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**R.M.W. Dixon.** 2016. *Are some languages better than others?* Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. vii + 272. £21.88 (hardcover).

Reviewed by Ravi Parihar, *Shri Mata Vaishno Devi University, India*

Dixon has written many important texts, such as *I am a linguist* (2011), *Australian languages: Their nature and development* (2002), *The rise and fall of languages* (1997), *A grammar of Yidiñ* (1977), and *The Dyirbal language of North Queensland* (1972). The book *Are some languages better than others?* is not as technical as Dixon's other works. It is written in a simple style and straightforward manner, making it accessible to the general public. Although readily understandable, the book still discusses complex issues and aspects. For instance, Dixon not only

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**Editors' note:** We present here two quite different reviews of Dixon's *Are some languages better than others?*, in the hope of contributing to constructive and rigorous conversation about the issues raised therein. We note that the two reviews were written independently. Neither should be taken as a response to the other review; rather each represents its author's response to the book itself.

describes his fieldwork experiences with languages such as Jarawara, Dyirbal, Tariana, but also provides general definitions and illustrations of linguistic terms. The book contains eleven chapters, supported by notes and sources, references, index, etc.

In chapter 1, “Setting the scene”, Dixon argues that language is the basic means of expression of human beings, and one of its foremost functions is providing information. While discussing the functionality of languages, he adds that the languages spoken in the contemporary world are more sophisticated than the earliest languages. Dixon states that initially, languages had limited vocabulary and their communication system was primarily dependent on gestures. Gradually, with the passage of time, these languages developed their vocabulary and grammatical mechanisms and became more sophisticated. Modern-day languages are now used for a variety of functions, such as social organization, aesthetic expression, argumentation, and proselytizing (the political function), which were not possible with the earliest languages.

“How languages work”, the second chapter, describes the components of a language: a grammar and a lexicon. The grammar and the lexicon are interdependent, that is, “interlocked” (p. 25) for the proper functioning of a language. Further, Dixon discusses the eyewitness (*evidentiality*) and non-eyewitness concepts in Jarawara. Similar concepts, which seem to be universal, are discussed by Everett (2005) for Pirahã, an Amazonian language spoken in Brazil (p. 622–623). However, Dixon specifies how languages can be different from one another; he compares English and Jarawara which, unlike English, does not distinguish between /l/ and /r/ phonemes. To further illustrate his description of how languages work, Dixon explains that any language having 12 consonants and 3 vowels can have in principle 36 monosyllables of the CV pattern type and 1296 disyllables of the CVCV pattern. This statement is based only on the logical combinatorial possibilities of the phonemes; Dixon does not show that any particular language exhibits all of the possibilities.

Chapter 3, entitled “What is necessary”, discusses the grammatical features that are available in the languages of the world that the author considers essential components of a language. These include statements, commands, questions, and the system of negating an expression. Dixon tackles the topic of polar and content questions: polar questions can be either statements or questions in disguise (with final raising intonation), whereas content questions are always formed using *Wh*-question words. While discussing the necessity of grammatical features, Dixon claims that, for clause linking, explicit coordination markers such as *and* and disjunction markers such as *or*, are highly desirable in a language (p. 72). Other features, such as gender and tense, are not necessary (p. 47).

In chapter 4, “What is desirable”, Dixon further explores features of the world’s languages, putting emphasis on their desirability. He states that it is desirable for languages to have genders and classifiers, even though they are absent in some languages. Also, Dixon argues that a language having no articles faces difficulties, since contrasts in meaning are lost. Dixon states that elements like an evidentiality system, comparative constructions, reflexives, and reciprocals are valuable assets to a

language. He also asserts that the causative construction is an advantageous feature, while according less importance to applicatives.

In Chapter 5, “What is not (really) needed”, the author shifts his focus from the grammatical aspects of language to style of speech and writing. Dixon contrasts the repetition of lexemes, words, or phrases in a speech from formal writing. He argues that rhetorical speech relies on repetition, which is an effective tool for drawing the audience’s attention. Dixon considers repetitions in formal writing to be a bad habit and proposes that they be replaced by close synonyms.

