A Grammar of Semelai

Semelai is a previously undescribed and endangered Aslian (Mon-Khmer) language of the Malay Peninsula. This book – the first in-depth description of an Aslian language – provides a comprehensive reference grammar of Semelai. Semelai intertwines two types of morphological system: a concatenative system of prefixes, suffixes and a circumfix – acquired through extended contact with Malay – and a nonconcatenative system of prefixes and infixes (including infix reduplication), inherited from Mon-Khmer. There are distinctive word classes – Nominals, Verbs and Expressives – the latter are iconic utterances which simultaneously provide information about the predicate and its arguments. Semelai has many derivational processes which change word class or affect transitivity, and it combines both head-marking and dependent-marking profiles. It also has a rich phonemic system of 20 vowel and 32 consonants. Nicole Kruspe’s discussion is complemented with a generous number of illustrative examples and texts, creating a reference work that will be welcomed by descriptivists and typologists alike.

NICOLE KRUSPE is a Post-doctoral Research Fellow at the Research Centre for Linguistic Typology, La Trobe University, where she is working on a description of the Aslian language Ceq Wong. A Grammar of Semelai is a revised version of her doctoral thesis, submitted to the University of Melbourne in 1999. Her dissertation was awarded the Chancellor’s Prize for Academic Excellence in 2001. She has carried out extensive fieldwork on a number of Aslian languages over the past thirteen years.
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Each grammar briefly introduces the society in which the language is spoken, and covers the key areas of phonology, morphology and syntax, together with typological and historical considerations. In each case, a sample text or texts in the language are provided, with full gloss and translation. A glossary of basic vocabulary is also included. The series aims to provide theoretical linguists in the various subdisciplines with reliable data and analysis which will provide a permanent and invaluable set of source materials.

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A GRAMMAR OF SEMELAI

Nicole Kruspe

Research Centre for Linguistic Typology
La Trobe University, Melbourne
for my daughters Amelia and Ruby Goss
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Preface

This is a description of Semelai, an Aslian language spoken by some 4,000 people in Peninsular Malaysia. The present book is a revision of my doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of Melbourne in 1999. The study is based on a corpus of data collected during an initial period of fieldwork undertaken from July 1990 to June 1991 at Tasek Bera, in the state of Pahang. Insights from recent visits in 2000-1, whilst a postdoctoral student at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany, have also been included. Revisions have been completed during a post-doctoral fellowship at the Research Centre for Linguistic Typology, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia.

First and foremost, this book represents an initial step in the documentation of a unique and complex language, in an area which to date has been largely neglected by linguists.

My main consideration in writing this grammar was to provide a lucid and accessible account of Semelai for linguists of all theoretical persuasions. The language is described in terms of Basic Linguistic Theory. I have sought to treat equally all aspects of the grammar, examining form and meaning and providing semantic motivations for the various distinctions made within it. A generous number of examples and texts are included to illustrate the discussion and to create a reference work, which will be of use to descriptivists and typologists alike. The discussion of the grammar is contextualised with reference to other languages and comparative notes are included where possible. The analysis is supported by references to literature on issues of theoretical and typological relevance.

When I first set out to write this description, the meagre resources available only hinted at what was to come. Each advance was -- reflecting Dillworth’s sentiments with regard to writing a description of Jah Hut – ‘a step in the unknown’ (1976c). This book provides a model of grammatical description for future researchers in this region. In addition, it will benefit typologists by providing empirical data for an area under-represented in cross-linguistic studies.

With this book I hope to draw attention to the Aslian languages and advance our knowledge not only of Aslian, but also of Mon-Khmer linguistics in general. Tucked away at the end of a vast continent, Semelai and the other Aslian languages represent an outlier of Austroasiatic, the oldest phylum present in mainland Southeast Asia. They hold an important place for our understanding of the linguistic typology of the region and the study of Southeast Asian prehistory.

