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Review of: The Amazonian Languages

Edward J. Vajda

Western Washington University, edward.vajda@wwu.edu

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REVIEWS

R. M. W. Dixon & Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald (eds.), *The Amazonian languages* (Cambridge Language Surveys). Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Pp. xxviii + 446.

Reviewed by EDWARD J. VAJDA, Western Washington University

The Amazon and Orinoco basins comprise one of the most complex language areas in the world. Sadly for linguistics, the indigenous languages of this vast area continue to remain among the world's most incompletely documented even as many of them fall under increasing threat of extinction. Despite a steady trickle of high-quality studies of individual languages during recent years, notably a fourth volume of the excellent *Handbook of Amazonian languages* (Derbyshire & Pullum 1998), many gaps in the overall linguistic picture of South America persist unfilled. The appearance of this long overdue book will significantly improve the situation. Edited by the director and associate director of the Research Centre for Linguistic Typology (La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia), *The Amazonian languages* joins several similar surveys published in the same series, notably *The languages of Australia* (Dixon 1980) and *The Papuan languages of New Guinea* (Foley 1986). Each of these books presents the first comprehensive overview of an important and highly endangered slice of the earth's linguistic diversity. Most of the 300 or so native languages of Lowland South America will likely not endure as naturally functioning systems of communication beyond the 21st century. Since the arrival of European explorers and settlers 500 years ago, many dozens if not hundreds of other Amazonian languages have vanished unrecorded, a fact that severely impairs all future attempts to comprehend the region's linguistic history. The loss of even a portion of the remaining languages before thorough documentation can be accomplished would compound this tragedy, since Amazonia contains numerous unusual typological features capable of revealing new insights into the human language faculty. Although the book aims at a complete survey, the editors have had to settle for simply listing some languages by name alone, as little else about them has yet been ascertained: Awaké, Hoti, Irantxe, Kanoé, Puinave, Sape and the Katukina group (20). The work of documenting these languages, as well as improving the descriptions of their better-known neighbors, should be considered of paramount importance to modern linguistics. Inspiring such research is a central aim of the present book.

The Amazonian languages affords a cogent overview of what is known about the typology and genetic affinities of all the indigenous languages of Lowland South America from the Caribbean coast and Orinoco basin to the Andes foothills and south through the watersheds of the Amazon's tributaries in Bolivia and Central Brazil, an area that could be called 'Greater Amazonia'. Certain languages and language families receive greater coverage than others, but this unevenness is useful in that it demonstrates which

specific areas most urgently require field work. Genetically, the languages of Greater Amazonia represent at least 20 separate families and more than a dozen isolates. What is more, the members of each family tend not to lie in contiguous proximity but instead are mixed in wildly random patterns which the editors compare to a Jackson Pollock canvas (1); a more scientific-sounding description would have done the linguistic map of South America less justice. Although most of these geographically discontinuous families also contain members located in other parts of South America, Central America or the Caribbean, the region under consideration can justifiably be called a linguistic area on the basis of the numerous diffusional structural features found among its many genetically diverse languages. The editors list fifteen specifically 'Amazonian' traits (8-9) shared between the region's genetically unrelatable languages but absent or only weakly represented among sister languages found in more distant parts of the continent. These include the presence of extensive gender or classifier systems, the expression of tense, aspect, and modality through optional suffixes, the prevalence of oddly conditioned ergative splits in the verb-internal actant agreement morphology (with only a single argument normally marked on the verb), and a strong propensity for agglutinative polysynthesis and head marking.

The book's fifteen chapters are written by an array of specialists from South America, Australia, England and the United States. Each chapter ends with its own bibliography. The volume itself finishes with a comprehensive index of authors (431-435), languages and language families (436-444), and subjects (445-446). The editors have done a superb job in uniting the disparate contributions and their necessarily uneven presentation of material into a unified whole. The preface (xxiv-xxviii) and first chapter, the editors' introduction (1-21), introduce two crucial principles that underlie the book's overall organization. One is synchronic, the other diachronic. Though each is controversial in its own way, both will serve any reader interested in Amazon linguistics exceedingly well. Rather than adopting any special formalism for their grammatical and phonological descriptions, the editors employ what they call 'Basic Linguistic Theory', defined as 'the cumulative tradition of linguistic theory, that has evolved over the last 2000 years' (xxvi). This descriptive approach cannot be dismissed as 'theory-neutral' since it advocates a principled avoidance of the opaque terminology and cumbersome formalism that has rendered so many linguistics books rapidly obsolete over the years, as newer formal theories arrive down the pike. 'Basic Linguistic Theory' also succeeds, by virtue of its practical simplicity (a couple of clearly written pages in the preface suffice to explain the requisite terminology), in covering maximum detail without excessive verbiage. Throughout the book there flows a detectable negative undercurrent toward previous formal grammatical approaches such as tagmemics that have tended to spotlight their own pet systems of descriptive formalism rather than the data being described. Dixon & Aikhenvald's approach lightens the reader's burden

considerably and will be applauded by many (including the present reviewer), but may not meet with equal enthusiasm in all circles, though it would be patently a shame if linguists interested in theories of universal grammar were to ignore Amazonian material simply because it has been presented without recourse to trendy theoretical frameworks.

