A typology of good grammars

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Writing a grammar is an exhilarating and exhausting experience. All grammars must meet high expectations. This paper reports on a study of qualities sought in grammars based on a survey of reviews of grammars. The study reveals that linguists expect a grammar to be comprehensive, clear, and accessible to all. It should also contain careful argumentation and a wealth of data that is appropriate, authentic, and meticulously checked. Writers of grammars must ask themselves a variety of questions before they begin, including what the goal of the grammar is, who the audience for the grammar is, how much time there is to write the grammar, and what the language reveals about its grammar. The paper then discusses and evaluates specific examples of good grammars of various types.

1. Introduction

When I was invited to participate in the Symposium on Grammatical Description of Undocumented Languages, Tom Payne suggested that I talk about my perspective as an editor, focusing on what makes a grammatical description “sellable.” What does an editor, or reviewer, look for in a grammar? What are the salient characteristics of the best grammars you have reviewed? I responded that I did not think that I could talk about this alone, because I did not think that there was a single template for a good grammar. We corresponded about titles, and ended up with “A typology of good grammars” — “grammar” was fairly obvious to me; “good” was, on first thought, somewhat less so. “Typology” was included because, I believed, there is more than one type of good grammar. This article is an attempt to understand these different terms, especially “good” and “typology,” with respect to grammars.

I begin by introducing the reader to my work on grammars. I then examine some of the factors that are, I believe, required of a good grammar based on a study of reviews of grammars. Following this I look at some of the factors
that lead to the word “typology” as well as “good” being part of the title of this article.

2. A little background

I began doing field work on Slave [slevi], an Athapaskan language of northern Canada, in the early 1970’s, for my Ph.D. dissertation. The following years were a time of great change in the Canadian north, and the federal government was interested in building an oil and natural gas pipeline through much of the area in which the language is spoken. There was tremendous concern about the human and social dimensions of this, and the government responded in several ways, including holding hearings in the communities to gauge community response to the proposed pipeline, and supporting research on the languages and the status of the languages in the area in which the pipeline would be built. I worked under contract, starting in 1976, on the research for what eventually became a grammar of the Slave language. In the first few years I prepared a preliminary grammar of one dialect of Slave and a dictionary of that same dialect. I conducted intensive field work between 1976 and about 1984, working with many speakers in a number of communities. This work culminated in a grammar of Slave, published in 1989. I have been involved in curriculum development, teacher training, and dictionary work on Slave as well over the years, and have continued to do theoretical research on Athapaskan languages, including comparative work.

In thinking back about writing the Slave grammar, my memories are at two extremes, exhilaration and exhaustion. Some quotes are perhaps of interest on both of these. First, Valentine, in the introduction to his 2001 *Nishnaabemwin Reference Grammar*, vividly conveys the excitement and pleasure of writing a grammar:

> Writing a grammar is a profoundly humbling experience. Languages are almost unbelievably complex and represent the richest traditions that we as human beings possess. What remotely compares with them, whether we are considering the massively intricate and fluid physical gestures involved in the articulation of sounds, or the systems behind the thousands of possibilities of distinct expression in the verb system of a language such as Nishnaabemwin? A language is a natural object with a beauty and a capacity to inspire awe on the order of Niagara Falls or Lake Superior, if we take the time to appreciate it. Writing a reference grammar provides the enjoyment of thousands of hours of careful scrutiny, though at the same time one realizes acutely the truth of
Michael Krauss’s statement that a hundred linguists working for a hundred years could never get to the bottom of a single language. Nishnaabemwin is a language exceedingly rich in structure, inviting many levels of analysis — it is an inexhaustible source of pleasure and challenge for its students. (Valentine 2001:xxxi)

In a recent book on dictionaries, Frawley, Hill, and Munro 2002 begin their introduction with what they term lexicographic war stories. Some of these war stories are as relevant to the writing of grammars as they are to dictionaries, and get at some of the sometimes overwhelming difficulties in writing a dictionary.

- how difficult it was to know where to begin;
- how, after finally beginning, the work was both glacially incremental and wildly circuitous;
- how the project went on and on and the book kept expanding from a modest list of words and glosses to something like a cultural encyclopedia what must be the lexicographic version of Congress’s feared “mission creep”;
- how some things turned out to be absolutely unachievable, no matter how clever the lexicographer;
- how, for some at least, the project had back-burner status because those who promoted and rewarded employees wanted more short-term and ostensibly theoretical results;
- how, when the work was finally completed and published, some people were unimpressed, and even mean-spirited and critical “What?! You forgot to include … ???”

While grammar writing and dictionary writing are different in many ways, many of the statements above reverberate with the writer of a grammar as much as they do with the compiler of a dictionary — the difficulty of finding a starting point, the length of the project, the inability to get the material wanted, the apparent lack of short-term progress, the near inevitability of errors, the sense of how much is not there rather than how much is there.

Frawley, Hill, and Munro go on to ask “Why do it?” They respond to this question about lexicography with something similar to what Valentine had to say about writing the Nishnaabemwin grammar: “There is something at once both marvelous and practical about producing a guide to the mind, world, and behavior of a group of people. The benefits that accrue from such a handbook — literacy, preservation, history, discovery — only add to the excitement of seeing the published dictionary standing upright on the bookshelf.” (2)
All this is to say that, despite the difficulties one faces in writing a grammar, the experience in the end of producing a piece of work that, one hopes, will be of long-lasting value is one that cannot be replaced.

3. On the “grammar” and “good” parts of the title

With this background, let me now turn to the task at hand, grammars and the essence of what makes a grammar good. This can be considered from at least two different perspectives. First, what does the grammar include? What topics must be covered in a good grammar, what is optional? This is a question addressed by Noonan in his article in this volume, and I do not concern myself with this to any large extent. Second, how is the grammar presented? What are those more elusive qualities that go beyond coverage of the language that are required to make a grammar stand out? This is the question with which I am concerned here. It is surprisingly difficult to find anything explicit in print about this when one looks at what strikes me as a natural place, information sheets about grammars for potential authors submitting to grammar series. Instead, we generally find much written about what goes into a grammar. These descriptions assume that we know what overall makes a good grammar, and the author requires guidance as to scope and organization, but not to quality. In the following discussion, I take my turn at trying to define what qualities a good grammar has based partly on a study of reviews of grammars, partly on what was required in the Cambridge University Press Grammar Series that R.M.W. Dixon and I edited, and partly on my own observations.

3.1 On the “grammar” part of “a good grammar”

As noted above, Noonan’s article in this volume deals extensively with the content part of a good grammar, and I examine this topic only cursorily. Content is, of course, critical to a good grammar; it is simply a secondary concern to me here.

