

# I *Australian languages*

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This chapter surveys, rather briefly, some of the recurring linguistic features of languages across the continent. It does not purport to be a complete ‘Handbook of Australian languages’ and does not attempt to list the many individual variations from the basic pattern.

Further details on some of the points mentioned below will be found in the surveys by Schmidt, Ray [1925], Capell and Wurm. Schmidt [1912, 1919] draws some intelligent conclusions from the rather scanty and inaccurate published material then available. Capell [1956] gives a great deal of important information, much of it based on his own field work; but even in 1956 far less was known about Australian languages than today and some of Capell’s data is, for instance, phonetically suspect. Wurm’s [forthcoming] readable survey essentially repeats and expands some of Capell’s ideas, and includes a lexicographic classification of Australian languages (see 10.1).

## 1.1 General

There were perhaps 600 aboriginal tribes in Australia at the time of the European invasion at the end of the eighteenth century [Tindale, 1940]. Each tribe spoke a distinct dialect, which usually had considerable lexical and grammatical similarities to neighbouring dialects. The existence of extensive dialect chains makes it difficult to put an exact figure on the number of distinct aboriginal languages; recent guesses have been that there were about 200 [Wurm, 1965; O’Grady et al., 1966].

On the basis of the similarities summarised below it has for some time seemed likely that at least the majority of Australian languages are genetically related. But, although there have been two excellent essays at phonological reconstruction over smallish areas – Hale’s [1964] work on languages at the north of the Cape York Peninsula, and O’Grady’s [1966] on the Pilbara region – as yet little has been done towards reconstructing proto-Australian (but see Dixon [forthcoming-b]). However, the writer is confident that progress will be made when more, reliable data is available on a variety of languages, and once

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there are linguists who have had a thorough training in the methods of historical linguistics working on comparative Australian.

The most divergent languages are found in and around Arnhem Land, although even these have a fair number of features in common with languages in other parts of the continent. From the small amount of data published it seems that Anewan, formerly spoken on the New England tableland, was also somewhat aberrant [Mathews, 1903*a*; Buchanan, 1900].

Tasmanian languages were, at one time, thought to be quite un-Australian. It now seems quite likely that Tasmanian languages are related to those on the mainland; and that it may in time be possible to prove the relationship. Tasmanian languages are not included in the present survey.

## 1.2 Phonology

Voicing is not normally phonologically significant. There is generally a nasal corresponding to each stop. For stops and nasals there are either 4, 5 or 6 contrasting 'places of articulation'. The maximal pattern is (with labels following O'Grady, 1966):

bilabial	lamino-dental	lamino-palatal/ alveolar	apico-alveolar	apico-domal (retroflex)	dorso-velar
<i>b</i>	<i>ɸ</i>	<i>ɸ</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>ɸ</i>	<i>g</i>
<i>m</i>	<i>ɸ</i>	<i>ɸ</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>ɸ</i>	<i>ŋ</i>

The bilabials, the dorso-velars, and the sounds articulated with the tip of the tongue – apico-alveolars and apico-domals – are phonetically similar to sounds found in many other languages. The laminals are rather different from sounds occurring in other languages. In the case of lamino-dentals, the teeth are slightly apart, and the blade of the tongue touches both teeth, with the tip of the tongue somewhere in the region of the lower teeth ridge. For lamino-palatal/alveolars, the blade of the tongue touches the hard palate, or the alveolar ridge, or often both, with the tongue tip usually touching the teeth.

Many languages show the maximal stop-nasal pattern. There are two types of deviation: (1) languages in an area that very approximately coincides with the present state of Queensland have no retroflex series; (2) some languages have a single laminal series, with lamino-dental and lamino-alveopalatal sounds as allophonic variants. The distribution

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## 1.2 Phonology

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of these languages is mapped in Dixon [forthcoming-b], where data is presented which suggests that proto-Australian had a single laminal series. Many present-day languages that involve a laminal contrast show this only in a certain structural position, or before certain vowels.

