R. M. W. Dixon

Abstract

Dixon's achievements lie in the grammars he has written, of languages from Aboriginal Australia, Oceania and Amazonia; in the grammars he has encouraged many students and colleagues to write; in his theoretical contributions concerning ergativity, adjective classes, noun classes and classifiers, causatives, demonstratives, etc.; and in the way he has nurtured linguistics as a scientific discipline in Australian universities.

Key words: Australian Aboriginal languages, Fijian, Amazonian languages, ergativity, causatives, demonstratives.

Cross-references: Australia; Causative, semantics of; Classifiers and noun classes, semantics of; Gender

R. M. W. (Bob) Dixon was born in Gloucester, on 25 January 1939, and brought up in Nottingham. After graduating in mathematics from Oxford University, he was in 1961 appointed Research Fellow in Statistical Linguistics at the University of Edinburgh. From reading the works of Boas and Sapir, Dixon realised that the only way to master the principles of linguistics was to undertake study of a previously undescribed language. This led to forty years of steady field work, with twenty five trips to the Cairns Rain Forest region of North Queensland, three to the Fijian island of Taveuni, and seven to the jungle village of Casa Nova in Brazilian Amazonia (the trips varied from ten months to two weeks in extent). Besides shorter grammars of three Australian languages (Warrgamay, Nyawaygi and
Mbabaram) where he worked with the last one or two speakers, Dixon has published comprehensive grammars of two Australian languages — *The Dyirbal language of North Queensland* (Cambridge UP, 1972, 420 pp.) and *A grammar of Yidi* (Cambridge UP, 1977, 563 pp.) — plus *A grammar of Boumaa Fijian* (University of Chicago Press, 1988, 375 pp.) and *The Jarawara language of southern Amazonia* (Oxford UP, 2004, 636 pp.). He has also published on Dyirbal songs and kinship, in addition to a thesaurus/dictionary plus texts volume on Yidi (with similar volumes for Dyirbal in preparation).

Bob Dixon is a zealot, believing that anyone who calls themself a linguist should shoulder responsibility for documenting languages. He has supervised the work of more than thirty graduate students, each of whom has completed a high-quality theoretically-informed grammar of a previously undescribed language, thus providing an inestimable addition to linguistic knowledge. These are all written in terms of the established and cumulative framework of linguistics treated as a natural science, which has recently come to be called 'basic linguistic theory'. Dixon makes no secret of the poor opinion he holds of people who receive a salary from a linguistics department but simply play around with formal theories or gather data for typological study by lolling in an armchair in a library. As might be expected, such freely expressed opinions do not make him terribly popular with some members of these groups.

A conviction that the basic business of language is the communication of meaning, and that the primary task of linguists is to understand how this is achieved, has characterised his work on 'the semantic basis of grammar'. Dixon's manifold contributions to typological theory have all utilised an inductive methodology. The much-cited paper 'Where have all the adjectives gone?' (1977) examines languages with a small adjective class, and looks at the semantic rationale for their membership. In the introductory chapter of *Adjective classes: a cross-linguistic typology* (Oxford UP, 2004), he suggests that every language has an Adjective
class (just as every language has Noun and Verb classes) but in some instances a degree of subtlety and insight is needed to discern it. His eighty-page paper 'Ergativity' (1979) was revised and enlarged as a monograph (1994), and is regarded as the seminal work on this topic. He has also contributed to typological theory with papers on noun classes and classifiers, complementation, causatives, the unit 'word', demonstratatives, and copula clauses. Dixon's study of his native language, *A new approach to English grammar, on semantic principles* (1991) has been thoroughly revised and enlarged and will be reissued in 2005 as *A semantic approach to English grammar* (Oxford UP).

In his comparative study of the ca. 250 indigenous languages of Australia, Dixon has persistently drawn attention to the difficulty of distinguishing similarities due to shared genetic inheritance and those resulting from borrowing. His 1997 essay *The rise and fall of languages* puts forward a 'punctuated equilibrium' model for the development of human languages over the past hundred thousand or more years. Dixon's monograph *Australian languages: their nature and development* (Cambridge University Press, 2002, 776 pp.) provides a detailed study of and justification for regarding Australia as a very long term linguistic diffusion area.

After spending a somewhat frustrating period as a lecturer at University College London, from 1964 (interrupted by a heady year at Harvard in 1968/9), Dixon was appointed to the chair of linguistics in the School of General Studies at the Australian National University and served as department head from July 1970 until December 1990. He developed a top-notch teaching and research milieu; thirty of its graduate students have gone on to academic positions across the newly-formed linguistics departments in Australian universities and in overseas institutions.

The apogee of Dixon's career came when — jointly with Alexandra Aikhenvald — he founded the Research Centre for Linguistic Typology at the Australian National University in
December 1996. RCLT relocated to La Trobe University in Melbourne in January 2000. It has about twenty members recruited from across the world — doctoral students, postdoctoral fellows and distinguished visiting fellows — every one of whom is either writing a comprehensive grammar of a previously undescribed language or has already done so. Each year, RCLT hosts an invitation-only International Workshop; these have resulted in volumes on distinguishing between areal diffusion and genetic inheritance, on derivations which change valency, on the unit 'word', on evidentiality, on adjective classes, on serial verb constructions, and on complement clauses and complementation strategies. Dixon has a straightforward approach to academic administration, abhorring secrecy. He sets an example in probity and work ethic, which is enthusiastically followed by members of RCLT.

Bob Dixon's activities range beyond linguistics. In the 1960s he published a couple of science fiction short stories under the nom-de-plume of Simon Tully and in the 1980s two detective novels under the sobriquet Hosanna Brown. He has since 1955 been working on discography and is co-compiler of *Blues and gospel records, 1890-1943* (fourth edition, Oxford UP, 1997, 1370 pp.) and co-author of *Recording the blues* (1970, reissued in 2001 as part of *Yonder come the blues*, Cambridge UP). His popular account of work in northern Australia, *Searching for Aboriginal languages, Memoirs of a field worker*, was published in 1983 by the University of Queensland Press and reissued in 1989 by the University of Chicago Press. We now await with eager anticipation Dixon's straight-talking autobiography, *I am a linguist*, scheduled for completion in 2005.

Selected bibliography


— (1977). 'Where have all the adjectives gone?' *Studies in Language* 1:19-80. (Translated into Spanish, 2000.)


NOTE: Linguistics books are as by 'R. M. W. Dixon', books on blues are as by 'Robert M. W. Dixon'. Please retain this distinction.