Handbooks of Australian Aboriginal languages have been or are currently being produced in various parts of the country. In this paper we wish to address some issues and problems we have encountered in compiling handbooks which may have wider theoretical import and practical applications.

This article is written with the following objectives in mind: To explain the structure, and the nature of information included in the handbooks to their users in more detail than is possible (or advisable) in the preface to the handbooks; to discuss some of the technical details and the terminology used in the handbook which would be of interest to an academic rather than a general audience; and to give students of linguistics an overview of some issues in Australian Aboriginal linguistics.

WHY HANDBOOKS?

The handbooks present, in a condensed format, information which is otherwise available only through detailed readings of technical works such as grammars, theoretical linguistic papers, and unpublished manuscripts. These works are often available only in relatively inaccessible journals and/or in research libraries. The body of these handbooks presents comparable information on each language in such a way as to make it readily retrievable. The handbooks are not written to be read from cover to cover; readers should be able to open them at any page and understand the information provided. Comprehensive indexes should allow rapid access to information on each language, each linguist, and each community.

Sources of all information are indicated, and varying opinions are noted. Where a certain piece of information is not known (e.g. the number of speakers of a language), or where written materials do not exist, the lack is explicitly indicated, rather than not mentioned.

DIFFERENCES OF PURPOSE

There are already handbooks of Australian languages, such as Oates & Oates (1970), Oates (1975), and Capell (1963). However, these handbooks do not provide comparable information on each topic or language -- usually because it is not available -- and the sources of their information are not always made explicit.

On the basic level our handbooks are organised in such a way as to make information maximally accessible. This involves consideration of graphic design and page layout. The decision to start every subsection on a new page for instance is a way of drawing attention to that language. On another level we are not aiming to present the information within standard English sentences, but rather into headings and lists. This makes the information structure clearer, and the reader does not have to read through long stretches of text in order to locate (or not locate, as the case may
be) a particular piece of information. Of course there are certain disadvantages in this mode of presentation: the particular sort of information that someone wishes to find on a language may not be included. And important information that does not fit under the headings may be excluded for this reason. Another potential disadvantage, which ought to be cured by strict adherence to the principle of source acknowledgment, is that some readers may tend to view the information laid out in this way as fact. This type of response is, however, impossible to fully eradicate in a society which places such a premium on the veracity of written matter.

The compilers of these handbooks are not aiming so much at presenting a viewpoint on the particular language as at presenting an accurate statement on the state of knowledge about that language. In some ways the handbooks reflect a change in approach to the humanities, the decline of empiricism, so that information is presented as the result of a person's research, not necessarily as the true situation of the languages. Conflicting analyses are mentioned, and conflicting information presented, rather than smoothed over.

WHY WRITE HANDBOOKS? -- RATIONALE

We see three main audiences for the handbooks, hence three different reasons for compiling them:

(1) To present in a readily accessible and retrievable form information on Aboriginal languages to their speakers or descendants of their speakers.

(2) To provide educators with the information necessary for the design and implementation of appropriate language programmes for their language situations.

(3) To provide linguists with basic information on the languages so that they can locate source material on particular languages, and devise appropriate research projects and strategies.

USEFULNESS OF THE HANDBOOKS

The handbooks should be useful to educators and to people involved in curriculum design or in the development of language programmes in schools in that they present in condensed summary form the available information on a particular language or linguistic area. Each language situation is unique and the development of an effective language programme is dependent to a large extent on the particular nature of that language situation. For example if there remains only one speaker of the traditional language, perhaps with a number of part-speakers (see below for discussion of the term 'speaker') then a fully bilingual education programme (i.e. one in which both the traditional language and English are used as mediums of instruction) would obviously be impossible. However there are language programmes appropriate for such situations.