In all cases bilabial, velar and all kinds of laminal stops and nasals can occur initially as well as intervocalically. However, in many cases apico-alveolars and/or apico-donals (where these occur) can function only intervocalically and not initially.

Languages east of the Gulf of Carpentaria usually have a single, apico-alveolar lateral, *l*. West of the Gulf the common pattern is for there to be one lateral corresponding to each stop-nasal series excepting bilabial and velar; but there are languages missing laterals in some series.

Australian consonant systems generally also include two semi-vowels, *w* and *y*, which can normally begin words; a semi-retroflex continuant, *ɻ*; and a flap *r*. Most languages allow some laterals and *ɻ* to occur word-initially, but only in relatively few words. *r* cannot normally occur initially.

A three-vowel system – *u*, *i*, *a* – is the norm. Vowel length is sometimes significant and sometimes not. Vowels do not as a rule occur word-initially.

Words can usually end in a vowel, or in a consonant other than a stop. Consonant clusters occur only intervocalically. All or almost all languages allow clusters of homorganic nasal plus stop, and of *r* or lateral plus stop. Most languages allow non-homorganic nasal-plus-stop clusters, and clusters involving *r* or lateral followed by a nasal, in addition to nasal-nasal clusters. Probably a minority of languages allow other types of two-member clusters, such as lateral, *ɻ* or *r* followed by *w*, or stop followed by stop. A small number of languages – mostly in Queensland – allow three-member clusters: *r*, *ɻ* or lateral; nasal; and stop.

In some languages every lexical root must consist of at least two syllables. Other languages allow monosyllabic roots but require that fully inflected words be disyllabic or longer. Most commonly, major stress falls on the first syllable of a word (although it appears that in some cases stress may fall on a later syllable, and may depend upon vowel length – Capell, 1956: 8). In some languages there is limited vowel harmony [Hale, mimeo-c; Capell, 1967: 99–101; Chadwick, 1968: 25–30].

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Phonological systems which differ from the pattern described above – for instance, in having fricatives, or vowel systems with more than three members, or allowing words to begin with consonant clusters or end with stops – can usually be shown to have, in fairly recent times, developed out of norm systems [Hale, 1964; Dixon, 1970*a*, *b*].

A slightly fuller description of the phonologies of Australian languages, with some exemplification, is in Dixon [forthcoming-b].

### 1.3 Word classes

Each lexical item belongs to just one part of speech, although there are wide derivational possibilities (these are always clearly marked morphologically). Thus noun and verb classes are distinguished both in terms of inflectional possibilities and of mutually exclusive membership. Adjectives take the same basic set of inflections as nouns and, in languages that have no noun classes (genders), it is sometimes difficult to formulate syntactic criteria to distinguish adjective and noun. Pronouns inflect rather differently from nouns. Amongst other parts of speech there is usually a class of particles that do not inflect and which provide logical or modal-type qualification of a sentence.

### 1.4 Syntax

The most common situation is for nouns to inflect according to a nominative-ergative pattern, while pronouns at least superficially follow a nominative-accusative pattern. That is, nouns have a single case (nominative) marking intransitive subject and transitive object functions, and another case (ergative) for transitive subject function. Pronouns, on the other hand, have one case marking transitive and intransitive subject and another for transitive object.

In a few languages pronouns inflect in a nominative-ergative pattern, like nouns. There are also some languages where both pronouns and nouns follow a nominative-accusative pattern.

Walbiri is an example of a language in which both nouns and pronouns inflect in a nominative-ergative pattern [Hale, 1970: 776–9]. Hale [1970: 759] reports that languages in which both nouns and pronouns follow a nominative-accusative pattern are ‘found in two widely separated areas: the Wellesley Islands and adjacent mainland in North Qld. (e.g. Lardil, of Mornington Island; Kayardilt, of Bentinck Island; and Yanggal of Forsythe Island); and the northwest coast of Western Australia (e.g. Ngaluma of the Roebourne

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area, and Yintjipaṅṅi of the Fortescue River area)'; see also von Brandenstein [1967].

