Book review

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Introduction

This book is intended as a guide for linguistic fieldworkers. As such, it provides an overview of the descriptively and theoretically important grammatical phenomena of languages across the world. The book enables the fieldworker to discover those phenomena, name them, and describe them.

In the view on language expressed in the introduction, the analysis of the formal system must be informed by its functional properties and vice versa (p. 11). This explains why, for example, in the chapter on grammatical categories (ch. 3), the verbal category is identified on the basis of the 'distributional' and 'structural' properties of verbs, while in addition a list is given of semantically defined verbal classes: motion, action, and stative verbs, verbs of cognition, sensation (*see*, *perceive*), emotion (*love*, *be happy*), utterance (*speak*, *affirm*) and manipulation (*compel*, *permit*), weather verbs, and verbs describing involuntary processes (*die*, *dry up*) or bodily functions (e.g. *hiccup*, *urinate*, *bleed*). In this way fieldworkers are encouraged to look at how the language expresses these various concepts in order to uncover interesting formal patterns within the verb class or across the verb class and other lexical categories. Generally speaking, the focus of the book is more structuralist than functionalist. This may have a practical reason, because for the descriptive linguist who studies a language that is not her own, only functional distinctions *with* a formal reflection are reliable enough to study and describe, at least initially.

Field manual

As a field manual for linguists whose aim is to write a descriptive grammar of a language, the book has various functions. Firstly, its table of contents can be seen as one possible outline of the grammatical description of the language of study, and thus as an indication of the various areas that should minimally be covered during the field research:

1. Demographic and ethnographic information. 2. Morphological typology. 3. Grammatical categories. 4. Constituent order typology. 5. Noun and noun-phrase operations. 6. Predicate nominals and related constructions. 7. Grammatical relations. 8. Voice and valence adjusting operations. 9. Other verb and verb-phrase operations. 10. Pragmatically marked structures. 11. Clause combinations.

Secondly, it helps the descriptive linguist to recognize phenomena and to name them in terms that are generally accepted and understood. Structural and functional properties of phenomena are illustrated by data from languages all over the world, from both published and unpublished sources. (The index lists some 160 different languages or language families from all continents, from Abkhaz to Zapotec.) Despite its limited size – only 365 pages of text, plus 50 pages of appendix, notes, references and index – the book is remarkably comprehensive. Of course, it does not cover all the topics in the same depth as e.g. is done in the three volumes edited by Shopen (1985). On the other hand, some chapters in the Shopen volumes turned out to be less practical in the field, while in this book there is hardly a page without some useful information. As an illustration of the amount of detail, consider the information on negation (section 10.2), a topic which usually takes up one or two pages (if any) in a descriptive grammar. The section begins by distinguishing constituent and clause negation. Of the latter, various formal expressions are discussed: multiple negation, different kinds of negative particles and negative verbs, negation expressed by alternative constituent orders (Kru, Niger Congo), change in tone (Igbo, Kwa, Niger Congo), neutralization of tense-aspect distinctions (Bemba), special inflections (Kawaiisu) and alternative case-marking patterns (Russian) (p. 290–291). The discussion of *non*-clausal negation includes derivational negation (*unhappy, non-smoker*), and use of negative quantifiers. And finally, attention is also drawn to the fact that sometimes clausal and non-clausal negation may interact to cause variations in negative scope (*I deliberately didn't bump into her* vs. *I didn't deliberately bump into her*). With this information in mind, the field worker may find it easier to formulate the relevant research questions and write a brief but insightful section on negation for the grammar.

Of course, the size of the book also has its limitations. For example, in chapter 3, next to the three-page discussion on numerals (section 3.3.3), the single sentences which make up section 3.3.2 and 3.4.3 (on non-numeral quantifiers[1] and direction/location adverbs[2]) are too meager to be of help. And complement clauses (section 11.2) are dealt with in only four pages – which, obviously, fails to do justice to the complexities of clause complementation. For example, notions as 'raising' or 'equi', 'exceptional case marking' and 'subject/object control' are not mentioned, nor the concepts discussed, while the few illustrations are mostly from English (7/12). The eleven-page discussion on relative clauses (section 11.5) does much better in the range and scope of the discussion and illustrative material provided.

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[1] 3.3.2. Non-numeral quantifiers. Non-numeral quantifiers include such terms as *much, many, few, some, a lot of, a great deal of , tons of* (as in *There were tons of people at the concert*) etc.
[2] 3.4.3. Direction/location. *Up/downriver, up/downhill, up/down(ward), north(ward), south(ward), east(ward), west(ward), left(ward), right(ward), hither, thither*, etc.

