139. Some distinctive characteristics of the vocabulary of Australian languages

1. Introduction and significance

English has been the principal language of the Australian Aborigines for more than 250 years. The term "Aboriginal" has been used to describe the language of the Australian Aborigines since the 19th century. The term is derived from the Latin word "aboriginem," which means "original" or "first." The term was first used to describe the language of the first inhabitants of Australia, the Aboriginal people.

2. Lexicography of Australian languages: Materials and methods

Despite the outpouring of fine grammatical descriptions of the last thirty years, seri- ous lexicology of Australian languages is still hampered by a shortage of good dictionaries. This reflects both the need to undertake grammatical and phonological analysis first, and also a prioritizing of grammatical over lexicological research. Goddard & Thibe- gnon (1978) have done recent work in Austral- ian lexicography and identify seventeen rea- sonable-sized dictionaries, and several impor- tant elicitation projects.

3. Lexicography of Australian languages: Materials and methods

Not all such semantically versatile terms are based on superelemental prefixes. However, they also reveal much about metaphorical and metonymic chains. The set of everyday equivalents of the Demmi term for "emerge" (Evans 1979).

4. Lexicography of Australian languages: Materials and methods

Second, at least one such system, Jilbirri (Hale 1971), can be used to investigate anto- nymy, since it derives its sentences from ordi- nary Warlpiri land names and puts the speaker's name and physical environment as antonyms. For example, "I am sitting on the ground," for example, as "the other is standing in the sky." Jilbirri not only shows up individual anti-
fields: within the field of perception verbs, for example, the lack of true antonyms for ‘open’ ‘tear’ and ‘smell’ necessitates the coinage of special forms, this being virtually the only section of the vocabulary where the antonymy principle will not supply formative.

Third, iconics of form in the sign language register may sometimes illuminate the basic visual metaphor, of certain forms, uniting the referents of the different co-occurring vocabularies. The Warlpiri words jinsi ‘female genitalia’ and jiri-thi ‘seed’ share the same root, but what if any is the link? The sign for these two words (Kendon 1981: 195) resembles the gesture known in Italian as il fisico, and suggests a fancied visual resemblance between the two, based on the grasshopper’s button-like head flanked by the long ridges formed by its legs.

3. Fields, elaborated and otherwise

Kinship, because of its tightly-structured field, central position in Australian Aboriginal society and great terminological elaboration, has long held pride of place in Australianist lexicology.

The extension of kin categories to cover the whole universe requires a set of principle

ciples for expanding kin denotations beyond their local referents, eg a same-sex equivalence principle which equates fathers with fathers’ brothers, from which it follows that father’s brother’s son = father’s son = brother, and so on recursively.

A central problem in most Australian kinship systems is to formulate the general principles that allow a recursive set of individuals to be included (Young, Brunton 1989). The system includes father, father’s brother, father’s brother’s son (by the same-sex sibling rule), but also father’s father’s brother, his brother and so forth (see Launghren 1982b on Warlpiri kinship). Now anthropologists have proposed various features dividing the set of kin terms into two grand divisions (see Whitley 1988 on Anindilyakwa ethnobiological vocabulary, and Pelle 1996 on Kukatja botanical terms). Terms for these two grand divisions are, however, the forms of basic kinship terms, transgression of which is virtually the only phenomenon of ‘sign metonymy’ (Evans 1997), by which the same term refers to entities of different classes and even kingdoms, on the grounds that one signals the presence or availability of the other. Thus throughout Arnhem Land traditional kinship systems the term for ‘father’ bears the same semantic treatment of these systems, which may exceed a hundred terms, remains a major problem (see Garde 2003 for a detailed discussion of the Northern Arnhem Land systems).

Other highly elaborated lexical fields in Australian languages deal with the natural world; the most thoroughgoing of these is probably the description of shells (see Weddley 1988 on Anindilyakwa ethnobiological vocabulary, and Pelle 1996 on Kukatja botanical terms). Terms for these two grand divisions are, however, the forms of basic kinship terms, transgression of which is virtually the only phenomenon of ‘sign metonymy’ (Evans 1997), by which the same term refers to entities of different classes and even kingdoms, on the grounds that one signals the presence or availability of the other. Thus throughout Arnhem Land traditional kinship systems the term for ‘father’ bears the same semantic treatment of these systems, which may exceed a hundred terms, remains a major problem (see Garde 2003 for a detailed discussion of the Northern Arnhem Land systems).