Word order is in many cases extraordinarily free; in many languages every word in a phrase is inflected for case, and words can and do occur in any order in a sentence. In other cases there is both less inflection and less freedom – thus, in Gumbaingar, nouns are always inflected but the inflection may be omitted from an adjective when it immediately precedes the noun it qualifies [Smythe, 1948/9: 68]. There is probably in all languages an underlying 'norm' word order – in this the verb is usually sentence-final.

Very little work has been published on relative clauses, complements and the like; it is thus not at present possible to make any generalisations about these or related phenomena in Australian languages (but see Dixon, 1969).

**1.5 Pronoun**

The standard Australian pronoun system involves a distinction between singular, dual and plural forms in each person. A very few languages appear to have a two-term system, lacking dual. There are rather more exceptions in the other direction, where the addition of trial (or paucal) forms makes for a four-term system.

The only languages known to the writer to lack duals are Maung, spoken on Goulburn Island, N.T., and Dyabugay, spoken just to the north of Dyrbal in the Cairns rain forest region. Languages involving trial pronouns include Anipḍilyaugwa and Nunggubuyu, from Eastern Arnhem Land; Worora [Love, 1931/2], Ngarinjin [Coate and Oates, 1970] and other languages from the Kimberleys; some languages of Victoria [Mathews 1902, 1903*b*, 1904; Hercus, 1966]; and Arabana in South Australia.

Perhaps slightly more than half the languages of the continent show an inclusive/exclusive distinction in first person non-singular pronouns. In some languages there are different non-singular pronouns depending on whether the two or more persons referred to belong to the same or different alternate generation levels, and/or whether they are related through male or female kinsmen, and so on.

O'Grady et al. [1966: 104] report that in all 'languages in Western Australia which are located south of the 22nd parallel of latitude, the inclusive/exclusive distinction of the nonsingular first person pronouns, marked in the languages to the north, is lacking'. Languages in other parts of the continent that lack an inclusive/exclusive distinction include Kalkatungu [Blake, 1969: 39] and

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Pittapitta [Roth, 1897] in north-west-central Queensland, and all the languages to the south of Gugu-Yalanji (which itself has the distinction – R. Hershberger, 1964*a*) in the Cairns rain forest region and its hinterland. Hale [mimeo-a] discusses kinship-determined pronouns in Lardil, Aranda and other languages; see also O'Grady et al. [1966: 88, 130] and Strehlow [1944: 90 ff].

Pronominal forms show a striking similarity over the whole continent. We will use  $\underset{d}{D}$  and  $\underset{n}{N}$  for segments that are realised as lamino-dental  $\underset{d}{d}$  and  $\underset{n}{n}$  in languages having two laminal series, and as laminal  $\underset{d}{d}$  and  $\underset{n}{n}$  in languages with a single laminal series. Similarly,  $\underset{d}{D}$  and  $\underset{n}{N}$  will be used for segments that are realised as lamino-palatal/alveolar  $\underset{d}{d}$  and  $\underset{n}{n}$  in double-laminal languages and as laminal  $\underset{d}{d}$  and  $\underset{n}{n}$  in languages with a single series.

The following forms usually function as transitive (and often also intransitive) subject:

[1] *First person singular*:  $\eta a\underset{d}{D}u \sim \eta a\underset{d}{D}a \sim \eta ayu \sim \eta aya$ . Forms with a stop and forms with a semi-vowel each occur in a variety of languages with wide geographical distribution; the same is true of forms ending in *-a* and those ending in *-u*.

[2] *First person dual (inclusive)*:  $\eta ali$  occurs in an exceptionally large number of languages.

