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Aboriginal Australians speak: an introduction to Australian Aboriginal linguistics

Eric G. Vaszolyi
Mount Lawley College of Advanced Education


*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are advised that this document may contain references to people who have died.*

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Aboriginal Australians Speak
Introduction to Australian Aboriginal Linguistics
ERIC G. VASZOLYI
ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIANS SPEAK
An Introduction to Australian Aboriginal Linguistics

Eric G. Vaszolyi
THE GENERAL AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC HAS BEEN LED TO BELIEVE THAT THE NATIVE AUSTRALIAN LANGUAGES ARE HOPELESSLY POOR AND PRIMITIVE IN STRUCTURE AND VOCABULARY. THERE ARE TWO MAIN REASONS FOR THIS MISTAKE. IN THE FIRST PLACE, THE AVERAGE WHITE PERSON WHO COMES INTO CLOSE CONTACT WITH THE ABORIGINALS AND THUS ACQUIRES A SMATTERING OF THEIR DIALECTS, IS HIMSELF RARELY WELL-EDUCATED. HIS OWN ENGLISH IS OFTEN OF A POORER TYPE AND MUCH MORE LIMITED IN VOCABULARY THAN THE LANGUAGE OF THE PEOPLE WHOM HE DESPISES. NOT EVEN MASTER OF HIS OWN TONGUE, HE CANNOT DO JUSTICE TO THE IDIOM OF THE PEOPLE AMONGST WHOM HE LIVES; AND OF COURSE, THERE IS NOT THE SLIGHTEST REASON WHY HE SHOULD TAKE AN INTEREST IN ANY UNECONOMIC LINGUISTIC STUDIES. EVEN MORE HARM HAD BEEN DONE, HOWEVER, BY SOME SCIENTISTS WHO, IN THEIR EFFORTS TO FIND THE 'MISSING LINK' IN THE AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINALS, HAVE DESCRIBED THEIR LANGUAGE AS DEVOID OF ALL ORNAMENTS AND GRACES, AND CHARACTERIZED BY AN ALMOST SUB-HUMAN SIMPLICITY.

T.G.H. STREHLOW, 1947
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eric G. Vaszolyi, Ph.D., University of Budapest, is Lecturer in Linguistics in the Aboriginal Teacher Education Program at Mount Lawley College of Advanced Education, Perth. Dr Vaszolyi has had a long-term involvement with the languages of minority groups having investigated languages in Hungary, Finland, Northern Russia and the Kimberleys Region of Western Australia. He worked for a time for the Scott Polar Research Institute at Cambridge University where he investigated linguistic and socio-cultural aspects of indigenous groups living in Arctic regions. He has also lectured at the University of East Anglia, Norwich.

Since his arrival in Australia in 1970 Dr Vaszolyi has conducted research into Aboriginal languages on behalf of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies and has worked as an advisor for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. He was also a Research Fellow at the University of Western Australia. He is an acknowledged authority on the Aboriginal languages of Western Australia, especially the languages of the Kimberleys Region.

FOREWORD

In recent years there has been a considerable increase in research into and the amount of published information about the languages of Australian Aborigines. Most of this information is expressed in linguistic terms and jargon which is not readily comprehended by laymen. Much of the information is not directly applicable to teachers and others who work with and for Aboriginal people. In this book Dr Vaszolyi provides the layman with an easily read account of various theoretical and practical aspects of Aboriginal languages and linguistics.

Dr Vaszolyi first felt the need for a book of this kind while working as an advisor with the Department of Aboriginal Affairs where he was involved in the in-service training of field staff. The need became even more apparent when he joined the staff of the Aboriginal Teacher Education Program (ATEP) at Mount Lawley College of Advanced Education. This program was established in 1974 with the generous assistance of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. Its primary objective is to provide specialist training for trainee and practising teachers in the teaching of Aboriginal children. ATEP offers in-college undergraduate courses and an external Graduate Diploma in Aboriginal Education course which involves the study of Linguistics, Anthropology, Aboriginal Education and related disciplines.

"Aboriginal Australians Speak" joins a wide range of other teaching and learning materials produced by ATEP at Mount Lawley College. Eric Vaszolyi and ATEP are to be congratulated on yet another valuable contribution to the area of Aboriginal Education.

ACTING-PRINCIPAL
MOUNT LAWLEY COLLEGE OF ADVANCED EDUCATION
24 MAY, 1976.
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E.G.V.

CONTENTS

FOREWORD: page v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS vi
1 INTRODUCTION 1
2 SOURCES 2
3 AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES 3
  3.1 The Number of Aboriginal Languages in Australia 3
  3.2 The Distribution of Aboriginal Languages in Western Australia 7
  3.3 The Sociolinguistic Nature of Aboriginal Languages 9
  3.4 Aboriginal Phonemics (Western Australia) 11
     1 Consonants 12
     2 Aboriginal-English Consonant Contrasts 16
     3 Vowels 20
  3.5 Main Structural Types of Aboriginal Languages 22
     1 Suffixing Languages 22
     2 Prefixing Languages 24
  3.6 Aboriginal Grammar: Some Distinctive Features 27
     1 Number 27
     2 Person 29
     3 Possessive Pronouns 30
     4 Affixes as Possessive Markers 34
     5 Numerals 35
     6 Demonstratives 37
     7 Case: Inflection with Affixes 38
     8 Gender (Noun Classes) 41
  3.7 Aboriginal Vocabulary 44
4 ABORIGINAL ENGLISH. AN AUSTRALIAN DIALECT 46
  4.1 Phonemic Symptoms 47
  4.2 Grammatical and Lexical Changes 49
5 PIDGIN ENGLISH. A LINGUISTIC POTPOURRI OF ITS OWN 51
  5.1 The Origins of Pidgin 52
  5.2 The Shape of Pidgin 53
  5.3 Pidgin as an Emotional and Political Issue 55
6 REFERENCES 68
1. INTRODUCTION

It has duly been recognized that Aboriginal society in Australia is far from homogeneous. People and groups referred to as part-Aborigines, urban Aborigines, fringe-dwellers, rural Aborigines, traditionally oriented or tribal Aborigines in the outback and so on display considerable diversity in terms of culture, identity, aspirations and the like. Language is no exception. Some Aboriginal people (mainly in cities or towns and some rural areas) would speak as good an English as any non-Aboriginal Australian and often much better: indeed, their only language, their 'mother tongue' is English. In contrast, in the outback one can still meet Aborigines who speak precious little or no English. Between these extremes there are lots of transitions: people who speak one or more Aboriginal languages well and also speak fluent English or not-so-fluent English or what is termed in this booklet Aboriginal English or Pidgin English. Others (young and school-educated people in particular) may no longer be fluent in Aboriginal languages, others again may understand but not speak the 'bush language' and use Pidgin or one or another variety of English instead and there are further variations on this theme. The writer of these lines has also had the sad, or rather tragic, experience when young Aboriginal fringe-dwellers of up to twenty years of age did not speak any language with full proficiency: they only knew a broken and poor variety of their forefathers' beautiful and powerful language while had not been able to acquire more than a very limited English or Pidgin. The result was, of course, an appalling intellectual, mental and social breakdown.

The objective of this booklet is to give the reader some idea about the most salient features of three, clearly distinguishable though mutually interfering, communauts or speech forms: Aboriginal languages in general, the Aboriginal English dialect of Australia and Pidgin English spoken in some Aboriginal communities. It goes without saying that only very essential linguistic features have been touched upon. For practical reasons, too, the scope had to be limited to Western Australia as much as possible. An all-Australian overview would be far beyond the limits of the present undertaking.

The author wishes to render sincere thanks to his teachers and his students assisting him in this project. He is indebted to many Aboriginal people at Wiluna, Jigalong, the Pilbara, Mowanjum, Derby, Broome, Fitzroy Crossing, Looma, Oombulgurri, Kalumburu, Wyndham, Kununurra, Halls Creek, the Cape York Peninsula and elsewhere, to all those who had the kindness and patience to teach him the languages and, perhaps even more importantly, the philosophy and wisdom of the Aboriginal race. Many thanks also to my students: trained and trainee teachers, social workers and field officers in the area of Aboriginal affairs who have been co-operative and responsive in various language courses thereby greatly assisting me to learn an important thing: how to teach this subject.

2. SOURCES

There are quite a number of publications on Aboriginal languages and various issues in Australian Aboriginal linguistics. Some amateurish writings need not be mentioned here. Most linguistic works in question are very professional and of high academic standards. Ironically, however, it may not only be a bliss. The trouble is not that the authors themselves are professional linguists (it is of course a prerequisite of scholarly standards) but that, more often than not, they write to linguists or linguistically trained readers. Regrettably, popular literature on linguistics, and particularly on Aboriginal linguistics, presented in a down-to-earth manner, is virtually non-existent in this country. It is for this reason that interested people with only a very rudimentary knowledge of linguistics or even less have no ready access to information available in linguistic publications. Many people working with Aboriginal communities in various capacities (teachers, doctors, nurses, social workers, welfare officers, homemakers, mechanics, police and parole officers and so on) need and indeed ask for tuition in particular Aboriginal languages and for general information about them, too. Most of this demand is yet to be satisfied.


In the light of publications, a lot has been done in the field of Aboriginal linguistics. However, the problems are so numerous and multifarious that a lot more is yet to be done in present and future.

Eric G. Vaszolyi
3. AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES

"There are some people even today who talk about ‘the Aboriginal language’, as if there were only one. How many there are, or were, depends partly on the way in which we distinguish between a dialect and a language. It is not always easy. For instance, in north-eastern Arnhem Land there are a number of small linguistic units, each with its special name. The dialects, or languages, spoken by these groups are different enough so that people who know one of them cannot understand another except by learning it. However, because they are small units, and exogamous as well, most people know at least one or two in addition to their own. Also, the differences are chiefly a matter of vocabulary and not of structure. But if we take structure as a criterion and say that here we have one broad language-unit with local variations, this plays down the other criterion, of intelligibility — whether or not, or to what extent, one such dialect, or language, can be understood by people who have not specifically learnt it.” (Berndt/1964: 39-40).

3.1 The Number of Aboriginal Languages in Australia

It appears justifiable to say that many white Australians are, generally speaking, rather uninformed about the Aborigines’ life style, attitudes and aspirations and about the true nature, values and limitations of their culture. The real danger in such a state of affairs is that ignorance, whether stemming from indifference or from an unavailability of dependable information, breeds all sorts of fallacies which, in turn, may (and often do) result in biased thinking and prejudice. All this applies to the Aboriginal linguistic scene, too. The black man’s vernacular has only too often been thought of and referred to by European-Australians (and sometimes by downright uneducated ones) as ‘lingo’ or ‘rubbish language’ assumed to be inferior to, say, English. People who do not know much about language in general and do not reflect on their own mother tongue, either, would probably find it hard to accept that nomad hunters of the bush have developed a language as intricate and sophisticated in its own way as Shakespeare’s or Banjo Paterson’s English. Another general fallacy holds that as English is spoken in this country from Perth to Brisbane without hardly any significant variation, analogically the Aborigines too would share one, more or less homogeneous, language throughout this vast continent. As a result, one can sometimes hear people talk, or rather ask questions, about the Aboriginal language in the same manner as we speak about the English language or the Italian language. The same kind of ignorance is reflected in some ‘popular’ books written by amateurs such as Aboriginal Words of Australia by an E.H. Papps (Sydney, 1965) or A.W. Reed’s Aboriginal Place Names (Sydney, 1967) and the like. Some people find it amazing, if not unbelievable, that there are, and have been, several hundred Aboriginal idioms maintained through the ages without literacy or mass media and handed down from generation to generation in a spoken, oral form only.

Well then, how many Aboriginal languages are there found in Australia, one would logically ask the question. The answer will inevitably be somewhat hesitant. Plainly speaking, we just do not know, with any degree of exactitude, the actual number of these languages in the past or present. For lack of reliable evidence, all estimates are tentative or highly speculative. Most Australian historians and anthropologists seem to accept a general assumption that prior to, and at the beginning of, European colonisation the Aboriginal population totalled up to a rough 300,000 or so. It is also assumed that they represented some 500 ‘tribes’ (no matter what exactly is meant by tribe and whether the term is apt or not) which, in turn, spoke up to about 500 ‘tribal’ languages and/or dialects (no matter what exactly is meant by language and dialect). It is common knowledge that as a result of colonisation, the Aboriginal population has considerably decreased, no matter what the actual population figures might have been in Captain Cook’s days. It is also evidenced that as the disintegration of traditional Aboriginal society advanced, scores and scores of their languages died out irreparably. As to the current situation, recent estimates appear to be rather controversial. Capell/1956 listed 144 Aboriginal languages. Capell/1963 included a total of 663 languages and dialects. Wurm/1963 postulated some 150 distinct languages embracing some 500 dialects. O’Grady-Voegelin/1966 listed 228 ‘discrete’ languages grouped in 29 ‘language families’. In conclusion, Wurm/1972 says. “At this stage, well over two hundred Australian languages may still be known, to some extent, by at least one native speaker each, but only very few languages have a comparatively large number of speakers. The numerically largest Australian language existing today, the multi-dialectal Western Desert language, has around 4,000 speakers but most of the other numerically strong languages have only a few hundred speakers each” (p. 11-12).

