

GENESUTRA ~ FOREWORD



Genesutra stands for 'Generalizing Sutra.' It is a digest of the Introduction to Linguistics course that I have taught at the University of Papua New Guinea since 2007. 'Brevity is the soul of wit'; hence, my choice of the *sutra*¹ form.

Through the wide-angle lens of dialectics, Genesutra captures Language *alive* with Generalization. It is Generalization (the '*Rational Mechanism* of Language') that helps us understand the superficial complexities of syntax; the lens of dialectics x-rays linguistic structures, revealing universal principles of human understanding at the core of their diversity.

Up until 2007, the **Introduction to Linguistics** course taught at the University of Papua New Guinea was shaped by the influence of prominent descriptive and historical linguists, John Lynch and Terry Crowley who taught at this university in the 1980s.

Descriptive linguistics focuses on spoken language. American anthropologists and linguists (Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, Morris Swadesh, etc.) developed descriptive methodology and techniques to record and analyze unwritten Native American languages in the early 1900s. *Phonemic, morphological, and syntactic* analysis enables descriptive linguists to describe the grammars of languages never before written down or analyzed. World-renowned descriptive linguists have flocked to Papua New Guinea, working in the field and in Summer Institute of Linguistics²(SIL) on the hundreds of diverse languages, many of which are on the endangered list.

In line with these concerns, the Introduction to Linguistics course at UPNG was primarily designed to train descriptive linguists, equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to study and record the endangered languages of PNG.

¹ **Sūtra** (Sanskrit) literally means a *thread* that holds things together; metaphorically, it refers to an aphorism/collection of aphorisms. It is derived from the verbal root *siv-*, meaning to sew (these words, including Latin *suere* and English *to sew*, all ultimately deriving from PIE **siH-/syuH-* 'to sew'), as does the medical term "suture" <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/S%C5%ABtra>

² **SIL in PNG** is a branch of SIL International, a volunteer nonprofit organization that has worked in PNG since 1956. In cooperation with the PNG Department of Education since 1956, research has been carried out in more than **389** languages, and at the present time about 316 SIL members are actively working on projects in **190** different languages (Retrieved 29/04/2011 from <http://www.sil.org/pacific/png/>).

Unfortunately, descriptive linguistics, concerned mainly with the *physical* forms of Language, is a highly specialized area of research and has therefore had limited appeal as a career choice amongst UPNG students.

Other specialised areas of linguistic research, such as Historical & Comparative Linguistics, which analyse language change; Generative Grammar, which explores the relationship between linguistic forms and meaning; Conceptual Semantics, which has attempted to grasp the nature of linguistic meaning; Cognitive Grammar, which tries to establish a correlation between grammar and general cognition, etc., have all accumulated a lot of knowledge about Language in their respective areas of interest.

None of these approaches, however, addresses the complex, multifaceted, interwoven nature of Language as one organic whole; so the *energy* of Language has eluded linguistic analysis so far. Genesutra attempts to ‘connect the dots,’ to reveal the living image emerging from the synthesis of diverse details that Descriptive Linguistics, Philosophy, Psychology, Anthropology, Cognitive Science and Sociology have accumulated. The mosaics below may help illustrate my point:



www.firelily.com/nirvana/image/mosaic.lily.jpg



www.filmandmusicfashion.com/wizardimages/art_mosaic_frog.jpg

Just like mosaics connect coloured tiles into meaningful patterns, dialectical linguistics captures a ‘live’ image of Language through the synthesis of all that we have glimpsed of it through the narrow windows of specialised analyses. I believe that all people, *including* those who may choose to pursue professional careers in descriptive linguistics, will benefit greatly from this breathtaking view. Why? Because they will see Language as it really is – they will get an idea of how it lives through use in society, shaping our minds, even as our minds shape our language (and our ‘realities’).

Olga Temple
May 4, 2011
Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea