Grammars that give back: Creating grammars with the language community

Darren Flavelle, Marianne Huijsmans & Jordan Lachler
(CILLDI; University of Alberta)

The grammaticography literature has noted the potential – and need – for community-oriented grammars (Mithun 2006, Kandanya 2006, Akumbu 2020). While there are some works describing such grammars (Baraby 2012, Rehg 2014), they are rare. In the UNESCO Decade of Indigenous Languages, it is important for us to more fully engage with the history of extractive practices in our field and develop resources better aligned with our ethical responsibilities to the communities we work with. In this presentation, we discuss two on-going community grammar projects, taking place in very different contexts, but motivated by the same ethos.

In the Oroha Community (Oceanic, Solomon Islands), the creation of a community-oriented grammar is just beginning, though the relationship with the community has been fostered for over a decade. The community has helped linguists create and annotate recordings, but being active in the creation of a grammar for themselves involves training for many skills they never knew they needed, or perhaps already had but never applied. We discuss the grammaticographic steps involved in working on this project with a community that has limited resources and formal education, but has immeasurable linguistic and cultural knowledge.

ʔayʔaǰuθəm (Central Salish, British Columbia), is the shared ancestral language of the Tla'amin, Homalco, Klahoose, and K'ómoks Nations. Because fluent speakers are few and elderly (FPCC 2022), due to the impacts of colonialism (TRC 2015), responsibility for teaching the language falls to a dedicated team of second-language learners, who must create all of their own teaching materials. To support this work, a group of language teachers, Elders, and linguists are meeting biweekly (online) to create a grammar that lays out and sequences the generalizations gained through ongoing documentation. This collaborative approach ensures that the grammar includes culturally rich documentation, explanation, and activities well-designed for the teachers' goals of revitalizing language and culture as parts of a whole.

In both cases, the grammars are intended to support instruction of and in the languages while also containing valuable documentation that can inform linguists. Working collaboratively with language teachers and community members ensures that the grammars will be relevant and engaging for the communities for whom they are intended. As minority languages are increasingly under threat worldwide (Austin and Sallabank 2012), there is an urgent need for such projects undertaken by and with communities (Czaykowska-Higgins 2009) and consequently for the development of effective, collaborative methodologies.

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Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) (2015), *Honouring the truth, reconciling for the future: Summary of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

Conference Section: Grammar writing, documentation, data collection
Convenor: Aimée Lahaussois (300-400 words, not including references)

BELOW HERE, SCRATCH NOTES AND QUOTES

Commonalities:
-colonial effects in both contexts (but different, so it may be too much to explain in space)
-education oriented grammars, in both cases intended to support instruction in the language
-in Oroha, both instruction of the language and instruction in the language for other topics
-in ʔayʔajǔθəm, instruction of the language primarily (at least to start), but also supporting immersion programming

-need for useful tools for the community that otherwise would not have them
-collaborative approach, allows for including cultural material that a linguist couldn't write about without community input
-ideally useful for linguists as well as communities (in a way, flipped audience - still want linguists to be an audience, but the primary audience is the communities)

- A Community-oriented approach to grammar Writing
    - New perspectives on making a grammar useful
    - What does it mean to write a grammar in a community-oriented framework?
    - Why it is important to create grammars in this lens
        - Community reciprocity
        - More accessibility for more people
        - Better for language learners
        - Most grammars are written for endangered/under-resourced languages
        - Those communities are often lacking in members who have advanced linguistics degrees or skills and are in the most need of usable materials.
        - Info in a community grammar is still accessible to linguists; while the reverse is not true
    - How to go about co-creating a community grammar?
    - This is a higher bar of ethical engagement, but also of scholarship, as you still have to know all the linguistics PLUS how to explain it accessibly to a broader audience

This paper discusses the on-going process of creating grammars with the goal of not just a high level of scholarly value, but value and usability to the community which provided the data for it. Historically, grammars have been oriented towards other linguists to better understand the structure of a given language (Rehg, 2014); this frequently ignored the needs of the community who cooperated with the linguist(s) on the creation of the resource. If that resource is unusable by the community that provided all the data for it, then the resource is an extractionary one. A community-oriented approach to grammar writing holds itself to a higher level of ethical engagement with the community, in addition to a high level of scholarship is necessary to achieve the desired outcome of being able to explain the contents to a broader audience. Such an approach involves the

community to a larger degree and ensures that the grammar is one that the community can use and derive more resources from in an on-going partnership.

