

Description before explanation: linguists' and learners' grammars

A major challenge in working towards a grammar of a previously undescribed, severely endangered language is posed by the fact that its two primary audiences (linguists and members of the language community) have very different needs and expectations. In this talk, I explore the different needs of the two audiences, survey the ways in which other scholars of Dene grammars have approached this task, and present one solution to the problem of different audiences. My observations are grounded in my own work on grammaticography of a Dene (Athabaskan) language in North America, spoken by fewer than 50 Elders. The community members interested in my work are adult language learners as well language teachers that are not themselves fluent speakers.

There are different views on what a grammar directed at linguists should look like, but there seems to be consensus about the fact that it should cover all areas of the linguistic system (Cristofaro 2006, Mosel 2006). Analyses should be well-motivated in the data, and descriptions should be supplemented by illustrative examples glossed following a transparent glossing system such as the Leipzig Glossing Rules (Comrie et al. 2015). The role of theory in grammar writing is debatable to some degree (see, e.g. Rice 2006 and Dixon 2010 for opposing views), but there is agreement that theory should be used to enhance the description by sharpening the researcher's eye for questions, rather than be the primary goal in grammaticography. With the rise of language documentation as a linguistic sub-discipline in the last 25 years, there is also increased recognition of the value of naturalistic, corpus-based data in linguistic description (see, e.g., Himmelmann 2012).

In the last two decades, linguists have become more aware of the need for their work to be accessible to the community where the language of interest is spoken. But "accessibility" is a difficult concept, and it is worth considering what it might mean in any given situation. Furthermore, there are neocolonial pitfalls of inadvertently creating barriers between learners and their ancestral language. In the speech community where I work, the minimal requirements of an accessible grammar would be as follows. (1) It has to be written in English. (2) Explanations of grammatical structures should contain explicit comparisons to English, especially in instances where English and the target language differ. (3) Any grammatical terms (including very basic ones such as "noun" and "verb") need to be explained and should be avoided as far as possible to not create terminology barriers. (4) The organization of such a grammar should use a pedagogical laddering approach (a good example of a grammar using this approach is de Reuse & Goode 2006). (5) Example sentences should be minimally complex, so as not to distract the reader from the point they are meant to illustrate. Elicited data is likely preferable to corpus data. (6) Hargus et al. (2020) observe that some Northern Dene speakers and learners consider interlinear morpheme glosses as disrespectful "breaking up" of the language, and report on situations where speakers even objected to the use of word glosses in text due to the different word orders of English and Dene languages.

My survey of the better and/or more recent published Dene grammars (all of which are written in English) shows that none hit all the marks. Faltz (1998), Hargus (2007), and Jaker & Cardinal (2020) do not cover topics beyond phonology and morphology. Most grammars (Rice 1989, Cook 2004, 2013, Hargus 2007, Lovick 2020) require the reader to have several years of linguistic training; those addressed at non-linguists (Faltz 1998, de Reuse & Goode 2006, and Jaker & Cardinal 2020) are of limited use to linguists working in a typological framework. Lovick (2020) is the only grammar based primarily on naturalistic speech. Glossing strategies vary widely even within individual works.

I suggest here that, in Dene languages at least, writing one grammar that serves all masters is not feasible due to the morphological and morphophonemic complexity of the verb (not to mention the terminological conventions). The successful grammars directed at community members mentioned above build heavily on previous grammatical descriptions directed at linguists. Here, as elsewhere, description of the linguistic system needs to come before it is possible to explain it to a learner.

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