Are Some Languages Better than Others?

R. M. W. DIXON

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Preface

This volume attempts a succinct portrait of the discipline of linguistics, pared down to its essentials. I have aimed to provide a representative overall view, without entering into every complexity and exception, or into rare features which occur in just a few languages. The focus is on languages as they are today, with relatively sparse mention of how languages change.

If something can be explained, it should be explainable in everyday language, which any intelligent person can understand, although of course a degree of concentration and thoughtfulness is required. I have tried to keep the use of technical terms to a minimum. Examples are quoted from a wide range of languages; these have been chosen to be simple (although not simplified), avoiding additional complexities which are irrelevant to the point being made.

Many examples are drawn from those languages I know best, from forty years of immersion fieldwork. I began by working on Dyirbal and Yidiñ, languages from the tropical rainforest of northeast Queensland, Australia. These peoples' land and culture had been ravaged by the European invader; the last generation of fluent speakers were keen that I should document the full glory of the languages. (Their grandchildren are now attempting to learn back some of the traditional languages and cultures, from the accounts which I published.) I then worked in two vibrant languages communities. First on the Boumaa dialect of Fijian, spoken amidst rainforest on the island of Taveuni. Then, venturing into the deep jungle of southern Amazonia, I studied Jarawara, a language which boasts the most awesomely complex grammar.

Chapter 1
Setting the scene

This might appear to be a dangerous book. Riots have been fomented by denigrating another's language. From time immemorial, Europeans—with their innate sense of superiority—have simply assumed that languages spoken by other kinds of people (especially those in out-of-the-way places) were 'primitive', and this has led to fierce counter-reaction.

In point of fact, none of the several thousand languages spoken today around the globe could in any sense be regarded as 'primitive'. Each has a rich vocabulary and a grammar of considerable intricacy. All present-day languages comprise a sophisticated linguistic system, which serves many social functions.

But no two languages do things in precisely the same way. Language A may be more effective in a certain respect, and language B in some other respect. Summing these up, it may turn out one language can be shown to be slightly (never more than that) superior.

The question is surely worth posing. Various aspects of the enquiry are explored in this short volume. Reviewing them, the reader will be able to decide for themself whether some languages can be considered 'better' than others (taking care to be certain what one means by 'better').

1.1 The role of language

Language is the most vital element in the social fabric of every human society.

Each person has physical needs: sustenance, shelter, and—in a cold climate—clothing. And mental needs: a sense of identity, of well-being, of security, of reality, and of purpose. Plus the potential for aesthetic expression. Language plays an interlocking role in many aspects of life. We can survey some of its most vital functions.

(a) Language assisting in the process of belonging

Each person values their name or designation, as an emblem of their being. Also the place to which they feel they belong, and perhaps another place where they currently reside. Great importance may be attached to membership of an ethnic group, which is often associated with a particular language. People need a regular routine of living—by day, by season, by year—with familiar sequences of activities. Words, phrases, and sentences are needed to organise and discuss these.

(b) Language enabling cooperative endeavour

When a number of people are associated in some group activity, language acts as a facilitator. They may be involved in a hunting expedition, or building a house, or taking part in a sporting event. The role of language here may not be large, but it is invariably critical.

(c) Language reflecting social organisation

When a minion addresses a boss, they should employ a respectful term of address, uttered in a deferential manner. Every kind of

social interaction requires nuances of vocabulary, grammar, and tone of voice—between wife and husband, parent and child, priest and parishioner, officer and infantryman.

A number of languages have speech styles which code levels of politeness, as in Japanese and Korean. In Thai there is a special speech register for talking to members of the royal family. In the case of Dyirbal, an Australian language, a special speech style must be employed in the presence of an actual or potential mother-in-law, father-in-law, son-in-law, or daughter-in-law. This shows the same grammar and phonetics as the everyday language style, but every noun, verb, and adjective has a different form.

