

Dealing with authority bias in language description: a fieldwork informed reality.

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In the process of compiling grammars for under-described languages, the novice descriptor-linguist is likely to face authority bias that directly affects decision making. This bias “occurs when the opinions and instructions of authority figures are unquestionably accepted and followed” (Howard 2019: 23). In the context of language description, common authority figures include both renowned scholars with strong publication records and language-speaker consultants. As Bower (2015: 205) notes, “[t]hese days, there are few areas of the world where no previous work at all has been done on the languages spoken there”. The literature produced by respected predecessors generally stands as a reference point or *anchor* (Tversky & Kahneman 1974) in relation to which new decisions are made. Also, descriptor-linguists almost naturally “invest native speakers with authority regarding how someone should speak a language” (Grammon & Babel 2021) and (necessarily) heavily rely on speaker judgements for grammatical analyses. The judgments, analyses, opinions, or contributions of these authority figures may easily be given inappropriate weight. One consequence of this is to stop the novice descriptor-linguist from seeing or seeking new or opposing evidence.

In this talk, I present one case study in which as a novice descriptor-linguist, I failed to question my predecessors’ analyses and my language-speaker consultants’ judgments in the process of compiling a grammar of Gizey (Chadic). This case study relates to the analysis of a set of personal pronouns, *mì* ‘3sm’, *tì* ‘3sf’, and *àsí* ‘3pl’. Ajello & Melis (2008) do not formally described any specialized function and my speaker-consultants continuously judged them to be synonymous to the regular set of pronouns *nàm* ‘3SM’, *nà?* ‘3SF’ and *sí* ‘3Pl’ (Ajello & Melis 2008). I had unquestionably followed these analyses/judgments for close to four years until I only just recently discovered that these pronouns have a distinct and typologically rare antilogophoric function. I discuss how I overcame the authority bias in order to propose a new analysis.

References

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