A dictionary (in this case The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, 1973 edition) gives a number of definitions of “grammar.” Most relevant is the following: “1. the study of the system underlying the esp. formal features of a language, as the sounds, morphemes, words, or sentences” (614). This definition is, unsurprisingly, not particularly useful in helping us to understand what makes a good grammar (in the sense of a book that contains this information), but rather tells us, in the broadest of strokes, what goes into a grammar.
In looking at descriptions of some grammar series, we find something similar: descriptions that focus on content. In a description of the LINCOM EUROPA Descriptive Grammar Series (Linguist List May 1999), information is included about what the grammars should include (phonology/phonetics, morphology, syntax, texts), the number of pages (120), the readership (scholars in general linguistics, especially in typology, students of the language family), special concerns (endangered languages, un-surveyed languages, scattered material). These guidelines provide information about what might be included in the grammar and who the audience is.

In the announcement of a major grammar series, the Lingua series, later the Routledge Descriptive Grammar series, “need for the production of purely descriptive studies which will provide a wide variety of data about individual languages” (Comrie and Smith 1977: 5) is stressed. This introduction goes on to say that “the ultimate aim is a framework which would act as a catalyst in the elicitation of all information that could be of interest for theoretical work in the above-mentioned fields [language universals, language typology, or comparative syntax, morphology, or phonology] in terms of any of the modern theories of language” (5). A detailed questionnaire is included, and its topics are syntax (sentence types, structural questions, coordination, negation, anaphora, reflexives, reciprocals, comparison, equatives, possession, emphasis, topic, heavy shift, other movement processes, minor sentence types, operational definitions), morphology (inflection, derivation), phonology (phonological units [segments], phonotactics, suprasegmentals, morphophonology [segmental], morphophonemics [suprasegmental], ideophones and interjections, lexicon.

In this introduction, Comrie and Smith focus on aspects of what “good” means beyond content: They say that a grammar must meet “conditions of accessibility, flexibility, and completeness,” recognizing that “with the passage of time we should expect to have to modify several of the assumptions behind the questionnaire in light of fresh data” (page 5). They also require that the grammar be “amply illustrated by examples from the language, with glosses” (page 9). They thus move from the topics to be covered in a grammar to those other factors that contribute to quality.

In a survey carried out by a group at Munich several years ago (Linguist List May 1995; summary of results reported October 1995), linguists were asked for their responses as to what a good reference grammar should be. Questions included what a good reference grammar should contain, the role of linguistic theory in a grammar, the kind of justification necessary in a grammar (exemplification, theoretical support, cross-linguistic support), organization of the grammar, and a range of other topics. Their findings are summarized here:
A good reference grammar should contain a grammar and a lexicon, not just a grammar, with emphasis on morphology and syntax, and strong examples and texts. A description of language variation is important. A good reference grammar should be descriptive and provide synchronic and diachronic, but primarily synchronic, information; it should not be bound to a particular theory; form and function should be described together; terminology should be suitable to the language described. The preferred order is phonetics/phonology — orthography — morphology — syntax — semantics — pragmatics.

While these guidelines are helpful, elaborating the topics that must, should, or could be included in a grammar, they do not go too far beyond this to answer the question of “What are the characteristics of a ‘good’ grammar beyond its content?”

3.2 On the “good” part of the title

In order to try to identify just what characterizes a good grammar in the sense that I am using this phrase, I decided to undertake a study of reviews of grammars, hoping that they would be helpful in defining what I was thinking about. This was very informative, and I found a remarkable consistency among the reviews as to what makes a grammar work and what does not. In the following, I quote passages from several reviews, chosen randomly, and drawn largely from *IJAL*, *Linguistic Anthropology*, and *Lingua*. While I tried to work from positive reviews, I have include some quotes from negative ones as well as these are often especially revealing of what is required of a good grammar. I have highlighted phrases that point to the qualities that the reviewers found to be particularly important in the grammars. This series of quotes goes on for some pages, and is followed by a summary and discussion.

3.2.1 A survey of reviews of grammars


Easy access reference book for the grammar of Hungarian, but it is also more than that: it provides the empirical basis of specific grammatical phenomena like overt movement of contrastive focus items … (854)


To conclude, this book provides a wealth of data and ideas which are presented with unsurpassed clarity. No linguist will want to write anything about the

There are plenty of data covering various aspects of the structure and use of the language, enriched further by the thoughtful inclusion of subtle dialect differences. … Profuse cross-referencing further enhances the usefulness of the data. (631)

Now I turn to those aspects that I consider as the limitations of the work. As I said earlier, this is meant to serve as an all-in-one source book for any (potential) researcher. It then is a little ironic that by predetermining the format in minute detail (…) some of the really interesting aspects (from the researcher’s point of view) of the language tend to get left out. This, I think, is an inherent problem for a descriptive grammar. Let me explain this. AK have been scrupulously non-committal to any particular theory of grammar, their purpose being just that of description. And there lies the rub. There is no atheoretical or theory-neutral research: it amounts to a contradiction in terms. Be it linguistics or any other scientific discipline, research problems are invariably determined by the paradigm one is working in. Take for the sake of illustration, someone working in the framework of generative syntax. Immediately the gaps begin to show. There is a section in the book on quantifiers, where it is noted that the universal quantifier ellaa always has a particle um with it, contiguous or otherwise. But this important piece of information is given in passing, without connecting it to other facts … (631)


In its own way, each of these works has had to strike an uneasy balance between the need for comprehensive, detailed, and accessible documentation of a language and the need for theoretically relevant and original linguistic analysis. (88)


… the authenticity and robustness of the data make this a very significant and lasting contribution to the description of the world’s languages. … Galloway
has not only provided the linguistic community with a detailed description, but he has also given the Sta:lo people the reference material they need to proceed with language maintenance and revitalization projects. His research provides a model for other linguists undertaking the crucial work of documenting endangered languages. (356)


The prose is clear and the discussion is especially detailed where difficult or problematic aspects arise. Throughout the monograph, each aspect of the language under discussion is amply illustrated with many sentence examples. (428)


It is remarkable for the great amount of data it presents, and even more remarkable for how easily a user can interpret that data. Their descriptive prose throughout is refreshingly clear and succinct — taut as a bowstring, crisp as a rifle shot. (120)

*The Thompson Language* might be characterized fairly as a “field guide” to *Nle’kepmxcín*. It began as a tool for fieldwork and was refined continually over more than a dozen summers in the field. That evolution explains in part its meticulous organization: the Thompsons wanted to be able to find information in it quickly. Related topics were cross-referenced, ever more faithfully and completely over the years, until the present grammar has within it an exceptional concordance of information.

