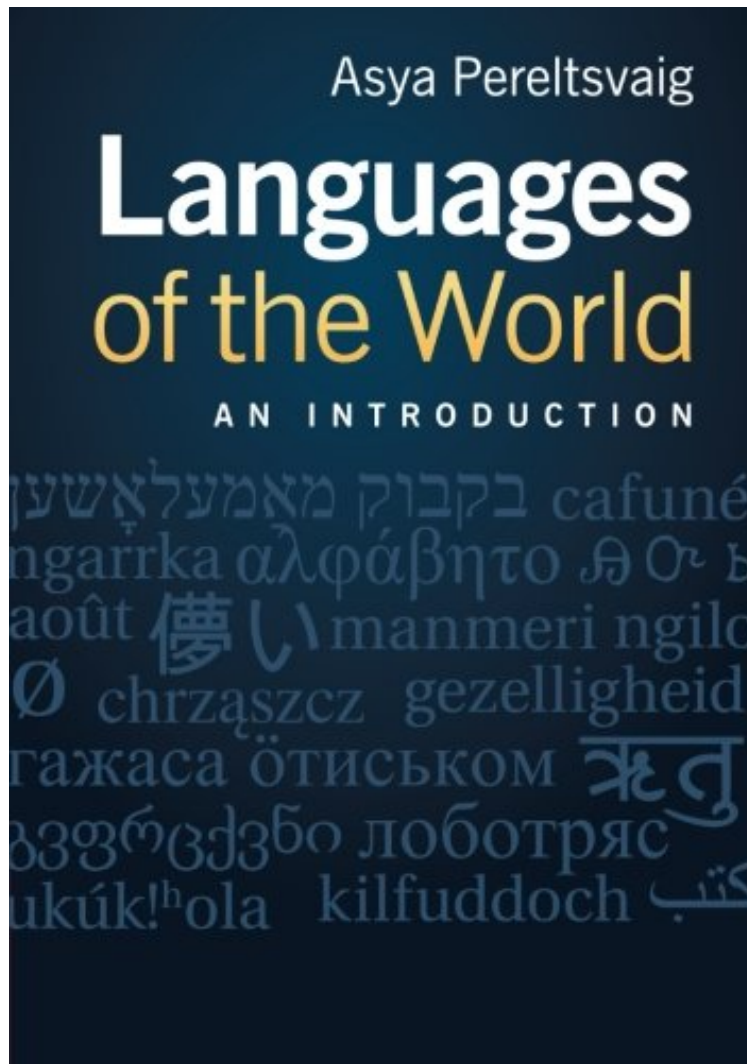


Languages of the World: An Introduction

Asya Pereltsvaig

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Asya Pereltsvaig : Languages of the World: An Introduction before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Languages of the World: An Introduction:

12 of 12 people found the following review helpful. For the Beginner? By John Cardenas This book offers a broad overview of the major language families of the world and salient characteristics of them. It discusses historical aspects of establishing language families and even introduces a bit of Chomskyan parametric theory. The author introduces subtopics such as pidgins and creoles, language isolates, and language contact in focused sections at the end of each chapter. The author is selective as she should be in a book of this length (a mere 278 pages--short for an introductory linguistics textbook) and scope. She does not aim to be exhaustive but illustrative. She offers both breadth and depth and one does not feel shortchanged in either dept (no small feat). My only caveat is the audience for whom this book

