
Dol’s grammar of Maybrat is a good read, and in many ways is a solid model of modern grammar-writing. Maybrat is an interesting language in subtle ways, a language spoken by 20,000 people in the central Bird’s Head in western New Guinea, and possibly a member of the putative “West Papuan Phylum,” a controversial grouping (Reesink 2002, Donohue 2008). Dol brings many of those aspects out clearly with explicit argumentation, including arguments that don’t support Dol’s analytical decisions (for example, section 8.7 “Some problems”). Even when the reader might disagree with a particular analysis, the data are presented clearly enough to make it easy to generate alternative hypotheses. This is, in short, what a grammatical description of a language should be: exploratory, descriptive, and detailed. The grammar covers all areas expected from a descriptive grammar, including an extensive wordlist, a diverse selection of glossed and translated texts, and (essential!) an index.

The grammar investigates a number of aspects of the language in more detail—welcome detail—than is found in many grammars. For instance, the discussion of relativization is superlative. To start with, Dol quite explicitly illustrates relative clauses for a wide range of syntactic and semantic roles (sections 5.3, 6.7). This means that we do not simply have to assume that the author is as well informed as the audience is about the variables and parameters relevant for a description of relative clauses, but we can explicitly see grammatical and ungrammatical examples for the different
kinds of data we would like. We also find information on extraction from subordinate clauses, such as shown in (1) (from p. 200).

(1) Ara ro t-no y-aut m-ria.
    tree REL 1SG-do 3SG-climb 3SG-tall
    ‘The tree that I make him climb into is tall.’

This material is of great value to syntacticians, and yet this kind of material is almost always absent from descriptive grammars. The failure to pay attention to theoretical concerns does a disservice to the field of grammar writing and language description, by reinforcing the (false) impression that grammar-writing does not bear on theoretical investigation—a view not so widespread now as 15 years ago, but one that is still often found, and often with good reason.

The discussion of negation offers welcome details on the scope of negation, and makes Maybrat relevant to cross-linguistic studies of negation in ways that most grammars of understudied languages are not. At frequent intervals, Dol ties in her work on Maybrat to wider discussion in the typological and descriptive literature to apply explicit tests to the data she is working with.

I mentioned earlier that the grammar is well enough written that the sceptical reader can easily find material to support alternative hypotheses. I shall present a few alternative analyses here, by way of illustrating the availability of data in Dol’s grammar, but also as a criticism of some rather fundamental flaws in an eminently readable grammatical description.

The phonology presents a number of choices that are not merely idiosyncratic, but that are contradicted by the data and analysis in other parts of the book. For instance, we are told that there is no vowel length contrast in the language described here (while there is a vowel length contrast in the more western dialect described in Brown 1991): “there is no difference” (55, footnote 3). Elsewhere, however, we learn that vowel length is contrastive in monosyllables, and discover such words as oo ‘feet’ (132), which certainly appears to have a long vowel and which consists “of only one syllable” (132, footnote 7; additional arguments given by Dol for treating long vowels as single syllables are on 56), and apparent contrasts between a long vowel in [a:m] < /am/ ‘traditional rain cape’ and a nonlong vowel in [ɔm] < /om/ ‘rain’ (18). Is ‘traditional rain cape’ really /a:m/, or is there free variation involved? We are not told. Although we are told that “no minimal pairs were found to warrant a phonemic distinction between long and short vowels” (56), on page 29 we are told that “the following contrasts can be made: /po/ ‘thing’ vs. /poo/ ‘our shoulder’ …” and that “because the phonetically long vowels are interpreted phonologically as sequences of like vowels, and not as phonologically long vowels, (these forms) do not constitute minimal pairs.” It is hard to imagine how a minimal pair could be found, given these rather ad hoc (and circular) conditions.

The author elsewhere similarly reveals a strange understanding of phonology, and more particularly the difference between phonetics and phonology. For instance, Dol reports that Maybrat speakers insist on a contrast between words that, both auditorily and acoustically, are identical (54). She then takes the lack of phonetic contrast (in this case between long and short vowels) to argue for the lack of phonological contrast, despite the relevant forms showing different outputs in certain morphophonological environments.
This is, however, just like the contrast in Dutch between *graat* ‘backbone’ and *graad* ‘grade’, both *[xraːt]* in isolation but showing different final stops when suffixed (for instance, in the plural these words emerge as *gra[it]en* and *gra[d]en* respectively), or *pad* ‘path’ and *pad* ‘toad’, which show different ablaut in the plural (*pad[en]* vs. *padd[en]*, respectively). The absence of a phonetic contrast does not necessarily indicate the absence of a phonological contrast, and so conducting an experiment with the roots in isolation will show no contrast from the Maybrat speakers, and potentially lead to a false analysis of the underlying contrast.¹

Given this, there are no objections to an analysis, paralleling that of Brown (1991) for a variety of the language spoken slightly to the west in Ayamaru, in which vowel length is phonologically contrastive, and apparent through interactions with verbal morphology, but which is phonetically neutralized in a number of contexts, including isolation. Under this analysis, a number of what are (sometimes) described as vowel sequences do in fact involve sequences of underlying glides and vowels. This latter analysis is intermittently discussed in footnotes (54, for example), but not adopted for reasons that are not entirely clear. Similarly, Dol dismisses the evidence that Brown presents for phonologically contrastive stress and the analysis of phonetic glides as allophones of phonological (unstressed) vowels, on the basis of the Ayawasi dialect (on which Dol worked) not maintaining the minimal pairs that Brown describes. Again, the absence of a phonetic contrast does not necessarily indicate the absence of a phonological contrast. In Ambai, from nearby Yapen Island, stress is phonemic, but cannot be realized on a final syllable. Thus although there are minimal pairs such as /káfar/ ‘fold’ and /kafár/ ‘kick’, both are realized with penultimate stress in inflected forms such as [ikáfar] ‘I fold/I kick’, with the contrast only emerging under suffixation: [ikáfári] ‘I fold it’ vs. [ikafári] ‘I kick it’ (Silzer 1983, Price and Donohue 2007). Later we learn that stress “seems to be weakly phonemic, as it cannot be fully predicted” (38). Since stress is, then, phonemic, why is it so hard to accept it as phonologically contrastive?

