



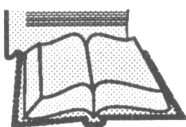
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Book Reviews

Macquarie Aboriginal Words

N. Thieberger and W. McGregor (Eds)

Macquarie Library, Sydney, 1994, xxv + 724 pp

Reviewed by Geraldine Triffitt

A scholarly, accurate book of this nature is long overdue. It dispels the myths of one Aboriginal language, so often incorporated in the existing books of Aboriginal words, which characteristically do not mention the number of Aboriginal languages nor mention any by name.

There has been an upsurge of interest in Australian Aboriginal languages in the past decade, by Aboriginal people aware of the importance of language in their culture. This may trigger a demand for bilingual education, so that the language is maintained for the next generation, or initiate language-revival programs for people wanting to learn their language, existing only in nineteenth-century documents. Non-Aboriginal people are gradually becoming more informed about Aboriginal culture in general. Landowners are seeking suitable words in the local language for their homes or properties, while business people see an Aboriginal brand-name as identifying a product as Australian. Hopefully, this will lead to greater communication between the would-be language users and language owners as the ownership and rights to language are recognised.

This book gives word lists for seventeen languages, representing all states except Tasmania: Bundjalung, Ngiyampaa, Paakantyi, Sydney language and Wiradjuri from New South Wales; Wembawemba from Victoria; Diyari and Kurna from South Australia; Nyoongar, Gooniyandi and Yindjibarndi from Western Australia; Datiwuy, Eastern Arrernte and Murrinh-Patha from Northern Territory; and Meryam Mir, Wik-Mungkan and Torres Strait Creole from Queensland.

The editors have shown great skill in their choice of languages. The selected languages demonstrate the variation in the indigenous languages of Australia. There are genetic differences, between the large Pama-Nyungan family which extends over most of Australia and the non-Pama-Nyungan languages of the north, represented in this book by Murrinh-Patha and Gooniyandi. Meryam Mir spoken on Eastern Torres Strait Islands is of Papuan, not Australian, origin. Other languages chosen reflect the effect of European invasion on the linguistic history of Australia. Some languages, like the Sydney language, exist only in books, but have provided botanic and zoological vocabulary for English, and influenced Aboriginal languages through the pidgins used for communication when Europeans took over Aboriginal lands. Torres Strait Creole is included as an example of a contact language. At the other extreme, Merkiyawuy Ganambarr describes her language, Datiwuy, still spoken in Arnhem Land.

Other language speakers have co-authored chapters with linguists who have analysed the languages and published dictionaries or grammars of the languages they describe.

In the foreword, the book is endorsed by fifteen prominent Aboriginal people in various areas of public life — politics, administration, media, arts, academic life, sport — and two non-Aboriginal people — a linguist and a lawyer.

The introduction by William McGregor gives an excellent summary of the characteristics of Australian languages (the term he uses for Australian indigenous languages). He describes the distribution and types of languages spoken

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before European settlement and the linguistic changes resulting from contact with Europeans — the loss of language speakers through diseases, massacres, dispossession, or the emergence of *lingua franca* such as pidgins and creoles used as contact languages. A further threat to language survival was the government assimilation policy, when institutionalised children were denied access to their families.

The languages are described as an integral part of the social organisation of the group. The kinship system, which regulates relationships between individuals, conditions the choice of vocabulary, even requiring a second language for communicating between individuals in avoidance relationships for some languages.

McGregor explains, simply, such complex grammatical aspects as ergativity. He shows the conciseness of agglutinating languages in examples of the prefixing and suffixing structures of non-Pama-Nyungan languages. To counter the argument that Australian languages have limited vocabularies, he shows that most of them have a vocabulary of 10,000 words, similar to that of an average English speaker. The vocabulary reflects the speakers' needs; consequently, there is a richness of terms for body parts, kinship and the natural environment, and devices like metaphors and part/whole relationships extend the meaning of words. Terms for new concepts can be borrowed from other languages, words may be given extended meanings or new words may be coined.

There is a general guide to pronunciation and spelling to which the individual languages are later compared and differences identified. The word lists follow a similar structure. They are arranged in subject categories: nouns relating to humans and human activity; then nouns of the natural world — the environment, botany and zoology; words expressing physical and non-

physical qualities; verbs of motion, state or action; other word classes, such as pronouns and locatives and place names.

The pattern for each chapter is similar: the location of the language, a brief linguistic history, the kinship structure, the word list which may accentuate particular aspects of the language, and a grammatical section which highlights particular features or morphology, syntax or word classes.

Each word from the word list is indexed in the two reverse indexes: Language-English and English-Language. These indexes will be widely used by new owners of houses or boats who want to have 'an Aboriginal word to mean ...' Hopefully, they will at least read the introduction to get an overview of the structures of the languages, and not just pillage words in isolation. The political natures of languages as a measure of identity, and the need for non-Aboriginal people to respect the sensitivities of the owners of languages, are not stressed sufficiently in this work.

The structure of the chapters is sufficiently flexible to allow characteristics of individual languages to be described. In her chapter on the Bundjalung dialects of the North Rivers district of New South Wales, Margaret Sharpe emphasises the dialectal differences in vocabulary and morphology. The dialects are unusual in having distinctive pronouns for 'he' and 'she', and a feminine suffix for adjectives and nouns.

