



Ústav Lingvistiky a ugrofinistiky

OPONENTSKÝ POSUDEK DISERTAČNÍ PRÁCE

A grammar of North West Lovari Romani
[Gramatika severozápadní olaštiny (lovárštiny)]
Mgr. Peter Wagner

The topic, scope, and general goals of this dissertation correspond fully to the expectation established by the title: the author presents a first pass at compiling the grammar of North-West Lovari Romani (NWLK). The work starts by placing NWLR in the linguistic context of related Romani dialects and sketching the sociolinguistic situation concerning its speakers, but the bulk of the dissertation is devoted to the NWLR grammatical system, covering phonetics, phonology, inflectional morphology, word formation, and syntax; the latter – due to the nature of the material – also touches on some aspects of discourse organization. Overall, the contribution of Mgr. Wagner’s research can be seen as two-fold. One, the work offers a wealth of primary data, with often meticulous attention to detail, and in some respects could be considered a pioneering effort, since it is explicitly anchored in a socio-pragmatic perspective. This angle – taking into account the speakers and their communicative needs, as reflected in linguistic structure – is only recently becoming part of describing spoken dialects, not just Romani but in general, and has been increasingly generating interest even among linguists who are not primarily engaged in language description but who have come to appreciate the importance of such data for developing adequate theories of language. And two, the descriptions themselves tend to raise new questions about various linguistic categories and grammatical organization, thus leading to further work.

Methodologically, the presented research is based on a standard approach to writing reference grammars, namely, it relies on observation, native speaker consultations, and comparison with other dialects. The comparative aspect is not explicitly revealed in the text itself, but it is not something we would expect in a descriptive grammar either. The data appear to come partly (mainly?) from the author’s own elicitations, partly from secondary sources, but it is left rather unclear what the proportion is between these two sources and what the reasoning was for choosing one or the other; the statement about wanting to “minimize influences from unreflected grammar knowledge” (p.5) is somewhat puzzling, given that the subject matter is an unreflected language to begin with.

The dissertation faces all the challenges that are inherent in trying to give a reasonably systematic picture of a language that is primarily oral and not fixed within any prescriptive limits imposed by a clear normative tradition: data collection is largely limited to one’s own recordings (without the benefit of existing corpora), which affects the range of phenomena that are available to analysis; grammatical categories tend to be quite fluid; the system as a whole – grammar and lexicon alike – are characterized by great variability; syntax can be expected to be relatively loose; etc. The author makes a valiant effort not to sweep the hard items under the rug, is clearly aware that his descriptions cannot always be easily molded into the traditional grammar-writing categories. In this respect particularly the latter sections of the syntax chapter are highly valuable – for their informational value



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as well as for offering a starting point for addressing the nature of spoken syntax of any language. Here especially the section 5.10.4 (very opaquely titled Marking within Main Clause) caught my attention as capturing the nature of the problem, but essentially the whole syntax chapter – sometimes more transparently, other times less so – can be seen primarily as a description of syntactic variation typical of spoken language.

As a purely descriptive enterprise, the work has no theoretical ambitions per se. This alone is not a problem – it is difficult enough to organize the enormous amount of material into a reasonably systematic reference grammar, and the author does a good job of trying to give it sufficient structure, while covering a lot of ground. It is equally commendable that he tries to incorporate the descriptive apparatus suggested in various typologically oriented studies. At the same time, it may be this very effort that also contributes to one noticeable weakness of the presented account: the terminology is often confusing, occasionally leading to incoherence. Some terms are rather obscure and not readily interpretable (e.g., ‘derivative onomasiology’ is not a standard label for derivational morphology/word-formation, if that is indeed what is meant by it), phenomena that might hold together on one account are separated into distinct categories and vice versa, without any explanation as to why a particular conceptualization and terminological labeling has been chosen. For example, why are *te*-clauses (‘if’) distributed over different sections (temporal clauses, p. 372 and conditionals, p. 379)? There is of course a connection, but it should be commented on.

The heart of the problem seems to be the mixing and matching of a number of terminological (and, indirectly, theoretical) traditions, which are not always compatible with each other or mutually interchangeable, but partly it is just plain sloppiness (as in using the label ‘phoneme’ for ‘letter’, p. 28) that results in inaccuracies of various kinds. A few further examples: the confusion in differentiating between lexemes and words (p.36); sorting out the differences between formatives, endings, grammatical words and word forms, which sometimes appear to be used interchangeably (p. 37); the puzzling treatment of NP and PP as the same syntactic object (p. 257); an unusual interpretation of the feature ‘headedness’ (e.g. p. 259 – in what sense is a relative clause a head of anything?). With such an apparently cavalier attitude toward terminological distinctions, it is perhaps inevitable that one of the harder categories to deal with in the context of spoken language – subordination vs. coordination – is left largely without any coherent analysis, resorting instead to mere lists of somewhat random-looking classes of relations. One example to illustrate: ex. #5.10.1-44 (p. 375) indeed expresses concession semantically, but is it really a case of syntactic subordination? It is a well-known fact cross-linguistically that concessives are often syntactically coordination structures rather than true subordinating one. In fairness, though, this is an issue that is currently attracting a lot of attention and the debate on what constitutes the concept of subordination in spoken language is on-going. The author does admit that this is not a straightforward distinction in NWLR.