was intended. I originally purchased the book to consider it for a freshman-level introduction to world languages class. My sense is that the linguistic concepts and terminology will be daunting for the layperson and the instructor will have to do a fair amount of remediation in that regard. Unless they have studied foreign languages, today's students don't know much of grammatical concepts as fundamental as direct vs. indirect objects, case, verb paradigms, word structure, etc. And they probably know nothing of the mechanics of sound production. I fear this will all be too much for them. This leads to another point: the book's almost exclusive focus on grammatical language differences--sounds, morphology, syntax. There is no discussion of how cultural concepts (kinship terminology, color, gender, time) may be embedded in language. My guess is that students new to this subject would be as interested or perhaps even more interested in anthropological issues related to language variation as much as the grammatical. All in all, a good book to have on my shelves but one that seems to presume a foundation of basic knowledge that many new to the subject may lack.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. A wealth of information well illustrated. By Monty Vierra I've given this book four stars for its clever cover, the breadth of information, and for the many fine illustrations--maps, tables, and figures galore. There's also a useful glossary of key terms given in the text as small capital letters, as well as the normal scholarly support: references and indexes. Unless you have to buy this book for a class, though, I recommend reading it a chapter or two at a time. There's a lot to absorb. It's the world, after all! I stopped short of giving it five stars because a book is a product of an author and a publisher, and in some matters I think the publisher has been a little careless. In light of the lavish illustrations, which require a great deal of care, this may seem an odd remark to make, but bear with me. First, although there's a great deal to admire in the breadth of this author's approach, there are some shortcomings that limit its usefulness, even in the classroom. For example, as a teacher-reviewer noted here, this book requires a good deal of support in the introductory classroom for those unfamiliar with foreign languages or even their own language. Consider something seemingly so simple as pronunciation, discussed on page 20. It would have been really helpful to include a simple diagram of the mouth, for example, to help readers identify points of articulation, and so on. Another missed opportunity was to use the "supporting website" to direct readers' attention to the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). Perhaps that's where a diagram could have been provided. For either of these points to have worked, the text should have included signposting. Speaking of the website, I have so far found no mention anywhere in the text of that website, which is advertised on the back cover. The only mention of any website is just the Cambridge website for the book on the copyright page and the back cover by what looks like a stylized mouse. From that website, you have to go to the author's website. And that was a bit of a disappointment, not because there isn't a lot there--there is--but it's not even casually keyed to the book. What a missed opportunity. I wonder if the editors were asleep at their desks on that one. Speaking of editorial neglect, there are a number of words missing, more than the usual share. A good "grammar" software would have spotlighted them. For example, there's "speakers [of] Indo-European languages" (page 25). Perhaps, too, a good grammar checker could have caught spurious collocations, like "credited for" on page 22. According to the Cambridge Dictionary Online (CDO), the expression doesn't exist. I would have used "credited with," which the CDO lists as an American expression. Other awkward expressions crop up here and there, as when the author says that the Indo-Iranian subfamily, "which too splits into two branches" (32). Language requires an ear, and "too" plus "two" doesn't equal euphony here. Alas, software won't tip you off to use "also" in this case. (The emphatic use of "too" is often preceded by "he/she/it" rather than "which".) [See page 176 for examples of "too" placement.]

Second, I think editors have a responsibility to consider the tone that an author imparts with even the smallest linguistic gesture. Take exclamation points. She really is fond of them. When everything! has to be exclaimed!, it tends to reduce! the effect of something! really worth noting! Also, because some Khoisan and other languages use the exclamation point to represent clicks, one wonders if that's what the author is doing with this exclamatory overkill. When we're writing, we often write sections at a time and then cannot see all the petty repetitions we're making that cause our writing to be tedious. This is what editors are supposed to look out for. What else did they miss? When the jacket says there are "test yourself" questions "throughout the book," someone ought to have asked what that should entail and make a checklist. I only found six questions in four chapters that were clearly aimed as advertised and accompanied by an answer. Otherwise, all other questions were/are rhetorical or general, at least in my reading. Four out of 12 chapters doesn't fit my definition of "throughout," either. One reviewer, if I recall correctly, lamented the lack of a discussion of Korean and Japanese, but in fact these are well covered in the discussion of the Altaic languages. The index is loaded with page references to both. What is missing from the language index, though, is reference to the Bantu languages. In the other index we find mentions of Sir William Jones, who is quoted at some length on page 16, yet who is not cited in the list of references. It's not an insignificant omission. My own lament has now become a perennial one with every book and article I read about languages like Chinese and Vietnamese being mainly "monosyllabic" under the guise of calling them "isolating." These languages are written syllable by syllable, but it only takes about five minutes of thumbing through an adult's dictionary of either language to see that over half the entries for each language are for two-syllable words. Affixes are not the only bound morphemes. Consider the word for butterfly in Mandarin: "hu2die2". Each syllable by itself can mean "butterfly," but they must be together to form that word. Otherwise, they need to be used with butterfly-related words, not by themselves. In addition, there's something called "tone sandhi," in which the tones change based on the other tones in

