

SIL Electronic Book Reviews 2012-011

Historical linguistics and the comparative study of African languages

By Gerrit J. Dimmendaal

Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2011. Pp. 421. ebook \$158.00, €105.00, hardback \$158.00, €105.00, paperback \$54.00, €36.00. ISBN 90-272-8722-8 (ebook), 978-90-272-8722-9 (ebook), 90-272-1178-7 (hardback), 978-90-272-1178-1 (hardback), 90-272-1179-5 (paperback), 978-90-272-1179-8 (paperback).

Reviewed by Annette R. Harrison
SIL International - Central Africa Group

When the late Austronesian linguist Terry Crowley published a version of the historical comparative linguistics course he had been teaching at the University of Papua New Guinea and the University of the South Pacific, he stated that one motivation for his introductory textbook was to demonstrate that the comparative method could be applied universally (1992:10). Gerrit J. Dimmendaal has done the same—and much more—for students of African languages, generously pouring more than thirty years of scholarship into a careful, thorough, insightful, and rich description of the historical lives of African languages. Ultimately, this is more than the "advanced textbook" in historical comparative linguistics described on the publisher's website, but a synergistic exposition on the nature of language and of language change with a special focus on Africa. Dimmendaal systematically works through a comprehensive explanation of the comparative method and related methods of analysis in the first seven chapters. The next five chapters he devotes to an exposition of language contact phenomena and areal influences, and in the final four chapters he discusses language change and its relationships to typology, cultural-historical studies, and the view of language as a species in an ecology. African languages provide the examples and illustrations for each topic, and in this way Dimmendaal substantiates the claim he makes in his preface: "African languages have a story to tell."

Resonances throughout the book include an appreciation of scholarly work and discoveries leading to our current understanding of African languages and their genetic relationships. I especially appreciated the insights into the actors and historical development of the scholarly disciplines related to historical comparative linguistics specifically, as well as to other sub-disciplines within the linguistic field. Moreover, Dimmendaal does not shy away from disagreements over theory, but presents relevant arguments from various perspectives and then makes his own position clear. The author continually insists that historical and comparative studies of languages must be thorough and methodical, and deep as well as broad. Dimmendaal does this more by example than through direct admonition. He cites himself so often that it becomes obvious that he speaks from years of field experience, careful data collection, deep analysis and reflection, and searches for explanations. He demonstrates seemingly encyclopedic knowledge of the histories of people

and languages on the African continent, knowledge of scholars and their work in historical, comparative, and contact linguistics, as well as theoretical developments in the field.

Another important theme concerns the inextricable relationship between language, society, and culture for the understanding of language change. In a discussion in the chapter on semantic change, for example, Dimmendaal insists that researchers must understand the everyday experiences of the people (i.e., "cultural experience") in order to discover how or to explain why a meaning changed as it did (p. 135). In his chapter on internal reconstruction, he points out that the term "free variation" may be a misnomer because of social or demographic constraints on the speakers (p. 145). Finally, in the second part of the book, he repeatedly emphasizes the importance of the nature of the social interaction in a contact situation for the analysis and explanation of linguistic outcomes (p. 210).

Structure

The structure of the book approaches the historical comparative study of languages beginning with the smallest elements in language (sounds), and moving to the broadest (human populations and civilizations of the past). It is apparent from the arrangement of topics that Dimmendaal considers an understanding of structural changes necessary to understanding change in meaning; and that both are necessary before approaching internal reconstruction or language-internal variation. A thorough understanding of the comparative method, including its strengths and weaknesses, is foundational to apprehending complexities in issues in which language contact and areal influences are factors, including borrowing or language shift, as well as contact languages that may be pidginized or creolized. Finally, the ability to approach problems in reconstruction, long range comparisons, and the evolution of languages is only possible when students can apply what they know of the comparative method and contact linguistics.