Teachers and other non-linguists (e.g. nurses, Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Department of Community Services officers) are not usually in an ideal position to accurately assess the language situation in a particular community. This is because they have as a rule neither the time nor the expertise to do so. For instance, when community members are asked for information about their particular linguistic situation, they are likely to give varying responses depending on the situation. The criteria
that a native speaker of a language uses for identifying speakers of the language are context dependent, especially so in Aboriginal Australia (see Merlan 1981, and Miller 1971). We will be discussing the technical term 'speaker' below; however to a member of a particular speech community, 'speaker' may be used to mean many different things. They could be referring to an "owner" of a language; to someone whose parent(s) speak the language; or to someone who comes from the country the language is or was spoken in. Furthermore, depending on the actual interview situation, that community member may suggest that everyone is fluent in the traditional language, or that the language is no longer spoken by anybody. For example if the interviewer is seen as an agent of assimilation then the response may be that there are no speakers of the language, if on the other hand there is a perceived benefit in belonging to a certain linguistic group it is possible that speakers may claim affiliation with that group.

Another potential cause for error occurs when somebody outside a particular language group is asked about that language. This is a well known source of misinterpretation and is discussed in Tindale's chapter "Blunders, excusable errors, and discarded ideas" (Tindale 1974:154). Even academically trained researchers may fall into this trap -- they are (or should be), however, aware of the dangers. For example the majority of linguists and anthropologists who have worked in the Fitzroy Valley have worked with Walmajarri people. On the basis of the Walmajarri evidence they have frequently -- and quite wrongly -- represented the Gooniyandi and Bunaba people as being virtually extinct (e.g. Birdsell 1970:118).

We are questioning the validity of the Western ideology of objectivity, that it is possible to ever elicit "true" or "pure" responses to questions, untinged by the interpersonal situation of the interview. We are used to behaving in this way ourselves, reserving the objective (or pretence at the objective) style to particular situations, such as those which belong to the well established western genre of the interview. This genre would appear to be absent from the majority of traditional and present day Aboriginal cultures and subcultures. What we see as a situation demanding an "objective" response of belief at the expense of the feelings and susceptibilities of the interviewer is seen by most Aborigines as a situation of potential threat to the face of the interviewer. Circumspection is demanded in such situations, just as it is demanded in the majority of dealings with members of the dominant culture. On the other hand, it should be recalled that straight objective answers that we may be expected to give to interviewers are totally inappropriate in other circumstances, where the face of mutual agreement is more important than the projection of objectivity. Would we publicly dispute the word of a friend in the name of truth in a party situation? For us, too, the interpersonal socio-cultural circumstance is an important factor guiding the way in which we respond to our fellows.

What we are ultimately suggesting is that a handbook based on research and fieldwork by trained linguists and anthropologists is more likely to provide accurate information on the linguistic situation of a community, than is work by a lone untrained person.

In order to devise and successfully implement a language programme appropriate to a particular community it is necessary to employ both a western 'scientific' approach and a local 'ethnolinguistic' approach. The western approach holds that there is an object of study 'a language', whose speakers can be counted and their proficiency tested. The ethnolinguistic approach is concerned with the context of the language and the political situation of its speakers. Our effort in these handbooks represents the
scientific linguistic approach. To design a language programme, the information of the types included in the handbook is indispensable. To have the programme accepted in a community, the ethnolinguistic factors must be taken into account. For example, language attitudes may militate against what would be considered by scientific criteria to be an appropriate programme. A case in point is Kriol. In many communities in the Kimberley the majority of the population may speak this language fluently every day, and it is the mother tongue of the young children. However, in most places in the Kimberley there is a strong negative attitude expressed by older people towards Kriol, and most do not approve of it being taught in the school. Although a Northern Territory style bilingual education programme with early literacy and instruction conducted in both English and Kriol would be feasible (perhaps even desirable) from the scientific point of view, in these circumstances community attitudes towards Kriol would militate against its inclusion in the school curriculum.