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4. Components of lexical structure

Several factors have contributed to the development of lexicography and to the evolution of Australian language structures. These include the following:

1. The development of a common core of basic vocabulary.

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verbs. The two most important questions this tradition has brought to the lexicon of the Australian languages have been a concern for the accurate characterization of the lexical meaning, and a thorough investigation of how far possible 'semantic primitives' are lexicalized in the target languages.

Consider emotion terms, an important topic in many languages that are universal or otherwise of human emotions. Do 'shame' / 'shyness' and 'fear', for example, constitute unique emotional expressions? Many Australian languages have a single term covering roughly this semantic range; unlike 'fear' it may be focused on something real rather than potential (e.g. the presence of someone in the wrong kinship category), and unlike 'shame' it can be applied to a situation where nothing 'wrong' has actually taken place. A number of authors (see Hanks 1990, 1996, Wierzbicka 1992) have proposed definitions for such terms as Punupi kanta and Nynganba kayum, using the different assemblages of simple semantic components like 'I am near person Y', this is bad; something bad could happen because of this' to pinpoint the exact differences from the nearest English terms. The results do not support the view that the meaning of emotion terms is identical across languages; even though the basic elements in which their meanings can be stated (notably 'think', 'something bad', 'feel' and 'say') may be roughly universal, they are assembled in different ways. Whether or not one adheres to the specific assumptions of the NVL approach, the advantage of a more concrete and exacting analysis is that it provides a better understanding of how different languages express emotional meanings. For example, in the case of 'fear', the Australian languages may differ in their use of the term to indicate fear of physical harm or fear of social disapproval.

The second problem has to do with the combinatorial manipulability of the semantic representation in definitions. In Kayardild, for example, 'want' is not lexicalized, and is not freely combinable with other semantic components; even though 'I want' can be expressed by the desiderative verbal inflection, and 'wanting to have X' can be expressed by the verbal desiderative case (Evans 1995), the lack of an independent lexeme makes it impossible to say something like 'he wants me to come' and speakers, if pressed, suggest statements like 'he says I should come' as the nearest English paraphrase. For example, 'want' have been thoroughly investigated in Australian languages as well, but how do we translate 'wanna' in the forms of Australian languages?

The third concern cross-linguistic equivalence, which becomes hardest to test precisely once a lexeme is said to express a semantic primitive, since differences in expression reflect the speaker's more elementary level of thinking. If an Australian language has a word translating 'think', polysemic 'hear', etc., nobody knows how it actually means the same, and that the boundary between these meanings is drawn in the same way. It may be appropriate in an initial set of 'canonized' or linguistically conceptual concepts for 'all', '(belong)', 'part', 'want' and 'think', for example? These are deep and tricky questions for linguistic theorists, and the reader is referred to Wierzbicka (1992) and Goddard & Wierzbicka (1994) for arguments in the affirmative, based on a number of Australian languages; here I confine myself to a brief examination of three issues.

The first concerns polysemic. It has been claimed (for example, Hanks 1992), that Pitjantjara, by having the same verb kulina for 'think', 'listen' and 'hear', thereby lacks a differentiated concept for 'think'; corresponding to her implicit monosemous analysis are cog-
6. Literature (a selection)


(1972), *The Dyirbal language of North Queensland* Cambridge: CUP.


Evans, Nicholas/Wilkins, David (2000), In the mind’s ear: the semantic extension of perception verbs in Australian languages. Language 76.3: 546–592.


(1994a), Building two worlds: Aboriginal English and crosslinguistic understanding. St Lucia, Qld. University of Queensland Press.


There are about 750 Papuan languages on the New Guinea mainland and the large islands of New Britain, New Ireland and Bougainville to the east and also further east on the Solomon Islands including the Santa Cruz Archipelago, and to the west on northern Halmahera and the islands of Timor, Alor and Pantar. They belong to five large and six small groups of probably interrelated languages, with these groups not related to each other, though two of the larger ones may be. There are also half a dozen or so isolates. One of the large groups, named the Trans-New Guinea Phylum, contains about 500 languages of which over 350 are very likely to be interrelated, with the remaining ones still in some doubt. The other four groups contain 100 (Serpuk-Ramu Phylum), 50 (Torricelli Phylum), 28 (West Papuan Phylum), and 30 (East Papuan Phylum) languages, and the six small groups together only 29. Even Papuan languages not related to each other may share a considerable