Language Description
Informed by Theory

Edited by

Rob Pensalfini, Myfany Turpin
and Diana Guillemin

Language Description Informed by Theory

Edited by

Rob Pensalfini
The University of Queensland

Myfany Turpin
The University of Queensland

Diana Guillemin
Griffith University

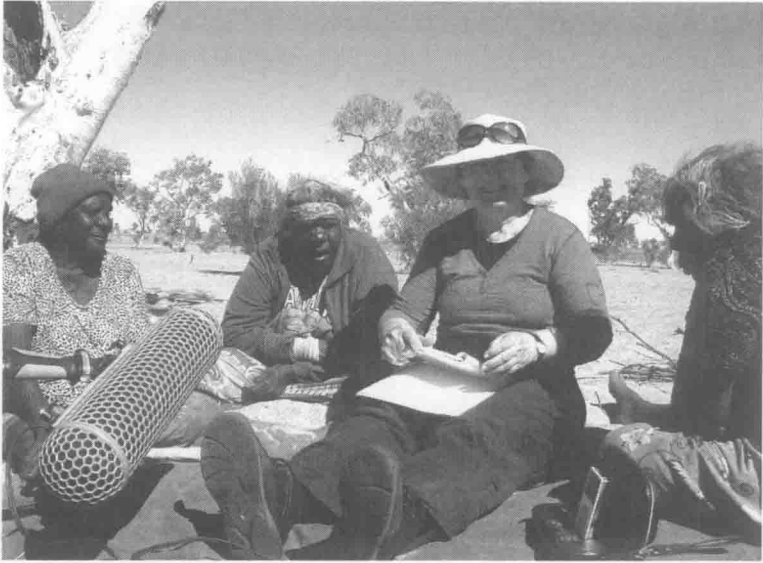# Map of Australian languages referred to in this book

Approximate location of Australian languages referred to in this book
(sub-groups not shown).

Key: Numbers correspond to the following languages whose spelling and location is based on the Australian Indigenous languages database http://austlang.aiatsis.gov.au/main.php

1. Adnyamathanha
2. Alyawarr
3. Anmatyerr
4. Arabana
5. Arrernte
6. Baagundji (Paakantyi)
7. Banggarla (Parnkalla)
8. Bilinarra
9. Binbinka
10. Bininj Gunwok
11. Darkinyung
12. Diyari
13. Dyirbal
14. Gadhang
15. Garrwa
16. Gudanji
17. Gujani (Kuyani)
18. Gumbaynggirr
19. Gunwinygu (Kunwinjku)
20. Gurindji, Gurindji Kriol
21. Guugu Yimidhirr
22. Jadliaura (Yardliyawara)
23. Jaminjung
24. Jaru
25. Jawoyn
26. Jingulu
27. Jiwarli
28. Jurruru
29. Kalkatungu
30. Kaurna
31. Kayardild
32. Kaytetye
33. Kriol (Roper)
34. Kuku Yalanji
35. Kunjen
36. Kurrama
37. Kuuk-Thayorre
38. Mangarayi
39. Martuthunira
40. Mudburra
41. Ngaanyatjarra
42. Ngaliwurru
43. Ngandi
44. Ngarigu
45. Ngarinyman
46. Ngarluma
47. Ngarnka
48. Ngiyambaa
49. Ngunawal
50. Nungali
51. Nyamal
52. Nyangumarta
53. Nyawaygi
54. Olgolo
55. Panyjima
56. Pintupi
57. Pitta-Pitta
58. Rembarrnga
59. Ritharrngu
60. Thalanyji
61. Waanyi
62. Walmajarri
63. Wambaya
64. Wangkangurru
65. Warlpiri
66. Warrgamay
67. Warungu
68. Watjarri
69. Wemba-Wemba
70. Wirangu
71. Yandruwandha
72. Yankunytjatjara
73. Yaygirr
74. Yidiny
75. Yindjibarndi
76. Yirr-Yoront
77. Yolngu Matha
78. Yukulta

Kathy Nangala Sampson, Dora Napaljarrayi, Mary Napaljarri Laughren and Leah Nampijinpa documenting endangered Warlpiri songs at Wirliyajarrayi (Willowra) Northern Territory, August, 2012. Photo: M. Turpin.

Warlpiri women from Yuendumu and Mary Laughren at the 1976 Purlapa Wiri (traditional music and dance festival) at Alekarenge (Ali-Curung), Northern Territory. Photo: D. Price.