(d)   Language used to display emotions

Whether insulting someone, or quarrelling with them, or offering support, language is the main means of expression. It may indicate anger, pride, delight, dismay, disgust, anxiety, worry, fear, curiosity, desire, appreciation, and more.

(e)   Language used to convey information

The description of events and states—telling others what has happened or is happening—constitutes a major function of language. Related to this is setting out a plan for future activity. And providing spoken instruction on how to do something, or a written manual explaining the operation of a machine.

Compiling histories of past events, and enunciating rules and laws to regulate conduct, also come under this heading.

(f)   Language as a means for aesthetic expression

Reaching beyond the necessities of life, all of humankind delights in making up stories, and enacting dramas. Songs may be

functional—an integral part of some social event or amatory tryst—or purely for enjoyment. The language which fulfils purposes (a–e) is here extended, partly just for pleasure.

(g) Language as the vehicle for scholarly thought and argumentation

Language is indispensable for constructing Aristotelian syllogisms, for expounding the tenets of Freudian psychology, for investigating a cure for cancer. Also for working out relationships through a classificatory kinship system, in which each person in a small community is related to each other person through a set of intricate algorithms.

(h) Language as the conduit for proselytisation

In a campaign to get people to join a political party, or vote in a particular way, or adopt some religion, language is the means of persuasion and exhortation.

Each language which is spoken in the world today fulfils these functions, and more besides. It achieves them through a vocabulary consisting of thousands of words plus a pretty complex grammar. There is no present-day language which could be regarded as 'primitive'. However, this cannot always have been so. It will be instructive (and also fun) to speculate about what things may have been like in the distant past.

1.2 A primitive language

Humankind (*Homo sapiens*) is considered to have evolved at least 100,000 years ago, possibly much earlier. A major feature, distinguishing us from earlier stages of development, is that

humans have a language—a means of communication involving contrastive vocal sounds, put together to make words, and those then combined to form sentences.

The earliest language did not simply fill a gap. There must have been an existing system of communication and this would have been steadily adapted through the incorporation of organised speech sounds.

Bodily postures, facial gestures, movements made with hand and arm, would have played a major role in communication before the evolution of language. There may have been a developed mental empathy between people within a social group, something which would have diminished once language was available to explicitly convey wants and fears. A question, 'what is it?', could have been conveyed by raised eyebrows, an injunction not to do something by a shake of the head. There would have been imitations of animal cries. A person with acute hearing might cup hand to ear and utter *Waa*, a conventionalised copy of the sound made by a wild animal, in order to warn others that a predator was nearby.

Language would, of course, have started in a small way, perhaps with just a few score words and sentences each of no more than two words. A name for each member of the group would have served for identification, used where we would employ pronouns (these are a sophisticated linguistic device which would have evolved quite a bit later). Suppose that one person, called Na, is enquiring of another, called Di, whether—having discerned a movement in the forest nearby—Di is afraid (the word for this is *ribu*).

Na utters: Di ribu?   'Are you afraid' (literally '(Is) Di afraid?')
Di replies: Di ribu   'I am afraid' (literally: 'Di (is) afraid')

Na might show that the first utterance is a polar question through gesture of face or hands, or by final rising intonation (as in many present-day languages).

There could have been words for 'good' and 'hot' and 'wet' with negation being added to form their antonyms: 'bad' being just 'not good', 'cold' being 'not hot', and so on. An original gesture to show negation (perhaps a head shake) would have soon been replaced by a word. The great advantage of language is that a speaker can be understood without being seen (for example, after dark, or just round a corner).

A two-word sentence would be adequate for *Di ribu* but could be a limiting factor when there are two entities involved in some activity. Suppose that Na goes out to hunt and kill (*baga*) a game animal (all large animals are covered by the general term *bibu*). Late in the afternoon, Di hears a shout from the other side of the settlement: *Na baga!* But what does it mean? Is it Na who has done the killing? Or is it the case that Na has been killed?

