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REVIEW

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William A. Foley. 2022. *A sketch grammar of Kopar. A language of New Guinea (Pacific Linguistics 667)*. Berlin – Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, pp. xvii + 248

There were several arguments for selecting just this volume among recent publications to be presented to a wider community of “general linguists” greedy for fresh arguments, facts, and inspirations in pursuit of their research goals concerning language endangerment, death, revitalization, saving in description, also language policies and planning, etc.¹ but also interested ethnologists, cultural anthropologists, etc. (astonishingly many of them signaling wants and needs concerning sources for such information).

Primo, the language described in the book is introduced as one that “was spoken” (the author explains the past tense form used with the fact that it “was already moribund twenty-five years ago [...] and hardly used in daily life”, p. 1) – so, the description actually is of a language “*newly-dead*”, in the *infancy stage* of its extinction.

Secundo, the author of the *Grammar* added the attribute *Sketch* in its title explaining that fieldwork data collecting lasted but “around a month” as “a side project to” his “main research on the documentation of the neighboring distantly related Watam language”, p. 2 (in relation to this, cf. below on Meier & Meier and Voegelin & Voegelin listing of Kopar). Thus, were it not Foley’s “side” interest in recording at least the data acquired during that month 25 years ago and preparing them for the publication under scrutiny here, Kopar could well silently disappear without any description left.

Tertio, even 25 years prior to the preparation of the “sketch grammar” there were so few speakers that not only recording data but also their verification and cross-checking with other informants~speakers “created problems” and results, briefly but sufficiently lucidly recounted, to have educational value for prospective fieldwork apprentices in

¹ Foley (p. 2) himself declares that he “offer[s] [t]his sketch to the linguistics research community and especially to *Papuanists*” (italics afm.); the present text is addressed primarily to *non-Papuanist* linguists.

similar situations. The author of the *Grammar* seemingly has no doubt that the situation after the twenty five years markedly deteriorated: “I suspect, very few fluent speakers remain today, perhaps less than two dozen [...], and even they would rarely use the language” that “certainly [...] has by now even more retreated in daily life” (p. 1). Indeed, the *last-minute* grammatical description.

Quarto, Foley “identified areas where analyses need to be regarded as provisional, pending further data *should their collection prove to be possible*” (2, *italics* afm.). The problem signaled in the latter part of this confession is by far not new and begs for a comparison; the story selected is one about the Polish zoologist and physician Benedykt Dybowski (1833-1930) who, serving (1879-1883) as a Tsarist government-appointed Regional Physician (*окружной врач*)² for a vast territory of Kamchatka Peninsula and adjacent areas with the statutory office in Petropavlovsk³ on Kamchatka, compiled relatively extensive word-lists of six (or seven) local tongues⁴ recorded directly from native speakers of each of them. Dybowski considered himself incompetent and unprepared to do it and even more to prepare them for publication, hence he entrusted the job to a prominent specialist in Ancient Orient philological and religious studies Ignacy Radliński and provided the following explanation of reasons inspiring him to collect his (as he labeled them) *dictionaries* of aboriginal languages in Kamchatka and neighboring islands printed in the introduction to the 1891 Kuril Ainu vocabulary: “there are circumstances that make the dictionaries particularly important and exceptionally valuable. The autochthons of Kamchatka and adjacent islands are dying out. For their total extinction, according to ethnographers’ estimation, one cannot wait even decades. Even if one assumes that an explorer, linguistically trained, comes to Kamchatka in the future with the intention to write down words in accordance with the principles of linguistics, it may turn out that it is too late, that the peoples concerned no longer exist. These vocabularies, therefore, are becoming the only trace of the tongue of an extinct people and simultaneously the only evidence of the existence of the people who spoke it” (Radliński 1891: 2). Radliński 1891 with its 1,900 entry words with equivalents in Polish and Latin remains the principal and most extensive source of data on the extinct Kuril Ainu (cf. Murayama 1971). The remaining tongues from the collection in question are either also extinct, moribund or seriously endangered at the best. For this reviewer, the similarity of both cases (Foley-Kopar-endangerment status) and (Dybowski-“Kamchatkan” languages-endangerment status) is obvious, even if in the latter case the respective languages were still spoken in all generations, the instruments to record them to posterity were limited to some paper (at that time rather difficult to obtain in Kamchatka) and some primitive

² Russian: *назначен на должность окружного врача*.

