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The language situation in Australia

In this volume I attempt to characterise what the indigenous languages of Australia are like, how individual languages have developed their particular structural profiles, and the ways in which the languages are related. A portrait is provided of the Australian linguistic area, which is certainly the longest-established linguistic area in the world.

This first chapter briefly describes relevant aspects of traditional Aboriginal society, the language situation at the time of White invasion and then the prehistory of the continent. A final section deals with the diffusion of cultural traits. Chapter 2 discusses ways of modelling the language situation, and applies the Punctuated Equilibrium model (presented in Dixon 1997). An appendix reviews the status of the lexicostatistic classification and the ‘Pama-Nyungan’ idea, in its various manifestations.

Chapter 3 gets down to business, providing a typological overview of the parameters of grammatical and phonological variation across the continent. Individual topics are then dealt with in detail in the following chapters – vocabulary in chapter 4, case and other nominal affixes in chapter 5, verb systems and inflections in chapter 6, pronouns in chapter 7, bound pronouns in chapter 8, prefixing and fusion in chapter 9, classifiers and noun classes in chapter 10. In chapter 11 there is discussion of ergative and accusative profiles and how languages shift with respect to them. Chapter 12 deals with phonology. Chapter 13 discusses genetic subgroups, small linguistic areas, origin places and directions of expansion, and shifting isoglosses. Finally, chapter 14 ties together some conclusions.

First of all, we should take note of the variable nature of the evidence available.

1.1 A partial picture

The European invasion of Australia began in 1788 at Sydney Cove but did not extend to every area – to the deserts in the centre, or to parts of Arnhem Land in the north – until the middle of the twentieth century. The information we have on individual languages comes from different periods. By the time the first information was recorded on NBf2, Gurrgoni, from the north coast, for instance, the language of Sydney (O1, Dharuk) had long ceased to be spoken.

Contact with White civilisation has led to the speedy extinction of Australian languages; in almost every instance, there are no longer any children learning the language within one hundred years of first contact (and often much sooner than that). As a result we have no time depth on any language. There are some reasonable grammars of languages of New South Wales from the 1840s and 1850s but these languages are no longer extant. In no case can we examine how the structure of a language has changed over a period of several generations.

Our knowledge of languages from certain parts of the continent is sketchy in the extreme. For instance, there appear to have been three distinct languages spoken around the mouth of the Burdekin River in North Queensland (my group I); we have just one short word list in each. It is very likely that a number of languages have passed into oblivion without a single word being recorded.

We know of about 240 or 250 languages that are or were spoken by the indigenous people of mainland Australia. More than half of these are no longer spoken or remembered (save for perhaps a sprinkling of words used within the English spoken by their tribal descendants). No more than twenty are currently being learnt by children. The remainder have just middle-aged or old speakers; each decade a few more of these languages cease to be spoken or remembered.

We have good or fairly good materials (a reasonable grammar, together with a dictionary or word list) for about ninety-five languages; these are almost all the result of work by professionally trained linguists, beginning in the 1960s. For about fifteen more languages, descriptions are in preparation. For about 110 languages there are grammatical and lexical materials of lower quality. These include: materials from amateurs of an earlier age (who did not have the idea of phoneme, etc.); work by modern-day linguists that is not of the first quality (and cannot be considered reliable); and materials by good linguists working with the last speaker of a language, who only remembered bits of it. For about twenty-five languages – all now extinct – only word lists are available (including, perhaps, a couple of pronouns).

The linguistic picture that emerges is uneven across the continent. For instance, there is no full description of any language from a twelve hundred kilometre stretch of the east coast, from Townsville to south of Brisbane. For only one of the twelve or so languages originally spoken in Victoria is there a reliable, modern description (this is Ta1, Wemba-Wemba). The language of the south-west corner of the continent (including Perth) is known mainly from an amateur grammar of around 1840 and a short account from the 1970s; the information they give is sometimes unclear and inconsistent (in fact, it is not clear that exactly the same language is being described).

