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Amazonia is one of those words that immediately conjures up exciting and exotic peoples with elaborate feathered headdresses and intricately painted bodies, peoples whose deep histories are barely known to us and whose ontologies defy classification into Western paradigms. The approximately 350 languages of Amazonia are equally exotic and have been subjected to increasingly intense scholarly study over the past twenty-five years. Including the roughly thirty-three languages that elude classification, thus constituting their own language family, approximately fifty genetic units are recognized in Amazonia, of which about fifteen form larger genetic units.

The Languages of the Amazon sets out to provide an accessible resource on the linguistic heritage of Amazonia for students of linguistics, anthropology, and Latin American studies, as well as interested general readers. Aikhenvald defines her area as “Greater Amazonia,” covering an expanse of almost seven million square kilometers, from the Amazon Basin up and into the Orinoco Basin. She points out that several features of the Amazonian languages extend beyond this area into what she terms the Circum-Amazonian region, which includes, for example, the Chibchan sphere in the Intermediate Area, and the Circum-Caribbean. In the preamble, Aikhenvald correctly states that this book is not an exhaustive tool for the study of this immensely diverse area, yet one cannot help but be grateful that she undertook the mammoth task of providing a well-organized, informed, and informative reference book to complement her earlier book, The Amazonian Languages, co-edited in 1999 with R.M.W. Dixon.

The Languages of the Amazon presents new insights and information gleaned from the most recent publications and the plethora of descriptive linguistic studies carried out in Amazonia over the last two decades. It gives an excellent overview of the very special linguistic features and quirks that are endemic to the area and that exhibit varying degrees of complexity, such as the ubiquitous nominal tense marking for past and future (“A former house and a wife-to-be,” p. 158), frustrating “in vain” marking, and systems of evidentiality, whereby speakers are required to specify their source of information when making a statement about a state of affairs.

The book contains fourteen chapters of varying lengths, several tables and diagrams, eighteen maps, a glossary of terms used, and three indexes that allow for detailed searches of particular subjects, languages and language families, and authors, as well as a 46-page bibliography. Six of the chapters have boxed...
insets with extra factual information and/or anecdotes aimed at livening up the book, and several chapters have sections with further sources to consult on general historical or ethnographic topics. Chapter 1 provides general information on Amazonia’s language families and peoples and their histories pre- and post-conquest. Chapter 2 focuses on language contact and linguistic areas. The rest of the chapters deal with various linguistically salient features: the sound systems; word structure; nouns; verbs; grammatical relations; valency-changing strategies; evidentiality; genders and classifiers; serial verb constructions; sentence formation; stylistic features of Amazonian languages (including numeral systems, speech styles, male and female speech, and mixed languages such as Island Carib); and finally, a succinct summary of the book called the “treasures of Amazonian languages.” Although Aikhenvald intends this final chapter as a revelation of what still remains to be investigated, it is rather more a state-of-the-art summary, without specific topics being earmarked as those requiring further study. However, given that almost every feature dealt with in the book could be the topic of a more detailed analysis, this is merely an oversight and does not take away from the general usefulness of the book. Moreover, Aikhenvald has published several in-depth monographs or edited books on the various topics presented in this volume. It is to her credit that she was able to press this vast amount of information into such a neat format.

For all the major positive attributes that this book has, the first half of Chapter 1, which provides an historical overview and some information on the social structures of Amazonian groups, is clearly the weakest part of the book, containing a few factual errors and/or omissions and several inconsistencies in the spellings of names of languages and countries. For example, the language Aikhenvald refers to throughout as Carib, which in more modern works is referred to as Kari’na, a name the people themselves prefer to use, is given as Karina (p. 33), Karinya and Kariña (p. 63) and Cariña (p. 118). A discussion of language and language family names points out that where a specific language name is also used to refer to the family, most linguists use the -an suffix to distinguish the two, giving as an example Tucano versus Tucanoan. More the pity that she did not apply this to the Cariban family so that we could avoid ambiguous and/or rather incorrect phrases such as “the Carib-speaking Makushi.” The factual errors or oversights reflect Aikhenvald’s lesser familiarity with the northern Amazonian area, specifically the Guianan and Circum-Caribbean areas. Many sweeping statements such as “All Amazonian groups are patrilineal. ... Most are virilocal” do not apply further north where several Cariban groups still practice mainly uxorilocality. Likewise, it is misleading to say, “Across Amazonia, a firearm is called mukawa, a loan from Nhêengatú, or Língua Geral” (p. 18). Across the Guianas (with the exception of Wapishana, which indeed refers to
a firearm by a term cognate with *mukawa*, namely *mokao*), a firearm is referred to as *arakabusa*, an early Spanish loan. As shown in Nordenskiöld (1922:95–105), no group south of the Amazon uses an *arakabusa* cognate, but the area where *arakabusa* is used is an “unbroken” area practically from the mouth of the Amazon to the east bank of the Orinoco. These criticisms may seem minor, but the implications are less so. Should we be rethinking the usefulness of taking Greater Amazonia as a unit? And should we be giving more consideration to the natural grouping of northern Amazonian peoples whose linguistic and cultural histories differ sufficiently to warrant closer attention than they have received in this book?

These criticisms, however, do not take away from the fact that *The Languages of the Amazon* will provide a valuable resource for linguists and anthropologists alike for many years to come.

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Reference