"Think syntactically."
Tomas Givón[1]

"All grammars leak. Functionalist grammars leak like sieves."
Scott DeLancey[2]

INTRODUCTION

1 MOTIVATIONS

This new grammar of Sikuani exists thanks to a handful of converging reasons. After three decades studying the language — my first fieldwork took place in 1971 — I had a two volume grammar released by the Belgian publisher Peeters. Then Dr. Ulrich Lüders, from Lincom Europa in Munich, invited me to consider publishing it at Lincom under a condensed format, something between one and two hundred pages. I did not think twice. The grammar had been written in French, which foredoomed it to be ignored almost everywhere outside France since, already at that time, a corollary to the aphorism "publish or perish" was "publish in English or stay confidential". Beyond that, who reads a 950-page description of a particular language spoken by a minority ethnic group? Tangentially I figured out that it would be easier, in one of both countries where the language is spoken — Colombia and Venezuela —, to raise some funding for having the English version translated to Spanish, thus making the grammar available for the — growing in number — literate speakers. I thought: "Six months. Close your eyes, read inside your brain, and let your fingers run all over the keyboard." This was 24 years ago.

Last but not least, in the nineties I had begun studying another language, Katukina-Kanamari, spoken on the mid-Amazon southern tributaries. My understanding of grammar underwent a radical shakedown. Anything I laid my eyes (ears) on in Katukina-Kanamari was the opposite of its counterpart in Sikuani. The language forced me to abstract away from what Sikuani had taught me, and probe the province where both languages belonged. Call it

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1 2011 in the woods surrounding Port-Royal-des-Champs.
2 2001 *Functional Syntax* LSA Summer Institute, UC Santa Barbara.

typology, theory, or plainly human language. Whence, and while writing the present account, Sikuani looked on occasion like something of a novelty to my own eyes.

Heloisa Lima-Salles and Orlene de Saboia Carvalho, of the University of Brasilia, achieved a first English draft of the previously selected excerpts. The former also provided valuable comments on several matters discussed in the chapters. To both colleagues I here extend my warmest thanks.

2 THE LINGUISTIC FAMILY

Sikuani, along with Hitnü, Cuiba, and Guayabero, is part of the small Guahiban family. The latter has been related to Arawak by Fabo (1911), Swadesh (1959), Voegelin & Voegelin (1965), Loukotka (1968), and Greenberg (1987). A majority of authors — the present author included — considers it as independent: Gilij (1782), Rivet (1948), Mason (1950), McQuown (1955), Castellví & Espinosa (1958), S.E. Ortiz (1965), Lobo-Guerrero (1979), and Tovar & Larrucea de Tovar (1984). Guahiban is geographically surrounded by languages belonging to the following families: Arawak (Achagua, Piapoco), Kakua-Nukak (Nukak), Saliba (Piaroa, Saliba), Chibcha (Tunebo), Pamigua (Tinigua).

In Queixalós (1993) I submit four varieties of Guahiban as desserving the denomination *language*: Hitnü, Sikuani, Cuiba, and Guayabero. Hitnü is closer to Sikuani than to Cuiba. Guayabero is the most divergent and has no reported variants. Sikuani and Cuiba conform a dialectal continuum displaying significant differences between both ends. More fine-grained distinctions can be found in Queixalós (forthcoming), to which substantial parts of this introduction owe much.

Speakers of Guahiban languages live in the extense tropical grasslands comprised between the Andean foothills to the West, down to the Orinoco river at the East, and, on a North-South axis, between the rivers Casanare, Meta and Guaviare, West tributaries of the Orinoco. Also, resulting from mid-20th century migrations, a great number of Sikuani speakers has settled in Venezuela: eastern banks of the Orinoco and the Manapiare river, a tributary of the Ventuari, itself a northern tributary of the upper Orinoco.

3 DEMOGRAPHY AND ETHNOGRAPHY

Figures can be starkly divergent. Based on my own first-hand experience and the following sources: Reichel-Dolmatoff (1944), Morey & Metzger (1974), F. Ortiz (1976, 1982), Ortiz & Pradilla (1987), plus Internet sites of Colombian government agencies, I would say that joining Colombian and Venezuelan populations the Sikuani are reputed to be over 30'000. The ratio of fluent speakers is unknown. One third of the Sikuani would be monolingual in their original language. The Venezuelan Sikuani seem to increasingly shift to Spanish.