Needless to say, all this controversy and guesswork manifests an underlying scarcity of adequate information on Aboriginal languages and their speakers. For lack of good solid bodies of records describing individual languages in detail, it is impracticable to compare and correlate language varieties in order to gauge their status and relation (i.e. whether speech form A is a distinct language compared with speech form B, or the two constitute...
dialects of the same language). The particular difficulties of distinguishing language and dialect in Aboriginal Australia have been indicated in O’Grady-Voegelin/1966 (p. 11) thus: “In some Australian languages more than half of the words in dialect A are entirely different from the words in dialect Z (the geographical extremes): between A and Z, there is only 45 percent shared vocabulary. Even though there is neighbor intelligibility between communities A and B, B and C, and so on to Y and Z, it would be misleading to use the simple term ‘language’ for a speech community whose cognate density lies in the middle range of what characterizes a ‘language family’ for the rest of the world. Something special is going on in Australia. To draw attention to this we use the term FAMILY-LIKE LANGUAGE for Australian languages having neighbor intelligibility but otherwise having as low a cognate density as exists between languages in the usual language families of the world.”

In addition to all this, it is usually very hard to count up the speakers of any particular Aboriginal language. For one thing, more often than not Aboriginal speakers are, or used to be, multilingual, that is they speak, or spoke, several distinct languages and/or dialects of a given area. Often it seems very hard or virtually impossible to identify someone’s first language or ‘mother tongue’. For example, one of my friends in the Kimberleys had a Mangala mother and Bunaba father and spoke both languages fluently since his early childhood, along with a couple of other tongues he had picked up while living with Walmatjari and Njikina people about Fitzroy Crossing. Some of his children were born by a Bardi mother, others by a Njangumata girl and acquired, in their turn, several of their parents’ and their neighbours’ languages.

With focus on Western Australia, it appears plausible that the number of Aboriginal languages actually spoken here would still be in the proximity of thirty including discrete languages (with a further number of dialects) as well as major dialectal varieties of the same language spoken over a vast area (mainly the desert and desert fringe area inland). The former ones encompass a number of related or unrelated languages, some of which are so overtly akin as Italian to Spanish or Dutch to German, while others so distant as English and Russian. In contrast, dialects of the same never-named language are spoken over the vastness of the Great Victoria Desert, Gibson Desert, Great Sandy Desert stretching right out to the Simpson Desert: up to several hundred speakers of one or another major dialect of this anonymous language (in linguistic papers referred to as Western Desert language) can be found at Warburton Ranges, Leonora, Laverton, Mount Margaret, Cundeelee, Norseman, Kalgoorlie, Wiluna, Jigalong, Fitzroy Crossing, Balgo Hills in Western Australia, thence down to Docker River in the south-western corner of the Northern Territory and then turning east to Ernabella, Yalata and Oodnadatta in South Australia. The degree of mutual intelligibility between members of this extensive chain of dialects varies depending on distance and social interaction between local communities. However, speakers of the Katutjara dialect at Jigalong can, and do, communicate with speakers of Mantjiljara at Wiluna or Ngaanjatjara at Warburton Ranges and the latter can talk to Pitjantjatjaru speakers at Ernabella.

It is also evidenced that quite a number of onetime tribal languages have died out since the establishment of Swan River Colony and that others are right on the way to extinction. The south-west of Western Australia has virtually no Aboriginal language left and the very little known about them was recorded by a few linguistically unskilled persons mainly in the late last century or early 20th century. Typically enough, we are not quite certain even about the question of what particular language(s) used to be spoken in the Perth metropolitan area and its surroundings. It is generally assumed that the ‘tribe’ and its language was called – well, something like Pipelman, Bebuleman, Bigalman, Bigbulmun, Bibulman, Peoplemen or the like. What the actual name was behind all these mind-boggling distortions appearing in various Australian publications, remains to be conjectured (see Bates/1966: 59-92). Wilfred Douglas, by far the best expert on the subject, gives the following phonetic description: Pipelman (or alternatively Bipelmen). He also says that this was but one group which inhabited the Brookton-Northam-Toodyay area; and that a rather loose Aboriginal term applied to their own languages in the South-West of Westralia (from Geraldton to Esperance) is NJUNGA. Indeed, it was W. Douglas who undertook the arduous task of salvaging what little had been remembered of the Njungar dialects before the late 1960’s (Douglas/1968: 2-4). Generally speaking, most, if not all, Aboriginal languages from the southern shores right up to the Pilbara are wiped out by now. In other areas, too, quite a few languages or dialects are known or remembered by only a few old men or women: Warwa in the Derby area, Nimanpurru on Dampier Land, Wumite and Wungkumi in the Western Kimberleys, Kampera at Kalumburu Mission and quite a few others are hardly ever heard and, sadly enough, hardly recorded, if at all, for posterity. However, an increasing interest in and appreciation of Aboriginal culture, noticeable in recent years, may well reinforce the viability of a number of Western Australian
Aboriginal languages. It is also noteworthy that as a result of current educational policies regarding literacy and bilingual education, two Aboriginal languages in Western Australia have already been given literacy (Pitjantjatjara at Warburton and Walmatjari at Fitzroy Crossing and Looma) and more literacy programs are currently under way. Hopefully, the truth of Aristotle’s adage is going to catch on in this part of the world: “To have one’s own language is the root of human dignity”.

3.2 The Distribution of Aboriginal Languages in Western Australia

Mention has been made above of an extensive network of related, and to varying degrees, mutually intelligible dialects stretching across the desert from the Nullarbor up to Halls Creek and from Meekatharra over to South Australia and the Northern Territory. Two central dialects, PITJANTJATJARA and NGAANJATJARA are spoken over a vast area including the surroundings of Norseman and Kalgoorlie, Menzies, Leonora, Laverton, Cundeelee, Cosmo Newbery, Warburton Ranges plus Giles, Blackstone and other camps in the Central Reserve. Pitjantjatjara/Ngaanjatjara language courses have in recent years been held annually in Perth, Adelaide and Alice Springs and this is also the Aboriginal language chosen for the first West Australian pilot study in bilingual education introduced in the Warburton Ranges school in West Australia and also in Ernabella, S.A.

Other offshoots of the Western Desert language complex are also viable idioms. MANTJILTJARA is mainly spoken in the Wiluna-Lake Carnegie area, while KATUTJARA at Jigalong, another desert fringe settlement south-west of the Pilbara, PINTUPI speaking minority groups can be found scattered over Warburton, Wiluna, Jigalong, Balgo as well as in the Northern Territory.

Opinions differ as to the status of several other idioms: it is disputed whether they are also dialects like those mentioned above or distinct languages, although more or less closely related to the aforesaid ones. For our purposes this is immaterial, the point being that there are several more viable linguistic entities of the Western Desert type. Thus, KARATJERI and MANGALA speakers can be found mainly at La Grange Mission and the surrounding stations south of Broome and Roebuck Bay; WALMATJARI speakers migrated from the north of the Great Sandy Desert up to the Fitzroy Crossing-Halls Creek area; KUKATJJA is spoken at Balgo Mission, in the north-eastern corner of the Great Sandy Desert. Over two hundred people speak TJARU in the Halls Creek-Balgo Hills area.

Other languages, however, differ considerably from those mentioned so far. YINTJIPANTI, NGALUMA and PANTJIMA speakers are now concentrated mainly in the Roebourne-Port Hedland area, NJANGUMATA represented between Port Hedland, Strelley and La Grange Mission.

Dampier Land (Broome, Beagle Bay, Lombadina, One Arm Point) is the home country of a profoundly different language type of which YAWURU, NJUL-NJUL and mainly BARDI are viable representatives. Further up towards the Kimberleys Aboriginal population figures show a steep increase and the number of languages still spoken rises too. NJIKINA, PUNAPA and KUNIYAN are spoken mainly in the Derby-Looma-Fitzroy Crossing area. WURORA, NGARINJIN, WUNAMPAL, WILA-WILA speakers are concentrated in the Mowanjum-Pantijan Downs area and on nearby cattle stations up to Mount House and Gibb River. KUNIN is the main language at Kalumburu Mission in the Northern Kimberleys. KITJA is a viable language in the Halls Creek-Turkey Creek-Wyndham-Oombulgurri area. MIRIWUNG, KATJERONG and KULUWARIN speakers live around Kununurra and its surroundings.

Naturally, this broad outline can only indicate the main traits of the present-day linguistic situation which is highly variable, anyway. As a result of economic and social pressures imposed upon Aboriginal society, the linguistic map of Aboriginal Australia has also changed rather dramatically. In the past, a language area by and large coincided with the tribal land of a particular group recognizing that language as its own. With the advance of colonial expansion, of course, lots of Aboriginal groups have been forced to leave their fathers’ land and seek refuge somewhere else, very often hundreds of miles away from the old country. Also many new habitats for displaced Aborigines (town reserves, missions, urban slums or rural stations) have turned into melting pots linguistically and otherwise: various distant groups which had traditionally not interacted before, came into contact and had to communicate on a day-by-day basis. Take the Wurora people for example. Their traditional tribal country lies in the Western Kimberleys, south of the Prince Regent River down to Walcott Inlet and Secure Bay. Missionary activities (Presbyterian Church) commenced in the area in 1911 (foundation of Kunmunya Mission). After World War 2, the whole native population, concentrated on the mission, was shifted down to Munja Reserve and soon afterwards further to the south, ending up at Mowanjum, some seven miles from Derby. For one thing, the new domicile for the Wurora was about 200 miles away from their own country (many broken-hearted old folks just died of homesickness in the
new camp) and, in addition to this, it used to belong to other Aboriginal groups, viz. the Njikina and Warwa. Thus the new arrangement imposed on the new settlers at Mowanjum was, in terms of their traditional tribal law, culpable and wrongful. At Mowanjum two other Aboriginal groups shared the same destiny: the Wunampal from the North-Western Kimberleys (north of the Prince Regent River up to Kalumburu) and the Ngarrinyinj of the Central Kimberleys. Living only a few miles away from Derby, these people have mixed with speakers of a variety of Aboriginal languages, mostly unrelated to and entirely different from their own: Bardi from Sunday Island, Njikina from the lower and Punapa from the upper Fitzroy River area, Walmatjarri from the vicinity of Fitzroy Crossing (and previously from the north of the Great Sandy Desert), Mangala, also from the desert, a few aged survivors of the Warwa tribe and also Tjerak speakers from the Eastern Kimberleys. Children of these people attending a school in Derby or Broome have a rather varied linguistic background at home; in the classroom, teachers would talk to them in Australian English whereas the kids can, at the best, answer in Pidgin or some sort of an Aboriginal English which, in turn, is puzzling and often unintelligible to the teacher. The likely outcome is a communication breakdown resulting in and/or stemming from intellectual pauperization with all its psychological and social ill-effects.

Further linguistic diffusion is, of course, facilitated by an increasing social mobility. In the outback, Aborigines only a few decades ago were more or less confined to a given area and a trip to the nearest township (like, say, Wyndham or Meekatharra or Laverton) was an exciting experience for a lifetime. Nowadays it is no problem to hike hundreds of miles and if you pick the right truckie in, say, Wyndham, in a couple of days you are down in Port Hedland and from there Perth is just another couple of days. English is of course much more needed than in the old days somewhere off the beaten track whereas the Aboriginal vernacular may be no longer a necessity for younger people trying to make a living in a town or city.

3.3 The Sociolinguistic Nature of Aboriginal Languages

Most languages taught in our schools (such as English, French, German, Italian, Greek, Russian, Japanese, Indonesian and others) are national languages spoken by large speech communities, millions and sometimes many millions of people. Indeed, some of them tend to function as international languages (English is spoken over five continents, Spanish used not only in Spain but over most of Central and South America except Brazil; French is the second official language in Canada, in addition to being the national language in France, half of Belgium, Switzerland and Luxembourg; German is spoken in two Germanys plus Austria and Liechtenstein, plus half of Switzerland and Luxembourg; Arabic is widespread throughout North Africa and several countries in the Middle East). Even so-called minority languages in Europe and Asia are spoken by hundreds of thousands, and sometimes by several million people (Basque and Catalan in Spain; Breton in France; Welsh in Britain; Flemish in the Netherlands; Hungarian in Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Romania; well over a hundred non-Russian and non-Slavonic 'minority' languages in the Soviet Union; Kurdish in Turkey, Iran and Iraq; Mongolian and Tibetan in China; scores of distinct languages in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and several South-East Asian countries etc.). Most of these languages have developed literacy. Put differently, they are (and have been) written down and have indeed recorded political, economical, historical, literary, religious and lots of other developments dating back several hundred and sometimes several thousand years.