A few points are required on the method of data collection. The technique employed was to work monolingually with a cross-section of the community, collecting narratives
in a range of genres. I worked on a daily basis with normah het, who became not only my principal informant, but also my friend. Her willingness to accept me into her family circle and allow me to participate in their daily life consolidated my knowledge of the Semelai language. Not only did normah provide me with language data, she also introduced me to her wider family and encouraged them to assist me in the collection of lexical and textual materials. Textual materials were also provided by the following people: ?amay isa – whose prolific knowledge of traditional narratives, and passion for relating them, despite her age and ill-health, was astounding; pa?nah jahudi provided traditional narratives; normah’s mother kir, in addition to traditional narratives, recounted events from her childhood and the Communist Emergency; the late br?him of Kampong Jelawat, galehah, her eldest son kassim and the late nari, also had much to offer.

Text collection was usually undertaken in a group setting, at the suggestion of the narrator, who felt that an interactive audience was a necessary and important component of the performative retelling of traditional narratives. Audience interaction ranged from interjections and non-verbal gestures, to direct comments and questions. This context of spontaneous conversation proved useful for data collection. Direct elicitation of language materials was kept to a minimum, employed only to clarify phenomena in the texts, or to work through infrequent or poorly understood structures. Unless otherwise noted, all examples in this grammar come from the collected texts. A selection of texts is found in §14.

The texts were transcribed and annotated primarily with the assistance of normah. These sessions took place in the afternoons when groups of people gather on each others’ verandahs. These group settings, which included people of all ages from different settlements, provided a forum of spontaneous and often lively debate which greatly increased my understanding of the language. In my translation and commentaries I have tried to capture some of the spirit of these engagements and the culture of the Semelai.

The reader should note that examples are numbered separately within each chapter; cross-references to examples are only made within individual chapters.

Semelai is not a written language. The orthography used here is phonemic, and follows Benjamin (1976b) and Diffloth (1976c) employing the standard IPA symbols with the following exceptions: IPA /j/, /y/ and /s/ are replaced by /?/, /?/ and /?/, and /?/, /?/ and /?/ are represented as the digraphs /hm/, /?n/ and /?q/.

The initial letter of Semelai personal names and place names is not capitalised in accordance with IPA conventions.

The language/ethnic names of some Aslian groups are not standardised. I have maintained the spelling found in the original document. The following variants are noted: Besisi/Mah Meri; Jahai/Jehai; Kensi/Kensiw; Kentaq Bong/Kintaq Bong and Semaq Beri/Semoq Beri.
Acknowledgements

Without the acceptance of the Semelai community this work would not have been possible. It is out of respect for them that I persisted with this research. It is impossible to acknowledge every one who assisted in teaching me Semelai, for every exchange provided a contribution to my knowledge of their language. I am especially indebted to my primary informant normah het for her friendship; to her extended family, and in particular her mother kop, for their hospitality and assistance in my endeavour; to my neighbours at Kampong Gau and their extended families, borhan pipin, ma?nah krdor, the late mntri? ?abas, the late nari and nortah nari. I would also like to thank ?amir wadi for the hours he spent with me in the early days; the people at Kampong Jelawat who always welcomed my visits; the residents of Kampong Putat pa?nah jahudi, ?amay isa and jimbang and layon who spent many hours enthusiastically retelling oral narratives for my benefit, and mtnor sujin, ?on, tatey, raizan maris, rohana ?inoian, shamsuddin gosi and the late brahim. I am also indebted to Bah Tony Williams-Hunt who generously found time to provide me with an introduction to the community, and to ?atim padot and family for making their home available during my initial field trip.

This research would not have been possible without the permission of the Government of Malaysia and the State of Pahang, to whom I am grateful. I would also like to thank the Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli, in particular Mohd. Sayed Abdullah, and Puan Munirah Abd. Manan, Economic Planning Unit, The Prime Minister’s Department. Thanks are also due to Professor Asmah Haji Omar, Universiti Malaya, and Professors Hood Salleh and Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, for their assistance and support in Malaysia.

My principal supervisor, Nicholas Evans, first suggested the Aslian languages as an area for research. Nick’s enthusiasm, challenging criticisms and perceptive observations were invaluable in shaping this work, enabling me to finally find order amidst chaos.

I have greatly appreciated the contributions of Mark Durie, Bill McGregor and Jean Mulder, who took over supervision at various periods over the years. I have also benefited from discussions with Geoffrey Benjamin, James T. Collins, Gerard Diffloth, Ilia Peiros and Niclas Burenhult, and from the considered comments and encouragement of my examiners, the series editors Bob Dixon and Keren Rice and the anonymous reviewer from Cambridge University Press. I would also like to thank Sasha Aikhenvald for her support and encouragement.