List of contributors

April Ngampart Campbell
Ti Tree School
Locked Bag 257, Ti Tree via Alice
Springs NT 0872
Australia
april.campbell@ntschools.net

Katherine Demuth
Department of Linguistics
Macquarie University
North Ryde NSW 2109
Australia
katherine.demuth@mq.edu.au

Samantha Disbray
The Northern Institute
Charles Darwin University
Darwin, Northern Territory 0909
Australia
samantha.disbray@cdu.edu.au

Murray Garde
School of Culture, History & Language,
College of Asia and the Pacific,
Australian National University
Canberra ACT 0200
Australia
murray.garde@anu.edu.au

Diana Guillemin
School of Languages and Linguistics
Griffith University
170 Kessels Road, Nathan Qld 4111
d.guillemin@griffith.edu.au

Malka Rappaport Hovav
Department of Linguistics
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem
Mount Scopus, Jerusalem 91905
Israel
mhovav@mscc.huji.ac.il

Harold Koch
School of Language Studies
Australian National University
Canberra ACT 0200
Australia
Harold.Koch@anu.edu.au

Beth Levin
Department of Linguistics
Stanford University
Stanford CA 94305-2150
USA
bclevin@stanford.edu

Giuseppe Longobardi
Language and Linguistic Science
University of York
Heslington York YO10 5DD
United Kingdom
giuseppe.longobardi@york.ac.uk

Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici
Università di Trieste
Via Lazzaretto Vecchio 6
34123 Trieste, Italy
longbard@units.it

Felicity Meakins
School of Languages & Comparative
Cultural Studies
The University of Queensland
St Lucia Qld 4072
Australia
f.meakins@uq.edu.au

Ilana Mushin
School of Languages & Comparative
Cultural Studies
The University of Queensland
St Lucia Qld 4072
Australia
i.mushin@uq.edu.au

Rachel Nordlinger
School of Languages and Linguistics
The University of Melbourne
Parkville, Vic 3010
Australia
racheln@unimelb.edu.au

Rob Pensalfini
School of Languages & Comparative
Cultural Studies
The University of Queensland
St Lucia Qld 4072
Australia
r.pensalfini@uq.edu.au

Erich Round
School of Languages & Comparative
Cultural Studies
The University of Queensland
St Lucia Qld 4072
Australia
e.round@uq.edu.au

Myfany Turpin
School of Languages & Comparative
Cultural Studies
The University of Queensland
St Lucia Qld 4072
Australia
myfturpin@uq.edu.au

Lynn Wales
School of Languages & Comparative
Cultural Studies
The University of Queensland
St Lucia Qld 4072
Australia
wales@uq.edu.au

Table of contents

Editors' introduction

Rob Pensalfini[1], Diana Guillemin[2] & Myfany Turpin[1]
[1]The University of Queensland / [2]Griffith University

1. Language description and language theory

This volume aims to contribute to the area of language description and, in particular, to how linguistic theories inform the way language is described. It also aims to help bridge the divide between theoretical linguistics and language description (see Foley 1993; Evans & Dench 2006; Schalley 2012). By linguistic theory we mean frameworks or models of linguistic knowledge that assist our understanding of how languages work, leading to better language descriptions. Like Sells, we use linguistic theory in the broad sense of "a flexible representational system used to account for various sets of data across different languages" and not in the sense of "a particular representational system designed to account for properties of, and generalisations within, a specific set of data" (2010:211). Linguistic theories alert the field linguist to look for various phenomena without presupposing their necessary existence (Sells 2010:210).

By language description we mean representations of language that are accountable to a corpus of natural data, typically in the form of a grammar, with cross-referencing to a dictionary and texts (Himmelman 2006). Increasingly these are accountable to an accessible corpus of audio and visual material. Language description is ideally part of a broader program of language documentation (Evans & Dench 2006:3). Description and documentation aim to describe language in all contexts. Singing, signing, joking, swearing, naming and motherese are all within the purview of language description. One of the goals of description is "to ensure that the full spectrum of language structures are represented" (Evans & Dench 2006:3).

Language descriptions can serve to advance the respective theories, for models of linguistic competence are in effect only as sound as the descriptions from which they are derived. Schalley notes that there is a "mutual relationship between theoretical and empirical work" (2012:1) and that one necessarily complements the other – whilst empirical work "needs to be underpinned by theory (rendering theory practical) … any theoretical work should strive for empirical grounding and testing" (2012:28). The purpose of language description, however, goes

beyond validating specific theories, as the quest for understanding what is possible in language is met through language descriptions. Areal specialists, typologists and historical linguists all draw on language descriptions (Evans & Dench 2006: 1). Language descriptions also serve many educational and cultural purposes for their speech communities.

