

Book Reviews

Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald & R. M. W. Dixon (eds.) 2001 (paperback 2006): *Areal Diffusion and Genetic Inheritance: Problems in Comparative Linguistics*. Oxford University Press: Oxford / New York. 453 + xvi pp.

The volume under review contains the proceedings from an international workshop *The connection between areal diffusion and the genetic model of language relationship*, held at the Research Centre for Linguistic Typology at the Australian National University in 1998. The book includes an introduction by the editors and fourteen papers addressing problems of areal and genetic relationships between languages from various points of view. The papers have a theoretical orientation, even though nearly all of them draw their data from case studies on languages in a particular linguistic area. The regions covered by the contributions include Australia, New Guinea, East and South-East Asia, Anatolia, Amazonia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

The book begins with a lengthy introduction, where the editors Aikhenvald and Dixon summarize in detail the theoretical questions the volume deals with. First, they list five principally possible explanations for similarities between languages: 1) universal properties and tendencies, 2) chance, 3) borrowing and diffusion, 4) genetic retention, and 5) parallel (convergent) development. They maintain that “the hardest task in comparative linguistics is to distinguish between these five kinds of similarity,” and rightly note that “the ‘parallel development’ explanation for some kinds of similarity between languages is not always paid attention to” (p. 4).

Aikhenvald and Dixon quite vehemently criticize the family tree model (p. 4–9). While all the criticism they present is in principle legitimate, the section nevertheless seems misplaced; it is not clear who is argued against, as the simplifications and limitations involved in the tree model have already been recognized for a long time, and hardly any modern comparative linguist suggests that the family tree ought to be applied “as the only (or as the main) means of describing relationships between languages” (p. 1). Many of the problems discussed by the editors

have, in fact, already been recognized by previous generations of scholars (see e.g. Bloomfield 1933: 311–318).

As a response to the perceived (and well-known) limitations of the family tree model the editors offer ‘punctuated equilibrium,’ a model of linguistic development outlined by Dixon in his book *The Rise and Fall of Languages* (1997); the term ultimately derives from the paleontologists Eldredge and Gould (1972), who applied it to their somewhat similar model of biological evolution. According to Dixon, family trees are valid only during periods of ‘punctuation,’ where a previously stable and diverse ethnolinguistic situation is suddenly altered by some cataclysmic event, such as a natural disaster, the emergence of an aggressive political or religious group, striking technical innovations, or an expansion into previously uninhabited territory (Dixon 1997: 67). As a result, one language will expand to cover a wide area and consequently diversify into several daughter languages. In a period of equilibrium, however, diffusion of linguistic features between languages takes over, as linguistic expansions take place only on a small scale or not at all. As a result, the original genetic connections between languages could eventually become completely obscured by linguistic diffusion.

Dixon’s 1997 book has, in fact, been chosen as the “position paper” for the workshop from which the current volume derives. Even so, the majority of the contributions in the present volume do not directly address the punctuated equilibrium model. On the other hand, Dixon’s model has already invoked much discussion as well as some rather vehement criticism elsewhere (e.g. Campbell 2003: 48–51).

The first paper by Peter Bellwood, *Archaeology and the Historical Determinants of Punctuation in Language-Family Origins*, is the only archaeological contribution in the volume, and regrettably also the linguistically weakest one. Bellwood defends the ‘Farming / Language Dispersal hypothesis,’ according to which widespread language families usually have their origins in periods of agricultural dispersal; in his view this could be equated with Dixon’s concept of ‘punctuation.’ This theory has been heavily criticized (cf. Bellwood and Renfrew 2002), and e.g. Campbell (2002) has shown that there is essentially no clear correlation between agriculture and the spread of language families. Bellwood himself admits that there are all kinds of exceptions to the hypothesis (pp. 33–34)—e.g. Athabaskan, a widespread North American language family with no agriculture, and New Guinea Highlands, a region with very ancient agriculture but no widespread families. Even so, rather than admitting that

the numerous counterexamples falsify the idea, he still sees the theory strong enough to allow him to connect the spread of Proto-Nostratic with the earliest agricultural populations spreading from the Levant (p. 36). As the Nostratic affinity is in itself a fringe theory based on near-zero evidence, such speculation hardly lends credence to the model.