the same word or expression. Thus the syllables that authors "isolate" to show tones are misleading both to readers and to themselves. (They're a teaching tool, something akin to having kids sing the ABC song in English.) Furthermore, by saying that Chinese "does not represent the pronunciation of words in the same way as alphabetic systems do" (page 126), the author may be giving readers the wrong impression. For example, readers may not realize that over 90% of Chinese characters have a phonological component, as documented by John De Francis in his book "The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy" (1984; available on) and easily verifiable with a good pinyin dictionary. Also, the "complaint" about earlier Chinese being even more "isolating" seems to miss the point of classical Chinese printing and writing conventions. Read Lao Zi and some sutras in a Buddhist temple. They're meant to be pithy. Think of Tweets or haiku. These are both modern writing forms with strict rules. Why not Classical Chinese? Finally, I have a couple of minor quibbles. The first of these is about the use of italics. These tend to "shrink" the appearance of a text even when the passages are at the same type size. So, a text in 12 point italics ends up looking like 11 pt. When italics are used occasionally, as with language samples, this difference is not great. A whole paragraph, as that on page 16, though, is hard to read in that format. See pages 161, 163 and 164-165, too. These I noted at a quick skim. The second minor point is about notes. Footnotes should remain scholarly and avoid anything off topic. Note 9 on page 156 adds an entirely spurious claim about the Coriolis effect on "bathtub" water. There is none. 11 of 11 people found the following review helpful. All that I was hoping for except...By JavaManA masterful and non-superficial examination of the World's languages. The approach is not solely descriptive, but analytical as well. The book is ideal for students of linguistics as well as amateurs like myself. In a discipline notorious for its impenetrable jargon, the author writes in a clear and non-intimidating manner. Perhaps the book's main virtue is that it serves as an introduction to most of the main concepts in modern linguistics. This is a wonderful and thought-provoking book. The main criticism I have is that the book is uneven in coverage - some languages receive virtually no coverage (ie. Korean or Japanese) whereas some are dealt with at length (ie. some of the languages of the Caucasus). I assume that this is to fully describe some unusual or illustrative feature of a language, but the author does not make it clear what the criteria are in the selection process. I read the Kindle edition of the book and I must observe that the maps and numerous tables do not render well on the Kindle reader. I was fortunate in having the Kindle app on my iPad as well which allowed me to read these items. But as the tables are a key part of the book, I can't recommend the Kindle version.

What do all human languages have in common and in what ways are they different? How can language be used to trace different peoples and their past? Are certain languages similar because of common descent or language contact? Assuming no prior knowledge of linguistics, this textbook introduces readers to the rich diversity of human languages, familiarizing students with the variety and typology of languages around the world. Linguistic terms and concepts are explained, in the text and in the glossary, and illustrated with simple, accessible examples. Eighteen language maps and numerous language family charts enable students to place a language geographically or genealogically. A supporting website includes additional language maps and sound recordings that can be used to illustrate the peculiarities of the sound systems of various languages. "Test yourself" questions throughout the book make it easier for students to analyze data from unfamiliar languages.

Advance praise: "This comprehensive and highly-informative book offers a plethora of intriguing, richly-documented facts. Written in an easy style, it is a great read for both beginning and advanced-level students and laypersons." -- Edith Moravcsik, Professor Emerita of Linguistics, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee "A lively and engaging introduction to the richness and diversity of the world's languages." --Greville G. Corbett, University of Surrey About the Author Asya Pereltsvaig is a lecturer in the Department of Linguistics at Stanford University.