HUMAN CATEGORISATION AND LANGUAGE
A SPECIAL SITUATION WITH AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINALS

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1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

In the course of my very extensive fieldwork experience in Australian Aboriginal languages I made an interesting observation. I had only observed this phenomenon before when working in Eskimo dialects, although it has also been reported by a few fieldworkers studying some north and north-east Asian and South American languages spoken by hunter-gatherers, which I myself have not worked with. This observed phenomenon, appears to be markedly different from that which I observed in other areas, especially much of the New Guinea area and Asia. I am referring to the attitude of informants towards systematic eliciting of vocabulary items or grammatical forms through a series of what the fieldworker may regard as well-chosen short sentences aiming at eliciting responses containing a range of grammatical forms in the informants' language which he is anxious to obtain.

2. PROBLEMS WITH QUESTIONNAIRES IN ELICITING AUSTRALIAN LANGUAGES

There are a considerable number of systematic questionnaires available for carrying out this work, and for Australian and New Guinea languages, Capell's questionnaires (Capell 1945,1962) have been used by many fieldworkers over decades. I produced a very much more extensive questionnaire for New Guinea languages for my own use in the 1950s, based on Capell's questionnaire; it was never published, but was used by several of my students and colleagues (such as the late D.C. Laycock) to advantage . All these found Capell's and my extended questionnaires useful and well applicable to fieldwork involving New Guinea languages. However, I experienced considerable difficulties when using Capell's Australian languages questionnaire (which is based on the same principles as his New Guinea languages questionnaire) during my work in Australian languages in New South Wales and southern Queensland still spoken in the mid 1950s and early 1960s by a number of aged informants, and also in some then still fully functional Aboriginal languages spoken on the islands of the Gulf of Carpentaria in the 1960s. These difficulties arose essentially from objections by the informants to the, to them, incoherent nature of the vocabulary items asked for by the fieldworker, and to what they regarded as the quite incongruous nature of the short sentences used by the fieldworker in his attempts to elicit grammatical forms and information. One look at Capell's questionnaire shows that the lexical part of it appears to be well enough arranged according to semantic fields as we know them, beginning with nouns including Human Beings such as man,

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woman, old man, old woman, married man, bachelor, clever man (medicine man), boy just walking, boy (uninitiated), youth (initiated), husband, wife, small girl, girl at puberty, mother, father, elder brother, younger brother, sister of man, daughter of man or woman, son of man or woman, people in general; continuing with Parts of the Body such as head, hair of head, hair of body, forehead, temple of head, eye, nose, ear, mouth, throat, nape of neck, lip, tooth, moustache, beard, cheek, jaw, chin; then Landscape and Nature, Trees, Animals (with Reptiles and Birds, Fishes, Invertebrates), Weapons and Utensils; continuing with Adjectives; and finally Verbs which are arranged in several semantic subgroups. While the informants did not as a rule object to the large semantic groups within the main group of nouns, they objected strongly and volubly to the ordering of items within these semantic groups as being confusing, and jumping, they said, from one category to a totally different one. So, with human beings, they felt that 'man' and 'woman' was a possible beginning and should be followed by 'married man', 'married woman', 'husband', 'wife', 'father', 'mother', 'son', 'daughter', 'boy just walking', 'boy (unititiated)', with youth (initiated) going into another group with 'old man', 'mother's brother' (not in Capell's list) etc. This ordering, they explained to me, would make sense to them, whereas the order in which they appeared in the questionnaire did not. This may sound somewhat like splitting hairs, but it certainly was one important issue in working with dying and to some extent half-forgotten Aboriginal languages with which I was predominantly concerned: the informants were unable to remember the Aboriginal equivalents of the questionnaire items if they were asked in a sequence which was at variance with what they regarded as the correct semantic ordering, whereas they remembered them quite readily if they felt that they were asked for in the correct semantic setting. This tendency was particularly strong with very old informants of dying languages which were no longer in current use, but it tends to highlight an attitude on the part of Australian Aboriginals in an exaggerated fashion – as pointed out above, it was to a lesser extent also observable with speakers of a fully viable language, Gayardilt, spoken on an island in the Gulf of Carpentaria. Most of them showed reactions largely comparable to those mentioned above, with the exception of the only European-educated member of the tribe, a young woman who spoke very good English, had lived amongst Europeans, and had absorbed much of white Australian culture before returning to live again with her tribe. She was therefore much more tolerant of outside views on categorisation than her fellow tribespeople who had had little contact with Europeans, and spoke little or no English.