For many national languages, literacy, performing arts, press and more recently, broadcasting and TV have played a standardizing role and resulted in propounding linguistic norms or ideals (consider the phonemic, grammatical and lexical standards represented by BBC English in Britain or ABC English in Australia, the Bühneneuhochdeutsch in German-speaking countries or the rules of French speech and writing set out by the L'Academie Francaise in Paris).

Aborigines in Australia have never reached nationhood. Their social organisation facilitated smaller units referred to by various terms in anthropological literature, sometimes with a degree of inconsistency (e.g. family group, band, horde, clan, tribe and the like used in different ways by different authors). Such comparatively small social entities represent comparatively small speech communities. This is to say that a small group of people (i.e. small by European-Australian standards) can be the custodians of a particular speech form, be it a dialect or a distinct language. The number of speakers in such a linguistic unit can be as low as 40-50 or as high as a probable maximum of 1,000-2,000, with a likely average of a few hundred people. This may seem amazing compared with speech communities in industrial or feudal societies. However, social formations of a similar type, (i.e. societies of semi-nomadic hunters) display very much the same picture in America, Africa, Greenland, Lapland in Northern Scandinavia, Siberia, Micronesia, Polynesia and elsewhere. Surprising as it may be, the Australian scene is not at all unparalleled.
Until quite recently, all Aboriginal languages have been unwritten and handed down to posterity through oral tradition. It goes without saying that they have also been non-standardized with a great deal of flexibility in terms of adaptation and change. Social interaction in the traditional Aboriginal society (such as exogamous marriage patterns, ritual congregations, meetings, trade contacts) facilitated linguistic interaction and brought about reciprocal borrowing of lexical and grammatical elements. Biliteracy and multi-literacy (i.e. an ability to speak/understand two or more languages) was widespread in Aboriginal Australia, which involved a high degree of linguistic interference of one language into another. In addition to that, there was a good deal of direct cultural pressure on the language, such as the imposition of linguistic taboo in a community as a result of someone’s death. Douglas describes a very interesting instance of this: “The custom of making ‘taboo’ the names of the dead gives rise to a number of variant forms. For example, throughout the lower Desert area, the stem of the first person singular pronoun in ngayu —. At Warburton Ranges, however, owing to the death of a person named Ngayanu, a new stem has come into everyday use. This is nganku —, a form borrowed from the so-called ‘mother-in-law speech’ (a special form of speech used in taboo situations such as when the mother-in-law is being addressed or during initiation ceremonies).” (Douglas/1964:111)

All put together, not only language structure but also language usage in Aboriginal Australia differs considerably from English. The future prospects of presently still viable Aboriginal languages is an intriguing (and also very serious) problem. Some of them have, no doubt, a much better chance to survive and develop in the present political and cultural climate than ever before. Nowadays there are a few literate Aboriginal languages in which textbooks and other publications have recently been printed. In Western Australia, Ngaanajatjara (Warburton Ranges) and Walmajari (Fitzroy Crossing area) have received alphabets and become the vehicles of bilingual education programs, too. Several other literary projects are under way (at Mowanjum, La Grange Mission, Port Hedland and Roebourne, Strelley and Jigalong). The Aboriginal vernacular has been given the franchise in several Roman Catholic schools (e.g. Njikina in Derby or Kitja in Wyndham). Whatever the future holds, there are encouraging signs of a large-scale cultural revival throughout Aboriginal Australia and it includes Aboriginal languages too.

3.4 Aboriginal Phonemics In A Nutshell, Western Australia

By now you will of course have acquired a reasonable knowledge of general phonology, on the one hand, and English phonetics and phonemics on the other (see Gleason, chapters 2-3 and 15-21). Relying on this groundwork, we can now proceed and acquaint ourselves with rudimentary phonemics of Aboriginal languages with particular regard to Western Australia.

As mentioned before, Westralian Aboriginal languages/dialects vary quite considerably and exhibit remarkable differences of vocabulary and grammatical devices. In contrast with all that, however, they display a surprising uniformity at the phonemic level: much the same stock of phonemes and very similar distribution patterns, with hardly any significant diversity, are shared from Wyndham to Esperance and from Shark Bay to Central Australia.

It goes without saying that Aboriginal languages have their own phonemic systems (just like English and any other language has its own) which are typically Aboriginal in that they have their own unique infrastructure with an underlying web of phonemic contrasts or oppositions (manifest in minimal pairs) and a finite set of rules regulating the possible occurrence and combination of phonemes. This is also to say, of course, that Aboriginal phonemic systems will of necessity differ from the phonemic structure of English. In this chapter we pursue a twofold aim: familiarity with Aboriginal phonemics, however rudimentary, will provide a clue to Aboriginal speech in general and, in addition to this, contrastive analysis of Aboriginal and English phonemics will hopefully promote a better understanding of your Aboriginal students’ problems in speaking and learning English (at the phonological level).

3.4.1 Consonants

All languages focused on here have a series of stops, some of which are more or less the same as their opposite numbers in Australian English, others differ to some extent and others again are just uniquely Aboriginal.

To start with a significant difference: most Aboriginal languages do not employ a phonemic contrast of voiced and voiceless stops (quite unlike English, of course). The marked difference between bet versus pet or tear versus dear or cage versus gauge is phonemically motivated and the p/b-t/d/k/g distinction in English is of crucial importance. In Western Australia, no Aboriginal language contrasts voiced and voiceless stops (and only a very few in other parts of Australia do). Both voiced and voiceless varieties may be heard as allophones (usually in free variation): motuka or moduga from motorcar and watipala or wadjbala from whitefellow are optional forms.
It is for this reason that Aborigines, whether children or adults, may well have problems with the voiced-voiceless distinction in their English. The lack of confusion in this important contrast is indeed one of the symptomatic features of Aboriginal English or the ‘Aboriginal accent’. In the classroom, too, Pill and Popi might be heard for Bill and Bobbie, or Bat, Bolin, Begi for Pat, Pauline and Peggy. Special drills contrasting p-t-k versus b-d-g may be useful in making the pupils aware of this phonemic feature of English.

This problem of pronunciation raises the question of how to denote Aboriginal stops by means of a Latin-based alphabet. The English characters p,t,k are strongly associated with voiceless consonants while b,d,g invariably symbolize voiced ones. As Aboriginal stops can be either voiced or voiceless or something in between, there is a great deal of understandable vacillation as to how to designate them: is the English voiceless series any better than the voiced one? Indeed, neither is really preferable to the other. Perhaps the principle of consistency should prevail and you might like to use either the voiceless series (p,t,k) or the voiced one (b,d,g) the important point being that you do not mix them.

There is no voiced/voiceless distinction in the languages referred to but the number of stops is larger than in English. In addition to bilabial, alveodental and velar stops (i.e. bdg/ptk) there are two more phonemes: a palatal and a retroflex stop. Neither is found in most dialects of English. The palatal stop is distantly reminiscent of the English /d/-/t/-/j/-/ in items like due, dual, duke or tube, tune, tutor (but not the initial consonant in jewel, junior or choose, chew). However, in English one is faced with the combination of two distinct phonemes (d/-t- followed by a -j-) whereas the Aboriginal palatal stop is a single indivisible phoneme, symbolized in a variety of ways: d’, dj, dy, di or t’, tj, ty, ti (and there are a few more). Also the Aboriginal palatal stop sounds much ‘softer’ (that is, it has a much more palatalized overtone) than its English approximation.

The retroflex stop is unparalleled in English (the tongue tip is turned back and bent upward). Linguists often denote this phoneme through d or t with a dot or dash underneath the character (d or t). For technical reasons, either is rather inconvenient (e.g. typing). Another way of writing it is -rd or -rt (and it seems to catch on, mainly due to the impact of newly established alphabets for Pitjantjatjara and Walmatjari). The objection to this digraph is that -t- proves to be a separate phoneme throughout Western Australia and therefore it might be confusing to use it as a retroflex marker: instead of symbolizing one single phoneme (i.e. retroflex stop) it can be read as an /-t/- plus a following /-d/-, that is two distinct phonemes making up a consonant cluster.

In sum, most Aboriginal languages in Western Australia have a series of five stops (bilabial, alveodental, palatal, retroflex, velar) without voiced-voiceless distinction. In addition, a few languages (mainly in the Roebourne-Port Hedland area, like Yintjipanti, Kariera, Ngaluma and Pantijma; also Kitja in the Kimberleys) also have an interdental stop (t or d or th or dh) reminding of the initial consonant in English thin, thank, thorn. However, this seems to be rather restricted.

A series of nasals is very important in all Aboriginal phonemic systems. Bilabial and alveodental nasals (m and n) sound much the same as the corresponding English phonemes. A velar nasal is also found in English in items like sing, song, young, ringing etc. But in English this phoneme is restricted to a syllable-final position whereas in most (and probably all) Aboriginal languages it may (and does) occur in any position. See the following Nganjatjara items:

- ngura ‘camp’
- nguntju ‘mother’
- ngalangu ‘ate’

As above, the velar nasal can conveniently be symbolized by the digraph ng; some linguists prefer the more technical ‘tailed’ (but typists don’t).

The series of nasals, just like the stops, has palatal and retroflex representations. The former is, in a way, like an English initial nj- in new, neutral, nuisance but not identical with it: again, the English word-initial consonants consist of two distinct phonemes whereas the Aboriginal sound is one single phoneme which, just like the palatal stop above, sounds much ‘softer’ than its best English approximation. Italian palatal n is closer to it (e.g. signor, bagno, lasagna).

The retroflex n (commonly symbolized an n or ɳ or ɳ) lacks from English, just like the retroflex stop above. To pronounce it, the tongue tip should be turned back while trying to utter an n sound. The best knack is, of course, to listen to a native speaker. Particularly so as distinction between alveolar and retroflex n is phonemic and therefore very important. See the following contrasts from Wunampal (Kimberleys):

- wana ‘if’: wana ‘bush honey’
- kantjal ‘thy foot’: kantjal ‘osprey’

Thus most Aboriginal languages in Western Australia have a series of five nasals (bilabial, alveodental, palatal, retroflex and velar). In addition, a few languages (mainly those in the Pilbara mentioned above) would also have an interdental n (symbolized as ɳ or nh)
A series of three contrasting I sounds (laterals) is also typical of Aboriginal languages. An alveodental lateral I sounds very much the same as an English I in words like: like, lip, slip, slice, plea, clever (that is, English ‘light’ I). Admittedly, the Aboriginal retroflex I (usually transcribed as I) or rI is not found in English; but the English ‘dark’ I is not really far from it (i.e., the lateral in call, roll, bolt, bulk, bold). There is, however, a crucial difference between the two English consonants and their Aboriginal opposite numbers. Firstly, the two English ones are allophones of the same, single English /I/ phoneme. In other words (just to brush up what you will of course remember from Gleason) the ‘light’ I occurs syllable-initially and never syllable-finally whereas the ‘dark’ I does it exactly the other way round. Technically speaking, they are in complementary distribution (remember Gleason, pp. 80, 263) and represent two allophones of the same phoneme. In Aboriginal, on the contrary, alveodental and retroflex laterals may, and do, occur in the same position; they are not, therefore, in complementary distribution and, as a result, they are not allophones of the same phoneme but two distinct phonemes. Compare the following minimal pairs from Wunampal (Kimberleys) and Bardi (Dampier Land), respectively:

(Wun.) pale ‘behind’; pale ‘wattle tree’
njawala ‘bamboo stem’; njawala ‘to pierce’

(Bardi) gulgal ‘black seabird’; gulgal ‘stomach rumblings’
gurwal ‘sky’; gurwal ‘butcherbird’

The third member of the lateral triangle, a palatal lateral (symbolized as I’ or lj or ly) is not found in most varieties of English. An -Ij- combination (mainly, perhaps, in the Cockney of London) in million, pillon, William, will you is somewhat reminiscent of, though not identical with it. Italian has a very similar palatal lateral in items like familgia, figlio, Inglese, biglietto etc. and so has Spanish or, for that matter, Russian. The important thing is that the Aboriginal phoneme contrasts with alveodental as well as with retroflex palatal. Compare the following Wunampal examples (Kimberleys):

pokala ‘that’; pokalja ‘yonder’
nguluk ‘magpie goose’; nguljuk ‘to tell off’

Two vibrants, widespread in all Aboriginal languages (certainly in the West) prove to be rather hard for most Englishmen and Australians but perhaps not so hard for Scots and Americans. So far as any comparison may hold, the Aboriginal alveodental vibrant is very much like a properly rolled Scotch /r/. It is never to be confused with another distinct phoneme, a retroflex /r/ pronounced with the tongue.

confused with another distinct phoneme, a retroflex /r/ pronounced with the tongue tip turned backwards. To contrast

the alveodental and retroflex varieties, see the following minimal pair contrasts from Bardi (Dampier Land):

buru ‘kangaroo’; buru ‘country’
barbar ‘shaking of ground’; barbar ‘shooting pain’

Two semiconsonants, found in all Western Australian Aboriginal languages, do not normally represent much difficulty. A bilabial semiconsonant /w/ is familiar to all English speakers (even if the English and Aboriginal phonemes do not correspond on a one-to-one basis). A palatal semiconsonant is also found in English forms like yarn, yell, yawn. Similarly in Aboriginal (e.g., Wunampal) there is piyanta ‘child’ and piyinta ‘another’, yey ‘speech’ and paya ‘calf of the leg’. The denotation of this phoneme is often inconsistent, the English characters i, j, and y being equally eligible. Again there is a free option: neither is superior per se to the other. Personally, I would perhaps prefer y for this phoneme for practical reasons as in English spelling y often symbolises this phoneme (e.g., yes, yolk, yeast) whereas j more often than not has quite a different phonemic value as in jar, jug, joy etc. Also if the grapheme y is consistently used for this purpose, then j might be used in combination with t, n, l (or d, n, l) to designate palatal stops, nasals and laterals, respectively: tj, nj, lj. (However, if for some reason or another you prefer the symbol j for the semiconsonant, then you might apply y in digraphs for palatals such as ty, ny, and ly, the important thing being invariably consistency and avoidance of confusion and ambiguity).

