

REVIEW ESSAY

Four grammars of Malakula languages
by Terry Crowley

Crowley, Terry (edited by John Lynch), *The Avava language of Central Malakula (Vanuatu)*. Canberra: Department of Linguistics, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 2006, xvi + 213 pp. [Pacific Linguistics 574.] ISBN 0858835649. Price: AUD 54.50 (paperback).

Crowley, Terry (edited by John Lynch), *Tape: a declining language of Malakula (Vanuatu)*. Canberra: Department of Linguistics, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 2006, xviii + 198 pp. [Pacific Linguistics 575.] ISBN 0858835673. Price: AUD 50.00 (paperback).

Crowley, Terry (edited by John Lynch), *Naman: a vanishing language of Malakula (Vanuatu)*. Canberra: Department of Linguistics, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 2006, xxi + 287 pp. [Pacific Linguistics 576.] ISBN 0858835657. Price: AUD 59.00 (paperback).

Crowley, Terry (edited by John Lynch), *Nese: a diminishing speech variety of Northwest Malakula (Vanuatu)*. Canberra: Department of Linguistics, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 2006, xiii + 81 pp. [Pacific Linguistics 577.] ISBN 0858835665. Price: AUD 27.00 (paperback).

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The posthumous publication of these four language descriptions written by the late Terry Crowley is, in many respects, a praiseworthy achievement. The premature death of the author in 2005, aged only 52, meant the loss of a major figure in Oceanic linguistics as well as a tragedy for his field of expertise, the firsthand documentation of Vanuatu's numerous endangered languages. The

months he had spent since 1999 exploring the languages of Malakula, linguistically the richest island of the whole archipelago, would certainly have proved fruitless were it not for the method he had wisely adopted during those last years: that of systematically writing up the drafts of his future monographs in publishable form – even in situations where most linguists would have preferred to wait for another session or two in the field before even starting to write. Fortunately – or should I say unfortunately – this precaution has proven particularly effective given the author's sad destiny: for instead of illegible notebooks full of handwritten data, we have inherited from him a spectacular set of four orderly and clearly written monographs, readily readable despite the incompleteness of their content. Equally worthy of praise is John Lynch (University of South Pacific) who, after the death of his colleague and friend, courageously took up the task of doing the final editing of these four works to prepare them for publication. Although he did not add any substantial information on the languages themselves, Lynch occasionally contributed some useful annotations and clarifications. The excellent form of these books, and the near absence of typographical errors, must certainly be credited to his careful proofreading. The publisher *Pacific Linguistics* also deserves to be thanked for having perfectly taken care of the whole project.

The result of this editorial challenge is a series of four grammars, at different stages of completion. The most complete is the description of Naman (308 pp., including 196 pp. for the grammar section and 51 pp. for the lexicon), which the author had submitted for publication shortly before his death. The sketchiest is Nese (94 pp., including 42 pp. grammar and 35 pp. lexicon), with repeated calls for further fieldwork. The two remaining descriptions, Avava (239 pp., including 121 pp. grammar and 64 pp. lexicon) and Tape (216 pp., including 108 pp. grammar and 49 pp. lexicon), are both in a decent state of finalization, even though the author obviously intended to enhance his data with further fieldwork.

The structure of the descriptions is similar: a table of contents, a list of tables; various prefatory sections (by Lynch and by Crowley); a rich, detailed introduction to the geography and sociolinguistic situations of the language; the grammar proper (including a detailed account of the phonology and a morphosyntactic description of noun phrases, verb phrases, simple and complex sentences); between one and ten interlinearized texts; a brief lexicon (vernacular to English) followed by a finder list. The only structural difference between the descriptions is the order of the chapters: whereas Nese and Tape have Lexicon–Texts–Grammar, Avava has G–L–T and Naman has G–T–L.

The four languages described are all spoken on the same island Malakula, in the northeast (Naman, Tape), the northwest (Nese), or the central area (Avava). Two characteristics they share are the absence of any previous linguistic documentation, as well as a high degree of endangerment. Naman has

'fifteen–twenty fluent speakers'; Tape 'a handful'; and Nese is spoken by only a single family. And even though Avava has managed to keep 700 speakers, these are now scattered across the island in several remote coastal villages, after the traditional inland territory of Avava was depopulated during the twentieth century. The precise cultural and sociolinguistic backgrounds of these four languages can be quite complex: each language is split up into several internal varieties which are linked to a wide array of place names, with all these names taking various forms according to the sources. These confusing intricacies are clearly explained in considerable detail in the remarkable introductory chapters of the descriptions, where the reader can find maps, census data, extensive historical and geographic discussion, and colour photos of the last speakers. Besides providing valuable information on the dying languages, these introductory pages give flesh and blood to their speakers, and bring to life the quest of the linguist himself.