The next contribution is Calvert Watkins's paper *An Indo-European Linguistic Area and its Characteristics: Ancient Anatolia. Areal Diffusion as a Challenge to the Comparative Method?* Watkins examines the linguistic features shared by the Indo-European languages of the Anatolian branch and the neighboring but genetically unrelated Hattic and Hurrian. According to Watkins, such features emerged through diffusion within an ancient Anatolian Sprachbund, but the mechanism of diffusion was in many ways different from the situation envisioned by Dixon in his equilibrium scenario. The convergence of the languages did not take place during millennia of gradual evolution, but instead the linguistic area formed quite rapidly and the languages in it underwent genetic differentiation at the same time, counter to what the model of punctuated equilibrium presupposes. It follows that the comparative method remains valid in such situations, and linguistic history can be worked out applying it.

Also modern Anatolian languages are represented in this book by Geoffry Haig's paper *Linguistic Diffusion in Present-Day East Anatolia: From Top to Bottom*, which examines the diffusion of various syntactic-pragmatic features between Turkish and the minority languages Laz, Zazaki and Kurdish. On the basis of his results, Haig points out that diffusion seems to proceed in a particular order through the domains of language: according to him, "linear alignment will proceed from larger to smaller units, starting perhaps with the narrative organization, means of expressing direct speech, topic introduction and tracking, and progressing down through clause coordination, subordination, and constituent order in the clause" (p. 219).

Australian languages are subject of two contributions. Dixon's paper *The Australian Linguistic Area* provides a very informative overview of the typology and linguistic geography of the Australian languages. As for the diachronic interpretation, Dixon vehemently criticizes the widely accepted Pama-Nyungan hypothesis, according to which the majority of the some 250 Australian aboriginal languages form a single language family, excluding only a few smaller groups of languages spoken in the northern parts of the continent. He shows that the Pama-Nyungan hypothesis was initially based on methodologically dubious lexicostatistic calculations, and

argues that no consistent evidence has come forth in later research. Dixon maintains that “we can recognize a number of low-level genetic groups (...) each due to recent expansion and split but on a small local scale. There is no clear evidence for higher-level genetic grouping” (p. 64). In his view, the Australian linguistic area developed over a very long period of equilibrium with only minor punctuations on a local scale, and the resulting diffusion has blurred the original genetic relationships to such a degree that the comparative method is incapable of uncovering higher-level groupings any longer, if such indeed exist; this he characterizes as “a completely different linguistic situation from those reported from anywhere else in the world” (p. 88; see also Dixon 2002).

An outsider to the Pama-Nyungan debate gets the impression that two issues have become to some extent confused in it: the validity of Pama-Nyungan as a genetic entity on the one hand, and the applicability of the comparative method in the field of Australian historical linguistics on the other. The first of these questions is naturally a matter for specialists in Australian languages to decide, but some general remarks can nevertheless be made here. While it seems evident from Dixon’s criticism that the Pama-Nyungan idea was originally based on methodologically untenable lexicostatistic calculations, also well-established families such as Indo-European, Uralic and Austronesian have initially been recognized on the basis of less systematic comparisons that mainly involved lexical similarities. From this perspective, the Pama-Nyungan idea seems at least worthy of further investigation (cf. also Miceli 2004), especially as such evidence for distant genetic relationships between some Pama-Nyungan languages as has recently been presented by e.g. Alpher (2004) and O’Grady & Hale (2004) does not seem easy to dismiss.

