Hunter-gatherers are often portrayed as ‘others’ standing outside the main trajectory of human social evolution. But even after eleven millennia of agriculture and two centuries of widespread industrialization, hunter-gatherer societies continue to exist. This volume, using the lens of language, offers us a window into the inner workings of twenty-first-century hunter-gatherer societies – how they survive and how they interface with societies that produce more. It challenges long-held assumptions about the limits on social dynamism in hunter-gatherer societies to show that their languages are no different either typologically or sociolinguistically from other languages. With its worldwide coverage, this volume serves as a report on the state of hunter-gatherer societies at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and readers in all geographical areas will find arguments of relevance here.

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The Language of Hunter-Gatherers

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Dedicated to the memory of Jane Hill and Jørgen Rischel, whose chapters in this volume and their overall academic oeuvre make outsized contributions to the field this volume addresses.

Jane Hill and Jørgen Rischel
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Maps</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Contributors</td>
<td>xix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>xxi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part I Introduction</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Hunter-Gatherer Anthropology and Language</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom Güldemann, Patrick McConvell, and Richard A. Rhodes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Genetic Landscape of Present-Day Hunter-Gatherer Groups</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen Dröfn Gunnarsdóttir and Mark Stoneking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Linguistic Typology and Hunter-Gatherer Languages</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balthasar Bickel and Johanna Nichols</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Ethnobiology and the Hunter-Gatherer/Food Producer Divide</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cecil H. Brown</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part II Africa</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Hunters and Gatherers in East Africa and the Case of Ongota (Southwest Ethiopia)</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graziano Savà and Mauro Tosco</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Changing Profile When Encroaching on Forager Territory: Toward the History of the Khoe-Kwadi Family in Southern Africa</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom Güldemann</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Part III Tropical Asia

7 Hunter-Gatherers in South and Southeast Asia: The Mlabri
   Jørgen Rischel

8 Foraging and the History of Languages in the Malay Peninsula
   Niclas Burenhult

9 Linguistic Clues to Andamanese Prehistory: Understanding the
   North-South Divide
   Juliette Blevins

10 Historical Linguistics and Philippine Hunter-Gatherers
    Lawrence A. Reid

11 Hunter-Gatherers of Borneo and Their Languages
    Antonia Soriente

Part IV New Guinea and Australia

12 The Linguistic Situation in Near Oceania before Agriculture
    Malcolm Ross

13 Language, Locality and Lifestyle in New Guinea
    Mark Donohue

14 Small Language Survival and Large Language Expansion on a
   Hunter-Gatherer Continent
    Peter Sutton

15 Language and Population Shift in Pre-Colonial Australia:
   Non-Pama-Nyungan Languages
    Mark Harvey

16 The Spread of Pama-Nyungan in Australia
    Patrick McConvell

Part V Northeastern Eurasia

17 Typological Accommodation in Central Siberia
    Edward J. Vajda

18 Hunter-Gatherers in South Siberia
    Gregory D. S. Anderson and K. David Harrison
Contents

Part VI North America

19 Primitivism in Hunter and Gatherer Languages: The Case of Eskimo Words for Snow
WILLEM J. DE REUSE 523

20 Language Shift in the Subarctic and Central Plains
RICHARD A. RHODES 552

21 Uto-Aztecan Hunter-Gatherers
JANE H. HILL 577

Part VII South America

22 Language and Subsistence Patterns in the Amazonian Vaupés
PATIENCE EPPS 607

23 The Southern Plains and the Continental Tip
ALEJANDRA VIDAL AND JOSÉ BRAUNSTEIN 641

Appendix A Preliminary Worldwide Survey of Forager Languages
Tom Güldemann, Patrick McConvell, and Richard A. Rhodes 670

