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BOOK REVIEW of SIEGEL, JEFF, 2023. *A GRAMMAR OF NAMA: A PAPUAN LANGUAGE OF SOUTHERN GUINEA*. PACIFIC LINGUISTICS: 668. DE GRUYTER MOUTON. ISBN: 978-3-1110-7661-4.

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1. Introduction¹

Jeff Siegel's *A Grammar of Nama* is a meticulously researched study that makes an important contribution to our knowledge of the languages of New Guinea, and to the field of linguistic typology in general. In this carefully edited volume of the *Pacific Linguistics* series (De Gruyter Mouton), Siegel provides an in-depth study of Nama, a small-scale language from the Nambu group of the Yam family, spoken in Western Province (Papua New Guinea). Siegel's extensive knowledge about the language is evident and results from a long time of study, immersion and collaboration with members of the Nama community. The grammar brings together and consolidates Siegel's previous studies on Nama's verbal system (Siegel, 2014, 2017) and relative clauses (Siegel, 2019), adding grammatical descriptions of all other relevant aspects of the language, as well as important observations from a crosslinguistic perspective. It is a new and indispensable addition to our understanding of the diversity of southern New Guinea's linguistic landscape, with noteworthy value for refining preliminary comparative studies on Yam languages (Evans et al., 2017). It arrives at an opportune moment, following the publication of Döhler's (2018) grammar of Komnzo —a related Yam language from the Tonda group—, and stands as the first fully-fledged published grammar of a language from the Nambu group of the Yam family.²

2. Structure

Chapter 1 offers a comprehensive introduction to the Nama language and its approximately 1200 speakers. With helpful maps and illustrations, the author presents the social, geographical and cultural context of the Nama-speaking world, and an informative historical overview of the area, from the first prolonged contact with outsiders (workers of an Australian oil company) in the second half on the 20th century. Cultural and sociolinguistic descriptions include the explanation of agricultural and hunting practices, ceremonial yam-counting, marriage practices and multilingualism in the Nama community, as well as the use of the *linguae francae* —

¹ This review was written prior to the sad news of the author's recent passing. As such, it focuses solely on the book itself (at the time of its publication) and does not reflect on the author's remarkable personality and distinguished work as a linguist. That broader legacy will be best honoured by his family, friends, collaborators, students and colleagues at ANU, and beyond.

² But see Kashima's (2020) fully detailed 'grammar sketch' of Nmbo, and the numerous studies of Nen published by Evans (e.g., Evans 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2017).

English and Tok Pisin — in religious and educational contexts. The author also pays attention to some dialect variation in Nama, mainly in a few nominals and verb stems (listed in the grammar's Appendix A).

The chapter also provides an engaging personal account of fieldtrips, work on location and data collection. Nama speakers that collaborated with the author are acknowledged, and the sources of data for the grammar are clearly explained: they include over three hours of recordings, naturalistic and elicited examples, and notebook notes (as well as a previously existing translation of the Gospel of Mark). All examples in the grammar include a reference to their source, and a list of recordings is provided in the Appendix B, accompanied by a link to an online repository, which significantly enhances the study's replicability. The chapter closes with a useful grammatical overview and an outline of the book structure that prepares the reader for the information presented in the subsequent sections.

Chapter 2 presents the phonology of Nama. Like other Yam languages, Nama has a rich set of monophthong vowel phonemes, as well as complex —and cross-linguistically less common— consonants, such as labialised velar velarised bilabial and some combinations of these with prenasalised articulations. One can also find more fine-grained details such as variation in aspiration, vowel fronting and openness, points of articulation for dental/alveolar stops, or the realisation of trills as taps in rapid speech. These features are illustrated with clear examples of minimal/subminimal pairs. The author then discusses the phonemic status of mid-central vowel phoneme [ə], which stands in contrasts to other documented Yam languages, where [ə] appears to have a more restricted or 'marginal' distribution. Although Nama stress patterns are described, no accounts of intonation appear here. However, following chapters mention the rising intonation for some interrogative clauses. A potential addition to the description could be a brief mention of vowel length in Nama and whether this is phonemically relevant.

