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Savosavo, spoken on Savo Island in the Solomons, is the easternmost non-Austronesian (i.e. ‘Papuan’) language. Although three other non-Austronesian languages are also spoken in the Solomons, none are particularly closely related to Savosavo. In fact, Savosavo shares more vocabulary (about 20%) with neighboring Austronesian languages than it does with these ‘Papuan’ languages (3.7% and below). With 98% of the population of Savo Island being first-language speakers of Savosavo, it is a small (ca. 2,500 speakers) but ‘safe’ language (although that situation could well change, as almost all Savo Islanders, including young children, also speak Solomon Islands Pijin).


The treatment of phonology is fairly straightforward, as Savosavo is not particularly exceptional phonologically. Especially appreciated is the section on intonation, for which audio files are available online. Although the chapter on word formation is short, this is due to the fact that suffixes and enclitics, as well as reduplication types, are simply listed here and crossreferenced to the chapter sections where they are dealt with in depth.

Ch. 4 is a mini-grammar of Savasavo, covering all ‘minor’ word classes and also presenting a very good overview for the chapters that follow on noun phrases and verb complexes. Savasavo has a number of features of note: e.g. the use of ‘seawards’ vs. ‘bushwards’ as absolute frames of reference rather than relative frames such as ‘right’, ‘left’, ‘front’, and ‘back’; flexible gender and especially its use to highlight discourse prominence; a morphologically marked nominative but an unmarked accusative; object-agreement rather than subject-agreement on verbs.

Noun phrases are strictly structured with regards to the order of elements (e.g. head final, except for emphatic and limiting markers such as ‘really’ and ‘only’). Verbs have independent inner and outer layers of morphology (inner marking includes object marking and transitivity-changing, whereas outer marking includes tense-aspect-mood (TAM), finiteness, and nominalization). Like most languages in the region, serial verbs—fully lexical verbs, aspectual verbs, and transitivity-changing verbs—are common in Savosavo.

Chapters on various clause types are too detailed to summarize here; presentation is organized according to both form and function and is very clear. The final separate chapter on the nominalizer -ghu is indicative of its prevalence in Savosavo discourse, both to derive nouns and also in a variety of verb and predicate constructions. Texts in ‘Appendix A’, in addition to narratives (standard for De Gruyter Mouton grammars), also include a number of locational descriptions elicited by the ‘Man & Tree game’, photos of which precede the texts.
The grammar under review is extremely well organized, and the various overviews are especially useful. The book will interest specialists in Papuan and Pacific languages and also language typologists. It is yet another in the growing number of excellent grammars of this linguistically diverse area of the world.