In any case, a final validation or refutation of the Pama-Nyungan hypothesis will require a detailed application of the comparative method to all the relevant languages—no doubt a very time-consuming task due to the large number of languages involved. As much of such basic comparative work still remains to be done in the case of Australian languages, claims of the method’s limited validity in Australia seem premature. Moreover, this research situation casts doubt on the entire model of punctuated equilibrium as well. Australia is Dixon’s primary example of the effects of long equilibrium, but it seems possible that the great difficulties in discerning (or at least proving) deeper genetic connections behind the areal diffusion at least partly stem from the insufficiency of research carried out so far. In fact, the empirical basis of the punctuated equilibrium model

seems to be scarce as well; as pointed out by Koch (2004: 48–57), at this stage the model is primarily based on thought experiments rather than a detailed analysis of linguistic data.

Following Dixon's paper, Alan Dench presents an Australian case study in his paper *Descent and Diffusion: The Complexity of the Pilbara Situation*. He discusses the contacts and relationships between the languages in the Pilbara region, an area where some twenty aboriginal languages are spoken, and which is characterized by extensive language contact and multilingualism. According to Dench, all the languages of the Pilbara region are probably genetically related, but it is difficult to determine which of the common features are due to genetic inheritance and which to areal diffusion. He discusses phonological innovations, morphophonological alterations and case-marking patterns, concluding that "None of the shared innovations (...) can be considered, conclusively, to be innovations arising in a single ancestor" (p. 130).

Dench identifies a number of factors that complicate the task of separating areal innovations from genetic retentions. Of special interest is the rarely discussed phenomenon of 'correspondence-mimicry,' a process whereby speakers perceive existing historical correspondences between related languages and then mimic those correspondences in loanwords. Such a procedure may produce sound correspondences indistinguishable from those exhibited by cognate items, thus rendering the detection of borrowings extremely difficult. While this phenomenon seems to occur in many languages of the world, it has been little studied so far (see Aikio 2007 for further discussion).

Dench's paper presents highly interesting discussion on the problems of identifying areal diffusion, but it also adds to the reader's doubts of whether the linguistic situation in Australia is so different from the rest of the world after all. Dench is certainly right in noting that "there are circumstances in which [identifying borrowing] (...) can be especially difficult and in some cases may not be possible" (p. 113), but still, none of the problems discussed in the paper seem principally different from those encountered in well-examined language families. For instance, among the Uralic languages, Saami and Finnic languages share numerous lexical and morphosyntactic features that set them apart from the rest of the family, and in many cases it is indeed altogether impossible to decide whether a particular lexical item or grammatical construction reflects common inheritance or arose through diffusion between the two branches. Even so, a common proto-language has been successfully reconstructed via the

comparative method, but setting up reliable correspondences has required decades of painstaking work. The first attempts to assess the relationship between Finnic and Saami were largely failures due to the difficulty of separating between borrowed and shared features, which reminds that initial difficulties in a situation where “there has as yet been very little detailed historical comparison of Australian languages at the lowest level” (Dench, p. 131), linguists should perhaps not yet be discouraged from trying to work out the areal and genetic connections with the received methods of comparative linguistics.

With Malcolm Ross’s paper *Contact-induced Change in Oceanic Languages in North-West Melanesia*, the book moves from Australia to Karkar Island off the coast of New Guinea. Ross presents a very interesting study on the contact of two genetically unrelated languages, the Oceanic language Takia and the Papuan language Waskia, both spoken on the Karkar Island. Due to its contact with Waskia, Takia has undergone a process which Ross calls ‘metatypy,’ i.e. pervasive calquing of syntactic and semantic patterns without borrowing actual forms. Ross argues that ‘syntactic borrowing,’ as defined by Harris and Campbell (1995), often makes up only a part of the more extensive phenomenon of metatypy which involves also semantic restructuring.

