

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.

The Language of Hunter-Gatherers

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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Tom Güldemann, Patrick McConvell, Richard A. Rhodes
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One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India
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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

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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

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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