1 The languages of Australia in linguistic research: context and issues

1 Background on the Indigenous languages of Australia

At the time of colonisation in the late 18th century, Australia was home to 700–800 language varieties, distributed across the continent (and including Tasmania and the Torres Strait Islands), which can be grouped into more than 250 distinct languages, some of which include a number of dialects.¹² These language varieties were spoken across a population of around one million people (e.g. Butlin 1983), which indicates the enormous linguistic diversity of Indigenous Australia. In many cases small populations (e.g. 40–50 people) maintained distinctive language varieties, and the largest populations speaking a single language variety were probably no bigger than 3000–4000 people. Linguistic diversity was not necessarily an impediment to communication, however, since Indigenous societies were frequently highly multilingual, with an individual often speaking up to 4–6 languages of the surrounding area. Linguistic diversity, in fact, was valued for its indexical relationship to identity and group membership (Evans 2007).

The relationship between language and identity is strong for all human societies, but is particularly so in Indigenous Australia, where language is often related directly to the land. As Rumsey (1993, 2005) explains, in Australia there is a direct relationship between a language and a tract of land; in creation myths it is very common for the ancestors to be described as passing across the land instilling different languages into different areas as they go (Evans 2007: 20). People are then connected to a particular tract of land and, through that connection, to the language associated with that place. Thus the Wambaya people are Wambaya because they are linked to places which are associated with the Wambaya language, and therefore speak Wambaya (see Rumsey 1993, 2005 for discussion). This ideology leads to an important distinction between speaking a language and “owning” a language. A person will “own” the language of the land to which her clan, family or group is connected, even if she doesn’t speak it.

¹ We wish to extend our thanks to Jane Simpson for reading an earlier version of this chapter and providing many suggestions and comments that have led to substantial improvements in coverage and content.
² The number of languages cited in the literature generally ranges from 250–300. Recent work by Claire Bowern (NSF grant 0844550) suggests that the figure might be closer to 350 (270 Pama-Nyungan, and 80–90 non-Pama-Nyungan (Claire Bowern pers. comm. 28/11/13)).
Unfortunately, the 225 years since colonisation have taken a devastating toll on the traditional Indigenous languages of Australia. Of the 250 or more distinct languages spoken in 1788, only 15–18 are now being learned by children as their first language. Another 100 or so have only small numbers of elderly speakers remaining, and most have no full or fluent speakers left at all (Marmion, Obata and Troy 2014). Australia has been identified as the country that has experienced the greatest and most rapid loss of languages over the last century, of anywhere in the world (Nettle and Romaine 2000: 9), with grim estimates suggesting that if recent trends of language shift remain unchecked, there may be no speakers of traditional Indigenous languages left at all by the year 2050 (McConvell and Thieberger 2001).

The linguistic situation is not unrelated to official language policy, which during most of the course of Australia’s history since colonisation has promoted an unrelenting culture of English monolingualism. Only in recent decades have there been positive government initiatives for the documentation, teaching, and public use of Indigenous languages (see chapter 8 for the general situation, § 3.6 below for a discussion of bilingual education, and chapter 10 for legal contexts). For the turn-of-the-century situation, see Laughren (2000); for reference to Australian language policy documents see David Nash’s compilation at http://www.anu.edu.au/linguistics/nash/aust/policy.html.

Although it is generally assumed that all Australian languages are ultimately related (except for Meriam Mir from the Eastern Torres Strait, which is clearly Papuan (Piper 2013), and the languages of Tasmania (Bowern 2012)) such relatedness has been more easily established for some languages than for others. Koch (this volume, chapter 2) discusses this issue in more detail. The current common position is that there are about 25 families represented across the continent, with linguistic diversity unevenly distributed such that one single family, Pama-Nyungan, covers seven-eighths of the continent, and the remaining 24 non-Pama-Nyungan families are concentrated in a relatively small part of the north-west (see Map 3, where some of these families are indicated in small caps). While there are a number of phonological, grammatical and typological similarities across Australian languages, many of which are discussed in the chapters in this volume, there is also an enormous amount of differentiation, even among languages that are geographically close. This great range of languages and linguistic structures makes Australia a treasure trove for linguists, and descriptive and analytical work on these languages has proceeded apace over the last 40–50 years. Australian languages have also proven themselves to be particularly interesting for linguistic typology and theory in many respects; this factor has fuelled interest in these languages and is a theme that runs throughout the chapters in this volume.

