

The Language of Hunter-Gatherers

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.

TOM GÜLDEMANN is Professor for African Linguistics and Sociolinguistics at Humboldt University, Berlin. He specializes in African linguistics, with a particular focus on languages subsumed under ‘Khoisan’ in the Kalahari Basin area of southern Africa as well as on Bantu and wider Niger-Congo.

PATRICK MCCONVELL has worked on Australian Indigenous languages, especially in the Northern Territory and Western Australia. He has published extensively on the social history of hunter-gatherer languages in general, and language shift, code-switching and mixing of languages.

RICHARD A. RHODES is Associate Professor of Linguistics at University of California, Berkeley and an internationally recognized expert in Algonquian studies. His recent work has focused on descriptive syntax and nineteenth-century Ojibwe/Ottawa documents.

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Edited by

Tom Güldemann

*Humboldt University, Berlin, and Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human
History, Jena*

Patrick McConvell

Australian National University, Canberra

Richard A. Rhodes

University of California, Berkeley



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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

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> x
<i>List of Maps</i>	xi
<i>List of Tables</i>	xiii
<i>List of Contributors</i>	xix
<i>Preface</i>	xxi
Part I Introduction	1
1 Hunter-Gatherer Anthropology and Language	3
TOM GÜLDEMANN, PATRICK MCCONVELL, AND RICHARD A. RHODES	
2 Genetic Landscape of Present-Day Hunter-Gatherer Groups	49
ELLEN DRÖFN GUNNARSDÓTTIR AND MARK STONEKING	
3 Linguistic Typology and Hunter-Gatherer Languages	67
BALTHASAR BICKEL AND JOHANNA NICHOLS	
4 Ethnobiology and the Hunter-Gatherer/Food Producer Divide	76
CECIL H. BROWN	
Part II Africa	89
5 Hunters and Gatherers in East Africa and the Case of Ongota (Southwest Ethiopia)	91
GRAZIANO SAVÀ AND MAURO TOSCO	
6 Changing Profile When Encroaching on Forager Territory: Toward the History of the Khoe-Kwadi Family in Southern Africa	114
TOM GÜLDEMANN	

viii	Contents	
	Part III Tropical Asia	147
7	Hunter-Gatherers in South and Southeast Asia: The Mlabri JØRGEN RISCHÉL	149
8	Foraging and the History of Languages in the Malay Peninsula NICLAS BURENHULT	164
9	Linguistic Clues to Andamanese Prehistory: Understanding the North-South Divide JULIETTE BLEVINS	198
10	Historical Linguistics and Philippine Hunter-Gatherers LAWRENCE A. REID	231
11	Hunter-Gatherers of Borneo and Their Languages ANTONIA SORIENTE	262
	Part IV New Guinea and Australia	309
12	The Linguistic Situation in Near Oceania before Agriculture MALCOLM ROSS	311
13	Language, Locality and Lifestyle in New Guinea MARK DONOHUE	337
14	Small Language Survival and Large Language Expansion on a Hunter-Gatherer Continent PETER SUTTON	356
15	Language and Population Shift in Pre-Colonial Australia: Non-Pama-Nyungan Languages MARK HARVEY	392
16	The Spread of Pama-Nyungan in Australia PATRICK MCCONVELL	422
	Part V Northeastern Eurasia	463
17	Typological Accommodation in Central Siberia EDWARD J. VAJDA	465
18	Hunter-Gatherers in South Siberia GREGORY D. S. ANDERSON AND K. DAVID HARRISON	499

Contents	ix
Part VI North America	521
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	605
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
<i>Appendix A Preliminary Worldwide Survey of Forager Languages</i> <i>Tom Güldemann, Patrick McConvell, and Richard A. Rhodes</i>	670
<i>Language Index</i>	700
<i>Subject Index</i>	710

Figures

2.1	Genetic diversity of hunter-gatherer and agricultural groups	<i>page</i> 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	<i>page 27</i>
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

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 <i>Handbook of North American Indians (Languages)</i> , 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	<i>page</i> 50
2.2	Haplogroups and haplotypes	53
3.1	The 4 variables (out of 228) that reached significance in the difference between hunter-gatherer and other languages	72
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	73
4.1	Tenejapa Tzeltal system for the classification and naming of oaks	78
4.2	Diegueño system for the classification and naming of oaks	79
4.3	Lake Miwok system for the classification and naming of oaks	79
4.4	Inventory of oak naming systems in eighty Native American languages organized by culture area with information on mode of subsistence	80
4.5	Association between BOT and AGR	82
4.6	Association between GOT and AGR	82
4.7	Culture area averages	83
5.1	Origin of the Ongota clans	97
5.2	Ts'amakko borrowings in Ongota	104
5.3	Vowel length reduction	105
5.4	Vowel height change	105
5.5	Dental assimilation of glottal stop	105
5.6	Nasal change	105
5.7	Gender suffix replacement in Ongota	106
5.8	Masculine suffix replacement in Ongota	106
5.9	Feminine suffix replacement in Ongota	106
5.10	Suffix loss with no replacement in Ongota	106
5.11	Suffix absorption in Ongota	106
5.12	Internal and final changes in Ongota	107