The phonological chapters are very good. Most of the phonetic characteristics of these languages – for example, prenasalized or labiovelar consonants – are classic in the Oceanic context. Naman and Tape have schwas, which are common in that part of Vanuatu. The most original phonemes typologically are the two prenasalized voiced trills of Avava: one alveolar /ɖ/ [ʰdʰ] – in fact represented in various parts of Oceania, and reconstructed for Proto-Oceanic – and the other one bilabial /ɓ/ [ʰmɓ], which is even rarer (Blust 2007).

As is customary, three types of transcription are used: the phonetic transcription in IPA; the phonological one, an IPA-derived ad hoc transcription system; and the orthographic transcription, used for texts. The rule adopted by Crowley, which makes sense, is to reserve the first two systems for the phonology chapter, while the rest of the book (morphosyntax, texts, lexicon) uses the conventional spelling. Although the result is generally straightforward, on several occasions this competition between three transcription systems may cause confusion for the non-Oceanist reader. One problem with the phonetic and phonological transcription systems chosen by the author is that, rather than consistently reflecting IPA conventions, they occasionally make use of ad hoc symbols – some of them derived from local spelling – that are sometimes at odds with phonetic reality. For example, if the flap of Nese is always 'realised as a retroflex flap' (p. 40), then why transcribe it as /r/ (and even [r] in phonetic transcription) rather than use the IPA dedicated symbol for the retroflex flap, namely [ɽ] and /ɽ/? Similarly, why represent the rhotic of Avava as /r/ and [r] if it is always 'realised phonetically as a flap'? Also, labiovelars, phonetically [p^w], [m^bw] or [v^w], are transcribed with a tilde (the IPA symbol for nasality), a convention that may confuse the reader unaware of the orthographies used in central Vanuatu: for example, /ḅirkoto/ [ḅirkoto] 'hermit crab' (Avava p. 28).

An extreme case of these inconsistencies can be found in the consonants of

Naman. Naman has a pair of voiceless affricate phonemes, one oral [ts] ~ [tʃ], the second prenasalized [ʰs] ~ [ʰtʃ]. Crowley chooses to transcribe these two phonemes respectively as /c/ and /j/, with no proper justification. This choice, and in particular the very confusing symbol /j/, achieves a total of four inaccuracies, because a *prenasalized voiceless postalveolar affricate* /ʰtʃ/ is wrongly represented as a *plain voiced palatal stop* /j/. Even worse, the latter symbol – obviously the one Crowley had in mind here – is misleadingly transcribed as /j/ (IPA for the palatal approximant, also present in Naman). It might thus prove difficult for the average IPA-trained reader to read a form transcribed /lejlej/ as phonetically [leʰtʃleʰtʃ]. Arguably, these choices follow certain traditions found among Oceanic specialists, including the – questionable – habit of favouring voicing over prenasalization in the phonological representation of prenasalized voiced stops. Yet in this strictly synchronic description of Naman, it would have been more accurate to represent the two phonemes as /tʃ/ and /ʰtʃ/. Finally, the orthographic transcription system adds even more confusion to the whole picture, by transcribing³ /c/ and /j/ as respectively *j* and *ns*. Compare the correspondences between the three transcriptions: ‘his grandfather’ *jëbën* = /çəbən/ = [tʃəʰbən] versus ‘his finger’ *nsëbën* = /jəbən/ = [ʰtʃəʰbən]. The probable intention to simplify transcriptions results here in low legibility.

The morphosyntactic chapters form the bulk of each description. Let me say it right away: these grammars are so clearly written, filled with language data and careful discussions, that students going to the field could rightfully take them as a model for writing their own language descriptions. One finds in them the same pedagogic spirit which gave rise to Crowley’s renowned textbooks in linguistics. In particular, every single point is illustrated with one or more examples, which are obviously taken from a genuine text corpus rather than resulting from elicitation. With just a few exceptions, these examples are neatly glossed and translated.

