

REVIEWS

Edible gender, mother-in-law style, & other grammatical wonders: Studies in Dyirbal, Yidiñ, & Warrgamay. By R. M. W. DIXON. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. xiv, 342. ISBN 9780198702900. \$110 (Hb).

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‘A language is a social phenomenon’, Dixon states at the beginning of this book. Merely looking at the structure of a language, he explains, is not a helpful tactic in attempting to understand the principles of linguistic features; a semantic approach, he sets out to demonstrate, might be much more fruitful. It is precisely this perspective on linguistics that is at the core of this inspiring book. The studies on Dyirbal, Yidiñ, and Warrgamay, three languages of north-eastern Australia, that are presented in the volume are all about meaning—how speakers make meaning, how grammatical features represent meaningful social and cultural practice, how meaning changes, and how it is always there, in multiple ways. The linguistic signs the author deals with are never simple; they are all semantically complex and express, for example, principles of taxonomy as well as cultural memory, individual ideas about the world and experiences of change and diversity. Words and grammar, as presented in D’s work, need to be seen in their social and cultural context and have to be studied with an awareness of the historical and political situations of the languages in question.

The linguistic features presented by D are among the topics of some of the most celebrated work on Australian languages at large, such as edible gender, mother-in-law speech style, and ergative syntax. Much of the work on these topics has been published, over almost half a century, by the author himself. Here, he has assembled a collection of texts that were, with two exceptions, previously presented as part of his monographs or as chapters in journals and edited volumes. D has not, however, simply reedited his texts, but carefully revised and recontextualized them. Additional overviews and rich comments bind the different chapters together and help to achieve coherence and accessibility throughout the volume. This specific structure and history of the book inspires a kind of ‘double reading’ experience: the reader is provided with a brilliant collection of papers on key topics in Australian linguistics, but also receives a programmatic introduction, if you will, into the work of R. M. W. Dixon and his way of seeing language and linguistics.

The volume is organized in five parts, made up of several chapters each. The first chapter stands separately, providing rich background information on what is to follow. D sets out with a kind of mission statement: ‘One can only fully comprehend the interwoven underpinnings and implications of a language through having some familiarity with the shared cultural heritage of its speakers’ (1). Whatever ‘cultural heritage’ might be here—we have to acknowledge, he implies, different sociocultural concepts, language practices, and people as being fundamentally coeval. Therefore, even though all of the linguistic analyses that are presented in the following chapters are based on D’s basic linguistic theory and widely accepted models of linguistic description, salient contributions to knowledge-making and semantic analysis in this book are presented as coming from the people who speak the languages under study: Chloe Grant (to whom the book is dedicated) and many others (all listed in the acknowledgments section at the end of the book). Their names are given throughout the text, wherever relevant, and the author’s emphasis is on his teachers, not on ‘informants’ or ‘consultants’.

Besides setting the scene in this introductory chapter for the ‘linguistic wonders’ to come in the following chapters, D also makes clear that even wonders are subject to change. With regard to Australia’s languages, however, change very often meant marginalization and silencing, and the author leaves no doubt about whom to assign the blame: the European invasion—from the 1860s in north-eastern Australia—has been disastrous, and its consequences are consistently referred to in the various following chapters, which, as the author points out, provide insights into previously much more complex and richer communicative practices.

The following section (Part I) presents two chapters on genders and classifiers. First, a lesson in semantic analysis is presented by focusing on the four-gender system of Dyirbal. This chapter moves far beyond discussing the structural properties of gender and its most obvious meanings; it contains a detailed analysis of how different cultural conceptualizations and real-world distinctions are mapped onto a single grammatical contrast. D demonstrates that understanding how this mapping works depends on close cultural knowledge and one's readiness to listen to what the people who speak the language have to say: often it is only by taking the mythological and social meanings of nominal referents into account that their assignment to one of the four genders can be properly explained. This observation also results in a critical note on George Lakoff's (1987) *Women, fire and dangerous things*. D argues that linguistic speculations about how women and 'dangerous things' might be conceptually related so that they can be grouped in the same grammatical category are not to the point, but rather what the speakers think about the semantic concepts at play (43). Ch. 3 presents an equally insightful study of classifiers in Yidiñ, which emphasizes the relevance of taxonomy.

In Part II, the book's central argument is exemplified by three studies on kin relations and ways of speaking with in-laws. Ch. 4 is a study of the classificatory kinship system of Dyirbal, which reaches far beyond discussing the rich kinship terminology available in this language. It provides fascinating insights into how social practice translates into grammar, and how specific linguistic features continue to be meaningful even though their sociocultural basis has been lost: D's description of the system in practice is largely a description of change, in terms of inappropriate marriages (called *ñirri* 'bird shit') becoming more and more common practice, as shrinking Aboriginal communities do not offer sufficient opportunities for finding right marriage partners. Ch. 5 contains a description of Jalnguy, the mother-in-law style in Dyirbal. D carefully explores its semantic organization and demonstrates how speakers construct and use a communicative practice that emphasizes vagueness as an appropriate way of dealing with one's in-law kin. In Ch. 6, insights into the origins of in-law vocabularies are provided.