[3] *First person plural (exclusive)*: forms generally begin with  $\eta an-$  and end in a variety of ways.

If there is no inclusive/exclusive distinction the dual and plural first person forms are generally  $\eta ali$  and  $\eta an-$ . Where the distinction is made the inclusive plural form is often built on a root  $\eta a\underset{n}{N}-$  or  $\eta a\underset{d}{D}-$ , while the  $\eta an-$  form has exclusive reference. However in Gugu-Yalanji [R. Hershberger, 1964*a*: 56] at least, the inclusive first person plural pronoun is  $\eta ana$ . Where there is an inclusive/exclusive distinction the first person dual exclusive pronoun is not uncommonly formed by augmentation of the inclusive root  $\eta ali$ .

[4] *Second person singular*: There are a fair number of different forms occurring here and they are perhaps unlikely all to be genetically related. Initial parts are  $\eta ind- \sim \eta und- \sim \underset{n}{N}ind- \sim \underset{n}{N}und- \sim yind- \sim yund-$ . The ending is almost always *-a* or *-u*, added to one of the six initial segments.

[5] *Second person dual*: forms  $\underset{n}{N}u(m)palu \sim \underset{n}{N}u(m)pala$  occur widely.

[6] *Second person plural*:  $\underset{n}{N}ura \sim yura$  occur in most western languages, and in some languages in other parts of the continent.

Examples of actual pronominal forms in a number of languages are given in Dixon [forthcoming-b]; see also Schmidt [1912].

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In some eastern languages the first and second person singular pronouns have three different forms, corresponding to the functions intransitive subject, transitive subject and transitive object. Thus Gabi, in south Queensland, has forms [Mathew 1910: 208]:

	first person singular	second person singular
intransitive subject	<i>ŋay</i>	<i>ŋin</i>
transitive subject	<i>ŋaydu</i>	<i>ŋindu</i>
transitive object	<i>ŋana</i>	<i>ŋina</i>

Only very rarely are there different forms for each of the three functional slots in the case of non-singular pronouns in any language.

Gumbaingar has one form for each of the three functional slots in the case of all first and second person pronouns except first person dual inclusive and second person singular – in these two cases one form functions as both transitive and intransitive subject [Smythe, 1948/9: 38]. See also Blake and Breen [1971] on Pittapitta.

The transitive object form of pronouns is typically derived from the unmarked subject form by the addition of *-ŋa* (examples are in Dixon, forthcoming-b).

Possessive pronouns are commonly formed by adding an affix to the unmarked ‘subject’ form. A number of affixes are in competition, each occurring in a variety of languages with wide geographical distribution; amongst the most common are *-gu*, *-ŋu*, *-ŋa* and *-mba*.

Languages whose possessive pronouns involve *-gu* include Wiradhari [Gunther, 1892: 67–8], and Western Desert [Douglas 1964: 73] in some incorporated forms. Aranda, in which all words end in *-a*, has *-ga* [Strehlow, 1944: 91–2]. Note that Yulbaridja has *-guŋayu* [O’Grady et al., 1966: 151]. *-ŋu* occurs in Waḷuwara (on singular first and second person pronouns) and Nanda [O’Grady et al., 1966: 122]. *-ŋa* is found in Gugu-Yalanji [R. Hershberger, 1964a: 56] and on non-singular pronouns in Pittapitta [Roth, 1897: 6] and Yanyula. *-mba* occurs in Pitjantjatjara [Trudinger, 1943: 210], and in Awabakal [Threlkeld, 1892: 17; H. Hale, 1846: 488–90]. Non-singular possessive pronouns in Waḷuwara involve *-ma*.

In a number of languages there are dative pronominal forms, obtained by adding an affix that is usually *-gu* to the subject form or to some underlying root. Some languages also have other pronominal inflections – allative, ablative, locative – often patterned on the noun paradigm; however, many languages lack these peripheral cases as far as pronouns are concerned.

