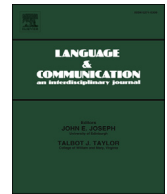


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# The sociocultural dynamics of indigenous multilingualism in northwestern Australia

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## ABSTRACT

The indigenous languages of the Northern Kimberley region of Western Australia comprise a single genetic family (Worrorran), with three branches, and extensive multilingualism across them. Languages are understood to have been directly installed in the landscape by ancestral creator figures. On that basis language difference – especially in lexicon – figures as an important aspect of social identity. In the center of the Worrorran region there has been structural convergence due to diffusion across the three branches, but continuing lexical divergence. This indicates that both the multilingualism there and the socioculturally motivated preservation of lexical difference are of longstanding.

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## 1. Introduction

This article addresses aspects of indigenous multilingualism, language ideology and social practice in Aboriginal Australia. It begins with a general account of the phenomena in question which pertains to most or all of the continent, and then focuses in more detail on examples from a particular part of Australia – the northern Kimberley region of Western Australia. Drawing on evidence from contemporary and historical ethnography, linguistic anthropology and comparative-historical linguistics, I develop an account of aspects of social identity and associated patterns of multilingualism which can be shown to have existed in the region for many centuries before European settlement, and continue to exist among the now diminishing number of speakers of Aboriginal languages there.

## 2. Land, language and social identity in Aboriginal Australia

Before European settlement, the continent of Australia was fully occupied by Aboriginal people who spoke many different languages – somewhere between 250 and 400 depending on where you set the threshold between dialect difference and language difference (Walsh, 1997; Asher and Moseley, forthcoming). A map of the territories associated with those languages is shown in Fig. 1,<sup>1</sup> on which the Kimberley region is labelled as such.

Historical and ethnographic accounts from around Australia – including early post-contact ones – show that among speakers of Aboriginal languages multilingualism has long been the norm rather than the exception.<sup>2</sup> To this day, in mainland areas where Aboriginal languages are spoken, almost every fluent speaker is fluent in at least two of them, and it is not uncommon for one person to speak four or five, even in areas where the languages differ greatly in grammar and vocabulary. Nor does speakership

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<sup>1</sup> This map attempts to represent the language, social or nation groups of Aboriginal Australia. It shows only the general locations of larger groupings of people which may include clans, dialects or individual languages in a group. It used published resources from 1988–1994 and is not intended to be exact, nor the boundaries fixed. It is not suitable for native title or other land claims. David R Horton (creator), © Aboriginal Studies Press, AIATSIS, 1996. No reproduction without permission. To purchase a print version visit: [www.aiatsis.ashop.com.au/](http://www.aiatsis.ashop.com.au/).

<sup>2</sup> For examples see Love (1931–2, 54; 1936, 48–9), Curr (1886–1887, 2), Elwell (1977), Merlan (1981), Sutton (1978).