Another interesting topic described in this chapter is the development of Nama's orthography, and the few new adaptations and improvements used in the grammar (for example, the representation of previously unrecognised velarised bilabials). Importantly, these adaptations were consulted with members of the Nama community. Useful tables present all phonemes along with their conventional orthographic representation.³

Chapter 3 is devoted to nominal morphology, with special attention to case and —to a lesser extent— number marking. The chapter also gives an overview of word formation processes, possessive prefixing (for a small group of kin and friendship nominals), and reduplication. Readers are advised that glosses in Chapter 3 are only given in a reduced format for the verbal part of the examples, the verbal morphology has not yet been explained. While this is a sensible approach that facilitates the understanding of the examples at this point, consistent glossing throughout the book (with a brief note in Chapter 3 explaining that the glossing of VP morphology would be explained in a later chapter) would also have advantages: since grammars are often used as reference works, readers revisiting this chapter after completing the book would then find fully glossed and comprehensible examples.

Nama has as many as fifteen 'major' case marking suffixes (and a few other referred to as 'marginal'). Meanwhile, the marking of number on nominals is very restricted and appears to be infrequent in naturalistic use. Siegel posits that these might just be vestiges of a once more productive system. The author's attention to case-marking allomorphs is noteworthy, and the provided data help improve the initial comparative picture of Yam case markers in Evans et al. (2017).⁴

³ Two minor inconsistencies are found in the chapter, where a *phonemic* representation for bilabial fricatives (ɸ) is given instead by means of its conventional *orthographic* form: “/f/”, “/fʷ/” (p. 38).

⁴ For example, whilst Nama's *-om* was preliminary regarded as an ergative marker restricted to 'animate singular nouns' (Evans et al. 2017: 749), it is here reinterpreted as a singular suffix *-o* followed by the ergative allomorph

Chapter 4 presents what is perhaps one of the most intricate parts of the grammatical description of Nama: its verbal morphology. Nama's verbal stems are always accompanied by affixes forming a rather complex network of indexing and TAM combinations, supplemented by markers for features such as deixis, valency-change etc. One of the most interesting aspects of Nama's grammar is its alignment, which combines an ergative-absolutive marking pattern for nominal arguments with a split-intransitive system for indexing affixes on the verb. Nama's argument flagging shows ergative case marking for A and absolutive marking for P and S. However, when it comes to index marking, a distinction is made between so-called A-aligned intransitives — where the argument index aligns with that of transitive 'subjects' — and P-aligned (stative) intransitives where the argument index aligns with that of transitive 'objects'.⁵ This remarkable alignment system is realised by indexing affixes, appropriately named A and P for transitive predicates, and S_A and S_P for the two types of intransitive verbs. While A and S_A are indexed by suffixes, P and S_P are indexed by two different set of prefixes, depending on a variety of tense/aspect distinctions. The author uses terminology of Greek letters α and β to distinguish these two types of P and S_P prefixes following the practice adopted for Nen by Evans (2012a).

The use of different types of argument-indexing affixes to express TAM distinctions illustrate Nama's so-called 'distributed exponence'. This is a morphosyntactic characteristic of Yam languages (see Carroll, 2016 and Döhler, 2018) by which grammatical features such as tense or perfectivity are expressed 'distributed' over more than one inflection. For example, Nama's 'imperfective current tense' is expressed through the combination of specific prefixes and suffixes. Moreover, perfectivity marking in Nama is also involved in the expression of number marking: while nominals do not carry number marking (and pronouns distinguish only between singular and nonsingular), verbal tense/aspect affixes might differ depending on the grammatical number of the arguments. Remarkably, the decisive factor is whether the referent is dual or non-dual (i.e., dual vs. the conflation singular/plural):