As our primitive language develops (which is likely to happen rather quickly), longer sentences will come to be used. And there will be some grammatical mechanism for distinguishing between who performed an action and who suffered as a result of it. (There is discussion in section 3.4 of how this may be achieved.)

1.3   What does 'better' mean?

We could describe a language a little less primitive than the one just outlined, with a couple of hundred words and sentences involving three or four words. And then, at a later stage in time (but still tens of thousands of years in the past), one slightly more advanced, in which two simple sentences can be joined together

to make a complex one, something which could be translated as 'Na climbed a tree to pick fruit'.

Each of these primitive languages is better than its predecessor. And every language spoken in the world today is better than our primitive languages. Better in what way? What does 'better' mean when comparing languages?

One language is better than another to the extent that it fulfils the primary functions of a language, as sketched in section 1.1. Modern languages fulfil functions (a–h), each in its own manner, and to a greater or lesser extent. The primitive language described in section 1.2 might have been reasonably useful for (a) a sense of belonging, (b) group cooperation, and—to a very limited extent—(d) expressing emotions, and (e) conveying information. However, each modern language is more effective for every one of these four functions. The primitive language would not have been able to deal with (c) social organisation, (f) aesthetic expression, (g) argumentation, or (h) proselytising.

If we can compare a modern-day language with a primitive one, and say which is better, we must surely be able to compare two modern-day languages. Such comparison is not a simple matter, as will be illustrated in chapter 10.

Each language has a distinct infrastructure. What is expressed through the lexicon in one language may be handled within the grammar in another. Whereas in English one says *He began to eat*, an indigenous Australian would express this in Dyirbal as *Bayi* (he) *jangga-yarra-ñu*, where suffix *-yarra-* 'begin to do' is placed between verb root *janga-* 'eat' and past tense ending *-ñu*. That is, English expresses 'begin' by a separate word and Dyirbal by a grammatical suffix.

One language achieves a certain communicative function in one way and another in a second way. The first way may be more

effective than the second; or vice versa. Alternatively, the two methods may be—as far as we can tell—equally effective.

There are some folk who insist that one should never try to compare the relative worth of languages. Why not? What are they afraid of? If linguistics is to be regarded as a natural science (which is a tenet I subscribe to; see section 1.5) then evaluation must be an element in its modus operandi. The doubters say that all languages are 'equal', that each language is perfect for the role it plays in the society which uses it. But if a language is perfect, why—indeed how—could it ever change? And each language is in a process of change, all the time.

Not every scientific question has a clear-cut answer. But if a question is not posed (if, indeed, a prohibition is placed on asking it) we shall never know what the answer might be.

Before moving on to discuss the diverse ways in which languages fulfil their functions, it behoves us to deal with a perennial misconception: the role of writing.

1.4 The truth about writing

Between 1963 and 2003 I undertook extensive fieldwork on Dyirbal, Yidiñ, and other Australian languages, on the Boumaa dialect of Fijian in the South Seas, and on the Jarawara language in the Amazonian jungle of Brazil, publishing a number of substantial grammars of these languages. Hearing about these endeavours, people invariably exclaim: 'But they weren't written languages, were they?' The clear implication is that, if they had no writing system in traditional times, then they weren't proper languages at all. This is simply a delusion, and unfortunately a most common one.

As already mentioned, *Homo sapiens* has been around for at least 100,000 years, maybe much longer. Language would have started out in a primitive way but it is likely to have rapidly burgeoned and—within just a few millennia—achieved a sophistication comparable to the languages of today. Yet the first writing systems, in both west and east, were only developed about five thousand years ago. For the great majority of their history, languages were just spoken. Writing is a sort-of optional extra: extremely useful in some ways, but detrimental in others. Writing is not at all necessary for the construction of a scientific argument, or for the creation of great literature.

Amongst the most revered epics in the world are Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*. These were composed orally, before the introduction of writing into Greece. Indeed, Homer's own designation for a poet was *aoidos* 'singer'. The two long poems were handed down, by word of mouth, through generation after generation, until, with the advent of writing, they were put down on parchment.