Our knowledge of Australian languages varies enormously across the continent. Some languages ceased to be spoken long before substantial linguistic work could be undertaken. This is the case for the languages of Tasmania, many of the languages of Victoria, and Sydney, for example. Other languages have been the subject of a
large amount of linguistic work, by a number of researchers, such as Warlpiri and the Arandic languages in Central Australia. Many languages fall somewhere in between these two extremes, with some amount of language description of varying degrees and quality.

A number of works provide overviews of Australian languages and their sociolinguistic, typological and grammatical properties. These include: Blake (1987); Bowern (2013); Dixon (1980, 2002); Evans (2007); Gaby (2008); Walsh (1991); Walsh and Yallop (1993, 2005); Yallop (1982), and also areal sourcebooks and surveys such as McGregor (1988, 2004); Menning and Nash (1981); Thieberger (1993) and Wafer et al. (2009).

This volume builds on and complements these works. We have attempted to summarise the developments in Australian linguistics that have taken place since the overviews in Current Trends in Linguistics (Capell 1971, O’Grady 1971, Wurm 1971) and Wurm (1972). To do this, we have focussed on the key areas of historical-comparative linguistics (Koch, Chapter 2); phonetics (Fletcher and Butcher, Chapter 3); (morpho)phonology (Baker, Chapter 4); case, constituency and grammatical relations (Nordlinger, Chapter 5); complex predicates (Bowern, Chapter 6); semantics (Gaby and Singer, Chapter 7); language maintenance and revitalisation (Walsh, Chapter 8); language contact varieties (Meakins, Chapter 9), and Aboriginal English (Eades, Chapter 10). The final chapter completes the picture with a focus on Australian English (Collins, Chapter 11). These chapters provide extensive discussion of the development of research in each of these areas over the last 40–50 years, and reflect many of the key areas of research in the languages and linguistics of Australia during this time. Inevitably, however, there are areas of research that we have not been able to cover for lack of space; § 3 of this chapter attempts to cover these areas in brief and point the reader to some of the relevant literature.

2 History of documentation and study

The Australian languages first came to the attention of European scholars after the discovery of New South Wales by Captain James Cook in 1770 and the establishment of a British penal colony at Port Jackson (Sydney) in 1788. Cook’s voyages yielded a wordlist of the Guugu Yimidhirr language—including the word kangaroo (Haviland 1974). Wordlists of the Sydney language were collected by a number of officials and naval officers of the first colony. One of these, Lieutenant William Dawes, began a systematic study of the grammar, but his results remained largely unknown until relatively recently (Troy 1992, 1993; http://www.williamdawes.org). The collection of wordlists, most of which used a very unsatisfactory English-based spelling, contin-

3 This section is abbreviated from Koch (2007: 22–24).
ued for the first century of European settlement. The largest published collection was in E. M. Curr’s (1886–1887) *The Australian race*, which includes three volumes of lists of up to 120 words for a great many localities of Australia. Many of these were supplied by settlers, policemen, missionaries, etc. For some languages this is the only documentation available.

Most of the early attempts to describe the grammar of Australian languages were made by missionaries (Threlkeld 1834, Ridley 1875, Teichelmann and Schürmann 1840, Meyer 1843).⁴ Around the beginning of the twentieth century grammatical sketches were published by the surveyor R. H. Mathews and the physician W. E. Roth (1984), among others. These were typically expressed in terms of the European Traditional Grammar framework, with the result that modern linguists find them unsatisfactory (see Koch 2008). An increase in the amount of documentation as well as in the professional quality of linguistic descriptions followed from: the work of Arthur Capell in the Department of Anthropology at Sydney University from the 1930s; the involvement of linguists of the Summer Institute of Linguistics from the 1950s; funding from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS, later AIATSIS) in Canberra from the early 1960s; and the establishing of linguistics departments in Australian universities from the late 1960s and 1970s. Indigenous linguists have played an increasing role in the documentation of their own languages (e.g. Bani and Alpher 1987, Ford and Ober 1991, Henderson and Dobson 1994, Granite and Laughren 2001, Bell 2003, Turpin and Ross 2012). In recent years the Resource Network for Linguistic Diversity has provided extensive support and training for Indigenous communities interested in documenting and revitalising their own languages (see http://www.rnld.org for details).