³ Officially (till 1924), Petropavlovskiy Port ~ Petropavlovsk; today Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy, the administrative center of Kamchatskiy Kray.

⁴ Northern (Shumshu Island) Kuril Ainu, Kamchatka river region Itelmen (= Kamchadal), Southern Itelmen, Western Itelmen, Eastern Koryak (edited and published in 1891-4 by Radliński), Copper Island Aleut, and possibly one more Aleut (Bering Island Aleut was probably treated as the same as that of Copper Island) ethnolect (the latter two remained unpublished as word lists (possibly lost) but a representative amount of lexical data from Bering and Copper Island ethnolects can be found dispersed in Dybowski’s works (like e.g. 1885)).

instrument (quill or nib pen requiring short-supply ink, or rather a pencil) to write with, and linguistics as an autonomous study discipline was yet to be born. Both Dybowski and Foley should be praised for their decision to publish their records they themselves considered imperfect and fragmentary and thus preserve for future generations *the only traces, the only evidence of the existence* of tongues once spoken and peoples who spoke them. Both authors deserve the everlasting gratitude for it.

Quinto, in spite of all the circumstances accompanying the conception and delivery of the *Grammar* quoted above, the final result needed 265 pages to print it on ! – and this boring recital of “arguments for” could (God willing...) drag on but... *sapienti sat*. Instead, this reviewer will resort to his usual (while in this role) procedure of checking the presence (or absence) of the glottonym *Kopar* in selected representative reference books within reach.

In Voegelins 1977 the index entry “Kopar = Watam” (p. 507) directs the user to <Bogia> where under <Bogia = Monumbo → Ramu> one finds “Watam = Kopar, 600 [speakers]” (p. 86); glottonyms *Yimas*, *Chambri*, and *Murik* from fig. 1 (p. 1 in the *Grammar*) “present[ing] the languages of the Lower Sepik family and their relationships” have been classified in Voegelins under <North New Guinea → Murik = Nor-Pondo> (253). In Meiers 1979:374 one finds “[...] *Watam* (auch *Kopar*) im Sepik Bezirk” under “153. Bogia-Sprachen → 153.1. West-Bogia-Zweig → Nord-Gruppe” (five tongues, altogether 6,000 speakers; *Jimas*, *Čambri*, and *Murik* are to be found under “162. Nor-Pondo-Sprachen”, p. 377). Grimes in *Ethnologue* ⁹1978: 389 lists “*Watam (~Marangis~Kopar [*sic!*]) with 600 [speakers] (after Wurm, 1971)⁵” suggesting “possible translation [of the Bible or other religious scriptures] needed”⁶. In *Ethnologue* (Lewis) ¹⁶2009: 619 (entry “Kopar”), the number of speakers quoted is “540 (2000 census)” and relation to Murik admitted; Kopar language area is shown on the map on p. 865 (glottonym 174).

Kamei et al. 1993 listed Kopar in its both Japanese (和文索引, p. 596) and “Western writing” (欧文索引, p. 906, in both cases central column) indices directing to Kamei et al. 1992: 232 left col. (listed as “コバル語 (Kopar)” under “61. ノル・ポンド (下流セピック) 言語亜門レベル言語系 (Nor-Pondo (Lower Sepik) subphylum-level Stock”). Contrary to what the index in Asher & Moseley atlas 2007 suggests, Kopar does not appear only on map 33 (p. [141], glottonym 356 – one of two Nor among six Lower Sepik languages in turn among 35 Lower Sepik-Ramu languages) but *is also listed* in the text on p. 113 with the same classification (and the population of native “speakers” 230; – just for the unfortunate Kopar – no reference to that page has been provided in the atlas index). Seemingly (and strangely), not only Kopar under any glottonym but none of the

⁵ Wurm 1971 is not listed in the “Bibliography” in *Ethnologue* ⁹1978: 412; possibly the reference is to Stephen A. Wurm’s contribution “The Papuan Linguistic Situation” to Thomas A. Sebeok (ed.) 1971. *Current trends in linguistics. Vol. 8. Linguistics in Oceania*. The Hague & Paris: Mouton (541-657; Sebeok (ed.) 1971 is listed in *Ethnologue* ⁹1978: 411).