It should be borne in mind, in the chapters that follow, that we are working with a partial picture. A grammatical marker that is attested in one or two languages may well

have occurred in several others, but these other languages were just not described, or not described in sufficient detail.

1.2 Social organisation and lifestyle

Before the European invasion there were probably around one million Aborigines in Australia, organised into about seven hundred political groups, which are commonly and conveniently referred to (by the Aboriginal people themselves) as tribes. Each had its own territory, system of social organisation, traditional oral literature and laws, song styles, and its own 'language' – just like the nations of Europe, but on a smaller scale. Aborigines identify themselves as belonging to a particular tribal group; they typically explain that the members of a tribe are 'all blooded', meaning that the normal expectation is to marry within one's own tribe (also see below).

Tribal boundaries typically (but not invariably) run along a mountain ridge or through a strip of barren country. A territory is often centred on some important water feature(s) and will frequently include a number of different ecological zones, with people moving around according to the season, following the pattern of food availability. Each Aboriginal family group has an association with a particular place, which they have a responsibility to take care of and maintain. Rumsey (1993) suggests that in Australia a language is linked to a tract of land; and a person is linked to a place, and hence to the language of that place. Thus, Jawoyn people are Jawoyn not because they speak Jawoyn, but because they are linked to places with which the Jawoyn language is associated. And **THUS** they speak Jawoyn.

The Australian Aborigines never developed agriculture. Like almost all hunter-gatherer communities across the world, there is no chief and no set of stratified social classes. Everyone in a tribe has specific social obligations towards everyone else, according to a finely articulated classificatory kinship system.

Aboriginal religion is, in large part, pragmatic. It is believed that ancestral spirits created the country, and the places and foodstuffs in it; knowledge about them is handed down from generation to generation. Religious practice involves understanding the sacred traditions of one's group, their relationship to the land and to totemic animals and the like, and organising one's life in the way that tradition demands. There are no gods, before whom one has to be humble, and no praying. Small wonder that Aborigines are said to have been one of the most difficult of the peoples of the world to convert to Christianity.

Related to their religious attitudes, Aborigines have a strong sense of history. They tell stories from the far distant past (see (7) in §1.4 below) and their kinship system distinguishes ancestors from each past generation. These are often organised in a cyclic pattern. For example, the same terms may be used for grandparents and grandchildren, with great-grandparents then being called by the same terms as one's children, and great-grandchildren by the same terms as one's parents and their siblings.

There is (or was) a classificatory kinship system, with every person in a community related to every other through a series of mathematical-like rules of equivalence. Each Australian community has strict conventions for how one should behave with each class of relatives. Certain classes constitute avoidance relationships – typically, classificatory mother-in-law and classificatory son-in-law. They should not look at each other, nor speak directly to each other. Indeed, in many communities there was a special speech style (sometimes called ‘mother-in-law language’ by bilingual Aborigines) which had to be used in the presence of an avoidance relative. This generally has the same phonology as the everyday language style, and usually the same grammar, but a different form for each of the most common lexemes (in a couple of instances, a different form for EVERY lexeme). See §3.4.

Young men were initiated at puberty. This involved circumcision and subincision over wide bands of territory down the centre of the continent (see map 1.3); and the cutting of cicatrices in some other areas. At this time they also underwent a lengthy period of instruction in traditional wisdom. A few groups had a special ‘initiation language’, which was taught to boys at that time and could only be used among initiated men. Among the Lardil of Mornington Island this employed a totally different phonetic system from the everyday language style (see §3.4).

Each tribe also had a number of song styles with distinctive musical format, accompaniment, scansion, subject-matter, and social role. Songs use some words from the spoken language style but there are often special words that only occur in songs, and also archaic words and other archaic features (see §3.4).

Every Australian tribe appears to have had more-or-less stable relationships with its neighbours. There would be regular trade of manufactured items; and periodic meetings between neighbouring groups to settle disputes by controlled bouts of fighting, to arrange marriages, and to exchange new songs and news. There could be varying degrees of hostility (with resulting fear) and some killings between neighbouring groups, but there are few reports of uncontrolled war and massacre (such as commonly occur in every other continent) in Aboriginal Australia.