Adding to the internal concordance are several other welcome means with which to access the data: a precise table of contents …, lists of abbreviation, … a detailed subject index. (120–121)


It has become fashionable these days to raise one’s voice in favor of so-called endangered languages. The best, it seems to me, that a linguist can do for the preservation of a language approaching extinction is to come up with a description as complete and as informative as possible... (357)

In the exposition of the syntax, each point of grammar is well supported by a clear example sentence, and morphological categories are presented with short but helpful explanations. (414)

The description of the language is well supported by clear, appropriate examples… (416)


The description detailed, and copiously exemplified, includes a good many intriguing remarks on the semantics of forms — inevitably at this stage of the investigation — those remarks are often best taken as suggestive rather than definitive. (388)

All these complexities are lucidly detailed. (389)


The book reviewed here does an excellent job of describing Lillooet grammar in a compact, informative, and intelligible manner. (642)

Though van Eijk does not waste words, the facts of Lillooet generally emerge in a straightforward and perspicuous fashion. But occasionally the presentation is a bit too compressed, requiring an extra degree of alertness on the reader’s part. (644)


In general, each section contains a pithy, yet clear, statement, illustrated with two or three relevant examples about the construction or phenomenon described by the title of that section. (575)

… Such an oversight, while not too misleading for the careful reader, is reflective of a more general tendency on the part of Mahootian to tailor her descriptions around the examples she provides rather than giving more general information … (575)

A second problem — one that will arise in writing any grammar — is that decisions must be made as to the status of certain morphemes, words, constructions, etc. However, Mahootian has not included any discussion of how these decisions have been reached or what the areas of contention are. (575)
Every detail of its contents, from the introduction and the phonology to the chapter on embedding, is most painstakingly described — clearly the fruit of much meticulous analysis — yet the work is not always easy to use. (336)


Unfortunately, the introduction is marred by an opaque writing style. As with most parts of this book, I found that two readings were necessary before the points were fully understood. Clarity is further reduced by the fact that several of the technical terms introduced are not well defined. (120)

Throughout this work, one is struck by the excellence of the authors' fieldwork. Care is taken to situate utterances within stretches of discourse… (123)

There are a number of factors that make it difficult for the reader to extract the core generalizations proposed in this book. One problem is the large number of typographical errors, some of which involve matters of content. (123)


Du Feu does not give the reader a clear presentation of how Rapa Nui handles the grammatical feature under discussion before citing confusing details. For example, Section 1.1.1.1 (p. 14) addresses the question of direct versus indirect speech. It would seem logical that one would explain how each of these kinds of sentences is formed in the language before discussing in what ways they differ, if they do. Instead, since the questionnaire specifically asks about differences between the two, Du Feu enters right into a discussion of details relating to differences between these kinds of sentences before we are even told what they look like. (143)

Throughout the book, the spelling of words is inconsistent, as is word division, and glossing. (145)

3.2.2 What makes a grammar “good”?

These reviews of grammars demonstrate that a good grammar is much more than a discussion of the phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and so on of a language. These topics provide the content of the grammar, and thus are absolutely necessary to the “grammar” part of the good grammar, but in and of themselves they are not sufficient to make a quality grammar. As mentioned earlier, Noonan, in his contribution to this volume, discusses many of the
topics that should be included in a good grammar, and I do not examine these further here. Instead, I focus on these other more intangible qualities that go to make a grammar good.

I have highlighted in the reviews some of the major points that, I believe, help us to understand what the essence of a good grammar is. The reviews are of a range of types of languages — well-studied languages, languages with little else written on them but from well-studied language families, languages with little else written on either the particular language or the language family. We find several notions echoing throughout the reviews that help us know what the essence of a good grammar is, and I discuss these now. All are important; the list is not meant to be ranked.

First, a good grammar is comprehensive and complete. The reviewers stress that a good grammar includes at least the traditional areas of phonetics, phonology, morphology, and syntax. Again, see Noonan's article in this volume on this point.

Second, the writing style must be clear.

Third, examples are of the utmost importance. There should be a wealth of data which is appropriate and authentic. The data should be carefully chosen to illustrate the point at hand. In addition, the data should be meticulously checked for spelling, and for consistency of spelling, glosses, and manner of glossing throughout the book.

Fourth, the reviewers agree that accessibility is very important. Accessibility is related to clarity of writing, but has a slightly different focus; the grammar should be easy to use and reach out to the reader. Another way of putting this is that the author of the grammar should place him/herself in the reader's shoes, attempting to anticipate what the reader needs to understand the grammar. Accessibility is also related to organization: a grammar should have a user-friendly organization which is appropriate for the language.

Argumentation is particularly important in a grammar in order to establish the credibility of proposed analyses. This too needs to be clear, accessible, coherent, and cohesive.

In the guidelines that R.M.W. Dixon and I prepared for the Cambridge Grammatical Description Series, we set out some general statements that encompass many of these points. I have listed these general statements below, and have bolded pieces of the description in order to focus on the points relevant to the current discussion.

Writing a good descriptive grammar is a difficult task, demanding a sound theoretical background, the ability to pursue a well-founded chain of argu-
mentation, the capacity to recognize an analytic problem and to put forward and compare competing solutions to it, and then to present an integrated analysis of the language.

1. Style
A grammar is a piece of scientific description. As with any type of writing, there are different ways to present the analysis. One is to state the facts in a dry manner, so that looking up something in the grammar is like using a dictionary or a cookbook. Another alternative is to think of writing a grammar as telling a story, gradually developing a theme, moving in a natural and integrated manner into the next theme, and so on. A good grammar conveys to the reader some of the excitement the linguist experienced while analyzing the language. Thus, part of the goal in writing a grammar is to make it user-friendly.

2. Organization
Within a topic, the presentation should generally begin with simpler patterns and move to more complex patterns. For example, it is usually better to begin the discussion of syntax with simplex sentences than with complex sentences.

3. Examples
Each point in the grammar should be illustrated with appropriate examples. … Examples should be taken from texts, …, whenever possible.

Length and completeness
The grammar should be comprehensive, and should attempt to describe every aspect of the structural organization of a language. It must be kept in mind that there is no such thing as an exhaustive grammar of any language, and not every question about a language can be answered within a grammar. It is good to indicate clearly what can be stated with confidence, those areas about which there is some doubt, and points that are not at present understood. Open questions which require study should be listed.

The grammar should be as concise as possible while describing and explaining everything in a clear and accessible manner.

The guidelines for grammar series and the reviews of grammars help to elucidate what it is that editors and readers look for in a grammar: clarity, comprehensiveness, conciseness, care, coherence, accessibility, richness of illustration. Basically, what is required of a good grammar is what is required of any good piece of linguistic work: careful and insightful analysis that is well-supported by strong argument and presented in a way that is easy to grasp and can draw in the audience at which the grammar is aimed.
3.2.3 Some additional criteria

In this section I raise a few points that do not come through as clearly in the reviews but which are, I believe, nevertheless prerequisites to a good grammar.

A few of the reviews mention the importance of discussing language variation. Anyone doing fieldwork quickly learns how much variation there is in speech, both in an individual and in a speech community. Perhaps in an attempt to uncover the systematicity in a language system, it is often tempting to overlook this variation in writing a grammar, and to amalgamate material from different dialects. While this might be legitimate at times, it can lead to the creation of a dialect that is not spoken by anyone. As an illustration, a Ph.D. student in my department who is a native speaker of a particular language listened to a talk on aspects of the phonological system of that language. It turned out that the presenter was, unknowingly, conflating data from two dialects and the particular forms in question could not co-occur within a single dialect. The analysis then, was invalid, as it was based on something that was not in fact a possible dialect. The available materials led to this problem: they combined different dialects and the speaker simply drew from this material. If data comes from a number of dialects, it is incumbent on the author to make clear what the differences between these dialects are so that the user of the grammar does not fall into the trap of creating incoherent language systems.

