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# Review of Alan S. Kaye, ed. (1997) *Phonologies of Asia and Africa: (Including the Caucasus)*

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**Alan S. Kaye** (ed.) (1997). *Phonologies of Asia and Africa (including the Caucasus)*. Technical advisor: Peter T. Daniels. Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns. 2 vols. Pp. xxi + 1041.

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This is an unusual book.\* For one thing, it is huge: two volumes, over 1000 pages, with articles on fifty different languages or groups. For another, the list of contributors is quite diverse, including a few phonologists with specific language interests (Shmuel Bolozy, Robert D. Hoberman, Maria-Rosa Lloret and Joseph L. Malone), a few linguists who are better known for their work in areas other than phonology (Bernard Comrie, Jeffrey Heath, H. Craig Melchert and Johanna Nichols) and a group of distinguished experts on particular languages or families (including Giorgio Buccellati, Gene Gragg, Robert Hetzron, Wolf Leslau, Paul Newman and others).

The goals of this book are also a bit unusual. In his introduction, the editor says this:

The idea for this volume came about as I searched in vain for a book which would enable my students to gain a concrete familiarity of solid phonological work by subjecting them to the exposure of many of today's (hard-)working linguists who would concisely describe and comment on the phonological processes in and structures of languages which they have carefully scrutinized, both ancient or medieval and modern. (p. xvi)

This is an attractive concept; undergraduate and beginning graduate students would undoubtedly benefit from studying and perhaps attempting to reanalyse a carefully presented description of the phonemic system and morphophonemic processes of an unfamiliar language. More advanced graduate students or established scholars could also benefit from having access to compact descriptions that summarise potentially interesting phenomena and give references to consult for further research.

*Phonologies of Asia and Africa* does indeed contain a number of solid phonological sketches, many of them presenting material that is available nowhere else. But it must also be said that many of the articles do not offer a sufficiently clear exposition of the phonology of the target language. In my view, the principal desiderata of a phonological sketch are these:

- The state of scholarship on the language should be briefly described, with references.
- The phonemes should be presented in a table, accompanied by commentary on any phonetic peculiarities or difficulties of phonemicisation.

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- The syllabic structure, phonotactics, stress and tone system should be presented with clear descriptive generalisations and generous exemplification.
- The phonological processes should be presented with similar clarity.
- Examples of the processes should be set off from the text and should be sufficient to prove the correctness of each element of the descriptive generalisation. (To do this may require examples of the process *not* applying.)
- Dialect comparison and diachronic observations should not constantly intrude on the synchronic description. (I found those articles that simultaneously cover several related languages or dialects to be particularly confusing.)

The last point may be in dispute, but the others are nothing more than common sense, especially if the sketch is to be usable by students and others without special knowledge of the language being described.

About half of the contributions come close to satisfying these criteria. Some that I found particularly clear and potentially useful include Bolozky on Modern Hebrew, Alexander Borg on Maltese, Gragg on Ge'ez, Lloret on Oromo, Ernest N. McCarus on Kurdish, P. J. Mistry on Gujarati, and Comrie on three Turkic languages. On the other hand, a few are almost entirely useless; for example, Cyrus H. Gordon's sketches of Eblaite and Ugaritic consist of nothing but a series of disconnected observations. The balance of the articles fall somewhere in between these extremes: the traditional scholarship and the phonemic system are covered satisfactorily, but the phonotactics and phonological processes are not set out with sufficient clarity or exemplification. One high point: several of the articles on extinct languages (such as Buccellati on Akkadian and Melchert on Hittite) do a particularly good job of explaining how we know what we know about the pronunciation of a language no living person has heard.