Each chapter begins with a short table of contents and an abstract. The author generally begins a topic by reminding the reader of what went before, establishing a connection between ideas. Often he gives an historical overview of the development of the idea through history. He then provides specific examples of the phenomenon at hand, using data from African languages, telling of his own experiences as a researcher and teacher, or relating what he finds to be particularly pertinent examples from the work of others. After the first example, he discusses the phenomenon in more depth, naming processes, giving terminology, discussing theoretical perspectives, all the while providing more examples to illustrate his points. Highlights from a selection of the book's chapters follow.

Chapter 2 is a nicely organized chapter about sound changes. Throughout the discussion the author describes rules or laws that have been attested and/or discovered through work with African languages, some of which may not have been described for languages in other parts of the world and are therefore not part of a general historical comparative linguistics curriculum. Some of these are Meinhof's Rule, Dahl's Law, and Katupha's Law, named after Bantu scholars, though the processes they describe are not restricted to Bantu languages. He also mentions changes affecting pidginized and creolized varieties of languages, and African youth languages. The end of the chapter addresses ways in which synchronic linguistic theory has affected knowledge about sound change, and thus, the comparative method.

In Chapter 3, Dimmendaal lays out the heuristic principles for grouping languages, and as he does so, he provides a helpful historical overview of how African languages came to be classified as they are. He includes an informative discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of various mass comparison methods, insisting all the while that the comparative method is the only one rigorous enough to support claims of genetic relationship. Nevertheless, he returns to the apparently inescapable conclusion that some mass comparison methods are necessary to establish (pre-) hypotheses for more rigorous comparative work. The chapter closes with a very readable summary family-by-family and branch-by-branch of African languages as their classification is understood and generally accepted today (pp. 81–92).

Chapter 5 covers semantic change with a focus on "universal cognitive strategies" for the reinterpretation of linguistic elements over time. The author includes a thorough presentation of grammaticalization theory from its historical origins, to models and research applied to African languages, to terms for processes, along with definitions and examples. He also points out weaknesses of the theory, or more specifically, he highlights the danger in data of inadequate historical depth which potentially traps the analyst in circular reasoning when attempting to determine the origins of the form of a given grammatical morpheme and the historical development of its functions. Synchronic comparison alone, he warns, may not necessarily lead to an accurate or helpful hypothesis. Nevertheless, he concludes with a description of how current grammaticalization models enrich linguistic theories, bringing together a number of interacting and co-occurring linguistic and historical phenomena.

Chapter 8 at first appears to treat borrowing if only to allow the comparative linguist to rule it out as a possible explanation for apparent cognates. However, in his discussion of code-switching, his adherence to Myers-Scotton's (1997) concept of a matrix language makes it clear that the existence of a matrix language is theoretically necessary in order to maintain a family tree model of language classification, even of those that arise through contact. It is upon this basis that he moves in Chapter 9 to argue for speaking in terms of "pidginization" and "creolization" of languages rather than creating unique categories of languages called "pidgins" or "creoles."

By Chapters 10 and 11, Dimmendaal has shifted the direction of his global argument for understanding the histories of languages from levels of phonology, morphology, and syntax, to the social meanings of linguistic forms as explanatory to language change. He discusses syncretic (or mixed) languages¹ in Chapter 10 with an emphasis on social symbolism and identity work. He returns to these themes in Chapter 11 after first describing the reduction processes that differentiate language shift from convergence. Ethnicity in the African context, he explains, may actually be less about language and more about shared customs, religious belief, and group solidarity. Then, in the context of examples from pygmy populations in central Africa, Berbers in Morocco, the various Maa-speaking groups in east Africa, and the Wolof-speaking Serer and Fulbe in Senegal, he makes a statement with tremendous implications for endangered languages on the African continent: "More often than not language in an African context appears to be like a piece of cloth which can be taken off and be replaced" (p. 262).

