

Briefly Noted

Essential Programming for Linguistics

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Edinburgh University Press (Edinburgh
Advanced Textbooks in Linguistics,
edited by Peter Ackema and
Mitsuhiko Ota); x+174 pp; hardbound
ISBN 978-0-7486-3855-0, \$115.00, £70.00;
paperbound, ISBN 978-0-7486-3856-7,
\$29.50, £19.99

This book is of only marginal use as a Perl primer for linguists or as a university textbook. Thick with explicatory text in 10-point Minion font, some chapters, such as that on references and modules, are consequently very difficult to work through, and are written in sometimes abstruse language (“The other thing is something to do with how we use functions,” p. 55), which further impedes full comprehension.

The book’s exercises become increasingly arduous (number 24, for example, asks the reader to build a basic concordancer using the localizer “my,” which is not explained until 20 pages later), and readers must therefore resort to downloading Weisser’s solutions and trying to decipher the code themselves. Furthermore, these solutions provide programs that are usually too basic for genuine linguistic research, such as a dictionary-compiler

into which the user must type every entry by hand. Because Weisser makes little reference to other work, readers leave this book with the discouraging feeling that no usable Perl code exists for linguists, and that they are still unable to write their own.

The book’s greatest shortcomings are in the areas of subroutines, modules, and objects. Making only a single passing reference to CPAN in his chapter on modularity, Weisser refers to only three modules (pp. 110–112) but never provides a functioning program that uses them. Because one of Perl’s greatest strengths is in the reusability of its modules, it is disappointing to find so little on them in this book.

Objects are also a great strength of Perl, but Weisser dismisses them in a dense four-page chapter which ends, as usual, with the acknowledgment that the examples he has provided can only be made useful by writing a program “which, however, I shall leave to you as a further exercise” (p. 120).

Linguists seeking a primer or classroom textbook on Perl are probably still best served by Michael Hammond’s *Programming for Linguists* (Blackwell, 2003), which, although it has slightly fewer examples of linguistically relevant code, brings readers to about the same skill level that Weisser’s book does, and with greater clarity.—*Brian Ó Broin, William Paterson University*

