

## Introduction

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This book grows out of the International Symposium on Grammar Writing: Theoretical, Methodological, and Practical Issues, which was held in Tokyo in December 2009. The symposium and this book project were supported by the Linguistic Dynamics Science Project (LingDy) at the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, as part of their activity to support and invigorate the descriptive and documentation research of under-studied languages.

The goals of the symposium, echoed in the goals of this book, were two-fold. First we aim to encourage and assist those interested in writing grammars in their endeavor by providing them with information and discussion about methodological and practical aspects of grammar writing. Second we hope to raise awareness about some of the complex issues involved in writing grammars and highlight possible ways of dealing with those issues. In this introduction, we situate the reader by identifying some of the challenges that face the grammar writer in the contemporary context.

**1. THE CHALLENGE OF GRAMMAR WRITING.** As anyone who has had a goal of writing a grammar can testify, grammar writing is a challenging endeavor. One might think that after undertaking fieldwork, writing up a grammatical description would be a straightforward task, but this is, for most, not the case. There are several factors that contribute to grammar writing being a challenge, and we introduce some of these in this section.

We would like to begin our discussion by addressing why anyone might ever want to write a grammar. To put it simply, many find grammar writing to be extraordinarily rewarding. Valentine (2001), in the introduction to the grammar of Nishnaabemwin, puts this well. He finds writing a grammar to be ‘a profoundly humbling experience’, adding that it ‘provides the enjoyment of thousands of hours of careful scrutiny’ (xxx). (Valentine also says, citing Michael Krauss, that ‘even with a hundred linguistics working for a hundred years’ one could ‘never get to the bottom of a single language’). Valentine says of Nishnaabemwin that ‘it is an inexhaustible source of pleasure and challenge for its students’ (xxxi). Thus, in addition to challenge, there is enjoyment, pleasure, reward, a sense of accomplishment. These then are some of the reasons that linguists are drawn to writing grammars. What, then, are the challenges?

Here we focus on three major challenges that the grammar writer is likely to face. One arises from the kind of training that students often get and the mismatch between expectations about what a language is and the reality of a language. The second is a consequence of the scope and the magnitude of the project of grammar writing. The third relates to the particular context in which we find ourselves today, with many languages not being passed on to the next generation.

**2. MISMATCH BETWEEN FACTS ABOUT LANGUAGE AND THE FRAMEWORK OF GRAMMAR WRITING.** Part of the challenge of grammar writing comes from the mismatch that often exists between the reality of language and the goals of a grammar, coupled with our expectations about grammar that have been shaped through what is typically taught in linguistics courses about grammar.

In a grammatical description of a language, we aim to capture the patterns and structures that organize a linguistic system through an analysis of primary linguistic data. Based on reading grammars and on coursework in linguistics, students generally approach linguistic fieldwork with a number of expectations, outlined below:

- Grammar (at least the most important part) consists of general rules: the goal of grammar writing is to identify the general rules and reveal how they form a system;
- Grammatical judgments are invariable: speakers can clearly and consistently tell what is grammatical and what is not, and do not vary about grammaticality judgments;
- Grammar is uniform and invariable: there is a single grammar for a community and therefore everyone in the community share exactly the same structural knowledge;
- The descriptive framework is universal (comparable and applicable across languages).

These common expectations can be contrasted with the reality that students often face in their fieldwork.

- Variability is everywhere: variability in language use sometimes make things seem random rather than rule-governed;
- Fluctuation and indeterminacy in grammaticality judgments: an individual speaker may have difficulty in determining grammaticality; s/he may vary in judgments at different times or for different, very similar, items; judgments quite often have exceptions and fuzzy boundaries;
- A 'grammar' can vary: the 'grammar' of a community is not homogeneous, but varies both within and between individuals;
- Crosslinguistic comparability has limits: even within a universal descriptive framework, there is much room for cross-linguistic variation.

The above set of common expectations is, of course, an idealization: those who have written a grammar of a language are fully aware of this. Students are often at least intellectually aware of what they might find in actual language use; for instance, those who have taken courses in sociolinguistics know about the variation that exists both within a single speaker and within a community, and those who have taken psycholinguistics courses learned that there are not always clear-cut judgments about grammaticality. Nevertheless it can come as a surprise when one begins work on a real language rather than on the constructed problems that we often use in linguistics classes just how much of an idealization is provided in courses. Moving from the real language to what gets written in a grammar requires conscious effort to find the common ground between the patterns and structures that form the grammar and the real language as it is spoken.

The mismatch between what a language is all about and what a grammatical description of a language can realistically capture provides one challenge to the grammar writer.

