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Are some languages better than others? By R. M. W. DIXON. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. vii, 272. ISBN 9780198766810. \$40 (Hb).

Reviewed by LARS JOHANSON, *University of Mainz*

This treatise unabashedly poses the simple polar question of whether some languages are ‘better’ than others. Dixon, an extraordinarily experienced linguist, is of course wise enough not to answer with a plain ‘yes’ or ‘no’. At the end of the book, he even completely leaves the decision to his readers: ‘It is up to you, the reader, to decide’ (245).

Before this final plea, however, close to 250 pages are devoted to preparing the issue in a careful and detailed way. D first states that it is legitimate and necessary to compare the relative worth of languages. Like every other science, he argues, linguistics has the fundamental task of evaluation. It is now time to fulfill this task and embark on a measured evaluation of the worth of different languages. The book aims to be a first step in this direction.

The fact that many linguists reject comparisons of this kind has its obvious reasons. The first stage in the history of linguistic evaluation was based on the belief in the superiority of European languages and the assumption that languages of other groups were primitive. D is certainly right in describing this as a racist approach, which partly still lives on (18–21). In many cases, however, the reason was sheer ignorance. We all remember the old bizarre statements of missionaries reporting that the exotic languages they were confronted with were so imperfect and difficult that their native speakers preferred not to use them.

The reaction to this stage was a second stage, a stage of redress. Anxious to avoid unfair evaluation, linguists had to emphasize, ‘as loud as was possible’ (20), that no language spoken in the world today is primitive and that all languages are about equal in complexity. According to D, linguists have now devoted about a hundred years to ‘redress of the racist idea’ (20), and thus it is time for a new, scientific assessment of the worth of languages.

A human language has several vital functions, for instance, to assist in ‘the process of belonging’ (2), to enable cooperative endeavor, to reflect social organization, to display emotions, and to convey information. It must be usable as a means for aesthetic expression, as a vehicle for scholarly thought and argumentation, as the conduit for proselytization, and as a means for persuasion and exhortation. These functions are dealt with in detail and properly exemplified.

Several chapters, especially Ch. 2, are devoted to the ways languages work. D explores (i) what is needed, (ii) what is desirable but not universal, and (iii) what is not really needed. All languages distinguish the three main speech acts (statements, commands, and questions), but they do so with different degrees of effectiveness. Many elements may in principle be desirable, but there is scarcely need for irregularities, suppletion, or grammatical and semantic redundancy. It is difficult to determine how many lexemes a language needs and how many words most of the non-major languages actually have. An ‘educated guess’ (172) might be between five and ten thousand. English and other major languages have many more, mainly because of numerous particular fields of activity that require specialized terminologies. In larger societies, every specialist group employs its own technical terms. In smaller language communities, D claims, the vocabulary covers all relevant aspects of the social and physical environment.

As far as the limits of a language are concerned, D asserts, it is important to identify what *MUST* be expressed, for example, mood, negation, possession, and identifying roles. A different question is what *CAN* be expressed. Particularly interesting are the difficulties of translating culture-specific statements between languages. Certain grammatical elements, such as aspect categories, also pose considerable problems. D concludes that not everything that can be said in one language may be rendered into another with reasonable facility. 'Everything can be said in every language' is a false maxim (187).

Across all human societies, there are recurrent functions that must be fulfilled. It is often claimed that all languages spoken in the world today fulfill them, each in its own manner and to a greater or lesser extent. One language achieves a certain function in one way, whereas another language achieves it in a second way. The first way may be more effective than the second, and vice versa. But does each language fulfill the functions equally well? Can one language be considered better than another? The crucial question is for what purpose it may be better. All present-day languages comprise sophisticated linguistic systems that serve many functions, but no two languages do things in precisely the same way. Language A may be more effective in certain respects, and language B in some other respects.

What is a difficult language? Some languages are easier to describe and explicate for pedagogic purposes. However, all languages are equally suitable for being learned by a child. The situation is different for adults past the age at which language learning is entirely natural. It is difficult to decide whether some languages are easier to learn as a second language than others. Some features may be particularly resistant to being learned, and others may be rather open. A high degree of complexity is demanding and may make learning difficult for outsiders. Recently developed creoles have only had time to develop a moderate degree of complexity and are thus relatively easy to learn. A language such as Tok Pisin is well developed and in no way primitive, but still easier to master than languages that show more complexities. However, a certain amount of redundancy is desirable if the language is to be comprehensible. Many of the easy features are those that have proved to be 'attractive' properties in cases of contact-induced copying (see Johanson 2002).