Aboriginal people of northern Australia performed lengthy 'song cycles', describing the travels, experiences, and actions of ancestral beings; these would take several days to complete. The full repertoire was taught at initiation, being handed down orally though aeons of time.

Alphabets have only been invented a handful of times. The most pervasive one started in the Middle East, a little less than two thousand years BCE, to be used for Semitic languages. This was then adapted in one direction for Greek, and in another for Arabic, and in yet another for Indian languages. The Cyrillic alphabet, used for some Slavic languages, was a development from the Greek, and so was the Roman alphabet, used for

Latin. Most modern European languages employ variants of the Roman alphabet.

As European missionaries spread out over other continents, they saw it as their responsibility to devise a writing system (invariably involving letters of the Roman alphabet) and to teach people to read—in order to be able to appreciate a translation of the Bible into their language—and also to write. Was this necessarily a good thing? As Albert Schweitzer, himself a missionary, put it: 'we proceed as if not agriculture and handcraft, but reading and writing, were the beginnings of civilisation'.

In non-literate societies, people have prodigious memories, being able to recall at will histories and laws, legends and song cycles, ways of making implements and for preparing all manner of foodstuffs. Then writing came along and natural laziness took over. 'It's all there in a book, we can look it up if we need to, don't bother your mind with all that detail!' Plato quoted Socrates as saying 'if men learn this [writing], it will produce forgetfulness in their minds; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks.'

G. L. Kittredge, a professor of English, wrote: 'the ability of oral tradition to transmit great masses of verse for hundreds of years is proved and admitted . . . To this oral literature . . . education is no friend . . . When a nation begins to read . . . what was once the possession of the folk as a whole, becomes the heritage of the literate only, and soon, unless it is gathered up by the antiquary, vanishes altogether.' And W. G. Archer maintained, in 1943: 'if we have to single out the factor which caused the decline of English village life, we should have to say it was literacy'.

There are many pluses and also a number of significant minuses to the adoption of writing. Note that in societies with writing, the great majority of language use is oral. One thing which is perfectly certain is that the relative worth of a language does not relate to whether it has been provided with an alphabet. Indeed, we shall see in section 2.5 how writing can impede what would be desirable change in a language.

It is interesting to note that some of the most complex grammatical systems which have been described belong to languages with no written tradition. This brings up the question as to whether a grammar which is more complex than another is to be considered better, something which will be considered in chapter 6.

1.5   The science of linguistics

Linguistics can be regarded as the general science of language, parallel to mathematics as the general science of number. Pure mathematics provides a central store-house of results and methods that are drawn on by more empirical disciplines such as quantum mechanics, psephology, bridge-building, power generation, aircraft design, and much more. In similar fashion, linguistics presents a theoretical account of the nature of human language. This can be drawn on, as required, by people engaged in language teaching, translation, dictionary making, the study of literary style, cultural anthropology, philosophy, and psychology, to name but a few.

Language is a classic instance of one part only having significance with respect to the whole. Linguistics aims at providing a theoretical body of structures and systems, dealing with the whole phenomenon of language, each part interwoven with the rest. The other disciplines which relate to language may then

draw on this central store-house as they wish, and will all be working in terms of the same consistent and all-embracing linguistic theory.

There are a number of possible approaches to the study of language. That which is followed here treats linguistics as a natural science, on a par with geology, biology, physics, and chemistry. The methodology is basically inductive. Detailed descriptions of the structures of individual languages are constructed, in terms of an evolved theoretical framework. The theory sets forth a number of parameters which are employed, as appropriate, in working out the grammar of a language. A particular language may reveal some new variation on an established parameter, which leads to refinement of the theory. Each grammar is cast in terms of the theory, and the theory itself is the cumulation of grammatical patterns uncovered in those languages which have thus far been thoroughly described.