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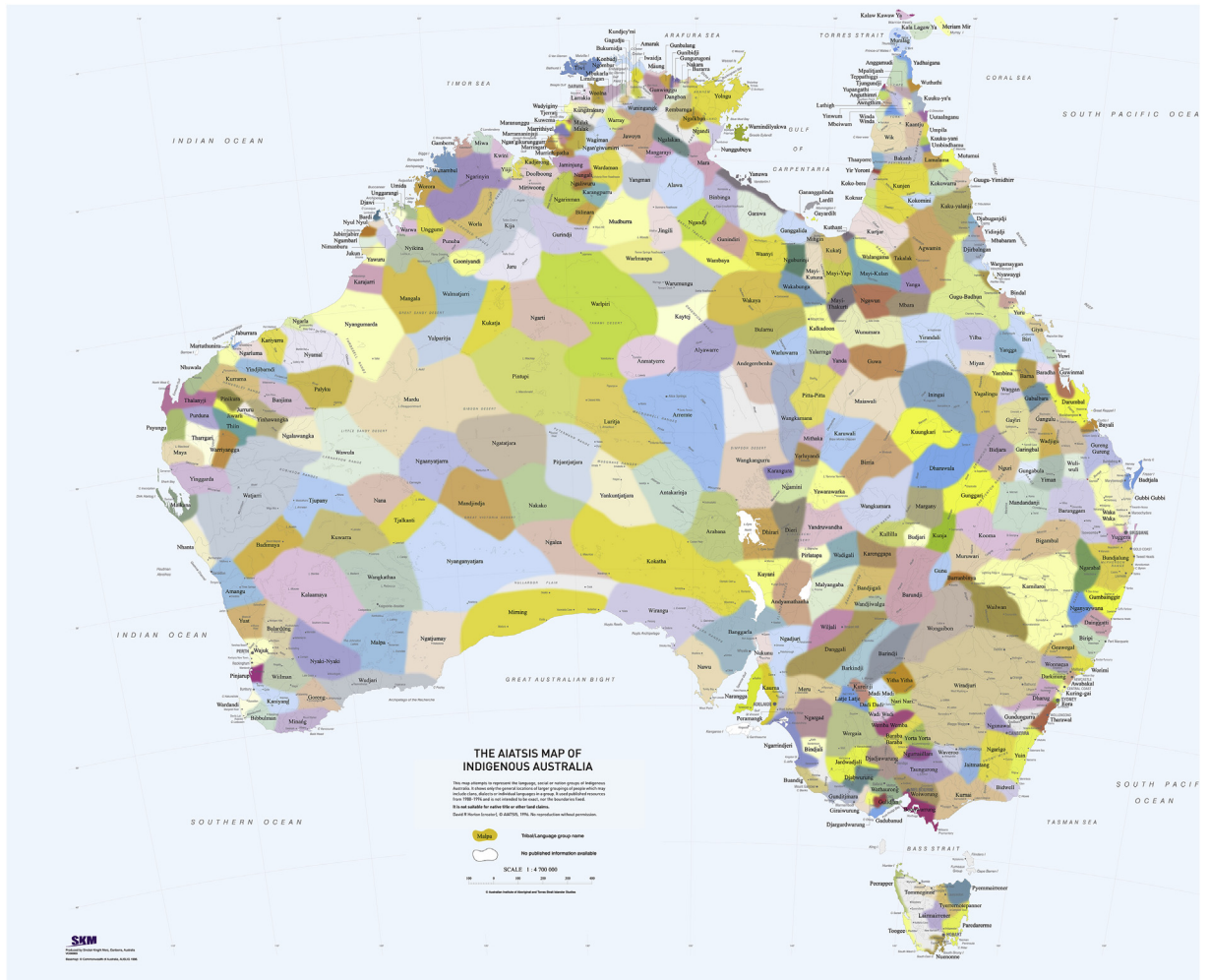


Fig. 1. Australian Aboriginal language countries.

cluster in such a way that, for example, languages A and B are spoken by all and only the members of some particular 'tribe'. Indeed, insofar as the commonsense western notion of 'tribe' presumes discrete populations that are distinguished *inter alia* by what languages they speak, it simply doesn't apply in Australia and never has (Merlan, 1981; Rumsey, 1993). So what are we to make of a map such as the above, which shows the whole of Australia divided up into discrete territories, with names, most of which are also the names of languages? Is it purely fanciful, with no connection to Aboriginal conceptions of the matter? On the contrary, it is clear from what Aboriginal people say around at least a good deal of Australia that they do think of the land as divided up into more-or-less clearly bounded regions, each associated with a name such as Warlpiri, Wiradjuri, or Aranda, which also names a 'language' (leaving aside for now the complexities of varying scale across which those names apply). Confusion arises only when we try to think of such names as referring to groups of people on the basis of what languages they speak, or of what languages were spoken by their human forebears.

Rather, such names refer, in the first instance, to areas of land, to which the languages are thought of as intrinsically related. Across much of northern and central Australia at least, there is good ethnographic evidence of that intrinsic relationship having been understood as one that was established by the acts of primordial beings (in some areas called 'dreamings') who moved across the land and sea, giving the world its present form by creating named places and leaving traces of themselves behind as features of the landscape. Among the features that they left behind were languages, which were linked to regions through having been spoken there by those beings, who would, for example, switch from one language to another as they reached a particular place, thereby establishing it as a boundary between language countries; or meet up with another such being speaking a different language, who would 'turn back' the arriving one at that point, to similar effect (Merlan, 1981; Rumsey, 1993; Sutton, 1997).

Persons too are thought of as intrinsically linked to places and areas of land, through facts of locally grounded spirit conception<sup>3</sup> and/or filiation to particular land-linked groups or social categories (clans as described, e.g., in Rumsey, 1996, 'semi-

<sup>3</sup> I refer here to the widespread Aboriginal belief in pre-existing spirits which live in the ground or in pools of water and enter pregnant woman around the time of the quickening and become incarnated in child to whom they give birth. For examples see Rumsey (1996).

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