Is it possible to have a theory-neutral description of language? "The data do not speak for themselves. I have been in rooms with data and listened very carefully. They never said a word" (Wolpoff 1975: 15). Even the apparently innocent choice to classify a word as a noun or a verb, for example, belies a belief in discrete lexical categories, which is part of a theoretical system. The choice of theoretical outlook determines how the apparent "facts" of a language will be described. Consider a pair like the English noun *comb* and its verbal counterpart *comb*. Adherents of a lexicalist view, in which categorical information is part of lexical entries that exist prior to the formation of syntactic constituents, will describe these as being homophonous words, clearly semantically related, but each with their own lexical entry. Conversely, adherents of a late-insertion and underspecification theory, such as distributed morphology (Halle & Marantz 1993 and work following), would conversely describe English as having a single vocabulary item, the root *comb*, whose categorial and real-world semantic properties depend on the syntactic and pragmatic environment into which it is inserted, post-syntactically.

One of the main theoretical choices that can drive language description is the choice of form-to-function versus function-to-form. Most descriptions of Australian languages have pursued the latter path. That is to say, when a single phonological string is found in two different environments, or with two distinct meanings or functions, the null hypothesis is that these are synchronically two distinct morphemes, with distinct lexical entries. An example of this is the use of elements homophonous with nominal case markers on verbs as part of a switch-reference system, as explored in Austin 1981. A diachronic link might be suggested between the two, to explain how it is that case markers came to appear on verbs (which Austin 1981 mentions). On the other hand, a researcher pursuing a form-to-function approach would begin with the hypothesis that there is a single morpheme which functions both as a nominal case marker and as a switch-reference marker (for an approach along these lines see Pensalfini 1995). A different example of the function-to-form approach is the glossing of grammatical case in the work of some researchers working in the Lexical-Functional Grammar framework, such as Austin & Bresnan 1996 and Nordlinger 1998. In these works, an element will be glossed ACC (Accusative) if it appears in the transitive object function, but NOM (Nominative) if it appears in Intransitive subject function, despite the fact that neither is overtly morphologically marked.

Just as theories inform language descriptions, language descriptions inform theories (Foley 1993) and descriptions of hitherto understudied languages can advance theories in profound ways. For example, the configurationality debate in Generative Syntax informed the detailed observations and descriptions of Warlpiri (as in Laughren 1989, 1992, 2002), whilst descriptions of this language challenged syntactic theory to account for languages with little surface evidence of hierarchical phrase structure (Hale 1983). Descriptions of Waanyi (Laughren et al. 2005) have also been informed by formal investigations of the syntax of verb-initial languages from the 1980s onwards.

Given that theory and description have much to offer one another it seems a worthy endeavour to consider their differences, as outlined by Foley (1993). As models of linguistic competence, linguistic theories are only of value when based on a significant representation of the world's languages. However, in a small-scale society, the use of language may be quite different from its use in less 'exotic' societies, whose languages have informed the backbone of current linguistic theory:

> the very idealization of much of current linguistic theory has rendered it largely inapplicable in meeting the very real and practical language needs of these tribal and traditional peoples and the nations in which they are found. It is crucial, if linguistics is not to become irrelevant in these contexts, that linguists meet their obligation to make their work responsive to the needs and integrity of the peoples with whom they work, peoples often socially dispossessed or disadvantaged.
>
> (Foley 1993: 3)

In small-scale societies comprehension often relies on insider or culture-specific knowledge, and undisclosed pragmatic goals, which can only be uncovered through detailed ethnography. Without an understanding of the particular social context, linguistic competence in the more restricted sense may need to be abstracted away from actual language use to such an extent that the selected utterances may only be regarded as idealized. This is not necessarily a problem for theoretical linguistics, "which puts a premium on formal rigour" (Foley 1993: 3), but goes against the aims of language descriptions which honour "the vagaries and inconsistencies of human performance" (Foley 1993: 2). The aim for language descriptions, as we see it, is to bring formal rigour to all aspects of language competence.

Like language documentation, language description should also "concern itself with the rights and needs of language speakers and their direct involvement in the documentation" (Austin 2010: 13). One of the current challenges of field linguists is to produce descriptions of languages that are aimed not only at other linguists, but that can also meet the needs of their speakers. Evans and Dench refer to the grammarians' need to balance "rigour with readability" and capture "the distinctiveness of a language with an awareness of how other languages

work" (2006: 1). In the context of endangered languages there is a further balance between producing language descriptions and tending to the urgent needs of the speech community. We dedicate this collection of papers to Mary Laughren, a scholar who has succesfully met these challenges throughout her career. Her work demonstrates what linguistic theory brings to language documentation and description, where language is recognized as an abstract, highly organized system, with useage subject to context, and which serves a multitude of functions within a particular culture and society.[1]

2.   Language description informed by theory

Since language description is by its nature multidisciplinary (Austin 2010: 12) the chapters in this volume have been selected from various areas of linguistics, namely phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and anthropological linguistics. As in Schalley (2012), the chapters herein reflect various methods and approaches to the study of language. Each paper illustrates how the description of a particular linguistic phenomenon benefits from a theoretical understanding of the issue at hand.