The second principle is bound to be even more controversial, at least to those who advocate the establishment of deep family trees, as it cuts to the heart of the current debate over how far back in time genetic relationships can be demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt. Echoing the strong position recently articulated by one of the editors in his important essay, *The rise and fall of languages* (Dixon 1997), that there are no 'families of language families', the editors avoid all deeper-level genetic groupings, adopting instead a solid conservative approach toward linguistic taxonomy. But Dixon & Aikhenvald go much further than simply declaring the existence of a universal de facto time depth limit (their suggestion is 5–8000 years) beyond which accumulations of random changes in the data render the comparative method inoperable. While most linguists skeptical of the possibility of demonstrating deep-level groupings simply adopt some such limit a priori, a position amounting to nothing more than glottochronology in a negative guise, Dixon offers a powerful historical explanation as to why the comparative method may have genuine temporal limitations. He argues that the family tree model by its very nature is applicable only to such linguistic history as has occurred during rather brief periods of punctuated equilibrium – that is, during instances of rapid geographic spreading and splitting of languages triggered by special events such as colonization of uninhabited territory, or conquest fueled by some new technology, ideology or innovative lifestyle such as agriculture or pastoralism that gives the intruders a decisive edge over their indigenous competition. Presumably, during times when such expansions are not under way (Dixon calls them 'periods of equilibrium' and suggests they have been the rule rather than the exception throughout most of the existence of *Homo loquens*), the languages of a region, while developing and changing as languages do everywhere, naturally tend to converge with their neighbors through gradual diffusion of multiple linguistic traits. Such periods of equilibrium, which lack major family-tree producing expansions and splits, may endure for thousands or even tens of thousands of years. Because equilibrium situations tend to favor gradual convergence rather than sharp bifurcations, such periods do not yield family trees but instead serve to blur the original genetic boundaries between previously established families in a given area of linguistic interaction. Assuming the history of human language is at least 40,000 years old (Dixon suggests over 100,000 years), much of linguistic prehistory almost certainly involved long periods of equilibrium, which, if one accepts Dixon, led to barriers beyond which comparative linguistics cannot penetrate with anything rising above the level of speculation.

Dixon & Aikhenvald hold that the theory of punctuated equilibrium has the following specific relevance for South America: the continent was rapidly populated by an incoming group or groups at least 12,000 (perhaps 20,000) years ago, and this initial expansion resulted in robust new family tree creation. After this initial expansion (which represented a period of punctuation) there followed several thousand years of equilibrium, leading to convergence between the branches of the original family tree (or trees – the data seems unable to resolve the question of whether South America was peopled initially by speakers of a single proto-language, as Greenberg asserts, or by several). Today's major indigenous South American language families are the product of later agricultural expansions (a second major punctuation) beginning as recently as 5,000 years ago. Each of the families that resulted from these newer expansions – Arawak, Carib, Tupí, etc. – nicely conforms to the family-tree model and can be substantially reconstructed using the comparative method. The region's isolates and small language families such as Makú, Nambiquara, Guahibo, Jivaro, etc., on the other hand, appear to be leftovers from the earlier long period of equilibrium that developed on the basis of the continent's first peopling by hunter-gatherers. If one accepts this scenario, then attempting to trace precise genetic connections among South America's widespread language families, or between them and the remaining residue of isolates and micro-families, appears by definition to be a near futile undertaking.

Even if one does accept Dixon's hypothesis of punctuated equilibrium, however, there are factors that suggest the possibility of new family trees (or even families of family trees) yet to be discovered. First, as Dixon & Aikhenvald themselves stress, there are Amazonian languages and even small families still almost unstudied; logically, some of them may conceal genetic surprises, if not on a deeper level, then at least on the level of their shallower family affinity. Second, and most important, since languages change at different rates and some languages for cultural or structural reasons may resist diffusional processes more steadfastly than others, it remains impossible to predict how long a period of equilibrium would have been needed to erase the telltale signs of genetic relatedness in every given case. Dixon's hypothesis does in fact allow for these facts, and their reality does not damage his overall premise (at most, his hypothesis about the development of ancient convergence areas during periods of equilibrium would have to more seriously consider a variety of idiosyncratic ethnic information about speakers of languages in geographic proximity). Third, the notion that equilibrium blurs ancient genetic distinctions within a linguistic area does not entirely preclude the possibility that comparing parallel linguistic features in geographically and genetically disparate areas of the world (say, for example, Amazonia and Eastern North America, two regions with no demonstrable historical contact, but which have been postulated by Greenberg to contain genetically related branches of 'Amerind') may ultimately prove capable of

revealing something tangible about very deep linguistic connections. Finally, in the specific case of South America, it is also theoretically possible that as yet undetected punctuations could have occurred during the several thousand years between the time of the initial peopling of Amazonia and the rise of food production among some of the region's inhabitants (though a plausible punctuating event triggering the creation of large new family trees during this long period would have to be postulated).

