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A Grammar of South Efate: An Oceanic Language of Vanuatu by Nicholas Thieberger

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## Book Reviews

Nicholas Thieberger. 2006. *A grammar of South Efate: An Oceanic language of Vanuatu*. Oceanic Linguistics Special Publication No. 33. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. xxviii + 384 pp., ill., maps + 1 DVD-ROM. ISBN-13: 978-0-8248-3061-8. \$39.00, paper.

The publication of Nicholas Thieberger's (T) *A grammar of South Efate* (GSE) is significant narrowly to the field of Oceanic linguistics, and more broadly to descriptive linguistics and the production of reference grammars. I will return to its narrow significance later, as it is the importance of this work as a model for grammar writers that is most noteworthy. GSE, along with Stephen Morey's *The Tai languages of Assam*, published not long before GSE in 2005, sets a new standard for grammar writing, demonstrating what should ideally be included in a comprehensive and accountable record of the grammar of a language. The advance that T (and Morey shortly before him) has made is in incorporating a digital component to the grammar, in the form of a DVD that includes, among other items, a digital dictionary and, most significantly, audio recordings of the primary data upon which the description is based, giving the reader the option of being able to listen to most of the example sentences in the text.

The text of the grammar follows a fairly standard model of grammatical description. What is not standard is the inclusion of a DVD providing the reader with immediate access to the primary data. The DVD includes a '!Readme' html file to guide the reader in its use, and the DVD is as a whole very user-friendly. One is directed to one of three applications, suitable for Macintosh, Windows, or Linux use. Upon starting the application, the user is then presented with a window through which audio files can be played. Brief and to the point instructions are shown in the window as it appears when the application is initially opened. From there one can browse the audio files that are linked to the example sentences (and some lexical data) given in the written text. From a dropdown menu in the top right corner, one chooses either a chapter (from 3 to 12, as chapters 1 and 2 contain no language examples) or one of the eight texts from the appendix. After choosing the desired chapter or text, one is then presented with lines of transcriptions in the main window. To the left of each line of transcription a number is given, which corresponds to the example number in the written text. So, for example, if one is reading chapter 7 and wishes to hear example sentence 12 being spoken, one chooses "Chapter 7" from the drop down menu, then clicks on the line of transcribed text to the right of number 12. And immediately one will hear the original recorded example. This is a truly impressive advance in the presentation of linguistic analysis, giving the reader a real sense of the spoken language, and making the author truly accountable for his analysis. A brave and challenging move.

In order to be able to achieve what he has and present the reader (and listener) with the result that we have in GSE, T has necessarily followed many additional steps that are foreign to the grammar writers who precede him. All good grammar writers record, tran-

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scribe, and translate as much natural data as they are able, and use this as the basis for their analysis and description. Upon completion of the published grammar, the notebooks filled with transcriptions and the original recordings have in the past been filed on the grammar writers' bookshelves or in filing cabinets. But with the recent emphasis on the field of language documentation as distinct from, but vitally linked to, language description, many field linguists are realizing that there are more steps that should be followed, and that a detailed, enduring record of a language should at least involve archiving of the original language recordings. T is somewhat of a pioneer in the field of language documentation, and he has followed many more steps and paths in his effort to produce a record of the South Efate language that is as complete as possible: complete, yet with the real option for verification and further analysis, as the original data are archived and available to all. As T says, "In working to create reusable, citable, and archivable data for South Efate my main effort has been in developing methods for interacting with digital data and then on establishing a repository for safekeeping of that data" (8). Apart from working with methods for linking and time-aligning audio data with its transcription, while engaged in his research on South Efate T also wrote a software tool called *Audiamus*, which enables direct access between the audio files and their transcripts.

