WALS Online

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The World Atlas of Language Structures Online. Ed. by **Martin Haspelmath**, **Matthew S. Dryer**, **David Gil** & **Bernard Comrie**. Munich: Max Planck Digital Library. Available online at http://wals.info/.

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A common dashboard sticker in Ghanaian taxi's has it that "If it must be done, it must be done well", where 'done well' cleverly doubles as a brand name. This seems to have been the motto of the creators of WALS Online, the web version of the World Atlas of Language Structures. The massive 2005 volume and the somewhat bumpy interface of the interactive maps on the accompanying CDROM have been transformed into a slick web interface with all sorts of clever stuff going on behind the scenes. *In a time where an increasing number of print sources is thrown online simply in the form of scanned pages or huge PDF files, it is refreshing to see what true adaptation to the medium of hypertext can bring us.* One consequence of this is that WALS Online, rather than a second edition of WALS 2005 (Haspelmath, Dryer, Gil, and Comrie 2005), has become a separate publication, edited by the same authors but published by the Max Planck Digital Library. Significantly, both the data and the chapter texts are freely available under a Creative Commons license, in line with the project's goal of '[making] information on the structural diversity of the world's languages available to a large audience' (as stated on the homepage).

Features and languages

WALS Online is a website consisting of five main parts. The first part, Features, functions as an index to the 142 maps and chapters of the original edition. The opening page of each feature is merely a configuration screen from where one can navigate to the chapter text or map, change the indicators used on the map, or select another feature for combined display. The chapter text is beautifully laid out, with an eye for good web typography. A minor issue is that after using the atlas for some time, the configuration screen starts to feel as an unnecessary barrier between the index and the texts and maps. It might have been better to make the chapter text directly accessible from the main index of features.

The second part, Languages, provides multiple interfaces to the languages that comprise the WALS dataset. Languages are indexed by name, by language family, and by country. Moreover, under 'Choose by region', an implementation of Google Maps enables the user to display the languages from any rectangular piece of the earth's surface simply by dragging sliders on a world map (or by manually inputting latitudes and longitudes). There is no overview map of all of the languages in the sample (apparently for performance reasons; Robert Forkel, p.c. May 2008).

References and authors

The third major part of WALS Online is a database of all 5728 references perused in extracting the feature values for the individual languages. This part of the website is extensively cross-referenced from both the Feature and the Language pages. My only gripe with it is that apart from the cross-referencing, the sole interface offered to explore this part of the website is a search screen. Even if a list of all the references would be rather too long, it would have been nice if references could at least be browsed by language family and by language[1], or by author. The reference search works fine, although the display of search results could be improved (sort options are absent from the results page, for example; one has to think of selecting the right sort option while building the search).

One consequence of putting all the references in a central database is that users are dependent on the quality of the cross-referencing job. On the whole, this job seems to have been done quite well. Nonetheless, it is not too difficult

to find an unlinked reference included in the database (Darwin 1878, mentioned but not linked in chapter 142) and worse, an unlinked reference which is wholly absent from the database (Zeschan 2004 in chapter 140).

The fourth part of WALS Online is simply an index of all the authors that coded features and wrote the chapter texts, with links to the features. Compared to the other parts, this one is a bit light on information; one would expect at least a few biographical notes, contact information and perhaps also the current affiliation of the authors.

The fifth part of the site is called *Newsblog*. The link leads to messages in the category 'News' on a weblog that at the same time functions as a place where comments pertaining to individual Features/Chapters can be left. To that end, every feature page includes a link 'discuss' which leads to a post on the blog. This is an innovative way of soliciting comments which ensures that comments and feedback end up in the right place, to be acted upon promptly if needed. There are two more links in the main navigation bar: one leads to a contact page, and one leads to an online Help feature.

Under the hood

Behind the scenes of any web application is interesting stuff that average users need not worry about, but that is the foundation of usability and extensibility. First a small gold nugget: a downloadable KML file (containing the placemarks and feature values) is provided for each page that includes a map. The same data is also available in XML format. Things like these characterize the great attention to detail that makes using WALS Online such a pleasant experience. Also notable is that every chapter contains a 'cite' link as well as a link to a downloadable PDF version. The PDF (which contains just the chapter text, not the maps) is presented as a 'print version'; it is unclear why this is not simply done with a print style sheet.[2]

The reference database is an example of how an online bibliography should be done.[3] Not only is it fully searchable, but every single citation can also be exported to various formats. A very neat feature, invisible to most users, is the embedding of bibliographic data (in the COinS format) on individual reference pages. This allows OpenURL resolvers to look up the citation online or in specified databases. It also allows users of clever research tools like Zotero (reviewed here) to directly save the citation to their library. A logical extension of this feature would have been to do the same for the chapter text pages, to make those as easily citable as the references from the database.

Another well thought-out feature which may go unnoticed (though not unused) by many visitors is the URI layout, i.e. the structure of the web addresses of the individual pages. All pages on WALS Online have short, readable URIs without meaningless clutter. Even individual citations in the reference database have their own URIs (e.g. http://wals.info/refdb/record/Ameka-1991). This is a big plus, since website users tend to think of the URI as another interface to the website.[4]

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, I simply want to reiterate what this review started with: WALS Online is a formidable linguistic resource *done well*. It bears all the hallmarks of a well-executed web application that is here to stay for years to come. The blurb on the book version read 'I suspect that many linguists will not be able to resist curling up with this massive volume on rainy days just for the fun facts.' I suspect the same holds for this online version. Why not make yourself a nice cup of tea (Dahl 2008) and enjoy the *World Atlas of Language Structures Online*?

References

Dahl, Östen. 2008. Tea. In: Haspelmath, Martin & Dryer, Matthew S. & Gil, David & Comrie, Bernard (eds.) *The World Atlas of Language Structures Online*. Munich: Max Planck Digital Library, chapter 138. Available online at http://wals.info/feature/138. Accessed on 2008-07-02.

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[1] Since May 2008, this can be done indirectly, namely via a link provided on the individual language and genus pages (accessible from the Languages part). The somewhat intimidating search screen remains the main entrance to the reference database.

[2] HTML pages can easily be styled with different cascading style sheets (CSS) according to media. An example of this can be found in the Verba Africana project (see Dingemanse 2007).

[3] Technically, that is. The data itself is not fully free from errors; for example, the editor of the 2004 volume *Coordinating Constructions* is cited in one reference as "Haspelmath, M." and in another as "Haspelmath, Martin".

[4] It is not fully worked out though: presently, the URI http://wals.info/refdb/ does not lead to the main 'references' page; instead, the underlying system shines through.