3.4.2 Aboriginal-English Consonant Contrasts

You will have noticed some of the most salient features of the Aboriginal system of phonemes in contrast with English such as

1. a wide range of stops and nasals (wider than in English)
2. lack of voiced-voiceless distinction
3. a series of palatal and retroflex phonemes (in a minority of languages also a set of interdentals)
4. three lateral phonemes plus two vibrants.

A very significant trait of this system is the lack of fricatives and affricates, so numerous and important in English. This descriptive statement does not imply that Aboriginal languages are defective or that English with its fricatives is more developed. The Aboriginal-English parallel is only significant from the viewpoint of language learning and/or teaching. It is, however, fairly relevant to a schoolteacher in recognizing and perhaps alleviating some of the difficulties which his Aboriginal pupils may experience in speaking and learning English.
In conclusion, a consonant chart is thought to be helpful.

**CONSONANT CHART**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BILABIAl</th>
<th>ALVEODENTAL</th>
<th>PALATAL</th>
<th>RETROFLEX</th>
<th>VELAR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STOPS</td>
<td>p</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>tj</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NASALS</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>nj</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>ng</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LATERALS</td>
<td>l</td>
<td>lj</td>
<td>!</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIBRANTS</td>
<td>r</td>
<td></td>
<td>!</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEMI-CONSONANTS</td>
<td>w</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>v</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For languages with a series of interdentals the chart should be extended thus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BILABIAl</th>
<th>INTERALVEODENTAL</th>
<th>PALATAL</th>
<th>RETROFLEX</th>
<th>VELAR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>STOPS</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>tj</td>
<td>!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>NASALS</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>nj</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>LATERALS</td>
<td>l</td>
<td>l</td>
<td>lj</td>
<td>!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>VIBRANTS</td>
<td>r</td>
<td>!</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>SEMI-CONSONANTS</td>
<td>w</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Alternative symbols in common use (figures refer to second table):

A1: b
A2: th, d, dh
A3: d
A4: dj, ty, dy
A5: d, t, d, rt, rd
A6: g
B2: nh
B4: ny, ñ
C2: lh
C4: ly
B5: n, rn
C5: j, r1
D5: r, rr
E4: j, i

There are nine fricatives and two affricates in English:

/ʃ/ as in feel or leaf
/v/ as in veal or leave
/θ/ as in thin or moth
/ð/ as in that or with
/s/ as in sit or loss
/z/ as in zeal or roses
/ʃ/ as in she or posh
/ʒ/ as in pleasure or rouge
/tʃ/ as in church or cheer
/dʒ/ as in joy or plunge
/h/ as in hill or mohair

As these consonants are absent from all Aboriginal languages in Western Australia, Aboriginal speakers (whether children or adults) who have not mastered English phonemics, might find it hard to pronounce them or might tend to substitute them with one of the Aboriginal consonants felt to be the closest approximation of the English phoneme. Phonemic substitution, in turn, proves to be hard on the English-speaking school-teacher unaware of the phenomenon and of the substitution patterns of Aboriginal versus English phonemes.

The main patterns can be described as follows:

1. English /ʃ/ and /v/ are normally substituted by an Aboriginal bilabial stop /p/. Thus:
   - pinitj for finish
   - pitjing for fishing
   - Djepri for Geoffrey
   - payavut for firewood
   - watjpala for whitefeller

2. English interdental fricatives are normally substituted by Aboriginal alveodental stops, thus:
   - tenk for thank
   - tri for three
   - tik for thick
   - tink for think
   - tin for thin
3. English sibillants s/z and ʃ/ʒ and the affricates tʃ/dʒ coincide in a substituting Aboriginal palatal stop. For example:

- tji: for see
- tjiwota for saltwater
- otjpital for hospital
- tjopdrink for soft drink
- tjipilajd for civilized
- politjmen for policeman
- mitjitj for missis
- tjem for same or shame or jam or gem
- tjip for sheep
- tjira for shearer
- tjiek for cheeky
- tjop for job

4. English /h/ is either dropped or substituted by an Aboriginal /yl/:

- ambag for humbug
- asbent for husband
- o:l for hole
- yil for hill or heel or heal

Considerable difficulty is represented by English consonant clusters, particularly word-initial ones. Two or more consonants, especially at the beginning of a word, may occasionally occur in several Aboriginal languages but within very narrow limits. Most languages (at least in Western Australia) just do not tolerate consonant clusters, particularly not word-initially and especially not those occurring in English. As a result, Aboriginal speakers incline to bifurcate the cluster and drop one of the constituent consonants (particularly sibillants). Examples:

- kin for skin
- pun for spoon
- ttingrey for stingray
- kul for school

potlait for spotlight
pinipeks for spinifex
kakadal for crocodile
pir for spear

3.4.3 Aboriginal Vowel Systems, Western Australia

The vowel systems of all Aboriginal languages in Western Australia are fairly simple, particularly when compared with English vowel phonemes.

Most Western Desert-type languages have a set of three vowels which can be short or long (length being phonemic):

- /i:/ or /ii/:
- /u:/
- /a:/

Note that vowel length is customarily indicated by either a colon following a short vowel symbol or by doubling the vowel symbol. Thus /a:/ or /aa/, /i:/ or /ii/ etc.

Phoneme /a/ does not have any English equivalent. The English /a/ in father, lard is longer whereas /æ/ is shorter and of a different nature than the Aboriginal vowel. The Italian vowels in la casa are closer to it.

The Aboriginal /u/ is not very far from an English /u/ in put, look, and the long variety from root, pool. The /i/ is close to that in English pick, live while /i:/ compares with the English vowel in peak, leave. These three vowels have, of course, a number of allophones but for our purposes there is no point to go into further details.

Other languages in Western Australia (mainly in the Kimberleys) have developed a more intricate vowel system consisting of five sets of phonemes, short and long:

- /i/: /e/
- /a/: /o/:

This phonemic quintuplet has an additional /e/ and /o/ which can be short and long alike (length is phonemic here, too). The former is close to the English vowel in pet, keg, step whereas the latter is reminiscent of the o in hot, lot, not.

As the Aboriginal system is rather different from English, the resultant phonemic contrasts are also consequently different. In other words, English vowel contrasts underlie a variety of phonemic distinctions which are not found in Aboriginal languages and, of course, vice versa. Thus, for instance, the English contrast of pat and pet or hat and hut does not occur, neither vowel of the English burglar is a phoneme in any Aboriginal language in Western Australia, diphthongs too are non-existent or atypical in Aboriginal while abundant and phonemically significant in English (see snail, smile, boy, goat, cloud, fire, towel, spear, share, fuel). It goes without saying that Aboriginal speakers
of English, whether within or without the classroom, might well have problems with English vowels and are likely to use their own Aboriginal vowels as substitutes. This in turn might well bring about communication problems. Suffice it to mention that the distinction of English man: men, gnat: net, pedalling: pedalling, pat: pet, expansive: expensive is not a matter of academic pedantry and expansive: expensive is not a matter of academic pedantry and neither is the contrast of cod: cord, code: curd (please keep in mind the difficulty in recognizing any differences in the list: t) it can be seen that a Western desert child would have great difficulty in recognizing any differences in the list: bit, bet, beet, pit, pot, peet, bid, bed, bead, because, to him, there are no distinctions between the vowel sounds i, e, ee, and ea.”

W. Douglas very rightly points out that Aboriginal school children may experience considerable psychological and neuro-physiological problems on a phonological level of speaking and/or understanding English: “The psychological problems which a vernacular-speaking child may find on this phonological level are so closely tied up with the physical ones it is difficult to disentangle them. An amusing anecdote is quoted by W. Edwards (1967), Superintendent of the Ernabella Mission. It reads: “Every school day for three years we have done ‘sounds’. Yet these sounds are still so strange to them that, when I spell out P-I-T and ask, ‘What does that say?’ someone will answer, ‘Bed’. I go over it again: ‘Now listen – P-I-T. It says pit.’ Then I ask, ‘Can anyone tell me what a pit is?’ ‘Yes. Dat fer sleeping!’ says one of the boys.”

The problem here, of course, is that psychologically the Desert language speakers do not recognize any contrast between voiced and voiceless stops, nor between aspirated and unaspirated stops. So the words bit, pit and bid all sound the same. When it is remembered, too, that there are only three vowel positions (a, i and u) it can be seen that a Western desert child would have great difficulty in recognizing any differences in the list: bit, bet, beet, pit, pot, peet, bid, bed, bead, because, to him, there are no distinctions between the vowel sounds i, e, ee, and ea.”

Admittedly, it is a hard task to classify a multitude of several hundred linguistic forms which comprise distinct languages as well as dialects and often differ widely in terms of grammatical structure and vocabulary. It seems to be a justifiable tendency in Australian linguistics to make a twofold division and separate two large and distinguishable linguistic groups showing some profoundly contrasting morphological features. Hence the division of suffixing and prefixing Aboriginal languages. (Capell/1956: 31-60; Wurm/1972:60-71)

3.5 Suffixing Languages

The overwhelming majority of Aboriginal idioms belong to the suffixing group whose name refers to the extensive use of suffixes as grammatical modifiers. In other words, a stem or root may be followed by one or more suffixes indicating various relations such as:

- tense of verbs (e.g. past, present, future)
- mode of verbs (e.g. indicative, conditional, imperative)
- number of verbs/nouns (e.g. singular, dual, plural)
- person of verbs/pronouns (e.g. first, second, third)
- subject and object of verbs (i.e. who is acting on whom/what)
- adverbial references (roughly corresponding to English prepositions such as in, towards, from, under etc.)

Not infrequently a stem is followed by a long sequence of suffixes, the whole string representing a single word in Aboriginal whereas its equivalent in English will be a phrase or a full sentence. See the following Wiratjuri (N.S.W.) example (Capell/1956:52):

```
gu - i - ngitjilinja - ngari - awa - kiri - li
| give | each | morning | shall | we |
other | tomorrow | two
```

That is, in plain English: “The two of us will exchange it tomorrow.”

In Western Australia, most Aboriginal languages south of Dampier Land and the Kimberleys represent this linguistic type (i.e. all Western Desert dialects plus languages of a similar type, thus Karatjari, Mangala, Walmatjari, Kukatja, Tjaru, Njungumata, Yintjipanti, Ngula, Pantjima).

A point which may be relevant to educationalists engaged in the Aboriginal field: in the light of the above examples, please reflect for a short while on the profound structural differences between English and any suffixing Aboriginal language and also on the
psychological implications of this diversity affecting Aboriginal schoolchildren (particularly in remote areas with a lesser degree of non-Aboriginal contact and where the vehicle of everyday communication is still the vernacular). Psycholinguistic mechanisms work in two completely different ways in English speech and Aboriginal speech. Put plainly: in Aboriginal (see the above example) the stem comes first; it is the bulk of a whole long sequence of morphemes strung together and also the carrier of the basic lexical meaning. Then the stem is followed by several bound morphemes indicating a variety of relations (in this particular case: reciprocity, time, future tense, number and person of the subject). Note also that the basic semantic message in English is conveyed by the lexical item 'exchange'; in the Aboriginal example the root means 'give' and it is then modified by a suffix denoting reciprocity ('each other' or 'one another'); in other words, the underlying notion of the verbal expression differs too. For an experiment, just try to read the Aboriginal word and repeat it a few times. You will obviously find it unusual, to say the least, against your own linguistic background. An Aboriginal speaker would, in his turn, find your mother tongue and its constituents and rules extremely strange and difficult to comprehend and acquire. What is a single and undivided, however complex, item in his language, turns out to be a string of separate items in English; the position of these items in relation to each other differs greatly from the order of the Aboriginal suffixes; and last but not least, what is a single long word in Aboriginal, corresponds to a number of short signals in English. The linguistic distance between the two languages (and the underlying cultural distance) brings about a lot of psychological pitfalls in terms of perception and reproduction. All this is true, of course, in any speech situation, not only in the classroom, but it does occur in the classroom too, and therefore a schoolteacher ought to be aware of it.