A spouse would generally be taken from another group of the same tribe but sometimes from a neighbouring tribe – in the latter case, an exchange marriage in the opposite direction would often also be organised (man for woman, woman for man). Partly as a result of this, and partly because of a sociocultural habit of learning languages, most Aborigines were at least bilingual and many were multilingual – they could speak at least one language besides their own and would often understand several more.

1.3 The languages

The term ‘language’ is used in a number of different ways. One is as a marker of political identity – in this sense, each of the seven hundred or more tribal groups in

Australia has its own language. In this book I shall use the term ‘language’ in the technical sense of linguists – if two modes of speech are mutually intelligible they are said to constitute dialects of a single language. One can write an overall grammar of the whole language, with notes on dialectal variation.

On the linguistic criterion, there were about 240 or 250 indigenous languages known to have been spoken in Australia. Almost all of these had a number of distinct dialects, each associated with a tribal group, or with a subdivision within a tribe. For the people themselves it is the tribal dialect (= political language) that has a name (in all but a very few instances) – for example, Pitjantjatjarra, Yankuntjatjarra and Pintupi in the western deserts area. Speakers of Pitjantjatjarra, Yankuntjatjarra and Pintupi recognise that these are mutually intelligible and – once the linguistic sense of the term ‘language’ is explained to them – acknowledge that they are dialects of one language. But this language had no name, in traditional times. There is now an accepted label. ‘The Western Desert language’ is currently in use, by Aborigines and non-Aborigines, to describe a chain of dialects, each mutually intelligible with its neighbours, which extends over one and a quarter million square kilometres (one-sixth of the area of Australia).

In other situations no appropriate name has come into use. I have worked on a language in North Queensland that includes at least a dozen dialects (tribal languages) including Girramay, Djirru, Jirrbal, Gulngay, Mamu and Ngadjan. There is no accepted overall name. I have employed ‘Dyirbal’ as a label for this linguistic language; it is an alternative spelling of the name for a central dialect (Jirrbal) which had the most remaining speakers when I began linguistic work, in 1963. But speakers prefer to refer to their tribal language names – Girramay, Ngadjan, and so on. Throughout this work I have had to make up names (like Dyirbal) for what are languages on linguistic criteria; they are simply labels of convenience.

I have had to make decisions concerning ‘what is a language (in the linguistic sense)’ and ‘what is a dialect’. Where there is a living language situation – such as for the Western Desert language – this is generally not a difficult matter. There will be the opinions of native speakers concerning intelligibility, and the detailed studies of linguists; these almost always give the same results.

In areas where languages are no longer spoken, one has to compare whatever information is available on vocabulary, phonology and grammar, and try to assess what the language situation was. In some instances there can be historical corroboration. For example, examination of materials from Jaja-wurrung, spoken around Franklingford and Maryborough in western Victoria, suggests that it was a dialect of the language I call Ta1, Wemba-Wemba, extending to the north and west. Wadha-wurrung (my Ta2) was spoken immediately to the south of Jaja-wurrung, around Lal Lal, Buntingdale and Bal-larat. Wadha-wurrung and Jaja-wurrung share about 45 per cent general vocabulary but show considerable grammatical differences, suggesting that they would not have been

intelligible, and belonged to distinct languages. This inference is supported by a report of E. S. Parker, Assistant Protector of Aborigines at Franklingford, who states that Rev. Mr Tuckfield from Buntingdale preached to his wards on 2 May 1842 but ‘the Widouro [Wadha-wurrung] language, I found, was understood only by a few [bilingual] people, and Mr Tuckfield, who is acquainted only with that language, could not be understood by the majority. Many of the words are identical, but others so essentially different as to make the two dialects distinct languages’ (Morrison 1966: 61).