The reciprocity of this type work is paramount to collaboration with the communities that linguists serve. An advantage of a community-oriented grammar is that it is more accessible to a wider range of people. Grammars are commonly written for endangered languages, whose speaker numbers are dwindling and whose language is in need of revitalization and/or reclamation. The majority of these communities are full of language learners, who are learning their heritage language as a second language. A community-oriented grammar aims to explain the various phenomena in ways that those without high levels of linguistic education can understand. In this way, it is often more difficult to create, as not only does the linguist need to have the understanding of the phenomena occurring in the language, but also be able to explain those phenomena in terms accessible to a layperson. Information in a community-oriented grammar is thus accessible to the community members and linguists, while the reverse is not true; a traditional reference grammar is full of linguistic jargon and dry writing that, while useful and interesting to linguists, might be off-putting for learners trying to reclaim their heritage language.

We present the on-going process of the creation of two such grammars, the conversations regarding structure of the resource(s) and the desired outcomes that the community has and how we can achieve those goals and create worthwhile scholarly materials concurrently.

Oroha is a language spoken by a small community on Small Malaita in the Solomon Islands, the language is woefully underdocumented and the speaker numbers count fewer than one hundred. In a community with little to no access to the internet with limited formal education, and being surrounded by stronger language communities (Sa'a, 'Are'are, Solomon Islands Pijin) the need for a community-oriented grammar is paramount. A traditional reference grammar will be of no use to the people who need it to help create pedagogical materials to help adult learners, let alone children who receive all their (limited) formal education in English, not even in SIP, which they actually speak. The creation of a community-oriented grammar with the aim of revitalizing the language and creating more speakers will aid future generations of Oroha people, as well as future generations of linguists who can continue work on the Language.
Scratch notes for ʔayʔaǰuθəm:

Due to the impacts of colonialism, especially the residential school system, only 3.1% of the population identify as fully fluent (FPCC 2022). However, 9.7% identify themselves as active learners, and there is a determined push for reclamation of language and culture across the four nations.

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Questions considered by Mithun and the Mohawk team:

How much detail should be included with descriptions?
…there is the issue of how much additional commentary should be provided

How much detail should be included about form?

How many examples?

Should apparent irregularities be discussed?

Should examples illustrate the use of forms in context?

How much grammatical information about the example should be included. Is a simple sentence translation sufficient? Would a word-by-word gloss help? A full morphological analysis?

Should frequency be addressed?

> To what extent should the structures of English or other well-known languages shape the description of the target language?

For the Mohawk grammar project we have arrived at a format geared to serve this evolving readership and to document as much as possible of the richness of the language. The presentation is layered. Each topic is introduced with an overview consisting of just the basic facts, illustrated with a few simple examples. Following the overview are subsections with additional detail, full paradigms where these are pertinent, and parsed examples from spontaneous connected speech, with representation of all communities. Additional subsections may contain information on related topics not of interest to all readers. Readers who are just beginning their study of the language, or who simply want an overview before plunging into a particular topic, can read the basic overviews alone.

Other chapters follow the same general format. Some deal with larger grammatical structures, such as enumeration and quantification, question formation, and complex sentences. Others deal with particular semantic domains, such as kinship, color, and place names. All contain brief introductory overviews of the structures under discussion which can be read on their own, plus additional sections providing fully parsed, naturally occurring examples of the structures and terms in context.

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Baraby

79: writing grammars for non-specialized speakers brings its own challenging issues, which are different, in many regards, from grammaticography conceived for linguists.

80: However, such a decision, which takes into account the needs of different types of users for the same product, raises a big problem: Is it possible to write a reference grammar for different users having different expectations?

80: As a solution to this problem, we propose a multilevel grammar, where most of the content is addressed to a non-specialized audience, speakers of the described language (it constitutes the first or main level), but with some additional grammatical information (the secondary level) aimed at specialists, such as linguists.

84: The general organization of the content is “bottom up”, starting with the simpler notions, for instance the word before the sentence, the noun before the verb, etc. It goes from structures to functions or from functions to structures

85: In our grammaticographic model, we claim that minority languages require reference grammars rather than pedagogical grammars, in order for them to be well documented, and in a comprehensive way, and such a grammar is probably not for beginners, users without any skill in formal grammar.

86: Even if the visual aspect of the grammar may not be as important as the text itself,

it is central to this kind of work since it is aimed at users who are not necessarily familiar with grammatical descriptions. In this case, the grammatical product must be attractive, using different typographical means such as different colors, fonts, the use of framed texts, etc.

90: Writing a grammar for non-specialists does not mean to oversimplify. Actually, it consists in vulgarizing specialized matter, to give access to it to those who are not familiar with descriptions aimed at linguists, and doing this is no easy task.

