
BOOK REVIEW FORUM

John Lynch, *Pacific Languages: An Introduction*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998. Pp. xix, 359, preface, tables, figures, maps, appendices, notes, references, index. US\$35 paperback.

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THIS BOOK IS ONE OF A KIND in its coverage (Oceanic, Papuan, and Australian languages) and the level of its intended audience (nonlinguists who want or need to know something about the languages of this region, as well as linguists). It may strike one as strange to omit the large non-Oceanic portion of the Austronesian family (the languages of Indonesia, the Philippines, Taiwan, Madagascar, and parts of mainland Southeast Asia) while including all the languages of Papua New Guinea and Australia, but this is quite understandable from a “down under” point of view and has the happy effect of not relegating Oceanic languages to the margins of Austronesian discussions centering on the Western languages, where they are often to be found. It also permits the author to concentrate on what he is most familiar with, the languages of Polynesia, Micronesia, Melanesia (broadly conceived), and Australia. He admits to an Oceanic bias in his treatment of language structures in part 2, pointing out that good general surveys of Papuan and Australian languages already exist (Foley 1986 and Dixon 1980).

Lynch, to strike his intended level—giving the general reader “a feel for what these languages are like” while at the same time offering linguists “something to get their teeth into”—devotes a preliminary chapter to basic concepts of linguistics, including topics such as transitivity and voice; person, number,

and gender; alienable/inalienable possession; genetic relationship; reconstructing a protolanguage; and methods of subgrouping. This formal introduction is done succinctly and well. The discussion is rich with examples from Oceanic languages, and this pattern continues throughout the volume—there is something of linguistics that can be learned on practically every page, and with a minimum of pain. If one has picked up the book out of an interest in “Pacific languages,” one’s curiosity is satisfied while at the same time one finds oneself looking at each topic through the eyes of a linguist.

Part 1 (chapters 2–4) focuses on the geography and history of the region, and includes a discussion of the dialect-language distinction based on mutual intelligibility (tempered by social identity), the difficulty of counting languages where dialect chains are involved, problems associated with language names, and something of the history of the documentation of these languages. A set of maps helps orient the reader to places and languages mentioned. The position of the Oceanic group of languages is shown within the Austronesian family, and the assumed historical migrations of various subgroups are traced. There is discussion of how the vocabulary reconstructed for the Proto-Oceanic language can be used in reconstructing culture history. With respect to the remainder of the region, an attempt is also made to answer the following question, “If both New Guinea and Australia have been settled for about the same length of time, why do we find such incredible genetic diversity among Papuan languages, whereas Australian languages all seem to belong to just a single family?”

Part 2 looks at the range of structures to be found—chapter 5 outlines the sound systems, and chapters 6–8 give grammatical overviews, respectively, of Oceanic, Papuan, and Australian languages. Topics receiving special treatment include vowel systems, consonant systems, prosodic features; problems faced in developing orthographies, spelling controversies; full and partial reduplication; pronouns and subject markers, articles and demonstratives; classifier systems; verb structure, derivation of transitive and applicative verbs; the passive, causative, and reciprocal; nominal (verbless) sentences; accusative and ergative languages; negation; prepositions versus postpositions; noun class (gender) systems; serial verb constructions; and switch reference. One must conclude that this is an area truly rich in its linguistic diversity.

Part 3, “The Social and Cultural Context,” addresses topics that are of widest interest. Chapter 9 on “Languages in Contact” examines peaceful contact between settled societies brought about by the pressures of exogamy (finding a spouse outside the group) and the need for trade, both between coastal and inland villagers and in the ritualized trading complexes over longer distances that have been documented by anthropologists. Also considered are the contacts brought about by conquest, colonization, and con-

version. The focus is on the linguistic effects of all such contacts. These may be lexical, as with the adoption of a whole set of terms associated with a cultural complex such as kava drinking; semantic, as when a term originally limited to kava comes to refer to any intoxicating beverage; phonological, as when new words bring new sounds; or grammatical, as when Oceanic languages that earlier were VO languages (having verbs that precede their objects) became OV languages through extensive contact with Papuan languages that generally follow the latter order.