- | | | |
|--------|---|---|
| (1) a. | Yèmofem | yètáftat. |
| | yèmofem | y-táf- ta -t |
| | 3NSG.ERG | α .3SGP-chop.up- IPFV .ND-2 3NSGA |
| | 'They (3+) are chopping it up.' | |
| b. | Yèmofem | yètáfèt. |
| | yèmofem | y-táf- Ø -t |
| | 3NSG.ERG | α .3SGP-chop.up- IPFV .DU-2 3NSGA |
| | 'They (2) are chopping it up.' (Siegel 2023: 123) | |

In these examples, the pronoun *yèmofem* by itself only indicates non-singular ('they'), but the imperfective marker employed in the VP (either *-ta-* or *Ø*) specifies whether the referent is dual (example *b*) or refers to more than two individuals (example *a*). Interestingly, the dichotomy dual /non-dual can be also expressed by different forms of the copula, and the verbs 'come' and 'go'.

-m. On the other hand, the author's analysis of *-e-* as a dative case marker which also functions as a 'ligature' before other case suffixes stands in contrast with descriptions of closely related languages. Notably, whilst Nama's *-(e)ne* is here segmented as *-e* (ligature dative) plus *-ne* (genitive suffix), descriptions of closely related languages analyse *ene* (Namo, Dre) and *(e)"de* (Nen), as full genitive markers, with **-ende* as the reconstructed genitive form for the Nambu group (Evans et al. 2017: 749). Since these languages do not appear to have separate 'e' datives, Siegel's interpretation of Nama's *-(e)ne* as dative + genitive is coherent from a language internal perspective but may invite further analysis from a comparative viewpoint.

⁵ In Nen, similar 'stative' intransitive verbs are named 'positional verbs' by Evans (2014).

Aspect and tense marking in Nama are also described as presenting some salient semantic peculiarities. The author explains that perfective marking is associated with events regarded as ‘an unanalysed whole’; often related to punctual events, but focusing on the inception of that event, rather than its completion (in the following chapter we find that “completeness” can be expressed by means of ‘periphrastic’ aspect markers). On the other hand, the description of tense begins with the distinction of three categories: current, recent (past), and remote (past). The first one, ‘current’, is typologically unusual: it conflates references to the present and earlier-in-the-day timeframes. It should be noted that the author describes also a seemingly unbound preverbal tense marker to indicate (current) imperfective events in the future, which is ‘the only way to specify the future’ (p. 190). One might wonder whether ‘future’ could then be considered a fourth tense category, even if its expression differs from the morphological strategies used to express the other three tenses.

Besides the number of combinations between aspectual categories and tenses, argument indexing, realis/irrealis, durative/punctual or delimited/durative distinctions might occur on some specific tense/aspect arrangements. Additionally, there are andative- and venitive-marking affixes indicating proximity or distance, not only in space but also in time. Finally, Siegel discusses valency reducing operations, including applicative prefixes—which can make P indexing refer to recipient or beneficiary arguments rather than to the theme—and a detransitivising prefix which uniquely encompasses antipassive, anticausative, reflexive, and reciprocal functions.

Chapter 5 expands on additional word classes and Nama’s phrase structure. The chapter discusses parts of speech (demonstratives, numerals, quantifiers, adverbs etc.), pointing out that Nama does not have a separate category for adjectives. This is based on observed morphosyntactic properties of *adjective-like* words, which can take a wide range of case markers, thereby classifying them as nouns. This contrasts with the analysis of other Yam languages, such as Nmbo (Kashima, 2020) or Komnzo (Döhler, 2018), whose descriptions include a semantic class of adjectives.

This chapter also describes the so-called perfect “periphrastic” marker *tè*, already mentioned above, along with other unbound TAM and ‘quasi-modal’ markers. These forms might occur accompanied by imperfective and perfective verbal forms, which raises the question of whether their use might be considered some type of distributed exponence.⁶ Proximal and (possible) mirative VP clitics are also discussed.

Chapter 6 presents the characteristics and the structure of simple sentences, as well as minor sentences, discourse markers (ranging from evaluative responses to indicators framing the ‘end of an interaction’) and ‘morphological discord’ in simple sentences.

