

AUSTRALIAN LANGUAGES

Aboriginal people have been in Australia for at least 40,000 years, speaking about 250 languages. Through examination of published and unpublished materials on each of the individual languages, Professor Dixon, a pioneering scholar in this field, surveys the ways in which the languages vary typologically and presents a profile of this long-established linguistic area. The parameters examined include phonological contrasts, types of nominal case marking, patterns of verb organisation, varieties of pronoun systems, the development and loss of bound pronouns and a prefixing profile, generic nouns, nominal classifiers and noun classes, and ergative/accusative characteristics. The areal distribution of most features is illustrated with more than thirty maps, showing that the languages tend to move in cyclic fashion with respect to many of the parameters. There is also an index of languages and language groups. Professor Dixon brings a unique perspective to this diverse and complex material which will appeal to researchers and students in linguistics as well as to anthropologists with linguistic interests.

R.M.W. DIXON is Director of the Research Centre for Linguistic Typology at La Trobe University. Professor Dixon's book publications include grammatical studies of five Australian languages, of a dialect of Fijian, and of English, as well as *Where have all the adjectives gone? and other essays in semantics and syntax* (1982), *Ergativity* (Cambridge, 1994), and *The rise and fall of languages* (Cambridge, 1997).

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AUSTRALIAN
LANGUAGES
Their Nature and Development

R. M. W. DIXON

Research Centre for Linguistic Typology, La Trobe University



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for Michael Osborne
Vice-Chancellor with vision

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ABBREVIATIONS AND CONVENTIONS

A	transitive subject function	IMP	imperative inflection
ABL	ablative case	inc	inclusive (addressee included)
ABS	absolutive case	INCH	inchoative
ACC	accusative case	INDIC	indicative mood
ALL	allative case	INST	instrumental case
ANTIPASS	antipassive verbal derivational suffix	INTERROG	interrogative
APPLIC	applicative derivational affix	INTR, intr	intransitive
aug	augmented	LOC	locative case
AUX	auxiliary verb	M, m	masculine
AVERS	aversive case	min	minimal
BENEF	benefactive	NEG	negative
BP	before present	NEUT	neuter
CAT	catalyst	NOM	nominative case
CAUS	causal case	NP	noun phrase
CC	copula complement	n-f	non-feminine
COMIT	comitative affix	n-min	non-minimal
CONTIN	continuative affix	n-sg, n.sg	non-singular
CS	copula subject	O	transitive object function
DAT	dative case	OBJ	object (O function)
du	dual	OBL	oblique
ERG	ergative case	pX	proto-language for subgroup X
exc	exclusive (addressee excluded)	PERF	perfect aspect
F, f	feminine	PL, pl	plural
FUT	future	POS	positive
GEN	genitive affix	POSS	possessive
H	stop homorganic with preceding segment	POT	potential
		PRES	present tense
		PRIV	privative

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PURP	purposive inflection (on nouns and verbs)	SUBORD	subordinate marking
RECIP	reciprocal	TAM	tense and/or aspect and/or modality and/or mood
REDUP	reduplicated		
REFL	reflexive	TR, tr	transitive
REL	relative clause marking	U	unstressed syllable
S	intransitive subject function; stressed	ua	unit augmented
	syllable	1	first person
sg	singular	2	second person
		3	third person
SUBJ	subject (S and A functions)	-	affix boundary
		=	clitic boundary

PREFACE

I began the preface to *The languages of Australia* (*LoA*, published 1980) by stating that it was, in several ways, premature. By this I meant that more descriptions of languages would be forthcoming during the 1980s and 1990s (as, indeed, they have been), which would provide a surer basis for generalisation. I now realise that *LoA* was most importantly of all, conceptually premature.

I had learnt the principles of historical linguistics from my teachers Warren Cowgill and Calvert Watkins, and from reading Meillet, Benveniste and others. And I had assumed that the methodology which applies so well for the languages of Europe and North America and Oceania would also be appropriate for the linguistic situation in Australia. It is not, but it took me a long time to realise this.

I sometimes wondered whether my lack of success in applying the established methodology of historical linguistics to the Australian linguistic situation was a feature of that situation, or a reflection on my abilities. Then, in the 1990s, I did intensive field work on Jarawara, spoken in southern Amazonia, and undertook a comparative study of the six languages of the Arawá family, to which it belongs. I found that here the established methodology worked perfectly (it was like a dream, after my struggles with the Australian situation). I was able to establish correspondence sets, compare their distributions, and then to reconstruct the phoneme system, more than four hundred lexemes, quite a bit of morphology, and some of the syntax for proto-Arawá. This easy success with Arawá emphasised to me the unusual – and probably unique – nature of the language situation in Australia.