The inclusion of a digital dictionary is a further significant feature of this work. The years of effort involved in producing a dictionary that the compiler feels is "complete" often means that many descriptive linguists publish a dictionary of a language that they have carried out detailed fieldwork on only after many years. Or never. As a compromise, some include short word lists as an appendix to a grammatical description, often arranged by semantic domain. T has made a step toward overcoming this problem by including a digital version of his in-progress dictionary with the grammatical description. While, of course, he recognizes that the content and definitions are far from complete, at least we have access to a sizeable lexicon (as far as I can determine T does not specify the number of lexical entries in the version included). The lexicon is presented using SIL's Lexique Pro. When one accesses the link to the dictionary, it opens with the South Efate–English dictionary in the main window and an English–South Efate finderlist down the left hand side. In the finderlist the South Efate translations are hyperlinked to their entry in the main lexicon. The dictionary includes photos for a small percentage of entries, mostly illustrating different tree and other plant species.

The DVD also contains some texts from historical sources, including an 1874-translation of Genesis, a word list collected by Jean-Claude Rivierre in the 1960s, and Osten Dahl's TMA questionnaire completed for South Efate.

In my opening paragraph I commented on the significance of this grammar for the study of Oceanic languages. South Efate is spoken on the island of Efate, in an area immediately surrounding the capital of Vanuatu, Port Vila. Despite this, and the fact that the language has approximately 6,000 speakers—a large language by Vanuatu standards—GSE is the first detailed grammatical description of the language to be published. This is especially significant, as the language sits on the boundary between the Southern and North-Central Vanuatu subgroups of languages. South Efate is classified as the southernmost member of the North-Central Vanuatu subgroup, but T's grammar shows

that the language has some Southern Vanuatu features. Comparative linguists will be able to use GSE to further our understanding of language subgrouping in the area.

Turning to the structure of the grammatical description itself, it is presented in a familiar logical order, progressing from lower level through to higher level units. Chapter 1 is mostly a discussion of T's methodology, fieldwork, and presentation of primary data accompanying the text. This is followed by chapter 2, focusing on historical and social details about the speakers of the language and their place. Chapter 3 overviews the phonology, and chapter 4, word classes. T then turns in chapter 5 to a description of nominals and the noun phrase. Chapters 6–10 discuss verbal morphology and syntax, and it is only the ordering of these five chapters that seems slightly less logical to me. Chapter 6 focuses on mood and aspect, which would seem more ideally placed subsequent to the discussion of verbs and verb classes in chapter 7 and the verb complex in chapter 10. Chapter 8, logically following the discussion of verbs and verb classes, is about valency changing processes. Chapter 9 discusses verb combinations, which I believe it would have been more sensible to discuss after the description of the verb complex. The final two chapters, 11 and 12, cover simple and complex sentences, respectively. The core of the description is followed by an appendix consisting of eight short texts. The audio files for these interlinearized texts are all included on the accompanying DVD.

I find the analysis and description as a whole to be sound and clearly expressed. All major areas of the grammar are covered. At 330 pages, the text of the description is not completely comprehensive, and there were some areas where I was keen for more detailed description (e.g., prepositional phrases and other clause level adjuncts). However, for a grammar of its size there is adequate detail on all key topics. The analysis is justified by ample illustrative examples throughout. There is only one aspect of the analysis that I wish to take issue with, and that is the discussion of verb combinations (chapter 9). On this subject I find myself somewhat in agreement with an earlier review of GSE (Early 2007).<sup>1</sup> In the preface T states that "South Efate shares features with southern Vanuatu languages, including a lack of serial verb constructions." In chapter 9 he goes into much detail about the different types of verb combinations that occur in the language, including verb compounds, auxiliary verb plus main verb, adverbial modification of verbs, and clause chaining. Some of the constructions that T discounts from being serial verb constructions (SVCs), look remarkably similar to constructions that others have analyzed as being SVCs in closely related North-Central Vanuatu languages (e.g., Hyslop 2001 for Ambae, Early 1994 for Lewo). There is some variation in the criteria used to classify SVCs and, particularly when a construction is undergoing grammaticalization in a language, it can be difficult to set boundaries in the analysis of SVCs. Thus I do not necessarily question T's analysis of verb combinations in South Efate, but I do believe that he should not place so much emphasis on the lack of SVCs in the language as being a significant typological feature, when some of the constructions under discussion do appear to be similar to those found in closely related languages.