The use of formalism and technical terminology also benefits by some comment. It is very easy in writing a grammar to get caught up in some particular formalism that is current at the time. Consider, for instance, grammars written in tagmemics. I personally find these to be extremely difficult to read because I am not very familiar with the theory. Similarly, while I was trained in generative grammar, I find that grammars that make heavy use of phonological rule formalism (not just slash/dash rule notation, but angled brackets, curly brackets, and the like) often obscure for me something that is really quite straightforward. Thus, in addition to aiming at clarity, conciseness, and the other characteristics discussed above, one should be quite careful about the use of formalism. Things should be said in words as well as in formalism. Just as data must be checked over and over for accuracy, formalism must be carefully examined to be sure it really is capturing the generalizations that it is designed to capture.

Something similar can be said about terminology. Linguistics, like any discipline, uses a considerable amount of technical terminology. The way in which a term is used can change over time, the same term can mean different things in different language families, terms are sometimes invented to define social groups rather than to illuminate what is going on in a language. It is
very important to take tremendous care in using terminology and, in general, to define what is meant by a particular term. For instance, in the Athapaskan literature, both the terms “aspect” and “mode” are used, but sometimes aspect refers to A and mode to B and sometimes vice versa. In writing the Slave grammar, I included a chapter in which I tried to define these terms as I would use them so that readers would be clear what was under discussion when they saw one of these words. Obscure words also need to be defined. For instance, in the Athapaskan literature, the term “conjunct” is used to identify morphemes that are closer to the verb stem, draw from a limited phonological inventory, are often syncretic in nature, and are, by and large, inflectional in function. In the Algonquian literature, this same word is used to identify a type of clause that is, for the most part, subordinate to a main clause. Reading the literature of these two language families is extremely difficult for a newcomer to the field, and this is partly because of the use of terminology which is unfamiliar to the reader. These comments clearly fit under the notion of accessibility.

3.3 Summary

To summarize, I have tried in this section to identify some of those sometimes elusive qualities that define what it means for a grammar to be “good” — a clear style; completeness; comprehensiveness; wealth of appropriate, carefully chosen data that is carefully explained; compelling argumentation, and consistency. In addition, two even less tangible points are critical. First, to speak anthropomorphically, each language has a story to tell, and it must be allowed to tell it. Second, a grammar is a work that, one hopes, will be used for years to come. A grammar is written for the present, but it also should be written for the future. This means thinking carefully about formalisms and technical terminology and, perhaps most important, about making a presentation that will be understood long after that grammar has been published. The writer of a grammar thus must in many ways be a visionary, able to see far beyond present times. Writing a grammar presents an enormous challenge to the author, but one that can be met, as many of the outstanding grammars written in the past demonstrate.
4. What is a “typology” of good grammars? Or how can good grammars differ?

4.1 A series of questions

In the previous section, I discussed a number of characteristics of a good grammar. In this section, I turn to the word “typology” and consider some of the ways in which these ingredients of a good grammar can be stirred together and what some of the questions are that enter in to deciding just what the grammar should look like. I begin with a series of questions, put here as direct questions.

– What are your goals in writing a grammar?
– Who is your audience?
– How much time do you have to write the grammar?
– What does the language “say” to you about the grammar?

These are some of the questions that I asked myself through the process of working on the Slave grammar. The set of answers very much shape the form that the grammar ultimately takes.

What are your goals in writing a grammar? While every grammar is designed to provide a grammatical description of the language in question, this does not on its own define what the goals are. Is the goal to write a full reference grammar? Is it to write a short grammar to give the flavor of the language without the depth of a full reference grammar — for instance, for the LINCOM EUROPA series? Is it a sketch? Is the goal of the grammar to present the language on its own? Is it designed to be a grammar that easily allows for comparative work between languages of the family? Is it meant to be a grammar to be used for work on linguistic typology, as the grammars of the Routledge series are? Is it designed primarily to further linguistic theory?

Who is your audience? To put this another way, what is the shared world of the desired audience? This question relates closely to the one about goals. Is the grammar written for linguists? If so, is it designed mainly for linguists who are experts in the language family? Is it for linguists who might wish to work in the language family, but who do not as yet have any knowledge of the family? Is it for typologists? Is it for speakers of the language? Is it for those wishing to learn the language? For teachers of the language? Very often, grammars are written for a community of speaker/learners of the language. A grammar designed primarily for speakers/learners of the language is not necessarily the same as the grammar designed primarily for linguists, as Callaghan 2002 points out in her
discussion of Miwok dictionaries, and as I have found in my own work experience. Depending on the audience, one might use different vocabulary, present different types of accounts, organize the material in different ways, and so on. It can be an enormous challenge to try to meet the needs of all potential audiences in a single volume. In reality, a grammar of a little-documented language is likely to be used for the full range of purposes. Yet authors should have in mind why and for whom they are preparing the grammar, as this will help with a number of critical decisions.

How much time do you have? This will help to determine what your goals are — something very different can be accomplished if you are doing six months of field work or six years of field work, especially on a language for which there has been little or no description. It is important to set one’s sights realistically. It is probably impossible to write a major reference grammar on a language which has not been described based on six months of field work. However, something can be written in this amount of time. It is important to let the reader know what the framework is so that s/he can know how to interpret and evaluate the grammar.

What does the language say to you about its grammar? This is the overall question that I consider in the remainder of this article. I will focus primarily on grammars that are designed as reference grammars and are based on in-depth research of a language over some time period. The audience in mind is largely one of linguists. The details vary depending on the goals and the audience, but these questions are, I believe, ones to take into account no matter what.

4.2 How can grammars differ?

4.2.1 Content 1: The major topics
First consider the content of a reference grammar. There is little disagreement that a grammar should include information on phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. More and more, discourse structure is also being discussed in grammars. In general, guidelines for grammars ask for some textual material and a lexicon. Within these general guidelines, however, there is room for much variation. Again, see Noonan’s article in this volume for detailed discussion.

4.2.2 Organization
What can be variable about organization? Essentially, assuming that the goal is to write a reference grammar of the language rather than a grammar to fit some predetermined outline, as with the Routledge Descriptive Grammar Series,
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each language demands its own strategy of presentation. To quote again from the guidelines for the Cambridge Grammar Series:

..., compare Dixon's grammars of Dyirbal [(1972)], Yidiny [(1977)], and Boumaa Fijian [(1988)], where three totally different strategies are employed. Basically, if an analytic decision concerning category X needs to refer to some facts concerning category Y, then the chapter dealing with Y should be positioned before that dealing with X.