Language Index 700

Subject Index 710
Figures

2.1 Genetic diversity of hunter-gatherer and agricultural groups  page 54
6.1 Proposed historical development of the Khoe-Kwadi family  136
8.1 Aslian family tree, rooted on Mon  166
8.2 Neighbor-Net graph of Aslian basic vocabulary, based on reflexes of 160 basic meanings in 27 Aslian language varieties  189
14.1 Nested groupings, south-east Cape York Peninsula  358
16.1 Relationship between Pama-Nyungan and Non-Pama-Nyungan  424
18.1 Viktor Sambuu, Todzhu herder departing Xam-Syra village, 2001  507
18.2 (Upper) Sergei Kangarayev (b. 1962), Tofa hunter, and (lower) Marta Kangarayeva (b. 1930), expert Tofa hunter  508
20.1 A family tree of the whole Algic family  554
20.2 Classification of the Ojibwe subfamily  555
20.3 Title page from Baraga’s Dictionary of the Otchipwe language (1853).  566
22.1 Relationships among Naduhup languages  613
22.2 Naduhup languages and contact with horticulturalists  632
Maps

1.1 Forager languages and early food production across the globe  page 27
3.1 Black = hunter-gatherers, white = food producers; circle = Trans-Pacific (Americas, Pacific, North Asian Pacific coast), square = elsewhere (Africa, most of Eurasia)  70
5.1 The Ongota and the neighboring peoples mentioned in the text  94
5.2 The movements of the Ongota along the Weyt’o River, according to the Ongota myth of the origins (by Sophia Thubauville)  99
6.1 Non-Bantu populations in southern Africa  117
8.1 Map of the Malay Peninsula showing the approximate distribution of Aslian languages and sub-branches (according to the traditional tripartite classification) and their relationship to the cultural label ‘Semang’  170
9.1 Location of the Andaman Islands  199
9.2 Tribal territories occupied in the 1860s  200
10.1 Map of Negrito languages of the Philippines  253
11.1 Approximate location of hunter-gatherers in Borneo  271
11.2 The location of the Penan Benalui in East Kalimantan  281
11.3 The distribution of some Pnan groups around the watershed of the Lurah River  282
12.1 Near Oceania: New Guinea, the Bismarck Archipelago and the Solomon Islands, with contiguous region  312
12.2 Major biogeographic regions of Island SE Asia and the Pacific: Sundaland, Wallacea, Near Oceania, and Remote Oceania  313
12.3 New Guinea shoreline at 6,000 BP  316
12.4 Papuan and Austronesian language areas  317
12.5 Oceanic Austronesian language groups and Papuan languages in NW Island Melanesia  320
12.6 Papuan Language groups: a tentative set of proposals  321
12.7 The hunters and gatherers of New Guinea  324
13.1 New Guinea and the languages and areas referred to in the text  338

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xii List of Maps

14.1 Western Desert language 359
14.2 Mid-Holocene lithic expansion zones (bifacial points vs. backed artifacts vs. both vs. neither) mapped onto non-Pama-Nyungan languages (hatched) and the Asian contact zone 1620–1907 365
14.3 Sample areas. 371
15.1 Map of the area occupied by the Pama-Nyungan family of languages in Australia 395
15.2 Map of the area occupied by the Non-Pama-Nyungan languages in Australia 396
15.3 The mid-central NT, distinguished from the rest of Australia by the concentration of discontinuities. 406
16.1 Change in meaning of some roots from east to west in Pama-Nyungan. 430
16.2 *Kaala ‘mother’s brother’ > ‘cross-cousin/spouse’ 440
17.1 Language map of central Siberia in the 1600s 466
17.2 Yeniseian substrate hydronyms and their probable language of origin 468
18.1 Map showing the traditional Tofa territory, located in the administrative district of Irkutsk, and just to the south of that, the Todzhu (Tozhu) District, in the Republic of Tuva 502
18.2 Two riverine views of Tofa territory, encompassing the Uda river watershed 512
20.1 Detail of language distribution in the Great Lakes area according to Handbook of North American Indians (Languages), Vol. 17 557
20.2 Approximate distribution of the western Great Lakes tribes ca. 1650 558
20.3 Approximate distribution of languages around the Great Lakes ca. 1650 559
20.4 Approximate distribution of languages around the Great Lakes ca. 1750 561
20.5 Approximate distribution of Ojibwe and Cree ca. 1980 562
20.6 Approximate distribution of Ojibwe dialects ca. 1980 563
22.1 Location of Naduhup and neighboring indigenous languages 609
23.1 (a) Ancient socio-political units (b) Linguistic stocks. Gran Chaco. 645
23.2 Early peopling 647
23.3 Gran Chaco after the Spanish conquest 648
23.4 The colonial period 651
Tables