Needless to say, Aboriginal languages of this group may use suffixes when there is nothing in English or the rough equivalent to an Aboriginal suffix is a separate English item (such as a preposition, an auxiliary verb or the like). A few examples taken from Pitjantjatjara are thought to be illuminative.

First, let us examine the following Pitjantjatjara sentences and their English equivalents:

Wati pikatjara. 'The man is sick.'
(man sick)

Papa pikatjara. 'The dog is sick.'
(dog sick)

Minjma pikatjara. 'The woman is sick.'
(woman sick)

These are three very simple Aboriginal sentences, each consisting of two items: a subject followed by a predicate. Now, compare the Pitjantjatjara sentences with their literal English translations (in brackets) and these, in turn, with the free English translations (in inverted commas). It can be inferred off-hand that in Pitjantjatjara, unlike English, there is no definite or indefinite article (the or a or an) and the so-called copula (is) does not occur, either.

Now let us proceed and examine the following sentences.

Watilu papa pungu. 'The man hit the dog.'
(man dog hit)

Watilu minjma pungu. 'The man hit the woman.'
(man woman hit)

Minjmalu papa pungu. 'The woman hit the dog.'
(woman dog hit)

Minjmalu wati pungu. 'The woman hit the man.'
(woman man hit)

In these sentences the subject carries a suffix (-lu) which refers to a doer performing an action (hit) affecting something or someone (man or woman or dog). The rule in Pitjantjatjara is that the subject must be marked by this suffix as soon as there is a so-called transitive verb plus a direct object in the sentence (as above). In English of course there is no such suffix and no such rule. Instead, the word order has an important syntactic function in that the subject comes first (in simple declarative sentences), the verb second and then occurs the direct object. Nothing else indicates either the subject or the object. Just compare these. The man hit the woman and The woman hit the man. For a Pitjantjatjara speaker, however, the word order (in this type of sentences) is immaterial for it has no function. You can say Minjmalu papa pungu or Papa pungu minjmalu : either means 'The woman hit the dog' and in either case the subject (minjmalu) is clearly marked whereas the object (papa) is clearly unmarked.

3.5.2 Prefixing Languages

Most of the so-called prefixing languages are found in a geographically well-demarcated area of Northern Australia: Dampier Land and the Kimberleys in Western Australia and Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. The main distinctive feature of this structural type is the application of prefixes as grammatical modifiers — in addition to suffixes and not infrequently infixes too. Some of the prefixing languages display a very interesting grammatical category (mostly unknown in the other linguistic group): gender or noun class. Subject to the occurrence or lack
of the latter category, it is customary to talk about three subdivisions within this group (Capell/1956: 36-45):

(a) Prefixing non-classifying languages, with no gender distinction, such as most indigenous idioms in the Dampier Land-Lower Fitzroy River area (Bardi, Njul-Njul, Tjawi, Yawuru, Njikina).

(b) Prefixing dual-classifying languages, with two genders (masculine-feminine distinction), such as Kitja and Miriwung in the Halls Creek-Wyndham-Kununurra area.

(c) Prefixing multiple-classifying languages, with more than two genders (usually four or five: there is either masculine-feminine-neuter or human versus non-human or animate versus non-animate distinction). Most indigenous languages in the Kimberleys belong to this type: Wurora, Ngarinjin, Kunin, Wunampal, Kampera, Wila-Wila and their numerous dialects.

The features of gender distinction will be presented in some detail below. A few examples taken from Wunampal demonstrate various prefixes of nouns, adjectives and verbs.

(a) ngantjal nga:riwa
   kantjal ka:riwa
   pantjal pa:riwa

(b) nguwanje lumpayanga
   kuwane lumpayanga
   puwane lumpayanga

(c) ngiyanga lumpaku
   kiyanga lumpaku
   piyanga lumpaku

All above examples show a particular prefix indicating singular first, second or third person: ng- can be interpreted as 'I/my', the k- refers to 'thou/thy' and p- means 'he/she' or 'his/hers'. There are, however, even more intricate double-prefixing forms like these:

kunganpun
   kurganpun
   purganganpun

Now the first item can be segmented like this: ku-nganpun. The first prefix (ku-) refers to a second person singular direct object (= thee). The second prefix (-nga-) indicates a first person singular subject (= I); and this pair of prefixes is followed by a verbal root (-npun) which means 'hit, strike, beat, knock'. On this analogy, you can now analyse the second example. Of course, the first prefix (pu-) means 'him/her' (note that this language does not distinguish the two sexes grammatically; he and she are referred to by the same means; the relevant differentiation lies elsewhere, viz. in a human versus non-human distinction). Then you know already that the following -nga- segment means 'I' and -npun, of course, is the same verbal root as before.

Well, what about the third example? It can be segmented like this: ku-r-nga-npun and but for one, contains the same bound morphemes (two prefixes plus a verb root) as the first example above. Here, however, you find an -r- infix between the two prefixes which indicates the plurality of the direct object: ku- 'thee' plus -r- plural - kur- 'you' (more than one, i.e. plural). Thus the whole combination of prefix plus infix plus second prefix plus verb root can be translated into English as 'I hit you (= several of you)'. You have of course noticed that a single Aboriginal word in this instance equals a full English sentence. After all this, you know how to segment, analyse and render the last example: purganganpun.

A prefixed stem may also take one or more suffixes like the following item: kungarmintangiyangamiyatiya. Well, you might perhaps like to have this item segmented. Here you are:

ku - nga - r - minta - ngi - yanga - miya - tiya
thee

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUFFIX</th>
<th>SUFFIX</th>
<th>SUFFIX</th>
<th>SUFFIX</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DUAL</td>
<td>EMPHATIC</td>
<td>DIRECTIONAL</td>
<td>PLURAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>take</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis: the first prefix, as you know, indicates a second person singular direct object (= thee). You will also recognize the second prefix referring to a first person singular subject. It is followed by an -r- plural infix, which, attached to the foregoing prefix, should be read as 'we' (= first person plus plural marker). Now comes the verb stem (-mintangi = 'take') which, in turn, is followed by several suffixes (four, to be accurate). The first of these (-ngi-) is a past tense marker, therefore -mintangi means 'take + PAST' that is 'took'. The next suffix (-yanga-) seems somewhat hard to interpret, it certainly has no English equivalent. This bound morpheme
refers to the direction of a movement or action (which can, more often than not, be accounted for by the speech situation or context) and can roughly be translated as 'thence, from there, from that side, from that direction, that way'. Then comes a dual suffix which refers to the subject. Remember that the subject is indicated by a prefix plus an adjoining infix: ngar- 'we'. Of course this segment and the suffixed dual marker are separated by three other morphemes in between, yet they belong together and mean 'we-two' that is 'the two of us'. Finally there is yet another suffix: -tiya. Tentatively, we might call it Emphatic Suffix. Its function is to emphasize or stress an action; in English you would use an auxiliary verb or stress (e.g. but I did see him; There is a chair in the corner; Yes, it was a silly thing to do). In conclusion, the whole longish string of morphemes can be translated into English thus: 'The two of us did take thee away from there'. Note again that the English equivalent of this single Aboriginal word is a full sentence.

3.6 Aboriginal Grammar: Some Distinctive Features

Salient phonemic characteristics of Aboriginal languages have previously been discussed in these notes (e.g. lack of voiced-voiceless contrast; lack of fricatives and affricates; occurrence of palatal and retroflex consonants, three to five cardinal phonemes making up the vowel system). One of the basic features of Aboriginal morphology (viz. extensive affixation fulfilling a variety of functions) has been presented above. In this subsection a few grammatical categories will be introduced. In one way or another, they are symptomatic of Aboriginal languages — therefore unfamiliar to people whose first language or mother tongue is English.

3.6.1 Grammatical Number

Most Aboriginal languages have at least three numbers. In addition to singular and plural (familiar from English) there is a dual number (just like in classical Greek and lots of other languages) which refers to two things or persons. The following Mangala forms of, say, puli 'stone' and njaltea 'this'). It should be noted that stems as well as dual and plural markers may vary (compare the singular, dual and plural forms of puli 'stone' and njaltu 'this'). It should be kept in mind that this sort of variation is quite normal in most natural languages (unfortunately for the learner) and that one can cite a great many similar examples from English (e.g. compare the plural forms of the following, randomly selected, items: house, rose, lot, rod, goose, mouse, ox, child, man, woman, sheep, fish, stimulus, phenomenon).

A few West Australian Aboriginal languages in the Kimberleys have in addition yet another number (according to Capell/1956: 61, similar types can also be found in Victoria). It has been evidenced in Ngarinjin, Wurora, Wunampal, Kunin and a few others. This additional category is customarily termed trial number which appears both inaccurate and misleading. In point of fact, a 'trial number' suffix may sometimes refer to three objects or persons but this is beside the point. Indeed it indicates a few things or persons, no matter how relative 'a few' may be. I have recorded examples when it referred to a given quantity without any doubt and as it turned out, it was certainly more than two but could be three or four or five or nine or a round dozen. After all, it is 'a few'. Anyway, here and now we might as well put up with this inapt term until linguists coin a better one (perhaps Palmer's 'little plural' as contrasted with 'big plural' is more appropriate, see Palmer/1971:88). The main point is that the traditional terms singular, dual, trial, plural suggest an incorrect structure of numerical relations in these languages, viz. that one is contrasted with two which, in turn, contrasts with three and all that goes beyond that is plural. Indeed, there is a twofold contrast of one and two (or much rather single and double or self and a
pair), on the one hand, and a few versus a lot (i.e. a small group of objects or persons contrasted with a large one), on the other. The actual numerical value was irrelevant in terms of traditional Aboriginal way of thinking, it is a European-Australian concept wrongly assumed in the Aboriginal system.

A few examples from Wunampal:

- 29 kunti 'husband' (Singular)
- kuntattimiya 'two husbands' (Dual)
- kuntatina 'a few husbands' (Trial)
- kuntati 'a mob of husbands' (Plural)

Demonstratives, pronouns, adjectives and verbs also distinguish four grammatical numbers:

(i) prinja 'this' (Singular)
   - prinjamiya 'these two' (Dual)
   - prinjana 'these few' (Trial)
   - prinja 'these' (Plural)

(ii) kuwane 'thou fell down' (Singular)
   - kurwanemiya 'you two fell down' (Dual)
   - kurwanena 'a few of you fell down' (Trial)
   - kurwane 'you (all) fell down' (Plural)

3.6.2 Grammatical Person Marking

In English three persons are indicated both in singular and plural, thus the total of person distinctions amounts to six. Aboriginal languages have seven; the first person non-singular (i.e. dual, trial and plural) includes two distinct forms, a so-called inclusive and exclusive, in relation to speech partners being addressed. As the grammatical terms suggest, a first person inclusive form (in dual or trial or plural) includes the person one is talking to whereas the other form excludes him or her. Let us examine the following Wunampal verbs:

- nguwanem 'I fell down' (1st Singular)
- ngarwanem 'we fell down' (1st Plural Inclusive)
- njarwanem 'we fell down' (1st Plural Exclusive)

The first form needs no explanation. The second one indicates that 'we all fell down including you whom we are speaking to'. The third form, in turn, means that 'we all fell down except you whom we are speaking to; we did while you did not'.

3.6.3 Possessive Pronouns

The use of pronouns to indicate possession (i.e. belonging to someone or something) is familiar in English, too. So it is in most Aboriginal languages: a free pronominal form is coupled with a noun meaning 'my/mine', 'thy/thine' and so on. For instance, the set of possessive pronouns in Mangala is as follows:

**SINGULAR**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ngitjakura</th>
<th>ngantjuru</th>
<th>nganani</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>my/mine</td>
<td>thy/thine</td>
<td>his/her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>nji junuka</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>pani kura</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second and third items may underlie dual forms, thus

- ngarwanem 'we two fell down' (1st Dual Inclusive)
- njarwanem 'we two fell down' (1st Dual Exclusive)

Now the first person dual inclusive means that 'the two of us fell down, that is myself, the speaker and you whom I am speaking to'. The second form indicates that 'the two of us fell down, that is myself, the speaker, and someone else but definitely not you whom I am speaking to'.