Three case studies are presented: (1) how borrowed words in Rotuman can be sorted out from native words based on how their sounds compare with those of the parent language held in common with the donor language(s), (2) the far-reaching effects of word taboo in societies where a person's name, or words sounding like it, cannot be uttered for a period of time after their death, and (3) a situation in which contact between two languages has been so extensive as to raise the mixed-language question, "How much can Language A be influenced by Language B and still remain Language A?"

Chapter 10 is an excellent study of "Pidgins, Creoles, and Koines" that, among other things, sets forth the story of Melanesian Pidgin and its three varieties, the Tok Pisin of Papua New Guinea, the Pijin of the Solomons, and the Bislama of Vanuatu. Also treated in this chapter are the pidgins of the Motu Traders, and Fiji Hindi.

Chapter 11, "Language, Society, and Culture in the Pacific," revisits some ancient bugaboos having to do with whether these languages are in any sense primitive. Topics include vocabulary size as well as specialization, classification, and abstraction. The chapter furthers this discussion with instances showing the richness of language in island societies, treating topics that include counting systems, kinship terms, language and gender, respect language, language and socialization, language in the national context, language and education, literacy, the media, and finally, the interrelated topics of language ecology: shift, survival, death, and revival. In this latter connection, the near death of New Zealand Māori and measures to revive it receive special attention. Also, it is noted that "the Hawaiian language was, and probably still is, in far greater danger than Māori of totally disappearing, but intensive efforts there are also beginning to see the decline arrested" (p. 269).

Part 3 closes with a brief concluding chapter, "Ideas about Pacific Languages," that continues the theme of "shift, survival, death, and revival." The author opens by quoting his family doctor who, when told the author's occupation, spoke of seeing, when he visited the university library, "rows and rows of dictionaries and grammars of languages spoken by just a few hundred speakers. 'Fascinating', he said, 'fascinating . . . but bloody useless!'" There follows a frank, if inconclusive, discussion of the precarious situation

in which many of these languages exist today, seen by some “as not being really serious subjects of study: They do not have a ‘literature’, they are not used in education, they have no real place in the national—let alone the international—domain” (p. 272). The author seems to conclude by saying it is the speakers of these languages who “will, of course, have the final say (or perhaps the last laugh) by choosing the course of action that seems most sensible and practical from their perspective.” After noting that it is its linguistic diversity that “has always been one of the intriguing features of this region for both Pacific Islanders and outsiders alike,” he closes with the following sentence: “As long as Pacific Islanders recognize that their languages are both their past and their future, the unity in diversity so characteristic of the Pacific will continue to make this region unique” (p. 277).

There follow four pages of suggestions for further reading, four appendices (the sources for data cited on each language, phonetic symbols, sample phonemic systems, and a glossary of technical terms), then the notes, references, and an index. The last appendix, with its brief and clear definitions for each term, will be of further help to the nonlinguist reader. The index is made more compact by the exclusion of redundancies such as the authors listed in the references, languages listed in the first appendix or on maps 3 to 11, names of Papuan language families that appear only in table 4, the terms in the glossary, and languages such as English and French when they are used to illustrate a point of grammar.

I find little to be critical of in this work. I think I detected a small problem with typography on p. 71, a bibliographic citation on p. 48 (Lynch 1997 should probably be Lynch 1998), and “mother’s sister’s daughter” included among cross-cousins on p. 254. But such instances are rare indeed. Overall, the book is well designed conceptually and in execution. The author has also been extremely attentive to details. Most importantly, he has exercised consistently good judgment in deciding how much to include and what has to be omitted in a treatment as broad scale as this one. The result is a volume that can serve not only as a source of information for anyone interested in the languages of the Pacific, but as an excellent introduction to linguistics for anyone who has some fluency in one or more of these languages, or for a class that includes such individuals among its members.

REFERENCES

Dixon, R. M. W.

1980 *The Languages of Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Foley, William A.

1986 *The Papuan Languages of New Guinea*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.