

Prosody in language description: Taking spoken language seriously

Nikolaus Himmelmann
(University of Cologne)

Most fieldwork is done on languages which do not have a literate tradition and which thus exist only in the spoken (and the gestural) medium. Documentation and analysis of such languages necessarily involves the process of "writing them down", i.e. devising a written representation for something which essentially only exists in non-written form. Linguistics has developed a widely shared standard for achieving transcription on the segmental level, which includes a fairly complete and systematic inventory of representations for segments (IPA) and techniques for establishing more abstract levels of segment representation (phonemic transcription). But (field) linguistics has been much less concerned, and less successful, with establishing standards for representing higher level units such as words and phrases, which in current practice usually involves an unsystematic mix of phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic considerations. This presentation argues that prosody should be the primary concern on higher levels of representation as well because otherwise one runs into the danger of not taking spoken language seriously.