FINE Grammars for Small Languages

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International Symposium on Grammar Writing
Tokyo University of Foreign Studies 2009

Language documentation stresses these aspects of fieldwork.

- focus on primary data
- explicit concern for accountability
- concern for long-term storage and preservation of primary data
- work in interdisciplinary teams
- close cooperation with and direct involvement of speech community

Himmelmann (2006:15)

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What is the role of grammars in language documentation?

- It's contextually contingent, but…
- the development of grammars that are comprehensive and theoretically-informed should be assigned high priority if our goal is to produce linguistic products that are maximally USEFUL for the purposes of both language documentation and conservation

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The question is, useful to whom?

- To linguists.
- To speakers of the language.
- To others.

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What about the grammars that we have been producing?

"Grammars…provide little that is of direct use to non-linguists, including the speech community, educators, and researchers in other disciplines..."

Himmelmann (2006:19)

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Why aren't our grammars more useful to speakers of the language?

- Because we write our grammars for linguists.
- In general, because we sometimes fail to give sufficient consideration to the potential audience(s) of our work.
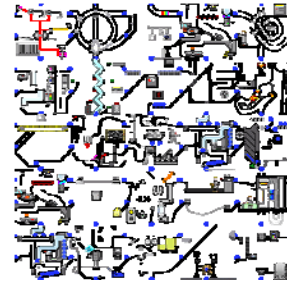
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Grammar Audiences

	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Type 4
Linguist	+	–	+	–
Speaker	+	–	–	+

How might our grammar appear to speakers of the language?

Why should we care?

"It would be very wrong for anyone to come to any given community, live there long enough to collect data, write up a linguistically fine grammar, receive a degree, get a good name and all kinds of benefits from it and forget about the people. This is not acceptable, no matter how it may be justified."

James Lokuuda Kadanya, SIL Sudan Branch.

What is the problem?

There is a "great gap between academically produced knowledge about language on the one hand, and real-world problems on the other." (Dobrin 2009:619)

The questions, then, are….

- How can we develop grammars that are more useful to non-linguists?
- More specifically, how can we develop grammars that are useful to the speakers of the language(s) with which we work?

We might begin by:

- training young linguists to write grammars,
- training them to write grammars of more than one type, and
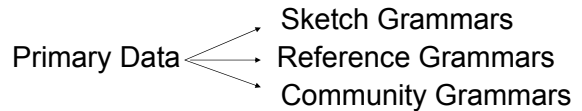- inculcating the humble virtue of usefulness.

What are linguists good for?

- The defining mission of our discipline is the scientific study of languages.
- But linguists can also play valuable support roles in language conservation efforts.
- By doing so, we can advance the agendas of both linguists and speakers.

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Grammar development.

Primary Data → Sketch Grammars
→ Reference Grammars
→ Community Grammars

A rich corpus of primary data is an essential foundation for an adequate grammar of any type.

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Types of grammars.

- Ideally, embed a *descriptive* grammar in the primary data (Thieberger, n.d.).
- Descriptive grammars attempt to describe everything. They are "thick", in the sense of Geertz (1973).
- *Sketch* grammars, *reference* grammars, and *community* grammars are typically normative (prescriptive).

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What is a community grammar?

- A community grammar is "a kind of reference grammar created for, and sometimes by, members of a linguistic community." (Noonan, n.d.)
- A FINE grammar is a type of community grammar.

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A FINE grammar has the following attributes.

- F = *focused*, responds to a 'felt need'
- I = *interesting*, can be read with pleasure
- N = based on *naturalistic* observation
- E = *educational*, serves as a teaching tool

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An example of a FINE grammar.

