Book Reviews


In the last three years two great figures of South American linguistics have been honored with collections of papers: Willem Adelaar with the volume Linguistics and Archaeology in the Americas (henceforth LAA), edited by Eithne Carlin and Simon van de Kerke; and Rodolfo Cerrón-Palomino with the volume Estudios sobre lenguas andinas y amazónicas (henceforth Estudios), edited by Willem Adelaar, Pilar Valenzuela and Roberto Zariquiey. The honorees of both collections are well known for their work in Andean linguistics, most especially on Quechua, and a glance at their bibliographies shows what close contemporaries they are: Adelaar’s first book publication is Tarma Quechua, Grammar, Texts, Dictionary (1977) and Cerrón-Palomino’s are Diccionario quechua: Junín-Huanca and Gramática quechua: Junín-Huanca (both 1976). Shortly after receiving a review copy of LAA, I also received a copy of Estudios, and with such close parallels between the volumes there was no question that they should be reviewed side-by-side. In my review I discuss each of the volumes in turn, and then offer a brief discussion of selected themes by way of conclusion.

LAA is the second volume in Brill’s new series “Studies in the Indigenous Languages of the Americas.” It is presented in the preface as being in honor of Adelaar, although this information does not appear in the title of the book. The contributors are well-known Americanists across a range of disciplines and the chapters are eclectic and wide-ranging in their subject matter, reflecting Adelaar’s diverse interests. The editors have managed to wrestle the contributions into some kind of thematic unity: the responses of indigenous American societies to the enormous changes they have undergone in the last 500 years or so. This theme is described in the preface as “the dynamicity and historicity of the Americas... Above all, the flexibility of the inhabitants to adapt to their changing situations” (p. vii), and they relate it directly to Adelaar’s wide-ranging scholar-
Those of us who do not have such a breadth and depth of knowledge may be tempted to dip into different chapters here and there (for example, as an Amazonianist, I found the chapters dedicated to Meso-American epigraphy a little inaccessible, although the wealth of graphic data certainly helped). LAA begins with a dedicatory preface and a bibliography of Adelaar’s works; then the 14 contributions are arranged in four parts. I discuss each in turn below.

Part I, *Historical comparative linguistics of South America*, consists of two chapters. In “Linguistic reconstruction of elements of prehistoric Tupi culture,” Aryon Dall'Igna Rodrigues presents a list of reconstructed lexical items which, he argues, point to a sedentary agricultural lifestyle among speakers of the proto-language around 5,000 years ago. The bulk of this paper consists of the list of reconstructions, making it a useful resource for the specialist but not so readable for a general audience. The very first paragraph of this chapter already shows how useful a map would have been, as it describes the extent and expansion of the Tupi people, making reference to various watercourses over a large geographic area.

“Problems of distinguishing nominal compounding from syntactic and noun categorization devices in Tupi-Guarani languages,” by Wolf Dietrich, describes the difficulties encountered in trying to distinguish lexicalized compounds from noun phrases built by productive syntactic processes, in the absence of clear phonological criteria. The discussion is detailed and thorough, although it appears somewhat inconclusive, as the titular problems are not ultimately resolved.

Part II, *Archaeology and linguistics of Meso-America and the Caribbean*, consists of four chapters. The first is “Preposed phonetic complements in Maya hieroglyphic writing” by Nikolai Grube. This chapter describes the use of phonetic complements to the logographic characters and shows that the motivation for their development is obscure, in contrast to other comparable writing systems, where avoidance of ambiguity can be adduced as a motivating factor.

“Mixtec cultural vocabulary and pictorial writing,” by Maarten E.R.G.N. Jansen and Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez, takes a dynamic approach to the discussion of a pre-Columbian tradition of illuminated manuscripts, linking them to present-day cultural practices among the Ñuu Dzaui or Mixtec people. This chapter is long (at 38 pages the longest in the volume) and wide-ranging, giving it a somewhat disjointed feel, but the depth of discussion and the authors’ obvious passion for the material make it a rewarding read.

“Unspecified arguments, predicates and events in Nahuatl,” by Michel Launey, is a rather elaborate investigation of the marking of unspecified arguments in Nahuatl, moving on to an exposition of the omnipredicative nature of the language and concluding with the absence of an interrogative verb. Similarly to the preceding chapter, its rather disjointed structure is compensated for by a very satisfying depth of analysis.