



Describing Morphosyntax

Thomas E. Payne

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This book is a guide for linguistic fieldworkers who wish to write a description of the morphology and syntax of one of the world's many underdocumented languages. It offers readers who work through it one possible outline for a grammatical description, with many questions designed to help them address the key topics. Appendices offer guidance on text and elicited data, and on sample reference grammars that readers might wish to consult. This will be a valuable resource to anyone engaged in linguistic fieldwork.

Describing Morphosyntax Details

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From Reader Review Describing Morphosyntax for online ebook

Gary Bruff says

I would never use this book in the way that it was intended: as a reference work for missionaries interested in translating scriptures into tongues with alien and bizarre grammatical categories.

That said, the book leads the reader on an interesting tour through a necessarily limited but apparently representative sampling of the world's languages, especially those very different from English and from English's European cousins. We are led to (re-)examine the analysis-polysynthesis continuum, clause types, case, tense-aspect-mood, voice and valence, topic-focus, lexical categories, etc. Entire shelves have been dedicated to each of these, so it is not surprising that the analysis feels shallow at times.

There is no sense of the ecology of the languages studied. A language might be highlighted for having one grammatical distinction, but there is no larger view of how that category's exponence leads to the presence or absence of other grammatical phenomena elsewhere in the same language. After reading this book, I felt as though I had come away with a grocery list of morphosyntactic possibilities but no real sense of nutrition or farming. The food just shows up on the shelves and we just take what we like. There is no real treatment of more formal syntactic processes and arrangements. The reader is left with the idea that semantic and in some cases pragmatic ideas map in a one to one relationship between morphemes and concepts. Nevertheless, this book should be treated as a roadmap through some only recently charted terrain. To truly describe a language, it would be necessary to consult whole grammars from the ethnolinguistic region under consideration.

But for people like me, those who are not likely ever to write a grammar or to translate a Bible, this book is well worth the effort. Payne presents a thousand interesting ideas that can be followed up and expanded upon by the reader's subsequent curiosity and drive. Think of this book as being like a literary anthology, one which can guide the reader to pursue and expand upon what interests her/him the most.

Rebecca says

A superb reference for all things related to morphosyntax.

Kevin Albrecht says

Read it before years ago. Great book with fascinating insights on language.

Jason Tank says

Finished this one ages ago, whoops. Definitely a must-read if you're into linguistics.

Xinyang Xie says

Really helpful.

Kelly says

This was a pretty good book, but not so great as a first introduction to linguistics because the author sometimes doesn't explain things very well. There were parts of the book that the professor had to explain to us because they were hard to understand. At the same time, it might be too basic for those who know the subject already. Beyond the awkward passages, though, it's thorough and pretty useful. I recommend it as long as you have other resources available to clarify a few points.

Irene says

Quite clear, nice selection of topics

Yvonne Tse Crepaldi says

good as a textbook, but not enough for postgrad

Sarah Mottaghinejad says

This is a really fabulous guide for doing linguistics fieldwork. I used it in my field study of Farsi, and it really helped me to write the grammar.

Matthijs Krul says

Though not intended as such: wonderfully clear and systematic intro to the morphosyntactic and related aspects of linguistics, very useful for conlangers and for teaching yourself the field.

Robert Murphy says

Excellent reference book to introduce all the ways language can vary to students. The explanations are a little light lots of time, and there is some "school" specific terminology (I heard DJP's voice in my head decrying "morphemes"!) but it would be hard to find a more comprehensive, useful book.

Martin says

Originally designed for those becoming field linguists, this book is a tremendous resource for those wanting to learn about the nitty-gritty details of morphology, syntax, grammar, etc. Starting at basic concepts and good explanations of what morphology is and how it can be used to study language, rapidly a clear picture emerges of how the different parts of language hang together. Not only is this shown for English but the text is designed to specifically show how all these mechanisms are at work in other languages. When you've studied the contents of this book carefully (e.g. not read it once) you should have a good picture of how different languages are related and how we can compare their grammatical mechanisms.

I would agree with other reviewers that this book is not for those with little or no linguistic background. It is possible to start fresh but given some subtle expert-blind spots in the writing it would be difficult to understand some of the chapters. It is highly recommended to use this book in combination with other works on grammar and syntax. The writing is clear and precise and contains lots and lots of examples. If there is a negative comment to be made I would say that the first three chapters contain wonderful visual examples that can help the reader mentally model the complexities of language, which are missing started at chapter 4.

Tao says

Actually I think it's 4.5,,for there is no practical exercise

Rasmus Puggaard says

read this language description & linguistic fieldwork course. It's actually a far better introduction to morphosyntax than the one I read for my morphosyntax course [Kroeger] with more widespread language samples, better category description, and simply more engaging reading. Very recommended.