⁶ The following explanation of the category has been provided in the introduction to Grimes: “Because of lack of information about intelligibility with related dialects or languages, bilingualism in other languages, or attitudes toward other languages, the Bible translation needs have not yet been determined more definitely. These languages are marked with an asterisk to the left of the name”

Lower Sepik family languages has been listed in Yartseva 1982: 76ff.⁷ Of course, it is to be found in Foley 1986 (: 214-29, subchapter “The Lower Sepik family, a comparative study”) and in Foley’s contribution (“The Languages of the Sepik-Ramu Basin and Environs”, 197-431, here subchapter “The Lower Sepik-Ramu family”, 203-20) to Palmer 2018.

This routinely executed checking procedure revealed also that the glottonym *Kopar* as well as its referent have been by far better known to authors of reference books like these quoted above than quite a number of glottonyms of languages, the pioneering grammars published in a few recent years of which⁸ had been chosen by this reviewer to be presented to the “wider community of general linguists” pointed to at the very beginning of this text who would otherwise probably never reach for any of them.

The core (pp. 1-203) of the *Sketch grammar* has been organized into seven “chapters”, followed by two “appendices” (205-242), “References” (243-244), and “Index” (245-248). The front matter includes consecutively “Preface” (v), table of “Contents” (vii-x), “List of abbreviations” (xi-xii), “List of Map” (*sic!* – precisely, one map “listed”, xiii⁹), “List of figures” (xv, four items), “List of tables” (vii, 13 items). Of these, the detailed table of contents and the list of abbreviations, and of course the index are really supportive for users. The list of references reveals how absent <focus on Kopar> was in research (the glottonym seems to appear only once on the list – in the title of an article by Foley¹⁰).

“Chapter 1” entitled “Introduction”¹¹ (pp. 1-5) starts with identifying the language described in the book as “now moribund language formerly spoken in three villages near the mouth of the Sepik River”. Apart from the information on the language situation and fieldwork circumstances in part quoted in the initial paragraphs of this text, it places Kopar in the genetic classification of the Lower Sepik family (mainly with the, simple but very transparent and informative, drawing also mentioned above as <fig. 1>) as well as geographically, on a map captioned “Distribution of the Lower Sepik languages” (p. 3)¹², provides details on field data collecting and collected (word lists (one outsourced), nominal and verbal paradigms, “three narrative texts of moderate length and one shorter narrative text”) and their use, and a hint on “minor dialect differentiation” (2), certain relevant facts from the recent history of both the Koper community and language, and

⁷ A verification, especially with the use of alternative glottonyms, proved to be too time-consuming to be repeated for the purposes of the present text.

⁸ Like Paluai (LPos. 62/2 (2020), 121-133), Papapana (LPos. 63/1 (2021), 119-129), Gurindji (LPos. in print), Xong (RO 75/1 (2022), 167-180).

⁹ Actually, two lines on two pages, proecological awareness failed – in this and in the two cases that follow.

¹⁰ And “the most closely related” (1) Murik – only four times: once in the same title, and thrice in the titles of Joseph Schmidt’s works dated 1922-3, 1926, 1953.

¹¹ For this reviewer, a nowadays common terminological inexactitude, a confusion of genres: in this writer’s very long practice as author, editor, and reader, <Chapter 1> in the absolute majority of cases followed the <Introduction>.

¹² The map is basically the same as the one printed in Foley 1986: 214 – with one important difference: the 1986 map is much more transparent; for a reader over, say, 70 years old, it does make a really huge difference.

points to prominent characteristic typological features (“typological profile”) of the language (phonologically “fairly typical of its area” (5); “strongly agglutinative, moderately polysynthetic [...] but perhaps not to the degree of” certain Amerindian languages (4); S-O-V order “more regularly than Yimas and some other Papuan languages” (5)). Usually, such introductory chapters with extralinguistic contextual material in pioneering grammars are perceived, particularly by users from outside the narrow field of, say, Austroasiatists, Austronesianists, Africanists, (in this case Papuanists), etc., as superficial, providing insufficient background information, “being too short”. The introduction in Foley’s *Grammar* is very short and may be met with a similar complaint; on the other hand, however, taking into account the conditions under which the language data had been collected and organized into a book as well as the entire volume of the book (cf. above), this reviewer found the amount of information squeezed in this compact text satisfactory enough to avoid airing such a grievance ¹³.