In “How about complexity?” (chapter 6), Dixon presents the notion of complexity in grammars and states that some languages are more complex than others. He discusses certain complexities in languages, for example, the two *-ra* suffixes in Jarawara (one being a negator, the other a tense marker), which are difficult to distinguish.

Chapter 7 (“How many words should there be?”) pertains to the terms required for particular activities. For instance, a linguist must have a vocabulary for the purpose of studying languages. The author makes an assumption about the number of words needed in a language, which, according to him, should be between 5,000 and 10,000 words. However, he states that specialized fields of study (law, music and art) need specific terminologies.

In chapter 8, “The limits of a language”, Dixon focuses on the confined uses of language in various domains of life. For instance, a speaker from Vietnam living in an English-speaking country might speak Vietnamese at home and with friends, but English in formal contexts. This means that a language might be used only in limited spheres of life. Dixon discusses the fact that the lexicon and grammar are interdependent, and that children acquire their mother tongue naturally, without putting any conscious efforts into its acquisition. He debunks the myth that “the human brain has space only for one language” (p. 188).

Chapter 9, “Better for what purpose?”, focuses on the need for clarity in oral communication. In brief, pronouncing a word clearly makes it easier for the hearer to understand what is being said. Dixon notes that hyphenation of a word (*un-inter-est-ed*) can be used to indicate pronunciation, which can lead to the better understanding of an expression or a word. The author further states that once a speaker knows how to pronounce a word, he/she usually knows how to write it, and vice versa.

Chapter 10, “An ideal language”, discusses aspects which contribute to making a language an ideal one. Dixon deals with linguistic features which can make a language an ideal one. Such features, which are considered as “the infrastructure of a language” (p. 213), are discussed in earlier chapters (chapters 1, 3, 4, and 6–10) of the book. Dixon lists 42 linguistic features, including reduplication, augmentatives and diminutives, phonemes, syllable structure, kinship terms, and vocabulary, that are prominent. Lastly, Dixon states that the desirable features of a language should not be understood as a design for formulating a “model language” (p. 242).

In the last chapter (“Facing up to the question”, chapter 11), Dixon tries to shed some light on the question given in the title of the book, asking “Can a language be declared better than another?” Dixon invites the readers to decide by themselves. He suggests that the reader take two languages, check each language against the

proposed list of linguistic features, and compare the “scores” for these two languages. The language showing more of the basic features would be considered the better one.

The book *Are some languages better than others?* presents an overview of the linguistic features of different languages of the world and offers a detailed description of various linguistic issues of prime importance, such as basic linguistic notions as well as phonological, morphological, and syntactic perspectives of languages. This book can be an interesting read for the general public. The layperson can indeed learn a lot about what linguistics deals with, how languages differ, what similarities there are among languages, what specific features a particular language has, etc. In general, it can help to understand how languages work and how languages can vary. However, the text would be more suitable for someone who has a rudimentary knowledge of linguistic terminology; without this background knowledge, a non-linguist reader could find this book a bit difficult to comprehend.

The book may also be of interest to linguists, particularly field linguists who rely on primary language data for their research.

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**R. M. W. Dixon.** 2016. *Are some languages better than others?* Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. vii + 272. \$24.50 (paperback).

Reviewed by Daniel Currie Hall, *Saint Mary's University*

Are some languages better than others? The question posed in the title of this book is, as Dixon acknowledges, one that not many linguists would ask. And indeed, the book is not written for linguists, but for a general audience. To some extent, its provocative title serves as a pretext for showing the reader a glimpse of the diversity of spoken human languages, with sections illustrating cross-linguistic variation in features such as case, tense, negation, possession, evidentiality, and definiteness. (Signed languages are not mentioned at all.) Many of the examples come from languages