A further point on which I commend T is the detailed historical, social, and ethnographic discussion of the language and its speakers in chapter 2. This is something that I

1. I am not, however, in agreement with all aspects of Early's somewhat harsh review of a work that I am enthusiastic in commending for its innovativeness.

like to see included in a grammatical description: a reminder that the language is spoken by a vibrant language community. Most grammar writers see fit to include a few pages of background on the speakers and cultural context of the language; T gives us a 33-page chapter, "South Efate, place, people, and language." This chapter includes geographical and ethnographic information about the speakers and the history of settlement of the area where the language is spoken. Also included is a detailed discussion of previous work on the language and on language issues generally on the island of Efate.

GSE contains a few too many instances of careless inconsistencies that should have been identified by meticulous, systematic crosschecking and editing. When publishing a monograph there is always a conflict between the pressure to get the work "out there" as quickly as possible and the endeavor for perfection. I commend T in getting this published version of his University of Melbourne PhD thesis off the press only a year and a half after submitting it for examination. However, if he had had the opportunity to spend more time on editing the work, some inconsistencies throughout the book could have been avoided. Assessing the issue of inconsistencies as a whole within the book, one does have a sense that individual chapters were written at different stages in the development and progression of the author's analysis. This is to be expected; but in revising the final version more careful attention should have been paid to ensuring that glossing, grammatical labels, and the minutiae of analysis are consistent throughout the work. I give just a couple of examples of the type of inconsistencies found in GSE.

There are instances where T's division and labeling of word classes in the word class chapter does not match up completely with later discussion. An illustration of this is the presentation of the subclasses of nominals. In table 4:1 (75) T recognizes a subclass of "Personal nouns," whereas in the discussion below the table he states that "Personal names typically do not have an article (*na-*) . . . there is no other formal means of distinguishing common and proper nouns" (75). Later, in chapter 5 he refers to the subclass as "Proper nouns," and then in discussing a different subclass, kinship nouns, he states that, "Like proper nouns, personal nouns cannot take the article *na*" (124). Thus three different terms have been used to refer to one subclass and two for another, one of which was used alternately to refer to both of the subclasses.

A similar issue of inconsistency in the division and discussion of subclasses arises with verbs. In the brief one-page discussion of verb subclasses in the word class chapter, and in the summary in table 4:2 (78), T further subdivides the subclasses of both ambitransitive and transitive verbs into A-type and U-type subclasses. He does not make the same division for intransitive verbs, observing only that they can be further subdivided into stative and active subclasses. However, in chapter 7 ("Verbs and verb classes"), while he goes into some detail on the division of intransitive verbs into A-type and U-type, there is no further discussion of an A-type/U-type division for transitive verbs. He gives examples of A-type and U-type ambitransitive verbs in the summary in table 7:2 (173), but he does not discuss the distinction in either of the sections on ambitransitive or transitive verbs (184–89). In the discussion on ambitransitive verbs, all examples given are clearly A-type, with no suggestion of any that are U-type, and no discussion of the distinction.

The examples discussed are representative of the type of inconsistencies that occur in the grammar; they are mostly not errors or contradictions in the analysis, but rather incon-

sistencies in terminology, glossing, and presentation. These inconsistencies are not numerous enough to mar the overall quality of the work, but they are numerous enough that the reader should be aware and vigilant when quoting the work.

To conclude, T's grammatical description of South Efate is a fine work; it is not comprehensive, but it covers in some detail all aspects of the grammar. It is not couched in a particular theoretical framework, and thus the analysis is easily accessible to all linguists. While the description itself will, of course, be of most interest to Oceanists and typologists, I believe that this is a ground-breaking publication that all descriptive linguists should examine, at least so as to be aware of the current exciting possibilities for language documentation.

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