

Minidisks

There is a lot of conflicting information about minidisk recorders and their applicability to linguistic fieldwork.

Minidisk recorders are handy – they are very small (therefore highly portable), and they have excellent battery life (and most of them take AA batteries). The media are quite cheap if bought in bulk (as low as US\$1.50 per disc) in some parts of the world and are rerecordable. Some of the more recent models can record in linear PCM format (that is, uncompressed audio) which removes one of their earlier main objections – that is, that the compression and proprietary format of the audio recordings are a bad idea. The files can be directly uploaded to a computer and saved in .wav format.

Despite this, they appear to be despised by a large portion of the fieldwork community. The older models require redigitisation of the disc to get them onto a computer and into a format where the sound file can be manipulated (although the resulting recording is probably still better than an analogue recording from a tape recorder). The compression algorithms are proprietary so we don't know exactly what they do to the signal. We have no data about the longevity of the discs and the back-compatibility – that is, whether discs recorded on earlier models will be able to be played on future models.

The newer models, called Hi-MD, can upload data directly to (PC) computers. The recordings they produce are high quality, especially for the price (in uncompressed PCM format). There are 1GB discs available, which will record about an hour of audio. The older 74 min discs record about 24 mins 30 sec and the 80 min discs about 27 mins.

Some models have level monitors, but they can be hard to read; one of the reasons the devices use little power is that power is conserved in many different ways (by, for example, not backlighting the display screen very much). This can be a problem in very bright or very dark conditions. Furthermore, the recording units need to be kept away well from the microphone. Another reason that they have such good battery life is that the motor doesn't run all the time. The disadvantage of this is that when the motor starts spinning, you can hear it, and if the unit is too close to the microphone it will be heard on the recording. (There are several ways to solve this – one is to make sure the minidisk recorder is behind the microphone and at least 2" away from it. Another is to put some obstacle between the unit and the microphone (like yourself; sit slightly to one side of the microphone and have the minidisk recorder on the other side of you from the microphone).

A final issue with minidisk recorders is potential data degradation. Some have reported data corruption in the transfer of the recordings to the hard drive (Klaas 2005) although this can be minimised by restarting the computer before transferring data, and using only the smaller capacity discs. Furthermore, any rewriting on the disc represents a potential for data corruption and degradation of the signal, so it is not advisable to move tracks around on the original disc.

In summary, minidisk recorders have some benefits and some obvious failings. They are a good choice if you cannot afford to buy another type of machine (such as a compact flash

recorder) or if battery life and compact size are paramount. The disadvantages can be minimised and the recorders are considerably better than the analogue equivalents for the price. However, with the cost of compact flash recorders coming down, they are a better option.