- Will provide an example of a single type of FINE grammar by discussing one under construction for Pohnpeian.
- The fine grammar I will discuss is one that is designed to teach Pohnpeians about the structure of their language, as it relates to the design of the standard orthography for the language.
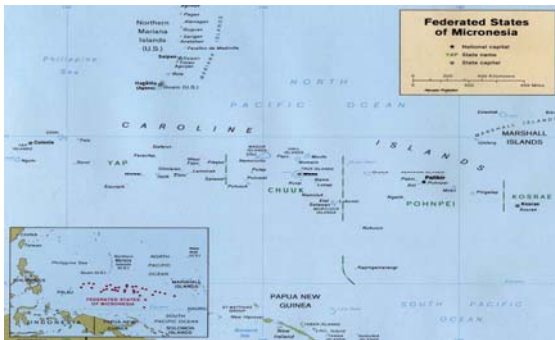
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The people…

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The place…

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The nation…

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Documentation of Pohnpeian
(formerly Ponapean)

- Ponapean Reference Grammar (Rehg and Sohl 1981).
- Ponapean-English Dictionary (Rehg and Sohl 1979).
- Many other studies of specific features of the language.
- One of the better documented languages of the Pacific.

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Do Pohnpeians use the grammar?

- Uncertain, but…
- Appendix of grammar, which lists the spelling recommendations made by Pohnpeian orthography committee, is used by educators.
- Workshops in Pohnpeian orthography are offered by the Department of Education.
- Course in Pohnpeian orthography is offered at the College of Micronesia.

  Orthography is thus an appropriate topic for a FINE grammar for Pohnpeian.

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A FINE grammar for Pohnpeian.

- **F**ocus on orthography (a 'felt need').
- **I**nteresting (to the best of our ability).
- **N**aturalistic, use real or realistic examples of the use of Pohnpeian orthography, especially common problem areas.
- **E**ducational, because it explains the linguistic and social bases of Pohnpeian orthographic conventions.

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Other properties of this grammar.

- It will be written in Pohnpeian.
- It will be locally produced and printed.
- It will be inexpensive.
- It will be available in hard copy.
- It will be downloadable from the internet in the form of a PDF.

In what way is this a 'grammar'?

- It's a community grammar, with a pedagogical function.
- It necessarily deals with phonology, morphology, syntax, and variation.
- It aspires to teach its users, not only about the orthography, but about the structure of Pohnpeian as well.

FINE grammars are a special type of sketch grammar.

- Like sketch grammars, FINE grammars cover selected aspects of the language, as they bear on the *purpose* of the grammar.
- But, FINE grammars logically follow the development of a more comprehensive description of the language.

What is an orthography?

- A phonemic transcription $\neq$ an alphabet.

- An alphabet $\neq$ orthography.

Key Elements of orthography.

- Alphabet (phonology and variation).
- Word Division (morphology and syntax).
- Other orthographic concerns, including punctuation, capitalization, etc. (syntax and culture).

The Pohnpeian spelling conventions that deal with these matters are relatively uncontroversial.

They constitute the core of this FINE grammar.

But what about spelling of individual words?

- Deal with by creating a spell-checker program, but…
- Problem of variation, both idiolectal and dialectal.
- Recommendations for dealing with dialect variation are hotly contested.

A solution to the dialect problem is clearly a 'felt need.'

"Without a question, an answer is experienced as manipulation; without a struggle, help is considered interference; and without the desire to learn, the offer to teach is easily felt as oppression." (Nouwen 1997:98)

Dialect variation

- Essential topic to be dealt with in a FINE grammar of Pohnpeian orthography.
- In the grammar, this issue is to be dealt with before anything else.
- Will talk about this aspect of the FINE grammar, since it's central to current concerns about Pohnpeian orthography and of interest to linguists (or at least phonologists).

Previously noted…

- Linguists can play valuable support roles in language conservation efforts and that, by doing so, we can advance the agendas of both linguists and speakers.
- I will illustrate this claim by showing how careful attention to dialect variation has enriched my understanding of Pohnpeian.

Dialect variation on Pohnpei.

- When the orthographic conventions for Pohnpeian were established, it was believed that there were just two major dialects.
- These two dialect are commonly referred to as the Northern and the Kitti dialects.
- The recommendation was that Pohnpeian spellings should reflect the pronunciation of the Northern dialect.

All dialects employ the same inventory of consonants.