As the other Guahiban groups, the Sikuani have endured a long-lasting process of sedentarization away from foraging life, firstly induced through their contact with Arawakan societies, long before the nonnatives laid their hands massively on the territory in the mid-20th century. As the other Guahiban groups, the Sikuani gave colonial missionaries a hard time about getting converted and fixed in permanent settlements, eventually setting up home by the bigger rivers while nomads continued their traditional hunting and gathering in the interfluves. Under the pressure of cattle raisers and missionaries — now rather US-based evangelical proselytists — the other groups, but also the extant nomadic Sikuani, abandonned once and for all the itinerant style of life. Additional contemporary threats are guerrilla, coca traders and oil companies. Villages consist of a dozen palm-made houses in the middle of the savannah, the explicit rationale being: "So as to afford a long-distance gaze." Those not surrounded by ranches or fixed by missions move every five or six years as they must get

closer to new cultivating sites. Recently-sedentarized groups complement their diet through seasonal itinerancy. For all, foraging in the wild remains a significant ingredient of the economic life.

Formerly nomadic regional bands are still the basis for emically subdividing the society in tightly territorialized segments called X-**momowi**, literally 'X's grand-children', perhaps a vestigial clanic taxon. Kinship is of the Dravidian type, and residence patrilocal. Preferential marriage takes place inside the linguistic / dialectal group. The village political leader is called **kapitana**, formerly **pematakaponaenü**, literally 'the one who carries the head', and **petuxanenü**, readable as 'the one who eats in the middle' or 'vagina eater'. The leader's main task consists in the maintenance of social concord through persuasion, and in interacting with Whites. The other influential character is the shaman, who heals diseases, thwarts griefs from supernatural origin, and keeps the universe equilibria steady. Among the agriculturalist groups, cosmogony is Arawak-based. This is in plain sight in one of the most popular foundational texts, which narrates the discovery of the All-crop Tree.

4 PREVIOUS STUDIES

Fernández and Bartolomé's (1895) grammar is the single important work on the language previous to the second half of the 20th century. Until then what we have are vocabularies by 17th and 18th centuries Jesuits (Castan, Mesland, who both wrote more than lists, likely short grammatical sketches, all of unknown destiny; Rivas 1727-1746, Rivero 1729, Rojas nd.) and scholars, travellers or missionaries in the late 19th century and first half of the 20th (Crevaux 1882, Melgarejo 1886, Fabo 1911, Loukotka 1938, Pérez 1935 and Vraz 1938).

In the sixties, scholars in Venezuela (Mosonyi 1964) and Summer Institute of Linguistics missionaries in Colombia (Kondo & Kondo 1967) issued some works in academic formats. Followed Kondo (1975, 1985a, 1985b, 2014), Mosonyi (1985), Ardila (2000), Queixalós & Jiménez (1994), and Queixalós (1985, 1989, 1991, 1998, 2000). Much of this documentation uses the exogenous label *Guahibo* for the language, mainly in the earliest works and those of missionary sources. The latter, chiefly interested in leading the speakers on the path of deculturisation and assimilation, tag the term *Sikuani* as "derogatory". I am confident that the natural speech samples adduced in what follows will help the reader come to a personal conclusion on this matter.

5 THE DATA

The period of my field notes extends from 1971 through 1993, included live tape-recordings of natural speech transcribed and translated, yielding a total of more than 300 pages. A number of examples in the coming discussions are excerpted from these texts. Since I presently have no access to elicitation sessions, I am led to state, more frequently than I would wish, that further work remains to be done with respect to explaining some of the facts at stake. That notwithstanding, it is clear that in analysing productions directly related to pragmatically-driven attitudes, elicitation is of little help. All in all I confess that I have sometimes felt like those scholars that study Latin or Ancient Greek. Conceivably, the present description, especially its hypothetical Spanish version, can prompt the hoped-for complement of research.

6 ORGANISATION AND CONVENTIONS

The book consists of ten core chapters, followed by a list of grammatical morphemes with their respective gloses, the cited bibliography, and an illustrative text. Contrary to common

practice, the chapter on phonology and morphophonology comes after the grammatical description. My own experience as a reader is that I need neither to pronounce the examples illustrating the grammar, nor to be aware of the morphophonology to process them. Rather, I must know something of the grammar to understand the morphophonology rules. Accordingly, the morphemes resulting from segmentation will display their pre-morphophonology shape.