2.1 Number of languages spoken by regionally defined hunter-gatherer groups  
2.2 Haplogroups and haplotypes  
3.1 The 4 variables (out of 228) that reached significance in the difference between hunter-gatherer and other languages  
3.2 Selected other variables: illustrative list of variables that were not significantly different for hunter-gatherer languages, chosen for good representation and wide distribution over the kinds of variables tested  
4.1 Tenejapa Tzeltal system for the classification and naming of oaks  
4.2 Diegueño system for the classification and naming of oaks  
4.3 Lake Miwok system for the classification and naming of oaks  
4.4 Inventory of oak naming systems in eighty Native American languages organized by culture area with information on mode of subsistence  
4.5 Association between BOT and AGR  
4.6 Association between GOT and AGR  
4.7 Culture area averages  
5.1 Origin of the Ongota clans  
5.2 Ts'amakko borrowings in Ongota  
5.3 Vowel length reduction  
5.4 Vowel height change  
5.5 Dental assimilation of glottal stop  
5.6 Nasal change  
5.7 Gender suffix replacement in Ongota  
5.8 Masculine suffix replacement in Ongota  
5.9 Feminine suffix replacement in Ongota  
5.10 Suffix loss with no replacement in Ongota  
5.11 Suffix absorption in Ongota  
5.12 Internal and final changes in Ongota
List of Tables

5.13 Irregular consonant change in Ongota 107
5.14 Non-Ts’amakko borrowings in Ongota 108
5.15 Ongota similarities with Nilo-Saharan languages 108
5.16 Ongota borrowings from South Cushitic 108
5.17 Similarities with Oromo dialects, Konso and North Omotic languages 109
5.18 Words with no apparent similarity in other languages 109
6.1 Independent non-Bantu lineages in southern Africa and internal classification 116
6.2 Typological comparison between Khoe-Kwadi and Non-Khoe 118
6.3 The system of independent complex pronouns in !Ora (Khoekhoe, Khoe) 120
6.4 The system of pronouns for participants in !Xam (!Ui, Tuu) 121
6.5 The system of person-gender-number markers in Proto-Khoe 122
6.6 The assumed system of pronouns in later Pre-Khoe 122
6.7 The system of pronouns for participants and gender I in Ju’hoan (Ju, Kx’a) 123
6.8 The system of pronouns in Proto-Khoe-Kwadi 124
6.9 The system of pronouns in Kwadi 124
6.10 Selected lexical correspondences between Kwadi and Khoe 125
6.11 The system of Sandawe pronouns 126
6.12 Potential cognates between Sandawe and Khoe involving clicks 127
6.13 Potential cognates between Sandawe, Kwadi, and Khoe not involving clicks 128
6.14 Proto-Khoe reconstructions atypical for a foraging subsistence 129
6.15 Proto-Kalahari Khoe reconstructions atypical for a foraging subsistence 130
6.16 Population diversity among major Khoe-Kwadi speaking groups 132
6.17 Assumed history of major Khoe-Kwadi speaking groups 139
8.1 Semang ethnolinguistic groups in Thailand and Malaysia 172
8.2 Northern and Central Aslian cognate pairs 183
9.1 Great Andamanese consonant correspondences 205
9.2 Correspondences for Proto-Great Andamanese *p (initial, medial, and final) 206
9.3 Correspondences for Proto-Great Andamanese *b (initial and medial only) 206
9.4 Correspondences for Proto-Great Andamanese *m (initial, medial, and final) 207
List of Tables

