WHY STUDY NEW GUINEA LANGUAGES?

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When I first posed myself the question that forms the title of this paper, I had thought that it might be possible to give a simple answer - or, at least, a series of simple answers. But when I came to write this paper I discovered that there were a large number of factors that had to be taken into account. There is, for example, the fact that the question posed is part of a much wider question: why study linguistics at all? What does it mean to be a linguist? This wider question cannot be considered in detail here, except insofar as some of the answers are also relevant to the study of languages of New Guinea. It has however been discussed at length by Householder (1968), and some of the points he has made are relevant to our topic. For instance, one can always give a personal answer: I study New Guinea languages - or linguistics - because I enjoy it, because it offers a challenge similar to that of doing crossword puzzles, because I want a university appointment teaching linguistics, and so on. These answers would apply to any discipline, and not specifically to linguistics.

An examination of the prefaces of more than a score of publications on the languages of New Guinea shows that none of the authors were concerned about the problem of why they were writing their articles. The study of linguistics in general, and of New Guinea linguistics in particular, is assumed to be a perfectly natural endeavour which needs no external justification. This is what we may call the 'academic' approach, and I suppose that most of my readers would regard this as valuable. If, as Householder says, 'the study of linguistics increases our knowledge and understanding of the universe', then perhaps we should be satisfied with that. The study of New Guinea languages increased our knowledge of linguistics, linguistics increases our knowledge of the universe, and everyone will agree that an increased knowledge of the universe is a Good Thing.

There is still something a little disturbing about this, however. Collecting matchboxes or playing chess also increase our knowledge of the universe, and perhaps the study of linguistics should be classed with the study of trivia; but I hope not. A strong case can probably be made for studying anything so basic to man as a cultural animal, or for studying anything to do with communication in a world which, messagewise, is becoming increasingly complex.

But how strong is the case that the study of the languages of New Guinea

can contribute to the whole discipline of linguistics?   I ask this because there is in America a growing school of thought that we are near to understanding the fundamental framework of language, near to the possibility of making a complete list of language universals, near to writing 'universal' grammars, near to the formalisation and description of the language-learning process.   On this basis the multiplication of further specific language descriptions becomes otoise, since the same structures are repeated over and over again.   In other words, the Linnaean stage of classification has passed in linguistics, and we should all be engaged in studying the theory only.

Those of us who have had experience of the languages of New Guinea would deny the view that they have nothing new to contribute in the way of new structures, even if we might accept the rest of the proposition – which is itself very debatable.   The detailed analysis of New Guinea languages is still in its infancy, and there is always the possibility of finding a language with totally unexpected characteristics.   Even what is known of languages of this area is rarely taken into account by some overseas theoreticians;   New Guinea languages may negate some of the claimed linguistic universals, for example.   The tonal characteristics of New Guinea Highlands languages are probably unique;   certainly they do not closely resemble the types of tone systems found in the world's other major tone areas.   Fortunately for those of us whose interests lie in the direction of description and analysis, there is still a great deal of spadework to be done.

I have dwelt thus long on the academic side of the study of New Guinea languages, not to minimise the importance of the practical side of such study, but to put it in proper perspective.   For it is a true, if disheartening, observation that, of the approximately 700 distinct languages estimated to exist in the New Guinea area (including West Irian), only a handful will ever have any greater currency than they have now.   That is, they will continue to be spoken by groups of native speakers ranging from about a hundred or less to about a hundred thousand;   and, with the spread of education and communications, the smaller languages will lose ground, and eventually die out.   Perhaps fewer than a dozen indigenous languages of New Guinea will ever be learnt by any outsiders other than missionaries and professional linguists.

The professional linguists have been considered above;   let us look at the missionary.   The missionary who wishes to use the native language simply for communicating his spoken message to the people probably comes only partially into the discussion of the practical applications of New Guinea language study;   but the work of the bible translator is

another matter.   It is perhaps a personal issue whether the translation of the bible into every native language is in itself of practical value (some would call it quixotically idealistic); but there is one practical consequence of all this bible translation and that is the question of literacy.   Few of the indigenous languages of New Guinea will ever have anything translated into them, or written in them, other than the bible and a few first reading primers, for few linguists are as dedicated as the members of the bible societies and the Summer Institute of Linguistics; but this is sufficient for training in literacy.   It is well-known, to readers of this journal at least, that peoples first made literate in their own tongue have less difficulty in attaining literacy in a second language than those who are confronted simultaneously with the problems of learning another language and of learning to read.

Closely connected with problems of literacy is the question of teaching indigenous people of New Guinea a European language - principally English.   A knowledge of indigenous language structures, on all levels - phonological, grammatical, semantic - can be of great assistance to the English teacher in pinpointing the problem areas of his pupils, and in dealing with such problems.

Another aspect of New Guinea language studies that needs to be taken into account is that of diachronic studies.   I am not sure whether the use of linguistic data for determining facts about the history and prehistory of Papua-New Guinea counts as an academic or as a practical aim - it depends, I suppose, on one's views about the practicality, or otherwise, of the study of history - but, whatever the case, the large groupings of New Guinea languages, and the study of loanwords, can tell us a lot about population movements in pre-European days.