**3. THE SCALE OF GRAMMAR WRITING AS A PROJECT.** Grammar writing is challenging for other reasons as well. The project of writing a grammar is substantially larger in scale than many other research projects. The grammar writer is called upon to have comprehensive knowledge of a language, from its phonetics to its discourse structure, coupled with socio-cultural knowledge. While pieces of a grammar are independent, components of the grammar intersect and interact with one another, requiring careful strategy and planning in how to go about writing. The grammar writer must thus put careful thought into how they will complete a project that has no logical end to it, how they will organize the grammar, and how they will relate the pieces of different parts of the grammar to one another.

The scale is large, and there is no particular template for writing a grammar. Much depends on the language itself and on who the author anticipates will use the grammar. There are many complex decisions to make, making grammar writing an art. There is also much to balance: What topics must be covered and which are optional? What language is represented? What kind of depth is needed for each topic? How do the pieces fit together to create a whole?

Even from this brief discussion, it is perhaps possible to see both the pleasure and the challenge that Valentine talks about.

**4. CONTEXT IN WHICH DESCRIPTIVE GRAMMAR IS SITUATED.** Grammar writing has probably always been a complex undertaking, but writing grammars today strikes us as perhaps even more challenging than it was in the past for several reasons. The most important change that has taken place is the recognition of the endangered state of so many languages of the world. This fact puts grammar-writing projects in a context different from the past and subjects the project to different sets of expectations and requirements. Many questions must be considered in writing a grammar that were not so important in the past. Who is the grammar written for? What kind of language should it represent? Can a single grammar serve all audiences?

Coupled with language endangerment are the rapid changes in technology in the past twenty or so years. One can gather amounts of data that were unprecedented until just recently. The potential scope of a grammar, as discussed above, has always been vast, but the advancement of the technology pushes the horizon even further: it allows more questions to be asked and also allows for new types of analysis and new forms in which grammars can be presented.

Thus, grammar writing in the present day has become more important, and at the same time, more complex and complicated. This is a very good time for us to reexamine the process and method of grammar writing.

**5. WHY DO WE NEED YET ANOTHER BOOK ON GRAMMAR WRITING?** There have been a few books on grammar writing published in recent years (Ameka, Dench, and Evans 2006; Payne and Weber 2007). One might ask why another book is necessary, given the recent attention to the writing of grammars. This book comes at the question of grammar writing in a somewhat different way than the other books. In particular, the focus of this

book in on practical issues in the actual process of grammar writing, rather than on the abstract values or theoretical frameworks of grammar writing. This was a direct reflection of our concern about the sustainability of the tradition of grammar writing.

While the chapters in this book may well appeal to anyone who decides to write a grammar, especially of an understudied language, we hope that the book will be of particular value to junior grammar writers, and above all to students who are trying to sort out the enormous task that they will take on if they decide to study a language and write a grammar of it for their dissertation.

**6. ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK.** The book contains eight chapters. The chapters by Carol Genetti, Andrew Pawley, and Thomas Payne represent excellent starting points on reading this volume. Pawley writes as someone who has supervised many dissertations that involved the writing of grammars. He gives excellent advice to the person undertaking such a project about how to plan the project, what a realistic thesis is, and so on. While he aims the chapter at Ph.D. students, it contains advice that will be useful to anyone who wants to write a grammar. Payne addresses a number of tensions that arise in writing a grammar: comprehensiveness vs. usefulness, technical accuracy vs. understandability, universality vs. specificity, a ‘form-driven’ vs. ‘function-driven’ approach. Most find that it is not possible to be both comprehensive and useful, for example, and Payne gives excellent advice on how to balance these conflicting demands. He ends with an outline of what a balanced grammatical description might look like. Genetti looks at how one might incorporate linguistic typology, argumentation, and theoretical innovation into a grammar, while at the same time maintaining a balanced grammar.

The other chapters address more specific topics. Ulrike Mosel considers how corpus linguistics can serve grammar writing, and how a corpus might be used in preparing a grammar. Marianne Mithun is concerned with data and examples, examining data from phonetic, phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, discourse, prosodic, diachronic, and language change spheres and how it can meet criteria of comprehensiveness, accuracy, and sensitivity. Keren Rice discusses the role of phonetics and phonology in a grammar. She provides a survey of how grammars have changed over the years in terms of the content about sounds, and makes recommendations about what aspects of sound structure should be included in a grammar. Terrell points out the importance of documenting particular domains of an endangered language on basis of his work on the Akha shaman chants. Kenneth Rehg discusses the larger role of grammars, and their importance in developing community grammars. Rehg stresses the important role that linguists have to contribute not only to the scientific enterprise, but also to language conservation efforts.

The chapters in this volume are all written by people who have made the kind of contributions that Rehg discusses, and are thus all informed by the knowledge that many languages are not being transmitted to new generations. We hope that the chapters are stimulating to the reader, especially to the person who is new to grammar writing, but we also hope that those who are experienced in grammar writing might come away with something new.

Just like a grammar writing project, the symposium and this book project would not have been made possible without various support from so many people. Although it would not be possible to list them here by their names, we would like to take this opportunity to

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