Another example is Nyungar, the language of the South-west of Western Australia which is currently the subject of several language programmes. Originally Nyungar was a language of the south-eastern portion of the territory currently ascribed to 'Nyungars'. With forced migration to New Norica in the mid-nineteenth century, Nyungar with its metathesised non-first syllable, became the lingua franca of the area (see von Brandenstein 1977 and forthcoming). These are all historical "facts" which we Europeans refer to as indisputable. However, when it comes to development of one particular language programme in the South-west, local people have taken exception to the suggestion that the language came from elsewhere, and that it is an 'artificial' language created by swapping non-first syllables. The language being used in the Nyungar classes bears little resemblance beyond the lexical level either to that described in early historical sources, or to that described in Douglas 1976. The students are deciding what form of the language to use, and they are adopting one that conforms largely to English word order and semantics. What is important for them is that they are making the decisions, in consultation with older people who remember more of the language. Thus a contemporary political process involving language has more importance in this situation than the actual language being used. A linguist is involved in an advisory capacity, but the 'scientific' aspect is only part of the input into the decision-making process.

DISCUSSION OF THE TYPE OF INFORMATION INCLUDED
The handbooks contain the following principal types of information about each language:

- Standard language name *
- Alternative names and alternative spellings of the names *
- Location (traditional: this may be included in a map, or given a separate heading) *
- Classification of the language *
- Dialects and variants of the language *
- Present number of speakers and their location *
- People who have worked on the language
- Practical orthography
- Wordlists
- Texts
- Grammar or sketch grammar
- Language programmes
- Language learning material
- Literacy material
This information is in most instances given under the above headings (with slight variation in wording). These topics are discussed in the introduction to the handbooks, but further detailed comment is required for some of them, those marked with an asterisk. (The others are in the nature of list and bibliographical information, and so are uncontentious.)

Standard language name. Under this heading we give the name of the language as it is referred to by its speakers, in the spelling preferred by the community of speakers (if this is known) -- otherwise, in the orthography in use in, or recommended for the language (cf. McGregor 1986).

Alternative language names are presented because there may be more than one name for a language. For example, "insiders" and "outsiders" may have different names for the language. And people can choose particular features of their own speech to identify themselves against other groups (see Miller 1971).

A fuller list of alternative spellings of the language names is also given in order to assist the non-linguist reader in particular in identification of the language. This is because for many languages there are a large number of variant spellings, some of which would appear unrelated, or might even suggest different languages. A reasonably comprehensive index is provided so as to assist in locating languages from the most commonly encountered spellings.

Traditional location. We discussed above problems that may be encountered when requesting information regarding speakers of a language; the same holds true of locations. Depending on the context of the interview (or speech) interaction, Aborigines may draw the boundaries in different ways. This is another way in which the affiliation of a particular individual may be expressed. This should come as no surprise to suburban Europeans who are accustomed to doing exactly the same thing. Suburban boundaries in our major cities are rarely precisely defined by residents, and they are often drawn differently by different local institutions, such as local governments, gas and electricity boards. Depending on the circumstances a person may now claim to live in one suburb, now (for other purposes) in another. We are also quite adept in shifting from one system of affiliation to a wider or narrower one, such as between local, state, and national depending on context. We would not think of accusing someone of misrepresentation because they claimed to be a Queenslander on one occasion, a Brisbanite on another, and an Australian on another.

Today, in parts of the Kimberley at least, people even classify certain stretches of land as "mixed" -- that is, as belonging to two (or more) tribal groups. This is usually land which belonged to border regions, and/or is currently inhabited by different groups of people, including perhaps people who traditionally inhabited country far away.

