
Reviewed by Paul Newman

To quote the King of Siam, this book "is a puzzlement". Why should two respected scholars spend years to produce a work which, if it is not ignored, is guaranteed to be the object of derision and ridicule? And yet that is just what Michael Mann and David Dalby have done. They have prepared a reference work that is so faulty in design it makes an Edsel look like a Mercedes. Before I go on to explain what's wrong with the Thesaurus, let me briefly describe what the work consists of.

1. The main part of the work, pp. 11-175, is a comprehensive inventory of the languages of Africa listed according to a classificatory scheme designed by Dalby (1977). Information is provided on each language's dialects, its alternative names, and its geographical location. The location is described broadly in terms of the country or countries where the language is spoken and more specifically with reference to a separate work, the *Language Map of Africa* (Dalby 1977). Bibliographic sources are carefully provided regarding the classification of each language, but, understandably (though regrettably), no attempt is made to indicate the standard reference grammar or descriptive sketch for individual languages.

The next section (pp. 176-205) presents a listing of languages by political states. For the larger languages, information is given on the percentage of people in the country who speak them, both as first and as second languages. No absolute population figures are provided either here or in the inventory. Useful information is also coded on the use of individual languages in education and the mass media and on their official status.

A section then follows on writing African languages (pp. 206-219). (Contrary to the full title of the work as given on the cover and the title page, this section is an integral chapter of the book, not an appendix). The chapter consists primarily of a presentation and explanation of the "African reference alphabet", which has been proposed by UNESCO "experts" as the basis for a practical inter-African orthographic system.
The book ends with a long bibliography (pp. 222–262) followed by an extensive index of language names and variants (pp. 263–325).

2. It should be clear from the description that the Thesaurus contains a wealth of information. Where, then, did it go wrong?

2.1. Classification. The most widely accepted, best-known classification of African languages is that of Greenberg (1963). This is a genetic/historical classification that explicitly aims to capture "true" groupings and subgroupings at varying depths of relationship. As Mann & Dalby correctly point out, such a classification has serious drawbacks for a reference work since it is subject to continual corrections and modifications as one learns more about individual languages and language relationships. Ideally a stable, unchanging classificatory system would be preferable. However, in place of Greenberg's internally consistent phylogenetic classification (which is wrong some of the time), M&D adopt an incoherent "referential" classification (Dalby 1977) that doesn't make any sense any of the time.

The trouble is this: Although M&D claim to eschew genetic classification, they cannot free themselves of its shackles and thus they end up not with a neat referential system (such as the Library of Congress cataloguing system), but with a bad pseudo-genetic classification. Since it is to a great extent genetic—in spite of what they say—it is bound to contain errors and thus require the changes and updating they want to avoid; but since it is not consistently genetic, their classification is at variance with what most other linguists would regard as valid groupings. Thus, instead of providing an alternative to Greenberg's classification that would have an independent value on its own terms, M&D propose an idiosyncratic framework that serves no identifiable purpose. (Fortunately, their classification should do little harm, since it is unlikely that anyone else will take it seriously and adopt it.) To illustrate the unsoundness of their classification, let us look at just a few examples.

M&D classify all of the languages of Africa into ten sets. Their set 0 is coterminous with Afroasiatic, a family (or "phylum") that M&D accept as "well-founded". So far so good, since most linguists, but by no means all—which means that M&D's classification is not immune to challenge as they had hoped—accept Afroasiatic with its Greenbergian membership. But when one looks at the groups they set up with their set 0 (= Afroasiatic), their classification becomes absurd. Chadic, for example, whose linguistic unity is much more certain than the higher level Afroasiatic, doesn't exist in M&D's scheme. Instead, West Chadic, Biu-Mandara, Masa, and East Chadic, branches of Chadic that I, rightly or wrongly, defined on an explicitly historical/genetic basis (Newman
1977) are presented (along with a couple of isolated languages) as independent subsets of Afroasiatic, as distinct from one another as they are from other Afroasiatic subsets such as Semitic or Southern Cushitic (the latter having been separated from "Cushitic" proper). This is comparable to ignoring the existence of a Germanic language family and treating North Germanic (Danish, Swedish, etc.), West Germanic (Frisian, English, etc.), and Romance (Italian, Spanish, etc.) as three equidistant, coordinate sets within Indo-European. One could, of course, do this for "practical" purposes, but it doesn't make any sense.

