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A METHOD FOR ELICITING PARADIGMATIC DATA FROM TEXT

The big handicap of text is that it does not give paradigmatic materials, i.e., does not show the substitution possibilities in the sentences. The big trouble with most paradigms is that they are highly artificial, and may be very far from actual usage. Both of these difficulties can be offset to a remarkable extent by the following procedure: After a person has gotten some good text (especially ordinary conversation text--it is much better than folktales), he should try to get other text on the very same subjects, or a repetition of the same text from a different point of view (without letting the informant see his first text). He should also try to get, from the same informant or other informants, a great deal of discussion of the details of the text. This can be prompted by questions asked by the linguist. These questions should be recorded, even though they may be in a trade language, or "broken" vernacular, since they provide the context of the answer. The extensive discussion of the text and repetition of details in it, often in variant phrasing, will give a great deal of the substitution possibilities that a person is hunting for, and they will be far more reliable than a translated paradigm. Let me give an example. Suppose I am trying to analyze English, and have a text on Little Red Riding Hood. In order to get some of the substitution possibilities which do not appear in the text, I could ask questions such as the following: "Did LRRH go to her grandmother's every day? Would she have gone if it had been raining? Did she walk or run through the forest? Do you think she will go again? How did the wolf go in the forest? Does a wolf run like a horse? Like a rabbit?" I grant that an informant may object to some questions as being "silly", and simply shrug for an answer. But it should be possible for a person eventually to get across to an informant that he wants the discussion, even though it is on an imaginary basis, for the sake of the language forms he can get and not for the plot of the story. This would be especially true if the text is a real life conversation rather than a folktale. I used LRRH only for illustration. I remember that Bloomfield, in one of his volumes of text, has seven different versions of one story. I once thought that a great waste of effort. Now I realize it is a priceless goldmine of paradigmatic materials.

--R. S. Pittman
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