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REVIEW


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The dust jacket tells us that this book is ‘the essential guide to the languages of the world, comprehensively dealing with more than 400 languages in a clear A-Z style’ and covers ‘the political, social and historical background of each language ... highlighted by maps and charts of scripts, while proverbs, anecdotes and quotations reveal the features that make a language unique.’ From this description it is clear that the work is aimed at the general reader rather than at specialists, and once that is understood, the book can be highly recommended for those for whom, for example, The World’s Major Languages (ed. by Bernard Comrie, New York: Oxford U. Press, 1987) is too technical, or who simply want to find general background information on a particular language or group of languages. Linguists seeking information on the phonological, morphological, or syntactic structure of a language will not find it here, but it is nevertheless an excellent reference work for the enlightened layman, and the kind of book that can entice younger readers to delve deeper into the study of languages and linguistics, and through them into the broader study of cultures.

While the arrangement of the main body is alphabetical according to the name(s) of each language, there are also treatments of language families with cross-references to the individual members considered in the book. The many maps are useful for purposes of orientation, although I find the world maps (presented in a kind of conformal projection) too rough to be completely helpful. An Introduction (vii - xvi) presents the scope of the languages treated (400 out of more than 5,000 spoken today) and the reasons for the selection: the languages ‘spoken by the great majority of the people of the world ... national languages of independent countries, languages of important minorities that will make news, classical languages of the past’ (vii), and languages of more than a million speakers. There is also discussion of ‘Why languages grow apart’, ‘Why languages converge’, ‘Tracing language history’, ‘What do proto-languages mean in historical terms?’, ‘How to use languages’, ‘The names of languages’, ‘Facts, real facts and statistics’, ‘Language families of the world’, ‘Questions and answers’, and ‘The survival of ancient languages’. Most of the observations and remarks in this section are eminently sensible and defensible and should be enlightening, especially to nonspecialists.
Each language is presented with an indication of the number of native speakers, the countries in which it is spoken, and a broad sketch of the dialect divisions, the political, social, and cultural significance of the language for its particular region or broader areas, and a thumbnail sketch of the history of the language, with frequent cross-references to related languages and dialects. A superficial impression of the structure of each language is presented through the quotation of a short literary text or of the first ten numerals in the language with accompanying translation and a reproduction of the script (if the latter varies from the Latin alphabet).

This is, of course, a massive undertaking and the volume contains a wealth of information in convenient and readily comprehensible form difficult to find in any one other source. It also lies in the nature of the beast that specialists will, of course, find minor infidelities here and there.

I hesitate to mention any at all, but cannot refrain from pointing out the fact that German (218) is spoken not only in ‘Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Russia, Kazakhstan, Romania, United States’, but also in France (Alsacia), as well as in Denmark (North Slesvig, Sønderjylland), where it enjoys official status in schools and churches, as does Danish (146) in Germany (northern Schleswig-Holstein). From the statement under Norwegian (459): ‘Norway separated from Denmark in 1814’, one could well get the impression that this was an act of the Norwegians to dissolve the 400-year old union with Denmark, whereas Norway was taken from the united Kingdom of Denmark-Norway and united with Sweden in 1814 by the Treaty of Vienna without the consent of the Norwegians, who then immediately demanded a high degree of autonomy and eventually complete independence in 1907. In the depiction of the older (or Germanic) runic alphabet (472), the rune for i is incorrectly given as ᚪ instead of ᛁ.

One problem I encountered in trying to use this dictionary is perhaps an insoluble one: how to deal with languages that have varying names, in this case Ekegusii. The dictionary does indeed list variant names for many languages, but I could not find Ekegusii as an independent listing nor in the index, nor in the list of Bantu languages, all of which is surprising, since this language has approximately 1,500,000 speakers. Of course, if one knows that Bantu language-names have a prefix in their native forms, like kiSwahili, it becomes apparent that one might try Gusii (under which the language is listed), but this is asking too much of an enlightened layman and even a great deal of a non-African specialist. It would therefore have been very helpful if the index had contained cross-references to the native form(s) of each language-name.

I have found it fascinating to browse through this dictionary (like any other dictionary!) and have learned a great deal from doing so. I recommend it very highly for all high-school, undergraduate, and public libraries, and to all persons who find language an object of fascination, even those who may be specialists in some area of linguistics. There is much here that any reader will not know.