Nama’s basic order is presented as APV and SV when arguments are overtly specified (that is, outside of verbal indexing). However, PAV generally occurs in particular P-focussed “experiencer-object constructions” (expressing sensations, feelings, emotions etc.), where the experiencer is referenced by the P argument (often not overt), and the stimulus by A-argument. Siegel’s choice to discuss word order using A/V (rather than S/O) is entirely reasonable given Nama’s alignment mentioned above.

A large section of the chapter is devoted to imperative sentences, which include a plethora of forms, depending on addressees, deixis, verb transitivity, benefactive nuances and tense/aspect distinctions. Moreover, some ‘special imperative forms’ are mentioned briefly for ‘come’, ‘stop’, ‘wait’ and ‘be’. These forms are similar to expressions discussed as minor

⁶ This suggestion is prompted by reading Siegel’s explanation of the characteristics of inchoative *fɛf(ɛ)*, which conveys different meanings according to the TAM morphology of the verb it modifies: “he has just cut it” (IPFV) vs “he’s almost cut it” (PFV) (p. 192).

sentences.⁷ The author also describes third person imperatives, employed to tell the addressee to tell someone else to do something (making the third person(s) nominal the A or S_A-argument).

The chapter concludes with an interesting description of morphological discord (e.g., singular P-index prefixes combined with dual markers) as a stylistic device to express something is out of the ordinary: usually exceptional largeness, but also smallness (in number or size).

Chapter 7 describes compound and complex sentences. Coordinating conjunctions and adverbial subordinate clauses (time, place, concessive, purpose, conditional, reason...) are explained and illustrated with multiple and clear examples.⁸ Some of these clauses can employ a nominalised verb rather than fully-fledged (non-finite) subordinate clauses, however there is no mention to the existence or not of possible restrictions on this strategy (for example, a lack of subject coreference in the matrix and the dependent clause).

Nama's relative clauses employ the relative pronoun strategy. Siegel rightly highlights the typological significance of this finding, as the strategy has so far been found exclusively (or almost exclusively) in European languages, where it is often described as an areal feature. Moreover, besides relativising 'subject' and 'object' arguments, Nama's relative pronouns can take genitive, purposive, perlative and comitative case suffixes, ranking high in Keenan and Comrie's (1977) 'accessibility hierarchy'. On the other hand, the author warns that relative clauses occur relatively infrequently in Nama conversations and narratives. Siegel also shows that Nama presents some internally headed relative clauses.

The chapter goes on to describe Nama's different types of complement clauses and focus marking clauses.

Chapter 8 underscores and summarises the main typological implications drawn from the analysis of Nama. These focus on unusual or unique aspects of Nama: the senary counting system still in use for ceremonial counting of yams; the relative pronoun strategy; the conflation of present and hodiernal past tense; the peculiarities of the perfective aspect and its combination with imperfective for certain meanings; morphological discord as a stylistic device; and the remarkable use of some unique dual/non-dual distinction, in which dual number is only contrasted to a conflation of singular and plural.

3. Evaluation

Siegel's description of Nama is an engaging read, based on careful research and an in-depth analysis of the language. It combines observations from naturalistic samples with elicited examples, while also acknowledging valuable reports from Nama consultants about features that are not directly represented in the source data (for example, the existence of dual forms with allative suffixes).

The grammar results from an impressive intellectual effort in tackling the complexities of a highly intricate verbal system, accounting for a wide range of details. Nevertheless, Siegel succeeds in maintaining a smooth narrative flow, supplementing the discussions with abundant—but not overwhelming—examples and tables. There is a useful summary of grammatical

⁷ Interestingly, the 'special' imperative form for 'wait' (*so*) is identical to the future marker (*so*), something that happens also in Komnzo (Döhler, 2018, p. 122). One wonders whether the future meaning could be the result of some grammaticalization process (cf. the use of 等 "wait" in Mandarin Chinese as a temporal marker 'when/by the time...' often implying a future-oriented event (Ross & Ma, 2006, p. 270)).