Another consideration that emerges from the determination of large linguistic groupings in Papua-New Guinea is the possibility of developing political groupings based on the linguistic groupings.   I myself do not feel that there is a strong probability of this, as economic and geographic factors are likely to be far more important in forming political bonds than linguistic groupings; nevertheless, one must reckon with the possibility.   People who speak related languages usually share a common origin and may cultural similarities, and may wish to retain and strengthen these ties.   As an illustration of this, a situation I encountered in the West Sepik district is relevant.   There, in an area of a large number of languages, administrative officers observed to me that certain villages were co-operative with administration, were willing to plant cocoa and coffee, and were keen on forming co-operatives, while the inhabitants of other villages were surly, strongly influenced by sorcery, uninterested in agriculture and political unity.   Upon investigation, I found that the boundary of the two

groups corresponded neatly with the isogloss drawn between two linguistic phyla. The differences were, of course, not linguistic, but cultural, probably very old cultural traits preserved by members of two distinct populations; but this story does exemplify one practical consequence of linguistic groupings.

Part of the reason for taking so much time to deal with as many aspects as possible of New Guinea language study, is that these considerations must be taken into account when writing linguistic descriptions. I speak here only of grammars, but the same kind of observations apply to all types of linguistic descriptions.

There are four types of grammatical models that have been and are currently being used for the writing-up of New Guinea languages. Without going into technical detail, we may call these models:

1) Latin-based
2) simple tagmemic
3) advanced tagmemic
4) transformational

By 'Latin-based' I mean to imply any type of grammatical description which introduces categories and concepts from any language other than that being described; the usual extraneous language is Latin, but it may be German or English. The alien categories are often those of case, or additional parts of speech (such as adverbs), or are implied in constructions wrongly-described, such as referring to the clause-linking markers in some languages as 'conditional' markers.

By 'simple tagmemic' I mean the type of framework used by many linguists - principally, however, those of the Summer Institute of Linguistics - up to about 1960; 'advanced tagmemic' takes in the developments in tagmemic theory since that time, and makes for quite a different style of grammar. 'Transformational' grammars need no explanation; in this category are included all types of generative grammars subsequent to Chomsky's Syntactic Structures (1957).

The last three types of grammar are professional, in the sense that they are written only by trained linguists. Latin-based grammars are semi-professional. New Guinea linguistics has largely been spared the amateur grammar, perhaps because of the lack of popular appeal of the languages of the area.

Pedagogical grammars are in a different category; they may follow any of the models outlined for descriptive grammars, or they may be rewrites of these in simpler for-

mat.   Pedagogical grammars are included in my remarks below on the writing of grammars for various publics.

In this inventory of basic grammar models, the progression is from less to greater levels of descriptive adequacy.   Unfortunately there is also a progression – though some may deny this – from greater to less readability.   This is where the linguist must choose his audience.   If he is writing grammars of New Guinea languages solely or mainly to test or develop new theories of grammar, or to see what effect the introducing of new structures has on well-established models, then he is free to choose the theoretical framework he feels happiest with, and to be as technical as he likes.   But if he is writing for other linguists who merely want to gain a quick insight into how a language of New Guinea works, then he can omit many of the transformational rules or tagmemic formulas, and substitute, for example, paradigms, and examples.   Latin-based grammars at least had the virtue of presenting a language, instead of a string of formulae and rules.   In writing for the non-linguist, the presence of paradigms and examples is even more important; one well-set out paradigm may save pages of complex morphological and morphophonemic rules.

Another type of audience is relevant here.   It will not be long before the indigenous people of Papua and New Guinea will be reading the grammars the linguists have written of their languages, and commenting on their adequacy and readability.   In this native-speaker audience we have a group of people who are likely to be even less tolerant of difficult grammars than European readers; we have an obligation to bear them in mind, and not exclude them by writing only 'linguists'' grammars.

What I am really asking for here is that the level of descriptive adequacy be matched to the purpose of the grammar, and that a lower – and more readable – level be adopted if this will suffice.   There are some indications, for instance, that transformational analysis – quite apart from the question of the lack of discovery procedures associated with it – is too powerful a tool for many linguistic descriptions, like using a steamhammer to break open a coconut.   If the linguist in is the position of not knowing all the permitted structures of the language – and that, I think, applies to all Europeans working on New Guinea lan-guages – there is no point in formulating rules that will generate them.   It may even turn out to be the case that adequate generative grammars can only be written by native speakers of the language.

What I have said so far applies to the study of New Guinea's lingue franche, Pidgin and Police Motu, as well as to the study of the regional languages.   Here there is a

need for grammars, dictionaries, and reading material, for a wide range of readers; and here the linguists can be of real assistance. If Pidgin is ever to become the official medium for internal communication within Papua-New Guinea, as I for one feel it must, then there is a further role for the linguist: that of language engineering. Some type of control is needed to supervise the growth of a new national language, as Pidgin may well turn out to be, to regulate the influx of foreign vocabulary, to create new expressions for introduced concepts, to enlarge the syntactic patterns. In the past, the 'descriptive' revolution among linguists has led to a hostile attitude toward 'prescriptive' linguistics, but I think that that day is past. We now know a lot more about what we can do and what we cannot do, and, in the case of Pidgin, I think we should be doing it. There is plenty of precedent for setting up committees to develop the languages of emergent nations in Africa and Asia, and the same kind of thing could be done in Papua-New Guinea, drawing on the experience of other nations. But that is perhaps another issue.

Here the case for the work of the linguist in New Guinea must rest. The judgment of readers on the value of his work will depend on their own interests and predispositions, but I venture to hope it will not be entirely negative.

References:

Chomsky, N.:   Syntactic Structures   (The Hague, 1957)
Householder, F.:   'The Ultimate Goals', Language Sciences 1.7-11, 1968.