

B. G. Hewitt. 1995. *Georgian: A structural reference grammar*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Co. (xviii + 714 pp., 1 map)

Reviewed for Functions of Language by
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The book under review is the first reference grammar of Georgia to appear in English. In the author's words, it was written with the intention that “the general linguist will, I trust, find ... whatever he [*sic!*] may desire to know about the workings of the Georgian language” (p 14) in its pages. In what follows I will offer an assessment of how well H[ewitt]'s book [henceforth GSRG] fulfills its mandate, and how it compares to other monographs on Georgian grammar written in those languages which a “general linguist” in the West can be expected to know.

0. Overview. GSRG is divided into seven chapters, including 50 pages of glossed texts, and lists of kinterms, names of body parts, and the like. Chapter 4, on the dauntingly complicated Georgian verb, is over 400 pages, longer than all other sections combined. On the other hand, the bibliography is far smaller than one would hope for in a reference grammar, only a third the length of the admirably comprehensive list of references in Harris 1985. Examples are presented in a fairly standard transcription, rather than in Georgian characters as in Aronson 1982 and Tschenkéli 1958. The only potential trouble spot I noted was the use of a “g” with a miniscule superposed dot to represent the voiced uvular fricative other linguists render with a gamma or a reversed upper-case “R”. Since both this phoneme and the voiced velar stop transliterated by a simple “g” are frequent in Georgian, readers unfamiliar with the language might be in for some unnecessary eye-strain. In length and coverage, GSRG is on a par with Tschenkéli 1958, a pedagogical grammar written by a native speaker. Both books are larded with examples and sample texts, with much useful information on the differences between the spoken, modern standard and medieval varieties of Georgian. H has the advantage over Tschenkéli in his extensive treatment of syntax (especially subordination) and the semantics of preverbs, which play a significant role in the verbal system. His frequent comparisons between Georgian and Mingrelian, a Kartvelian language H knows well, are often illuminating. GSRG is over double the length of Vogt 1971, and has wider coverage and more abundant examples than Aronson's textbook [1982]. In all honestly, however, I cannot give GSRG my unconditional endorsement, and especially not to readers for whom it would be their first introduction to Georgian. My principal reservations are these:

1. Politics and language. In the preface H mentions that around the time he received the commission to write GSRG, “an unforeseen rift in my relations with Georgia” led to Georgian becoming “a virtual dead language” as far as he was concerned (xiii). This does not strike me as

the most auspicious circumstance in which to write a reference grammar of a language that is very much alive. One annoying, but not particularly harmful, consequence is the 17-page introduction, in which the reader is treated to H's views on language and ethnic identity, and the linguistic policies of post-Soviet Georgia. A more serious problem is the evident lack of editorial input from native speakers, who could have saved H from the glaring error he only caught when the book was already in press (remedied in the Corrigendum on p. xiv), corrected a few minor typos that H did not catch, and provided the subtle distinctions of meaning H was unable to puzzle out from dictionaries and literature anthologies (for example the interplay between context and presupposition in the choice of deictic pronouns and adverbs, especially those he glosses simply "by 2nd person").

2. Transitivity and aspect. One of the marks of a successful linguistic description, I believe, is that the categories selected by the author cut along the grain of the language. If one has enough hands-on experience with the language under study, it is usually possible to sense which descriptions approach this ideal, and which come across as forced, awkward or contrived. In many areas of Georgian grammar, H succeeds in finding the grain; but as far as the verbal system is concerned, I feel he has missed some important and useful generalizations.

Over the past 10 years or so, H and Alice Harris have carried on a debate over whether Georgian is an 'ergative' language, an argument which hinges on whether the so-called 'medial' or 'medio-active' verbs — which assign ergative case to their subjects, even though most of them are intransitive — are underlyingly transitive. In order to save his assertion that Modern Georgian is ergative, H must resort to phantom direct objects for medial verbs, which are "present underlyingly but obligatorily deleted once the verb's transitivity has been established" (p 341). By this analysis, for example, *c'q'alma iduḡa* [water-ERG boiled-3sg:AOR] "the water boiled" would be derived from an underlying transitive construction meaning, more or less, "the water boiled itself". It appears that H has fallen into the old trap of recapitulating diachrony in synchrony. While no one doubts that early Georgian conformed quite closely to the ergative language type, the modern language is fundamentally different. Transitivity is simply no longer all that important for the grammar, whereas aspect most certainly is. H consistently overplays the role of transitivity, as a result of which his analysis of Georgian morphosyntax abounds in phantom arguments such as the "itself" mentioned above, or the divine agent he sees lurking beneath superficially transitive wish formulæ such as *net'av sul šentan mamq'opa* "may I be with you always", which H glosses "would that X [sc. God] might let me be with you all the time" (p 447). (I studied these in the field myself, and none of the speakers I consulted ever invoked God, or any other extraterrestrial for that matter, as an explanation for the morphology). On the other hand, H's treatment of the principal aspectual oppositions marked by the Georgian verb (punctual vs. durative, perfective vs. imperfective, telic vs. atelic) is far too sketchy, and — once again falling into an often-visited trap —

H projects the narrative-structuring use of aspect onto the event-types with which the aspectual categories are most commonly associated.

4. Conclusion. This first English-language reference grammar of Georgian has fallen far short of my expectations. I would have liked a more thorough treatment of subjects not discussed in English, French or German sources (the non-standard dialects, urban slang, use of Russianisms, etc.), a more complete bibliography, and less intrusion of a linguist's personal views on political and social questions.

References.

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