Tamsin Donaldson shows how a language name distinguishes one language from another. Ngiyampaa is derived from *nyiya* 'word' and *paa* 'world'. Its two dialects *wayil-wan* and *wangaay puwan*, like related languages Gamil-araay and Wira-djuri, mean 'no-having'. A fragment of text demonstrates how a sentence can be combined in one word, where English needs several words.

The Darling River dialects are unified under the name for 'river', Paakantyi. Luise Hercus

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compiled her word list from the information she gained from speakers no longer living. She gives examples of the complexity of the case suffixes.

Only early documents were available for Jakelin Troy's Sydney language and the Wiradjuri word lists. Although the languages have died out, they have provided many flora and fauna terms used in English. The chapter on Wiradjuri by Sally McNicol and Dianne Hosking describes some of the difficulties of creating a standard orthography for words that vary from source to source.

Recordings of a Wembawemba speaker, the only example of a Victorian language, were made by Luise Hercus in the 1960s. This is an example of a language that has no adjective class, but uses nouns with attributive suffixes or stative verbs to express qualities.

The two South Australian languages, Diyari and Kaurna, were studied by Lutheran missionaries in the mid-nineteenth century. Their extensive dictionaries provided the data for the word lists. Peter Austin had the added advantage of recording fluent Diyari speakers, but the last Kaurna speaker died in 1929. Rob Amery and Jane Simpson have been involved in the resurgence of interest in Kaurna, now taught in language programs in schools. Their word list has an additional section for terminology used in learning, schools and education.

The variations between languages are shown in the three Western Australian languages. In the south-west, Alan Dench has reconstructed a word list for the dialects of Nyungar from historical documents. He remarks on the changes in pronunciation as children speak Nyungar words with English sounds. Sentences have Subject-Object-Verb word order, and the few verbs, although sparsely documented, were used in series with adverbs to express different meanings. In contrast, Gooniyandi has a free word order and a

rich case and verbal morphology. Speakers are combating the Kriol spoken by their children round Fitzroy Crossing with the help of language programs prepared from linguistic analyses by William McGregor and other linguists.

Yindjibarndi, spoken at Roebourne, still has several hundred speakers, including Sue Smythe, who co-authors the chapter with Nick Thieberger. The four-section kinship system, as well as giving everyone a place in society, impacts on the grammar by having different pronouns for same or different generations. Unlike the ergative Gooniyandi, Yindjibarndi is a nominative/accusative language where the subject is unmarked as in English.

Through explaining the meaning of *yothu yindi*, Merrkiyawny Ganambarr describes the complexities of the Arnhem Land kin system. Although a Datiwuy woman, she learned her language as an adult having been taught the children's language, Dhuwaya, and English at school. Her word list is rich in terms for the environment and food sources, distinguishing between general, inedible and edible terms for animals, plants and aquatic life. Separate sections occur for billabong foods, tubers, nuts, vegetables, fruits and sweets.

The Eastern Arrernte, one of the Arandic languages of Central Australia, is being taught to children in several school programs and is used on radio and television programs. The co-authors of the chapter, John Henderson and Veronica Dobson, are also the compilers of the excellent *Eastern and Central Arrernte to English Dictionary*. The orthography of Arrernte is unusual, using only three vowels, which makes the appearance of the language different from other Australian languages. For this reason, the word list needs more guidance to pronunciation. This is another language which reflects kin relations in the pronoun system, and examples are

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given of the complicated verbal morphology. Murrinh-Patha is an example of a *lingua franca* which has spread at the expense of other languages in the Wadeye-Daly River area. Nouns have classes or genders and Michael Walsh has given the class markers in the word list. Gender differences are also reflected in the pronouns.

The selected Queensland languages are very diverse — Meryam Mir, a Papuan language spoken in Eastern Torres Strait; Wik-Mungkan, the common language at Aurukun on Western Cape York; and Torres Strait Creole, used as an identity marker, particularly by young Torres Strait Islanders.

The people of Mer speak both Meryam and Creole. The chapter on Meryam Mir by Gamalai Ken Passi and Nick Piper gives interesting insights into the mythology and the idiom of the language. A textual example is given of the use of the special style *nasnas mir* 'sad talk'. In the Wik-Mungkan language, stress distinguishes differences in grammatical features, such as tenses or negative verbs. Words occur singly or in groups, with the compound form having extended meanings. many compound words are used in Barbara Savers' word list.

Torres Strait Creole has developed this century from Pacific Pidgin English, and about 85 per cent of the vocabulary is borrowed from English but with changed meanings, particularly kin terms.

The influence of indigenous languages is reflected in the difference between Eastern and Western creoles. Anna Shnukal describes the taboos associated with the names of those related by marriage. Unlike the Australian languages, creoles are not agglutinating languages and have few affixes.

The languages in this book show great variation in linguistic history, sociolinguistic use, grammatical features and depth of vocabulary which provide an insight into the richness of Australian indigenous languages. It is likely that the book will be used more by the general reader than by Aboriginal people trying to learn their language.

This is an important book. The danger is that the general public will only consult the indexes to appropriate Aboriginal words to name their houses, belongings or businesses. This will be a sad misuse of the book.

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Outback Ghettos: A History of Aboriginal Institutionalisation and Survival

P. Brock

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, x + 180 pp.

Reviewed by Andrew Markus

This is an important book. It represents a detailed enquiry into issues of major significance, draws on a wide range of sources including oral testimony, and affords ample evidence of a resolute, open-minded approach, free of

ideological blinkers. Ten years ago, historians in this country lacked the capacity to approach contact history with such sensitivity. This is not to say, however, that the book is free from problems.