Dative *-gu* is found in, for example, Walbiri, Awabakal [H. Hale, 1846: 488–90], Wanman, Yulbaridja and Bailko [O’Grady et al., 1966: 137, 151, 88].

In the West Torres Straits language dative pronouns involve suffix *-ka*, and are derived from the unmarked (intransitive subject) forms of singular pronouns, but from the possessive forms of dual and plurals [Ray, 1907a: 23; Klokeid, personal communication].

Third person pronouns are often set off morphologically and syntactically from the first and second person forms. In some languages third person pronouns inflect on the pattern of nouns, rather than of other pronouns (for instance, Gumbaingar – Smythe, 1948/9: 38). Third person pronouns often carry a demonstrative meaning, and sometimes involve an obligatory specification of the proximity of the object referred to.

In Thargari there are ‘near’, ‘far’ and ‘remote’ forms of the third person singular pronoun [Klokeid, 1969: 17]. For the Western Desert language third person pronouns occur in four forms ‘near’, ‘mid-distant’, ‘distant’ and ‘not visible’ [Douglas, 1964: 47/8]. Roth [1897: 2] describes a slightly different system for Pittapitta: there are three third person forms, indicating (a) proximity to the speaker’s front or side; (b) proximity to speaker’s back; and (c) remoteness anywhere from speaker.

Third person pronouns do not commonly distinguish sex, although this does happen (for the singular pronoun) in a few languages – for instance, Yanyula and Alawa [Sharpe, forthcoming]. Aniḡḡilyaugwa distinguishes sex for almost all pronominal person and number combinations.

There does not appear to be any third person singular pronoun form which occurs in a fair number of languages with wide geographical distribution. There are, however, frequently encountered regional forms. Thus *ḡuḡa* is found in many languages in Western Australia [O’Grady et al., 1966]; *ḡulu* ~ *ḡula* are found in a variety of languages in the eastern half of the continent.

Languages in which *ḡulu* is found include Gugu-Yalanji [R. Hershberger, 1964a: 56] and Garawa; *ḡula* occurs in Bandjalang [Cunningham, 1969: 92/3] and Waruḡu, immediately to the west of Dyirbal.

Third person dual and plural pronouns are more frequently derived from the singular form than is the case for first and second person forms. There are, however, forms *bula*, third person dual, and *ḡana*, third person plural, that recur in a wide variety of languages in all parts of the continent. *bula* is a somewhat ubiquitous form – in many languages it functions as a simple number adjective ‘two’ instead of or in addition to being third person dual pronoun; cf. 1.11, below. *ḡana* can also occur as an adjective ‘all’.

In some languages, predominantly in the central and western north



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but also in New South Wales and Victoria, reduced forms of pronouns are incorporated as affixes into the verb, or into the auxiliary.

For a full discussion of this see Capell [1956] and also Wurm [1969].

### 1.6 Noun and adjective

In the great majority of Australian languages noun and adjective inflect in the same way for case. There is typically a system of from about four to eight cases.

The few languages that lack case inflections are all in or near Arnhem Land: for instance, Gunwinggu [Oates, 1964], Maung, Nunggubuyu. In most of these languages verb prefixes provide some identification of subject and object.

In most languages intransitive subject and transitive object functions are marked by nominative case. This is almost always realised by zero inflection. In a fairly small number of languages *-ŋa* can be used to mark transitive object function on common nouns and adjectives; in a rather larger number of languages *-ŋa* occurs just with proper nouns, to indicate transitive object (and, in a few cases, intransitive subject).

Some of the languages which involve *-Na* inflection on nouns are listed in Dixon [forthcoming-b]. This affix is plainly cognate with pronominal *-ŋa*, mentioned above.

There are two common ergative inflections, marking transitive subject:

[1] the inflection is commonly *-gu* or *-ŋgu* on nouns ending in a vowel, but is often a homorganic stop followed by *-u* when the stem ends in a nasal. There may also be allomorphic variants, in the case of stems ending in a vowel, that depend on the length of the stem.