The dichotomy of inclusive-exclusive distinction must always be clearly indicated whenever reference is made to more than one first person in verbal forms, demonstratives, possessive markers and so on. The following table demonstrates the inclusive-exclusive contrast by presenting personal pronouns of three Western Australian Aboriginal languages: Njikina, Karatjari and Mangala.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERSON</th>
<th>NIKINA</th>
<th>KARATJARI</th>
<th>MANGALA</th>
<th>ENGLISH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SINGULAR</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>ngayu</td>
<td>ngatju</td>
<td>ngayu</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>tjuwa</td>
<td>njuntu</td>
<td>njuntu</td>
<td>thou</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>kinja</td>
<td>kinjangka</td>
<td>pantu/pani</td>
<td>he/she/it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DUAL</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st incl.</td>
<td>yayu</td>
<td>ngali</td>
<td>ngaliyara</td>
<td>we-two incl.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st excl.</td>
<td>yarkamiri</td>
<td>ngalja</td>
<td>ngaljara</td>
<td>we-two excl.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>kurkamiri</td>
<td>njumpala</td>
<td>njumpala</td>
<td>you-two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>irkamiri</td>
<td>kinjangkutjara</td>
<td>pantaara/paniya</td>
<td>they-two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLURAL</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st incl.</td>
<td>yartju</td>
<td>ngantjuru</td>
<td>ngantjuru</td>
<td>we-incl.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st excl.</td>
<td>yarka</td>
<td>nganja</td>
<td>nganani</td>
<td>we-excl.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>kurka</td>
<td>nju</td>
<td>nju</td>
<td>you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>irka</td>
<td>kinjang-karangu</td>
<td>paniyara</td>
<td>they</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The use of pronouns to indicate possession (i.e. belonging to someone or something) is familiar in English, too. So it is in most Aboriginal languages: a free pronominal form is coupled with a noun meaning 'my/mine', 'thy/thine' and so on. For instance, the set of possessive pronouns in Mangala is as follows:
The above pronouns can either precede or follow a noun. Thus ngitjakura papala means ‘my (elder) brother’ and njuntukura papala ‘thy (elder) brother’ etc. Quite apparently, the underlying forms of these possession markers are personal pronouns (except ngitjakura in 1st person singular) followed by a -kura-segment which is obviously a possession marking suffix:

njantu ‘thou’ : njuntukura ‘thine’

njura ‘you’ : njurakura ‘your’

In Njangumata, too, possessive pronouns are clearly derived from personal pronouns:

**PERSONAL PRONOUN**  **POSSESSIVE PRONOUN**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SINGULAR</th>
<th>DUAL</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>ngatju</td>
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<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>njuntu</td>
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<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>palinj</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st incl.</td>
<td>ngali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st excl.</td>
<td>ngalayi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>njumpala</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>pulanj</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**PLURAL**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SINGULAR</th>
<th>PLURAL</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>kuntu</td>
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<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>kuntinu</td>
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<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>kuntingu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st incl.</td>
<td>kuntingarumil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st excl.</td>
<td>kuintinarumil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>kuniturumil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>kuntiiurumil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st incl.</td>
<td>kuntingaruna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st excl.</td>
<td>kuintinaruna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>kunituruna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>kunitiuruna</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PLURAL

1st incl. kuntingaru our husband (incl.)
1st excl. kuntinjaru our husband (excl.)
2nd kuntinuru your husband
3rd kuintiwaru their husband

Optionally, possessive pronouns may also be used in the same language, instead of the above suffixes, thus kunti ngayaningke ‘my husband’, kunti na:ningke ‘thy husband’, kunti pininingke ‘her husband’ etc.

3.6.5 Numerals

The stock of cardinal numerals is uniformly restricted in most Aboriginal languages to two or three (Wurm/1972: 63-64). Thus, for instance, in Tjaru there is yangi ‘one’, kutjara ‘two’ and murkun ‘three’. To a limited extent, however, either grammatical numbers (singular, dual, trial and plural forms) or actual numerals can be used to indicate small quantities exceeding three. See the following examples recorded from Mangala:

(i) puli ‘stone’ (Singular)
puli yara ‘a couple of stones’ (Dual)
puli yara puli ‘three stones’ (Dual plus Singular)
puli yara puli yara ‘four stones’ (Dual plus Dual)
puli yara puli yara puli ‘five stones’ (Dual plus Dual plus Singular)

and so on.

(ii) wantju ‘one’
k utjara ‘two’
murkun ‘three’
kutjara-kutjara ‘four’
kutjara-kutjara-wantju ‘five’
kutjara-kutjara-kutjara ‘six’

and so on.

Likewise, in Njanguma we have waratja for ‘one’, and kutjara for ‘two’, then waratj-kutjara or kutjara-pa-waratja means ‘three’ (2+1), kutjara-kutjara is ‘four’ (2+2) and so on. Significantly, five, ten and twenty can also be denoted: parir ‘hand’ refers to ‘five’ (i.e. the five fingers); the dual form of this, parirtjiri ‘hands-two’ means ‘ten’ (i.e. ten fingers) while ‘twenty’ is parirtjiri tjintajiri ‘hands-two feet-two’ (i.e. ten fingers plus ten toes adding up to twenty), tjintajiri being the dual form of tjina ‘foot’.

It should also be noted that while the restricted number of numerals no doubt creates difficulties in learning arithmetic, this linguistic limitation does not indicate that Aboriginal people are incapable of learning or handling figures. M. Robinson makes an interesting point in his paper on card games in the Kimberleys:

“In another context, the ease with which Aboriginal players handle the computations and money calculations required by games like kuns goes some way towards refuting the claim that they are generally incapable of handling numerical and arithmetical problems. Teachers continue to despair at the seeming absence of number conceptualisation among Aboriginal students (Hindle, n.d.), while shopkeepers and welfare workers maintain that their Aboriginal clients are unable to manage monetary transactions. These claims have some empirical foundation, although the skills demonstrated by kuns players suggests that the problem is influenced, in large part, by the social context in which it occurs rather than by cognitive factors alone.” (Robinson/1975: 48).

In a different way, E. Vaszolyi comes to much the same conclusion in his paper on Aboriginal world view:

“One striking feature of traditional Aboriginal world view is, or was, the unimportance of numbers and numbering. We find it hard or just impossible to comprehend. We count, measure and weigh everything. Our principal idols, such as money and machines, all rest on a pedestal made of figures and calculations. For an Aboriginal hunter, however, figures and counting are irrelevant. When he is hungry and gets a kangaroo, his problem is resolved. If he is lucky and kills two, that makes a pair. When a hunting party sets fire to the bush and kills a number of kangaroos so that the whole camp have a feast with plenty of meat, that is a ‘big mob’. There is no point in counting them; the actual number would not make any difference since there is an abundance and that is what counts. Likewise, the hunter must have a perfect skill to be successful and must also have a few simple but effective weapons (spear with a spearthrower, boomerang, a wooden club or just a handy stone) — but neither the first nor the second necessitate any mathematical device or calculation (unlike firearms). To my knowledge, most Aboriginal languages have a word for ‘one’ and ‘two’, also for ‘some’ or ‘a few’ as well as for ‘much’ or ‘many’ — and that was perfectly sufficient before the white man entered the scene and counted everything up. It may be a point of interest to mention that Australian Aborigines do not stand alone with their reluctance to worship figures as we do. Quite a few hunting-gathering tribes in America, Africa, or Asia are, or were, similarly unconcerned with arithmetic. Some have words for ‘one’, ‘two’ and ‘three’, also for ‘some’ or ‘a few’ as well as for ‘much’ or ‘many’ — and that was perfectly sufficient before the white man entered the scene and counted everything up. It may be a point of interest to mention that Australian Aborigines do not stand alone with their reluctance to worship figures as we do. Quite a few hunting-gathering tribes in America, Africa, or Asia are, or were, similarly unconcerned with arithmetic. Some have words for ‘one’, ‘two’ and ‘three’, others can count up to five and others again up to seven. One of the Samoyed tribes in Northern Siberia also has a term to denote ‘ten’ and ‘twenty’. The former comes out of a form which originally meant ‘hands-two’
All this makes me think that Aborigines have no inborn inability to count. In the olden days they simply did not have to, because it was irrelevant to them. In recent times, I think, the lack or inadequacy of education has, to a great extent, been responsible for their incompetence in mathematics. However, not too long ago I had a twenty-year-old Aboriginal assistant who was as good at maths as any educated young man of his age. At the same time it was irrelevant to them.

In conclusion, this makes me think that Aborigines have no inborn inability to count. When some of the animals strayed away, he set out to find them. For a few years ago I foolishly asked an old man on the Derby town reserve how many people lived there at that time. The question took the old chap by surprise and he hesitated. "Maybe 10...maybe 20...maybe 200..." he might say. A few years ago I foolishly asked an old man on the Derby town reserve how many people lived there at that time. The question took the old chap by surprise and he hesitated. "Maybe 20..." he mumbled "maybe a hundred..." he tried again; and then suddenly he straightened up and said conclusively: "No, it's a million." But the other side of the coin is that the same people can describe each beast in a herd by a characteristic feature and thereby account for them. A turtle farm manager told me some time ago that one of his native labourers named several hundred turtles individually although he had no idea about the numerical total of the stock. This reminds me of an old experience when a great many years ago I met an aged Samoyed reindeer herdsman who could count up to five or so and naturally could not tell exactly how many beasts he had in a herd of several hundred. But he did know, and did account for, each beast in the mob by the age, size, sex, colour, a funny marking on the ear, the shape of the horn, the way of hopping or grazing about and other individual characteristics. When some of the animals strayed away, he set out to find them. He did not know how many were missing; but he did know exactly which ones were missing." (Vaszolyi/1975:8-9).

3.6.6 Demonstratives
In modern English there are only two demonstratives: this and that. Some Aboriginal languages show very much the same two-fold division; thus, in Njangumata there is njungu 'this/here' and ngunu or pala 'that/there'. Likewise, in Mangala there is njalatu 'this/here' and yalatu or panatu 'that/there'. However, most Aboriginal languages indicate more degrees of distance in terms of location or direction. Ngaanajtjara, for instance, has the following set of demonstrative roots (Glass-Hackett/1970:50):

- nga: — 'this' (near)
- pala — 'that' (mid-distant)
- njara — 'that' (distant)
- tji — 'that' (distant)
- palunja — 'that' (previously mentioned)

In Wunampal there is a fourfold distinction of distance in relation to the speaker:

- pinja 'this' (near)
- pokala 'that' (not too far)
- pokaya 'yonder' (distant still visible)
- pokalja 'that one beyond' (not visible)

3.6.7 Inflection With Affixes: The Category of Case
In modern English there is precious little inflection and even less inflectional affixation. Instead, there is a large number of prepositions to indicate relations in time and space. Aboriginal languages represent a much more agglutinative linguistic type, with lots of suffixes and often with post-positions as well. The number and semantic-syntactic scope of inflectional suffixes vary, of course, a great deal in individual languages and/or dialects, but the linguistic mechanism is very much the same. It seems both legitimate and convenient to postulate the category of grammatical case for these languages if an Aboriginal case is viewed as the combination of a stem plus an inflectional suffix.

Thus in Karatjari there are eight distinct forms, i.e. eight cases with the following references (Capell/1962:73):

- basic form (subject and direct object)
- general locative
- movement towards
- possession
- instrument and agent
- second locative
- movement away from
- reason for something

Njangumata has developed the following grammatical cases:

- Nominative (basic form)
- Ergative (agentive)
- Genitive
- Locative
- Ablative
- Instrumental
- Dative
- Lative
- Causative
- Purposive
Note that some of the Njangumata inflectional (case) suffixes may have several allomorphs. Thus, the ergative suffix is [-lu] or [-tju], the dative has a [-na] or [-ta], the locative suffix can be [-nga] or [-ngu] or [-ngi]. Similar allomorphic variation seems to be common in other languages, too. Thus, in Ngaanjatjara there is, for example, an ablative case denoted by either [-la] or [-ta] or, remarkably, by [-ngka] (see Glass-Hackett/1970:34).

39 Closely related to Karatjari and Njangumata, Mangala displays the following case distinctions:
- Basic form (nominative)
- Ergative (agentive)
- Instrumental
- Lative
- Ablative
- Locative
- Genitive
- Dative
- Purposive
- Causative

Wunampal in the Kimberleys, has six distinct inflectional suffixes, plus a number of postpositions fulfilling a variety of functions. The suffixes are as follows:

Ablative: -yanga ‘from/out of’
Lative: -ku ‘to/towards/for’
Locative: -ngintalu ‘in/on/at’
Circumlative: -nginja ‘round/about’
Instrumental: -njane ‘with’

In addition to these, there are lots of postpositions such as:
ko:ya pale ‘behind the crocodile’
ko:ya arangu ‘atop the crocodile’
ko:ya mintatj ‘across the crocodile’ etc.

Very often, the English equivalent to an Aboriginal postposition or case suffix will be a preposition. A locative suffix would normally be translated as at, on, in; a lative would be to or towards, instrumental with or by, ablative from, out of, off, purposive for and so on and so forth. Sometimes, however, no English equivalent can be found and a phenomenon can only be explained and comprehended in terms of Aboriginal grammar. The occurrence of an ergative-agentive suffix in a number of Aboriginal languages will be highly illuminative. Let us analyse the following three groups of examples from Njangumata.