The question with regard to their set 3, which consists of Mande, Ijo, and Kordofanian, is: What do these languages have in common? The answer is "nothing", except in a way that implicitly acknowledges the central importance of Greenberg's classification in African linguistic scholarship. The only thing that ties these three groups together is the fact that they were all classified by Greenberg as Niger-Kordofanian, but their membership in the phylum or their subgrouping position with the phylum is still not settled. As far as I am aware, no one has ever suggested that these three groups constitute a valid classificatory unit of any sort.

Set 1, which consists of Songhay, Nubian, and the Saharan language group, is similar to set 3. Greenberg placed these three in Nilo-Saharan, by far his most disparate and questionable phylum; but apart from their common membership in the phylum—which some people would argue has not been demonstrated—there is no evidence that they constitute a valid unit coordinate with sets 5 and 7, M&D's other Nilo-Saharan groups.

Whatever objections one might have about the sets above appear as mere quibbles when one looks at set 9, which includes, in addition to Bushman and Hottentot languages, Chinese, Tamil (Dravidian), and Malagasy (Malayo-Polynesian), not to mention Indo-European languages such as English, French, German, Portuguese, Hindi/Urdu, and Marathi! In their attempt to be "practical" (and original), M&D have lost sight of what classification is about, namely, putting like things together. The result is a practice that is so bizarre and pointless it barely qualifies to be called a classification. In the absence of anything more sensible, M&D would have been better off to have given up the pretense of classification altogether and simply to have listed their inventory of languages in alphabetical order.

2.2. Autoglossonyms. M&D adopt a policy of listing each language "by the name used by its speakers" (p. 2). They give no reason for this misguided decision, but just assume that it is the "correct" thing to do. But why? We certainly don't follow this practice with major European or Asian languages. In English, "German" is German, not Deutsch;
“Dutch” is Dutch, not Nederlands; “Swedish” is Swedish, not Svenska, just to mention a few languages closely related to English. So why should the practice necessarily be any different for African languages? The result of M&D’s policy is a supposed reference book strewn with unfamiliar names that no one has ever heard of instead of the normal, long-standard designations. Thus Kpelle is belee woo, Nuer is fog naab, Amharic is amaranu, Gbaya is baya, Kikuyu is gekoyo, etc.

The problem with this approach is twofold. First, this policy runs counter to the expressed aim of the work to provide a “practical frame of reference” (p. 3, emphasis mine). African-language specialists may or may not applaud M&D’s linguistic purism, but anthropologists, historians, reference librarians, and so on, are going to find the work unusable because of the total disregard for well-established nomenclature. Second, the adoption of autoglossonyms as the terms of reference for the language names undermines the criteria of stability and consistency that are essential for any terminological system. The problem with using a people’s “real name”, as opposed to a well-established conventional one, is that it is subject to change each time a new meticulous scholar goes to the field. So Musgu, for example, is changed to Mulwi, and then “finally” becomes Munjuk—i.e. “finally” until some other scholar with a different orientation studies Musgu in a different location. Similarly, Lame becomes Zime or Zime becomes Lame, the order not being important because we are told that they are both “wrong” and that “the people” (whoever that is) call “the language” (whatever that is) vu dustapao. The result is referential chaos and instantaneous obsolescence.

2.3. fonetisk transkriptfør. As if the cult of the autoglossonym weren’t bad enough, M&D have decided to write the language names not in standard English orthography but in a phonetic script called the “African reference alphabet”. Again intractable problems of practicality and stability emerge. Take, for example, names such as tigrinya (= Tigrinya), tamun (= Bamun [= a member of the Bamileke cluster]), ngbandi (= Ngbandi), or isiXhosa (= Xhosa), just to cite a few of the easier ones. Although transcriptions such as these may be useful for specialists who would like to know how a particular language name is pronounced in that language, they are totally unsuitable as English (or French) representations of names for general reference purposes because of the need for special characters not found on ordinary typewriters. A few African linguistic specialists with an array of Macintosh fonts at their disposal might not be troubled, but for all other scholars—in Africa as well as elsewhere—the orthography used for the language names is incomprehensible and unreproducible.
Worst of all, many of the transcriptions as presented are probably wrong, so that the “names of reference”—and that is what they are claimed to be—probably have a half-life of two to three years, if that. Just looking at the group within Chadic (p. 20) that I happen to know something about, one finds that every single name on the list is phonetically/phonologically inaccurate! M&D’s jerra should be /jaral/ (without /e/ and with a single /r/; hona is /xwana/; boga and gabin (which are simply Ga’anda speaking villages), are /poka/ and /kabon/ respectively; ga’anda is /kaa?anda/; nyimaño is /nymaño/, actually me /nymaño/, with a voiceless lateral fricative); and pulmde (which is mutually intelligible with me /nymaño/) is /pi?im(n)di/ with a voiced lateral fricative). M&D aren’t to be criticized for these mistakes—there is no reason why they should know these minor details—but the mistakes show the utter futility of their underlying approach.

