

Book Review

Dixon, R. M. W. *Basic Linguistic Theory*, 3 Volumes. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2010 – 2012.

This is the third edition of a book that has. This three-volume work, presents a summation of the insights, methodology, and experience in linguistic description of one of the world's leading linguists. The work can accurately said to be Dixon's *magnum opus*. The book represents the summary of the author's lifelong dedication to linguistic description, that is, to the description of specific languages and groups of languages. Dixon became first known for his descriptions of two native Australian languages, a grammar of a variety of Fijian, and then later as the author of a detailed description of an Amazonian Indian language, and a semantic approach to English grammar. In addition he has written two prominent surveys of native Australian languages, and other books of linguistic interest. He has also served as an editor of several volumes of articles on specific linguistic topics.

Dixon has proposed that language should be described, not in abstract and theoretical terms, but rather in terms of the complex features of surface structure as observed by the linguist. This means of course that individual languages must be described before any over-arching theories can be formulated that correspond to the actual facts of language as it exists in reality and is spoken by actual speakers.

Dixon has outlined his view of what linguistics should be in numerous writings, as in a review of a grammar of a native Australian language:

Books about linguistics fall into two broad categories. There are trendy volumes, the attention-getters, which expound some novel theoretical nuance. A book of this type will sell well for a while, but most often the idea does not stand up under detailed scrutiny and is soon replaced by another nuance; and so on.

And there are the solid contributions to linguistic science, the detailed descriptive grammars of individual languages. These are written in terms of what can usefully be called 'basic linguistic theory' ... (Dixon 1996: 839).

It is precisely this 'basic linguistic theory' which is Dixon's approach to linguistics and which is the topic of the present book under discussion here.

The three volumes of Basic Linguistic Theory are: Volume 1: Methodology, Volume 2: Grammatical Topics, and Volume 3: Further Grammatical Topics.

The first volume, Methodology, introduces several topics relevant to the description of language as actually spoken by the speakers of that language. These topics include detailed a discussion of linguistics as a part of natural science (Vol. 1: 1-4) and the nature of grammar and meaning. This is followed by discussions of the

basic structures of language: words and clauses. This is followed by a discussion of what linguistic analysis is. This volume also presents the terminology used in linguistic description and analysis. There is a basic discussion of linguistic typology, a branch of linguistics which has developed in the previous decades as an alternative to approaches formulated by Noam Chomsky and his successors. The topics of phonology and lexicon are presented in one section each. Volume 1 concludes with a short presentation of field work, the actual methods of how and what to record of a language by the linguist in the setting where the language is spoken, an approach which Dixon himself has frequently put into practice.

In Dixon's discussion of what sets off the approach of basic linguistic theory, the practice of linguistics as part of natural science, is emphasized in the introductory section of Volume 1. The following short description of his approach summarizes succinctly the goals of these three volumes and is a good summation of his entire lifelong work:

This book deals with linguistics conceived as a branch of natural science, with a single cumulative theory which has recently come to be called 'basic linguistic theory.' There are other approaches to the study of language, which involve the postulation of a profusion of competing 'theories' (the term 'theory' here being accorded a quite different sense). This is reminiscent of the competing

'theories' in disciplines such as economics or literature. (Vol. 1: 3.)

The second volume, *Grammatical Topics*, consists of more detailed presentations of topics related to the concepts of word and clause. These are discussed in some detail and include: the distinction between what Dixon's labels as grammatical words and phonological words, adjectives, transitivity, copula clauses, verbless clauses, pronouns, demonstratives, possession, relative clause constructions, and complementation and complement clauses. Throughout the text there are examples from a wide-range of languages around the world.

The final volume, *Further Grammatical Topics*, continues the detailed discussion of the previous two volumes. Topics discussed in this volume include numbers, negation, reflexive and reciprocal constructions, pivots, passives and antipassives, causitives, applicatives, comparative constructions, and questions. This volume too includes numerous examples from various languages. The final section of this volume is a brief overview of other issues related to language and its investigation.

This volume concludes with two appendices: "Sources materials," a short annotated critical bibliography of basic texts in the field of descriptive linguistics, and "How many languages," a very brief discussion of the vexing question of how many languages are spoken in the world.

Each volume contains a detailed table of contents, a glossary, and a list of references. There are also three indices at

the end of each volume, one of authors referred to in the text, languages cited, and a subject index.

Dixon's approach to linguistic analysis, as exemplified in *Basic Linguistic Theory*, is firmly in the tradition of modern science; that is, it is objective, empirical, and applies the inductive method (from the particular to the general), and stands in contrast to other 20th century approaches to linguistics, attributed in great part to the work of Noam Chomsky and his followers, which are abstract, theoretical, and deductive in method (from the general to the particular).

Dixon's book has already been cited in other research as a model of how the research is presented, as for example in a recent survey of the Semitic family of languages. (Goldenberg: 2013: 4).

In conclusion, this monumental work consisting of nearly 1,500 pages, in three volumes, provides a very useful guide to descriptive linguistics. The three volumes are to be highly recommended as a guidebook and reference work to anyone engaged in or interested in linguistics in general and especially in linguistic typology and the description of individual languages.

References

- Dixon, R. M. W. 1996. Review of: A grammar of Wardaman, a language of the Northern Territory of Australia. By Francesca C. Merlan. Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994.

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