

How are grammars made? An autoethnography on the birth of *A Grammar of Eastern Geshiza* and the importance of cultural anchoring in grammar writing

Sami Honkasalo
University of Helsinki

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This talk explores the birth process of Honkasalo's (2019) *A Grammar of Eastern Geshiza*. In this sense, it is an autoethnography and case study of grammar writing. By reflecting on the author's work against the constantly changing landscape of descriptive linguistics and the production of descriptive grammars, the talk aims to not only to identify some key issues, but also to provide a suggestion to the field with the proposed notion of 'cultural anchoring'.

The talk focuses primarily on three aspects in the birth process of the grammar of Eastern Geshiza. First, it lays the foundations by covering the noteworthy characteristics of Geshiza as a language of the Sino-Tibetan (Trans-Himalayan) family. Second, it highlights grammar writing as a metamorphosis where the final product emerges as a negotiation between ideals and practical constraints in a heuristic process. While the literature on linguistic fieldwork has expanded in recent years with several textbook-like monographs (see e.g., Bowerman 2015 and Meakins et al. 2018 for two relatively recent publications), writing descriptive grammars and conducting fieldwork for this purpose are still frequently discussed in a teleological fashion with a retrospective viewpoint. While some change can be perceived, the talk argues that greater transparency regarding the heuristic birth process of descriptive grammars is needed. In short, reflecting on the subjective birth process does not diminish the scientific value of a grammar.

Finally, the talk introduces the concept of 'cultural anchoring' and discusses its broader relevance to grammar writing. 'Cultural anchoring' (or the lack thereof) has been discussed in earlier literature. Most grammars, however, tend to provide only brief introductory remarks on the extra-linguistic contexts of their target languages. Inspired by Prins's (2016) notion of 'web of relations', namely the network of connections a language holds with the non-linguistic realities such as culture, geography, and categorization of the world, the talk proposes that descriptive grammars should be anchored more deeply into such various extra-linguistic contexts, rather than treating language simply a system to be described in isolation. Not only is linguistic endangerment often tied to cultural endangerment, but we also cannot be fully certain how our grammatical descriptions will be used in the distant future, calling attention to the need for a broader approach to description. In conclusion, while descriptive grammars are a well-established genre, they are also flexible and evolving. Consequently, grammar writers must strive to ensure that their descriptions meet the needs of future users.

References

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