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BOOK REVIEW:[#]

Australian Aboriginal Languages: A General Introduction. By Barry J. Blake. Angus and Robertson. 137pp. \$4.95.

Reviewer: Bob Dixon*

RICH, NEGLECTED HERITAGE

It is hard to think of any aspect of Australian society which has been so misunderstood as the nature of Aboriginal languages.

Early settlers put about the idea that Aborigines didn't really have a fully developed language - just a few score names for common objects, with no real rules for the combination of words. This supposed lack of language was sometimes taken as proof of primitiveness, which could be reckoned sufficient justification for usurpation and even slaughter.

Dr Barry Blake, Senior Lecturer in Linguistics at Monash University, begins his admirable survey with an account of what novice students at his university said they would expect to find if ever they studied an Aboriginal language. Some said there would be no grammar; others suggested that the sounds would be the sounds of nature, like the whistling of the wind or the rippling of water.

Dr Blake goes on to explain - in clear and cogent terms that should be understandable to any Australian, white or black - that the grammatical structures of Australian languages are just as complicated as those of any language from the Old World. They resemble Latin more than English, with "case endings" on nouns showing whether something is subject or object of a sentence, or whether an activity is "to" or "from" or "at" or "because of" some object.

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The sounds of Aboriginal languages are described with care, and compared with English. There are at least two different kinds of *t* sound (like many Indian languages) and two different *r* sounds - one like that in Australian pronunciation of words like Mary, and the other a trilled *r* as in Scots English.

Dr Blake eschews technical jargon, explaining some of the important structural features of Aboriginal languages in a very straightforward manner. Wisely, most of his examples are from Pitta-Pitta, a language from north-west-central Queensland that has, for an Australian language, a rather uncomplicated grammar.

There are useful chapters on Aboriginal vocabularies - nothing primitive here either. Each language has about 10,000 words; not as many as in the massive dictionaries of English but about the same number as the working vocabulary of the man-in-the-street speaker of English.

A fascinating chapter on 'Language and Social Life' describes ways in which grammar can mirror kinship systems. Most Australian languages have more pronouns than English: different words for "we two" and "we all". There are often two different forms for "we two": one which includes the addressee ("you and I") and one which excludes him or her ("she/he and I"). And some languages have different pronouns depending on whether the two people referred to are in the same male descent line or not!

There is useful mention of Pidgin English and Aboriginal English. A final chapter lists Aboriginal words that have been taken over into Australian English, giving the original meaning and spelling and the language from which each originally derives: barramundi, brigalow, kangaroo, taipan and many more.

Dr Blake's survey fills a real gap. For too long the only volumes generally available on Aboriginal languages have been "lists of words suitable as house names", muddled together from different languages, or perhaps implying that there was just *one* Aboriginal language.

It is to be hoped that volumes of this nature will be replaced on newsagents' racks by Dr Blake's accessible and informative account. There were, as he states, about 200 distinct languages in use among the 600 Aboriginal tribes of the continent, each as different from the others as are English and French, but probably all springing from a single ancestor language spoken many millennia in the past. They were rich and subtle vehicles of communication, and of aesthetic expression. It is time all Australians became aware of this important intellectual heritage.