xiv	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, Konsoid 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 Jul'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	xv
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 *ɲ (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 <i>y</i> reflex of PAN *R in Sinauna Tagalog	240
10.3 Examples of the <i>a</i> 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 <i>l</i> 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 <i>r</i> reflex of PAN *R in Arta	247

xvi	List of Tables	
10.9	Nominative pronouns in Umiray Dumaget, Paranan, and Casiguran Agta	248
10.10	Radical phonological change in Northern Alta	250
11.1	An inventory of Pnan groups in Borneo	267
11.2	Genealogical classification of Pnan languages according to the Ethnologue	272
11.3	Pnan and Dayak compared	274
11.4	The internal subgrouping of the North Sarawak group	284
11.5	Reflexes of PAN *b	286
11.6	Reflexes of PAN *d and *j	287
11.7	Correspondence of Proto-Kenyah **NC	288
11.8	Reflex of Proto-Kenyah **ə	289
11.9	Reflex of Proto-Kenyah **a	289
11.10	Final diphthongs in Penan Benalui	289
11.11	Penan Benalui grammatical words not shared by Kenyah	292
11.12	Penan Benalui lexemes not shared by Kenyah	293
12.1	Foragers of New Guinea, according to Roscoe (2005)	327
13.1	Sample lexical correspondences	343
13.2	Pronominal prefixes in One and Olo compared	343
13.3	Typological differences between One and Olo	344
13.4	Typological features of One and the north-central New Guinea area	344
13.5	Linguistic features that are shared between Skou and Tobati	346
13.6	Linguistic features that differentiate between Skou and Tobati	346
13.7	Features of Skou in an areal and genealogical perspective	346
13.8	Typological differences between Damal and its neighbouring languages	346
13.9	Free pronouns in Auye, Damal and Lani compared	347
13.10	Damal and Lani compared	349
13.11	Distinguishing features compared across different hunter-gatherer populations	350
14.1	Figures extracted from Peterson and Long's (1986:69) tabulation of 'size distribution of patrilineal groups'	360
14.2	Worldwide language speaker estimates	368
14.3	Geographic regions and average number of estate groups per language variety	369
14.4	Proportions of regional size averages	370
15.1	Density algorithm operation	393
15.2	Proto-Australian vocabulary	397
15.3	Non-Pama-Nyungan language families with high-level cognacy	399

List of Tables	xvii
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 Ablative, 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

xviii	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

Contributors

GREGORY D. S. ANDERSON Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages, Salem, OR, USA

BALTHASAR BICKEL University of Zürich, Switzerland

JULIETTE BLEVINS City University of New York, USA

JOSÉ BRAUNSTEIN Academia Nacional de Ciencias de Buenos Aires, Argentina

CECIL H. BROWN Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA

NICLAS BURENHULT Lund University, Sweden

MARK DONOHUE Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages, Salem, OR, USA

PATIENCE EPPS University of Texas, Austin, USA

TOM GÜLDEMANN Humboldt University, Berlin and Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History, Jena

ELLEN DRÖFN GUNNARSDÓTTIR Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, USA

K. DAVID HARRISON Swarthmore College, PA, USA

MARK HARVEY University of Newcastle, Australia

JANE H. HILL University of Arizona, Tucson, USA

PATRICK MCCONVELL Australian National University, Canberra

JOHANNA NICHOLS University of California, Berkeley, USA

LAWRENCE A. REID University of Hawaii, Manoa, USA

WILLEM J. DE REUSE University of North Texas, Denton, USA

xx List of Contributors

RICHARD A. RHODES University of California, Berkeley, USA

JØRGEN RISCHER University of Trier, Germany

MALCOLM ROSS Australian National University, Canberra

GRAZIANO SAVÀ Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale” Naples,
Italy.

ANTONIA SORIENTE Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale” Naples,
Italy.

MARK STONEKING Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology,
Leipzig, Germany

PETER SUTTON SOAS University of London, UK

MAURO TOSCO University of Turin, Italy

EDWARD J. VAJDA Western Washington University, Bellingham, USA

ALEJANDRA VIDAL Universidad Nacional de Formosa, Argentina

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