To illustrate the points made, it may be mentioned that in eliciting Aboriginal equivalents for parts of the body, the informants were confused through hairy parts not being put together in the list used (i.e. they said that hair of head, beard, moustache, hair of body should have been asked for together), and mouth, lip, tooth, tongue should not have been separated etc. Even when the various parts of the body were pointed to, the illogical sequence distracted them from finding the Aboriginal terms. In the case of landscape and nature terms, no problems were encountered with a semantic group of 'sky' which contained all objects visible on the sky at day or night, including flocks of flying birds. With wind and whirlwind, 'dust' was regarded as closely associated. 'Night, morning, midday, afternoon, evening' had to be carefully brought in in connection with concepts such as 'dawn' and 'red sky at sunset'. With animals, birds, fishes etc. their value or meaning to the Aboriginals had to determine their semantic ordering. With weapons and utensils, their use for certain distinct areas of application (hunting, objects of clothing and ornaments, women's utensils etc.) had to be very clearly separated from each other so as not to confuse the informants. These matters were often discussed with the informants even outside language sessions with them, and they endeavoured to make clear to me what their views were and what they regarded as categorising appropriate to describe a coherent situation.

3. A GLIMPSE OF OTHER LANGUAGES

This situation compares well with informant problems I experienced with old Eskimo informants. For instance, while trying to elicit terms referring to weapons and utensils I asked for 'kayak'. There was no problem with this and weapons and utensils associated with 'kayak', such as paddle, seat, waterproof cover of the user, harpoon, harpoon line, floating bag to keep the carcass of a harpooned seal afloat and knife. However, when asked for the term for 'woman's knife' immediately after this, the informant reacted quite angrily, pointing out that no woman's knife was carried in a kayak, and refused to give the term. What should have been done was to expand the semantic field to 'seal', then to the hunting and securing of the seal, the transporting of it to the shore – then the woman's knife would have come in in the correct place and logical sequence as a utensil for skinning the carcass. The lesson from this is clearly that the fieldworker must have at least some knowledge of that culture especially when dealing with old informants steeped in their traditional culture, in particular a culture of hunters and gatherers, so as to avoid being regarded as an ignorant fool, with possible detrimental consequences for his or her work.

It is now widely recognised that human categorisation differs widely in different cultures. To expand on this, it may be briefly mentioned that there are languages with quite unusual categorisations, and that the creativity of the human mind in this is enormous, as cognitive science has found (Lakoff 1987). The question which may be asked on the basis of what has been briefly outlined above concerns the reasons behind informants in some language areas and situations being so highly, and intolerantly, steeped in the categorisations as expressed in their languages, whereas those in other language areas and situations are less so.

An example of languages and world views with unusual categorisations of concepts referred to by nouns is the Äŷiwo language of the Reef Islands in the Santa Cruz Archipelago, Solomon Islands. That language displays dozens of different, semantically determined noun classes which are marked on the nouns by prefixes. The first noun of one of these classes that I encountered was a deformed Tahitian chestnut. The quite sophisticated informant was asked whether he could think of other nouns which belonged to the same semantic category and class. He volunteered quite readily a drum, a termite and rafters of a roof. Asked what these objects had in common in his view, he pointed to the fact that they were wooden and had cavities in them, with the termite being something responsible for causing such cavities (e.g. in the rafters). This is just one of the unusual categorisations in the language. Nevertheless, speakers of this language are quite tolerant of categorisations quite different from their own, by speakers of other languages.

4. ELICITING IN LOGICAL SETTINGS IN AUSTRALIAN LANGUAGES

Coming back to the question of eliciting adjectives in Aboriginal languages, I found that, especially with aged informants of dying languages, it was absolutely essential to elicit adjectives in at least a noun phrase within which variations were quite acceptable to the informants, e.g. 'big stick, small stick, long stick, short stick, straight stick, crooked stick'. Putting such noun phrases into something allowing for variations, and for oppositions, made eliciting of the Aboriginal equivalents of adjectives relatively straightforward.

