

Swiss Army Knives for Linguists The Utility of Complementary Methodologies

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When a particular methodology has provided us with results, it is easy to consider the project complete. When that methodology yields little, it is tempting to consider the project uninteresting and move on. But language is a multi-faceted phenomenon, and sometimes a combination of tools can move us further than any one alone. This point is illustrated here with a set of minute but powerful markers in Mohawk, an Iroquoian language indigenous to northeastern North America. The markers are not of a type that most current theory would draw attention to, yet they have much to contribute to our understanding of language. They are pervasive in spontaneous speech, particularly in lively, highly interactive conversation. But they can be nearly imperceptible auditorily, and speakers are typically unconscious of them. They are routinely missing from English to Mohawk translations, and from pedagogical materials prepared by even highly skilled speakers. They are also conspicuously rare in the speech of otherwise remarkable second language learners. A combination of technical, analytic, and conceptual methodologies helps us to make sense of this constellation in a way that no single one could in isolation. Understood as a group, the markers show us something special about this language on the one hand, and shed light on how grammatical systems in general function and evolve over time on the other.