

Walking the line:
Finding the balance in academic grammar writing¹

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0.0 Introduction

An academic reference grammar is a complex study which can be enriched by incorporating diachronic, ethnographic, and theoretical dimensions. The puzzle for the grammar writer is how much can one expand in a particular dimension and still maintain the primary goal of presenting the facts of the language in an accessible and interpretable way. For example, if one travels too far down the diachronic scale, one risks obscuring the synchronic facts and essentially producing a historical study. The same is true for the theoretical dimension. This presentation will thus address a practical question: how does one find the proper balance of simple descriptive fact and theoretical contextualization. Or, phrased differently, how can do justice to the language-specific richness and variety of structural categories without either being straight-jacketed by theoretical convention or overrun by it. How does one find the balance?

1.0 Balancing typologically established patterns with language-specific categories

Linguistic typology provides us with an inventory of critical structural categories and relationships which can guide the fieldwork and analysis

- Lexical categories (noun, verb, adjective...)
- TAM categories (past tense, perfective...)
- Evidential (hearsay, mirative...)
- Grammatical relations (subject, absolutive...)
- Constructions (serial verb, complementation)

We have to be careful, though, not to take the discovery of linguistic types to be the ultimate goal of grammatical investigation. This risks limiting the grammatical description to just those aspects of the language that have been recognized as linguistic types and does not encourage one to look more deeply.

1.1 The “Checklist model of grammar writing”

Lingua Descriptive Studies Questionnaire

2.1. inflection

2.1.1. Noun-inflection

2.1.1.1. Which of the following means are used to express the syntactic and semantic functions of noun phrases?

2.1.1.1.1. bound affixes

2.1.1.1.2. morphophonemic alternations alone (internal change)

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- 2.1.1.1.3. *clitic particles*
- 2.1.1.1.4. *pre-/postpositions*
- 2.1.1.1.5. *word order*
- 2.1.1.1.6. *derivational processes (e.g. adjectivalization)*
- 2.1.1.1.7. *other means - specify*
- 2.1.1.1.8. *combinations of the above*

2.1.3. Verb morphology

2.1.3.1. Voice

2.1.3.1.1. Passive

2.1.3.1.1.1. Personal passive: Which of the following passive constructions exist, and how are they formed (here and throughout section 2.1.3.1, indicate both changes in the morphology of the verb and in the syntactic expression of the noun phrase arguments of the verb):

2.1.3.1.1.1.1. The direct object of the active appears as subject of the passive.

2.1.3.1.1.1.2. The indirect object of the active appears as subject of the passive.

2.1.3.1.1.1.3. Some other constituent of the active appears as subject of the passive.

This approach assumes a universal set of categories from which all languages “choose” a subset. The focus is on answering a particular set of structural questions rather than on exploring how categories are instantiated and used.

A more balanced, richer, and accurate approach is one which takes each language as having a unique shaping of structures and categories which interlock with each other in complex ways.

1.2. The “All is unique” model of grammar writing

The other extreme end of this continuum would be a grammar written entirely without reference to cross-linguistic categories. Such a grammar would be uninterpretable, possibly not even possible. However, some grammars go farther down this path than others. Consider, for example, the following quote from Matisoff’s *Lahu Grammar*:

“The simplest vC’s are binary, with a single vV preceding the Vh. We have been using ‘β’ to symbolize the verbal nucleus of a VP; this is, the obligatory Vh plus any versatiles that may optionally be juxtaposed to the head. We may then generate binary vC’s by some such rule as the following: β -> (vV) + Vh.” (Matisoff 1972:211)

Matisoff was writing in the late 1960’s, in the heyday of Chomskyan generative grammar and the infancy of modern linguistic typology. In addition, he was writing about a language that is vastly different typologically than the western European languages that were the focus of the early work in Generative Grammar. Without the tools of functional-typological linguistics, he had to take a unique, frequently idiosyncratic, approach. The grammar is extraordinary in its richness, depth, and insight; however, it takes

commitment on the part of the reader to learn the terminology sufficiently to understand the text. It is not a grammar for the casual browser.

