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*The non-Pama-Nyungan languages of northern Australia: comparative studies of the continent's most linguistically complex region*. Edited by Nicholas Evans, x+513 pp, 2003, 4 maps, Pacific Linguistics in association with the Centre for Research on Language Change, Australian National University, Canberra

This volume is an especially significant contribution to the comparative study of Australian languages and thus ultimately to theories of Australian prehistory that may be based on such study. As Evans notes in his introduction, it is the first book length historical study of the non-Pama-Nyungan languages of northern and north western Australia, an area containing 'perhaps 90% of Australia's linguo-genetic diversity' (p 3). While Evans himself does not discuss the more general implications of this diversity — it is a book for linguists rather than historians — generally it has been taken as evidence for the relative antiquity of linguistic settlement in this area, in contrast to a later spread of the less diverse Pama-Nyungan languages across the remainder of Australia.[1]

The main detractor from such a view has been RMW Dixon, who maintains that the widely held and traditional model of language development simply does not apply in Australia.[2] His own model would require quite a contrary interpretation of the diversity of non-Pama-Nyungan languages, namely that population movements have been too numerous and extensive to allow many of the languages to reach a 40% to 60% 'equilibrium level' of shared vocabulary. Considering our lack of direct

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[1] For an excellent introduction to the considerations involved see Evans and Jones 1997.

[2] Dixon 2002: xvii-xx, 20-44.

knowledge of actual prehistorical developments, Dixon's theory can only be critiqued in terms of it's logical basis.[3] In this regard it may be noted that one motivation for Dixon's approach was his 'lack of success in applying the established methodology of historical linguistics to the Australian linguistic situation'.[4] As time passes, however, the 'established methodology' has been applied to Australian languages with increasing success,[5] the present volume being an especially important examples of this precisely because of the diversity of the languages involved.

The volume makes its greatest contribution to the study of the Gunwinyguan family and related languages. These are dealt with in half of the sixteen papers in the volume, including five authored or co-authored by Mark Harvey. Particularly important is Harvey's 'initial reconstruction of Proto Gunwinyguan phonology', since this establishes a solid basis for the comparison of such other aspects of the languages as their grammars. This extremely careful and exhaustive paper could serve as a model for phonological reconstruction; with due caveats about possibilities of borrowing and discussion of the steps taken to minimise the problem, Harvey was able to identify 1315 sets of cognate words (not including the verb forms treated in the paper discussed next) that could support the reconstruction of forms in the protolanguage.

A second key contribution to Gunwinyguan is a reconstruction of 'Proto Gunwinyguan verb suffixes' by Alpher, Evans and Harvey (pp 305-352). Following

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[3] In addition to pp 5-7 of the work under review see Black 1997 and Koch 2004: 48-57.

[4] Dixon 2002: xvii.

[5] For another recent example see Bowern and Koch 2004.

the best comparative approach they do not merely posit reconstructions of isolated suffixes, but instead they present partial reconstructions of nearly twenty verb paradigms, whose shared idiosyncrasies provide especially compelling comparative evidence. These two key papers are supplemented by a number of others relating to Gunwinyguan. Particularly impressive is Rebecca Green's paper on 'Proto-Maningrida within Proto-Arnhem', whose reconstructive work on 24 verb paradigms provides for the first time solid evidence of the relationships among the Maningrida area languages, as well as their more distant relationship to Gunwinyguan. The other papers include one by Evans and Merlan on 'Dalabon verb conjunctions', one by Merlan on 'The genetic position of Mangarrayi', and three others by Harvey on Western Gunwinyguan and on verb systems and object enclitics in Eastern Daly languages.

Aside from Gunwinyguan and related languages the volume includes two other papers that are especially noteworthy. One is Stokes and McGregor's 'Classification and subclassification of the Nyulnyulan languages' of northern Western Australia. While this language grouping has never really been in doubt, the paper provides a very neat phonological reconstruction based on 405 cognate sets that solidly confirms the grouping and provides some evidence on its internal divisions and the problems of its external relationships.

Even more noteworthy is the published version of Ian Green's ground breaking work on 'The genetic status of Murrinh-patha'. While earlier studies had not been able to group Murrinh-patha with any other language, Green found striking similarities in the verbal 'auxiliary' paradigms of Murrinh-patha and Ngan'gityemeri that enabled him

to reconstruct partial paradigms for eighteen auxiliaries in a shared ancestral language he called 'Proto Southern Daly', although only six of these paradigms are sampled in the present paper. Green characterises the genetic relationship as close (p 128, 155) and yet ultimately allows that the paucity of other grammatical and lexical similarities leave open questions about the actual extent of divergence (p 155).

One question that needs further work is the extent to which the similarities between Murrinh-patha and Ngan'gityemeri actually represent shared innovations rather than shared inheritances, but resolution of this question depends on higher level comparative reconstruction involving such groups as Gunwinyguan. This made me realise that the work on Gunwinyguan had focused on suffixes for tense, aspect and mood (TAM), leaving it largely incomparable with Green's work on pronominal prefix paradigms. In a final paper in this volume Harvey deals more broadly with pronouns and especially pronominal prefixes in a wide range non-Pama-Nyungan languages, but this work is programmatic, suggesting that a considerable amount of difficult work remains to be done.

Theere are four other papers in the volume. Reid contributed a second one relating to Ngan'gityemerri (here spelled with double *rr* while Green spells it with single *r*) to documents interesting changes in verbal structure within the last sixty years. A paper by McConvell on 'Headword migrations' provides evidence from the Jarragan languages that pronominal marking can move diachronically from verbs to noun phrases in a way contrary to a proposal by Nichols. There are also two papers providing comparative data, if not historical reconstruction, for the closely related Wanyi and Garrwa languages, namely one by Breen and, somewhat oddly perhaps, an

'update' to Breen's data by Belfrage; one may wonder why they didn't get together to provide unified coverage.

The volume is attractively laid out and excellently proofed: since I did not notice a single typo in the English I can hope that there may also be none in the considerable data from Australian languages. I did encounter a statement or two I could quibble about, but I can no longer locate them, and in general the comparative work is of the highest quality. While non-linguists may find the volume difficult to follow, they may well want to be aware of its potential impact on our understanding of the prehistory of Australia.

Reviewed by Paul Black, Charles Darwin University

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