9.5 Correspondences for Proto-Great Andamanese *w (initial and medial only) 207
9.6 Correspondences for Proto-Great Andamanese *t (initial, medial, and final) 208
9.7 Correspondences for Proto-Great Andamanese *d (initial, medial, and final) 208
9.8 Correspondences for Proto-Great Andamanese *n (initial, medial, and final) 209
9.9 Correspondences for Proto-Great Andamanese *l (initial, medial, and final) 209
9.10 Correspondences for Proto-Great Andamanese *r (initial, medial, and final) 210
9.11 Correspondences for Proto-Great Andamanese *c (initial, medial, and final) 210
9.12 Correspondences for Proto-Great Andamanese *ŋ (initial, medial, and final) 211
9.13 Correspondences for Proto-Great Andamanese *y (initial only) 211
9.14 Correspondences for Proto-Great Andamanese *k (initial, medial, and final) 212
9.15 Correspondences for Proto-Great Andamanese *ŋ (initial, medial, and final) 212
9.16 Some Great Andamanese vowel correspondences 213
9.17 Aka-Bea body part prefixes 214
9.18 Proto-Great Andamanese body part prefixes 214
9.19 Proto-Great Andamanese Pronominal prefixes 215
9.20 Sea-related cognate sets in Great Andamanese 216
9.21 Diversity in Onge and Jarawa sea-related terms 217
9.22 Bare monosyllabic roots in Proto-Ongan, and Proto-Austronesian cognates 219
9.23 TR/TVR correspondences 226
9.24 CVR/CVRə correspondences 227
9.25 Correspondences in pre-palatal diphthongs 227
10.1 The development of verbal prefixes 239
10.2 Examples of the y reflex of PAN *R in Sinauna Tagalog 240
10.3 Examples of the a reflex of PAN *ə in Sinauna Tagalog 241
10.4 Comparison of Sinauna Tagalog verb affixation 241
10.5 Central Luzon and Tagalog nominative pronouns 242
10.6 Examples of the l reflex of PAN *R in Northern Alta 244
10.7 Nominative pronouns in Northern Alta and other Cordilleran languages 245
10.8 Examples of the r reflex of PAN *R in Arta 247

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List of Tables

10.9 Nominative pronouns in Umiray Dumaget, Paranan, and Casiguran Agta
10.10 Radical phonological change in Northern Alta
11.1 An inventory of Pnan groups in Borneo
11.2 Genealogical classification of Pnan languages according to the Ethnologue
11.3 Pnan and Dayak compared
11.4 The internal subgrouping of the North Sarawak group
11.5 Reflexes of PAN *b
11.6 Reflexes of PAN *d and *j
11.7 Correspondence of Proto-Kenyah **NC
11.8 Reflex of Proto-Kenyah **ə
11.9 Reflex of Proto-Kenyah **a
11.10 Final diphthongs in Penan Benalui
11.11 Penan Benalui grammatical words not shared by Kenyah
11.12 Penan Benalui lexemes not shared by Kenyah
12.1 Foragers of New Guinea, according to Roscoe (2005)
13.1 Sample lexical correspondences
13.2 Pronominal prefixes in One and Olo compared
13.3 Typological differences between One and Olo
13.4 Typological features of One and the north-central New Guinea area
13.5 Linguistic features that are shared between Skou and Tobati
13.6 Linguistic features that differentiate between Skou and Tobati
13.7 Features of Skou in an areal and genealogical perspective
13.8 Typological differences between Damal and its neighbouring languages
13.9 Free pronouns in Auye, Damal and Lani compared
13.10 Damal and Lani compared
13.11 Distinguishing features compared across different hunter-gatherer populations
14.1 Figures extracted from Peterson and Long’s (1986:69) tabulation of ‘size distribution of patrilineal groups’
14.2 Worldwide language speaker estimates
14.3 Geographic regions and average number of estate groups per language variety
14.4 Proportions of regional size averages
15.1 Density algorithm operation
15.2 Proto-Australian vocabulary
15.3 Non-Pama-Nyunggan language families with high-level cognacy
List of Tables