Buccellati's otherwise excellent article on Akkadian supplies a typical example of how phonological processes could have been handled better. Here is what he says about the process traditionally called 'vowel harmony' in the Assyrian dialect:

Vowel harmony is a very distinctive Assyrian phenomenon: *a* in a short medial syllable which follows a stressed syllable assumes the quality of the following vowel, e.g., O[ld] B[abylonian] 'i**š**batū ~ O[ld] A[ssyrian] 'i**š**butū. (p. 25)

Buccellati goes on to discuss some relevant philological difficulties, but this is all he has to say about vowel harmony itself. To most phonologists, the basic observation will be intriguing, but the lack of further explanation and the single example will seem frustratingly inadequate, raising many unanswered questions: is this process purely diachronic, relevant only to dialect comparison, or does it have synchronic consequences in Assyrian? Is it triggered by vowels other than *u*, and does it truly affect only *a*? Is stress on the (immediately?) preceding syllable necessary? What exactly is meant by a 'short medial syllable'? More careful attention to formulating the descriptive generalisation and especially more extensive and appropriate exemplification would have settled these questions, thereby making the material more useful to non-specialists. (The answers, gleaned from other sources: yes, the process is synchronically active in Assyrian, as shown by paradigms like *qaqqudum/qaqqadam/qaqqidim* 'head (NOM/ACC/GEN)'. And yes, it is also triggered by *i*,

as the same paradigm shows. It appears that only short *a* in an open syllable is affected, suggesting that the process crucially targets an *unstressed* vowel.)

For many readers of this journal, another concern will be whether the contributions to this volume make appropriate contact with matters of phonological theory. The editor's position on the question is forcefully stated:

What the entire field of phonology has always lacked and is still lacking until now is a book with the present focus and scope, in which the subject matter is thoroughly packaged, consumed, and digested as a data-oriented, descriptive discipline, and does not merely serve as a hot-plate for a rehash of rules of various types and layouts with assorted labels and devices reflectant of different premises, styles, interests, or parameters. (p. xvii)

The decision to focus on description rather than theory is reasonable (even if the rhetoric of this passage is not), but it would also make sense to include appropriate references when the target language has been important in the theoretical literature. A few contributors are careful to cite more theoretically oriented works: Bolozky on Modern Hebrew, Borg on Maltese, Maarten G. Kossmann & Harry J. Stroomer on Berber, Lloret on Oromo, and Malone on Mandaic. For many of the rest, there are no relevant citations to add. But others simply omit relevant references. Some examples:

- A considerable literature of theoretically informed works on the metrical phonology of Arabic stress and syllable structure has appeared during the last two decades, but it is mentioned nowhere in the four articles on varieties of Arabic (totally 100 pages altogether).
- In his article on Moroccan Arabic, Heath summarises and proceeds to reject 'the currently most popular model' of Arabic morphology, but cites no references for this model. Indeed, his bibliography contains only three items - all by Heath.
- There is a large literature treating theoretical issues raised by Turkish vowel harmony and stress, but Comrie's contribution does not mention it.

These omissions are difficult to understand. Surely there can be no doubt that, in a work intended for students, a good bibliography is second in importance only to clarity of exposition.

This book's coverage is not as broad as the size and ambitious title might suggest. The first volume deals exclusively with Afroasiatic languages, mostly Semitic but also including Egyptian/Coptic, Berber, Hausa and three Cushitic languages. The second volume is somewhat more diverse: it includes various ancient and modern Indo-European languages of western Asia and India, one atypical Dravidian language (Brahui), three Turkic and three Caucasian languages and two isolates (Burushaski and Sumerian). Non-Afroasiatic languages of Africa receive scant attention (Swahili, Sango and an overview of Nilo-Saharan) and East Asian languages are not touched at all.

These volumes are printed on fine paper with a decent binding; Eisenbrauns deserves credit for putting out such a well-made product at a price that is not unreasonable for its size (\$119.50). Peter T. Daniels, the technical advisor, is to be commended for the typographic excellence of this book. Despite the daunting typographical complexity (which includes diverse phonetic transcription systems, the Hebrew, Syriac and Coptic alphabets, and the Ethiopian syllabary), errors are rare and the layout is attractive. Unfortunately, there is no index, nor is there a detailed table of contents, so these volumes cannot be used to search conveniently for, say, a particular type of phonological process.

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*Phonologies of Asia and Africa* is a good idea imperfectly executed. Anyone with a special interest in one of the languages will probably want to read the relevant article, and Semiticists especially will find the first volume to be valuable. But non-specialists or those looking for readings to recommend to students should proceed cautiously, selecting only the best articles and supplementing the bibliography when necessary.