

Abstract:

Language description: a challenging and fascinating task

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In the last centuries, so many grammars have been written for so many languages and yet we are still far from fully grasping the essence and mechanisms of human language, and yet no available grammar is able to completely explain or predict one or two minutes of spontaneous speech in any of the diverse tongues attested on Earth. Be that as it may, however imperfect their descriptions may be, linguists have no other choice than describing the languages they study in order to better understand them as well as to make them understandable both to the scholarly community and to the speakers. Indeed language description is both a challenging and fascinating task. Entering a language one is not (totally) familiar with is a challenge, a dive into the unknown, where one has to struggle and scramble to find the rules that govern it. At the same time, these rules are so marvellously designed and arranged, that one cannot but feel dazzled and fascinated by the inner beauty of the language one has chosen to study. Undoubtedly, language description is worth spending one's time on, I would say even: is worth investing a scholar's life in.

In this presentation, I will share with my audience the troubles and satisfactions I have experienced during the past 35 years in the course of several description projects devoted to three different languages families: Niger-Congo, Afro-Portuguese Creoles and Romance.