Part III combines four grammatical studies: on ergativity in Dyirbal and Yidiñ (Ch. 7), serial verb constructions in Dyirbal (Ch. 8), complementation strategies in Dyirbal (Ch. 9), and grammatical analysis in Warrgamay (Ch. 10). What makes all of these studies exciting is that understanding socially meaningful practice is consistently seen as a central aspect of the analysis of grammatical structure. In Ch. 7, one of the core arguments is that the differences in the syntactic principles for clause linking in Dyirbal and Yidiñ result from contrasting narrative techniques: while in Yidiñ a story is usually told in the first person, it is told in the third person in Dyirbal. Simply because of different distributions and frequencies of first- vs. third-person pronouns, coordination in Yidiñ uses a subject/agent pivot for pronouns and a subject/object pivot for nominals, while Dyirbal uses a subject/object pivot in all contexts. Serial verb constructions in Dyirbal are presented in their rich semantic organization and further explained in terms of their structural context in Ch. 9, where the focus is on complementation strategies. The study of conjugation classes in a variety of Warrgamay illustrates how grammatical reanalysis can result in the identification of syntactic classes of verbs (transitive and intransitive) with specific conjugation classes (originally based on the phonology of the verbs).

In Part IV, the author concentrates on further phenomena of change, with a focus on variation and contact. Chs. 11, 12, and 13 form a unit by being dedicated to a dialectology of Dyirbal, with emphases on variation in grammar (Ch. 11), the lexicon (Ch. 12), and the phonology (Ch. 13). In Ch. 14, the observations made so far are used to inform a more general study of language contact. Here, D takes up an argument he has continued to present over the years, perhaps most prominently in his *The rise and fall of languages* (1997): with a time depth of about 40,000 years since the first settlers began to populate Australia, the Aboriginal languages encountered there between the beginning of the European invasion in 1788 and today cannot be classified into one or two large genetic units. Rather, D points out, they form part of huge linguistic areas that have emerged through the mobility of speakers and various forms of language contact. Consequently, only a few languages of the Cairns rainforest region can be shown to be genetically related, while most others might be isolates (280). Migration histories of Dyirbal and Yidiñ as well as convergence phenomena between them suggest that these two genetically unrelated languages came into con-

tact only recently. Linguistic evidence for the contact history of both languages, as well as for Warrgamay and Ja:bugay, is discussed in the remainder of the chapter.

The book's final section, Part V, is 'a final adieu' (299) to Dyrirbal and Yidiñ. Dyrirbal is now falling out of use, and only few people still share some knowledge of it, while Yidiñ is no longer spoken. Yidiñ people now try to gain some knowledge of their ancestors' language by consulting the grammar published by D in 1977. Ch. 15 is a sociolinguistic account of the relatively brief history of Yidiñ's decline, with a description of the limited influence of English during the last decades in which this language was spoken. Ch. 16 describes the gradual decline of Dyrirbal, which D has witnessed for some thirty years. The description of the social history of contact between Dyrirbal and English commences with the European invasion and deals with the consequences of genocide, theft, murder, and the abduction of children, but also with subaltern agency and resilience. The core part of this last chapter, however, is about the years during which the author worked on the different varieties of Dyrirbal and interacted with their speakers. As in the author's other contributions on the biographies of the Dyrirbal people he worked with, and his own biography and fieldwork experiences, there is no notion of nostalgia in this chapter. This makes this last section of the book as inspiring to read as the previous ones: it is an enlightened comment on the field itself, very clear about the context in which work on Dyrirbal (and other languages of Australia) has been done and the impact this work may have or will have.

This book has been extraordinarily pleasant to read for a number of reasons. It is written, quite characteristically, in a compelling and lucid style. Furthermore, it is beautifully organized into thematically coherent chapters that, one by one, help the reader to understand the author's thoughts about language and linguistics at large: it is only through an intimate understanding of the sociocultural context of a language (which will only be achieved over decades of interaction with speakers and through having an idea of equality of different ways of knowing) that linguistic features can be adequately analyzed, by prioritizing a semantic analysis. And on such a firm basis an analysis of processes of change and historical entanglements between different languages can fruitfully be attempted. This might not be big news—but being brought forward in such an astute and exemplary way, the author's proposal to take meaning and practice in language seriously is significant at a time when many linguists see the field as a laboratory rather than other people's homes, and look at language history as a history of genomes and population drift. This book is essential reading for every scholar of language and linguistics; it not only offers the reader a collection of inspiring analyses, but also is exemplary in making transparent its author's thinking over an entire scholarly career.

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Signing and belonging in Nepal. By ERIKA HOFFMANN-DILLOWAY. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2016. Pp. 176. ISBN 9781563686641. \$60 (Hb).

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Signing and belonging in Nepal is a touching and authentic reflection on the often-unexpected nuance in the ways deaf people work within particular cultural milieus to find one another, or-