

Book Review

Dixon, R.M.W. (2019) *Australia's Original Languages*.

This is a short book, but that does not prevent it having multiple parts and arguments. In the main it is a linguistic study of several traditional Australian Aboriginal, or indigenous, languages. There have been specialised exhaustive and scholarly studies in the same vein - however this book is selective in examples of grammar, terms of address, lexicons, pronunciation and poetic forms, resulting in a short (182 pages) readable volume well suited to a popular audience. As such the volume fills a need for a general interest work of its kind. The author is an accomplished senior Australian academic and researcher, who has embedded himself with speakers of old languages to record and restore their legacy. His expertise, developed over decades, informs the authentic, lively and authoritative style of the volume as a whole. It is a good read.

There are contemporary political and cultural reasons for publication of a book of this nature, and in addition to an exposure to linguistics the reader is given a brief archeological argument about the origins of language on the Australian continent, about white/black relations from the first European arrival, about the destruction of the tribes and their 250 languages, and the current need for archival and educational care of remaining language and revival of extant ones. These topics are organised in thirteen different chapters.

Even apparently analytic linguistic are couched in terms of an argument about the complexity of traditional languages. Linguistic data is continually shaped in tables that compare European and traditional languages, as well as one language with another. The book is shaped on the whole as a defence of the status and nature of aboriginal language, against what it sees as their overwhelming denigration by European over the past 200-300 years. This motivation keeps the style and continuing examples of usage and structure of words, extending to valuable account of song and kinship forms. Being a short volume, any argument is in danger of being simplified. There have been a huge array of linguistic studies since the first British

arrival ... the author) admits Cook took pains to learn and use key phrases in interaction with bribers he encountered. The book is more positive towards Cook than to an earlier English explorer William Dampier. His description of the first peoples of West Australia as "the miserables people in the worldly" is overly stressed and repeated by the author, who explains how little Dampier knew of the richness of culture or language (and food gathering) of the people he observed. There has been a plethora of appreciative and educative studies that rebut prejudice like Dampier. Dixon is not alone in arguing his case, and it would take a large and worthwhile to depict the full history - good and bad - of studies of indigenous languages and cultures in last 200 years.

The book unashamedly and fairly locates itself as part of a contemporary apologia for indigenous culture, and that is its strength and finally also its weakness. To defend the complexity indeed modernity of traditional languages to a contemporary general audience would have been enough of an accomplishment. However the book seeks a wider big picture of linguistic anthropology, human evolution and philosophy, speculating on the 50,000 year old origins and history of first language; the diversification of languages over 500 tribes and 250 nations, across the world's largest island; and speculations of proto (pre human) and typology of languages, when comparative studies join in hypotheses about the diffusion of language from Australasian to North American to Pacific Islands over 30,000 years ago.

These topics are all valuable, and worth asking, but truly require more referencing and articulation, and perhaps less political motivation. Contemporary apologia, however sincere or passionate, for traditional societies cannot ensure the veracity of anthropological inquiry - the latter certainly benefits from cultural and indeed political empathy, but finally depends of a high level of scholarship which, in the important areas that the book introduces, needs nuanced study. Indeed, in several matters the book can seem to do itself a disservice, in simplifying or preventing further development of its claims for indigenous peoples.

For example, it strongly rebuts any idea that the diverse linguistic forms are dialects of a main aboriginal language. Dixon sees this reductionism of the true richness of language development as another example of racism which has infected most approaches to traditional languages. However he is happy to accept dialect as a core stage of language diversification - that geographical isolation and separation, and dialect formation, lead to the creation of a new language. This argument presumes quite a lot about why a small population, with abundant food supply and in a relatively short period of time (several millennia) 250 discrete nations/peoples and quite distinct languages could evolve, each one with a separate totemic/fauna

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identity, with linguistic functions rooted in a intricate structures of kinship, geography, religion, hunting and everyday life. Put simple, the intricate diversification of structures, identified to a large extent by Claude Levi Strauss, in particular of the Arunta people of central Australia, is the next level of “complexity” that Dixon sees in linguistic forms (and kinship), but seems omitted or reported too briefly in this volume.