I should emphasize that the accuracy (and thus stability) problem concerns not just bare phonetic transcription but more complicated issues of phonemic analysis, each linguistic problem having its practical consequences. For example, the Cushitic language ‘af daasanac (= Dasenech) is interpreted as having an initial glottal stop and thus is alphabetized under the consonant /?/ at the end of the alphabet, but afaan ooroomo (= Oromo), a closely related language that uses the same /af-/root meaning ‘mouth/language’, is interpreted as being vowel-initial and thus is alphabetized some 60 pages earlier under /a/. Although we really don’t know, it is highly unlikely that the phonetic presence or phonemic status of the glottal stop is any different in these two languages.

M&D’s argument for adopting autoglossonyms is that these are the names used by the speakers of the languages themselves. But the phonetic transcription they employ is clearly not what the speakers use when they write in their own language, nor is it the designation they use when they write about their language in English, French, or some other European or African language of wider communication. M&D proceed, curiously, as if none of the languages in Africa had ever been written before, which, of course, is patently false. Given their paternalistic approach to an imaginary pre-literate Africa, one would think that this book had been written in 1887 rather than 1987. What authority at present gives them the right to tell Hausas, for example, that their language should be spelled hawsa rather than Hausa, when the latter spelling has been well established and fully accepted for over half a century?4 When one discovers that M&D— with full consistency, for which they get full credit—write the language name English as /ylif/ and German as /dsyc/, one begins to wonder whether they really are in earnest or whether the whole thing isn’t just one huge, expensive hoax.
In all fairness to M&D, it should be pointed out that the transcription system for language names that they employ in this reference work is based on an orthographic system proposed for supposedly practical purposes in Africa by a “meeting of experts” (UNESCO 1978). The principles of this “African reference alphabet” and its suggested application to individual languages are spelled out clearly in their chapter 4. (There is no discussion of what effect, if any, the proposed alphabet has had during the past decade in the development and harmonization of African writing systems. We can assume that the impact has been next to nil.) Although this certainly was not M&D’s intent, the chapter serves a very useful purpose as a prime demonstration of the futility of attempted linguistic engineering by “experts” who approach their task without taking into account historical and cultural traditions, technical and economic limitations, or educational and political realities.

2.4. Lower case. The discussion of proposals for African language orthographies leads me to my final complaint about the book: the lack of capital letters. Except for the cover, title page, and copyright page, which presumably were prepared by the publisher without the authors’ consultation or consent, the entire book is written in lower-case letters. My first thought was that the authors were innocent victims of university cost-saving measures by Mrs. Thatcher’s government, i.e. that the shift key on their typewriter had broken and there were no funds to repair it. To my dismay, however, I discovered in the preface (and on p. 210) that M&D had exclusively used lower-case on purpose for specific doctrinaire reasons. As a colleague to whom I showed the book said, “how terribly silly!”