Given the sad circumstance that gave birth to these books, it is an unpleasant task for me to do my reviewer’s duty and concentrate now on their imperfections. Of course it would have made much more sense to conduct this discussion with Terry in person. However, because these works must outlive their author in the most professional way, I believe he himself would have liked them to be read and reviewed with the same demanding eye that he used when criticizing his colleagues’ works. I hope the following pages will be understood as a tribute to the quality of his publications, and a way to keep their scholarly value as high as he wanted it to be.

The author’s choice is to stick closely to the synchronic data observed for each language, and to include no other material. With just a few exceptions,

³ The letter *j* is commonly used in Vanuatu orthographies – after Bislama’s spelling – to transcribe /tʃ/.

the analysis therefore makes no reference to the diachrony of these languages, let alone to historical reconstructions. Likewise, apart from a couple of footnotes or a few lines in the introduction, the author makes no reference to published material, whether about other Oceanic languages, or theoretical or typological in scope. This strict editorial decision may be owing to the author's desire to write a description as efficiently as possible, without allowing for any material external to his own field notes. But even if it results in an elegantly simple, data-centred description, this total absence of external references makes it difficult for the non-specialist reader to situate certain facts in the broader context either of the Oceanic group, or of some major typological trend. A short footnote here and there, pointing to some relevant references, would have been helpful.

For example, Naman has a benefactive construction involving the food classifier *nakha-* (as in 'She made *his* pudding' = 'she made pudding for him'), which is described as 'possibly a newly emergent edible possessive construction' (p. 75). In fact, Crowley could have cited here the references that have described the very same construction for other languages of the Solomons (Lichtenberk 2002) or New Guinea (Margetts 2004); this would have helped the reader understand that this is more likely to be a conservative pattern than an innovation.

Likewise, the author describes a modal category of Naman (pp. 114, 200), similar to English *lest* constructions, and coins for it the new term 'adversative'. In fact, exactly the same category is found in all the languages I know of Vanuatu and the Solomons, and was described by Lichtenberk, in a 1995 study, under the term 'apprehensional'. The absence of any reference either to this study or to descriptions of other Oceanic languages gives the reader the impression that this modal category is unique to Naman, which it is not.

In other cases, the descriptive terms chosen by the author are at odds not with the Oceanist tradition, but rather with the technical terminology in use among language typologists. For example, the long-winded phrase 'general statements about the world of which there is no specific time reference asserted' (Naman p. 99) could have been shortened to *generic statements*. Similarly, 'events which are encoded in association with a preceding auxiliary that carries realis marking' (of the type *I want that you come ...*) (Naman p. 100) would be more accurately described as *dependent clauses governed by a verb of manipulation*. Also, the gloss 'continuous/habitual' for the prefix *ma-* of Naman (p. 113) would have gained from discussing the term *imperfective*, which is used precisely by Comrie (1976) as a cover term for these two aspect categories.

In some cases, the terminological inaccuracy ultimately misleads the syntactic analysis itself, as appears in the naming of parts of speech. For example, all these languages possess – quite classically for Oceanic languages – a set of locative words (like 'down', 'above', 'at sea', 'in the bush') which fill

the syntactic function of adjuncts, and match the typological definition of adverbs. While they are properly called ‘adverbs’ for Tape (p. 182), they are wrongly designated as ‘locational nouns’ for Naman (p. 164) and Avava (p. 115), although they share no distributional property with nouns. The shallow evidence given (Naman p. 165) to account for this choice (a sentence like *Above they spoke ...*, where ‘above’ is analysed as a subject NP; or one like *The language of there*, where ‘there’ is called a ‘possessor noun’) is not at all convincing. Clearly these are adverbs, not nouns.