Further, the author is very blunt about discounting any diffusion of language (along with other social and food innovations) from Australia, to Asia. The Australasian renaissance of language that the author mention begins in Taiwan, independent from the Australian phenomena that preceded it by 30,000 years, and is the main focus of the book. While he admits Indian scholars see linguistic parallels between Australian and ancient their language (parallels that extend to rituals and physical appearance, some claims), Dixon discounts this in a kind of misplaced defence of Australian culture, that because they were isolated first peoples were particularly vulnerable, especially through sickness, to first contact by Europeans. There has been a widespread acceptance of trade occurring to and fro North coast and modern Indonesia for many millennia - yet the author categorically rejects any argument for singular location of birth of languages based on the linguistic accomplishment he observes in indigenous Australian languages. Much is known and can be explained about origins of language of Australia, due to unique environmental conditions. How can multiple origins be explained in historical and contextual terms?

The book reflects the linguistic training and background of its author, and this explains the exclusion of domains of expression that semioticians would want to include in the spectrum of human languages. One is not talking about the horizontally, historical and geographical diversification of primary languages, but the multiform expression contained within each main language - a vertical diversification of languages.

The author provides an invaluable and welcome introduction to poetic and song forms- but does not extend analysis to dance or decorative forms that accompanied rituals, and provided an essential expressive supplement to song and poetry, and also a profound link between human and nature sign systems. There is no mention, for instance of the elaborate gestural systems, including the highly intricate systems of foot markings in dust of inland Arunta and other peoples. Linguists have not always had the tools for study of non verbal expression, such as ephemeral gesture displays. Conceptually, this omission typifies a long prejudice against non verbal languages by linguists - or at least semantic prioritisation of verbal languages. However in the case of an indigenous linguistic anthropology, non verbal expression needs to

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be included. The exclusion by Dixon of such references allows him to posit the old shibboleth, that traditional languages are oral. The assumption about oral languages risks repeating an implicit racism, that later societies with written system were more advanced.

In making this assumption, and excluding non verbal material, the book ignores layers of non verbal representation, expression, signifying fields, which extends out to the marking and pages of nature itself. Semiotics, studying signifying and syntactic fields in addition even prior to their signified or semantic sense (pragmatic consequences and function), has no problem attributing a practice of inscription or "writing" in all societies - indeed in arguing more widely, as Derrida would stress in his focus on grammatology, for the true interdependence of written and spoken forms, indeed of all multi forms of language expression.

It would seem that conceptual and analysis grasp of the multiform nature of individual language, achievable using semiotic methods, is an essential toolkit to articulate and address questions about origins and dissemination of languages.

What happened on the Australian continent 60,000 years ago (there is anthropological consensus on date, which if anything is conservative) has enormous potential, both for the development of culture and society on one continent, and arguably for the development and dissemination of language and culture across the entire homo sapien family. The nature of that origins, as the first bridge of the human stage of homo sapiens evolution, is an important question for all cultural anthropological study. It throws up ethical, philosophical, historical and semiotic insights even richer than the perspectives directing Dixon's query. It is potentially a prime case study for semiotics in its promise to provide a fuller contextual picture to language and culture than linguistics alone can provide. Let's not assume too much, from the perspectives and needs of modern societies, indigenous or otherwise, about the experiences of the first homo sapiens ancestors, coming upon new Australian landscape of vast sea and sky, and natural horizon and abundant foodstuff. Let's take a more tentative step out of the known into a semiotic phenomenology, that is counter intuitive in terms of the known and familiar constructed world of modern sensibility. Let's step into the unknown in order not only to recognise complexity and structure in the lives of first peoples - in the tradition of Lévi-Strauss - but to explain the contextual and historical development of complex structures, including the grammatical and lexical features of spoken language, from what went before.