Grammar Sketch Outlines

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Introduction

A grammar sketch differs in many ways form a complete grammar, not only in the obvious dimension of size (a grammar sketch is obviously shorter than a complete grammar, 20-50 pages as opposed to 200+ pages). The target audience of a grammar sketch (or complete grammar) needs to be considered just as carefully as the target audience of a dictionary, and for the same reasons: the amount, and type, of information that is included is dependant on the people who are intended to read it. The shorter a document, the more specialised the audience is, since it necessarily covers less ground, and so has less random appeal to a wide audience. Typically (and most usefully) a grammar sketch is used to

demonstrate (basic) proficiency in a language; this does not entail total understand, but good all-round competence

illustrate the most salient points of the grammar of the language. This is subjective, but useful. It is perfectly acceptable in a sketch to point out that there are details that you do not fully understand, because a third important use of a grammar sketch is to

act as a springboard for others who might wish to work in the same area, and who are seeking information on which to base their decision. There might be other people interested in a particular aspect of grammar, or in more long-term work, who need to know if the language profile is one that they are comfortable with. They might be interested in that particular language, or in one that is (closely) related to it, and so perhaps structurally similar to it.

For all these reasons the grammar sketch should cover a lot of ground, but only go into great depth on the points that have proven difficult, unusual, or particularly (theoretically) interesting. Any basic requirements for language ability should be covered, unless they are totally unproblematic. Since a grammar sketch is short, it forces clear writing and clarity; for this reason a lot of the sketch should be concerned with defining concepts as they are relevant to the particular language.

Read this in conjunction with a linguistics manual or dictionary, which provides more detailed coverage on many topics, and useful definitions of much terminology. Particularly recommended: Tom Payne's book.

Guideline for Grammar Sketches (aimed at Irian Jaya)

1. INTRODUCTION

This should cover the non-linguistic information: who speaks the language, where it is spoken, what other names are in use, the "health" of the language, any (short) dialectal information that is easily available, aspects of bilingualism, and any other interesting points that strike you.

2. PHONOLOGY SKETCH

If you have already written a phonology paper, this requires little attention, and simply listing the phonemes, mentioning any unusual restrictions on co-occurrence (like the lack of initial ŋ in English), and any unusual allophones. Any unusual or non-intuitive orthographic decisions need to be explained here.

1 1/2 or 2 1/2. Grammar summary

Either just before, or just after, the phonology section you should include a brief summary of the grammar; this should cover the salient typological aspects of the language, and be the sort of information that you find in the first chapter or two of a teach-yourself [language] book: word order, case marking or verbal agreement, serial verb, obligatory objects, what the complex parts of the grammar are. In addition to mentioning these things (briefly!), you should also refer to upcoming sections in the grammar sketch in which you discuss these points in more detail. Here you should also mention the definition of any terminology you make use of, and justify terms such as core, oblique, etc. This is to make sure that your presentation is clear to people who are not familiar with aspects of the language, and who cannot access any further information.

3. CLAUSE TYPES

Identify and describe the basic clause types of the language:

verbless clauses	equative clauses (*saya guru*)
	prepositional clauses (*saya ke sana*, *ini untuk tuan*)
verbal clauses	intransitive, only one argument (*kau pu anak ada tidor*)
	intransitive, obligatory oblique argument (*kita tinggal di sini*)
	transitive, two arguments (*kitong cari babi*)
	ditransitive, or extended transitive (*de kasi kasbi sama de pu ipar*)

Other aspects of non-obligatory clause structure: where do optional obliques, such as setting phrases (in the garden) occur, or time expressions, or instruments; if there is variation in any of these categories, mention that here (in word order, case marking, verbal agreement, etc.)

This section entails that you've already made great progress on section 6, but is more suited to the beginning of the written version of the grammar sketch.

4. PRAGMATIC VARIATION

In addition to 'random' variation in the clause, describe what differences appear with pragmatically important information (like contrastive focus positions, question words, topics; all typically at the beginning on a sentence).

5. SYNTACTIC ~ PRAGMATIC VARIATION

This is variation in the clause structure associated with pragmatic changes in the discourse; unlike the material in 4, this is morphosyntactically marked. This category includes things like passives (I saw him, vs. He was seen by me; this signals a change in the relative prominence of the two arguments), antipassive or other voice systems with different alignments (not typically found in Papuan languages), and also applicatives (morphology that adds a new object), noun incorporation (into the verb) (typically found when the action is habitual), and any morphological focus markers you might find.

6. WORD CLASSES.

Harder than you might think; in addition to semantic types (property words, action words, etc.) we need morphosyntactic criteria that identify why they form word classes in this particular language. You need to examine semantic type (objects, properties, actions, manners), discourse function (referential, modifying, predicating), and morphological markedness (how much and what morphology appears). Typical categories are noun, verb, adjective, adverb, pronoun, demonstrative, numerals, adposition.