Classification. Information about classification of the language is based either on O'Grady, Voegelin and Voegelin (1966) or on Capell (1940). The method used by O'Grady et al to classify languages into groups and subgroups was lexico-statistical. Lists of 100 words in neighbouring languages, were compared and this was claimed to reflect the degree of genetic relationship between the languages. For a damning criticism of the classification based on this method, see Dixon 1980:260-265. We will not repeat the details of Dixon's criticism here, but add that it seems unlikely that the counts were actually done for many Kimberley languages. Not only were word-lists not available for a number of these languages, but
also recent counts such as Tsunoda 1981:5 and McGregor 1984:5 indicate that strictly on the basis of the criteria used by O'Grady, a quite different picture of language families would emerge. For instance, Gooniyandi and Walmajarri would have to be classified as different groups of the same phylic family, as they share 22% common vocabulary on a basic 400 item word-list (see McGregor 1984:5). However, O'Grady et al. rightly classify Gooniyandi as a member of the Bunuban phylic family, Walmajarri as a Pama-Nyungan language. It would appear that in the absence of adequate lexical information, O'Grady, Voegelin & Voegelin 1966 (and later classifications) relied on Capell's earlier work (see below), and that they perhaps did not apply their criteria as rigidly as Dixon (1980:262-263) castsigate them for. We recall our previous observation here that our handbooks aim at presenting not so much "facts", as information gathered and interpreted by investigators.

Capell's classification of Australian languages was typological, not genetic (e.g. Capell 1940). He identified linguistic groups principally on the basis of shared formal-grammatical features; but he used lexical information also. Thus he distinguished (Capell 1940) prefixing versus suffixing languages (i.e. languages which have prefixes and perhaps suffixes as well vs. those which have suffixes only, and no prefixes); noun classifying languages (i.e. languages which distinguished noun classes or genders), and within these, dual vs. multiple classifying languages; affix transferring languages (i.e. languages in which affixes which he expected should occur on the end of verbs actually occurred on the end of the first word or constituent of a clause); and so on. As is well known, genetically related languages may be typologically quite diverse -- for instance, the majority of the Pama-Nyungan languages are non-classifying (i.e. they have no noun classes), however a few, such as Dyiilbal, do (Dixon 1972:44). What is interesting in regard to the Kimberley region languages is that Capell's typological classification divided the languages into groups, which on present evidence, correspond to genetic families. The Bunuban family for example is a prefixing family without noun classification; these two features serve to distinguish the two members of this family from nearby languages with the exception of the Dampier Land languages. These he distinguished lexically -- the Dampier Land languages had numerous unique lexical items which did not resemble lexemes of other Australian languages. For the present at least, Capell's 1940 classification still stands as a valid classification of the Kimberley languages. Linguists have yet to demonstrate conclusively any higher order groupings of the families, and within the families.

Classification of the Pilbara and desert languages is more contentious, and the detail of classification is as yet not resolved. For this reason, Thieberger's handbook organises the languages of Western Australia by geographical area (the borders of which follow known or hypothesised subgroup boundaries), whilst McGregor's organises the Kimberley languages by language group, as per Capell's classification.

Dialects and variants of the language. The term "language" is at least as problematic as is the term "speaker". The term means something quite different to the linguist and the speaker. Linguists tend to identify languages on the basis of formal characteristics, ignoring political matters. Where interpersonal and intergroup differences in speech are relatively minor and subject to rule, they identify idiolects and dialects of the one language. Thus for example, across a large area of South Australia, southern central Western Australia to the Pilbara, is a huge chain of dialects each of which differs minimally from its neighbours, so that the speech forms of neighbouring peoples are mutually intelligible.
(however, speakers from far apart would not readily understand one another). Speakers do not necessarily see these differences as minimal, and do not necessarily view the differences as mere dialectal differences. They may see even small differences as indicators of major linguistic and political or cultural divisions.

