New Guinea and Neighboring Areas: A Sociolinguistic Laboratory

Stephen A. Wurm, Editor

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The computational linguist who manages to worm his way through this volume should come away impressed, at the very least, by the size of the linguistic universe that has not yet been explored by Turing machines. That universe includes the chief themes of this book: the phenomena of language contact and change, of language planning, of multilingualism and code-switching, of pidgin/creole continua, of social variation—in short, all the phenomena that have been treated in the past 10-15 years under the rubric of sociolinguistics.

West of the New Guinea mainland itself, east of the Solomon Islands, and south through the New Hebrides stretches the territory known as the New Guinea area. Over 1000 separate or separable languages are spoken here, making it the most diversified linguistic region, for its size, in the world. Research in the area, as presented in this book, has taken three tracks: grouping and categorizing (genetic and geographical relationships); reporting on events of sociolinguistic concern (grouped roughly under "Ethnography of Speaking"); and more detailed investigation into one major sociolinguistic phenomenon, the advent and development of pidgins and creoles.

Most of the papers presented here are long on documentation and short on programming: that is, they can be scanned for research ideas but not translated easily into computational terms. Warm notice should be taken of the possible exceptions to this generalization: for example, Mike Olsen's work on the social significance of possessive markers in the Barai language presents three morphological systems and their set-theoretical interpretation in a fashion that would lend itself interestingly to computer grammar construction. Other papers that might stimulate research ideas include Graham Scott on lexical expansion in the Fore language (for those interested in learning, here is a description of how speakers expand their vocabulary by (a) using the available vernacular and (b) borrowing loanwords with attendant semantic and phonological shifts) and the papers by Johnston, Muhlhauser, and Wurm and Muhlhauser on stylistic and dialectal comparison (for those interested in language generation).

Readers of this collection will probably wish that the editor had done a better mapping job in every sense of the term—the book could have included more geographical maps for the non-initiated, more precise grammatical descriptions for the computationally-minded, and a properly detailed index for everyone. Much of the hesitation with which non-sociolinguists will approach the book might have been dispelled by taking this more scrupulous path.

The appearance in this *AJCL* issue of a paper by Weber and Mann on "Prospects for Computer-Assisted Dialect Adaptation" (pp. 165-177) may point the way to a fresh consideration of the possibilities for computational research in these fuzzier areas of linguistic theory and action. At any rate, the Weber and Mann paper is an early bird in the field, suggesting interest in the book reviewed here, and partially describing a territory from which we have, one hopes, not heard the last word.

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