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Review Of "The Function Of Verb Prefixes In South-Western Otomí" By H. Andrews

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Review

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To see how various techniques are put together in basic computational linguistics but would like to make a complete, working system. [Michael A. Covington, University of Georgia.]

The Core Language Engine (CLE) was developed at SRI International and Cambridge University in the late 1980s. Like LILOG, CLE uses unification-based grammar, logic-based semantics, and a Prolog software environment. Distinctive to CLE is the use of quasi-logical forms (QLFs), which are semantic representations in which quantifiers, anaphors, and certain other abstractions have not yet been moved from their surface syntactic positions. Accordingly, CLE separates quantifier scoping and anaphora resolution cleanly from the rest of semantic analysis.

The 14 chapters, written by a total of 10 authors, fit together surprisingly well. The project as a whole strives to be consistent with linguistic theory without being tied strictly to one theoretical framework. Thus, the syntax resembles GPSG, but with list-valued subcategorization features; the semantics is model-theoretic, but with a distinctly non-Montagovian (and therefore simpler) use of lambdas; and the morphology is admittedly atheoretical (but it works).

Processing involves three major steps. First, a left-corner parser applies the syntax rules, producing a packed tree (à la Tomita) which represents alternative structures concisely. Then the semantic component traverses the packed tree and builds a QLF semantic representation. (This could have been done concurrently with the syntactic parse, but the implementors found it more efficient not to do so.) Along the way, of course, many alternatives are discarded. Finally, the ‘resolver’ translates QLF into pure logical form by resolving anaphors, determining quantifier scope, and dealing with certain other abstractions, such as the abstract predicate that relates friend to John in friend of John.

There is much here about how to make things work. CLE uses gap-threading (‘in’ and ‘out’ features) to handle not only unbounded syntactic movements, but also passives. List-valued subcategorization accounts for, among other things, VP control (John wants to leave, where John is the subject of both verbs). The semantics includes a representation of arbitrary quantifiers (as predicates of the numbers of individuals that satisfy two given predicates). Later chapters deal with lexicon-building, database querying, and machine translation. I recommend this book to anyone who understands basic computational linguistics but would like to see how various techniques are put together to make a complete, working system. [Michael A. Covington, University of Georgia.]


Andrews gives an analysis of data she gathered over a twenty-five-year period in San Felipe Santiago, Mexico. She argues that verbs typically take from one to three prefixes, and that, although the canonical form of a prefix in isolation is CV, prefixes change phonological shape (the vowel and tone of all but the closest to the verb stem being lost, among other changes, such as feature spreading) when they co-occur. Thus, three prefixes together will generally be realized as a single syllable with the form CCCV.

The prefixes relate information quite commonly carried by affixes in many languages, including four major types indicating the person of the subject, the time of the action, the location or direction of the action, and the actuality of the event or assertion (reals or irrealis mode). They can also give other information, such as aspect (a single prefix can range across the categories of habitual, continuous, progressive, and iterative, and others indicate completive, imperfective, and the like). But these four major types characterize what A labels an independent clause in Otomi; her definition of ‘independent’ has to do with grounding an event or assertion in reality. Not all free-standing clauses are independent in this sense, many of them being dependent upon some other clause in the close linguistic context that supplies the missing information.

A major point of the book is that deixis is a key element in understanding Otomi verb structure. Since deictic reference in nominals is crucial to the proper selection of verbal prefixes, A finds it necessary to outline the structure of the noun phrase. Many deictic factors come into play: whether the addressee or the referent of an argument of the verb is located centrally, or within sight of the deictic center, or even approximately at eye-level or below eye-level; whether an argument is to be considered as a locative; whether an event is to be looked at as momentary; and so forth. When a nominal is
used predicatively, a combination of prefixes and suffixes can distinguish dual, plural, inclusive, and exclusive person, except in the instance of third person, where generally pronouns play this role. A combination of affixes and pronouns can indicate the gender of the speaker and/or of the addressee.

A groups the prefixes by a complicated set of criteria. Some prefixes in the realis mode encode three distinct persons-of-subject, three categories of time reference, and two categories of location or direction with respect to the deictic center. True imperatives lack a person prefix for subject. Another group marks the situation of a dependent clause (‘dependent’ in that it is not independent in her sense) as simultaneous with or in sequence with an associated independent clause, essentially indicating an adverbial modifier of the independent clause. One prefix tells us whether a clause in a narrative or discourse is on the eventline with other clauses or synchronous with that eventline.

The six chapters of analysis are followed by one chapter of example text with morpheme-by-morpheme glosses as well as translation.

The data presented here are complex, and the reader who picks this up expecting to learn about the phonology and morphophonology of Otomi (which is what I expected to do) will be left with many questions. But the title does not mislead: this is a book about the function of these morphemes, and it certainly succeeds in demonstrating the centrality of deictic notions in describing the Otomi verb. [DONNA JO NAPOLI, Swarthmore College.]


Ayapova’s work is the first book-length introduction intended for the general English-speaking public of this major modern Turkic language. Kazakh is spoken by approximately six million native speakers in Kazakhstan, China, Russia, Mongolia, and other countries of residence of the Kazakh diaspora, although many more would claim it as their mother tongue without being able to speak it fluently. In September, 1989, it became the official language of Kazakhstan.

The purpose of the book is to ‘enable the student to begin to communicate in every day life in the Kazakh language’ (vi). Its organization is well-suited to the fulfillment of that aim: Section 1 (Steps 1–50) introduces and provides extensive practice in pronunciation, sentence models, dialogues, and conversational formulae. Section 2 (Steps 51–70) reinforces the material in the first section with additional dialogues which model culturally appropriate ways of speaking to accomplish essential daily tasks such as making appointments by telephone or by dropping by an office to talk directly with the office receptionist. A cluster of ‘steps’ form a unit; most units conclude with two post-tests, an answer key for the exercises and post-tests, and a list of vocabulary words introduced in the unit.

The Table of Contents, however, obscures the book’s clear organization by giving only the page numbers of the steps without listing the contents of each step. Quick referencing would also be facilitated by a complete word list at the end of the book.

Ayapova encourages learners to use the key when doing the exercises and then to practice them. As the book’s subtitle (200 sentence models) indicates, the author emphasizes the learners’ recognizing native language models, practicing them, and then creating their own. Learners are spared long grammatical descriptions; rather, they are succinctly introduced to new forms and provided considerable opportunity to assimilate them. This book is eminently suited for those who learn best when materials are presented gradually and systematically with plenty of opportunities to absorb them before moving on to new forms.

In the case of the alphabet, however, a little more explanation might help. Most of the letters of the alphabet are given equivalents in American English. The sounds of some Kazakh letters, though, are simply called ‘unique’ without any equivalents, and learners must rely solely on the letters’ written representations and their pronunciation on the tapes in order to recognize them. But Ayapova does facilitate recognition by presenting these sounds in the context of words, and by providing phonetic drills in the book’s first eight steps.

For those learners who will start Kazakh before actually going to Kazakhstan, the book’s format provides numerous opportunities to practice many of the essential components of