Clearly, one can write English without upper-case letters, but that is just not the way it’s written. Writing an English book entirely in lower case makes it extremely difficult to read from a strictly visual point of view, especially when the book contains long lists of names and bibliographic entries. More important, it shows M&D’s complete contempt for the potential reader. There are times when scholars have a right (even a responsibility) to take unconventional positions on intellectual matters; but a reference work with the imprimatur of the International African Institute strikes me as the wrong place for M&D to express their peculiar ideological viewpoint. By adhering to this ridiculous typographic system, M&D have turned what was supposed to be a solid reference work into a philosophical/political tract that will sit on library shelves and collect dust, being too impractical to use and too boring to read.
3. I would like to end this review—which, regretfully, has been extremely negative—with a constructive piece of advice. Although my proposal may sound extreme and critical, it is the best that I can think of among the various unattractive choices. I offer it in a spirit of helpfulness and collegiality. Since the book as it now stands absolutely cannot serve as the reference work for which it was intended, I would suggest that the publisher withdraw the book from the market! M&D have done a tremendous amount of work amassing information on the languages of Africa. Presumably all of this information is on a computer somewhere. It thus shouldn’t be an impossible task for a research assistant with editorial skills and common sense—the latter being the essential ingredient missing in the present work—to prepare a revised, usable version. The classification would have to be modified so that it was rational, the language names would have to be recast so that they were accessible, and the book would have to be reset according to the conventions of standard English so that it was readable, but all of this is feasible. Of course, such a revision would involve a delay of a year or so and would involve extra expense, but what is the alternative? The authors can remain stubbornly committed to the present volume, whereupon all of the hard work and expense that went into it will have been wasted (not to mention the embarrassment to the International African Institute), or they can acknowledge their errors in judgment and cooperate in the preparation of a new, sound version of a reference work that might qualify as a major contribution to African linguistic scholarship.

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NOTES

1. M&D’s snide characterization of Greenberg’s classification as one that “purports to reflect in detail supposed historical relationships” (p. 3, emphasis mine) misses the point. Scholars have been able to find mistakes in Greenberg’s classification—one would hope so in the quarter of a century that has passed since it was published!—just because it is a substantive verifiable/refutable classification that follows standard cladistic principles.

2. Unfortunately, as the pages of journals such as JALL show, this has become the trendy thing to do in African linguistics. It is not clear whether the motivation is well-meaning political anti-neocolonialism or whether it is just pedantry pure and simple.

3. Linnaeus, one of the great classifiers of all time, understood that two important criteria for acceptable technical nomenclature were stability, i.e. the avoidance of gratuitous innovation from established practice, and “commodity” the avoidance of names that were barbarous, lengthy, or otherwise difficult (see Larson 1971).

4. As a result of meddling by outside experts, Hausa in Niger suffered through a decade or so of having its own phonetically “correct” orthography instead of the standard Nigerian Hausa orthography in which a proliferation of books and newspapers were being produced. This expensive and counterproductive experiment was ultimately abandoned.
The other possible explanation was that in keeping with the literary tradition at the International African Institute, e.e. cummings’s daughter d.d. had been hired as a secretary there, with not unpredictable consequences. This rumor turns out to have been unfounded.

What I find incomprehensible is that the publisher agreed to publish the book in its present form. Wasn’t the manuscript sent out to reputable scholars for pre-publication review? Didn’t M&D ever consult with their colleagues and friends before blundering into this academic blind alley?

REFERENCES


Department of Linguistics
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Compte rendu par Alain Kihm

De cet ouvrage, on remarque d’abord le titre: En apprenant le créole à Bissau et à Ziguinchor. Invitation au voyage, invitation à parcourir les rues de ces villes, yeux grand ouverts et oreilles attentives. Le livre se veut un guide “pour l’auto-apprentissage de ceux qui ont la possibilité quotidienne de s’initier à la langue” (p. 1), en somme un Baedeker qui, on le sait, s’adresse aux voyageurs indépendants et curieux.

La citation faite à l’instant se termine par “et rien de plus”. Les auteurs sont trop modestes. Certes, “personné, après avoir étudié ce livre, ne parlera vraiment le créole” (p. 1). Mais parle-t-on jamais “vraiment” une autre langue que sa langue maternelle? Et même celle-ci ... En tout cas, le livre de JLD et JLR est bien une description du kiriol, comme ils transcrivent, partielle évidemment, comme toutes, mais un vrai travail de linguistique. L’auteur de ces lignes se rappelle avoir débarqué la première fois en Guinée-Bissau, il y a plus de dix ans, sans avoir jamais entendu un mot de kriyol (comme je transcris’—il n’existe pas encore d’orthographe officielle), n’ayant pour tout bagage linguistique que l’ouvrage de Wilson (1962), excellent au demeurant, mais sommaire. Que j’aurais été heureux d’avoir ce livre dans mon sac!

Avant de poursuivre, il ne sera peut-être pas mauvais de donner au