The Dyirbal grammar (Dixon 1972), begins with chapters on Australian languages and the Dyirbal language and its speakers. Dixon then looks at word classes, syntax, deep syntax, morphology, phonology, semantics, lexicon, and prehistory; he has appendices on Dyirbal logic, previous work on Dyirbal; he also includes texts, vocabulary, a list of affixes, references, and an index of Australian languages. The grammar of Boumaa Fijian (Dixon 1988) is ordered in a different way and divided into many more chapters. In this grammar, Dixon again begins with an introduction, and then turns immediately to phonology and the word. There are two major overview chapters dealing with syntax — the first on clauses and phrase structure and the second on verbs. These are followed by chapters on pronouns, deictics, predicates, noun phrases, possession, clausal NPs, classifiers, numbers prepositions, time expressions, interrogatives, word derivations, verbs, adjectives, word classes, clause, sentence, complement clauses, the relator me, syntactic organization, previous work on Fijian, texts, references, and vocabulary. While the grammars include similar topics, Dixon organized the books very differently because he felt that the languages demanded different types of treatment.

Another example comes from the domain of grammars of Athapaskan languages. There have been remarkably few grammars of Athapaskan languages in recent years; dictionary work is far more prevalent. One grammar of an Athapaskan language is Eung-Do Cook's grammar of Tsuut'ina (Sarcee). Cook has a discussion of the orthographic system and sound-symbol correspondences near the beginning of the grammar, but leaves the discussion of morphophonemics until the end. Cook (1984:5) is quite explicit about why he does this: “The organization of this book is different from many comparable linguistic descriptions written in a structural framework in that it starts with syntax, proceeds to morphology, and then to phonology. This procedure does not necessarily reflect any theoretical bias, although I believe it would be only natural from the native speaker’s point of view.” In my grammar of Slave, on the other hand, I follow a more traditional path, presenting an overview of major phonological processes near the beginning of the grammar, and then
interleaving discussion of morphophonemics into the chapters of grammatical categories, as it is appropriate.

The point that I wish to make here is that the language should be presented in such a way that its own character comes out and the needs of its audience are met. However, there is not a single way to accomplish this task. Different linguists may have different ideas about what this is for a particular language, and different goals and different audiences may lead to variation in how a grammar is organized. Thus we will find variation across grammars, even of the same language.

While the overall organization of a grammar will vary from language to language, within a particular topic, the presentation should generally begin with simpler patterns and move to more complex patterns. For instance, in Algonquian languages verbs are normally divided into two major classes, intransitive and transitive, and then each of these classes subdivides into animacy classes. While person marking is quite straightforward with intransitive verbs, the role of a person hierarchy becomes evident when the transitive classes are studied. It is probably a good idea to discuss intransitive verbs before discussing transitive verbs for this reason. In some more transparent cases, one would normally present simplex sentences before introducing complex sentences; affirmative constructions before negative constructions; the sound system as a whole before positional restrictions on where segments can occur.

4.2.3 Content 2: Some more details

While grammars are generally thought to include the topics of phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics, there are other topics that they could include. A major area that is found in some grammars is comparative/historical information. Should a grammar include diachronic discussion in addition to the synchronic description of the language? In the Cambridge University Press grammar guidelines, the following is suggested:

While the primary purpose of a grammar is to provide a synchronic description of a language, diachronic information should be introduced when appropriate. If enough is known or has been reliably reconstructed of the history of the language, it is useful to provide diachronic explanations for synchronic irregularities, homonymies, and the like. Comparative remarks on what happens in closely genetically related or geographically contiguous languages may also be helpful and instructive.

In writing the Slave grammar, when confronted with problems of page limits, I decided to take out much of the comparative/historical material that I had
originally included in it because it seemed to me that this information was secondary to the synchronic description of the language. In some cases, however, it is probably close to impossible to write a grammar without taking historical information into account (e.g., Michif, which is traditionally thought of as being a mixture of Cree and French).

4.2.4 Theoretical perspective

There is general agreement that if a grammar is written to be of lasting value, it is important that it not be written in the linguistic framework that is of current at the time, but that it be presented in what Dixon calls “basic linguistic theory.” As the Cambridge University Press guidelines say,

The language analysis should be informed by insights and techniques of linguistic theory. However, the write-up should be in terms of basic linguistic theory, using the terminology that is used and understood by the majority of linguists, and that is relevant for the language … If it is necessary to use an unusual term, it must be defined. A grammar should be a statement about a language, not an argument for a particular theoretical framework.

Two issues come up in this quote. First, the grammar should be informed by theory. This will help make it coherent, and it will allow questions to be asked that might not come up otherwise. But second, theory is not the goal of a grammar. Another work can be written that directly addresses interesting and current theoretical issues, but the role of the grammar is not, say, to critique whether Optimality Theory is superior to derivational theory or to decide how the minimalist account of question formation requires enhancement based on the facts of this language. These are important and valid areas of linguistic research, but they are not the content of a grammar, although they could well inform the research.

I will give a few simple examples of what I mean by “informed by the theory” through a comparison of some works on Athapaskan languages. The first comes from what is sometimes called conjugation and sometimes called aspect in the Athapaskan literature. In Athapaskan languages, there are morphemes that are usually identified as \(-n\), \(-s\), and gamma (\(-gh\)) based on their reconstructed forms. In my 1989 Slave grammar, I treated these as what I called conjugation markers. The idea was that one of these is listed as part of the basic lexical entry of each verb, and is simply memorized as part of that verb. Between the time of the Slave grammar and my more recent work on word formation in the verb of Athapaskan languages, I learned a lot about aspectual systems, and came to view these same elements in a very different way. In my 2000 book, I treated these as contentful items that I called, following
Carlota Smith (who in turn followed Vendler and others) “situation aspect,” marking accomplishments, activities, achievements, and semelfactives. While these items can be lexicalized, overall what I found is that there is a remarkable consistency in aspectual semantics between the verbs that take a particular one of these morphemes. If I were to redo the Slave grammar now, I would treat these morphemes as having meaningful properties overall, with some idiosyncrasy, rather than treating them as entirely idiosyncratic, as I did in 1989. Additional knowledge about language and current theoretical concerns around aspect systems allowed me to view these morphemes in a way that I had been unable to in the past.

Another issue that arises in Athapaskan linguistics has to do with the treatment of what is at least historically a concatenation of morphemes before the verb stem. When one looks at many grammars of Athapaskan languages, one finds the verb described as consisting of a template. For the discussion here, the important part of this template is as follows (I use the terminology in Rice 2000).

situation aspect — viewpoint aspect — 1/2 subject — voice/valence — stem

My concern here is the status of the situation aspect through voice/valence portion of the verb. Some typical forms in the imperfective, taken from Navajo (Faltz 1998), are presented below. I follow Faltz’s terminology here in naming the paradigm:

Imperfective-mode conjugation (216)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>sg</th>
<th>pl</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sh</td>
<td>iid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ní</td>
<td>noh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>form is variable (Ø, i, ee, yi) depending on what precedes it</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For instance, in what Faltz calls the Imperfective-mode conjugation, the form of the second person singular subject is ní.

n-Imperfective conjugation (416)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>sg</th>
<th>pl</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>nish</td>
<td>niid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ní</td>
<td>noh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the n-Imperfective conjugation, the second person singular subject has the form ní, differing from its form in the imperfective-mode conjugation by the presence of a high tone.
A typology of good grammars

s-Imperfective conjugation (417)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>sg</th>
<th>pl</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>shish</td>
<td>siid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>sì</td>
<td>soh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>zero</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here the second person singular has the form sì, without the nasal component seen in earlier forms.

