

Book Review

Barclay, Peter. *A Grammar of Western Dani*. Munich: Lincom. 2008.

The island of New Guinea, with a population of close to nine million, includes the independent state of Papua New Guinea in the eastern half and the Indonesian province of Irian Jaya in the western half, and the inhabitants of the island speak a large fraction of the total number of languages of the world. It is estimated that there are around one thousand languages spoken on the island. These languages are genetically divided into two broad groups: languages which belong to the wider Austronesian family and all the others, commonly referred to as non-Austronesian languages or as Papuan languages. It should be noted that, while "Papuan" is a commonly used term referring to this latter group of languages, it is misleading in that the genetic relationship of these languages to each other is still to a great extent uncertain. There are a number of reasons for this uncertainty. One is the sheer number of Papuan (non-Austronesian) languages involved, around 750 (Foley 1986: 8). The other reason is that relatively few of these languages have been adequately described. This too has various reasons in addition to the sheer number of languages in question. The land itself is characterized by its remoteness and inaccessibility as well as the relative underdevelopment of the transportation and communication infrastructure.

The Western Dani language is a member of the far-flung Trans-New Guinea phylum, which according to the Ethnologue website contains 586 languages, a majority of the Papuan language group. It is further subcategorized

as a language of the Dani-Kwerba sub-grouping, which contains 22 languages, and finally as a member of the smaller more closely related Dani family with seven languages (www.ethnologue.com). The number of speakers for Western Dani is given by the Ethnologue site as 180,000 according to a 1993 census. This is considerably larger than the 100,000 for Western Dani given by Foley in his survey of Papuan languages, which classifies the language as a member of the Dani family along with five other languages (Foley 1986: 239-240). These numbers clearly make Western Dani one of the languages of the island with the largest number of speakers. Most indigenous languages of the island have from a few hundred to several thousand speakers, and some are increasingly endangered by languages of wider currency. Western Dani does not seem to be immediately endangered by Indonesian, at least for the time being, nor by a widely spoken lingua franca of the Tok Pisin type as in the eastern half of the island (Papua New Guinea).

Barclay's "Grammar of Western" Dani is a welcome addition to the slowly accumulating descriptions of a large group of languages which are characterized by their grammatical and syntactic complexity. The author is a Christian missionary of the Australian Baptist Missionary Society who lived among the Western Dani people for nearly ten years and learned their language as few outsiders would be able to do with more limited contact. The grammar is an edition of the author's doctoral thesis prepared for Monash University in Australia. With over 650 pages, it is a comprehensive and detailed description of the language with numerous paradigm lists of forms and lexical items. It also contains numerous example sentences illustrating the grammatical points.

The book is divided into ten units of varying length. The introduction discusses mainly the history of contact between the Western Dani and Europeans which began early in the twentieth century when the western half of the island was under Dutch rule. Christian missionary contact began after the Second World War and since then the language has been studied and written down by missionaries in connection with their proselytizing work. The introduction discusses more briefly the linguistic setting of the language and the methodology employed by the author in his compilation of the grammar. The second chapter, "The Dani Sound System" lists the segmental phonemes of the language and gives a detailed description of the complex morphophonological processes including the extensive assimilation processes. The third chapter, the shortest of the book, "Words," is a brief summary of the various word classes to be discussed and analyzed in the following chapters and contains a brief discussion of word order, which is SOV, as is typical for most Papuan languages. The fourth unit, "Nouns," begins with a discussion of the cultural aspects and semantics of the nominal vocabulary. As is expected, the Western Dani vocabulary is a comprehensive descriptive apparatus of the distinct natural environment and culture of its speakers. As new concepts and objects have inevitably begun to enter the world of the speakers, names for these previously unknown items and concepts have had to be developed. Many are based on native lexemes. Others have been imported from the Malay-based Indonesian language, particularly in the translation of the Christian Bible into Western Dani. This would seem to be a logical choice for such vocabulary since Indonesian is the official language of the state in which the people live, it is the

language of most formal schooling they receive, and since Malay-Indonesian has a centuries-old tradition of Islam, an Abrahamic religion related to Christianity. This Indonesian source furnishes a large number of loans (marked as such in the glossing) in the example sentences, a large proportion of which are taken from the Western Dani version of the Christian scriptures. An example of an Islamic-based loan is the word for "God," *Ala*, which did not exist previously in the language. However, the translation of "Holy Spirit" (*Aberiniki*), a uniquely Christian concept, is built up from the indigenous forms /abet/ 'true' and /iniki/ 'heart' (p. 54). Since Western Dani has native words for only the first three numbers, plus a reduplicated form for 'four', Indonesian numerals are used for the higher numbers (p. 111). An important part of this unit is the discussion of nominal possession which is indicated by prefixed pronominal forms. If a noun is indicated as the possessor, it precedes the possessed noun which is itself prefixed with the corresponding pronominal form. Independent personal pronouns too generally precede the prefixed possessed noun. Personal pronouns, quantifiers, demonstratives, color words, intensifiers, and postpositions are also dealt with in lists and example sentences.

The following, extensive fifth section is on "Verbs," which are the most complex feature of the language. Western Dani verbs occur generally in serial formations, as independent verbs, finite medial verbs, non-finite verbs, and dependent medial verbs. These verbs are variously marked with affixes for person, number, tense-aspect-mood, subject and object, and for a realis/irrealis distinction. Verb forms can be chained together into serial verb formations of some grammatical and

semantic complexity. This is of course a well-known prominent feature of many Papuan languages. "Objects" are the topic of the next unit, the sixth. While subjects are generally marked by a suffix on the verb, objects referring to humans, and occasionally pigs, are marked as prefixes on verbs. Inanimate and non-human animate objects are not marked on the verb but occur rather as independent words in the sentence. Again, pigs, which are traditionally the most important domestic animal in the culture, may be marked directly on verb forms.

