

Are Some Languages Better than Others?

By R. M. W. Dixon


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This book sets out to answer a question that many linguists have been hesitant to ask: are some languages better than others? Can we say, for instance, that because German has three genders and French only two, German is a better language in this respect? Jarawara, spoken in the Amazonian jungle, has two ways of showing possession: one for a part (e.g. 'Father's foot') and the other for something which is owned and can be given away or sold (e.g. 'Father's knife'); is it thus a better language than English, which marks all possession in the same way?

R. M. W. Dixon begins by outlining what he feels are the essential components of any language, such as the ability to pose questions, command actions, and provide statements. He then discusses desirable features including gender agreement, tenses, and articles, before concluding with his view of what the ideal language would look like - and an explanation of why it does not and probably never will exist. Written in the author's usual accessible and engaging style, and full of personal anecdotes and unusual linguistic phenomena, the book will be of interest to all general language enthusiasts as well as to a linguistics student audience, and particularly to anyone with an interest in linguistic typology.

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Review

"Essential."--*Choice*

About the Author

R. M. W. Dixon is Adjunct Professor and Deputy Director of the Language and Culture Research Centre at James Cook University. He has written extensively on a number of Australian and Amazonian languages, as well as on ergativity, semantics, and English grammar. His many books include *The Rise and Fall of Languages* (CUP 1997), *Basic Linguistic Theory* (OUP 2010-2), *Making New Words* (OUP 2014), and *Edible Gender, Mother-in-Law Style, and Other Grammatical Wonders* (OUP 2015). Dixon's academic biography *I am a Linguist* was published by Brill in 2011.

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