An important topic is the different ways in which languages are interwoven with cultures. D stresses that a language is a social organism that responds to the environment it inhabits. Each language has its own character, which mirrors the society it serves. Its specific 'genius' (242) is something that can be felt, but scarcely made fully explicit. A language is normally learned together with every other aspect of the culture to which it pertains. Intricate linguistic details can only be mastered when a suitable cultural understanding is achieved. It is easiest to learn a language-plus-culture that is most similar to one's own. D repeatedly emphasizes that a major role of a language is assisting in 'the process of belonging'.

D summarizes features that should ideally be present in every language to ensure that it is an effective vehicle for identification, cooperation, communication, argumentation, and so forth. He presents forty-two features that reflect his own opinion on what the ideal language would be like. If some well-developed languages would turn out to be easier to learn than others, they would be languages of an 'ideal' character. They would include grammatical categories of modest extent (213). Each language would have a rich vocabulary and a grammar of considerable intricacy. If the advantageous properties are summed up, it may turn out that one language can be shown to be slightly superior. D stresses that his inventory of features should not be regarded as a blueprint for fabricating a 'model language'. Linking together all of the desirable features would produce a confused mixture, 'something of a hotch-potch' (242).

Readers are invited to assess each of the features, modifying them, maybe deleting some of them, or adding further features. Reviewing the list, readers will be able to decide for themselves if some languages can be considered 'better' than others. D supposes that readers will vary in their weightings according to their major concerns, but that they will make their decisions based on properties such as the following:

- The language is more easily understood by a listener.
- It is more straightforward for description by a linguist.

- It requires less effort to be acquired as a second language by an adult.
- It poses relatively little difficulty when being translated out of, or being translated into.
- It provides greater specificity for naming and for describing social stratification.
- It has richer resources for expressing emotions.
- It is highly suitable for encoding cooperative endeavor, for conveying information in a succinct and memorable manner, for functioning as a vehicle for aesthetic expression, for being a conduit for scientific thought and argumentation, and for being effective for mass persuasion.

D gives detailed instructions for weighting the features and comparing the ‘scores’. He concludes the discussion with the encouraging appeal ‘Let’s check it out’ (246). Eager to comply with this request, I first had Kazakh, one of my favorite Turkic languages, in mind. It then struck me that Esperanto, according to the clearly declared purpose of its inventor Ludwik Zamenhof, actually comes closest to the ideal in most structural respects. This artificial language, devised as an international medium of communication, possesses a Eurocentric vocabulary and grammar, but is rather easily learned in different parts of the world, for instance in Japan. Is it disqualified because it does not assist in ‘the process of belonging’, mirroring a certain environment, society, or culture, thus simply lacking a ‘genius’?

D confesses that this book is, ‘in essence, speculation—a hypothesis awaiting confirmation’ (246). It is, however, speculative at a high intellectual level, thought-provoking, stimulating, and inspiring. It provides a wealth of interesting data, drawn from the author’s own ‘forty years of immersion fieldwork’ (vii) on lesser-known languages and analyzed in a lucid way. The book is a veritable compendium of linguistics, a collection of concise but detailed information about the essential components of human languages. It is written in an accessible, enjoyable, and refreshingly clear style. It also brings many other important questions into focus, for example, the varying extents to which speakers of diverse tongues make use of the vast potential resources of human language.

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A theory of phonological features. By SAN DUANMU. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xiv, 178. ISBN 9780199664962. \$99 (Hb).

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In this book, San Duanmu proposes a minimal set of distinctive features to account for the segmental contrasts observed in phoneme inventories of about 1,000 languages. This is the first large-scale investigation of this type, and I think phonologists are likely to be surprised by how efficiently these contrasts are accounted for and by which phonological distinctions are NOT necessary. The book provides a wealth of setting-off points for further work investigating the sound systems of the world’s languages. D has written extensively on prosodic and segmental phonology. Pursuing a minimal set of phonological distinctive features has been a thread through much of his work, culminating in this book.

The project is reminiscent of Jakobson, Fant, and Halle’s (1952) *Preliminaries to speech analysis: The distinctive features and their correlates*, because it addresses segment inventories