A similar syntactic issue appears in the discussion of serial verb constructions, on which the author is a renowned specialist. As is common in Oceanic languages, one finds proper verb serialization, consisting of two or more genuine verbs, but also more problematic cases, where a first verb is followed by a second element X which in itself does not qualify as a verb, and appears only in that verb modifying position. It is puzzling that Crowley, who is otherwise keen on purely distributional criteria, nevertheless decides to describe these X forms as ‘serialized verbs’ (Naman p. 137, Avava p. 92, Tape p. 162), based on the intuition that they ‘have meanings that are plausibly verbal’. Not only is that stance untenable from a rigorous syntactic viewpoint, but even that semantic criterion does not hold: why should such forms as *lue* ‘outwards’, *khur* ‘apart’, *vëvrëkhon* ‘aimlessly’ be described as verbs on a semantic basis, when they don’t even have the syntactic properties of verbs? Even the diachronic argument – saying that these are former verbs that have only recently specialized in the serial position – is not valid here: for example, Naman *lue* ~ Avava *lu* ~ Tape *luo* ‘out’ all reflect POc **lua* ‘outside’, which is not attested as a full verb in any modern language. The analysis would thus have been more accurate if these forms had been included under the section ‘post-verbal modifiers’ (Naman p. 127). Interestingly, the very same author was more precise in his description of Paamese, when he identified these verb modifiers as forming a syntactic category distinct from verbs, which he called ‘adjunct’ (Crowley 1982:162).

Sometimes problematic is the presentation of the internal organization of the clause, and the interface between syntax and pragmatics. Thus, the syntactic concept of [*subject*-]*predicate* is absent from the author’s vocabulary, and mistaken for the pragmatic concept of [*topic*-]*comment*. The author’s uni-dimensional approach, by ignoring this useful theoretical distinction used in linguistics at least since Li (1976), results in a questionable analysis of (1):

- (1) *Kine* | *netë-g* *ingët*.
 1sg child-1sg many
 ‘I have many children.’ (Naman p. 146)

Crowley understands (1) as consisting simply of two noun phrases, a topic (*kine* 'I') and a comment (*netë-g inget* 'many children'); he explicitly calls it an 'equational construction', an interpretation which unfortunately does not make sense (**I am many children*). Parallel patterns found in other languages make it clear that, in order to be analysed properly, (1) requires two levels of analysis: while it indeed has a general (discourse-motivated) structure *topic-comment*, the latter comment itself is a full (syntactic) clause, consisting of an NP subject (*netë-g* 'my children') and a zero-marked adjectival predicate (\emptyset -*ingët* 'be many'). The structure of (1) is thus exactly parallel to its Japanese translation (1a), where the topic and the subject are distinctly marked:

- (1a) *Watashi wa* | *kodomo ga* <*ippai*>_{PRED}.
 1sg TOP child SUBJ many
 'I have many children.'
 (literally 'As for me, (my) children are many')

Crowley is also unconvincing when he tries to distinguish 'topicalization' from 'NP fronting' (Naman p. 205). Consider sentence (2), which any linguist would describe as a case of topicalization:

- (2) *Igem dalë-n gem ati-des*.
 2pl leg-3sg 2pl 3pl:REAL-alright
 'Your legs are alright.' (literally 'As for you, your legs are alright')

Although Crowley himself sees a 'topic' in the exactly parallel example (1) above, he refrains from using that term for (2), and prefers to speak of 'noun phrase fronting' – that is, a 'pattern of movement of noun phrases to the head of the clause'. This old-fashioned conception of topicalization in transformational terms forces him to claim that *igem* has been 'shifted away from its original position' of possessor 'to the head of the clause'. In doing so, he explicitly draws a questionable connection between topics such as *igem* in (2), and the fronting of question words through '*wh*-movement', which also occurs in Naman. On the other hand, he decides to restrict the term 'topicalization' to those rare cases when the topic phrase 'cannot be construed as having been fronted out of that clause', such as (3):

- (3) *Iget mokhot Ø-imes ne-n Ø-ve nejëkh*.
 1pl.incl person 3sg:REAL-die spirit-3sg 3sg:REAL-become kingfisher
 'As for us, when somebody dies, their spirit becomes a kingfisher.'

The distinction made by Crowley between 'NP-fronting' for (2) and 'topicalization' for (3) is not grounded functionally, but is simply an artefact of his own

theoretical assumptions. Because the interpretation he gives for (2) does not work in (3), he chooses to create a new ad hoc distinction, redefining topicalization along lines that do not match the now general use of this term among linguists. Arguably, however, the same facts could have led to a different analysis: namely, precisely because (3) invalidates the transformational hypothesis in terms of 'fronting', a unifying interpretation has to be found to account for both (2) and (3). This is in fact the case with the modern, functionally-based concept of 'topic': that is, an utterance-initial phrase that highlights an entity so as to provide the interpretative framework for the following clause, regardless of whether this phrase is formally referred back to in the comment – as in (2) – or not – as in (3).