How are these patterns to be treated in a grammar? In Rice 1989 I treated the parallel Slave forms of the n-imperfective and s-imperfective conjugations as bimorphemic. The first segment, n- or s-, I called a conjugation marker and the consonant the subject marker (šh-1sg, iid 1pl, ni- or high tone 2sg. oh-2pl., with other complications, and ignoring the vowels). While I considered these sequences to be morphologically complex, I did not try to assign any meaning to the first part, but identified it as a conjugation class marker, as discussed above.

In Rice 2000, I treated the first part of these spans as a marker of situation aspect, with n- marking an achievement and s- an accomplishment. This makes semantic sense in that n- occurs with verbs that occur at a point in time (e.g., arrive) and s- with verbs that have duration and an endpoint (e.g., make sg. object).

A very different treatment is offered by Faltz in his book The Navajo verb, A grammar for students and scholars. The morphophonemics of this span of the verb is complex. This can be seen in the imperfective forms above, but becomes even more clear in the perfective paradigms. Here we see the morphemes called classifiers, labeled voice/valence above, entering in to play a role in the form that this span has.

s-Perfective conjugation (417)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>zero/barred-l classifiers</th>
<th>plain-l/d classifiers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sg</td>
<td>dpl</td>
<td>sg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>sé</td>
<td>siid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>síní</td>
<td>soo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>z or s</td>
<td>s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notice here that the form of the aspect–subject complex differs depending on which of the classifiers is present. This is true in what Faltz calls the s-perfective conjugation, given above, and in what he labels the n-perfective conjugation as well, shown below.
n-Perfective conjugation (418)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>sg</th>
<th>dpl</th>
<th>sg</th>
<th>dpl</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>ní</td>
<td>niid</td>
<td>iish</td>
<td>niid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>víni/iíní/yíní oo</td>
<td>víni/iíní/yíní nooh</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>ní</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here we see two things. First, segmentation of the complex into morphemes is more difficult, especially in the n-perfective forms where an n- is not always present as the first element. Second, the first person singular forms in particular look quite different depending upon the voice/valence marker in the verb: with imperfective forms and plain-l/d classifier perfective forms, the first person singular is easily identified as a voiceless sibilant, but this phonological unit is not even present in the zero/barred-l classifier perfective forms. Something similar can be said for the second person dual/plural forms. It is much more difficult to segment these chunks and maintain a constant correspondence between sound and meaning. Faltz thus treats these units as single chunks, without worrying about the number of morphemes that are involved, and does not try to break them up into component parts.

These various ways of approaching the material are all reasonable, and it is difficult to dismiss one as opposed to the other. In 1989, I took a very traditional approach to Athapaskan verbal morphology, and simultaneously decided to employ a basic principle of one meaning/one form, thus building much that I later came to view as historical rather than synchronic into my synchronic grammar. This was highly influenced by the generative phonology framework prevalent at the time. Further, I decided that a principle of recognizing recurrent partials was important, but did not really look at meaning. Later, I recognized a meaning component; thus the change in terminology from conjugation to situation aspect (and from classifier to voice/valence). Further, I decided that I had gone overboard in trying to maintain the principle of one meaning/one form, and I would now introduce allomorphy to account for the different forms of the first person singular and second person dual/plural. This is done in a different theoretical context for looking at the relationship between phonology and morphology, one in which a theory of allomorphy has found a role. Faltz makes explicit his reasons for choosing the descriptive framework that he did; he writes that “I realized that the mode inflections would be more lucidly described taking an approach familiar from European languages, namely, by defining sets of different subject prefixes for different modes. Thus, the reader will find no “mode markers” in this book — rather the combinations of the
classical mode markers with the classical subject prefixes are themselves viewed as the synchronic subject prefixes which differ, therefore, not only from mode to mode but also from conjugation type to conjugation type” (xi). Faltz goes on to suggest that the subject marking systems for the various modes become easier to recognize, that formal properties of the inflectional system emerge in a natural way, and the dependence between perfective mode subject prefixes and the classifier can be seen as an instance of the kind of familiar relation exemplified by the dependence of imperfect subject suffixes on conjugation class in Spanish, or the dependence of future subject suffixes on conjugation class in Latin and Irish (xi).

To return to what I would do now if I were to revise the Slave grammar, I would use a combination of these approaches. First, I would treat the n- and s- in the verbs above as a separate component, as I believe that this leads to insight into the aspectual richness of the verb. Second, I would treat the subjects as having special allomorphs in certain perfective paradigms. This treatment comes from what I think is an increased understanding on my part of what the semantics of the verb is.

I will give one more example of how an analysis is informed by theoretical assumptions. In Holton’s 2000 dissertation on Tanacross, another Athapaskan language, he argues that stems can end in either voiceless unaspirated or voiced stops/affricates. In light of comparative Athapaskan studies, this is a rather surprising conclusion since voicing is not usually thought to be an underlying property of stops/affricates in these languages, but rather stops/affricates can voice intervocalically. Holton argues that the vowels that can follow these voiced stops/affricates are excrescent rather than underlying vowels synchronically, and therefore the consonants must be treated as voiced underlyingly rather than predictably. If Holton’s primary focus were comparative/historical, he would treat these vowels as underlying; synchronic considerations led him to a different analysis.

What we see in all of these examples is that linguistic theory informs linguistic description, and changing theory can change a description. Depending upon the theory that one adopts, very different descriptions may be accorded to a language.

4.2.5 Terminology
Something else can be seen in the examples above. There are several terms that are used in the Athapaskan literature that are undergoing some rethinking these days. We have seen situation aspect vs. conjugation marker. A parallel case is voice/valence vs. classifier, also mentioned above. In both of these cases,
Part of the reason for this, I believe, is that in many cases it is difficult to figure out why the particular morpheme in question is present rather than some other one — thus, idiosyncrasy is the focus. However, I have tried to turn this on its head, and focus on the regularities, recognizing that nevertheless there are idiosyncrasies. Again, we see different assumptions present: with a mixed system which is sometimes regular and predictable and other times irregular and unpredictable, what do we take as the basis for the description? I now lean towards bringing out the regularities, while recognizing the unpredictable cases, and in using terminology that highlights the predictable nature; in the Slave grammar I used terminology that reinforced the unpredictable, idiosyncratic nature of things.

4.2.6 Data presentation

Data can be presented in different ways in grammars. I begin with the writing system adopted. The Cambridge University Press guidelines say the following:

Authors should use either IPA symbols or a practical orthography with IPA equivalents unless general practice in the family strongly mitigates against this.

