A grammar of the Kokota language,
Santa Isabel,
Solomon Islands

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Buka aohi mala gato puloi
noḡu datau

Ambrose Variḡutu
?1929 - 1996

This work is dedicated
to the memory of

Chief Ambrose Varigutu
?1929 - 1996

Abstract

Ooe Kokota ('Kokota talk') is spoken in three villages on the island of Santa Isabel in the Solomon Islands. Its speakers now number probably in excess of 900. It is an Oceanic language within the Austronesian family, belonging to the North-West Solomonic subgrouping.

This dissertation is the result of field research carried out on Santa Isabel between 1994 and 1998. It presents an overview of the grammar of the language, including its phonology, and its phrase, clause and sentence level syntax. Particular attention has been paid to a number of areas of interest in the grammar.

The stress regime is complex with substantial irregularity, variation between and within speakers, and changes in progress. These changes include a shift from a regime based on moraic trochees to one based on syllabic trochees; and the regularisation of irregularities resulting from the prosodic shadow of lost morphological complexity. A discussion of this comprises the bulk of a chapter on stress and prosody.

The system of possession also comprises a chapter on its own. One form of inalienable possession exists, and two of alienable (consumable and general). The relationship between these categories and nominals is semantically driven, not syntactically, with any nominal potentially occurring with any category, depending on the semantic context.

Argument structure is a further area receiving special attention, particularly the assignment of argument indexing in the verb complex. This operates on the basis of a hierarchy of semantic roles. One result of the system is the coreferential assignment of both preverbal agreement (typically indexing actors) and postverbal agreement (typically indexing undergoers) to a single argument, an experiencer, regardless of the presence of other core arguments in the clause.

Like many Oceanic languages, Kokota has limited morphological complexity. Consequently aspects of the morphology are discussed in conjunction with other areas of the grammar to which they relate syntactically or functionally.

Preface

This dissertation is a flawed and incomplete work. In writing it I have learned a small amount about the grammar of one language. More importantly, I have learnt that the grammar of a language is infinitely complex and fractal-like. Each detail reveals further more intricate details, each in turn revealing still further intricate details, from broad facts about sentence structure to one individual's unusual use of one word on one occasion and beyond. No path of inquiry may be pursued to its end. I have also learnt how extraordinarily difficult it is to know anything.

The French poet Paul Valéry expressed the sentiment that no work is ever completed, merely abandoned. I abandon this work now, and present it for all its gaps and inconsistencies, in the hope that I may at some future time be able to resume it, and abandon it again with slightly more confidence.

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