

Challenges of Writing a Polylectal Grammar: A look from Senhaja Berber

Many underdescribed languages have no standardized form, and consist of multiple distinct varieties. Meanwhile, traditional grammar writing often focuses on one variety, which is presented as the representative standard for the whole language. Describing a language is always a challenge, and describing several varieties poses additional challenges. The issue of writing polylectal grammars remains undertheorized. An early paper is Weinreich 1954, who tried to bring a dialectological perspective into structuralist descriptions, treating Yiddish varieties as a ‘system of systems’. Later overviews are Bickerton 1973, Berrendonner *et al.* 1983, and Mühlhäusler 1992. Little attention has been given to this topic in Ameka, Dench & Evans 2006, except a paper by Diller; cf. also Diller 1973. There are still very few polylectal grammars, with the exception of Evans 2003. Polylectal grammars acknowledge language variation and help the analysis. The present paper examines these issues on the material of Senhaja Berber varieties spoken in northwestern Morocco. Senhaja tribe confederation consists of ten tribes, which correspond to ten sub-varieties of Senhaja. In my grammar, seven varieties are represented, while three of them are given most attention: Ketama (West), Hmed (Center), and Zerqet (East). These varieties are geographically remote and linguistically distinct. Hence, their description aims both at capturing the variation and establishing the common features. When one variety shows deviant features, the data from other varieties often help to explain the origin of the structure. The major questions in writing a polylectal grammar are:

- How to organize the description in a lucid way, without making the architecture too cluttered and avoiding the problem of ‘not seeing the wood for the trees’? Should the data be presented simultaneously, or should varieties be treated in succession? Should notes on variation be delegated to ‘Dialectal notes’ following the description, or can variation be discussed in the major text?
- In a polylectal grammar, should we favor function-to-form (semasiological) organization or form-to-function (onomasiological) organization?
- Should diachrony be considered in a (primarily synchronic) polylectal grammar?
- How does the description of multiple varieties shed light on the origin of the structures and help explain the emergence of particular features?
- Should all varieties be given the same attention, or can some be chosen as primary ones for the description? How should one make a well-informed choice of ‘witness varieties’ to focus on, each bringing their own evidence to the picture? Should more attention be devoted to the variety that has more speakers, or is deviant, or archaic? How can one avoid establishing a standard?
- How to deal with a multidialectal situation, a cross-dialectal communication, and a structural mismatch between the varieties (grammatical subsystems)?
- What is the link between a polylectal grammar and typology, and what implications does a polylectal grammar have for typology?

The paper focuses on (1) the challenges of organization – how to present examples and variation; function to form vs. form to function; which varieties to give more attention in the grammar, and (2) the benefits for the analysis – how does one variety give more insight into the structure of another variety? Examples from my own polylectal grammar of Senhaja will be provided.

References

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