Documenting Language Structures for Language Writers

Tim Stirtz, SIL International

Linguistic publications are often inaccessible to language users. The data is normally written in IPA and structures are explained in a way that catches the interests of outsiders and academics, rather than in a way useful to those who write the language.

In languages with extensive morphophonology, writers not only need to understand the meaning and use of morphemes, but also the sound changes at morpheme boundaries, and especially how to write them in each environment. Academic publications typically include illustrative examples of morphemes used in a few contexts. However, in addition, writers need to see tables where all possible sound changes are represented in the orthography for each morpheme. Although they often hear the sound changes, it is a much greater challenge to consistently represent the changes in writing without such documentation.

In other languages, writers may face the challenge of where to divide words, especially if some bound morphemes are also used alone as words. Academic publications typically represent morphemes as either bound or free in the data examples, and rarely explain the reasons for the choice. When a morpheme can be either, the two encodings are often presented in different sections. However, writers need to see the choice for such morphemes contrasted in one place with all possible structures that accompany it when it is bound and when it is free. Although they speak the language fluently, it can be a great challenge to consistently write word-breaks without such documentation.

This presentation gives best practices for constructing grammar books for writers of indigenous languages. It draws from the author's experience of producing 10 books, each with a different language team after collecting data in participatory workshops where teams chose their own writing rules informed by language structures. Each book lists the writing rules, referencing the sections where each is illustrated by tables and other data in the orthography. The structures are presented with simple explanation, each section incrementally builds on the knowledge learned in previous sections, and all terminology is initially defined as well as listed in a glossary with data examples. In addition, each section has an exercise where the learner can practice identifying a particular morpheme in sentences taken from a collection of natural texts at the end of the book.