Equally unclear is the difference between epenthetic schwas and schwas that are optional phonemes. Both of these are highly restricted: epenthetic schwas can only occur between two consonants, that is, in a C ___ C environment, while “optional schwa phonemes” can only occur preceding a word-initial consonant in CV(C) words. Since epenthetic schwas cannot occur word-initially, and “optional schwa phonemes” cannot occur word-medially, it seems simplest to treat them as different realizations of one and the same phenomenon. The restriction to CV(C) words is consistent with the vowel-lengthening that applies to monosyllabic words that receive stress: there is a bimoraicity condition in the language, and epenthesis or lengthening applies to enforce this condition. Dol argues for a contrast between epenthesis and “optional phonemes” on two grounds. First, the two kinds of schwas are in complementary distribution: “the optional phoneme only occurs word-initially, while the epenthetic element occurs between a sequence of two consonants” (18). This seems to be a radical misunderstanding of basic phonological principles. Second, “[the optional phoneme] behaves like other vowel phonemes in that it can be preceded by a glottal stop.” We are told that “a glottal stop occurs phonetically, but

¹ A similar problem was pointed out by Sapir for Sarcee. In Sarcee, *dini* represents the two phonetic homophones ‘this one’ and ‘it makes a sound’; when suffixed, however, the difference between the two forms emerges (/dini/ vs. /dinit/) (Sapir 1933).
is not phonemic. It occurs frequently in word-initial position when a V-initial word is uttered in isolation” (18). Given that the “optional phoneme” occurs in word-initial position, in a predictable environment, and that the “epenthetic element” cannot occur in word-initial position, a simpler analysis would treat all schwas as epenthetic, arising for different reasons (a constraint against monomoraic words for the word-initial schwas, and a constraint against consonant clusters for the word-internal ones). The word-initial schwa behaves like other vowels (not vowel phonemes) in that it can be preceded by a glottal stop. Again, the contrast between phonetics and phonology is not appreciated.

We find phonetic glides introduced between nonlow vowels and a following vowel, so that /tuu/ ‘I’ is realized as [tuwo]. Dol writes: “I will assume that this glide is non-phonemic” (30). What, then, are we to make of the orthographic contrast between the (monomorphemic) words fiyaf ‘yellow’ (129) and pria ‘everything’ (131)? Given that elsewhere we learn that a y can, by some, be pronounced as a j (as in English, or Indonesian), this is not merely a pedantic question about consistency, but potentially the data on VV vs. VGV sequences that we were told do not contrast.

In the discussion of morphology, Dol introduces the notion of “overt” agreement and “covert” agreement. Overt agreement is found on a verb; covert agreement is agreement that is not there, rather like the difference between sheep (SG) and sheep (PL) in English, which (in Dol’s analysis) would be sheep and sheep-Ø, with a covert plural suffix. The danger in an analysis that employs notions such as “covert morphology” is that it is very hard to constrain; we might posit an ergative case suffix (or is it prefix?) in English in examples such as She-Ø ate the cake (compared to the absence of such a suffix in She rested on the lounge), and it would be very hard to argue against such an analysis. It is true that at least some paradigms contain null cells; but that does not equate to null morphemes, given widespread blocking in paradigms (see Börjars and Donohue 2000, building on much earlier work on blocking such as Andrews 1990).

Other hedging occurs in the analysis; we are told that “to-yo cannot function adverbially” (106), but in a footnote on the same page are told that “there are a few examples in the data which suggest the opposite” (106, footnote 49). While it is disturbing to see the lack of integration of one statement with another (if to-yo CAN occur predicatively, then it can, surely?), it is, as I mentioned at the beginning of this review, highly welcome that Dol is so open as to present all of the data required for the readers to draw their own conclusions.

In conclusion, Dol’s grammar of Maybrat clearly goes beyond the “standard” of modern grammar-writing in many ways, showing a concern for details of syntax that is often missing; it tries a lot, and generally succeeds. At the same time, there are some serious problems in the area of the phonology. I have a sense of a “dismissal” of phonology from the minds of many grammar writers, reducing it to an orthographic level of understanding. While it is true that we must accurately represent the phonological form of words and phrases that we deal with, we must not imagine that a language description that fails to indicate all phonological distinctions (whether they contrast in minimal pairs or not) is an acceptable “grammar” of a language: the phonology is as much a part of the grammar as is a discussion about (rigid, preferred, basic, dominant, whatever) word order. Given the paucity of follow-up grammatical work on most languages, a grammatical description is a de facto documentation of the language. Failing to accurately identify phonological con-
Contrast in phonetically identical base forms can lead not only to errors of morphological analysis, but also to fanciful extensions that are in fact phonologically contrastive. Imagine what a failure to perceive an aspiration contrast would do to an analysis, especially if such a contrast was derivational: I went three years working on Palu’e before my friends insisted that they were right, I was wrong, and exaggerated the contrast so much that I was forced to perceive it. Similarly, an analysis with too many (overly many) phonemes will mask interesting paths of grammaticalization and extension between real homophones that are analyzed away into separate phonemes. It is high time that we returned to a full respect for accurate phonological description, and see it as more than simply a way to achieve consistent orthographic representation.

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REFERENCES