Chapter 12 sums up the book's section on language contact and areal influences by returning to the crucial importance of classifying and naming for the understanding of languages. He works toward an operational definition of an inherited lineage for languages. Though he considers both

branching and network models in order to represent linguistic relationships, he ultimately returns to a biological taxonomic model as the most pertinent for the consideration of language as a species within an ecological environment, an argument he makes in the final chapter of the book.

Chapter 13 represents a return to the importance of differentiating the chronological or inherited features of languages from those acquired through contact and areal diffusion, a theme that appeared in the early chapters of the book. Dimmendaal discusses typology as a tool to learn about innovations and changes that may be common to unrelated languages.

In Chapter 14, Dimmendaal returns to the topic of mass comparisons, noting that Greenberg's classification of African languages has been more or less substantiated by the work of many other scholars. The author proceeds through an inventory of the language families on the African continent discussing features that demonstrate group cohesiveness, and also features that differentiate one language family from others. Two interesting discussions in this chapter are first, the consideration of Khoisan as an areal grouping of three independent language families as opposed to a single family and second, a comparison between Greenberg's analysis yielding 16 language families in Africa and the author's own analysis which results in 23 (p. 328).

In Chapter 15 Dimmendaal describes the contributions of comparative linguistics for descriptions of the cultural history of African populations, including their spread or decline. This may be an important chapter for the student who requires a material explanation for the value of the results of the comparative method, i.e., an answer to the "so what" question.

Dimmendaal's final chapter (16) highlights the environmental adaptability of human language and also draws on data and studies beyond the African continent. Yet he goes beyond a "why or how do languages adapt and change" question to a more provocative one: why do some change in the same ways, even when there appears to be no link whatsoever between them, i.e., no evidence for a genetic relationship, contact, or areal effects? He presents a number of explanations from the literature, including Atkinson et al.'s (2008) application of the punctuation model and Hill's (2001) localist and distributed strategies (p. 360), before settling on the argument for "self-organising principles" that affect languages regardless of their genetic classification or geographic location. Borrowed from evolutionary biology, the self-organising principles model may provide the most satisfactory explanation for similar types of change and their directions in unrelated languages to date (p. 365). The model is comparable to the idea of drift (Sapir 1921), yet applies, as drift does not, to unrelated languages. I find much of the discussion in this chapter to be pertinent theory for the practical application of language standardization. Citing Hill's work, Dimmendaal speaks of a community's linguistic repertoire in terms of a resource for them, as well as a strategic area for research on patterns of communication and the relationship between variation and speaker claims to various identities (pp. 360–361). Dimmendaal concludes by mentioning topics not treated in his book and makes a final plea for longitudinal studies on language change.

Critique

Dimmendaal is ahead of any reviewer in pointing out the weakness of his book as a textbook. He gives his reasoning for not providing any data sets for student practice (the instructor may like to

provide his or her own data). Moreover, he does not provide a "further readings" or "discussion questions" section at the ends of the chapters. Nevertheless, he does point out areas for further study in the context of explanations about the limits of a theory or model. Also, despite the list of topics and the abstract at the beginning of each chapter, it is not always easy to pick up the line of argument.

A further criticism that might arise only from some audiences is that Dimmendaal's discussion is somewhat weak on practical applications that benefit from historical comparative work, notably the development of a written standard. For example, in Chapter 7 on language-internal variation, he introduces the idea of a "standard language" in his discussion of Swahili lects (northern, southern, and standard), without really discussing standardization, what it may mean for language communities, or how it comes about. Much later, he does mention the use of the standard form in schools and public administration, but overall seems to conflate written and spoken forms. It is only several pages later that he mentions a cursory definition of language standardization (p. 160), though by that point in the discussion he is explaining dialect leveling. It is apparent that his interest in standardization for the purposes of the chapter concerns the relationship of formal variation to language change, rather than the sociolinguistic practicalities related to the phenomenon.