Amazonian languages are discussed by the editor Aikhenvald in her paper *Areal Diffusion, Genetic Inheritance and Problems of Subgrouping: A North Arawak Case Study*. The study treats contact-induced phenomena in Arawak languages, a family of about 40 languages spoken in a highly discontinuous area in the Amazon basin. Due to their patchy distribution in the midst of other Amazonian families, many Arawak languages show heavy contact influence from genetically unrelated contact languages; consequently, the amount of common Arawak lexical and morphological material that can be demonstrated as genetic inheritance from Proto-Arawak is rather small.

In particular, Aikhenvald concentrates on contact-induced changes in two Arawak languages, Tariana and Resígaro. Tariana is spoken in the Vaupés basin alongside genetically unrelated Tucano languages. An unusual cultural feature specific to this area is linguistic exogamy and obligatory multilingualism. As a result of the intensive language contact, Tariana has become grammatically restructured according to the model provided by Tucano languages. However, the Vaupés linguistic area has a cultural prohibition against borrowing of actual forms, and hence the number of loanwords transferred between the languages is extremely small.

On the other hand, a completely different situation is encountered in Resígaro spoken in northeastern Peru. At present, all its speakers are bilingual in either Bora or Ocaina, which belonging to the Bora-Witoto family and are genetically unrelated to Resígaro. Resígaro has been heavily restructured according to a Bora model, and basic vocabulary and even bound morphology has been extensively borrowed from this source. These two markedly different cases provide a good reminder that language contacts cannot be reconstructed only through tracing loanwords: even during intense language contact, the degree of lexical borrowing varies greatly on the basis of sociolinguistic and cultural factors, ranging from near complete lack of loanwords to almost uninhibited borrowing of basic vocabulary.

Languages of East and South-East Asia are represented by as many as four papers. James A. Matisoff's paper *Genetic versus Contact Relationship: Prosodic Diffusability in South-East Asian Languages* deals with the historical development of prosodic systems. First, Matisoff discusses certain general methodological issues of comparative linguistics, presenting welcome criticism of methodologically dubious long-range comparisons, which he has aptly termed 'megalocomparison' (see also Matisoff 1990). Then he moves on to deal with the main issue of diachronic background of tonal contrasts in various languages of South-East Asia, a linguistic area well known for being 'tone-prone.' Matisoff shows that it is very difficult to determine whether the "infinitely various" (p. 315) tonal systems in Sino-Tibetan or Tibeto-Burman have a common origin or whether they arose through several independent developments, and that many different scenarios of tonal diffusion can be surmised. The paper ends with a long list of hitherto unanswered questions concerning the diachronic backgrounds of prosodic and tonal systems, revealing that much further research on these questions is still needed.

N. J. Enfeld's paper *On Genetic and Areal Linguistics in Mainland South-East Asia: Parallel Polyfunctionality of 'Acquire'* concentrates on a very specific problem of South-East Asian comparative linguistics: the diachronic analysis of a particular verb-like morpheme with the original meaning 'to come to have,' which shows a wide range of similar grammatical functions in several Sinitic and Thai languages. In addition to the basic lexical meaning, the morpheme has developed into a modal or aspectual marker, as well as a marker in various resultative, adverbial and potential constructions. Enfeld concludes that morphemes from at least ten distinct etymological sources have developed the same kind of

polyfunctionality in this area, which shows that the pattern of grammatical functions must have spread through areal diffusion.

Two studies concentrate on Sino-Tibetan languages. In her contribution *Language Contact and Areal Diffusion in Sinitic Languages*, Hilary Chappel argues that the family tree model works reasonably well for Sinitic languages at least in the realm of phonology, but fails to capture the effects that waves of ‘Mandarinization’ have had on many Sinitic languages on other levels of language. She concludes that in order “to reconstruct the history of a language family adequately, a model is needed which is significantly more sophisticated than the family tree based on the use of the comparative method” (p. 354). This conclusion, while in principle fully valid, seems to entail the erroneous view (shared by the editors Aikhenvald and Dixon; see above) that the family tree is *supposed to* depict the entire history of a language family in a comprehensive manner. In reality, the family tree model is just a representation of genetic connections between languages that have diverged from each other through language split; criticizing it for not illustrating something more is a bit like criticizing the periodic table of chemical elements for not illustrating molecules.