The languages of Australia show recurrent similarities, such that almost everyone who has studied several of them (beginning with Grey 1841) has inclined towards the opinion that they must all be related. Related how? Well, presumably in the way languages in other parts of the world are related, as one language family. I belonged to this band. There was, we assumed, likely to have been an ancestor language, proto-Australian. *LoA* was the first serious attempt to put forward a hypothesis concerning proto-Australian. But the procedure followed was flawed. I used a selection of data from the clearest and most accessible descriptions available, most of these being of non-prefixing languages. (In the late 1970s, when the book was completed, there were only a handful of descriptions available for prefixing languages; these were all made

full use of.) The method was selective; by comparing similar paradigms in a number of languages, I reconstructed proto-paradigms, which were certainly sound and valid with respect to the data employed. However, they did not justify the label ‘proto-Australian’.

In preparing the present volume I have made use of all the available material on each of the 240–50 autochthonous languages of mainland Australia, taking account not only of the sixty or so good grammars produced during the past twenty years, but also examining and analysing the old (and often far from satisfactory) materials on languages from southern regions, which fell out of use many years ago. It will be seen – from the surveys of phonological and grammatical features presented throughout this book – that no clear picture emerges of what the full inventory of lexical and grammatical forms could have been for a putative proto-Australian.

It is natural to work in terms of the prevailing body of opinion in any discipline. I began (in the 1970s) by hypothesising that the Australian languages were likely to constitute a genetic family (like Indo-European and Austronesian) and that ‘Pama-Nyungan’ was a high-level subgroup within it. But a subgroup may only be established on the basis of significant distinctive innovations. Although at the time I wanted ‘Pama-Nyungan’ to be a subgroup, it proved impossible to uncover sufficient distinctive innovations to justify this. On pages 255–6 of *LoA*, I stated: ‘Pama-Nyungan – although a useful label to cover the large class of Australian languages which have not undergone radical changes that involve the development of pronominal and other prefixes to the verb, and a generally polysynthetic structure – has not yet been shown to have any genetic significance.’

Some of the reviewers of *LoA* suggested that what I had reconstructed to be ‘proto-Australian’ was in fact better labelled ‘proto-Pama-Nyungan’. This is not so. For example, proponents of ‘Pama-Nyungan’ as a genetic group have typically taken ergative *-ngu* to be a diagnostic feature of ‘proto-Pama-Nyungan’. But forms relating to *-ngu* are found in only about one-third of the languages regarded as ‘Pama-Nyungan’ and this form cannot really be imputed to a ‘proto-Pama-Nyungan’. In a major contribution to comparative Australian studies, Sands (1996) showed that an original ergative form **-dhu* explains the great majority of modern ergative forms right across the continent (in both prefixing and non-prefixing languages, in both ‘Pama-Nyungan’ and ‘non-Pama-Nyungan’ languages).

As explained in the appendix to chapter 2, ‘Pama-Nyungan’ was first introduced within a lexicostatistic classification of Australian languages, in terms of a view that every language should be able to be placed on a fully articulated family tree. The validity of such a family tree was assumed; it was then just a matter of discovering the place on the tree appropriate for each language. Later, the ‘Pama-Nyungan’/‘non-Pama-Nyungan’ division was redefined in terms of languages without and with number-segmentable non-singular pronouns (see §7.2). Lexicostatistics has been shown to be based on non-sustainable premisses and to have limited usefulness anywhere in the world. It has the lowest applicability in Australia, where there is no distinction between ‘core’

and ‘non-core’ vocabulary in terms of borrowability. Yet this is one of the few parts of the world where people still have recourse to lexicostatistics, as an indicator of genetic relationships.

I have – over the past thirty and more years – experimented with many ways of accounting for the relationship between Australian languages. In this volume I work in terms of what appears to me to be the only appropriate model for this quite special language situation. My essay *The rise and fall of languages* (1997) was conceived as a prolegomenon for the present work. It suggests that – during the hundred thousand years or more during which humankind has had language – there have been, in each geographical region, long periods of equilibrium broken by short periods of punctuation. During punctuation there is expansion and split of peoples and of languages; here a family tree diagram will model what happens. During equilibrium periods the number of languages spoken within a given region will remain roughly constant; there will be diffusion of cultural and linguistic traits so that the cultures will become more similar and the languages will tend to converge towards a common prototype.

It is generally accepted that the first people settled in the Australia/New Guinea land mass at least forty thousand (and probably fifty thousand) years ago. The spread of people and languages around the continent would have been a period of punctuation, which a family tree diagram would have modelled. But this is likely to have been completed within a few thousand years. It is likely that for tens of millennia the non-mountainous/non-forested part of the Australia/New Guinea land mass has constituted a linguistic equilibrium area. It is this which has to be investigated and described. Interestingly, there are a number of putative low-level genetic subgroups, pointing to minor punctuations in quite recent times (some probably due to expansion into previously unoccupied territory, as water resources became more abundant). A number of these genetic groups have been established, by reconstruction of the proto-language and the systematic changes through which the modern languages have developed; for others this remains to be done. On the evidence available, it seems most unlikely that the low-level genetic groups will be relatable together in terms of higher-level genetic groups. The question of whether all Australian languages go back to a single ancestor is not answerable, because of the great time-depth involved. All that we can perceive is a well-established equilibrium situation, across the continent; this is what must be studied. The most notable feature about the languages of Australia is that they do, without doubt, constitute the longest-established linguistic area in the world.