1.3 Finding the balance

To balance between these poles, I would advocate an approach which sees the categories identified by linguistic typology as the starting point – rather than the endpoint – of the investigation. For example, if one takes the discovery of serial verbs as the starting point, one might write:

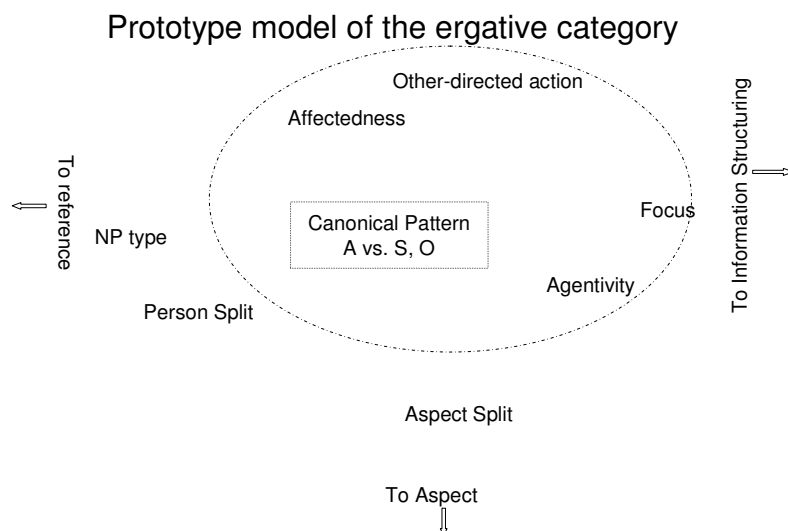
“These are serial verbs because they have the following properties which define the serial-verb category in the typological literature...”

However, if one takes the notion of “serial verb” as the starting point, one can follow up such important statements with more nuanced description, such as:

“However, some examples suggest that ...” (e.g. this is actually clause linkage; some of these verbs have grammaticalized to auxiliaries; some of these verbs function as true prepositions, etc.)

The result is a grammar which builds on linguistic typology, is typologically relevant, but which also allows one to present the full shape of linguistic categories, especially those fascinating boundaries in all their messy glory.

I have taken to thinking of linguistic types as categories organized around prototypes (e.g. Rosch 1973), with basic level exemplars, and examples that deviate from the central prototypes in different directions and to different degrees. For example, consider the category of ergative casemarking:



If we take the canonical ergative pattern (casemarking on A and none on S and O) as the basic-level exemplar, we can see that the pattern deviates in a number of directions leading to related functional domains. The grammar writer can see his task as defining the area of this conceptual-typological map that is covered by a particular morphological category.

A real-world example is that of Dolakha Newar “adjectival verbs”. Linguistic typology typically gives us two distinct lexical classes, adjectives and verbs, each with their own characteristic morphosyntactic features. In Dolakha Newar, we can identify two such classes. Some of the morphosyntactic properties which distinguish them are given as follows:

Adjectives

- Open class
- Multiple phonotactic shapes
- No inflection
- Occur w/ copula in predicates
- Modify nouns directly

Verbs

- Closed class
- CVC structure
- Inflect for multiple categories
- Occur independently in predicates
- Must be nominalized to modify N’s

If we were limiting our investigation to the checklist, we may decide we had found both categories and stopped here. However, closer investigation reveals a third category, which I have called “adjectival verbs”; these have the syntactic properties of adjectives, but the morphological properties of verbs:

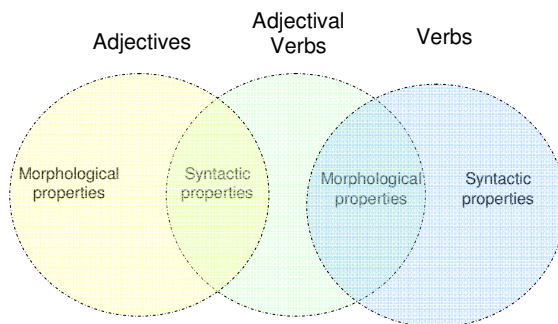
Syntactic properties

- Nominalized to modify nouns
- May be used referentially (w/clitic)
- Occur w/ copula in predicates
- May be modified by intensifiers

Morphological properties

- Inflect for negation, causation, etc.
- Can inflect for tense (rarely do)
- Usually suffixed by nominalizer

The Dolakha Newar category of adjectival verbs maps some of each of these prototypes, occupying the intermediate ground.



In sum, taking typology as the starting point of the investigation:

- allows for the exploration of the language-particular shapes of grammatical categories;
- incorporates theoretical notions without constraining the description; and
- allows description to revolve around enrich typological theory

2.0 Assertion and exemplification versus argumentation

Another scalar dimension of grammar writing is that between the simple assertion of descriptive facts (with examples to illustrate them) and argumentation for facts and analyses.

