Grammar writing and language contact

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Language contact is as old as language itself. Every language has been and is in contact with other languages and traces of contacts can be found at many levels of grammar. Thus, on the one hand side when writing grammars even those linguists who are not particularly interested in language contact have to deal at list superficially with issues of language contact. On the other hand side, linguists interested in the study of language contact might decide to consult reference grammars in the hope of finding some information on contact phenomena because not every contact situation and every language family is covered by in-depth studies. Before being able to identify language contact phenomena one needs to know a good deal about the lexicon and grammars of the involved languages.

Language contact is not only of relevance for sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and historical linguistics, but also for typologists. There are no systematic comparative studies of how typologically, and diverse genetically languages 'react' to the impact of one and the same dominant majority language. In other words, it is not clear which role linguistic features such as structural similarity caused by genetic relationship and extra-linguistic features such sociolinguistic similarity caused by comparable contact situations play in determining the outcomes of language contact. This type and similar types of studies could be made possible if language contact would be treated more systematically in descriptive grammars (as discussed, e.g., by Mithun 2014, Aikhenvald 2015, Marten & Petzell 2016).

This talk deals with issues of language contact when writing a grammar. I will start from the trivial fact that most grammars of endangered languages or, more generally, minority languages, are not written by native speakers but by researchers who live and work in the speech community while using another language, the respective dominant, majority language, as a medium of communication. This practice has advantages and disadvantages. One recurrent problem for writers of grammars is the wish (of the writer or of the speech community or both) to describe the 'pure' language untouched by today's dominant language(s). In the main body of the talk, I will sketch how contact phenomena show up in different parts of the lexicon and the grammar. Loan words are the most visible result of language contact situations but some might be particularly difficult to detect because the donor language is closely related or the situation of language contact dates well back in time. In situations of intense language contact (level 3-4 on the scale by Thomason 2001: 70-71) also structural impact is to be expected and can occur at different levels of the grammar (phonology, morphology, syntax).

The talk will be based on my own experiences of writing grammars of Nakh-Dagestanian languages that are today spoken in a situation of asymmetrical language contact with Russian, but have been influenced by other languages before. I will also survey the treatment of language contact issues in reference grammars of languages spoken in other parts of the world, affected by majority languages other than Russian.

References

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