The main avenues of publication of the results of linguistic research have been: Sydney University’s *Oceania* journal and *Oceanic Linguistics* monograph series, Monash University’s *Linguistic Communications* series, AIAS (now Aboriginal Studies Press) in Canberra, Pacific Linguistics at Canberra’s Australian National University,⁵ Dixon and Blake’s five volumes of the *Handbook of Australian Languages* (Australian National University Press and Oxford University Press), Cambridge University Press, Mouton (de Gruyter), and Lincom Europa. A recent initiative of the last-named publisher is a series *Outstanding Grammars from Australia*, edited by R. M. W. Dixon, which consists of facsimile copies of thesis-length descriptions of (primarily) Australian languages. A number of dictionaries have been published by the Institute for Aboriginal Development (now IAD Press), Batchelor Press, and Muurrbay Aboriginal Language and Culture Cooperative in Nambucca Heads, N.S.W. For further on the history of documentation of Australian languages the reader is referred to McGregor (2008).

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⁴ A comprehensive history of Australian missions, with especial attention to language matters, is Harris (1990).

⁵ Since 2012 the Pacific Linguistics series is published by de Gruyter Mouton in Berlin.
3 Areas of research not covered in this book

It became clear to us at the outset of this project that a single volume would not be enough to include discussion of all of the research that has been undertaken on the languages of Australia in the past 50 years. There are, therefore, a number of strands of research that we have not been able to cover adequately in this volume. In this section we briefly survey some of these, and point the reader to the main sources of further information.

3.1 Historiography

The history of Australian linguistics has only recently begun to be seriously discussed, with studies on particular researchers, languages, or linguistic themes. A “Society for the History of Linguistics in the Pacific” has been established and has held three conferences. McGregor (2008) is a recent volume focussing on the history of research in Australian linguistics, including the contributions made by key individuals, and includes chapters on the history of research in areas not covered in this volume (e.g. Adam Kendon on Australian sign languages). A special issue of Language & History 54(2) contains further contributions on Australian linguistic history (Koch 2011, Wafer and Carey 2011).

3.2 Specialised speech registers

Complex systems of linguistic etiquette have long been part of Australian Indigenous culture. It was anthropologists who first drew attention to this fact (e.g. Thomson 1935, Stanner 1937, Sansom 1980, Liberman 1985). Avoidance registers used for communicating with in-laws, especially mothers-in-law, have been a special object of interest to linguists (Dixon 1971, Haviland 1979a, 1979b; Rumsey 1982, McConvell 1982, McGregor 1989, Laughren 2001). Hale (1971) describes some features of registers used in the context of initiation; and Nash and Simpson (1981) discuss the practice of name taboos upon death in central Australian communities. Goddard (1992) describes some special speech styles used among Western Desert people including joking speech styles used among certain kin (see also Garde 1996). Harris’s “Yolngu rules of interpersonal communication” (e.g. 1977) have been much cited, especially in educational contexts. A text-book overview of registers is Alpher (1993).
3.3 Gesture and sign language

Early ethnographers made observations about the systems of gestures that are widespread among Aboriginal people. These are typically referred to as “sign languages”, although they are more appropriately described as an auxiliary system of communication. Older sources are summarised in Umiker-Sebeok and Sebeok (1978). The most comprehensive study is Kendon’s (1988) description of the elaborated system used by Warlpiri women especially when under a speech ban after suffering bereavement. Other relevant publications include Kendon (1995), Cooke (1996), Wilkins (1997), and research into the role of gestures in indicating deixis (Haviland 1993, Wilkins 1999). A recent collaborative project involving Indigenous communities from Central Australia and linguists Margaret Carew and Jenny Green has produced the first online dictionary of sign languages in Central Australia, *Iltyem-iltyem* (http://iltyemiltyem.com/sign).

A recent major publication in the domain of multimodality in Australian languages is Green (2014), a comprehensive multimodal study of story-telling by Arrernte speakers, which involves correlation of linguistic text, gestures, and sand drawings. Green also has a number of related projects and publications underway, as listed on her webpage: http://languages-linguistics.unimelb.edu.au/academic-staff/jennifergreen.

3.4 Song language

“Song language” is the term that has come to be used for the special linguistic characteristics of Indigenous songs. This has been a minor area of research throughout the whole period under study. This research mediates between linguistics and ethnomusicology. Much research has involved collaboration between practitioners of the two disciplines (e.g. Barwick et al. 2009, Black and Koch 1983, Dixon and Koch 1996, and the unpublished volumes by the traditional Wangkungurru elder Mick Maclean and the linguist Luise Hercus (Maclean and Hercus, n.d.), with notations provided by the ethnomusicologist Grace Koch). One active scholar combines training and expertise in both disciplines (Turpin 2005).