90: For minority languages, vulgarizing also means helping speakers develop metalinguistic knowledge they did not have the opportunity to learn while at school. Our experience with Innu teachers has shown that they are quite motivated to learn more about their language, as long as we take the time to explain what they need to learn in order to move forward. A good grammar aimed at speakers has to be written in a simple, clear and precise style, but simplifying does not mean less rigor in the description.

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Akumbu

72: In other words, a grammar of an endangered language should be accessible to speakers of the target language.

84: The second reason for the inability to read the grammars which came out clearly during interviews is the fact that the people do not have a culture of reading. Most people with oral traditions would rather listen or watch instead of read.

86: a grammar can be useful to the community only if there is sufficient sensitization. Community members need to understand the place and role of their language in the face of global languages.

86: At the top of the list of users of a grammar should be members of the community in which the language is spoken.

87: grammarians should not only think about the design of grammars for linguists, but also develop strategies of how such grammars can be transformed into grammars for non-specialists. (Mosel 2006:45, quoted in Akumbu)

87 fn: I recognize the fact that academic grammar writers who support the development of grammatical descriptions and also work with communities are doing hard work that many other linguists are not bothered to do. Many of them could become “famous” by abandoning all the efforts they make to secure grants and focus on theoretical work.

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Peter K. Austin (2003). Introduction (LDD 1). In Peter K. Austin (ed.) Language Documentation and Description, vol 1. London: SOAS. pp. 6-14

"...genres of standard description products are reasonably well conventionalised: dictionaries, grammars, text collections, and journal articles. There are publication outlets and evaluation and review processes for these, and descriptive linguists understand how their careers may be enhanced by adopting these genres. Other more experimental production has recently appeared in the context of emerging possibilities of multimedia (see Csató and Nathan below): web sites, CD-ROMs, talking and picture dictionaries etc. There are so far no standard genres for this kind of writing and no evaluation metrics."

Mithun, Marianne. 2006. Grammars and the community. Studies in Language 30:2, pages 281-306.
"In many cases, local languages are being replaced by global languages in stages. Skilled speakers use the traditional languages in fewer and fewer contexts. Succeeding generations control smaller inventories of rhetorical styles, complex constructions, and vocabulary. In such situations, faithful documentation becomes increasingly important. A record of what is actually said by skilled speakers in a variety of situations, when they are choosing what to say and how to say it, can provide a priceless record not just of relative clause structures, for example, but also of what was said, of how experience was segmented into concepts and how these concepts were combined, of how speakers interacted with each other. Each example taken from spontaneous speech provides an illustration not just of the point it is meant to illustrate, but of many more aspects of the language and language use. Such documentation can also provide answers to theoretical questions we do not yet know enough to ask. It can be our best hope for serving future readers from all backgrounds."

"To lessen frustration for grammar users within the speech community, of course maximal transparency of terminology is extremely important. All else being equal, a term like 'past' is more transparent than a term like 'preterite'. It can sometimes be useful to include the form of a marker when mentioning the term, as in 'the s-Repetative'. Learning new terminology requires an investment of time and patience for anyone, particularly for those who are not in the habit of reading grammars."

Kenneth L. Rehg. 2014. On the role and utility of grammars in language documentation and conservation. Language Documentation & Conservation Special Publication No. 8 (July 2014):
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“While there is widespread agreement about the goals and methods of language documentation, not everyone agrees on what its products should be. The traditional goals of fieldwork were to produce a grammar, a dictionary, and a collection of texts, commonly prioritized in that order.”
“Indeed, the relatively small body of literature that exists on writing grammars typically focuses on how linguists can make grammars more useful to other linguists.”

“Grammars…provide little that is of direct use to non-linguists, including the speech community, educators, and researchers in other disciplines…” (Himmelman, 2006)

“That is, [the Pohnpeian Reference Grammar] was written using the tools of linguistic theory that were available at that time, but the analyses resulting from the use of those tools were presented so as to be comprehensible to a broad audience, most especially educated Pohnpeians. It is thus useful to bear in mind that one’s theoretical framework need not dictate one’s descriptive framework.”

“First, the grammar has clearly impacted the way in which speakers, especially younger speakers, view their language. When I first began work on this grammar, teenage speakers of the language who were learning English would often tell me that Pohnpeian, unlike English, had no grammar. By this, they meant both that it had no written grammar and that there were no rules for speaking the language. I no longer hear such comments.”

“A community grammar, as described by Michael Noonan (n.d.), is “a kind of reference grammar created for, and sometimes by, members of a linguistic community as an aid to establishing [or reestablishing] a language in the schools, for teaching the language to adults, [etc.]”.”

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