

One grammar for several lects

This paper is devoted to a descriptive case when several dialects or closely related languages are treated under one cover, whether this cover is called a pan-dialectal grammar, a multilectal grammar, or a comparative one. We discuss possible approaches and practical solutions, as well as challenges specific for this type of grammar writing.

The paper is based on our personal experience of writing a grammar of Forest Enets and Tundra Enets, two Northern Samoyedic (Uralic) linguistic systems with disputable status: two dialects according to some researchers (Prokof'ev 1937, Tereščenko 1966, Labanauskas 2002, Sorokina 2010), and two languages according to some others (Janhunen 2009, Salminen 1997, 2007, Siegl 2013), see also (Khanina & Shluinsky 2022) for a targeted discussion of this dialect-language issue. Besides, we provide for an overview of similar endeavors to display an array of opportunities available for grammar writers (e.g. Evans (2003), Gruzdeva (Forthcoming), Gruzdeva & Fedotov (Forthcoming), Laine (Forthcoming), etc.).

First, we discuss possible beneficiaries of any grammar, from typologists to community members, and outline the pros and cons of a multilectal grammar for each of them. Second, we introduce particular solutions of data representation chosen by us and some other authors of multilectal grammars. Finally, we discuss a fundamental problem of a multilectal grammar: how to find a balance between a single grammatical description, or at least a single narrative, and a description of each lect in its own terms, the ideal which most grammar writers aspire to. For example, when dealing with cognate morphemes of closely related languages, there is always a danger of overestimating their similarity and of overlooking minor differences they might have. Among possible risks contributing to this chance are occasional gaps of data for one lect, when the data for the other lect(s) are more plentiful, or the inevitable linear nature of researchers' minds to which data on particular phenomenon from one lect become available before the parallel data from the other one(s). In yet other cases, (quasi-)identical functions in the related lects are performed by non-cognate morphemes, and so the latter can be treated together in a multilectal description, and then the same is the danger of overrating the similarity.

Thus, this paper contributes to the several topics of the conference: challenges and solutions for meeting the diverse needs of typologists, language learners and native speakers, as well as approaches to variation in language description.

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