An even more radical stance is taken by Randy J. LaPolla in her paper *The Role of Migration and Language Contact in the Development of the Sino-Tibetan Language Family*, who appears to deny the validity of the family tree altogether. While her study discusses a wide range of interesting data, one of her conclusions is something one is not used to hearing from a professional comparative linguist. Quoting Dai (1997), she asks: “Is not possible for two languages that were not originally related to become related through intense contact?” (p. 246; LaPolla’s translation). Acknowledging the principal independence of genetic and areal relationships is, however, the theoretical methodological cornerstone of comparative linguistics, and this premise is also inherent in the comparative method (Fox 1995 *passim*). Obliterating this distinction would invalidate all results ever obtained via the comparative method, including the very existence of the Sino-Tibetan language family, which is after all the subject of LaPolla’s study.

The so-called ‘Niger-Congo’ (and to a lesser extent, ‘Nilo-Saharan’) languages of Sub-Saharan Africa are the subject of Gerrit J. Dimmendaal’s paper *Areal Diffusion versus Genetic Inheritance: An African Perspective*. Dimmendaal examines phonological and structural features that are widely spread in the Niger-Congo languages, including ATR (advanced tongue

root) vowel harmony, nasalized vowels, noun classes, and serial verbs. His conclusion is that there is relatively little evidence for morphological diffusion in African languages, and for instance, he sees noun classes in Niger-Congo languages as a genetically inherited category. For phonological and prosodic features it is more difficult to choose between genetic and areal explanations, but in any case, the comparative method remains applicable to the African languages, and regular sound correspondences can be established even between remotely affiliated language groups (such as Bantu and ‘Tano-Congo’ languages, as exemplified by Dimmendaal on p. 372).

Even so, much basic comparative work on African languages still remains to be done. Very deep genetic groupings such as ‘Niger-Congo’ and ‘Nilo-Saharan’ have been widely accepted as established language families since Greenberg’s (1966) work on African language classification, but the validity of such groupings as a whole has never been demonstrated according to the standard set by already well-studied ancient language families such as Indo-European, Uralic, Austronesian, and Uto-Aztecan. There seem to be no publications documenting regular sound correspondences between all assumed major branches of ‘Niger-Congo’ or ‘Nilo-Saharan’. The Niger-Congo grouping is also criticized by Aikhenvald and Dixon in the foreword (p. 8), and its tentative nature is apparently recognized by Dimmendaal as well; he writes that “by the criteria of regular sound correspondences (...) Niger-Congo is not a proven genetic unit” (p. 368). As in the case of Australian languages, it seems that a whole lot more low-level comparative work on African languages is needed before high-level genetic groupings can be conclusively established.

African languages are also subject of Bernd Heine and Tania Kuteva’s paper *Convergence and Divergence in the Development of African Languages*. First, the authors present an overview of certain features that characterize parts of Africa as convergence areas, such as the Ethiopia Highlands, the Kalahari basin, and the Rift Valley. In more detail they examine Nile Nubian languages, which have undergone pervasive contact-induced changes, and underline the significance of ‘metatypy’ (as defined by Ross; see above) as a pattern of contact-induced change. They even propose a new subtype of this process, ‘grammaticalizing metatypy,’ which not only involves “a certain semantic configuration or schema, but also the idea that this configuration be used for encoding grammatical meaning” (p. 408). However, the notion of ‘grammaticalizing metatypy’ seems to suffer from the general weaknesses of the currently fashionable

‘grammaticalization theory’ that is purported, among others, by Heine and Kuteva (see Campbell 2001).

