcher's time is limited and may not be home when the researcher visits.

Local escorts who can introduce you to people in the village are the best kind of assistants. They essentially act as your local ambassador, explaining the nature of your research to new families that you may one day one to visit and record. They will describe the village's extended family networks to you and teach you the pace of life. A local assistant is particularly useful during the introductory phase of the fieldwork, but not after, because their presence may mean that there is an extra guest that the host family will feel obligated to feed during visits to the village families.

### 4.2. Annotation components

As mentioned in an earlier section, video files collected from solid-state camcorders need to be decompressed through a laptop computer. The computer needs be able to handle the decompression of large files, usually over ten gigabytes, for around two to three hours. For a Macintosh computer, built-in software such as iMovie works well. The compressed files should then be transferred and backed on to external hard drivers that are large enough to hold all your media files. The media files

need to be converted to MPEG files so that they can be annotated in an annotation software such as ELAN<sup>3</sup>.

## 5. Conclusion

Performing ethnographic research in an environment like rural Malawi is pleasant because the people are very welcoming to visitors. However, since many under-documented languages are spoken in areas that have no electricity and may be difficult to get to, many preparatory procedures are necessary in order to gather what is desired in a limited time. Because the researcher is not isolated in a laboratory she needs to spend a great deal of time both before and during her trip to immerse herself into the local culture in order to make the kind of social connections necessary to gain access to family groups where she can collect authentic research on natural interactions. At the same time, it is imperative to remember that the people she records are not passive subjects, but rather individuals going about their daily lives. Just as we would feel imposed upon if a foreign researcher showed up at our house and took videos of us talking without ever learning about our lives, speaking our language or participating in social activities, so too will the residents of Malawian villages if the field researcher fails to integrate herself into the community. This paper has provided a number of key suggestions for how an ethnographic researcher can prepare to integrate herself into rural Malawian life in order to record the best possible video footage of daily life while respecting the privacy and cultural norms of the people who live there. While many of these suggestions are applicable in other African country contexts, and elsewhere in the world, the researcher should know that the norms of daily life and the expectations of research subjects vary. However, with careful planning, research, consideration for the privacy and autonomy of her subjects and a simple curiosity for having experiences that will differ wildly from what the researcher is used to, anyone can immerse themselves in the life of their field site so that they can gain valuable authentic research.

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<sup>3</sup> Alternative linguistic annotation software is available, but ELAN appears to be the most capable of processing large media size of High Definition videos.



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