For obtaining grammatical forms and information, substitution tables (like those included in Capell's and other questionnaires) are excellently suited for work with informants in many language areas outside Australia. With Australian Aboriginals some of them have been found to be of use with

reasonably sophisticated informants speaking fully viable languages, but of very limited use with old informants of dying languages. A substitution table such as the one below has led to the extreme situation where the informant in fact broke off the session and ran away screaming 'you are crazy, what exactly do you want?'. He was lost for further work in the language.

put	my	spear	on	the ground
don't put	your	axe	under	the stone
look at	the	honey	near	the paperbark
don't look at		basket	close to	
(all numbers)				

The attitudes discussed appear to indicate cognitive differences which in turn shape social attitudes. I still got adverse reactions from old informants of dying languages sometimes, over categorisation questions, in spite of exercising utmost care based on my experience of working with many Aboriginal informants over a period of several years. The dozen or so old informants with whom I was able to work repeatedly, for a period of several weeks at a time, over a more or less extended period, got used to working as informants after initial difficulties, and overcame their problems with outside views on categorisation. However, many of the informants of dying languages worked with me only for short periods lasting up to ten days, and had no previous experience as language informants. Their reactions, as well as the initial attitudes of the long-term informants seem to be crucial to what is discussed here.

Substitutions in the above table were possible and quite readily accepted provided they corresponded to the informants' ideas of a coherent situation. The object nouns in the above table could be freely substituted without causing difficulties and so could the locations. Some substitution involving pronouns was possible if it was suitably explained, but verb substitution required careful explanation; for example, after using 'put', it was necessary to say 'Now, if you do not want him to put it there, how would you say 'don't put...'?'. This was acceptable.

5. SITUATIONAL TESTING

This leads to the one really successful method for obtaining extensive materials from Aboriginal informants in dying and partly forgotten, difficult-to-recall languages: situational testing. This means that the fieldworker devises a number of situations which fit well into the traditional daily activities of his or her informant, such as looking for various types of game, fishing, camp life, walking in various types of country with keen attention paid to the immediate and farther surroundings, meals and drinking, health and illness, on a river or at the seashore, hostilities and fights, corroborees and other entertainments. These situations are then approached through a number of sentences in a logical sequence which together form a dialogue and narrative woven together which allows logical substitutions and alterations without breaking the flow of the situational approach. In this, the informant is given great freedom to volunteer additional information or to alter the flow of the approach – explanations of passages which the fieldworker cannot immediately follow may be asked for as they occur if the informant is known to give such explanations easily, otherwise these are best left until after a given situation has been worked through. An example of such a situational testing as well as a sample of a language session with informants is given in Wurm 1967:39-46. The first sentences of this particular situational testing example, which extends into hundreds of sentences and many hours are as follows: 'The sun is rising, it is getting high.' 'Yes, the crows are calling already.' 'I am hungry, let us two go and find something to eat.' 'My father killed a kangaroo

yesterday, we ate it last night.' 'Is there anything left?' 'I will go and have a look.' 'No, there is nothing left, only a few bones and the dogs have eaten most of those bones.' 'We will have to go and find some food.' As the story unfolds, it goes through looking for food in a dry river bed area, finding honey and catching a possum, preparing it, eating it, looking for water, finding it, etc. This allows a wealth of information to be obtained on the lexical and grammatical levels which would otherwise, (that is through direct eliciting) be virtually impossible to collect, or at least nowhere near in such profusion and genuineness. This situational testing approach has the added advantage that it prods the informants' memories much better than direct eliciting (which can be very tiring for them) and it can bring back a half-forgotten language to full fluent command in a short time with them.

6. THE PROBLEM OF DIFFERENT SEMANTIC CATEGORISATIONS

As I have said, my experience in other language areas has shown that while situational testing is always a very useful expedient everywhere, direct elicitation is readily applicable in most areas without having to resort to very careful attention paid to the specific semantic categorisations on the part of the informants on the lexical and grammatical levels to the same extent as is the case with working with Aboriginal languages, with this problem considerably magnified and more sensitive when working with old informants in dying and partly forgotten Aboriginal languages. Only a few instances such as the Eskimo, north and north-east Asian, and South American jungle languages mentioned briefly before, seem to present similar difficulties. Why should this be so? In the case of the New Guinean, especially Papuan, languages in which similar problems could well be expected, I have experienced far fewer difficulties of the kind described, even when working with old unsophisticated informants. The same applies to my experiences in languages of east, south-east and central Asia, even in the case of dying languages, and the same seems to be the case with some of the languages spoken in north and north-east Asia in Siberia which are not of the type mentioned above with which categorisation is a sensitive issue.

