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Historical Linguistics and the Comparative Study of African Languages by Gerrit Dimmendaal (review)

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Historical Linguistics and the Comparative Study of African Languages.

GERRIT DIMMENDAAL. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2011. Pp. xviii + 421. \$158.00 (cloth), \$54.00 (paper).

Reviewed by Jeffrey Heath, *University of Michigan*

Gerrit Dimmendaal states that his original concept for an undergraduate textbook ballooned into a weighty treatise, and was then scaled back to a publishable length. In spite of the label “advanced historical linguistics course book” on the back cover, the surviving work is difficult to recommend as a textbook, though it will find niche use in graduate courses on African linguistics in Europe or Anglophone Africa. It has no exercises or chapter-ending homework suggestions, so an instructor is on his or her own in that respect. It is also not cumulative, with each chapter presupposing its predecessors, in the fashion of most textbooks.

Instead, it is a magisterial single-author handbook of African historical and sociolinguistics. The chapters are roughly equal in size and are generally self-contained, so readers (and instructors) can cherry-pick. Each chapter is thoughtfully and clearly argued and based on considerable bibliographic erudition combined with extensive field experience, especially in East Africa. Not the least of its attributes is a thirty-four-page bibliography with over eight hundred entries, almost all of which are commented on individually in the main text, rather than being submerged in parenthesized laundry lists of the sort one sees in some less reputable journals.

Part 1 (pp. 1–176) presents the comparative method, part 2 (pp. 177–280) is on language contact issues, and part 3 (pp. 281–372) covers a range of wider historical and methodological issues.

Part 1 is the most conventional and businesslike of the three: sound correspondences, sound change, genetic classification, morphosyntactic and semantic change, internal reconstruction, and language-internal (dialectal) variation. I would highlight Dimmendaal's sensible, balanced commentary on the pluses and minuses of grammaticalization theory (pp. 122–32), which in other hands has become a rather blunt instrument in African historical linguistics.

That over one hundred pages are devoted to contact issues (part 2) reflects their special importance for African linguistics. There are chapters on borrowing, pidgins and creoles, syncretic languages, language obsolescence, and implications of the above for genetic classification. Dimmendaal has an impressive command of the general (not just Africanist) literature on these topics and is not afraid to show his own cards on controversial issues. For example, he argues against the claim that Ma'a and its non-African ilk are true mixed languages that threaten to subvert conventional genetic approaches. In this connection, he sides with Carol Myers-Scotton's matrix model of code-switching. The chapter on syncretic languages is a fine survey of the youth antilanguages that are burgeoning in African capital cities, along with structurally similar registers that have developed among local subethnic groups in the hinterlands.

Part 3 is heterogenous. It has the obligatory chapter on major African phyla (Afroasiatic, Nilo-Saharan, Niger-Congo, Khoisan), reviewing their rather colorful history with Joseph H. Greenberg at the center. Dimmendaal expels Mande and Dogon from Niger-Congo, and Songhay, Koman, and Gumuz from Nilo-Saharan, and breaks Khoisan up into three unrelated families. These decisions are reasonable in the context of current thinking, though the expulsions will make it harder for some Africanists (including your hapless servant, a Songhay and Dogon specialist) to know which language-family conferences to attend. This is flanked by a chapter on the role of typology in historical linguistics and one on language and history (words and things).

In the final chapter, "Some Ecological Properties of Language Development," Dimmendaal plunges into the fray on speciation, evolutionary teleology, punctuated equilibrium, spread and residual zones, and esoterogeny (self-inflicted complexification). His favorite biological concept, however, is "self-organising principles" (e.g., p. 365). I fear that this concept, as Dimmendaal uses it, mixes two distinct processes. First, widely separated and unrelated languages, like corporations and other complex structures that must operate effectively, tend to develop similar organizational features. Dimmendaal correctly points out that we need not resort to a Chomskyan black box to account for such similarities. Secondly, a specific language defends its own heavy investments in morphosyntactic patterns, even idiosyncratic ones, by repeated formal renewal of these configurations using new morphological material. Both processes are central to the evolution of languages, and Dimmendaal shows considerable insight in recognizing their importance, but they should be teased apart.

The Ecology of the Spoken Word: Amazonian Storytelling and Shamanism among the Napo Runa. MICHAEL A. UZENDOSKI and EDITH FELICIA CALAPUCHA-TAPUY. Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2012. Pp. xvi + 245. \$50.00 (cloth).

Reviewed by Suzanne Oakdale, *University of New Mexico*

This book is about Ecuadorian Napo Quichua storytelling practices and the philosophies about the cosmos that are embedded within these events. The two authors, one of whom is an Ecuadorian Napo Quichua and the other an American, lovingly present a range of storytelling performances that focus on how different beings, including humans, animals, plants, and places, relate to each other. Throughout, their concern is to highlight the aesthetic dimensions of these events. Hymesian verse analysis, grammatical patterns, drawings, and attention to musicality, among other techniques, are all employed to this end. As most of the performers are their relatives, the authors have a rare intimacy with the prosaic ways in which these sorts of mythological accounts are woven into and shape contemporary life. As a result, the reader gets a glimpse of Upper Amazonian mythology as vital, living tradition told by elders at the riverside as well as by university-educated narrators at folklore celebrations and musicians singing in a new genre of modern electronic dance music. The book offers particularly interesting discussions of the role of the body in Quichua storytelling, Napo Quichua ideas about different modes of communication, and orientations to ecology, as well as insights on the project of translation more generally.

Combining an ethno poetic approach that focuses on the aesthetics of communication with the large literature that stresses the centrality of the body in Amazonian cosmology, the authors treat Quichua storytelling as "somatic poetry," defined as a way of creating multimodal embodied works of art "by listening, feeling, smelling, seeing, and tasting of natural subjectivities, not just those emanating from human speech or from the human