For all these reasons, there may yet be credible linkages awaiting discovery among Dixon & Aikhenvald's separate genetic units – and likewise between well-established families elsewhere in the world. This means that engaging in deeper-level linguistic comparisons beyond the various suggested time-depth ceilings (a practice some linguists infelicitously call 'long range' comparison) cannot be regarded out of hand as a fruitless searching for linguistic El Dorado (the reviewer's, not the editors', metaphor). One such putative South American 'family of language families' – Macro-Jê – is contemplated by the editors themselves (18), though here too they seem to favor the likelihood of a proto-Sprachbund over a proto-family origin. Perhaps Fortescue's (1998) concept of a 'language mesh' could be usefully applied in such a situation, where geographically disparate languages seem to show more than coincidental similarity, yet lack the requisite body of evidence needed to determine whether the parallels in question are areal or genetic in origin. What is crucial here is the editors' assertion that the correct choice between such possibilities is practically unknowable, given the nature of overall linguistic prehistory and the known rhythms of language change. And the main lesson for comparative linguistics in general is that the editors have provided a theoretical basis justifying not only the historical plausibility of the language families they accept, but also a strong hypothesis that cogently predicts the impossibility of demonstrating any deeper linkages between these groupings. Opponents of Dixon's hypothesis will have to counter with a better one of their own which illustrates how originally separate language families or branches of a single family could have maintained their genetic distinctiveness through millennia of interactive development in relative equilibrium. So far, none seems to be in the offing. The once celebrated lexicostatistical technique of bean-counting core vocabulary (using the Swadesh List or any similar lexical roster), though often useful, has proven untenable as a universal tool, since languages for cultural reasons may readily replace basic words with new ones. This has been amply demonstrated for parts of New Guinea and Australia (Dixon 1997: 9–10), and the possibility of core vocabulary attrition in prehistoric Amazonia, a similar region of small indigenous language groups, cannot be discounted either. The argument for grammatical or typological parallels is also problematic (unless perhaps the evidence in question is extensive enough to include entire paradigms and shared morphological idiosyncrasies of the type favored by Meillet), since even languages that culturally resist lexical borrowing may

readily allow diffusion of grammatical traits and patterns (if not morphemes) from neighboring, genetically unrelated languages. For Amazonia, Alexandra Aikhenvald has convincingly documented exactly this scenario among genetically unrelated languages in the Vaupés region of eastern Brazil (391–406; see also Aikhenvald 1999).

Buttressed by Dixon's hypothesis of 'punctuated equilibrium', most of the volume's material is organized around Amazonia's well-documented language families. The editors studiously avoid any further mention of 'stocks', 'phyla', or 'superfamilies' of any kind. Most individual chapters are devoted to one or another of the continent's major genetic groupings; a few discuss micro-families and isolates or linguistic convergence zones of special interest. Each chapter contains clear, detailed sections on sociolinguistics, genetic affiliations, and typology. All major aspects of phonology, morphology and syntax are covered as best as can be expected given the current state of knowledge of each individual language. The impression gained is that while much remains to be done in Amazonian linguistics, the work accomplished so far is more voluminous and impressive than has often been believed. The grammatical descriptions, all written in 'Basic Linguistic Theory', include numerous glossed examples from each language, or, in the case of a large family, from prominent representative languages. Also accompanying each chapter is a line map showing the location of the languages under discussion. Families represented in Amazonia by only a small minority of their members receive no separate discussion, while families with many or most of their members located in the area are given extensive attention. Chapter 2 (23–64), by Desmond Derbyshire, for instance, is devoted to a detailed genetic and typological overview of Carib, South America's second largest family. Chapter 3 (65–106), by Alexandra Aikhenvald, presents a similarly thorough discussion of Arawak, which, with its 40 living members (a conservative numerical estimate), probably represents the largest remaining indigenous family south of Mexico. The original dispersals of both Carib and Arawak, whose members once dotted much of South America and intruded into Central America and far up the Caribbean, are linked to early agricultural expansions. It is important to note that Aikhenvald avoids the super-stock term 'Arawakan', and uses Arawak for the closely-knit family that super-comparativists call 'Maipuran'. In general, family names in this volume lack the '-an' suffix commonly used by North American linguists for families and more speculative higher-level linkages. 'Cariban' is thus 'Carib', 'Panoan' simply 'Pano', etc. This practice of using single language names as family designations causes less confusion than might be expected, since context normally identifies the meaning intended. It is also more in keeping with naming practices current among South America's linguists.