The terminological problems, however, might also be a language issue, at least to some degree. The dissertation is written in English, which by itself should be taken as a positive feature, making the text more widely accessible, but in its current form, the text is quite difficult to read and interpret due to far too numerous idiosyncracies, both lexical and



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grammatical (one humorous example of a lexical nature: *siblings* (the intended meaning) is not the same thing as *sibilants*, which is the actual word used in glossing the collocation ‘brother and sister’). If the text is intended for publication (in whatever form or scope) in English, it needs to be rewritten and carefully proofread by a native speaker of English.

As already mentioned, the text raises a number of questions for various reasons and in varying degrees of seriousness. In what follows, I give a short random list of some of the specific questions that occurred to me while reading the dissertation. Some of them simply offer food for thought, others are mentioned because they would require additional attention and elaboration, if the work is to be at some point published.

1. The case system is very interesting but against the background of various case-marking systems in the world’s languages, it begs the question of the relationship between the layer I and layer II markings and also of the nature of layer I. At least two questions emerge. One, could it be that NWLR has some sort of ‘absolute – non-absolute’ subsystem, possibly as a highly grammaticalized rough distinction (kind of like nominative/absolute vs other), when finer semantic distinctions are not needed? The distribution of NOM and ACC definitely deserves clearer explanations. Two, how would we determine whether NWLR truly has cases, as opposed to postpositions (or enclitics) expressing certain semantic concepts/roles? Layer II morphemes seem to bear certain properties of such (erstwhile?) postpositions (out of which real case markers can develop, to be sure). The very fact that layer II marking takes as its base the generic OBL form (rather than a plain root) should raise some suspicions.
2. Why is present tense called ‘subjunctive’ (p. 160)? This is unusual, especially if it is said to be “prototypically” connected to indicative (p. 162).
3. Why is comparative/superlative morphology treated as word-formation? Doesn’t it bear features of grammatical categories more than forming new lexemes?
4. With respect to the decision to classify NPs and PPs as the same syntactic objects, we should be asking whether the PP truly behaves like any NP, in all NP environments. E.g., can it appear in the slot of an adnominal genitive (in this dissertation called “chaining”), such as the example 4.2.5.11 (p.116)? Or in vocatives? Etc. It seems that the author confuses the referentially based notion of ‘nominals’ (i.e. expressions that refer to entities) with the syntactic categories NP and PP (i.e. distinct syntactic forms, with distinct distribution and behavior).
5. The section labeled Absolute (5.10.1.3.11) deserves a more elaborate commentary. It is related to the essence of spoken syntax and the author could get a lot more mileage out of this observation than a single paragraph, especially since there are other examples scattered through other sections that seem to fit this description as well. And as additional food for thought: could this idea of ‘absolutiveness’ (in the author’s terminology), as a type of loosely adjoined structures, apply also to at least some of the distributional patterns concerning the NOM? Again, it is not crosslinguistically strange for spoken syntax to have some nominals just loosely attached, especially close to the edges of clauses, without being explicitly marked for a semantic role or syntactic function, because those are inferable from context.



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Although Mgr. Wagner's dissertation suffers from the weaknesses noted above, those are more formal than substantive. The work is an impressive compendium of extremely valuable material, in which he shows an appropriate level of understanding of the topic, its challenges, and its research promise for further work – not just his own or in Romani linguistics, but for the linguistic community at large. It is obvious that he's mastered the language he's describing and is dedicated to this highly useful but also very time and energy consuming scholarly path. The way he manages to organize the hard-to-conceptualize data (hard for someone who is not a Romani specialist) is very helpful, particularly the easy-to-navigate tables of the complex morphological information. The bibliography seems adequate (at least to this non-Romani linguist) and references are properly incorporated in the text. It is evident that Mgr. Wagner is aware that there are open questions requiring further analysis and this is another positive contribution of the dissertation: in addition to new and fascinating linguistic material, the work generates new questions and new challenges to engage in. The area in which improvement will be desirable in the future is the organization of the grammar as a whole. The presented work is sometimes hard to follow not just because of the non-idiomatic English but also because certain categories are talked about before they were properly illustrated and exemplified (e.g. frequent references to morphological categories, classes, and structures in the phonetics/phonology sections, which come first). The text should be accessible to a non-Romani linguist as well, not just to narrow specialists. The syntax chapter could have been divided into at least two separate chapters (e.g. simple clause features vs complex sentences) and although the dissertation is intended as a reference grammar, it seems a little odd that there is no concluding chapter, however brief, that would synthesize all of the findings into a few generalizations or at least remind the reader of the most prominent and important features to remember about NWLR.

On the whole, the work does fulfill the basic requirements of a dissertation and I therefore recommend that it be admitted for a defence.

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Praha, July 15, 2012