Summary

This descriptive grammar focuses on the endangered language of the Mamaindê people, a community of some 250 individuals who live in four villages on the border between the states of Mato Grosso and Rondônia, Brazil. Their language, Mamaindê, is part of the larger Nambikwara family, and has been classified as belonging to the Northern Branch of that family. The language, while still used vigorously within the community of speakers, is suffering some signs of disintegration as bilingualism in Portuguese is growing rapidly.

Chapter 1 focuses on the cultural, historical, and sociolinguistic contexts of the Mamaindê language. In this chapter, I lay the groundwork for a broader understanding of this people and their social context that would enable the reader to appreciate the cultural nuances that permeate their language. Culturally specific examples are given throughout the text in order to supplement this broader perspective.

The second chapter focuses on phonology. The phonology description introduces a language with 16 vowels and 14 consonant phonemes. The large number of vowel phonemes is due to the fact that creaky voice and nasality are found to be contrastive vowel features. The syllable template is defined as CCVC. Stress is found to be largely quantity sensitive, but a number of stress rules are employed, each limited to a specific morphological strata. Mamaindê is a tone language, with two lexical tones occurring in four syllabic patterns, and tone sandhi evident in specific morpheme boundary contexts. Over 20 phonological processes are identified, including assimilation, elision, epenthesis, strengthening, weakening, metathesis, coalescence, and lengthening, showing that the phonological component of this language is considerable. Some of these processes pose significant challenges to phonological theory, including the spreading of vowel place features to coda consonants, and the formation of pre-oralized nasals. Throughout the segmental phonology, as well as throughout the stress and tonal systems, it is discovered that the phonology must repeatedly make reference to morphology.
Morphology is covered in chapter 3. Here we glimpse the real productive power of this language, which is highly poly-synthetic. Noun morphology is dominated by the noun classifiers, which are not only able to describe and categorize all nominals, but are also used extensively as metaphor. Verb morphology is even richer, with some 15 slots for affixation. Noun incorporation can be prefixed on the verb, referring specifically to body parts involved in the action of the verb. A robust evidential system, fused with tense, is able to provide ways for speakers to encode their source of information for each utterance. The existence of a high and low register, each with its separate set of inflectional morphemes, makes the verb system much richer and socially adaptable. A set of endearment terms are available that show a high degree of intimacy between the speaker and the focus of his utterance. And lastly, emotive morphemes can be used which provide clues to the listener as to the overall attitude of the speaker.

The fourth and final chapter describes the levels of syntax and discourse. This is appropriately the smallest section of the entire work, as syntax is certainly the least complex component of the grammar. However, a few highlights include the impersonal construction, which allows the speaker to distance himself somewhat when speaking of his own emotions, and a large set of connectives functioning in a switch reference system, which indicates to the hearer when there will be a change of subject in the following clause. Although discourse is not studied in depth, topics such as repetition, tail-head linkages, and fronting/left dislocation are discussed as some of the more important discourse features of this language.