Overall, Crowley is a good describer in terms of formal, morphosyntactic patterns; but he pays insufficient attention to the functional logic behind these patterns, and more generally to the semantic and pragmatic dimensions of language. For example, his analysis of deictics is disappointing: for Avava (p. 62) as for Naman (p. 90), he quickly lists a handful of 'demonstrative-type' forms, without giving any clue as to their semantic or pragmatic differences. Nothing is said either about the system of space reference, or about strategies for reference-tracking and anaphora. Essentially, apart from a nice mention of 'hesitation phenomena' (Naman p. 216), a discourse-based viewpoint is absent from Crowley's reflections, even when it could offer the key to a specific construction. Ironically, he himself criticizes his fellow linguists for 'largely – or even completely – ignoring features of discourse structure' (Naman p. 203).

This last point brings me, finally, to a more general impression left by these four language descriptions. What I regret most is the reduced space dedicated to in-depth functional discussion. Undeniably the author is keen on discussing linguistic facts, sometimes even at length, which is good, but his interests are generally limited to formal considerations: he provides arguments and examples to show that the same form can appear clause-initially or clause-finally, that it combines equally with verbs or with nouns, or can be cross-referenced with a pronoun. But the semantic and pragmatic problems raised by all these constructions – which I regard personally as the ultimate questions a linguistic description must address – are frustratingly absent from Crowley's writings.

Most of the time, a new morpheme is simply characterized by its translation in English, with no further attempt at any abstract definition: 'Postposed *ne* expresses the meaning of "just" or "only".' (Naman p. 169); '*Lis* is used to express the meaning of "again" or "more".' (Naman p. 132). When a form shows a polysemy that is surprising – at least to the reader – Crowley generally contents himself with the factual mention of its various senses, without trying to unravel the semantic motivation for this pattern. For example, the

Naman form *nsi* is first described as a ‘necessitative’ postverbal modifier (p. 134) – equivalent to English *must* – but later ‘the same form’ is said to express a ‘general proximate temporal and spatial meaning which can be glossed as “now” or “here”’ (p. 171). Nowhere does the author attempt to give any interpretation for that semantic connection; and in fact it is even unclear if he considers these as a case of polysemy (same word) or of homophony (two different words). Unfortunately, the lexicon at the end of the book is not helpful here, because it omits to mention the necessitative sense of *nsi*.

Another example of a striking polyfunctionality is Naman *mën* (p. 130): used affirmatively it means ‘(do) first’, but when negated it translates as ‘no longer, no more’, and paradoxically ‘not yet’, which is semantically the opposite of ‘no longer’. What could possibly be the semantic commonality between these three rather different senses? To take a third example, the author notes (Naman p. 143) that ‘the negative of equational clauses’ (*X is not Y*) is expressed ‘by means of the negative existential verb’ (*there is no X*): how are we supposed to interpret this observation? What historical or pragmatic mechanism can account for this unexpected merger of two functions that are formally distinguished in almost all other Vanuatu languages?

These fascinating issues constitute, in my view, the moment in a language description when things really begin, and when the describer really has to stick his neck out: first, by stating the problem; second, by proposing a plausible hypothesis. Unfortunately, perhaps due to his desire to produce descriptions quickly, the author fails to acknowledge most of the issues raised by his data – let alone answer them. Hopefully, the frustration felt today may tomorrow turn out to serve as encouragement for future students to take over Crowley’s pioneering work, and address the questions left unanswered. In fact, such an outcome would answer the author’s own appeal for conducting more fieldwork on these precious languages of Malakula. Luckily, despite their imperfections, these four descriptions are solid enough to serve as a useful basis for any future research of this kind.

All things considered, the flaws I have pointed out here for the sake of accuracy are minor issues in comparison with the incredible amount of firsthand data that are offered to us here. The writing and publication of these four grammars such a short time after the fieldwork itself is an admirable *tour de force*, which I wish other field linguists (including myself!) were able to imitate. In a way, Terry Crowley has taught a useful lesson to us linguists working on endangered languages: that we shouldn’t be overly demanding and perfectionistic if we want our valuable data to come out in print. The heart of our projects, and the basis for any future studies, is first and foremost the publication of our factual observations on languages, in the clearest and richest possible form. In this regard, the legacy he has left us is invaluable.

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