If IPA or some standard phonetic tradition is used, the system needs to be commented on. If one of the standard systems is not used, it is extremely important that the symbols be interpreted. For instance, in the Athapaskan language family, symbols like {d} are used for voiceless unaspirated stops and {t} for voiceless aspirated stops. This is common in North American orthographies, but I have seen phonological treatments on North American languages where the analysis ultimately must be rejected because the source did not make clear that these symbols have non-standard values. As another example, vowel symbols are notoriously easy to misconstrue. The symbol {i} is used in both Navajo and Slave, but in the former it represents a far laxer vowel than it does in the latter. As a phonologist who is interested in such details, I find it frustrating to go to a grammar and find that the range of vowel qualities is not described, but simply a statement along the following lines: {i} has the value /i/.

Moving beyond transcription systems, presentation of data also varies from grammar to grammar. While the three-line presentation is probably the most common (line 1: data in language, line 2: morpheme-by-morpheme gloss, line 3: English translation), some have adopted a four line system where the orthography without morpheme breakdown is given on the first line and the morpheme-by-morpheme breakdown on the second line. The Cambridge University Press guidelines make the following comment: “Each example should be given in three lines, the word or sentence, with hyphens separating
morphemes (when it is possible to specify morpheme boundaries), interlinear
gloss, and translation.”

There are cases in which morpheme-by-morpheme breakdowns may not
be necessary. This may be the case in syntax, where word-by-word breakdowns
may be sufficient, or only partial morpheme breakdowns (e.g., to highlight ma-
terial that is relevant to the syntax). It may also be the case in the presentation
of paradigms where the user can pick out the differences on their own. I find
I still have problems with morpheme-by-morpheme breakdowns in Slave, not
because I don’t know the meanings but because I’m never sure where to put
the hyphens.

Sometimes the writer of a grammar makes a decision that goes against the
idea of morpheme-by-morpheme breakdowns. Valentine 2001 comments ex-
specifically on this. A typical example from Valentine is shown below.

Zhashkoonyan gye zhaangweshwan wnisaawaan daawewaad.
‘They kill muskrats and mink and sell them.’ (AM15.7)
Zhashkoonyan na 3obv ‘muskrat(s)’; gye av ‘and’; zhaangweshwan
na 3obv ‘mink’; wnisaawaan vta ind 3pProx>>3obv ‘ANpl kill Anobv’
daawewaad vaito conj 3pProx ‘(CONJ) ANpl sell (Y).’

Valentine makes the following introductory remarks:

Each example sentence is introduced with a specific reference number, and
below the sentence, there appears a free English translation. At the end of
the free translation, there is usually a reference code, here (AM15.7) provid-
ing the source of the example. Below the free translation is a box containing
a word-by-word analysis of each word in bold face, followed by an italicized
annotation of its grammatical properties, followed by a word-level gloss.…
Overall, the glosses introduce many useful innovations in the characterization
of Algonquian meanings. …

Linguistic researchers may be disappointed to see that morpheme-level
segmentations of examples are rarely provided. At a conference held in Thun-
der Bay, Ontario, in 1996, a steering committee of Nishnaabemwin speakers
explicitly requested that such details not be included, as it was felt that they
interfered with the flow of the presentation, and contributed to what is some-
times called the “intellectual mining” of aboriginal languages and cultures.
(pages xxxii–xxxiii)

Even more detail is sometimes needed in a grammar. The Cambridge Univer-
sity Press guidelines include the following advice. “It may be necessary to pro-
vide background that will enable the reader to contextualize the example. … It
can also assist in understanding a grammatical point if the context in which a
sentence was produced is described.” In the Slave grammar, I included discussion in the text to help clarify the difference in meaning between two common complementizers, talking about the kinds of questions that one might ask in order to elicit a response with a particular complementizer.

4.2.7 Summary
Grammars can vary in many ways, and I have discussed a number of these ways in this section. The author of a grammar has many questions to think about as s/he begins the process and as s/he works through the process of writing the grammar. Most important probably are the goals and the audience, but a host of issues demand attention of the grammar writer as s/he sets out on the process of writing a grammar and as the work continues.

5. Some example grammars
I have so far talked about “good”, “grammar”, and “typology,” focusing on what I have called the “essence” of a good grammar beyond its content, and ways in which grammars can vary. I am sure there are many more ways in which a good grammar can be put together, and I have not offered a typology in any real sense, but rather given a sense of variation. In the last part of this article, I look briefly at three works with different goals. The first is not a full grammar, but a sketch of Chipewyan by Fang-Kuei Li. The second is the Slave grammar. The third is a recent grammar by Rand Valentine, on Nishnaabemwin, an Algonquian language.

“Chipewyan” by Fang-Kuei Li is a sketch of Chipewyan, an Athapaskan language, published in 1946. It appears in a book of sketches of several Native languages of North America. Li states that the sketch is based on fieldwork done in the summer of 1928 in Fort Chipewyan, Alberta, Canada; Li had already worked with other Athapaskan languages. The article is twenty-five pages long. The discussion of phonology includes the consonant system (inventory, phonetic description, distribution in terms of syllables and morphological positions), the vowel system (discussion of the phonemicization and variation), tones, syllables, various morphophonemic alternations (e.g., voiced and voiceless fricative, simplification of double consonants, lenition processes, assimilation, nasalization), morphology (word classes, noun, possessive prefixes, possessed forms, vocative suffix, postpositions and their objects, postpositional suffixes, verbs including discussion of the semantics of verb stems, verb stem
variation for aspect and the form and function of the verb prefixes; verb suffixes, independent particles, and word order (probably half a page!).

Even more than fifty years later, Li’s sketch is the first thing that I recommend to someone who asks me for an introduction to an Athapaskan language. What makes it so valuable? It is a lucid, precise, and detailed description of the phonology and morphology of the language. While there is a sense in which it is not complete, it opens the door to every topic in the phonology and morphology of these languages that has been recognized as important over the years. Each time I return to the sketch, I find something there that I had not realized was present, so it has continued to be a rich resource for me over the years. I find it accessible, although it is not wordy, given it length. Examples are copious and clearly illustrate the point that is being made, terminology is easy to understand. I have hoped to write something like this that would retain the essence of what Li did, while adding more syntax and representing a somewhat more current perspective on the languages after the passage of fifty years. Other than adding syntax, it is difficult to go beyond Li’s work.

The Slave grammar represents a much deeper view of an Athapaskan language. This was a multi-year project, covering several dialects of Slave as spoken in the Northwest Territories, Canada. The grammar was designed to be a reference grammar with as in-depth a description as possible. I began doing fieldwork in 1973; the majority of the field work for this book was done by 1980, although I continued to add to the grammar until shortly before it was published, in 1989. It is thus the product of many years of fieldwork, analysis, and writing. When I began work on the grammar, and at various stages along the way, I spent considerable amounts of time in the library reading grammars. I took as my model a grammar of English by Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik 1974. This grammar was far beyond anything that I would ever be able to produce for Slave, but its depth and comprehensiveness made it stand out to me as something that I could emulate.