A third way to use this this book in the field is as a questionnaire. At the end of every major section and chapter a few diagnostic questions are given. The answers to those questions may constitute potentially substantive portions of a grammar. The questions given below are an illustration – they occur at the end of chapter 7, after a 30-odd page explanation of grammatical relations and how they may pattern (nominative-accusative, ergative-absolutive, tripartite, split, etc.):

"Exemplify some simple intransitive, transitive and ditransitive clauses. Three-argument clauses may not unequivocally exist.
What are the grammatical relations of this language? Give morphosyntactic evidence for each one that you propose. (a) Subject? (b) Ergative? (c) Absolutive? (d) Direct object? (e) Indirect object?" (p. 167)

Generally speaking, the diagnostic questions are specific enough to stimulate analytical thinking about the phenomena in question, and they also help to report the findings in a structured way. The questions are also general enough to be applicable to any language (I think), and they are theory-neutral enough. In the latter two respects I find them better than many of the questions in e.g. Comrie and Smith (1977), who by their detail and theoretical bias may have been useful to some field linguists, but distracting straitjackets to others.

Fourthly, this book can be used as a reference guide. The book provides references to a fair cross-cut of classic and more recent publications from the theoretical, typological and descriptive tradition that have proven their usefulness in language description. In this way, the book enables the field worker to put the data in the larger context of linguistic research. The selection is of course limited, but it is my impression that most major works on typology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics and discourse analysis are listed.

And finally, the book contains useful practical suggestions on elicited and text data. Chapter 12 (conclusions) contains a discussion of various text genres with their structural characteristics and how to elicit them in field work: conversation, narrative texts (personal, historical, folk stories, mythological stories), hortatory texts (sermons, lectures), procedural, expository and descriptive texts, and ritual speech. Appendix 1 includes a very useful discussion of the distinct properties of elicited and text data, and suggestions for managing both types. The author suggests that the controlled, systematic, and rule-dominated parts of language (e.g. inflectional inventory, pronoun inventory) are best approached with an emphasis on elicited data, while the more pragmatic, semantic and subtle parts of language (intonation, sentence level particles, voice) are best analysed via a large body of text data (pp. 368–369). Appendix 2 gives a sample of some 60 reference grammars that can serve as examples of how a grammatical description may be organized. The grammars listed range from purely descriptive to quite theoretically oriented. The fact that few of the grammars in the list are from the 1990s, while more than 40 were written in the 1970s and 1980s is probably more a reflection of the author's library than that it should be taken to indicate that the 1990s produced less good descriptive work.

Evaluation

A general point of criticism is the lack of consistency in referring to the source of the material used as illustrations. Often this is done according to scientific standards, but in many cases appropriate references are lacking. The negation data mentioned above illustrate this point: none of the illustrations is accompanied by a reference to its source (and except for Russian, these languages only feature in the context of negation, so the reference cannot be found elsewhere in the book either). A point was made by my (Dutch) students who found the fact that the one Dutch example in the book includes an incorrect statement (in Dutch, adjectives do *not* 'inflect like nouns', p. 65) rather disconcerting: 'What about the quality of the hundreds of examples from languages we can't check?' Also, sometimes the translation does not match the morphemes and their glosses (e.g. p. 60, example (43), where Yagua *naana* is glossed as '3 dualis' but translated as 'she'), but I should add that this type of error is rare and never concerns morphemes that are crucial for the discussion.

This book is a highly useful tool for linguists who are planning to write a grammar on a previously undescribed language, whatever their (non-)theoretical inclination. Especially those with little experience in non-European languages and/or lacking a broad empirical linguistic background will find the book of help. For linguists with a traditional descriptive background in one particular language (family) this book may help to translate the traditional terminology (often idiosyncratic and language-particular) into current and generally accepted linguistic terms, so that cross-linguistic patterns become clearer.

The book is also a good textbook to use in undergraduate teaching, e.g. as (part of) a general linguistics course on morphosyntax, or as (part of) a course on linguistic typology. Teachers of introductionary courses to general linguistics, morphology, syntax, or discourse analysis may use it to dig for new, 'exotic' illustrative material to use in class and/or as examination material. I have used the book twice as a textbook in a course on linguistic field methods for a group of students of linguistics (second, third and fourth year) and other disciplines (e.g. anthropology, computer science, theology). The non-linguistic students found the book hard to access because of the overwhelming amount of linguistic terminology introduced by it, while the linguistic students were very happy with it. An introductory level of linguistic knowledge is thus presupposed. All the students liked the book for its clear style, self-containedness and richness of illustrations. From a didactic point of view, the order of the chapters (representing a grammar from its smallest building blocks, the morphemes, to the largest units, the discourse) may not be the best; for example, pedagogically, the brief discussion of Anderson's (1982) word and paradigm framework (p. 21) comes much too early (and is also too abstract without illustrations). But as the chapters are written as independent units, they can be dealt with in any order.

This book deserves a place in the library of every linguistic institution, and in the suitcase of every field linguist. It weighs less than one bottle of tax-free shopping, it costs slightly more, but its effects on the field work will last a lot longer.

References

Anderson, Stephen, 1982. Where's morphology? Linguistic Inquiry 13(4): 571–612.
Comrie, Bernard and Norval Smith, 1977. Lingua descriptive studies: questionaire. Lingua 42: 1–72.
Shopen, Timothy (ed.), 1985. Language typology and syntactic description, vol. I, II, III. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.