Song texts are the closest equivalent to poetry that occurs in Australian cultures: the first major study of song texts (Strehlow 1971) compared Arrernte songs to the literature of European languages. Note that a number of studies include terms such as “poems” (Dixon and Duwell 1990), “poetry” (von Brandenstein and Thomas 1974, Dixon and Koch 1996), “poetics” (Turpin 2007, Treloyn 2009), or “literature” (Donaldson 1979). One broad type of song is intimately related to traditional land-based mythology and accompanies sacred and secular ceremonies, combined with dance, choreography, body decoration, etc. Another type provides commentary on everyday events. Research in traditional genres is now possible only for a handful of
traditional Aboriginal societies (see Walsh 2007). Collections of studies of song language are: Barwick et al. (1995), Clunies Ross et. al. (1987), Kassler and Stubington (1984), Marett and Barwick (2007), and Turpin et al. (2010). A significant website is that of the Wadeye song database (http://sydney.edu.au/arts/indigenous_song/wadeye/).

Much work on the language of song is undertaken within a broader focus on Indigenous music and performance more generally. The National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia is a current standout in this area, and has already produced a number of recordings and publications (see: http://www.aboriginalartists.com.au/NRP_publications.htm). Other notable works in this field include Berndt (1976), Anderson (1992), Moyle (1986, 1997), Marett (2005), Marett et al. (2013), Magowan (2007), among others.

3.5 Discourse, pragmatics and interaction

The collection of texts has long been a part of language description (the so-called “Boasian trilogy” consists of grammar, dictionary and texts (Evans and Dench 2006)), and most grammatical descriptions of Australian languages include a few illustrative texts, usually narratives. A number of linguists have produced volumes consisting primarily of texts, e.g. Holmer and Holmer (1969), von Brandenstein (1970), Schebeck (1974), Glass and Hackett (1979), Heath (1980), Hercus and Sutton (1986), Dixon (1991) and Austin (1997). However, such studies have generally not discussed discourse or pragmatic structure per se.

A small number of studies have treated discourse and pragmatic structure as their primary research topic (e.g. Kilham 1977, McGregor 1987, Swartz 1991, Carroll 1995, Glass 1997 [MA thesis version 1980], Rose 2001, Kim et al. 2001, Mushin 2005, Simpson 2007, Mushin and Baker 2008) or have included discourse structure as part of a grammatical description (e.g. Goddard 1985, McGregor 1990, Patz 2002, Wilkins 1989). Studies that consider the literary and aesthetic qualities of texts include Napaljarri and Cataldi (1994), Cataldi (1996) and Klapproth (2004); and some recent work has looked at narrative in children's discourse (Bavin 2000, Disbrey 2008). For a recent discussion of the research on discourse in Australian languages, see Baker and Mushin (2008). For references to studies on the discourse functions of grammatical features see Nordlinger (this volume, chapter 5) and especially the papers in Mushin and Baker (2008). For prosodic aspects of discourse, see references in Fletcher and Butcher (this volume, chapter 3).

Studies of interaction have been even fewer than those of narrative discourse. Pioneering studies were by Liberman (1982, 1985) and Garde (2002, 2013). Recent years have seen an increase in interest in this area (see for example, Moses 2009, Blythe 2009 and the papers in Mushin and Gardner 2010).
3.6 Language and education

There have been numerous studies on language issues in the educational system. Early studies discussed problems of literacy and classroom communication for children who spoke languages other than English. Representative collections are Brumby and Vaszolyi (1977), Eagleson, Kaldor and Malcolm (1982). Many short, language-related articles appeared in teacher journals such as *The Aboriginal Child at School*. Some international publications are Malcolm (1979), Malcolm (1982), Christie and Harris (1985). The introduction of a bilingual education policy (see, for example O’Grady and Hale 1975) in the Northern Territory led to numerous publications. Overviews include Murtagh (1982), Gale (1990), Hartman and Henderson (1994), Devlin (1995), Harris (1995), Hoogenraad (2001); see also the discussion in Laughren (2000). Particularly important are the discussions by Indigenous educators and linguists such as Raymattja Marika (1999) and Eve Fesl (1993). The large number of vernacular books produced by the Northern Territory bilingual education program, supported by linguists and teacher-linguists, are in the process of being digitised and put on the web by a project at Charles Darwin University, Living Archive of Aboriginal Languages (http://laal.cdu.edu.au/). The subsequent dismantling of the policy also attracted the attention (and concern) of linguists (e.g. Devlin 2009, 2011, Simpson, Caffery and McConvell 2009). The complex interaction between home language and the educational system for Indigenous children has been a topic of recent research by a number of researchers, including Jane Simpson and Gillian Wigglesworth (e.g. Simpson and Wigglesworth 2008, Wigglesworth et al. 2011) and Denise Angelo and colleagues (see, for example, the papers listed at http://www.languageperspectives.org.au/).