The remaining chapters cover the following genetic groupings: Tupí (chapter 4, by Aryon D. Rodrigues, 107–124), Tupí-Guaraní (chapter 5, by

Cheryl Jensen, 125–164), Macro-Jê (chapter 6, by Aryon D. Rodrigues, 165–206), Tucano (chapter 7, by Janet Barnes, 207–226), Pano (chapter 8, by Eugene E. Loos, 227–250), Makú (chapter 9, by Silvana Martins & Valteir Martins, 251–268), Nambiquara (chapter 10, by Ivan Lowe, 269–292), and Arawá (chapter 11, by R. M. W. Dixon, 293–306). Some of these families have as few as three members. The next two chapters are devoted to micro-families and isolates, many of which are severely endangered and poorly documented. Chapter 12, ‘Small language families and isolates in Peru’ (307–340), by Mary Ruth Wise, gives basic typological and sociolinguistic data (including native-speaker estimates) for about half a dozen genetic units located in northern Peru and adjacent countries. Chapter 13, ‘Other small families and isolates’ (341–384), by Alexandra Aikhenvald & R. M. W. Dixon, provides similar information for the remainder of Amazonia, noting along the way the locations and names of several languages as yet undocumented. The description of many languages discussed in these chapters is incomplete in important respects, a fact that poignantly attests to the urgent need for fieldwork. The final two chapters showcase special linguistic areas rather than genetic groupings. Chapter 14, ‘Areal diffusion and language contact in the Içana-Vaupés basin, north-west Amazonia’ (385–416), by Alexandra Aikhenvald, discusses the intense diffusion of grammatical traits but not lexical items among the genetically unrelated East Tucano (now the region’s dominant indigenous language), Tariana (a North Arawak outlier) and Makú languages spoken by hunter-gatherers who have become economically subordinated to the former two agricultural populations. Because one’s native language was until recently considered a badge of ethnic identity in the Vaupés region, Tariana and Tucano speakers traditionally engaged in an exogamous interrelationship in which lexical borrowing was actively discouraged as a violation of exogamy. However, the bilingualism that necessarily developed among these two speaker groups has produced extensive phonological and grammatical convergence. This can be plainly seen, for instance, by comparing Tariana with Arawak languages outside the Vaupés region (Aikhenvald 1999). Such a sociolinguistic situation has important implications for theories of language change and it challenges certain assumptions commonly made by comparative linguists (see above). Finally, chapter 15, ‘The Upper Xingu as an incipient linguistic area’ (417–430), by Lucy Seki (translated by the editors from the author’s original Portuguese), discusses ongoing processes of convergence among 17 native groups living in the watershed of one of the Amazon’s major southeastern tributaries in an area long isolated by rapids and other natural barriers to European incursion. Seven of these groups have been located in the Upper Xingu for less than a century, and this special study provides a revealing glimpse into the genesis of a linguistic area rather than its long-term result, as areal studies usually do.

This beautifully written and brilliantly edited volume, with its intricate yet

user-friendly grammatical descriptions, detailed but clear maps of language distribution, and wealth of never-before published field data will undoubtedly become the standard linguistic reference to Lowland South America for years to come. Nevertheless, the editors are clearly motivated not by a wish to have the last say in Amazonian linguistics, but rather by a fervent desire to encourage new research that will add entire new chapters to future editions of their book. In this connection, they ruefully note several unfortunate trends in the present state of Amazonian linguistics, in addition to the endangerment of most of the languages. First, up to the present there has been little cooperation or constructive exchange between missionary linguists working in the field and specialists from local universities. Second, South American linguists have tended to busy themselves in applying each successive North American formalism to the prestige languages Spanish and Portuguese, while neglecting the vast indigenous wealth in their own backyard. In fact, at the time this book went to press, no Brazilian resident had published a monograph on an indigenous Brazilian language since 1595(!); fortunately, such work is currently well under way (see Seki, forthcoming) and many of the results are showcased in the present volume. Finally, the editors enumerate the many benefits to the linguistics profession that would quickly accrue 'if everyone who calls himself a linguist – from South American countries and from overseas – were to devote a year or so to field work' in the Amazon and publish their results in a straightforward fashion (19). If *The Amazonian languages* does succeed in attracting new scholars to the task of documenting the region's disappearing languages, then this pioneering volume may in retrospect come to be viewed as one of the most important linguistics books of the late 20th century.

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- Author's address: Western Washington University,
Department of Modern and Classical Languages,
MS-9057,
Bellingham, WA 98225,
U.S.A.
E-mail: vajda@cc.wvu.edu*

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