In a few instances the patchy nature of documentation may make it hard to decide ‘what is a language?’. First consider a situation for which we have good information. Within the Dyirbal language, H1, there is a chain of dialects running for about 150 km through the rain forest from Malanda down to Cardwell – including Ngadjan, Mamu, Gulngay, Jirrbal and Girramay. Each has 80–85 per cent vocabulary in common with neighbouring dialects and very similar grammar, clearly indicating that we do here have a single language. The end dialects, Ngadjan and Girramay, share only about 50 per cent general vocabulary but have a higher score for verbs and closely similar grammar. However, if all we had from this area were a short word list for Ngadjan and the same for Girramay, with no information on verbs or grammar, and no documentation of the intervening dialects, it would be impossible to recognise Ngadjan and Girramay as dialects of a single language. Indeed, on the 50 per cent lexical score, we would tentatively suggest that they constituted distinct languages. (‘Tentatively’ because of the patchy nature of the material available.)

In other areas, we do have patchy materials similar to those just imagined for Ngadjan and Girramay. For instance, there are data on five speech varieties in a region between Mount Mulgrave, Kalinga station and the Palmer River, North Queensland – Aghu-Tharrnggala, Ikarranggal, Koko-Possum and two varieties of Kuku-Mini (sharing only 46 per cent general vocabulary). Grammatical data are available only for Aghu-Tharrnggala. I have tentatively grouped all of these into one language (De2, Kuku-Mini), but if fuller information were available it might indicate that we have more than a single language here (probably not five, but possibly two or three). Similar remarks apply for WE2, Kalaaku, on the Bight.

As an example of the opposite sort, just north of Perth there is a set of tribal dialects for only two of which we have substantial data; almost certainly there were further dialects which disappeared without being recorded. I have tentatively recognised these as constituting six distinct languages, making up the Watjarri/Parti-maya subgroup, WGa. A case could be made out for WGa being a single language which consists of a long dialect chain. Or else something between one and six languages. In instances like this, where the data are scanty, inferences have to be tentative.

In summary, it is generally (although not universally) possible to decide on ‘what is a language?’ when full documentation is available. But in many parts of the conti-

nent the documentation is patchy. As a result, our estimate of the number of languages (recognised on linguistic, rather than on political, criteria) spoken in Australia at the time of the European invasion must be in the form of a range – probably somewhere between about 230 and about 300. There may, in addition, have been a few languages for which nothing was recorded. In some instances we just have a tribal/language name, but not even a short word list, and so cannot tell whether this group spoke a further dialect of an already recognised language, or some quite different language.

1.4 Prehistory

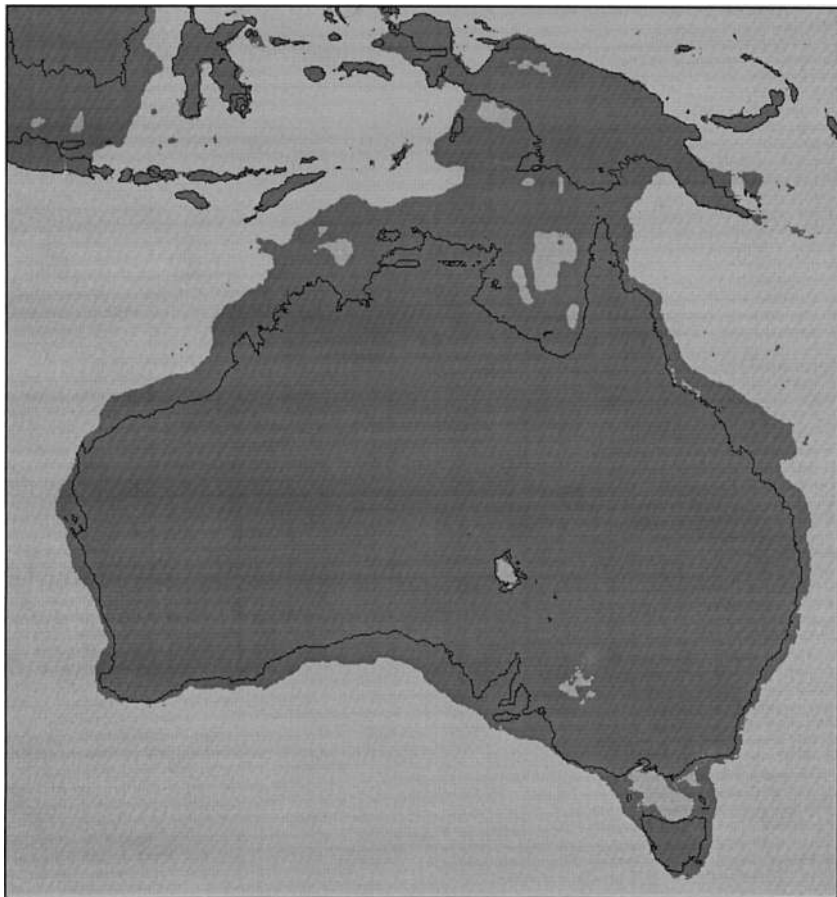
It is appropriate now to consider some relevant pieces of information concerning the prehistory of Australia, and of its Aboriginal population.