An example of the assertion and exemplification would be to write:

“Complement clauses have structure X
Example 1
Example 2
Example 3...”

Argumentation, on the other hand, tells the reader *why* one has analyzed the structure in that way:

“This is a complement clause. We know this because:
Argument 1 w/ examples
Argument 2 w/ examples...”

2.1 Insufficient Argumentation

Insufficient argumentation prevents the reader from understanding the grammar writer’s analysis. The reader may ask: “Why is this a complement clause?” It also does not incorporate the richness of descriptive detail that is required in order to argue effectively. Finally, the text does not engage the reader in the analytical process.

2.2 Excessive argumentation

On the other hand, excessive argumentation can obscure the descriptive facts, or be tedious and excessive.

Do you need a spectrogram to argue for the phonetic value of every consonant in the language?

Arguing for every fact also requires extensive discussion of non-occurring patterns.

Do you need to demonstrating that CCV really is the syllable template by demonstrating that certain syllable shapes are not attested or accepted by speakers (“Really, this language doesn’t have CCCCCCCCCCV!”)

Excessive argumentation also has the disadvantage of lengthening the grammar.

2.3 Finding the balance: when to assert and when to argue

A balanced grammar can result from knowing when to assert and illustrate facts and when to provide argumentation. Reflecting on my own practice, I found that I used assertion and exemplification for the following:

Low-level descriptive facts

- Phonetic values of segments
- Simple phonological processes
- Allomorphic variation (e.g. stem classes)
- How verbs are borrowed
- Phonotactic structures of verbs
- Verb paradigms
- Ordering of elements in the noun phrase

Definitional statements

“Non-finite verb forms differ from finite verb forms in that they do not convey information about tense, person, or number, and in that they do not have separate suffixal paradigms which indicate negation or mood.”
(Genetti 2007:186)

Expected patterns and structures

- Proximal and distal demonstratives
- Numeral systems
- Casemarkers
- Simple clause structure
- Interrogative pronouns

Usage or distributional patterns

- The uses of the present tense
- The sets of nouns classified by numeral classifiers
- The uses of the various demonstratives
- The distribution of the allative casemarker
- Conditions under which noun phrases have post-verbal placement
- Different uses/meanings of two imperative constructions

On the other hand, I found it useful to provide argumentation in these situations:

Cases where more than one structural analysis is possible

- “The adverbs of location are distinct from locational nouns in that they cannot occur within a noun phrase...” (Genetti 2007:230)

- “These alternative views of the syllable structure have different descriptive goals. One describes the syllable structure as it is likely to be understood by the speakers...The second describes the syllable structure as revealed by patterns of distribution...” (Genetti 2007:62)

Cases where illustrating complexity is more important than taking a stand

- “The primary reason to consider the plural morpheme to be a clitic rather than a suffix is...
 - In the absence of a head noun, it can be bound to a genitive phrase or relative clause...On the other hand
 - Not always bound to the final element
 - Can occur on both elements of a conjoined NP...” (Genetti 2007:97-98)

Cases where the language differs from typologically-expected patterns

- “In this chapter, I have described two classes of ‘adjectivals’...Adjectival verbs still can inflect...The class of simple adjectives, by contrast, has no inflection. This is a major difference in morphological behavior and argues that the two adjectival categories are lexically distinct...”

Although the two classes differ in their morphological behavior they have similar syntactic behavior...” (Genetti 2007:212)

- “In many languages one can grammatically distinguish between classes of objects...direct and indirect...[or] primary objects and secondary objects...However, in Dolakha Newar neither of these patterns is in evidence. Instead, all O and R arguments appear to constitute a single grammatical relation of object”
 - 3.1 object casemarking
 - 3.2 relative clauses
 - 3.3 emphatic possessives (Genetti 2007: 315-317)

Cases where the language differs from areally- or genetically-expected patterns

- Paradigmatic ergative casemarking (p. 109-110)
 - (55) ergative case w/ negated verb and non-volitional agent
 - (56) cognate-object verb “talk a talk” where the object is not differentiated from the action of the verb itself
 - (57) highly unaffected object
 - (58) continuous, imperfective aspect
 - (59) non-active verb, unindividuated object, non-agentive agent, and future imperfective

Cases which counter explicit claims in the literature

- “Other restrictions, of the type commonly found on related constructions in other languages (see e.g. Haspelmath and König 1995), are not in evidence in this language...the participial construction does impose constraints on anaphora, control, the scope of interrogative or imperative mood, or the scope of negation...The argumentation... will be summarized briefly here” (Genetti 2007:446)
- “It should be noted that both relative clauses and nominal complements constitute modifiers of nouns within a single unified noun phrase and do not occur as independent noun phrases in appositional relations with the heads (cf. DeLancey 1999; Noonan 1997). This can be seen from...” (Genetti 2007:389)

In sum, one can be judicious in the use of argumentation.
Cases where illustrating multiple analyses is beneficial
Cases which are surprising or go against expected trends
Otherwise, asserting structure and giving examples might be sufficient.