All this can be demonstrated with an example. Negation is a universal feature of language. That is, each sentence is expected to make a choice between being negative (shown by *not/n't* in English, as in *John hasn't died*) and being positive (shown by zero marking in English, as in *John has died*). Suppose that a new tribe is contacted, and a bright young linguist, Emma Jilbay, analyses the structure of its language. She finds that every statement must have one of three suffixes attached to its first word. These are *-la*, which marks a positive statement, *-na* which marks a negative one, and *-dit*, indicating that it is unknown whether or not the statement is true. Thus, with noun *Jani* 'John' and verb *kapu* 'has died', we get:

Jani-la kapu   'John has died'
Jani-na kapu   'John hasn't died'
Jani-dit kapu   'It is unclear whether John has died'

Suffixes *-la*, *-na*, and *-dit* form a grammatical system; one—and only one—term must be selected from the system for every statement. (One can't say just **Jani kapu.*) Emma Jilbay's work shows that a grammatical system dealing with negation does not always have two terms: 'yes' and 'no'. There can be three terms: 'yes', 'no', and an uncommitted 'don't know'. The general theory is thereby refined.

Linguistics is generally reckoned to be the second oldest science (after astronomy); its beginnings were in India, before 500 BCE, with Pāṇini's magisterial grammar of Sanskrit. Like every other science, it has four fundamental tasks: description, explanation, prediction, and evaluation. We can briefly comment on these.

(a) Description. For each language, there should be a full grammar, detailing every grammatical structure, every prefix and suffix, their meanings, and their possible combinations. Each sentence in the language should be providable with a grammatical analysis. And, by applying the rules of the grammar in an appropriate manner, new sentences—which are judged as acceptable by native speakers—can be generated.

The second component is a full lexicon (or vocabulary). Every word is provided with a statement of its grammatical status (for example, 'intransitive verb'), its central meaning, and metaphorical extensions of meaning. It is carefully distinguished from semi-synonyms and contrasted with antonyms, all this being illustrated with well-chosen examples. There is also consideration of the cultural context in which a word is typically used, and its pragmatic import.

For a little-known language, there is a third component to the description: a collection of texts. These cover a variety of

speakers, spanning all age-groups and both sexes. Also a range of genres—spontaneous conversations, declarations, speeches, instructions concerning fabrication and food preparation, and stories. The latter might include legends, fables, histories, accounts of current events, and autobiographies.

(b) Explanation. A linguist asks why something is the way it is, especially if it seems unusual or regular. The explanation can come from within a language, or from outside it.

An explanation from within is found in German. Each noun belongs to one of three genders, shown by the form of a definite article which accompanies it: *der* for masculine, *die* for feminine, and *das* for neuter. Nouns referring to male humans take *der* and most of those referring to females take *die*; for example:

der Mann 'the man'   die Frau   'the woman'
der Junge 'the boy'   die Witwe 'the widow'

However, the word for 'girl' takes the neuter article, *das Mädchen*. Why should this be?

The answer is found by examining a process of word formation. Many nouns may take the diminutive suffix *-chen*, and a word so created always takes the neuter article. For example, the word for 'duck' is feminine but its diminutive is neuter:

die Ente   'the duck'   das Entchen   'the duckling'

Mädchen 'girl' is a diminutive, based on an old noun which is no longer in active use. Thus, like all diminutives, it is classified as neuter.

An example of cultural explanation for what appears to be a grammatical oddity comes from Dyirbal, spoken in north-east Queensland. There are here four genders, marked—as in German—by an accompanying article: human males take *bayi*, human females take *balan*, edible fruit and vegetables take *balam*, and there is also a neuter gender, marked by *bala*, which is used for most non-animates (such as 'wind' and 'stone' and 'noise'). What at first seems odd is that 'sun' is feminine, *balan garri*, while 'moon' is masculine, *bayi gagara*. The explanation lies in the belief system of Dyirbal speakers—in legend, the sun is a woman and the moon her husband. The two nouns are thus allocated to genders on the basis of this characterisation.

