

Language Documentation & Linguistic Theory 2

A theory is only as good as the data: casting a wide net in Kabardian and Ahtna documentation

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A theory is only as thorough as the data: Casting a wide net in Kabardian and Ahtna documentation

The documentation available for any particular language can heavily influence the scope of linguistic theory. As such, comprehensive documentation must capture a variety of types of language use. Here we consider two “genres” of documentary data: those based on elicitation or prompted speech, and those consisting of spontaneous, naturally occurring connected discourse. We present case studies from two unrelated polysynthetic languages, in which only a combination of documentation techniques facilitates meaningful contributions to typology and language description.

Our first case study is from Kabardian, a North West Caucasian language, spoken predominantly in the Russian Federation and Turkey. In Kabardian, many grammatical roles may be relativized, including obliques like place and instrument (Colarusso 1992). However, the frequency of occurrence of the oblique roles roughly follows the Keenan-Comrie (1977) accessibility hierarchy, which means that many hours of narration may not contain a single example of relativization of, for example, instrument. When these forms are elicited, however, speakers judge such constructions to be quite natural. Without elicitation, a description of relative clauses based only on Kabardian narrative data would be incomplete.

Our second case study is from Ahtna, an Athabaskan language of Alaska. A recent attempt to situate Ahtna within a typology of motion events based on the elicited (or “prompted”) narration of so-called “Frog Stories” (Meyer 1969; see e.g., Slobin 1996, 2004) reveals that narrators tend to make use of only a small portion of the grammar of path and location available to them. Speakers telling Frog Stories do employ a set of spatially-oriented verb prefixes, but they tend to underutilize the many other ways Ahtna encodes spatial relationships. The ubiquity of these other systems, which include riverine directionals, postpositions, demonstratives and near-paradigmatic toponymy, only becomes apparent when we turn to Travel Narratives, a genre of spontaneous connected speech that is more familiar to Ahtna speakers. It seems that elicited Frog Stories are not the most authentic setting for studying the full range of Ahtna grammar about spatial relationships, and they only provide a glimpse into the ways these relationships are expressed in actual discourse.

In the Ahtna study, elicitation alone cannot provide sufficient data for an adequate description of motion events; we must also look to spontaneous natural discourse to provide a complete picture. In the Kabardian study, the reverse is true: spontaneous discourse does not reliably reveal all possible relative clause forms, and the researcher must turn to elicited data to fill in the gaps. These findings have implications for language documentation: documenting only a narrow range language use types may cause a common phenomenon to present itself as rare, and a rare phenomenon may not show up at all. We argue that typological theories and descriptions are only as good as the data upon which they are based. We support casting a wide net in language documentation so that a variety of data sources are available to researchers making typological observations and writing grammatical descriptions.

References

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