Applications

Dimmendaal's presentation leaves those in SIL and similar organizations with a number of challenges. First, though he seems to appreciate limited use of a lexicostatistical or glottochronological approach for comparative linguistics, he stresses that over-confidence in the results of those kinds of survey results would be at worst misguided, and at best only the tip of the iceberg of potential studies of a language or group of languages. Either he is not aware of sociolinguistic studies by SIL linguists, or those studies are not adequate in terms of their depth (for example, those on the companion site to this one, SIL Electronic Survey Reports); he decries the "very few empirical studies of synchronic variation in African languages taking into account variables such as social group, age, gender, or register" (p. 172). He is specifically interested in what those studies may contribute to understanding how innovation(s) in a language begins—who initiates it or them in a group, and why other groups take up the same innovation(s) in turn. Nevertheless, he is familiar with the work of SIL linguists, citing Ahland (Colleen) and Ahland (Michael), Bendor-Samuel, Carlson, Casali, Hedinger, Kutsch Lojenga, Payne (Doris), Unseth and Watters. The issue does not seem to be the quality of work, but the depth and relevance for studies of language change.

Another challenge is to continue with long-term fieldwork that is analytically and descriptively deep as well as broad. Dimmendaal emphasizes the potential for valuable theoretical contributions that are only possible based on years in the field and the production of careful analyses based on the current forms of the language at all levels—from phonological, morphological and syntactic studies, to pragmatic and sociolinguistic studies—along with thoughtful and methodical historical comparative work to establish hypotheses of relatedness for classification.

Dimmendaal's assumption of the crucial connection between linguistic analysis and sociolinguistic studies for historical comparative work is strongly Labovian, and he describes his own attempt with sociolinguistic interview methods in the Tima-speaking community in Sudan's Nuba

Mountains (pp. 169–173). Moreover, he is keenly interested in language ecology studies, those that document and analyze the whole environment of a language and its speakers (p. 370). Finally, linguists and anthropologists in long-term relationships with language communities may make significant contributions in the area of "ethno-syntax" (Enfield 2002), which explores the relationships between grammar and culture, and which may ultimately contribute to an increased understanding of the self-organizing principles of human language.

Field linguists are especially well-placed to make outstanding practical contributions as well. For example, in his chapter on semantic change Dimmendaal stresses the need for good dictionaries, though he is thinking of etymological dictionaries rather than community-friendly dictionaries (see Williams 2011). Sign languages, including their historical development, is another area where field linguists have a unique contribution to make. Dimmendaal lists sign languages as an unfortunate gap in his volume.

Historical Linguistics and the Comparative Study of African Languages is a valuable tool for teachers and students, an important reference for other scholars and researchers, as well as a beautiful testimony to the stories of African languages, and to the inquiring mind and rigorous scholarship of the author.

Notes

1 Dimmendaal's opinion is that most all languages are "mixed," and so the term "syncretic language" is more precise (p. 238).

References

Atkinson, Quentin D., Meade, Andrew, Venditti, Chris, Greenhill, Simon J. and Pagel, Mark. 2008. Languages evolve in punctuational bursts. *Science* 319:588.

Crowley, Terry. 1992. *An Introduction to Historical Linguistics*. Oxford: OUP.

Enfield, Nick J. (ed.). 2002. *Ethnosyntax: Explorations in Grammar and Culture*. Oxford: OUP.

Hill, Jane. 2001. Language on the land: Towards an anthropological dialectology. In *Archaeology, Language, and History: Essays on Culture and Ethnicity*, John E. Terrell (ed.), 257–282. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, Greenwood Publishing.

Myers-Scotton, Carol. 1997. *Duelling Languages: Grammatical Structure in Codeswitching*. Oxford: OUP.

Sapir, Edward. 1921. *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech*. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, and Company.

Williams, Angela M. 2010. Doing more with less: Picture dictionaries in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Paper presented at Afrilex 15th: Annual International Conference of the African Association for Lexicography, Gaborone, Botswana. Presented on July 20, 2010.