

Examples: how to get them, how they are used by others

In this talk, I discuss linguistic examples in descriptive grammars from two perspectives: that of the grammar writer and that of one user group, typologists.

Taking the grammar writer's perspective, I will argue that stimulus-based recordings, notably narratives with help of a book, yield the most examples. This is based on a study of the provenance of all 900+ examples in the author's reference grammar, where the variables text type (genre), recording year and clarity were investigated. The study also reveals that no recording was 'useless' in the sense that it didn't result in any examples for the grammar. I will also argue that this very narrow and utilitarian view is of course not to be taken as an incentive to mainly collect stimulus-based data, as we do not know the future use and users of our corpora (Himmelman 2006: 2).

Taking the users' perspective, I will argue for:

- 1) Clarity: use consistent glosses that follow the conventions.
- 2) Brevity: use short examples before long ones. In general, but much depending on the purpose, typologists prefer short examples (corroborated by the IMT Vault, a database of 20000 linguistic examples in Language Science Press books, which have an average length of 5 words).
- 3) Context: provide extralinguistic context – it facilitates interpretation of the example and the linguistic phenomenon it illustrates.
- 4) Accessibility: add a proper tag that gives information about type of discourse and speaker, and that is a unique identifier that points to the original source. Most typologists are keen on finding (more) data in your archive – make sure it is easy to navigate.
- 5) Good translations: be cautious of idiomatic translations. Consider adding literal translations at phrase or sentence level.

Data comes from an informal survey amongst typologists (n = 20) aiming at finding characteristics of the ideal example. The five traits listed above were mentioned by three or more typologists each. Surprisingly, naturalness is not a concern of any of the typologists that responded to the survey. Indeed, several argue that simple and brief elicited examples could precede more complex natural examples to increase understanding of the data. I will illustrate the traits of good examples with data from my own and other's grammars, and will contrast them with the mistakes I made.

I take an explicitly utilitarian point of view here because usage of examples by grammar writers and typologists is easily measurable. This does not mean, however, that I am against holistic data gathering, natural and chaotic text types, long examples and presentation of examples that illustrate the language's culture, points which I will stress throughout the talk.

Reference

Himmelman, Nikolaus P. 2006. Language documentation: what is it and what is it good for. In Jost Gippert, Nikolaus P Himmelman & Ulrike Mosel (eds.), *Essentials of language documentation*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.