Basic Linguistic Theory

Volume 1 Methodology

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Basic Linguistic Theory

R. M. W. Dixon

The three volumes of *Basic Linguistic Theory* provide a new and fundamental characterization of the nature of human languages and a comprehensive guide to their description and analysis. The first volume addresses the methodology for recording, analysing, and comparing languages. Volume 3 (which will be published in 2011) examine and explain every underlying principle of grammatical organization and consider how and why grammars vary.

Volume 1

Methodology

Volume 2

Grammatical Topics

Volume 3

Further Grammatical Topics (*in preparation*)

A complete list of R. M. W. Dixon's books may be found on pp. 380–1

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How to read this book

This book is, of course, designed to be read from first to last page. But other strategies are possible.

Chapter 1 outlines the approach followed throughout, and should be consulted first. The lengthy Chapter 3 provides an overview of grammatical structures and systems found across the languages of the world. Many of these topics are dealt with in more detail in the chapters of Volume 2 and of the projected Volume 3. Ideally, Chapter 3 should be studied at an early stage, although experienced linguists may choose to skim it.

The remaining chapters of Volume 1, and those of Volume 2, could be read in any order. However, recurrent themes are developed across chapters and maximal benefit will be obtained by reading the chapters in the order in which they were written.

Preface

For more than four decades I have been doing linguistics in the true sense of the word—undertaking immersion fieldwork, writing grammars, compiling lexicons. I've studied, in fair detail, more than two hundred published grammars, and consulted several hundred more. I have worked—by inductive generalization—on a number of topics in typological theory, and have read everything I could lay my hands on that is relevant to this endeavour. However, despite having been learning, learning all along the way, I feel that I know only a fraction of what I would like to know.

This book is a distillation of what I have learned thus far—the most satisfactory and profitable way to work, and what pitfalls to avoid. In short, how best to obtain reliable and satisfactory results which have scientific validity. Volume 1 sets the scene, with chapters on aspects of methodology. Volumes 2 and 3 then deal in fair detail with each of a number of grammatical topics.

The reader will find opinions expressed straightforwardly, without demur. Some of the things that are said may go against certain of the current 'fashions'. I do not expect others to agree with everything I say. But all the points made here have validity, and are worthy of serious consideration.

The languages I know best are those that I have worked on myself and published on—the Australian languages Dyirbal (1972, 1973, 1989b), Yidiñ (1977a, 1977b, 1991b), Warrgamay (1981), Nyawaygi (1983), and Mbabaram (1991c), plus Boumaa Fijian (1988), Jarawara from Brazil (2004a), and English (1991a, 2005a, 2005b). If some point can be illustrated from one of these languages then I do so, rather than using data from another language which I know less well. This applies especially to the general discussions in Volume 1. For points which do not occur in these languages, and for further exemplification of points that do, information from many other grammars is used.

Sources are sometimes included in the text but more usually in notes at the end of a chapter. It has not been thought necessary to quote sources for well-described languages such as Latin, French, German, Estonian, Turkish, Hebrew, Mandarin Chinese, Quechua, Swahili, Thai, and the like. Specific references are often not given for the languages I have worked on. If, say, an example is taken from Jarawara, the interested reader can easily consult my comprehensive grammar of that language (Dixon 2004a) to see how the matter under discussion fits into the overall linguistic system of the language. Sources are provided for information from other languages. There is a glossary of technical terms, included at the end of each volume.

There is today a fashion in linguistics—and no doubt in other disciplines as well—of what can be called 'quotationitis'. That is, attempting to cite every single thing published on or around a topic, irrespective of its quality or direct relevance. Not unusually, quotations are provided from several sources which are contradictory in assumptions and import, without attention being drawn to this. I have used citations sparingly; these only reflect a small proportion of the grammars and general works which I have studied. The present work is conceived of as being like a well-organized garden; I have tried to avoid it degenerating into an impenetrable jungle.

At several places I mention the number of languages currently spoken across the world. The habit has arisen of quoting a figure of well over 6,000, which is the number of 'language names' listed in *Ethnologue* (Gordon 2005). This is put out by a missionary body with the main purpose of indicating where there is considered to be need for translation of the Christian Bible. The volume is uneven in scope and reliability, particularly as regards what is a language and what is a dialect (decisions on these questions frequently relate to policies concerning translation teams, and decisions may change as policies change—for one instance of this, see Dixon 2004c: 8). More than 200 languages are listed for Australia (many labelled 'nearly extinct' or even 'extinct'), but 60 would be an optimistic estimate for the number which are still actually spoken (or else well remembered). The actual number of distinct languages currently in use across the world is no more than 4,000, quite likely a fair number fewer.

This book has been envisaged, planned, and written in close collaboration with my colleague Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald. We have discussed every topic, often many times. I have benefited from her grammars of Warekena (1998), Tariana (2003), and Manambu (2008), and from her typological studies (particularly 2000, 2004). I am the one who has written the book (and Aikhenvald would not necessarily agree with every single word in it) but the ideas, analyses, and generalizations are in very many instances our joint work.

Nick Enfield carefully read every chapter and provided the most useful comments, corrections, and suggestions. And I owe a considerable debt to the several score students and colleagues whose grammatical descriptions I have assisted with over the years, having learnt from each of them.

These volumes have been brought to fruition through the help and encouragement of John Davey, linguistics editor *sans pareil*. Of the several publishers I have worked with over almost five decades, Oxford University Press is, in every department, the most efficient and caring. John Davey exudes an enthusiasm which makes one feel valued and wanted, and works in a friendly and unobtrusive way to assist each author in realizing their potential.

And so, I cast my pebble upon the beach.