

**Dixon, R.M.W., 2002. *Australian languages. Their nature and development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Xlii+734 pp.**

**Reviewed by Gerhard Leitner, Berlin**

Apart from an intrinsic interest to various branches of descriptive, comparative and typological linguistics, Australian languages have a natural place in Australian Studies. It is important to know how Aboriginal Australians communicated, how languages relate to issues of the origins and of periods of settlement and diffusion, archeology, social, religious and other cultural practices. They bear upon land claims and the history of contact during and since the colonial period. This study by one of the leading expert covers much ground and includes aspects of the history of the earth, climate change, water resources, migration, etc. so as to arrive at externally validated hypotheses about the cohesion or diffusion of Aboriginal Australia's 250 distinct languages with their about 250 dialects. But the bulk of this study (AL) is about the internal, linguistic analysis of the cohesion or diffusion.

The literature on these languages is considerable and there is a good number of accessible studies. AL is on the technical side and will be largely inaccessible to non-specialists. Though technical conventions are explained at the beginning, AL suffers from the technicalities and unnecessary abbreviations (for language names and areas). Thus Yolngu languages in north-east Arnhem Land are referred to as Y with sub-groups Ya, Yb and Yc. That apart, the book is one of the most important contributions to the field and I will come to some findings that relate to disciplines outside linguistics.

Dixon develops an interesting *Punctuated equilibrium model* (PEM) which contrast with the *family-tree model* for language diversification. PEM argues for long periods of stability between tribes when languages-in-contact borrow more or less freely from each other, becoming more or less similar. So-called punctuations or periods of rapid change, in contrast, produce language splits along the lines of the well-known family model for Indo-European languages. The PEM situation has often been referred to as symbolizing a language areal, as in India. The main reason for arguing for this revision of past accounts of Australia's language situation is a likelihood account of diversification based on Indo-European, Papuan and other language areas. There are just not enough languages in Australia to be compatible with the family-tree situation. Now, it might well be that the old Pama-Nyungan model is compaible with PEM but it is based on questionable vocabulary statistical accounts (see pp 44ff). He suggests instead two kinds of relationships, i.e. those that follow from periods of equilibrium and on-going contact and those due to punctuations and split. Of course both scenarios are not incompatible with a single proto-Australian or proto-Australian-Papua New Guinea language, but, Dixon says, the situation is unprovable either way: "There is no certainty that the modern languages of mainland Australia do go back – even in a long and indirect fashion – to a single ancestor language... The time depth is so great that we will never be able to resolve this question" (p 38). He then deveops a 'tentative scenario' which draws on demographic history, food and water resources, topography and the changing sea levels as well as periods of equilibrium and punctuation (p 38ff). As a result, one can recognize some fifty linguistic areas that are either genetically or typologically linked and are described in summary fashion in the introductory part (pp xxx-xlii) and in detail in chapter thirteen.

Such genetic (or family-tree-type of) subgroups are postulated, for instance, in regions of affluent, fertile forest and water lands in the far north. Thus, there is a Cairns subgroup, one for the north-east of Arnhem Land (Yolngu), but also for inland and desert-like areas like in Central-inland NSW and the Northern Desert Fringe, etc. Small (typological) linguistic areas can be found in the Lower Murray region, the Arandic groups around Alice Springs and even in the North Kimberley region.

His summarizing hypotheses about the history of development are worth looking at. He believes that "at an earlier stage the grammars of Australian languages had a fairly direct semantic basis" (p 691), which means that their syntactic and morphological structure was not yet well developed and, as one would say, close to surface grammar. Some early remnants of morphological markers may have survived such as the suffix *-ni(m)* in the Fitzroy group of languages. At that period languages may have been synthetic and agglutinative like Latin, to use a European language for comparison. But the development of typical features of Australian languages – to mention the fact that verbs tend to incorporate syntactic markers or that pronouns tend to be clitics or affixes. Pronouns, for instance, were clitics or contracted, weak forms preceding verbs and then became prefixes (p 693). There are other features that characterize most Australian languages (p 693ff). But periods of punctuation then broke the hypothetically postulated initial similarity.

Overall, AL is a highly suggestive book that will be of interest mainly to linguists. One will have to await the diffusion of this approach into more accessible publications. But one can, for instance, read his *The rise and fall of languages* (1997, Cambridge University Press) to get more details on PEM.