(a) Yukuru tjintji. ‘The dog is fat’.
   (dog fat)
   Mitawa tjintji. ‘The woman is fat’.
   (woman fat)
   Wakura tjintji. ‘The crow is fat’.
   (crow fat)

In all three Njangumata sentences, the subject is a noun in the ‘basic form’ (carrying no case suffix) and the corresponding English gloss, too, is in the ‘basic form’. The predicate is invariably an adjective. So far so good.

(b) Yukuru mitikarini. ‘The dog runs’.
   (dog runs)
   Mitawa mitikarini. ‘The woman runs’.
   (woman runs)
   Wakura mitikarini. ‘The crow runs’.
   (crow runs)

In these sentences the predicate is a verb; the subject is unalterably in the ‘basic form’ both in Njangumata and English.

(c) Yukurulu kuwi patjininji. ‘The dog’s nibbling some meat’.
   (dog meat nibbles)
   Mitawalu kuwi patjininji. ‘The woman’s nibbling some meat.’
   (woman meat nibbles)
   Wakuralu kuwi patjininji. ‘The crow’s nibbling some meat’
   (crow meat nibbles)

Now, in the last three sentences the predicate is a verb, notably a so-called transitive one which involves a direct object (in this case: kuwi ‘meat’). The subject in Njangumata carries a specific suffix (-lu) which is called ergative or, alternatively, agentive marker whereas the English equivalent is invariably a noun in its ‘basic form’. The rule can, of course, be set down in a very simple way: if a Njangumata sentence has a transitive verb as its predicate (involving or implying a direct object), the subject must show up an ergative/agentive suffix whereas the direct object is unmarked. However, no ergative suffix occurs on the subject if (1) the predicate is an intransitive verb (involving no direct object) or (2) when the predicate is not a verb. In contrast with this, a subject in English may, of course, carry no particular marker under any circumstances. Some other Indo-European languages such as Latin or German, or for that matter, the Slavonic branch, may mark the direct object in a sentence: that's what the so-called accusative case is good for.
3.6.8 Gender (Noun Classes)
This grammatical category does not appear to have been widespread in Aboriginal Australia. Apart from a few isolated instances, it is mostly found in the North (Kimberleys, Arnhem Land), usually associated with the application of prefixes.

The category of gender can also be found in a number of language families outside Australia. Most Indo-European languages have it and so do several Semitic and American-Indian languages, or for that matter, Bantu. In Australia the term noun class has been applied until recently (Capell/1956:38-45). However, gender appears to be more appropriate (the term noun class may be ambiguous in linguistic literature; besides, the feature affects not only nouns but pronouns and verbs as well; and in addition to all this, the phenomenon does not differ from gender distinction in other, non-Australian languages, therefore it might as well come under the same heading.)

In Western Australia (Kimberleys) the number of genders ranges from two to five. In case of a dual system (i.e. Kitja) there is masculine-feminine dichotomy and neutral (sexless) items have to fit in with either. Ngarinjin and Wurora display four genders each: a masculine, a feminine and two neutrals. Wunampal exhibits the most complex system of all with five genders to be demonstrated as follows.

In the language under examination, nouns belong to one of five definite sets. No formal morphological marker indicates the gender affiliation of a noun (unlike, say, 'Italian, where ragazzo can only be masculine as its ending indicates, and ragazza is feminine, for nouns with a word-final -a are by definition feminine; likewise, casa is of course feminine, although it means 'house' and globo 'globe' must be masculine. Russian has three genders and it is formally marked on the noun whether it belongs to masculine, feminine or neutral. For instance, nouns with a final (non-palatal) consonant are masculine, whereas feminine ones end in -a and neutral nouns are marked by an -o or -e. Thus stol 'table' or teletfon 'phone' are masculine, shkola 'school' and golova 'head' feminine and, finally, ozero 'lake' or oruzhiye 'weapon' neutral.) In Wunampal a noun may end in a vowel or consonant, may consist of one or more syllables or may show various other structural properties – none of these would indicate what gender the noun is. There is some, however meagre, semantic indication in that all humans belong invariably to one particular gender and everything else (whether animate or inanimate) must fit in with one of the remaining four classes. Thus there is no masculine-feminine contrast (like in English he versus she and his versus her); instead, human vis-a-vis non-human distinction is found, and within the latter there is a fourfold sub-division which, however, does not seem to be semantically conditioned. In other words, the underlying motives of classifying Wunampal nouns into one gender rather than another, appear to be more or less arbitrary. There seem to be tendencies of putting certain semantic entities in one group and others in another, but lots of exceptions would invalidate rather than corroborate any overall pattern (other than the class of nouns denoting humans as mentioned above). Thus, for instance, many nouns referring to, say, reptiles belong to gender A but others will be found in gender B and others again in gender C and the same holds good for other semantic categories, be it weapons, utensils, birds, geographical formations, heavenly bodies or abstract concepts.

Interestingly, recent borrowings from English have also been allocated to a particular gender. No wonder that watjala 'white-fella' or mitij 'missus' or kultija 'schoolteacher' belong to the humans' gender. More amazingly, mitjin 'mission' or motuka 'motorcar' or pitjkit 'biscuit' or otpitj 'hospital' are all allocated to different genders, for unknown reasons.

Without further, and much more profound, bearing upon the grammatical structure, however, gender distinction would not make much sense or simply it would not be tenable. But the operation of concord underlies the web of gender distinction and affects the whole of Wunampal grammar. Indeed it appears to be one of its most basic characteristics, the loss of which would probably alter the total structure of the language. The Wunampal concord is a grammatical arrangement facilitating an agreement of gender between a noun and an associated pronoun, demonstrative, adjective, verbal form, or even adverb (or what would be an adverb in English). To make the concord operative, pronouns, demonstratives etc., have five allomorphic variants to match the number of genders and, as a selectional restriction, a noun of a particular gender must always take one of these forms. In other words, the gender affiliation is not morphologically marked on the noun but it is (or may be) clearly marked on an accompanying adjective, demonstrative etc., in the same phrase or sentence. The following table presents five Wunampal nouns (with English glosses) belonging to five different genders. Each is followed by an appropriate form of a demonstrative (pinja etc.) meaning 'this' plus an adjective (piyapa etc.) glossed 'good, nice, fine'.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Noun</th>
<th>English Gloss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>stol</td>
<td>table</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>ozero</td>
<td>lake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>mitjin</td>
<td>mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>motuka</td>
<td>motorcar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>pitj</td>
<td>biscuit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As shown above, the demonstrative and adjective take various prefixes, each of which indicates a particular gender. The same prefixes are found in other word classes, too, referring invariably to the same gender. Thus a pronoun plus verb combination:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GENDER</th>
<th>NOUN</th>
<th>DEM.</th>
<th>ADJ.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>yalki 'teenage boy'</td>
<td>pinja</td>
<td>piyapa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>yey 'talk'</td>
<td>winja</td>
<td>wuntapa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>kimpu 'spearblade'</td>
<td>minja</td>
<td>miyapa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>lewa 'dog'</td>
<td>anja</td>
<td>ayapa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>loya 'bird'</td>
<td>ninja</td>
<td>nayapa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the above phrases there is no noun, they consist of a pronoun and a verb. However, both the pronoun and the verb are prefixed, thereby implying someone or something of a particular gender. This is to say that pini 'he/she' may refer to a man, woman, boy or girl, husband or hunter, sorcerer or mother-in-law – anything fitting in with this class but nothing else. In turn, wini 'it' implies nouns which denote animals, objects, concepts etc. belonging to this and only to this group. The same holds good of course, for mini and ani and nani. The word for, say, crocodile belongs to the ani-gender, but the water-goanna is mini and while the sun is a nani, the word for shield represents the wini-gender. Every Wunampal speaker of six or so years of age can classify hundreds, if not thousands, or words in the correct way, without violating the strict rules of gender concord. To confuse one gender with another would be such a silly mistake as referring to my dogs round a campfire.

As it is, the verb would be promptly and unmistakably clear that reference is being made to the campfire: the w- prefix of the verb, referring to a definite gender, indicates (or implies) something which belongs to that particular gender (and under the circumstances it can only be the fire, gradually 'dying out').

### 3.7 Aboriginal Vocabulary

The lexicon or vocabulary of a language reflects the collective physical and spiritual experience of its speakers: it is a detailed documentation of what is relevant to a society living in a given environment over a given period of time. Put it differently, the vocabulary of a language is culturally determined. In plain terms it means that, for example, a tropical population would not create words for snow or iceberg whereas Eskimo people in the Arctic regions have no terms referring to tropical plants or beasts of the jungle. Some linguistically ill-informed people hold that Aboriginal languages have a rather limited stock of words, a few hundred or so items altogether. Quite the contrary of this misconception can be proved. Aboriginal languages have developed sizeable vocabularies, as extensive and elaborate as any European or other language. The nature of the Aboriginal lexicon is, of necessity, different from English and other languages. Aboriginal vocabulary displays a very detailed and refined description of a nomadic or semi-nomadic hunting and food-gathering society, its natural environments, economic activities, social organization and institutions, its religious beliefs and world view and a great many concepts and references which have for ages been and, to a varying extent, still are relevant to Aboriginal people. Quite naturally, they did not coin terms for, say, washing machine or outboard motor for they dispensed with these gadgets. How many words can be found in English to denote members of the extensive family of Macropodidae? To the author's knowledge, there is kangaroo, wallaby, wallaroo and (the regionally restricted) euro. All these four terms have no doubt been borrowed from one or another Aboriginal language and gained franchise in Australian English. Aboriginal languages would have a minimum of a dozen, and very often considerably more, terms for kangaroo varieties: in addition to a generic term, there are distinct words for various subspecies and separate terms again to distinguish the male and the female of a particular subspecies (distinction is sometimes made between fully grown and young animal, too). In English, uncle can be either the father's or the mother's brother, whether younger or elder. Aboriginal languages would have distinct kinship terms for these. Likewise, distinction is, as a rule, made between younger brother and elder brother, younger sister and elder sister and many other degrees of relationship – quite undistinguished in English. Most European languages, including English, only have two demonstratives (this/that). Aboriginal languages would normally have a minimum of three and often four or even more demonstratives distinguishing (1) this = something tangible, within reach;
4. ABORIGINAL ENGLISH: AN AUSTRALIAN DIALECT

Distinct from Aboriginal languages, on the one hand, and the so-called Pidgin English, on the other, there is a language variety usually termed in linguistic circles as Aboriginal English. It is a peculiar dialect of Australian English developed by Aborigines as a result of contact with European-Australians mostly in rural areas and in the outback. Basically, it is English with an Aboriginal ‘accent’ just like English with an Italian or Indian or French or Negro accent. The learner is an Aboriginal person normally speaking one or more Aboriginal languages/dialects and picking up English in an informal way; in this process of second-language acquisition the recipient does not recognize or does not master certain features of English which, in turn, results in noticeable peculiarities at a phonemic, grammatical and lexical level. In other words, it develops under the pressures of linguistic interference as an Aboriginal person speaks English peppered with phonemic slips, grammatical alterations and semantic modifications originating from his or her Aboriginal linguistic background (just like a, say, Italian migrant’s peculiarities in speaking English originate from his or her native Italian dialect). It should also be kept in mind that Aboriginal English has developed under the conditions of a general educational deprivation and that an increasing Aboriginal access to schooling will hopefully result in a considerable improvement of their English language proficiency, too. Also, Aboriginal English is not a rigid and easily circumscribable language variety. Indeed, its boundaries seem rather elastic and it appears to be some transitional form in the process of second-language acquisition while advancing from zero or near-zero toward educated Australian English.

One can of course hear Aborigines speak good fluent English with no accent whatsoever (or, for that matter, speak it with a broad Aussie accent). Others display not more than just a tiny tint of Aboriginal slur. Others again may prove hard or very hard to follow. It largely depends on such social and cultural factors as the span and intensity of contact with English speakers, the degree of formal education, age and physical aptitude, the individual’s intellectual abilities, motivation and the like. Also a great deal depends on the Aboriginal speaker’s actual linguistic background, i.e. what particular Aboriginal language can he or she speak: all things being equal, a Wurora and a Pitjantjatjara person may well represent two noticeably different brands of Aboriginal English conditioned by differences inherent in Wurora and Pitjantjatjara, respectively.

(2) this = something outside reach but within talking/shouting distance or a similar range; (3) that = something mid-distant, i.e. within the range of a stone or a throwing stick or spear; (4) that = something outside such a range but still visible and (5) that = something invisible, far away. All put together, Aboriginal vocabularies are by no means inferior to English, they are just different, displaying a different domain and being differently structured.