A major finding of the work reported in this volume is that Australian languages tend to vary in terms of a number of typological parameters, and to change with respect to them in a cyclic fashion – moving from type A to B to C and then back to A (some parameters shift in only one direction while others may be bidirectional). These cyclic changes are discussed through the volume and summarised in the final chapter, 14.

The only definite dates in this book are those provided by geographers for things like the rise and fall of sea level and by archaeologists for things like the earliest trace

of humans, and of dingos. I will often comment that a certain feature appears to be of relatively recent origin, and that something else appears to be relatively ancient. What dates should be attached to recent versus ancient? Should it be a few hundred years versus a few thousand? Or a few thousand versus a few tens of thousand? I don't know.

This volume includes a number of maps, most of which show the isogloss for a linguistic feature. It will be noted that the isoglosses do not bunch. For ease of reference, the languages have been arranged in fifty groups (some genetic, some small linguistic areas, some simply geographical). The twelve groups relating to languages classified as 'non-Pama-Nyungan' are given a first letter N (NA–NL). This is to enable the reader to see that only one isogloss (that for number-segmentable non-singular pronouns) runs along the division between groups NA–NL, on the one hand, and the remaining groups (labelled A–Y and WA–WM), on the other hand. The 'Pama-Nyungan' idea is a pervasive one, used both by Australianists and by linguists at large. However, it is totally without foundation and must be discarded if any progress is to be made in studying the nature of the linguistic situation in Australia.

It should also be pointed out that comparison between work on Australian languages and work on languages from other parts of the world is otiose. For example, Crowley (1997: 275) offers the comment that 'an Australian Dempwolff has yet to arrive on the scene'. Now Dempwolff (1934–8) compared the vocabularies of a number of Austronesian languages and reconstructed the forms of more than 2,200 lexemes in proto-Austronesian. There is no way that anyone – 'a Dempwolff' or anyone else – could do this for Australia. Capell (1956: 85–93) recognised thirty-six recurrent lexical forms which he labelled 'common Australian'. In §4.2 below the inventory is expanded to about 120 recurrent lexemes, each of which is found beyond a single geographical region. Doubtless a number more could be added after intensive comparison of vocabularies from languages in different parts of the continent. But this is a long, long way short of 2,200. The language situation in Australia is simply unlike that of Austronesian; or of Indo-European or Uralic or Uto-Aztecan. It is unique.

The materials available on Australian languages are not of uniform quality; this applies to early materials from the nineteenth century and also to recent descriptions from the end of the twentieth century. Grammars vary in terms of their accessibility (how clearly organised they are, and how easy it is to find things in them) and – most importantly – in terms of their quality. When one examines some recent descriptions, one does not have full confidence that, for instance, the appropriate inventory of phonemes has been recognised, or that the morphological analysis has maximal explanatory power. It is a convention in academic society today (and perhaps slightly more in Australia than anywhere else in the world) that one should hesitate to criticise the work of colleagues. Indeed, there is a tendency on the part of many people to assume that EVERYTHING which has appeared in print is equally valid and correct. A close investigation shows that this is not the case. In some instances linguist A works on language X and publishes a slim grammar; then linguist B works on the same language and

produces a rich and exquisite description, revealing and explaining complications that had passed A by. In many cases only one linguist has worked on a language but it is not hard to assess – by the lack of internal consistency, and by the general way in which a grammar is written – that this work is of less than adequate quality.

In this volume I take account of all published and unpublished materials, but I have placed most reliance on those that are written in an accessible manner, and especially on those that I consider to be of good quality. For example, I look to see whether a writer provides explicit criteria for the analytic decisions they make rather than, say, assuming that the categories of traditional Latinate grammar (or those of some current formal theory) will apply.

The reader must be alerted to the fact that I have not attempted to provide an exhaustive survey of the literature. To have included a summary of every idea that has been put forward concerning the relationship between Australian languages would have added considerably to the length of this book, and would have made it less coherent and less readable. There are right indented and unjustified passages discussing a number of alternative analyses. In addition, references are provided within the text to good-quality discussions of points that I deal with. But I must ask the reader's indulgence for only including bibliographical references that are strictly relevant to the overall thesis which is developed in the volume.

A companion volume is in preparation (but still some way from completion): *Australian languages: a complete catalogue*. This will consist of a short account of each of the 240–50 languages, giving tribal and dialect names, traditional territory and current situation, plus a summary of the main phonological, morphological and syntactic features, and an annotated list of published and unpublished source materials.

The older one gets the more one learns; and, at the same time, the greater the realisation one has of the vast amount one does not know. A young scholar is likely to have confidence that relevant problems can be neatly stated and satisfactorily answered. As the years advance, one tries rather to clarify the nature of the problems, and to formulate some ideas towards their solution.

All scientific progress is cumulative but sometimes a discipline becomes enmeshed in a cul-de-sac of its own making. One needs to make a sidestep in order then to continue to move forward. I have tried, in this book, to provide something of the foundation for further work on the indigenous languages of Australia which, hopefully, will enable future generations of scholars more fully to understand the nature of these languages, and of their development and interrelations.

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