The last paper in the volume, *What Language Features Can Be Borrowed?* by Timothy Jowan Curnow, differs from the others in that it is a theoretical contribution not based on any particular case study, but rather an attempt for a conclusion to this book. Curnow begins with defining borrowing in the widest possible sense, i.e. “addition, loss and retention of features under contact” (p. 415). From this point of view he points out problems in hierarchies for borrowing that have frequently been proposed in contact-linguistic literature. For instance, it is often maintained that a particular linguistic feature (such as noun classes or phonological tones) easily spreads through diffusion, but it is unclear what implications such an assumed correlation has for retention or loss: is a feature that easily diffuses also easily lost under contact, or is it, on the contrary, easily retained under contact with a language lacking the same feature? So far, there have been few attempts to solve such questions.

One can add that many of the actual constraints for borrowing that have been proposed so far seem premature. For instance, a scholar acquainted with north Eurasian languages is somewhat surprised by the discussion on the supposed difficulty of borrowing verbs (p. 415–416). While verbs seem to be resistant to borrowing in some linguistic areas, this is far from universal; for example, the Uralic languages do not seem to avoid loan verbs. The assumed avoidance of loan verbs has often been “explained” with the supposed difficulty of borrowing members of a highly inflected lexical category, but as it is properly recognized that numerous highly inflected languages freely borrow verbs, such an explanation turns out to be of little merit. To cite one example, North Saami has very many borrowed verbs, including basic verbs with meanings such as ‘to be going to,’ ‘to begin,’ ‘to stay,’ ‘to happen,’ ‘to need,’ ‘to have to,’ ‘to get,’ ‘to notice,’ ‘to find,’ ‘to use,’ ‘to want,’ ‘to stop,’ ‘to think,’ ‘to sing,’ ‘to move,’ ‘to like,’ ‘to lift,’ and ‘to lend’ (Sammallahti 1998: 226–252), as well as innumerable others. This borrowing has not been hindered either by the highly inflected nature of the North Saami verb or by the complex morphophonological alterations that are characteristic of North Saami verbs. Hence, the presumed general “difficulty” of borrowing verbs seems to be a myth based on borrowing strategies that are attested only in certain languages or linguistic areas.

In a more general vein, Curnow summarizes features that are more likely than others to be borrowed under language contact, based on the

other contributions in the volume (p. 425–433). His general conclusion, however, is rather pessimistic. As answer to his question, “What conclusions can be drawn from the development on universal constraints on borrowability on the data presented here?”, he suggests that “we may never be able to develop such constraints” (p. 434). If this is indeed the case, it implies that instead of universal constraints, historical linguists will just have to be content with searching for genuine historical explanations for the linguistic situations encountered in the world. But then again, this should not be a dismerit to any historical science.

In conclusion, one can first look how the contributions of this volume relate to the chosen “position paper,” Dixon (1997), where the theory of linguistic ‘punctuated equilibrium’ was put forward. As already noted, few of the papers in this book directly address Dixon’s model; the ones that do (especially the papers by Watkins and Ross) take a rather critical stance. Considering also the critiques published elsewhere (e.g. Campbell 2003), one can only side with this criticism. There is a need to develop more refined methods for the study of prehistoric language contact, but at the same time, there seems to be no need to abandon the comparative method as a general tool for working out genetic relationships between languages.

But ‘punctuated equilibrium’ put aside, *Areal Diffusion and Genetic Inheritance: Problems in Comparative Linguistics* is an excellent and very thought-provoking book. The papers introduce the reader to research in several very different linguistic areas, and despite the impressive range of linguistic phenomena covered, the contributions are written in a way that is easily accessible to a reader with no special knowledge of the languages in question. But as any book presenting many novel ideas and theoretical considerations, it will also prompt the reader to make critical remarks. One can warmly recommend this volume as food for thought to all scholars working in the field of language contact and comparative linguistics.

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Contact information:

Ante Aikio
Giellagas Institute for Saami Studies
P.O. Box 1000
FI-90014 University of Oulu
Finland
e-mail: ante(dot)aikio(at)oulu(dot)fi