The seventh unit deals with "Verbal Modifiers." These include various types of adverbs and intensifiers. A separate unit, the eighth, is devoted to "Time and Place." There are extensive lexical resources in Western Dani for exact indications of the different times of day and for periods of time either preceding or following the time of speaking or temporal center of reference in the sentence. Contact with the outside world and contemporary global culture has resulted in the coinage of expressions for previously unknown concepts, such as those for 'week' and 'year.' However, the various phases of the moon are indicated with distinct expressions. Locational expressions are extensively used and many expressions of this sort include an indication of location as either relatively "higher" or "lower" than the deictic center.

The last two units cover sentence structure. The ninth unit deals with "Simple Sentences." These include "verbless" sentences indicating exclamations, negation, and equational and predicative relationships. Other more usual sentence types with full verb phrases are discussed as various types of interrogative, negative, and exclamatory sentences.

An interesting section in this unit is devoted to "Greetings," which seem to frequently occur with explicit sexual and excretory references (p. 482) The tenth unit is on "Complex Sentences" and includes separate and detailed discussions of the following topics: Complementation, Coordination, "Stringed Complexes," Serialization, Chaining, Subordinate Clauses, and Purposive Clauses. As described in this unit, the typically Papuan clause chaining is characterized in Western Dani by three features: 1) one or more dependent clauses arranged consecutively with each clause ending in a one, or more frequently, a two-word medial verb with 2) the medial verb indicating whether the subject of the next clause is the same or different as the subject in its clause, and 3) the final verb of the sentence which is inflected for the various grammatical categories. The first word of the medial verb complex is a non-finite verb form marked for singular or plural subject, and optionally for object. It does not show person, tense, mood, or aspect.

The text of the book ends with an "Afterword" serving as a short summary and overview of the more striking grammatical and syntactic features of the languages. This is followed by a comprehensive "Bibliography." There is no index.

This comprehensive grammar of Western Dani is a nuanced and insightful description of the main phonological and grammatical features of a Papuan language. There were a number of issues and questions which occurred to me while reading the grammar.

Neither in the phonological section nor anywhere else in the grammar is there any

discussion of suprasegmental features such as tone, whether it is phonemically functional or not, nor of word or sentence stress. This is surprising in view of the author's obviously extensive knowledge of the language and familiarity with linguistic description. The only mention of word stress is contained in one sentence in a larger footnote as a possible explanation of a lengthened vowel in one verb ("It could be explained by stress assignment to the penultimate syllable, a process which could have caused the lengthened vowels in the class 4 verbs" (p. 39).

The grammar seems to be intended primarily for the use of Christian missionaries and in particular for those involved in the translation of the Christian scriptures into other indigenous languages on the island of New Guinea. This would explain the fact that the bulk of the textual examples are taken directly from the Western Dani translation of the Christian Bible. For anyone familiar at all with the Bible it is easy to identify such examples. However, and this is I think a shortcoming, there is no citation of the sources of the biblical examples. There are comprehensive morphological glosses given with an English translation, but it would be useful to know the exact source of the biblical text example for the purpose of comparison. There are occasional sentences which seem to be drawn from more spontaneous discourse, but the source of these as well is generally not indicated. Barclay explicitly defends the extensive use of the biblical quotes as reflecting the usage of native speakers who have collaborated extensively in the translation project (p. 12). The basis of the Bible translation into Western Dani for these native speakers is the Indonesian version of the Bible. The written tradition in Western Dani is of very recent origin,

and the strangeness of the world portrayed in the Bible, and of Christianity in general, to traditional Papuan -- and Western Dani -- culture is obvious. It is only reasonable, then, to see the Bible quotes as reflecting a highly artificial form of the language, even if they do reflect, as Barclay claims, the grammatical structure of the language (p. 12). However, linguists who are not missionaries, such as academic Papuanists and typologists, as well as other linguists can make use of the grammar and find much of linguistic interest in it, especially the verbal morphology and the clausal syntax.

The last major problem with the organization of the grammar in my view is the highly idiosyncratic interlinear morpheme glossing system used in the examples, which requires some getting used to. This problem is alleviated to some extent by the complete table of symbols and abbreviations at the beginning of the book (pp. xiii-xx), but it would have been more convenient if a more conventional morpheme glossing system had been used. One thing to be said in defense of Barclay's system is that it is thorough and extensive and does an adequate job of reflecting the complex morphology and syntactic structure of the language. But any ease in using it comes only when the reader becomes familiar with it through constant flipping back and forth. An index of grammatical topics would be helpful for the sake of reference. The detailed table of contents and the page references given with the morpheme glossing abbreviations and symbols compensate to some extent for the lack of a topical index.

There are frequent interesting and detailed discussions throughout the text of the relationship between the language and the culture and society and the physical

environment of its speakers. The author has obviously reflected extensively on the relationship between the Western Dani environment, Western Dani culture, and the language and how this relationship is reflected in the semantics and the grammar of the language. These ethnographic notes are among the most interesting and informative aspects of the book.

To conclude, despite a few problems with the book, Barclay's grammar is a valuable in-depth contribution to the ongoing documentation of Papuan languages. Any linguist not familiar with Papuan languages can learn a lot from it, especially if it is used in conjunction with a general overview of Papuan language structure as given in Foley's survey. The publisher is to be commended for making this thesis available to the wider linguistic community in a well-edited hardcover book.

Reference

Foley, William A. 1986. *The Papuan Languages of New Guinea*. Cambridge Language Surveys. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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