Some examples: Waluwara has simply *-gu*, with no alternants (this being derived, by regular sound change, from *-ŋgu*). Wembawemba has *-gu* after a vowel, *-u* after a consonant [Hercus, 1969: 46]. Kalkatungu has *-(ŋ)gu* on a disyllabic root ending with a vowel, with assimilation when the root ends in a consonant [Blake, 1969: 33].

[2] inflection *-lu* (with variant *-lu* in some languages).

For instance, Aranda, in which all stem-final vowels have been neutralised to a central *-a*, has ergative inflection *-la* [Strehlow, 1944: 74]. Note that Arabana has *-ru*, a development from *-lu*.

In a number of languages both *-(ŋ)gu* and *-lu* ~ *-lu* occur, as allomorphic

variants of the ergative case. Thus in Walbiri *-ŋgu* is used with disyllabic stems and *-lu* with those of three or more syllables. In Pitjantjatjara *-lu* occurs with proper nouns ending in a vowel and *-ŋgu* with common nouns and adjectives ending in a vowel; proper nouns, common nouns and adjectives that end in a consonant take a homorganic stop plus *-u* in the ergative inflection [Trudinger, 1943: 206/7].

Ergative case inflections are one of the most complex and most fascinating areas of Australian comparative grammar. A full discussion would be out of place here but one or two further examples may be given. Thargari has some similarities to Walbiri: ergative inflection is *-gu* (a development from *-ŋgu*) with a disyllabic stem ending in a vowel, but *-du* (with assimilation, etc.) on all other stems [Klokeid, 1969: 25]. It is tempting to speculate whether the *-du* might be related to an original *-lu*. Gumbaingar makes an interesting comparison – oversimplifying slightly, ergative is *-du* after a vowel, a homorganic stop plus *-u* after a nasal, and just *-u* after *l* [Smythe, 1948/9: 29–31]. If Gumbaingar *-du* inflection were related to an original *-lu* it would seem that *-lu* can be assimilated to a stem-final consonant in the same way as can *-(ŋ)gu*. The situation is even more complex in Walmatjari; here the ergative inflection is:

- lu* after a stem of three or more syllables ending in a vowel;
- ŋu* on a disyllabic stem ending in a vowel;
- u* on a stem ending in a lateral or *r*;
- du* after a stem ending in a bilabial or apico-alveolar nasal or stop;
- ɖu* after a stem ending in an apico-domal nasal or stop; and
- ɖu* after a stem ending in a dorso-velar or lamino-palatal/alveolar nasal or stop.

The final three alternants specify a stop after a stem ending in a nasal or a stop; note the rather limited assimilation here. Alternant *-lu* is presumably related to the *-lu* ~ *-lu* occurring in other languages; *-ŋu* may be related to the ergative inflection *-(ŋ)gu* in other languages; it then remains to decide whether the alternants involving a stop relate to *-lu*, or to *-ŋu*, or whether they are historically independent of both.

Virtually every language has a locative – ‘at’, ‘on’, ‘in’ – inflection of nouns and adjectives. In the great majority of cases this is exactly the same as the ergative inflection except that the final vowel of the locative is *-a*, as against *-u* for the ergative case. The often complex alternations encountered in the case of the ergative are exactly repeated for the locative.

Thus Waḷuwara has *-ga* for locative inflection. Gumbaingar has *-da* after a vowel, a homorganic stop plus *-a* after a nasal, and just *-a* after *l* [Smythe, 1948/9: 29–31]. And similarly, repeating the alternations sketched above, for Thargari [Klokeid, 1969: 28], Walbiri and Walmatjari. Different dialects of the Pitjantjatjara/Western Desert language vary slightly in their ergative and locative inflections – sometimes the two cases are out of step. Thus, for the