The Jarawara Language of Southern Amazonia

By R. M. W. Dixon and with Alan R. Vogel


Reviewed by Mary Ruth Wise
SIL International

This award-winning book has already been thoroughly reviewed. (See, for example, Michael W. Morgan’s June 23, 2005 review in Linguist List 16, 1940.) However, a brief summary is in order. Then I will focus on a few topics of special interest in the grammar.

Summary

This book is a detailed description of Jarawara, which belongs to the small Arawá language family of Brazil. (A few hundred Kulina (one member of the family) have migrated up the Purus River into Peru.) The author considers Jarawara to be a dialect of Madi – along with Jamamadí and Baniwa (p. 12).

Chapter 1 begins with a typological overview of the language, followed by a sketch of the historical background, culture, and current situation of this small group – 170 speakers of Jarawara. The classification of Jarawara as a dialect of Madi and areal influence are also discussed.

Chapter 2 describes the small inventory of consonants (11) and vowels (4), the simple (C)V syllable pattern, stress placement, and phonotactics. The distinction between phonological words and grammatical words is discussed in some detail since they are not always isomorphic.

Chapter 3 gives a grammatical overview of Jarawara. Gender, animacy, number, and the distinction between A-construction versus O-construction transitive clauses are among the more salient features of the morphosyntax.

Chapters 4 through 9 describe the highly agglutinative predicate structure – up to eleven “slots” within a verb. The three pronominal positions within a verb, auxiliaries, miscellaneous suffixes, the tense-modal system, mood suffixes, verb derivations (causative and applicative prefixes), and verbal reduplication are discussed.

Noun phrases, possessed nouns, adjectives, and demonstratives are treated in chapters 10 through 12.
Chapters 13 through 19 treat various clause structures: copula clauses, verbal main clauses, commands and questions, A-constructions and O-constructions, complement clauses, dependent clauses, and nominalized clauses.

Chapters 20 and 21 describe peripheral markers, chapter 22 a relational noun, and chapter 23 list constructions. Chapter 24 discusses relativization and conjunction. It also includes a chart contrasting the various clause types.

Chapter 25 discusses word class derivation, and chapter 26 describes various topics in semantics and formulaic expressions. Chapter 27 gives a tentative diachronic explanation of some unusual features of Jarawara.

The book concludes with three interlinear texts, references, vocabulary (of words appearing in the examples and texts, a list of affixes, and an index.

**Evaluation**

This book can be used as a model for a descriptive grammar. The exposition is clear; the examples are well-chosen and are often given in pairs to explicate by contrast the point discussed.

I have noted only a few minor problems. One of the few typos is “am old shaman” in plate 1 opposite p. 8 and in the list of plates. A geographical misstatement occurs in p. 6: “The Purús River rises high in the Andes.” In fact, the headwaters of the Purús are on the eastern slopes of low hills to the east of the Urubamba River and do not flow into the Urubamba but rather continue eastward into Brazil.

Dixon is correct (p. 12) in stating that languages of the Arawá family are not related to Arawak(an). In addition to his own 1997 paper, it would have been helpful to mention David Payne’s statement that if there is a relation, it is very distant and not to Maipuran (mainstream) Arawakan (1991: 365).

**Comments on topics of interest**

**Gender**

Gender agreement is one of the most pervasive and, at times, puzzling features of Jarawara (and all Arawan languages). Vowel alternations indicate gender in many verbal suffixes. The particular alternation usually (but not quite always) depends on the position of the suffix in the verb.

**The ka- applicative**

The applicative marker ka- sometimes derives a transitive verb from an intransitive, but sometimes it simply adds a semantic sense such as ‘inside’ or ‘full’. The various functions and meanings of the applicative are not unlike those in many other Amazonian languages although
the forms of applicatives differ (see, for example Duff Tripp 1997:99–100 on the applicative in Yanesha’, an Arawakan language).

A- and O-constructions

One of the most striking features of Arawan languages is the contrast between A-constructions (agent) and O-constructions (object). If the grammatical pivot in a section of a discourse is in Agent function, then the A-construction occurs. Similarly, if the grammatical pivot is in O function then the O-construction occurs. These constructions contrast in whether there is explicit specification of an argument or not, in the form of the third-person singular pronoun, and in use of the prefix hi- and whether the mood suffixes agree in gender with the A or O. Similar constructions in Kulina were first described by Arlene Agnew (1963) and made available in 1976 on microfiche but unfortunately never published in print. Agnew termed the constructions “subject-oriented and object-oriented.” Others (see Adams and Marlett 1991) have argued that these constructions are anti-passive. However they are termed, it is clear that there are two contrasting transitive constructions and that the pivotal argument governs which is used.

Possible areal features or pan-Americanisms

Dixon discusses areal influence as shown in a few lexemes of Jarawara (pp. 12–13).

I add the following as possible areal features or pan-Americanisms: The applicative prefix ka-might be one. Note that the applicative in Cholón (once spoken in the western Amazon) is (h)a- (Alexander-Bakkerus 2005:211–212).

Lenition of k (under certain circumstances in the applicative ka-) also occurs in other languages. In the Kampa languages an initial k in noun stems is lenited to y when a possessive person marker is prefixed (see Payne 1981:87–88).

Dixon (p.197) lists six past tense markers (three eyewitness and three non-eyewitness). Neighboring Panoan languages of Amazonia also have six past tenses (see, for example, Faust 1973:43–48). Again, an inventory of several past tense suffixes is not unusual in Amazonia.

Grammatical ordering of verbal suffixes can be changed for special effect (p. 70). In Yanesha’ (Arawakan) verbal suffix order depends on whether the suffix is functioning derivationally or inflectionally. In Panoan languages (and Quechua) the order of some suffixes depends on their scope. Again, this may be an areal feature.

A final note

This volume is must reading for anyone who wants an in-depth understanding of the phonological and morphosyntactic structures of an Amazonian language and for anyone looking for a model reference grammar.
References