(1) *Land mass and sea levels.* From about 125,000 BP, Australia and New Guinea formed one land mass. There was fluctuation in sea levels and, consequently, in the coastline. For example, at about 50,000 BP there was just one land bridge, where the Torres Strait now lies. 25,000 years later there was a continuous land bridge across what is now the Torres Strait and the Arafura Sea; see map 1.1. The western portion of this bridge became submerged about 10,000 BP and with the Torres Strait following about 7,000 BP. By that time, the coastline of Australia was essentially as it is today.

Tasmania was isolated from Australia until about 40,000 BP, when two land bridges emerged, on the east and west of what is now Bass Strait. The western bridge probably disappeared around 17,000 BP with the eastern one following by about 14,000 BP, once more isolating Tasmania.

Map 1.1 (provided by Kurt Lambeck) shows the likely shape of the land mass at about 25,000 BP. At that time, the coastline was further out right around the continent; down the east coast it was about where the Great Barrier Reef now stands. A great deal of the Timor Sea region was land but there was at all times a water gap, of around 100 km or more, between the Australia/New Guinea land mass and Timor. Notice also the inland lakes – one in the middle of where Bass Strait now lies, several in what is now the Gulf of Carpentaria, and one just north of what is now Joseph Bonaparte Gulf (on the Northern Territory/Western Australia border). See Lambeck and Chappell (2001).

(2) *Changing water resources.* There have been profound physical changes in Australia within the past few tens of millennia. Geographers believe that – in terms of varying water resources – the land which supported perhaps one million Aboriginal people in 1788 would have provided for substantially less than that number twenty thousand years ago, but it could well have supported rather more than the 1788 population ten thousand years before that.



Map 1.1 Likely coastline (and maximal extent of inland lakes) for the Australia/New Guinea/Tasmania land mass at about 25,000 BP (with the modern coastline superimposed)

(3) *Human time-depth.* All archaeologists are agreed that people have been in the Australia/New Guinea land mass for at least forty thousand years; some would say fifty thousand years (and a few would opt for a longer occupation).

There is agreement that the first settlers are likely to have arrived from South-east Asia, simply because there is nowhere else from where they could conceivably have come. The sea level was relatively low on several occasions around 50,000 BP; at that time there would have been a number of short sea voyages necessary to travel from the South-east Asian land mass (which then extended to Bali) to Australia/New Guinea. Birdsell (1977) investigated a number of alternative ‘island hopping’ routes. For

instance, a route from Kalimantan via Sulawesi to New Guinea involved ten water gaps, the largest of 93 km, while a route from Bali to the Kimberley coast of Western Australia involved eight water gaps, one of 87 km, one of 29 km, one of 19 km, with the remainder each being less than 10 km. (Butlin 1989 discusses a similar scenario.) This presupposes good navigational skills, and fairly sophisticated water craft, which must have required cooperative effort to build.

Archaeologists tell us that there were people living in Tasmania by about 35,000 BP. This is soon after the date of 40,000 BP, given for the establishment of a land bridge with the mainland.