It appears that intolerant attitudes towards semantic categorisations different from those found in the language of the informants were mainly met with in cases in which long and frequent contacts of speakers of such languages were limited to contacts with speakers of the same or different languages in which semantic categorisations were very largely similar to those found in the informants' own language. Such a situation prevails with Australian Aboriginals who, especially when the fieldworker is dealing with old informants of a dying language, live very much in their traditional past to which they cling in an exaggerated way especially if strongly reminded of it through the fieldworker's approach and the latter's efforts to bring their linguistic and cultural past back to full life with them. Speakers of fully viable Aboriginal languages, especially in geographically isolated settings (such as the islands in the Gulf of Carpentaria) would to some extent also belong to such a category. Most Aboriginal languages have very similar semantic categories, and much the same statements may be valid for most of them. The same is true of many Eskimo speakers, which would explain the same intolerance with them. The same may also be true of the north and north-east Asian hunters and gatherers and the South American jungle tribes mentioned who may have been very much isolated from contacts with speakers of languages with other semantic categorisations than their own. In all these cases, long-term isolation from the outside world, of the speakers of a number of usually related languages may have led (perhaps through diffusion) to an approximation of the semantic categorisation principles found in the different languages. (One is reminded in this of the remarkable similarity of most Australian languages in their phonetics and phonology.)

By way of contrast, most speakers of New Guinean, especially Papuan, languages have frequent and long contacts with speakers of often quite different languages with semantic categorisations at variance with their own and are very often bi- or multilingual, at least passively. This would explain their tolerance towards semantic categorisations which are not the same as those encountered in their own languages. The same holds true of the languages in the various parts of Asia mentioned above and of much of Africa. The fact that those who seem to be most intolerant of semantic categorisations different from their own all have a traditionally hunter-gatherer culture, may not be the main primary cause of such an intolerence in itself, though the very strong bonds and interface which such people have with nature and their own biosphere would make them prone to attach greater value to their own world view and resulting categorisations than may be the case with people whose ties with the world around them may be more diffuse and perhaps more tenuous. At the same time, the special type of linguistic semi-isolation leading to their intolerance may, in part, be a consequence of the cultural and regional setting in which they find themselves, together with the geographical and traditional ethnic isolation of Australia, Greenland and other parts of the Arctic area, and parts of the jungle areas of South America. The same may well be true of other parts of the world traditionally inhabited by hunter-gatherers, such as desert areas in South Africa inhabited by Bushman tribes.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

My observations during fieldwork, on the importance of human categorisations found in language (see also Craig 1986), as highlighted by the intolerance of speakers of Australian Aboriginal languages and some other languages to categorisations different from their own, underline the fact pointed out by many including myself, and recently reiterated by Mühlhäusler (1987), that each language is in some ways unique, especially from the point of view of cognitive linguistics, and that the disappearance of any one language or its conversion, in cognitive terms, to 'Standard Average European'[1] constitutes the irretrievable loss of a conventionalised system for making sense of the world. Study of languages threatened by disappearance in the foreseeable future should therefore be the first and most important task of linguists, far more important than that of linguistic theory carried out in a cultural vacuum, independently from the culture of the speakers, in the belief that there is a supremely important universal base to language and a relatively insignificant variation at the surface level. This view was strongly endorsed by the Executive Council of the Permanent International Committee of Linguists when looking towards Australia as one of the possible host countries of the next International Linguistic Congress to be held in 1992, in the hope that the study of languages threatened with disappearance would constitute the, or one of the, main themes of that congress. In spite of the fact that the final decision of the Committee gave Quebec the privilege of hosting the 1992 Congress, the fact remains that, in view of its geographical location and long tradition in this type of linguistic work as evidenced by the work of Luise Hercus for instance, Australia seems uniquely well suited to carry out such studies on a large scale to the furtherance of our understanding of human language.

NOTE

1. That is, the original native world view which constitutes the reference setting of a language has been heavily influenced or even largely replaced by one characteristic of the average European world view, even though, in purely formal terms, the language still possesses most of its original vocabulary and much of its grammatical structure. The vocabulary items may have lost

some features such as class markers based on the original native world view, and the grammatical structure may have lost categories also based on that world view, and added new ones reflecting the average European world view.

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