A good example of the differences in classification of the linguist and the speaker is afforded by the Dampier Land languages. These languages are on the whole quite similar to one another, and similar enough for some linguists to suggest them as dialects of a single language (Capell 1966:103). However, one of us (McGregor) is not convinced of this, and is of the opinion that there may be three or four varieties distinct enough from one another to be regarded as languages). But to speakers, there are a dozen or so languages. The differences that linguists see as defining dialects are seen by Dampier Land Aborigines as defining distinct languages. Each significant political unity is seen as possessing its own distinct language, significantly different from the language of all other groups. Within some of these named languages speakers are aware of slight linguistic differences -- which are not in their opinion significant enough to mark the speech differences as languages -- which are on the whole regarded as geographically distinct dialects, and are unnamed. However, in the case of Karajarri, a Pama-Nyungan language spoken immediately to the south of the Dampier Land languages, speakers name three distinct dialects. Note the difference here: speakers of these three named varieties still refer to themselves as Karajarri as an encompassing term; but speakers of the named varieties of the Dampier Land languages do not have a higher order term that covers two or more varieties.

Present number of speakers and their location. The handbooks present both traditional and present locations of speakers of languages. There are however problems with both the terms "speaker", and with locating speakers geographically.

We discussed above some of the different things that the non-linguist may mean when (s)he uses the term "speaker". To the linguist the term means something quite different to the non-linguist. Linguists normally use the term to refer to someone who has fluent speaking control of the language, to someone who can think in the language, in common parlance. Where the person does not, but has some control of it, linguists speak of semi-speakers or part speakers. Such individuals may be claimed by other speakers of the language to be speakers, or not, as the case may be. It will be clear that it is very hard to accurately define the part speaker; but it is generally used of someone who has some control of the grammar, and knows a good number of words (say in the order of 1000), not someone who knows just one or two words, or who can understand the language but cannot speak any at all. But there are problems with this definition: for instance there remains a single speaker of Nyulnyul (Dampier Land), who is deaf, and so cannot interact verbally (she does so by replying to written notes), and who is unable, on account of her deafness, to relate free texts. Yet it would seem natural to regard this woman as a full speaker.

It is of course not easy to give an accurate indication of the number of speakers of a language in the terms of the strict definition (full speakers). What criteria should the investigator use? It would be impossible for a single linguist to interview one hundred individuals with a battery of tests designed to indicate whether that person is a speaker or not. In practice, if we interview a fair number of individuals, we will hypothesise on the basis of a few instances of speech whether the person is a full speaker or not. In addition, we will doubtless rely on information
provided (ideally) by a speaker of the language, or a part speaker, or a speaker of a nearby language. For this reason, figures of the number of speakers of a language are to be taken with a grain of salt. As a rule of thumb, it seems to be the case that the reliability may be expected to be approximately half an order of magnitude. That is, it would seem to be significant to talk about a language with one speaker, five speakers, ten speakers, fifty speakers, one hundred speakers, five hundred speakers, or a thousand speakers (no Western Australian Aboriginal language has more than that number of speakers). It is not always clear from the sources whether the number referred to is the number of full speakers, or the number of full and part speakers.

As a rule, any given language will have in addition to its full speakers (if any), a number of part speakers with varying degrees of fluency. Again, roughly, unless the language is a lingua franca of the area, we may expect that the number of speakers (full and part) together should be half an order of magnitude above the number of full speakers.

The traditional location is drawn largely from Tindale (1974) and Capell (1963), both of whom are not entirely uncontroversial sources. Boundaries defining a language or tribal area, as in Tindale's maps, do not adequately reflect the socio-linguistic situation, either traditional or contemporary, but their usefulness lies in the approximate limits they put on the tribal areas. Because of predominant multilingualism in Aboriginal Australia (see e.g. Dixon 1980:69, Brandl & Walsh 1982), the boundaries of a particular language would normally extend far beyond the approximate tribal limits.

Speakers may live in a different location from that of their traditional language. They are usually from multilingual backgrounds and may not know what language a particular word or morphological form originally comes from, sometimes they have a few variants for one word. An example is Onslow where people describe their language or country affiliation (often an interchangeable concept) by referring to a single language name, for example Kurrama, which they may or may not speak, the language that they do speak being the local dominant language, in this case Panyjima. It is not unusual for a lingua franca to develop in multilingual societies, and in Western Australia some linguae francae are Yindjibarndi (Roeburnd), Walmajarri (Fitzroy Crossing), Kriol (Kimberley), Yamaji (Mullewa, Geraldton), Nyungar (South West), Bardi (Dampier Land), Ngarinyin (Derby, Mowanjum) and Wangkatha (Goldfields). Hence the contemporary situation is much more involved than a language planner would like.