Formatting was initially done by Erich Round, before Adam Bowles took over. Adam’s valuable suggestions and attention to detail in preparing the manuscript are greatly appreciated. The maps were drawn by Chandra Jayasuriya.
Financial support during my candidature came from an Australian Postgraduate Research Award; fieldwork was made possible by a generous award from the Alma Hansen Travelling Scholarship and a Departmental Travel grant, and a Luce fellowship and a tuition fellowship from the University of Hawai‘i at Mano‘a allowed me to undertake tuition in Malay at the Southeast Asian Summer Institute in 1989.

The Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, the Harbison-Higginbotham Research Scholarship and the Research Centre for Linguistic Typology, La Trobe University, provided generous financial and institutional support at various stages of this project.

To my friends and family who have provided me with moral and practical support over the years, I am deeply grateful. Too many years and too many people have passed by for me to thank every one, but particular thanks go to Alec Coupe, Catriona Hyslop, Andrew Ingram and Janet Sharp for their encouragement and practical assistance in the final stages, and to Anthony Jukes and Tonya Stebbins.
Abbreviations and conventions

The following lists comprise the major abbreviations and conventions employed throughout the thesis. Occasionally some abbreviations which only have local relevance are introduced where necessity dictates, e.g. BEN 'Benefactor' in §9. Due to their limited application they are not listed here.

Some general conventions:

* non-occurring or reconstructed form
~ 'in free variation with'
→ 'is realised as, becomes'
← 'is derived from'
= 'is equivalent to'

The abbreviations and conventions are listed according to domains.

Phonological conventions:

/ / phonemic representation
/// underlying representation
[ ] phonetic representation
~ checked release
: length
. stress
. syllable boundary
σ reduced syllable
ω word
UR underlying representation
Nu nucleus
On onset
R rhyme
C coda
IPA International Phonetic Association

Morphological conventions:

√ root
*√ synchronically non-occurring formative
[ ] morpheme template
++ morpheme boundary: underspecified affixes
- morpheme boundary: prefixes and suffixes
<> morpheme boundary: infixes and the circumfix
= clitic boundary
: separates meaning elements in a portmanteau morpheme
μ morpheme
Grammatical relations:

A  agent-like argument of a transitive verb
O  patient-like argument of a transitive verb
S  single argument of an intransitive verb
IO indirect object
Subj subject, A, S or the subject of an NVC

Personal pronouns and kin terms:

1  first person
1&2 first person inclusive
2  second person
3  third person
aug augmented
f  familiar
min minimal
pl plural
sg  singular
EB elder male sibling, or parent’s sibling’s offspring
EZ elder female sibling, or parent’s sibling’s offspring
UA unidentified agent
YS younger sibling, or parent’s sibling’s offspring

Derivational affixes:

APPL  applicative  LSR  light syllable reduplication
BE  to be a number  MCAUS  manipulative causative
CAUS causative  MID middle voice
COMP comparative  NMZ  nominalisation
DEM demonstrative  PERFM  perform
ENM enumerator  SRC  source
EQUIP equip with, provide  RDP reduplication, specific to
HAVE happenstance  NOM  nominals
HAVE possessive  TOG  collective
IMPERF imperfective  UNIT a unit, or measure
INDIV individuation  NOM  nominalisation
INTENS intensive  USE utilise
ITER iterative  XS  excessive agent/performer

Clitics:

ABS  absolutive  IMM imminent aspect
ATTN attention  IMP imperative
AUG augmented  IRR irrealis
BCS because  NM name
CL clitic  OF possessive
Abbreviations and conventions

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<tr>
<td>CONN</td>
<td>connective</td>
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<tr>
<td>DET</td>
<td>determiner</td>
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<td>FACT</td>
<td>factual</td>
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<td>PFOC</td>
<td>possessor focus</td>
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<td>REL</td>
<td>relative proclitic</td>
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<td>SC</td>
<td>speaker conclusion</td>
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Other interlinear glosses and abbreviations:

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(av.) lexical item from the avoidance speech style
[ton] toponym
[name] personal name
sp. species
[HES] hesitation
Map 1  The Malay Peninsula
Map 2 Approximate distribution of Aslian languages
Map 3 Tasek Bera and environs