Food resources will not have been constant during the time that people have been in the Australia/New Guinea land mass. Types of available plant food will have varied with climatic changes. Archaeological investigations suggest that giant marsupials roamed Australia at the time of the first human settlement, not becoming extinct until 35,000 or 30,000 BP. It is not known to what extent (if any) their demise is related to their being hunted by early settlers.

(4) *Time needed to populate the continent.* When a group of humans comes into some unoccupied land they tend to reproduce and fill it within a fairly short time (witness the Maoris in New Zealand). Birdsell (1957) has shown that – where there is unlimited possibility for expansion in terms of land and food resources available – a population is likely to double each generation. On this basis, it might have taken little more than two thousand years from the arrival of the first immigrants in Australia for all parts of the continent to have been populated to the limits of their food-bearing resources.

There are different ways in which the Australia/Tasmania/New Guinea land mass could have been populated. The first people to arrive could have expanded and split and journeyed right across the continent. Or they could have travelled around the perimeter, fully populating the coastal regions and only at a later date venturing inland (see Bowdler 1977, 1990).

(5) *Non-continuous occupation.* Kangaroo Island (south-west of Adelaide) is known to have been occupied from about 16,000 BP until about 4,500 BP. After that time no one lived there, although it is a fertile and hospitable place; no explanation is known for this abandonment. (Note that Kangaroo Island is clearly visible from the adjacent mainland.)

No systematic information is available on the continuity or discontinuity of occupation for mainland areas. However, it is very likely that there were ebbs and flows in the population pattern. Once the continent had been fully populated it is likely that there would always have been people living along the coasts and major rivers. At times

when water resources were scarce – around 20,000 BP and probably also at other times – there may have been no one living in other inland areas; these would have been repopulated when the rainfall once more increased.

(6) *Physical homogeneity.* Aborigines appear to be relatively homogeneous in their physical type. There is no obvious evidence for several different races, which may have entered the continent at different times and perhaps by different routes (and, presumably, speaking different kinds of languages).

However, there is one small group of Aborigines which does stand out physically from the remainder. Tindale and Birdsell (1941) reported a distinct, pygmoid people in the eastern coastal and mountain region near Cairns. We shall discuss this in §2.3.

(7) *Legend as history.* All along the east and south-east coasts Aborigines have legends that clearly relate to historical facts (note that not all legends have an historical basis, but a number undoubtedly do). In 1850 Aborigines from the Melbourne area told a white settler that a long time in the past Port Phillip Bay was dry land, and described the path that the Yarra River then followed to the sea; this accords with what the geographical facts were about ten thousand years ago (McCrae 1934: 176; Blake 1991: 31–4 and further references given there). The Torres Strait islanders have legends that it was once possible to walk from Australia to New Guinea (Bani 1988). All down the east coast there are legends that the coast used to be further out. Along the Queensland coast it is said to have been where the Great Barrier Reef now stands – which is where it was, about ten thousand years ago.

In 1964 George Watson of the Dulgarbarra Mamu tribe (speaking a dialect of H1, Dyrirbal) recorded a Dreamtime story concerning the origins of Lakes Eacham, Barrine and Euramoo volcanic craters on the Atherton Tableland (this story is shared with the neighbouring Yidinj-speaking tribe). After two newly initiated men had broken a taboo and angered the rainbow serpent, ‘the camping place began to change, the earth under the camp roaring like thunder. The wind started to blow down, as if a cyclone were coming. The camping-place began to twist and crack. While this was happening there was in the sky a red cloud, of a hue never seen before. The people tried to run from side to side but were swallowed by a crack which opened in the ground . . .’ (Dixon 1972: 29).

This is a plausible description of a volcanic eruption; yet these craters are thought to have been formed at least seventeen thousand years ago. What is even more significant, after George Watson had recorded this story (in 1964), he remarked that when the lakes were formed the country around them was not rain forest, as it is today, but just open woodland. In 1968, Peter Kershaw (1970) showed, by a dated pollen sample from the organic sediments of Lake Euramoo, that the rain forest in the area is