Individual and large scale movement of people as a result of the white invasion has led to a complicated pattern of language distribution, which does not reflect traditional reality. Today due in part to their greater mobility speakers of a language may be found far from thier home territory. In the Kimberley, isolated speakers of Ngaanyatjarra (Warburton Ranges) may be found, and speakers of Torres Strait languages are present in Broome and Port Hedland. Furthermore, of course, the present reality is that speakers are more permanently located in communities in towns and on properties (outstation movement).

As is well known, tribal boundaries in traditional Aboriginal Australia were not as well defined as the maps suggest (Berndt 1959, Miller 1971). They were certainly not boundaries such as between Queensland and New South Wales. Because of widespread multilingualism, the regions which supported speakers of a language would be much larger than the regions over which a tribe moved.
CONCLUSION

We are currently involved in compiling Handbooks of Western Australian languages. One of us (McGregor) is in the last stages of preparation of a handbook of Kimberley languages, and will shortly begin a second volume which will consist of wordlists in each language. Thieberger is in the process of compiling a similar handbook of the remaining languages of Western Australia. Both of these handbooks owe much to Menning and Nash's (1981) Sourcebook for Central Australian languages. We hope that one result of this paper will be to encourage other linguists to compile similar handbooks for other situations. Could we also add that hopefully this could be done in a spirit of co-operation and sharing of precious resources and time.

Strong interest has currently been generated in the idea of regional language centres: the first, the Kimberley Language Resource Centre was established in 1984, and was followed by the Barkly Regional Aboriginal Languages Centre in 1985. More recently strong interest has been expressed in the Pilbara, and it is likely that a centre will be established there in 1987. Strong interest was also expressed in a recent conference on language maintenance held in Canberra in May 1986 under the auspices of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, where at least a dozen regions were mooted as needing a centre. We feel that the not inconsiderable efforts expended in compiling handbooks of this type are justified by their usefulness. For a linguist or an educator to make recommendations regarding language issues (translation/interpreting, literacy, language maintenance, etc.) it is imperative that some groundwork have been done firstly in the library, and secondly in the field. There is no region of Australia of such linguistic uniformity that a single linguist could effectively study and document it in the short time that would be available to him/her in the employ of a language centre.

We have recently put forward a proposal for a handbook of post-contact languages -- that is, languages which have arisen on this continent since the arrival of Europeans. Response has been encouraging, if not overwhelming. It is our belief that such a volume could provide educators and Aboriginal people (as well as of course linguists) with invaluable information. However, post-contact languages fulfil a quite different functional role than do traditional languages in present-day Aboriginal culture and in Aboriginal-white cross-cultural interactions (personal and institutional). And they are (with few exceptions) in less danger of dying out. This means that a handbook would most usefully be organised on quite different lines to those discussed in this paper. We feel that a similar emphasis on terse presentation of "scientific fact" is warranted, but in addition, longer discussion of issues -- including for example language attitudes, and cross-cultural (mis-)communication -- would be called for.
FOOTNOTES

(1) Situations such as this may also put the linguist in a moral dilemma: should (s)he attempt to "educate" the local population towards acceptance of the Kriol in the school, in the firm belief that doing so would be advantageous to the children's educational potential? It is rather surprising that, despite strong and insistent claims to this effect by linguists, there is little, if any, actual published evidence available which unconditionally supports or refutes this contention. In the absence of strong "scientific" evidence for a particular "scientific" stance, it is imperative that linguists carefully consider their moral and occupational roles. Perhaps it is time for linguists to take on a stronger advisory role, in place of the god-like role they have tended to assume -- or have been understood as assuming -- to date in their dealings with Aboriginal people.

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