Abstract:
Child language and child-directed language in grammar writing: Exploring the potential
Birgit Hellwig

For some time now, issues of field data have assumed an important role in the theory and practice of grammar writing. And, as can be seen from various contributions to this conference, there continues to be a strong interest in the role of different data types and the kinds of descriptive generalizations we can derive from them. Discussions cover the entire continuum from natural data types on one end to elicited data types on the other, and we have an increasingly sophisticated understanding of their different uses, advantages and disadvantages. We as grammar writers also tend to have our own individual preferences with regard to the various data types, but no matter what our preferences, one central aspect of our task involves accessing speakers "metalinguistic knowledge, manifest in their ability to provide interpretations and systematizations for linguistic units and events" (Himmelmann 1998: 166). Typically, this kind of knowledge is accessed through some form of elicitation. In this talk, I want to discuss the potential of a naturalistic data type to provide insights into adult knowledge: the language used by and with young children acquiring a language. It is clear that this data type cannot replace elicitation, but it is argued that it constitutes a valuable additional resource. Drawing on examples from Qaqet (a Baining language of Papua New Guinea), this talk explores salient issues and discusses how the potential of this data type could be harnessed for descriptive grammars of the adult language.