The prologue by Disbray is a tribute to Laughren's work in the area of Warlpiri education and literacy. It shows how the linguistic description of Warlpiri has been connected to Warlpiri educational advancement. Like Hale, Laughren worked to equip Warlpiri people with the skills to document their own language. An extensive collection of Warlpiri literature and pedagogical resources emerged as the Warlpiri quickly embraced literacy whilst comprehensive work on descriptions of Warlpiri began (e.g. Hale 1967–68; Laughren 1978; Nash 1977). Disbray identifies the achievements of the Warlpiri–English Bilingual Program that officially ran from 1973 to 2008. The author argues that Warlpiri literacy and language proficiency, and the production of Warlpiri resources and trained Warlpiri teachers, are achievements of the program to be included in evaluations of bilingual programs alongside English outcomes. The author emphasizes collaboration between Warlpiri and non-Warlpiri colleagues and recognition of the different skills that each bring to bilingual education as critical. Such factors have been identified as key to achieving student outcomes elsewhere (e.g. Silburn et al. 2011: 33–40; Harris 1995: 13–18).

Part 1 of the volume concerns phonological descriptions. Turpin and Demuth consider the phonological characteristics of child-directed speech (which they refer to as baby talk, or BT) in Arandic languages, drawing on the notion of the foot in

---

1.   For the relevance of her work to the Warlpiri community see Disbray (this volume).

the prosodic hierarchy (Selkirk 1986). The similarities with neighbouring Warlpiri BT are striking: both exhibit a reduction of coronal contrasts which the authors suggest may be due to these being difficult for young children to articulate. They also exhibit more widespread characteristics of BT, such as cluster simplification, prevalence of stops, reduplication and omission of word-initial unstressed syllables, often resulting in forms that are maximally a disyllabic foot. The authors account for the BT forms by identifying phonological and word-formation processes that derive BT forms from probable source forms in standard speech. They suggest that BT may be a partial reflection of the phonologically restricted forms typically used by young children, as claimed by Arandic speakers. This is therefore a possible source for many BT forms across societies, where BT then becomes formalized into a special speech register to greater or lesser degrees across communities.

Round reviews recent suggestions that the prestopping of laterals in Australian languages can be explained in a parallel fashion to the prestopping of nasals, and draws attention to the theoretical context of the debate. Seminal work by Butcher (1999, 2006) argues convincingly that prestopping enhances cues to place of articulation in nasals and is therefore perceptually advantageous, in accordance with predictions from enhancement theory (Stevens et al. 1986). While this is true of nasals, the author argues that prestopping most likely degrades place cues in laterals. Instead, Round suggests an articulatory motivation for prestopping of laterals in languages that already possess prestopped nasals. The prestopping of laterals may arise because laterals follow the same gestural coordination template provided by prestopped nasals, drawing on the theory that there is a preference for shared, abstract patterns of gestural coordination of gesturally complex segments (Krakow 1989; Browman & Goldstein 1995; Goldstein & Fowler 2003; Nam & Salztman 2003). Round also proposes an account for the uneven distribution of nasal prestopping across places of articulation, by considering interactions between perception and articulation, and language use and universals.

Part 2 concerns itself with morphology, and consists of three papers on the morphologically rich languages of Australia. Mushin argues that categorical distinctions between languages that employ dual pronominal systems (with each system distinct in both form and distribution), and those which employ a single set of pronouns (functioning as referential indices), are limited in terms of their empirical coverage. Whereas it has been claimed that dual systems employ one set of pronouns for marking formal features in core grammatical roles, and a distinct set for contrast, emphasis, or in oblique roles, the author presents evidence from Garrwa for the existence of liminal systems, wherein distributional and morphosyntactic distinctions do not correlate with formal phonological distinctions.

