

2009 PUBLIC SEMINAR SERIES

Ethnoclassification and the Environment in Northern Australia

Presented by Brett Baker

Senior Lecturer in Linguistics

School of Behavioural, Cognitive and Social Sciences at UNE.

The systems of ethnobiological classification that we find in Indigenous societies in Northern Australia are quite different in two major respects from those more familiar to speakers of non-Indigenous languages. Firstly, the vast majority of simple names denote species, rather than genera. Secondly, all names for taxa are simple names, there is no possibility of compounding specific+generic names in most Australian languages that have been described in order to create a taxa-denoting term. So we don't find anything like 'silky oak' or 'white pine', where the first element identifies a species (or more specific kind) of the genus (or general kind) denoted by the second element ('oak', 'pine').

I argue that the first fact follows from the nature of the biological environment in Australia, in particular, the dominance of a handful of large genera such as Eucalyptus, Acacia and Melaleuca. The second fact in part follows from the first, but in other respects is simply a reflection of broader characteristics of 'names' in Australian languages. Both of these characteristics are problematic for universalist theories of ethnoclassification such as that of Berlin and associates

Wednesday 29 July 2009, 12.15pm

The Seminar Room, NARU, 23 Ellengowan Drive, Brinkin

This seminar is free and open to the public.

The views expressed in this lecture are those of the presenter and do not necessarily represent the view of ANU.

Enquiries T: 08 8920 9999 E: naru@anu.edu.au