SIL Electronic Book Reviews 2014-004

Languages of the world: An introduction

By Asya Pereltsvaig

Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. 298. ebook $28.00, hardback $110.00, £65.00, paperback $35.00, £22.00. ISBN 978-1-139-21112-3 (ebook), 978-1-107-00278-4 (hardback), 978-0-521-17577-7 (paperback).

Reviewed by Samuel Mubbala
Lugwere Bible Translation and Literacy Project – Uganda

In her book, *Languages of the World*, Pereltsvaig investigates what all natural languages have in common and the ways in which they differ. She also endeavors to demonstrate how languages can be used to trace different peoples and their past and examines whether certain languages are similar as a consequence of common descent or language contact. To answer these broad questions Pereltsvaig conducts a worldwide investigation into all known language families and summarizes it in a relatively easy-to-read and unintimidating volume.

The introductory chapter is followed by ten chapters, each describing a group of languages relative to their geographical location, then a chapter categorizing all languages into macro-families, and lastly, a chapter describing the pidgin, Creole, and other mixed languages. Pereltsvaig's investigation draws upon well-known works in the world of linguistics, but in some cases she goes beyond them and refers to genetic research to shed more light on the task.

For most of the language families the author provides a map locating the languages of that family and tracing their geographical origins. The family is then divided into branches and subgroups according to their distinctive linguistic features—phonological, morphological and syntactic aspects, and vocabularies—which the author then analyzes. The members of the sub-groups are listed with information on their population and status, ranging from being used popularly/officially to being endangered, and the members that may have become extinct are also given. The grammatical properties that constitute the prototype of a family or branch are highlighted and problematic issues are discussed.

An example is the Austronesian family, which includes the languages of Indonesia, the Philippines, Polynesia, and the Malagasy language of Madagascar. After analyzing the family's interesting prototype Philippine-style topic marking and some discussion of the controversy over the origins of the Polynesian languages, the author focuses on the mystery of Malagasy. Although about 90% of Malagasy's basic vocabulary is of Austronesian origin, it has a Verb-Object-Subject word order and the Philippine-style topic marking morphology to encode the grammatical relations, at the same time it also has substantial Bantu elements. While genetic studies shed light on the fact that Austronesians came to the island, it is essentially

linguistics which makes a significant contribution to answering the question of Malagasy's origins. This example supports Pereltsvaig's theory that languages can be used to trace the origins of ethnic groups.

Pereltsvaig also addresses the issue of language change and language death. She explains that changes occur not only in a language's vocabulary and grammatical apparatus, but, with time, even the morphology may change. With good examples, she proposes a cycle through which human languages apparently change their morphology, in a clockwise manner, from agglutinative to fusional, from fusional to isolating, and from isolating to agglutinative. English and French are cited among languages moving from fusional to isolating, while Chinese is among those moving from isolating to agglutinative, and Finnish and Hungarian languages are moving from agglutinative to fusional morphology. Several factors are shown to contribute to language change, but the outstanding cause is contact with other languages.

Pereltsvaig affirms, "Language contact and the resulting lexical and grammatical borrowing may reshape the language to be quite different from its relatives" (p. 230). These language changes, and even deaths, result in a continuum of mutual intelligibility amongst the members of the language family and can lead to a language becoming an "isolate," such as Greek. Regarding language change, Pereltsvaig explains, with good illustrations, August Schleicher's comparative reconstruction methodology. This is the idea that, "by comparing cognate words and grammatical structures in related languages one can work back through time and reconstruct the words and structures of the ancestral language (or 'proto-language')" (p. 16). The study of these changes helps not only to determine the relationships between languages but to reveal much about the circumstances of the speakers.

There is insightful investigation and extensive research undertaken in Pereltsvaig's work, however, in some places the book provides rather inadequate information on the subject under discussion. This might be due to various reasons, but the author does not provide any caveat where an insufficiency is apparent. Two areas in which this is apparently observed are:

a) Some language families do not have clear categorization and adequate description. Examples of these are the Nilo Saharan and the Bantu language groups.

b) The sub-groups or members of a language family which do not have the family's prototypical linguistic properties receive limited or no treatment, such as the Austronesian language family cited above.

Notwithstanding the insufficiencies noted here, Pereltsvaig sufficiently/adequately answers the questions raised in her abstract, and shows that "…a study of human languages enhanced by evidence from other disciplines such as anthropology, archeology, history and genetics, leads us to a better understanding of the human condition" (p. 3). This book amply qualifies as a textbook for a course on the languages of the world, is a must-read for all those involved in field linguistics, and is a handy reference book for ethno-, historical, and comparative linguists.