7. NOUN PHRASES

Do you have a noun phrase, a contiguous string of words that all refer to the same argument, or can elements referring to the same being occur in different parts of the sentence. Describe the position(s), and morphology, for different types of modifiers: (the categories defined in 6.). Pay attention to relativisation; which arguments can relativise (typically, S > A > O > obliques).

8. POSSESSION

Are there different ways of marking possession, and if so do they indicate different semantic relationships (present vs. future possession, for instance, or permanent vs. temporary), or do they depend on the type of object that is possessed (typically, body parts > kin terms > (other items like name, house, some tools) > animates possessums (dogs, pigs) > inanimate items). The choice here is often very revealing about the world view of the people. Describe position and morphology for possessive constructions.

8 1/2 Noun Classes

In sections 7 and 8 you should note any noun class, gender, or classification that goes on in the language; how many there are, where they appear, how they are marked, if there are semantic associations with the different classes.

9. VERBS

Note agreement patters (subject, object, second object), any tense/aspect/mood marking, ways to increase the number of arguments (causatives, applicatives, adjective (verb derivations, transitive (intransitive, etc.). How are these things marked, how do they change the clause structure?

9 1/2. Both nouns and verbs

If you have any sort of inflectional categories for either of these, or for anything else: include a full paradigm or two, to show the sort of variation that you're dealing with. This makes things much more valuable, some raw data, complete.

10. SENTENCE TYPE

How do you mark negation, how to ask questions, or give commands. Note that the morphosyntactic category of a clause is often different to the function that it serves (such as interrogative clauses being used to perform commands in English "Aren't you cold?", an interrogative construction, often means 'Close the window!', a command). This is important for observations on socio-cultural interaction.

11. COMPLEX SENTENCES

These involve subordination. You might want to discuss relative clauses in more detail here, or in section 7; in either case, make sure you refer from one to the other, so people can find it easily. Other types of subordinate clauses to mention are

Setting	When X, Y
	Before X, Y
After X, Y	
Conjoining	X and Y
	X and.then Y
	Because of X, Y
	X in order to Y
	Even.though X, Y
Switch reference	(either verbal or through other means)
Complements	I want, hope, think, believe (that) she has eaten;
	I told, persuaded, asked, made her eat

Many languages have no overt means of encoding these concepts; often these are the first things borrowed from another language that does have them, when they come into contact. Other languages (especially verb-final ones) have explicit verbal morphology to signal these relations, and do not use separate words at all.

12. STILL HERE?

This is getting to be a long grammar sketch! But no matter, it's all interesting, and this sort of material makes the sketch much more readily publishable; be aware, though, that it is technically beyond the minimal requirements for an overview. This is where to mention how to mark reflexive events, reciprocals, comparative constructions (or alternatives to them), adjectives with comparison (the pot which is as big as this one / bigger than this one), and other complex materials, such as negation or questioning in complex sentences (I think she's gone, going to I don't think she's gone vs. I think she's not gone, for example)

13. DISCOURSE

A complex topic, and this should really be only a taste of what there is. mention topic chains (if there is a preferred structure, or any morphosyntactic marking), anaphora and ellipsis (as in 'I went home and __ ate dinner', eliding the second 'I'), pivots and their role in discourse, the use of T/A/M to advance a story line or introduce material, and any unusual characteristics of narrative or conversational structure.

14. WORDLIST

Especially if the language has not been (well) described before (likely to be the case), include at least a basic wordlist, perhaps more (depending on the length of the sketch). This is most usefully arranged by semantic classes (as on a survey wordlist; body parts, kin terms, pronouns, animals, natural world, etc.). If you include a more extensive list, you might want to arrange it alphabetically; this is then the nucleus of a future dictionary.

You might choose to annotate the list with any extra information you have, about it being borrowed, or being cognate with a form in another language; this is then the nucleus of a future

work on the historical relations of the language, and much appreciated by anyone thinking of pursuing work in the area, even if speculative.

15. TEXT(S)

Not much; either on medium length text, or two shorter ones. This should be arranged in three-line glosses (as is all material in the sketch): vernacular, morphemes, and free translation. In addition, it might be useful to include annotations on any points of interest that are illustrated in the text, to do with unusual constructions, or issues you've raised earlier in the grammar sketch. Importantly, also point out anything that you don't yet understand

16. REFERENCES

Include any materials on the language you're describing, either published or (if accessible to others) unpublished; do not list endless manuscripts that you've written (or intend to write) if they aren't freely available somewhere (it makes it look like you're inflating your own importance). Do also list any works on neighbouring or related languages that were helpful, and any non-introductory works that have been useful (don't list introductory books or textbooks unless you explicitly refer to some section, as it makes your linguistic knowledge appear limited).

Other?

It's a nice idea to acknowledge anyone (at all) who helped you, as it cannot detract from the work, and shows your ability to get on with other people; a big enough contribution deserves co-authorship. If in doubt, be generous. You should mention your principal informants and their contributions, and (if appropriate) any institutions that you worked with, under, or visited while writing up the sketch.