Discover Your Language training in Papua New Guinea

ABSTRACT

“Discover Your Language” (DYL) is an annual four-week course which started in 2013. It introduces linguistics (syntax and morphology) to Papua New Guinean Bible translators, and helps them to co-author a preliminary grammar of their language. Our primary goal is to train translators to appreciate the grammar of their own language, equipping them to translate in a more natural, grammatical way. Each team of two students from a particular language is paired with a mentor. Lessons introduce grammatical topics such as morphemes, pronouns, semantic roles and verb morphology. The lessons include English or Tok Pisin examples, and then each group works together to discover how that feature is expressed in the students’ language. The course participants also record texts in guided elicitation, transcribe them into FLEX (Fieldworks Language Explorer), and give English translations and word glosses. The analysis of their written and oral texts provides examples for the sketch grammar.

The secondary goal of DYL is to produce descriptive grammars. Instead of assuming that grammar-writing requires many years of research by a university-trained linguist, we give people a linguistically trained mentor and interactive teaching, and ask them to write about their language in a Grammar Description template. Difficulties include the typological diversity of PNG languages, the fact that many languages are undescribed, and sometimes the limited English proficiency of the course participants, who typically have year 10 education or less. We have also observed that the quality of the written grammar varies depending on the linguistic expertise of the mentor. Often a mentor with more experience in PNG languages can help prepare the data for a linguistic audience. The intended audience for the Tentative Grammar Descriptions is both the translators’ local communities – for language vitality, literacy and translation, as well as the academic linguistics community – for typological study.

DYL promotes language documentation and description in PNG, where so many languages are endangered. DYL training is increasingly needed, as many Bible translators in PNG do not have a linguistically trained adviser, or any outsider advocate. Grammatical description in a Bible translation project supports translation quality (Järvinen & Healey 1998) and can increase speakers’ value of their languages (Boerger 2015). This poster reviews the four DYL workshops, highlighting strengths, weaknesses and how we plan to improve it. Similar training courses have been offered in Africa (Stirtz 2015; Wiesemann 1986), and we suggest that DYL workshops could be run elsewhere in the Pacific.

REFERENCES