3.0 Towing the theoretical line versus theoretical innovation

If one innovates excessively in grammar writing, one risks presenting the analyses in such an idiosyncratic way that the grammar is impossible for others to understand. Basically, this was the problem with the “all is unique” discussed in Section 1 above.

On the other hand, reference grammars are ideal venues for unconventional analyses. This is because writing a reference grammar gives you a sense of the big picture that you cannot obtain any other way. Also, the grammar provides the reader with the full context in which to understand and interpret a new analysis.

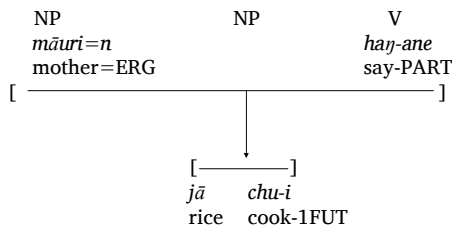
In my own grammar, my most innovative work was presented in Chapter 21, the final chapter of the grammar, on the sentence. In that chapter I explored this critical syntactic unit in all of its structural and prosodic glory.

One of the innovations was the presentation of the syntactic relationships between clauses in terms of two “design principles”: chaining and embedding.

- Chaining: units are linearly ordered at the same level of the syntax
- Embedding: One clause is entirely incorporated within another

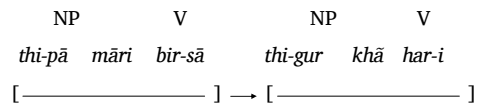
These were illustrated in the grammar using diagrams like the following:

Embedding Structure



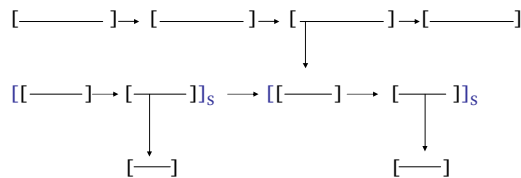
Chaining Structure

- (4) *thi-pā māri bir-sā thi-gur khā har-i*
 one-CL bread give-COND one-CL talk say-1FUT
 'If you give me one bread, I will tell you one thing.'

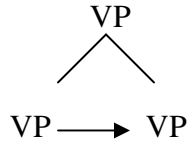


These basic structural types then combine to lead you to progressively more complex structures, such as the one in the diagram below:

Another complex sentence



I then demonstrate that the systems are more subtle than this, as chaining and embedding can combine not only at the level of the clause, but also at the level of the verb phrase.



While I have insufficient time to expand on the details of these structures here, the context of the reference grammar provided me with the opportunity not only to explore the grammar to a level of depth that I had not previously taken it, but also to see the complexities of the structure in novel ways that I was then able to present as part of the grammar. Although this analysis does not follow other theoretical paradigms directly, it clearly draws on them, a point which I happily make in Chapter 21, and then goes beyond. Readers are able to understand the analysis because the entire grammar is at their fingertips; I was able to explore the new approach without space limitations or the need to explain all the details from scratch.

Recommendations for innovation

- Take conventional analysis based on linguistic theory as starting point
- Build off what you've already established in the grammar
- Be explicit as to where you deviate
- Provide argumentation: explain, justify, be explicit as to why and how it is innovative
- ***Don't overdo it!*** Balance innovation by building on the bedrock of conventional structural description and argumentation

4.0 Conclusions

In writing a reference grammar, one wants to reveal the unique structural patterns, their functions, and their significance, yet still produce a work that will be interpretable over the coming decades or centuries. I have attempted to present some guidelines for how to balance theoretical notions and descriptive fact, simple assertion and argumentation, and conventional thinking and innovation. I hope that these will be useful and help others to find their own balance in grammar writing, and that this approach can be fruitfully applied to other domains in the production of these complex works.

References

- Genetti, Carol. 2007. A grammar of Dolakha Newar. [Mouton Grammar Library 40.] Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Matisoff, James A. 1972. The grammar of Lahu. [UC Publications in Linguistics 75.] Berkeley: UC Press.