“Chapter 2” (6-23) is devoted to “Phonology” (“somewhat typical phonemic inventory for the languages of the area” (6), with 6 vowel (7) and 18 consonantal (6) phonemes, briefly discussed are also allophones; “phonotactics” (8-12); “stress” (13); “morphophonology” (13-22); and “a note on presentation of examples” (parallelly in four lines: phonemic transcription – underlying representation – glossing – English translation (22-3)).

“Chapter 3” (24-52) deals with “Word classes” (“only two major classes of words, nouns and verbs; all other classes are small and closed” (24) – “the other” eight classes enumerated (24) and described are: adjectives (30-5, “[...] there is one true adjective” [...]) (30)), quantifiers (quinary-decimal-vigesimal numeral system and “three other quantifiers” for ‘some, few’, ‘many’, and ‘all’ (36-9)), independent pronouns (three persons, four numbers – singular-dual-paucal-plural; also recorded five interrogative pronouns (39-41)), deictics (41-6), postpositions (46-9), temporals (49-51), conjunctions (one native, and two Tok Pisin loans (51-3)), and interjections (five recorded and listed (53)); the chapter includes also brief introductory information on nouns (“morphologically simple”, 25-6) and verbs (“the most morphologically complex class of words”, 26-30). The author decided to “use a mixture of semantic and formal criteria to define each class” (24) which is logically risky – hence in the book one finds such passages as “words denoting properties can be divided into three classes: *Adjective* (*only one*, we remember), *Adjectival verbs* [and] *Nouns* (30-1) or “While the perfective is semantically an aspect, it is treated here [*i. e.*, in the section on “Tense” (97-104)] because formally it behaves like a tense in Kopar” (101).

“Chapter 4”, evidently the shortest in the grammatical part, focuses on “Nouns and noun phrases” (54-64, again we remember: “morphologically simple”), while “Chapter 5”, naturally the most extensive in the whole volume, concentrates on the “the most complex” component of Kopar grammatical structure, namely the “Verbal morphology” (65-150; briefly and selectively: transitivity (66-8), “pronominal affix agreement systems for core arguments” (68-96, with “the accusatively aligned system” (68-70)), “the ergatively aligned system” (71-85), “pronominal agreement in the perfective” (86-90), “the dative suffixes” (90-6), “tense, aspect and mood” (96-120, six tenses (97) and four aspectual

¹³ See our remarks in LPos. 62/2 (2020): 130; 63/1 (2021): 124-5; RO 75,1 (2022): 175-6.

categories (“distinctions”) established but “aspect [...] still remains not fully understood” (104), modality (107-12) and “mood of illocutionary force” (112-20, here questions, imperatives, prohibitives, hortatives), “verb stem derivations: valence changes” (120-32, *i. a.*, reflexivization, transitivity and detransitivization, causatives, applicatives), “verb theme derivations” (132-50, here “possessor raising” (133-5)¹⁴ and incorporation (135-50)).

“Chapters 6” (151-79) and “7” (180-203) have been allocated to syntax, the former to clause structure (here “basic verbal clauses”, 151-73, and “nonverbal clauses”, 173-9: “Kopar verbal clauses and non-verbal clauses have very different structures and possibilities” (151)), the latter to “interclausal relations” (here “non-finite constructions”, 180-6, and “finite constructions”, with “finite subordinate clauses”, 187-90, “coordination of full independent clauses”, 190-3, and “clause chaining”, 193-203).

Followed are two appendices (1 – being a 200-entry “comparative wordlist of Kopar and Murik”, 205-10, and 2 – a longer narration text (perhaps one of the “moderate-length” texts mentioned in the “Introduction”, 2, cf. above), with interlinear analysis and English translation, 211-42).

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¹⁴ “[...] a very common feature of the narrative texts. Possessor raising occurs when a human possessor of a noun occurs as a dative pronominal suffix instead of or in addition to [...] being realized as a *-na* POSS marked constituent in a noun phrase. Nouns from which possessors can be raised are most commonly body parts [...]” (133). Marginally, there seems to be no <(5.83f)> example referred to (cf. 133-4) and <POSS> seems to be absent from the “List of Abbreviations” (xi). Reviewer’s task, however, is not that of a proof-reader so no other possible flaws have been noted down for the sake of the present text.

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