(c) Prediction. This can involve saying that if a language has a certain property then there is a high chance of it having a certain other property. Or we can say that if a language has a particular make-up then it is, over time, likely to change in a specific way.

Some languages have a large open class of adjectives, with hundreds of members. In contrast there are a fair number of languages, scattered across the world, which have a small set of adjectives; these cover a common set of meanings. If Emma Jilbay reports that in her language of study there are just ten words which have special grammatical properties enabling her to recognise them as a small class of adjectives, then we can predict that these are likely to relate to dimension ('big' and 'little', 'long' and 'short'), age ('new' and 'old'), value ('good' and 'bad'), and colour ('black', 'white' and perhaps 'red'). We know that such a small adjective class is very unlikely to include any forms referring to what have been called human propensities, such as 'rude', 'jealous', and 'clever'. Such concepts will, in such a language, be

rendered by either a noun (for example, 'she has cleverness') or a verb (literally 'she clevers', meaning 'she is clever').

Sciences such as geology and chemistry deal with matter, and are enabled to make exact statements. Linguistics is concerned with social events, the behaviour of humans, and, as a consequence deals in terms of compelling tendencies, and with correlations which are strong but not unconditional. We are unlikely to be able to predict the *exact* composition of Emma Jilbay's small adjective class, but we can confidently indicate the sorts of meanings which will be there.

Some categories in a grammar are independent of each other, others may show a dependence. Consider number and gender in 3rd person pronouns. In some languages (such as Hungarian) the sex of a person referred to is not shown; there is just one 3rd singular and one 3rd plural pronoun. Then there are languages with masculine and feminine forms for both 3rd singular and 3rd plural; for example, Rumanian and Modern Greek. And a considerable number of languages have a gender distinction for *just one* of the terms in the number system {singular, plural}. In such a case, gender is *always* shown in the singular, *not* in the plural, as in Russian: singular *on* 'he', *ona* 'she', and *ono* 'it', but just *oni* 'they' in the plural.

'Singular' is what is called the 'unmarked term' in a number system. If some other parameter varies with respect to number, the theory predicts that there will be more choices in singular and fewer choices in non-singular. If, for instance, the system of case affixes (showing what is subject, object, and so on) has varying size depending on number, the prediction is that there will be most distinctions in the singular.

Once a language has been fully described, with a detailed understanding of how its components interrelate, it can be

possible to predict how the structural profile is likely to change, with internal connections shifting. In English the verb shows tense, as in *live-d*. There are a number of phrasal verbs, consisting of simple verb plus preposition; for example, *live off* and *take after*. The meaning of a phrasal verb cannot be inferred from the meanings of its components; each phrasal verb has to be accorded a separate dictionary entry (see section 7.5). In the present stage of the language, tense goes on the simple verb component of a phrasal verb: *he live-d off his mother*, *she take-s after her father*. We can predict, as a likely change, that the phrasal verb will come to be treated as a single item, with tense added to the end of it: *he live-off-ed his mother*, *she take-after-s her father*.

(d) Evaluation. A metal is needed for use within a new manu-facturing process. Which would be most suitable? Following a study of relative conductivity, malleability, and durability, a decision is made concerning the best metal for the purpose. What would be the best sort of stone for re-facing a crumbling cathedral? After careful assessment, a choice is made. It is also an accepted procedure to compare the value of different economic or political systems.

Comparing two things and assessing their worth is a natural practice in most disciplines, but it is something which has by-and-large been shunned in linguistics. If linguistics is to be recognised as a science, which is my contention, it has to seriously engage in evaluation.

Just recently there has been healthy debate about the relative complexity of languages. It is accepted that one language can be more complex than another in a particular area of grammar. For instance, Dyirbal has a more complex system of genders, with four terms, than German, with three, and this is in turn more complex

than the set of just two genders in French. The question is whether one can expand on this and, by comparing complexity across every area of grammar between two languages, decide that one is overall more complex than the other? This is not an easy matter. Some would argue that complexity within a pronoun system should be weighted more highly than complexity of types of comparative constructions. Others might maintain the opposite viewpoint.