The Slave grammar is organized into five major sections, introduction (overview of language, typological characteristics), the sound system (overview, consonants, vowels, development, tone, major phonological rules, constraints (morpheme, surface, syllable)), categories, model (the lexicon), syntax (word order, pronouns, coreference, conjunction, comparison, negation, commands and hortatives, tense/aspect/mode, yes/no questions, alternative questions, direct questions, indirect questions, mode, yes/no questions, alternative questions, direct questions, indirect questions, right extraposition, topicalization, complements, complementizers, direct and indirect discourse, relative clauses), and texts, followed by references and an index. I also included a detailed, section-by-section table of contents. This multi-dialectal grammar probably has
more depth and breadth of material available than for any other Athapaskan language as yet, although I suspect (and hope) that the grammars being written today will go far beyond it, partly because it has served as a model to some of those working today on grammars. I tried to achieve both breadth and depth in the grammar. Coverage was important to me, as was accessibility. In terms of coverage, over my years of using this grammar, I have found that much is there. Yet there are areas in which I really would like to know far more than is in the grammar. This is especially true of syntax and semantics, but is also so to some degree true of morphology. I single out these areas because these are the areas in which linguistic theory has probably evolved the most in the past thirty years, and there are many questions that I have now that I do not think I could possibly have thought of when I was doing the fieldwork. Some of this information is available in material that I have, but much requires additional fieldwork. In terms of accessibility, I tried to use several different ways to make the grammar user-friendly (detailed table of contents, index, cross-referencing), and I tried to design it so that chapters could be read relatively independently of other chapters. The Slave grammar is the product of many years of intensive work, and yet it remains only the barest beginnings of achieving an understanding of the Slave language.

The final grammar that I want to discuss is Valentine's grammar of Nishnaabemwin. This reference grammar has two major goals. First, Valentine designed it to be a reference grammar of the language. Second, Valentine's audience explicitly includes speakers of the language as well as linguists, and he deliberately incorporated into the book material that would belong in a textbook called something like “The structure of Nishnaabemwin.” As Valentine says, “This grammar is designed to be useful to a variety of readers, including researchers, Nishnaabemwin teachers, and any diligent student of the language” (xxxi). Further, “One reviewer pointed out that this grammar is actually a compound work, consisting of an introduction to linguistics as well as a grammar. This I have done, again, to accommodate my intended primary audience, those interested in teaching the language, who typically lack extensive linguistic training” (xxxxiii). Valentine is certainly not the first to follow this path, but he is, I believe, particularly successfully in how he does it.

Valentine covers a range of topics in the grammar. The introduction is followed by sections on phonology and orthography, parts of speech, noun inflection, verb inflection, derivation, nominals and pronominals, verbs and their semantic roles, being and becoming, location and manner, time and circumstance, quantity and degree, and syntax and communicative function. In addition, there is a glossary, references, and an index. No texts are included,
although the copious examples are drawn largely from texts. Note that many
Nishnaabemwin texts are available already, making the need to include them
in a grammar somewhat less than with languages where there is little or no-
ing available.

Because Valentine's goals are different, I would like to end this section with
a detailed quote from his grammar on stress and syncope (51–52). This quote
shows clearly how Valentine tries to weave together a description of a complex
pattern in Nishnaabemwin, stress and syncope, with instruction about the ba-
sic building blocks of a stress system.

Many Algonquian languages share similar rules of stress patterning. The stress
patterns that are presented in this section show similarities with those found
in Delaware, Potawatomi, and Menominee, all sister languages of Nishnaa-
bemwin.

We have already seen that the consonants and vowels of words are orga-
nized into syllables. Syllables are also organized into larger groupings called
metrical feet. By “metrical” I mean having to do with rhythm patterns of
pronunciation. In Nishnaabemwin a metrical foot is a grouping of two syl-
lables together, in which the first syllable of the foot is weaker, and the second
syllable is stronger. This pattern can be represented as follows:

\[
\text{Foot} \quad \begin{array}{c}
\text{Syllable} \\
\text{weaker}
\end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c}
\text{Syllable} \\
\text{stronger}
\end{array}
\]

The system here is quite simple: a standard foot consists of two syllables, the
first of which is the weaker member and the second the stronger. To see how
this system works, we will use a few words as they are pronounced in Minne-
sota Ojibwe, closely related to Nishnaabemwin, and show how the stress rules
relate the pronunciations of Nishnaabemwin and Ojibwe. Consider the word
\textit{gidagoshin}, meaning “you arrive” in Minnesota Ojibwe. If we organize the syl-
lables of this word in patterns of feet with weak and strong components, we
arrive at the following specification:

\[
\text{F} \quad \text{F} \\
\text{W} \quad \text{S} \quad \text{W} \quad \text{S}
\]

\text{g i d a g o s h i n}

This word consists of four syllables organized into two metrical feet. When we
compare this Minnesota Ojibwe word to its Nishnaabemwin counterpart, we
make an interesting discovery. The Nishnaabemwin pronunciation (and spell-
ing) is often *dagshin*, which lacks some of the vowels of the Minnesota Ojibwe. If we examine the two pronunciations, we find that the missing vowels in Nishnaabemwin are exactly those which happen to fall in weak metrical positions.

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
\text{F} & \text{F} \\
\text{W} & \text{S} & \text{W} & \text{S} \\
\text{Niashaabemwin:} & g & d & a & g & sh & i & n \\
\text{Minnesota Ojibwe:} & g & i & d & a & g & o & sh & i & n
\end{array}
\]

So the Nishnaabemwin word is actually identical to the Minnesota Ojibwe, the only difference between the two words being that in Nishnaabemwin metrically weak vowels are de-emphasized to the point of deletion, while in Minnesota Ojibwe they are not.

Of course, there are consequences of putting into one book material that most often is divided between an introductory linguistics textbook and a grammar. The biggest consequence perhaps is length. The Nishnaabemwin grammar is very long. What I found in using this reference grammar is that, at least from the perspective of a linguist, the introductory linguistic material did not detract from the book in any way whatsoever. It is integrated in such a way that it serves to add to the quality of the book. Whether the book succeeds for its intended audience, the speakers of the language, is a question that I am unable to answer.

6. **Summary**

Writing a reference grammar of a language is a monumental task, one that usually becomes larger and larger as time goes on, as it is a task for which there is no logical endpoint. Further, there is no cookbook for how to write a grammar. The essentials are that it provide good coverage of the structures of a language in a way that is true to the language and accessible to the user. A good grammar depends on the strengths that the author brings to it — to provide an interesting and well-grounded analysis, to use her/his knowledge of language and linguistics to the fullest, to write in an interesting way, to be true to the language. The best of grammars have the characteristics that we expect in any good piece of work. It is a humbling experience to write a grammar; and writing a grammar is a task that is in many ways never really done even though an author puts closure to it. I personally found it to be the hardest task, but at the same time the most rewarding task, of my career. Grammar writing is not for everyone, but for those who thrive on it, it is an experience not to be missed.
References


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