⁸ It is worth noting that Nama's coordinating conjunctions *a* 'and' and *o* 'or' are identical in Komnzo (Döhler, 2018, p. 316) and are likely loanwords from English, (perhaps through Tok Pisin or Motu Hiri). Cf. also Bislama *o* 'or' and Solomon Island Pijin *an/o* 'and'/'or'.

morphemes in Appendix C, offering glosses, functions and links to the relevant sections. The examples provided are concise and illustrate well the points under discussion. It is often helpful to access the context from which sample clauses are extracted, for instance, to understand aspectual distinctions. Conveniently, many of the examples in the grammar can be traced back to sources listed in the appendices, and are available online; naturally, other examples come from the author's notebook and lack contextual information. One small point to note is the existence of a couple of scattered mentions to (entries in) 'the Nama dictionary', but this is not further referenced or found in the list of resources.

Aside from the almost inevitable occurrence of very minor typos (which are nevertheless infrequent), no significant shortcomings are evident to the reviewer.⁹ While no grammar can be considered a definitive and all-encompassing description of a language, Siegel's study covers the most central aspects of Nama, and even delves into some finer details related to morphophonemic variation, (dis)similarities with related languages, or some possible historical developments (mostly based on synchronic observations).¹⁰ However some potential avenues might perhaps be suggested to further expand the research on the characteristics of Nama and its neighbouring Yam languages.

Certain aspects of the description of Nama could be explored further from a diachronic perspective, for example, through processes such as grammaticalization. Thus, one finds that Nama's complementizer *nde* 'that' is identical to an element mentioned elsewhere in the grammar: *nde* 'like this/that' (also glossed 'this.way'). This identity aligns with cross-linguistic reports of complementation resulting from the grammaticalization of simulative manner expressions—for example in Kuteva et al. (2019, p. 398) and Hernáiz (2024)—and might be worth exploring. The similarity between allative and purpose markers, on the other hand, is discussed by the author from a language-internal synchronic perspective, but comparative research on genetically related languages could potentially add more arguments to dismiss (or not) a common source for both meaning-markers.

Another aspect of Nama that could benefit from further research is the potential effect of the order of constituents in some parts of the grammar. While the relative order between nominals and quantifiers, numerals and demonstratives is clearly explained (and a short overlook of NP configurations is given in section 5.2), other discussions could benefit from observations on order. For example, the discussion on the absence of an adjective category in Nama lacks a clear mention to the syntactic positioning of adjective-like words relative to the nominals they modify. One wonders whether this might be important, given that the capacity to bear case markers is considered a central argument for the discussion in Nama, whereas for related Komnzo, Döhler (2018, p. 90) posits that "[a]djectives may serve as the host for any case enclitic if they occur in the rightmost position of the noun phrase". Only the single word *kès* 'dead/death' is analysed in this respect, but with no reference to whether its behaviour is representative of other words which could potentially be considered adjectives. Similarly, it might be promising to elaborate more on the positioning of content question words (fronted or in-situ), or the order and adjacency of relative clauses with respect to their relativised nominals.

Another potential line of analysis is the existence of ideophones in Nama; for example, the interjection '*rèrri*' (said when something gets stuck or hooked on something), or the discourse particle '*(eee)ee*' (which denotes a more or less prolonged action) might be suitable candidates.

⁹ Some errors include 'synchronially' (p. 97 and 107), the reference to '2/sg' instead of '2|3 sg' in Table 4.1 (p. 107), and the term 'intransitives' for 'transitives' in: '[t]his contrasts with normal intransitive sentences in which the direct object [...]' (p. 117) and '[s]emantically, agentless intransitives [...]' (p. 223).

¹⁰ For example, he discusses the potentially productive (in the past) transitivising elements *w-a*, which appear in many transitive verb stems.

Siegel and his consultants are to be commended for the tremendous effort documenting Nama. The author's outstanding description and analysis will make Nama more accessible to speakers and non-speakers of the language and will hopefully help preserve Nama's cultural and linguistic heritage. The language's noteworthy typological features will also be of great interest for linguists across different areas of interest, underscoring the significance of language documentation and the need to understand and position lesser-described languages at the forefront of (cross-)linguistic generalizations.

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