Pensalfini's paper on Jingulu attempts to determine the source of a small set of optional deictic markers on nominals, which are homophonous with some of the verbal tense markers, and shows how the choice of theoretical framework

can lead to very different synchronic analyses. In Jingulu, light verbs are bound morphemes that encode tense, aspect, mood, and associated motion, and are the only obligatory part of a verb. The author examines the relationship between light verbs and the nominal markers, which, unlike the verbs, do not reflect verbal/inflectional properties of the clause. He hypothesizes that the nominal markers may have arisen from the reduction of subordinate (relative) clauses. Two competing hypotheses are entertained for a synchronic analysis of this phenomenon, with the choice between them depending on the basic theoretical approach chosen. The most satisfying description makes use of the notion of an abstract Determiner, following Chomsky (1995) and Longobardi (1994), alongside a theory of late insertion (Halle & Marantz 1993). The author also searches for similar phenomena in other languages, examining tense marking occurring on nominals independently of clausal tense. While some such phenomena are found in other languages, these typically mark temporal rather than spatial deixis.

Koch explores the reconstruction of verbal inflectional classes for Pama-Nyungan languages, a family that covers the majority of the Australian continent. He points out several problems with the traditional concept of morphological conjugation markers in these languages, including the assumption of morphophonological regularity and the difficulty of deriving paradigms morphemically. The author then appeals to the uniformitarian principle (Hock & Joseph 1996), that reconstruction must be consistent with what is understood about language change, to articulate a series of principles which he claims ought to underlie reconstruction. He demonstrates this approach with a revision of Dixon's (1980) internal reconstruction of Walmajarri verbs, and then extends this to Pama-Nyungan verbal morphology. This detailed study makes a significant contribution to reconstruction, particularly in the Australian context, which has often occurred in a rather ad hoc manner.

Part 3 includes chapters on various aspects of the syntax of a range of languages, including Romance, Australian Aboriginal languages, and creoles.

Guillemin applies Chomsky's theory of Derivation by Phase (2001a, 2001b) to the analysis of the specificity marker *la* in Mauritian Creole, and argues that this morpheme must surface as a "last resort" to licence the null definite article in some syntactic environments. Definiteness and Specificity are assumed to be universal semantic categories that must find expression in natural language, but they are not necessarily marked in all languages. Building on Chierchia's (1998) Nominal Mapping Parameter, according to which the basic denotation of nouns varies cross-linguistically with respect to the features argumental and predicative, Guillemin proposes that languages whose nouns are argumental lack a definite article and mark the specific versus non-specific contrast. Languages whose nouns are predicative require an overt definite article and mark the definite versus indefinite

contrast. Her analysis gives support to the claim that languages that have only two articles will mark either definiteness or specificity (Ionin 2003), not necessarily both; the analysis also validates Chomsky's view of language as an economical system where features are morphologically realized only when they must be, not otherwise.

Longobardi examines the syntax and semantics of negative elements across Romance languages and proposes that there are three basic parameters that are encoded in the negative morphemes used for sentential negation. These determine whether simple negation occurs pre- or post-inflection, whether the negation morpheme is ambiguous between a substantive meaning (e.g. Spanish *no*, Italian *non*) or an expletive (e.g. French *ne*), and whether negative elements are ambiguous between "negative operator" or "polarity item". Longobardi's proposal establishes typological implications between having post-inflection negation and post-inflection negative phrases not requiring co-occurrence with negation. The theoretical focus of the work is on exploring how minimalist research on syntactic diversity can be conducted. An analysis of Romance data provides evidence that Negation parameters are encoded only in the lexical specifications of the sentential negation morpheme and the negative determiners of each language. Longobardi concludes that within a proper minimalist approach to both principles and parameters no need arises for redundant notions such as (strict or non-strict) "negative concord" versus "double negation" languages.

The chapter by Nordlinger adds to our understanding of serialization in northern Australian languages, and to the nature of serial verb constructions more generally. Nordlinger describes a complex verb construction in the Australian language Wambaya. Drawing upon the typological and theoretical serialization literature (e.g. Sebba 1987; Durie 1997), she argues that these are serial verb constructions. While this is counter to the general belief that Australian languages lack serial verbs, it is in line with recent work by Laughren on the non–Pama-Nyungan Waanyi (2009). Given the rarity in the literature of serial verb constructions in non-configurational languages, Nordlinger considers the theoretical implications of the unusual properties of Wambaya serial verb constructions, such as strict transitivity matching and anti-iconic verb ordering.

Meakins' innovative paper brings evidence from code-switching, specifically the case of Gurindji and Kriol code-switching in northern Australia, to bear on the debate on the syntactic position of noun phrases in non-configurational languages. Case-marked nominals derived from Gurindji occurring in Kriol matrix sentences (as defined by the presence of Kriol verb-inflection categories) show properties of adjuncts (e.g. optionality) even when they are construed with arguments, and they are always cross-referenced with pronominal elements (whether Gurindji or Kriol). This and other distributional data argue in favour of some version of the