3.7 Child language acquisition

Until recently not much research has been pursued on children’s acquisition of Australian languages. The principal studies before current studies were Bavin and Shopen’s work on Warlpiri (e.g. Bavin 1990, Bavin and Shopen 1991). Warlpiri is also the subject of a much-cited study of Baby Talk (Laughren 1984). The Aboriginal Child Language Acquisition Projects (phases 1 and 2), led by Jane Simpson and Gillian Wigglesworth, have been concerned with analysing the development of children’s linguistic abilities in the interface between schooling and multilingual home communities (see Simpson and Wigglesworth 2008 and http://languages-linguistics.unimelb.edu.au/current-projects/acla2). More recently, a large-scale project has begun on the acquisition of Murrinh-Patha, with involvement from a team of researchers from the University of Melbourne (http://languages-linguistics.unimelb.edu.au/projects/lamp).
3.8 Language and law

Problems of intercultural communication affecting speakers of Indigenous languages in their interaction with the criminal justice system have long been discussed in the literature (Strehlow 1936, Kriewaldt 1960–1962, Nash 1979, Liberman 1981, Walsh 1994, Cooke 1995). One of the issues has concerned the kind of English known or produced by Indigenous people caught up in legal processes. A celebrated case involving the linguist T. G. H. Strehlow in the late 1950s is described in Inglis (1961, see also Eades 2013). Highly significant and influential in the area of Aboriginal English in the legal system has been the work of Diana Eades (see, for example, Eades 1992, 1995, 2008, 2013, and this volume, chapter 10).

Linguists have been involved in documenting the relation of Aboriginal groups to their traditional lands, as part of the exercise of granting legal rights in land to groups of Australia’s Indigenous people. From the first settlement on Australia by the British in 1788 until the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act of 1976—for the Northern Territory—and the Native Title Act of 1993—for Australia as a whole, there was no official recognition of Indigenous ownership of the land. Studies concerned with language issues in relation to Aboriginal language claims and the Native Title Act include Neate (1981), Nash (1984), Koch (1985, 1990, 1991), Simpson (1994), Walsh (1999) and Henderson and Nash (2002).

3.9 Placenames

Research for land claims has fostered a renewed appreciation of the importance of territorial affiliation for Aboriginal identity, and has documented thousands of sites. Placename research has become the subject of recent interest by linguists, anthropologists, historians, and especially state Geographical Names Boards, as Indigenous placenames are being increasingly recognised in the public sphere. A number of conferences on Indigenous placenames have been held since the 1990s. Many of the papers from these conferences appear in three collections: Hercus, Hodges, and Simpson (2002), Koch and Hercus (2009), and Clark, Hercus, and Kostanski (in press).

3.10 Kinship terminology

The study of kinship terminology has traditionally been the preserve of anthropologists more than of linguists (e.g. Elkin 1938–1940). A major study of kin classification systems by the linguistic anthropologist Scheffler (1978) uses methods from linguistic semantics as well as anthropological kinship theory. A significant contribution by linguists is Heath, Merlan and Rumsey (1982). Grammatical uses of kinship categories are described in this book, as well as in studies such as Hale (1966), Hercus and White...

Another topic related to kinship is the study of social category terminology—the majority of Australian social groups have societal divisions called moieties, sections, semi-moieties, or subsections (depending on the number and structure of the social categories they distinguish). These have long been the subject of study by anthropologists (e.g. Radcliffe-Brown 1930–1931). More recently, partially in reaction to von Brandenstein (1982), McConvell (1985) initiated the study of the diachrony of subsections. A current research project nicknamed “Austkin II” aims to map the Australian social category terms and reconstruct their prehistoric spread (see McConvell and Dousset 2012).

4 (Selected) internet resources

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages [ed. David Nathan]: http://www.dnathan.com/VL/
Living Archive of Aboriginal Languages: a repository of bilingual education materials: http://laal.cdu.edu.au/

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