This is not an endeavour which will concern us here, except tangentially, as we focus on the quite different question of whether one language can be considered better than another with respect to fulfilling the functions outlined in section 1.1. (Peeping ahead, we shall conclude, in chapter 6, that being more complex is not necessarily being better.)

The science of linguistics expounded here must be distinguished from other approaches to the study of language, such as the 'formal theories', espoused in particular by Noam Chomsky and his followers. The 'formalists' do not undertake comprehensive, theoretically-informed descriptions of languages, then generalising inductively on the basis of these. In place of this, hypotheses are put forward concerning aspects of language, with confirmation sought by examining restricted portions of languages. Formal theories come and go, each aiming to eclipse its predecessors and current competitors. In contrast, the linguistics described in this book works with a single cumulative theory, in the way that other sciences such as chemistry and geology do.

1.6   History of 'evaluations'

It is the norm for any people to consider their ethnic group, lifestyle, and language to be optimal, with all others regarded as

deficient. After a visit to Paris in 1778, Dr Samuel Johnson remarked: 'What I gained by being in France was learning to be better satisfied with my own country.' The tribe I lived amongst in the Amazon jungle is called Jarawara by neighbours, but their term for themselves is 'Ee jokana', literally 'We, the real people'. All else is unreal.

There are two sides to any society, the material and the social. What is typically compared is the most visible: material objects such as tools and implements, weapons (whether spears or guns), means of transportation, machines, sophistication of dwellings, and the like. On this parameter, Europeans rank high and indigenous Australians extremely low.

A social system is implicit, and has to be lived in to be fully appreciated. Each Australian tribe had a scheme of kinship organisation, whereby each person in the community was 'related' to every other person through a complex array of algorithms. The scheme determined all social roles: who one might marry, who would be responsible for arranging a boy's initiation, or an old person's funeral, and so on. The workings of this society were thus perfectly regulated. As a minute example of the complexity involved, a Dyirbal man might only marry someone who was his father's elder sister's child's daughter, or his mother's elder brother's child's daughter, or his mother's mother's younger brother's daughter, or his mother's father's younger sister's daughter, and so on through further applications of the algorithms. On this parameter, indigenous Australians rank high and Europeans rather low.

Language is a social phenomenon. It is thus natural that intricacy of grammatical system should correlate *not* with degree of material development, but instead with sophistication of social system. It has been found that the languages with the most

demanding grammars are among those spoken by small tribal groups which are high in social but low in material elaboration. Indeed, linguistic parameters tend to reflect social ones.

We can now outline three stages in assessing the worth of languages.

Stage 1, Racist evaluation. When Europeans used their ships to traverse the world, and their guns to conquer substantial territories, they came into contact with many ethnic groups. These were inferior—to varying degrees—in material culture. On this basis they were judged to be inferior people, and their languages were assumed—without evidence—to be primitive things, with just a few hundred words and at best a smattering of grammar.

The intruders, with their blinkered view, only perceived what was on the surface. In fact, these ethnic groups typically had more finely-tuned social systems than those of the invaders, and languages which were certainly as rich, often richer. It is surely significant that Europeans typically experienced considerable difficulty in mastering the local languages, whereas the conquered people soon exhibited an easy fluency in English, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, or whatever.

Stage 2, Redress. So pervasive was this racist evaluation that, if one was to teach the elements of linguistics, it had to be countered at once. The first pages of textbooks and the first lectures of freshman courses emphasised, as loud as was possible, that 'no language spoken in the world today is primitive' and then 'that all languages are about equal in complexity'.

Stage 3, Scientific evaluation. I suggest that, linguists having now devoted about a hundred years to redress of the racist idea, it is