15.4 Non-Pama-Nyungan language families with low-level cognacy 400
15.5 Cognacy rates among PN languages in Western Australia 401
15.6 Cognacy rates among non-adjacent languages in Western Australia 401
15.7 Cognacy rates among PN languages in central and eastern Australia 401
15.8 Mirndi language family 407
15.9 Coverb structure 408
15.10 Proto-Garrwan pronominal roots and suffixes 409
15.11 Nungali noun class prefixation 414
15.12 Terms for centipede 415
16.1 Changes in meaning Proto-Pama-Nyungan *kalmpa 433
16.2 Kakara ‘moon’>‘east’ 435
16.3 Grandparental terms in proto-Pama-Nyungan 440
17.1 Family-internal branching and estimated time depth 470
17.2 Yeniseian cognate sets 471
17.3 Case-like enclitics in Ket that attach directly to the noun stem 476
17.4 Case-like enclitics in Ket that require a possessive connector 477
17.5 Systematic correspondences in tone between Yeniseian and Athabaskan 482
17.6 Phonemic prosodemes in Southern Ket monosyllables 483
17.7 Abitative, dative, instrumental, and locative forms of ‘rock’ in some Inner Eurasian languages 485
17.8 Position classes in the Ket finite verb 487
17.9 Proto-Yeniseian finite verb morphology 488
17.10 Morpheme position classes in the Modern Navajo verb 493
18.1 Tofa calendars 509
18.2 Todzhu calendar 510
18.3 Tofa cardinal directions 511
18.4 Tuvan cardinal directions 511
18.5 Tofa bear euphemisms 513
18.6 Tofa bear part names 513
18.7 Tofa bear verbs 514
18.8 Tofa sibilants + liquid 514
18.9 Tofa velars + nasals 515
18.10 Tofa substrate lexemes with no discernible cognate or known etymology 515
18.11 Shared Tofa and substrate lexemes 516
18.12 Weather terms 517
18.13 Wayfinding terms 517
19.1 The English and Eskimo “word” compared 534
List of Tables

19.2 Transliterations of the Comparative Eskimo Dictionary (CED) 548
21.1 Cognate density in Numic languages 586
21.2 Cognate density in Takic languages 586
21.3 UA Etyma versus Non-UA Etyma in Takic and Numic Languages 587
21.4 Variability in Takic and Numic for WALS feature groups 589
21.5 Numbers of minority feature realizations by language and subgroup 590
21.6 Variability in spreading Numic languages compared to Takic 591
21.7 Minority feature realizations that are more common in type than the majority realizations 592
21.8 Minority feature realizations that are rarer than the majority type 594
22.1 Useful wild-occurring plants (may be semidomesticated or managed) 619
22.2 Relatively low-maintenance domesticates 621
22.3 More intensively cultivated domesticates 622
22.4 Other terms relating to cultivars 624
22.5 Cognate Naduhup terms relating to material culture 628
23.1 Linguistic classification of the indigenous peoples in Gran Chaco 643
23.2 Population size and locations 644
23.3 Selected lexical forms across the continuum Toba-Pilagá languages 657
23.4 Nivacle nominal deictic determiners 658
23.5 Maka nominal deictic determiners 658
23.6 Wichi deictic determiners 659
23.7 Pilagá nominal deictic determiners 659
23.8 Pilagá and Wichi shared vocabulary 660
23.9 Shared Wichi and Quechua vocabulary 661
23.10 Toponyms 662
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xix
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Preface

This book has had a long, maybe overlong history. It originated in papers that contributors to this volume presented at an international workshop, “Historical linguistics and hunter-gatherer populations in global perspective,” at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology Leipzig in the summer of 2006. The workshop was organized by the first editor and his colleague Alena Witzlack-Makarevich (see https://www.eva.mpg.de/fileadmin/content_files/linguistics/pdf/HunterGatherer_webpage_2006.pdf), generously sponsored by the Institute’s Department of Linguistics. We would like to thank the then director, Bernard Comrie, for his crucial support as well as Claudia Schmid for her skillful conference coordination.

Following the workshop, the idea arose among the editors of this volume to make the content of the workshop public through a selection of the papers presented. That, however, left some key gaps, so to achieve better areal and thematic coverage of the topic, additional contributions were solicited.

As is obvious from the date of the workshop, this book has been a long time coming. We would therefore like to express our particular gratitude to the contributors who stayed the course for all these years. The topic is such that the volume and its individual contributions have lasting relevance to a field deeply concerned about marginalized languages.

In the final phases of the production of this book, we received tremendous administrative help from Edwin Rhodes for which we herewith express our deepest gratitude. We acknowledge the financial and institutional support granted us by the Humboldt University Berlin, the University of California, Berkeley, and the Australian National University in connection with the production of the volume itself.

It is our hope that this book will inspire further in-depth study of the languages and linguistic history of forager populations the world over.

The editors