	Phoneme	Spelling
Stops:	p, pʷ, t, ṭ, k	p, pw, d, t, k
Fricative:	s	s
Nasals	m, mʷ, n, ŋ	m, mw, n, ng
Liquids	l, r	l, r
Glides	j, w	i, w/u

Inventory of vowels.

i   u   7 vowels in Northern dialect.
(e)   o   6 in Kitti.
ɛ   ↖   All Vs occur long and short.
   a

/e/ occurs only in the Northern dialect.

Spelling of Vowels

Phoneme	Spelling
i	i
e, ε	e
a	a
↖	oa
o	o
u	u

Vowel length is indicated by h; therefore ah, etc.

The use of diacritics was rejected by the Pohnpeians.

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Based on spelling, Kitti speakers often claim that their dialect is superior.

Spellings of common words.

Northern	Kitti	Gloss
seisei	seisei	'haircut'
seisei	soaisoai	'paddling'

oa = /↖/

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Actual pronunciations.

Northern	Kitti	Gloss
/seysey/	/sεysεy/	'haircut'
/sεysεy/	/s↖ys↖y/	'paddling'

For obvious reasons, Kitti speakers are not aware of the contrast in the Northern dialect.

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Mid-vowel distribution.

North	Kitti	Gloss
/pel/	/pεl/	'steer'
/lεs/	/lεs/	'split'
/pεl/	/p↖l/	'taboo'
/s↖y/	/s↖y/	'tell a story'

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Origins of distributional differences.

Original 5 vowel system, with /ε/ as the mid-front vowel.

North	Kitti
ε → e/__C_0i	--
a → ε/__C_0i	a → ↖/__C_0i (?)

These rules preceded a rule of final vowel deletion.

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How did the Kitti dialect get a 'crazy rule'?

Rule: a → ↖/__C_0i

Postulated development

a → ə/__C_0i   in both dialects

ə → ε in Northern dialect

ə → ↖ in Kitti dialect

Vowels in Pohnpeian colored by adjacent Cs. Therefore, ə would have had both front and back allophones.

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Essential observation.

There must have been a stage during which
both dialects had a schwa phoneme.

Why is this interesting?

Fieldwork in 2007

We found a dialect that exhibits the inter-
mediate stage we postulated.

Wene dialect of Kitti

i		u	All vowels occur short
		o	and long.
ɛ	ə	↖	
	a		

Consequences?

- The dialect situation is more complex than previously believed.
- Defenders of both the Northern and Kitti dialect solutions need to reconsider their positions.
- We plan to use these findings (and others) as the basis for reconvening the Pohnpeian orthography committee.

Value of this FINE grammar to the community.

- Provide a much needed spelling guide.
- Enhance the communities understanding of the spelling system *and* the language.
- Because it will be written in Pohnpeian, it will serve as an example of 'best practices' in writing the language.

Value of this FINE grammar to the linguist.

- Much to be gained by following the Aristotelian method of approaching a problem from different starting points.
- No incentive to look more carefully at dialect variation until I approached Pohnpeian phonology with orthography as the starting point.
- Has enriched my understanding of the language.

Other types of FINE grammars

It's easy to envision still other types of FINE grammars that the people of Pohnpei might find useful or interesting, including ones on:

Honorific speech grammar.
Comparative grammar (Pohnpeian and neighboring languages).
Contrastive grammar (Pohnpeian and English).
Evolutionary grammar (origins of Pohnpeian).

Conclusion

"Linguistics could come to more closely resemble fields like medicine and economics, where interplay between theory and practice is welcomed in adding to their richness, and where 'applied' forms of work are not seen as belonging to a separate discipline (Dobrin and Good, 2009:629)."

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Thank you.

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ARCHIVED SLIDES

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Language documentation.

- Over the past decade, an increasing number of linguists have taken up the task of creating a lasting, multipurpose record of the world's many endangered and minority languages. These efforts, often referred to as "language documentation," have drawn new attention to the tools, methods, and products of basic linguistic research.

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The best shape for a grammar.

"The best shape for a grammar will ultimately depend on the needs it is destined to serve." (Mithun 2005:304)

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Thank you.

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