Grammatical exemples are liberally provided, so as to supply clues that might complement my own analyses. Several of their visual aspects will seem somewhat odd or nonconformist. Boldface is used instead of italics because on occasion the latter misshape phonetic symbols (of which Sikuani is, fortunately, not so generous). In the second line, camel case allows to save space compared to the usual dot. My experience also had me spare the potential reader the hassle of having to go back and forth between the examples and the list of abbreviations. Thus, morpheme glosses appear as entire words to the extent that examples do not get truncated in some counterproductive way. Otherwise I provide abbreviations. For convenience, while different morphemes grouped under the same section heading, say, *focus*, get specific glosses in the relevant chapter, say, *contrastive, corrective*, they are glossed generically in other chapters, where the subvarieties appear to be immaterial, *e.g. focus*. To avoid locally irrelevant distractions, a word that occurs segmented in an example may be left unsegmented in another. Similarly, some examples display referent indexations and others not. A final word on examples. The events they narrate often feature atrocities. These, however, are constitutive facets of *what the people talk about*, typically when the topic is tradition but not only. The most cursory perusal of missionary literature, that used for literacy training but also in more academic brands, reveals countless bicycles, shoes, money, cheap things, expensive things, radiosets, football matches, jeans, shotguns, payments, buyings, sellings, debts, salaries, bosses, electric lamps, metal wires, cows, outboard motors, Mondays, watches and — just to cut it off here — miracles achieved two-thousand years ago on the east banks of the Mediterranean sea. All these, beyond being what the people *also* talk about in some Western sectors of the territory, are what the writer wishes that the people talk about.

7 MORPHOSYNTAX: PRELIMINARY REMARKS

The following are a few sketchy aspects of the typological profile of the language. Word classes comprise verbs, nouns, pronouns, adverbs, adjectives, postpositions and particles. The basic word order is, in very pre-theoretical terms, S(O)V. Coding, constituency and other syntactic patterns display nominative-accusative alignment together with head-final order. Nouns feature clusivity and alienability distinctions, as well as a rich assortment of quantifying and classifying devices. Two arguments are indexed in verb morphology. Clusivity also surfaces there. Verbs have zero exponence for third person, as well as nouns in predicate position. In verbs, the inclusive undergoes a broad-ranging process of grammaticalisation, including honorific uses and passive voice. Tense is bipartite: future / nonfuture. Two profuse sets of verb-bound forms, auxiliaries and applicative preverbs, wrap the essentials of verb morphology. Valence properties yield two subclasses of nouns and three subclasses of verbs. Trivalent verbs have the recipient participant as direct object. Verbs also divide between prototypical ones, featuring a realis / irrealis contrast, and those that share some of their properties with nouns as predicates. As other remarkable subclasses of verbs we have a set of body-posture verbs and a set of directional verbs, both with far reaching impacts in grammar. Noun incorporation and nominalisation are highly productive, the latter supplying the bulk of subordinate clauses.

Introduction

From the outset I hasten to put forth a caveat regarding my usage of *form* and *formal*. I avail myself of these terms — in a sense which owes little to what is known as *formal grammar* (*e.g.* Polinsky 2010) — as analytically useful equivalents of *linguistic expression* or *exponence* for capturing the explicit, realized correlate of a semantic or pragmatic notion and, beyond, for talking about those "surface" facts that allow to unveil structure, in Givón's words: the "observable components of grammatical structure" (1995 177).

The technical terminology is a demanding issue. First, in order to keep distinct the different layers of structure that a clause involves — *e.g.* semantic roles*,* formal coding, etc. — one must resort to sometimes wordy periphrasis like *the participant surfacing in accusative argument position* for what many a grammar just dubs *the accusative participant*. I have occasionally indulged in such shorthands.

A descriptive grammar, even one of functionalist observance, cannot proceed unrestrictedly from function to form lest what the language has to offer to typology be missed. As a case in point we have — this is highlighted in the relevant chapter — construing nominalisations in genitive modifier position as relative clauses. From there, some terminological decisions were necessary to get things straight at the relevant level of structure. For instance, in the realm of morphosyntax, *noun valency* seems far more accurate than semantics-based terms like *alienable / inalienable possession*. Not to mention that the "inalienable" side of his kind of "possession" seldom involves possession. Such oft observed mismatches led me to submit a few terminological creations, the case of *intrinsic linkee* instead of *possessor* when dealing with **corners**, **mothers** and **free wills**.