Grammars across time and space: The fluctuating description of Mỹky

The existence of different sources of grammatical description for a given understudied language, spanning different approaches and covering different time periods, is far from unusual. This talk takes one step back and looks at how four sources of grammatical information, written at different points in recent time and corresponding to different grammar-writing traditions, approach the description of Mỹky, an endangered isolated language spoken in southern Amazonia (state of Mato Grosso, Brazil).

The sources in question are Moura (1957; a brief grammar sketch), Meader (1967; grammar sketch), Monserrat (2001, 2010; a descriptive grammar), and Bardagil (upcoming; grammar sketch). Thus, the variables under observation are (i) the different authors; (ii) the four different grammar traditions—Jesuit, SIL, *indigenista*, and descriptive-generativist; (iii) geolectal differences; (iv) chronological differences spanning over 60 years, and (v) the two extant varieties of Mỹky, the one spoken by the Manoki-Iranxe (Moura, Meader, Bardagil) and the one spoken by the Mỹky (Monserrat, Bardagil).

Besides paying attention to the phonological and morphological profile of Mỹky as described in the four sources examined, the focus will be on negation as a case study for the comparison. Negation is not only a phenomenon that features prominently in all four sources, but it also touches on several morphosyntactic categories. Standard negation (Miestamo 2005), in declarative main clauses, is expressed morphologically with one verbal suffix. For present tense, it is *-(r)aara*, with the Manoki variant *-lee(ra)* (1). Phrasal negation is expressed with the suffix *-pu* (2), which negates the presence or existence of the entity denoted by the noun and is also used more generally to negate non-verbal predication.

(1) Pali-**leera**-pa-nãtã.
     laugh-neg-1sg-disc
     'I didn't laugh.'

(2) Opyri jamã-**pu** manã-∅-pa.
     tapir small-neg kill-3sg.obj-1sg
     'I killed a big tapir.'

The comparison of the diverse descriptive sources for a single language, even if they are relatively close in time, turns out to be a surprisingly rich source of information for a an underdocumented language such as Mỹky, for instance shedding light on the now lost dialectal variation within the Manoki group. Just as interestingly, it also shows the extent to which the content of grammatical descriptions is subject to the characteristics and the particular context of the person or persons doing the description. The ongoing process of writing a community-oriented pedagogical grammar in the context of a revitalization initiative for the Manoki variety is also discussed in the light of the previous descriptive sources.

References

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