Under the pressures of profound changes, Aboriginal languages have been, and are being, forced to expand their vocabularies and make up for what they have not developed before. One way of enriching and modernizing a lexicon is to extend the meaning (semantic scope) of native words. A few examples taken from Wunambal (Kimberleys) should be illuminative. In this language there has, for instance, been an old word for eaglehawk: kantjal. Nowadays the people call the aeroplane kantjal, too. Likewise, panman in the olden days referred to the tribal medicineman or ‘witchdoctor’. These days medical practitioners are also called panman. The primary meaning of kanmen is ‘cave’ but nowadays it also means ‘lock-up/jail’. The policeman in this language is called yirkal which is yet another indigenous word: yirkal means ‘rope/chain’ and yirkal-ngari ‘the one with the chain’—recalling grim memories of the past with arrested Aborigines chained up in detention. In the first place, ngali means ‘paper-bark’ and aru ‘stone’. However, the first has recently developed a secondary meaning of ‘blanket’ and later ‘banknote’, too, whereas the second has been employed to denote ‘coin/small change’.

The other common way of expanding a vocabulary is borrowing from another language, in this case English. Moduga or mutuka, watipala, yelafela, mitijti, mitjin, mitjinboy, dokia or dakata, waruk or warkam, matjitji, kultitja and scores of other items exemplify this process. However, such a lexical fertilization is very often a two-way game, interaction rather than just a unilateral influence. So it is in this case. Lots of Aboriginal languages have borrowed quite a number of English words but Australian English has also picked up many Aboriginal words which have indeed become ‘dinkum Aussie’ terms giving a special flavour to Aussie English. Just think of Australianisms like boomerang, billabong, corroboree, kookaburra, didgeridoo, woopera, bunyip, coolamon, kangaroo, wallaby, Canberra, Wollongong and lots of others. Thus, our Aboriginal fellow-Australians have made their contribution to the Australian national character in terms of language, too.
Aboriginal English can broadly be described in terms of some symptomatic features occurring in the realm of phonemics, grammar and vocabulary.

4.1 Phonemic Symptoms in Aboriginal English

Deviation from the generally accepted phonemic patterns of Australian English appears to be the most conspicuous feature of Aboriginal English.

One problem area is usually the pronunciation of two English labiodental fricatives /f/ and /v/, lacking in most Aboriginal languages and therefore substituted by /p/ or /b/ which appears to be its closest approximation in an Aboriginal sound stock. It is for this reason that

- flour becomes plawa
- native becomes natip
- different becomes diprent
- overseas becomes obatji
- everything becomes ebriting
- river becomes riba
- freshwater becomes pretjwota
- give him becomes gibim

English sibilants /s/, /z/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/ and affricates /tʃ/ and /dʒ/ are, as a rule, also substituted by one or another Aboriginal consonant, normally /tʃ/ or /dʒ/: the first is reminiscent of the initial consonant pair in English tune or tube, the latter is close to a /dʒ/ in dual or dew (but not the initial consonants in either chew and chicken or jewel and judge). As a result,

- somebody becomes tjambadi
- savages becomes tjabiljijdj
- as soon as becomes atjunatj
- sergeant becomes tjadjin
- schoolteacher becomes kulttja

English dental fricatives (e.g. those in thin, thick, that, those) are substituted by Aboriginal alveolar stops:

- the becomes da
- them becomes dem
- they becomes dey
- that becomes dat
- nothing becomes nating
- something becomes tjamting

The English /h/ phoneme is normally dropped in Aboriginal English:

his becomes iz
helping him becomes elpinim
home becomes oom
honey becomes ani

Vowels represent a large problem area, too (see Section 3.4.3). English thriphthongs and diphthongs are, as a rule, substituted by one or another Aboriginal cardinal vowel and so are a few English cardinal vowels, too. Thus, for instance,

- flour becomes plawa
- person becomes petjan
- early becomes eli

The vowel contrast in English cod versus cord versus code versus curd is likely to be ignored by an Aboriginal speaker who (particularly if his first language does not have an /o/ phoneme, anyway) would probably pronounce any of these items as /kad/ or /kaad/ or /kud/.

Another area of difficulty is consonant clusters. Some Aboriginal languages do not permit consonant clusters at all, others have some (e.g. bl-, br-, kl-, kr-) but not those common in English (e.g. sk-, sp-, spl-, spr-, fl-, fr-). The result:

- school becomes kul
- spray becomes prey
- split becomes plit
- spanner becomes pena

Of course, sometimes several substitutions may take place concurrently. Compare, for instance, Aboriginal English waruk with English work. The English long vowel is substituted by an Aboriginal short /a/. Further, the final English consonant cluster is split up and a vowel appears between the consonants whereby the whole structure of the word is altered: the English original has a CV:C structure and is monosyllabic whereas the Aboriginal adaptation shows a CVCVC pattern and becomes bisyllabic.

W. Douglas rightly points out that some English words are almost unrecognizable when adapted to the phonemic system of an Aboriginal language; thus, for instance, when dress, bread and trousers emerge in Pitjantjatjara as turirpa, purilpa and tawitji, respectively (Douglas/1975: 32–33). Occurrences like these would, however, go beyond Aboriginal English properly so called. These are borderline cases of word adoption or word borrowing from one vernacular to another. Put it differently, Aboriginal English is a specific dialect of Australian English spoken by Aborigines and understood, with or without some difficulty, by non-Aborigines. However, if the interference of an Aboriginal language
forms occur in the speech of one and the same person: fricative sounds and other times do not. As a result, alternate forms occur in the speech of one and the same person:

42 Grammatical and Lexical Changes

The grammar and vocabulary of Aboriginal English, too, display deviations from common Australian English. Plural forms like womans, mans, foots and childrens occur for women, men, feet and children, or conversely, singular forms occur when plural is required. Comparative adjectives like more better or more bigger can often be heard. The he-she-it distinction is neutralized when he or him refers not only to a male but also a female or something inanimate. The highly complex English verb system is normally rather simplified and restricted in Aboriginal English. Auxiliaries of question or negation may well be omitted. Various forms of the English be verb (am, are, is, was, were) may not occur, resulting in phrases like I am hungry or me Djepri 'I am Geoffrey'. The English you refers to either a single person or to several ones; in Aboriginal languages there is a distinct form goes beyond a point, the Aboriginal English speech (or what is meant to be one) becomes unintelligible to the non-Aboriginal listener and it results in a communication halt or breakdown. An average Australian is unlikely to identify turirrpaa, puriljpaa and tawitji as dress, bread and trousers, respectively. Thus they are no longer Aboriginal English words; they have crossed the border and become Pitjantjatjara loanwords borrowed from English.

Frequent substitution and other phonemic modifications in Aboriginal English do not, of course, suggest any innate inability of Aboriginal speakers to recognize and reproduce, say master, English vowels and consonants. Normally, samples of Aboriginal English only display a good deal of inconsistency or hesitation in following English phonemic patterns: in other words, speakers of Aboriginal English sometimes do pronounce, say, English fricative sounds and other times do not. As a result, alternate forms occur in the speech of one and the same person:

referring to a single person, another one referring to two persons and yet another distinct pronoun denoting second person plural. In this case, English does not make a distinction which is highly important to Aboriginal speakers and the resultant confusion may well be reflected in Aboriginal English.

In the realm of vocabulary, too, English makes distinctions when Aboriginal languages (and as a consequence, Aboriginal English) do not and vice versa. Thus, high and tall and long are likely to coincide in Aboriginal English, resulting in references like longfella for a tall man; skinny may stand for slim, slender, lanky or thin; big is used for big, large, great and corpulent; cheeky or tjiiki can be sly, cunning, malicious, malevolent, spiteful, ill-disposed, ill-natured, mischievous, vicious, bad, wicked, evil or the like and so one can talk about a cheeky person, cheeky dog, cheeky bullock, cheeky mosquito, cheeky kid, cheeky crocodile, cheeky snake and, finally, a cheeky bugger is a universal substitute for just about anything or anybody on earth.

The same holds good for verbs, too: for example, hit in Aboriginal English has a much wider scope and stands for strike, beat, assault, knock, throw, sling etc., look is used for see, watch, gaze, stare, view etc. In Aboriginal English one can talk not only about a big mob of bullock or a mob of donkey but also about big mob water, big mob money or mob o'time. The mob/bigmob formula (meaning of course much or plenty) has, rather typically, caught on not only among Aborigines but also in the speech of white-skinned North Australians.

In summary, Aboriginal English is a dialect of Australian English, considerably diverse in phonemics and largely restricted in grammar and vocabulary, yet not inherently inferior to other (uncultivated) varieties of English spoken in Australia.
5. PIDGIN ENGLISH: A LINGUISTIC POTPOURRI OF ITS OWN

In certain areas, mainly in tropical Australia from the Kimberleys right across to Northern Queensland one can sometimes hear Aborigines and non-Aborigines discourse in a language which is neither Aboriginal nor English (by the latter meaning either Australian English or what we have termed as Aboriginal English). For the non-initiated it is hardy intelligible or plainly unintelligible: admittedly, it is a language of its own, no matter how much it may remind the listener of a twisted ‘kinda English’.

To give a taste of this language, here is a short sample:

“Big Name watchem sheepysheep: watchem blackfella. No more belly cry fella hab. Big Name makum camp alonga grass, takum blackfella walkabout longa, no frightem no more hurry watta. Big Boss longa sky makum inside glad: takem walkabout longa too much goodfella. . .” (Baker/1966: 317-318)

Supposedly, it means this: “The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. . .” (Psalm 23).

5.1 The Origins of Pidgin

This peculiar language is named Pidgin English. Conceivably, the epithet comes from the English word business and it implies that Pidgin is, and has been, a ‘trade language’ between English-speaking skippers, plantation owners, overseers, police officers, administrators and other ‘colonials’, on the one hand, and non-English-speaking natives in the Australasian region, on the other. It has developed local varieties in the South China Sea area, on the Southern Sea islands and also in New Zealand and Australia. In the newly independent state of Papua New Guinea the local Pidgin has been chosen as official language. In other areas it appears to be an intermediary language of a limited duration, functioning so long as either a local native language or English is established as the sole or main vehicle of communication.

One of the main areas where Australian Pidgin took root was Queensland:

“The language came into being on the sugar cane fields of North Queensland in the 1870s when large numbers of natives, predominantly from the Blanche Bay area of northern New Britain, were more or less forcibly brought to Australia as workers in those fields. The language of the majority of these natives was the Tolai language, also known as Kuanua or (Tinata) Tuna, a Melanesian language that is at present the mother tongue of approximately 25,000 natives. In the attempt at communication between these native laborers, and their English-speaking employers and overseers, a rudimentary language developed whose grammatical structure was largely Melanesian, whereas its vocabulary was composed of prevalent English elements (many of them with modified meanings as a result of misunderstandings on the part of the natives, and all of them with drastically altered, i.e., Melanesianized, pronunciation) and a fair percentage of words from the Tolai language. This rudimentary language became fuller and more elaborate over the years, and underwent a certain amount of standardization. The English speaking employers and overseers made more or less conscious efforts to learn at least enough of it to allow them to engage in elementary communication with the native workers, and the native themselves began to employ it as a general means of intercommunication among themselves, allowing them to cut across the language barrier separating the non-Tolai speaking native workers from the Tolai speakers.

The language was named “Pidgin English”, after the “Pidgin English” employed in Chinese seaside cities by Chinese in their dealings with Europeans — “Pidgin” being derived from “business” — although the two forms of speech have only little in common.” (Wurm/1968:353-354).

Pidgin is not, as some incline to believe, a bastardized English. A foreigner or learner may speak broken or corrupted English but it is broken or corrupted English and not Pidgin English, which is an English-based contact language with its own grammar and vocabulary. This is another thing that some people tend to overlook, viz. that no matter how “funnily” it may sound to some, Pidgin is not just a childish gibberish to look down upon: it has its own structure, its own rules and its own word stock. It may seem “primitive” and may no doubt be rather simplified and restricted compared with English but it has certainly developed its own regularities and patterns.

In Australia, the use of Pidgin is not restricted to Aborigines and it was not them who introduced Pidgin. In all probability, Pidgin spread in and from North Australian coastal settlements where English-speaking colonists met not only Aborigines but also Chinamen, Japanese, Malay, Torres Strait islanders, Kanaka workers, Filipinos and other nationals. In such a Babel, Pidgin English emerged not only as a restricted version of the ruling majority’s language but also as a simple interethnic contact lingo, a bush-Esperanto, used by all parties concerned. It may or may not hold good for other parts of Australia, but in the Kimberleys there is a very interesting distribution of Pidgin-speaking
Aborigines. Normally, Pidgin would be spoken by Aborigines (and mainly men) who spent some time in coastal ports (such as Broome, Derby, Wyndham, Darwin) or worked on luggers or had a spell with pearlers or the like. Inland-bound people who spent most of their time on stations with cattle as stockmen or farmhands would not normally speak much Pidgin: apparently, they acquired some sort of an English from the colonial masters rather than Pidgin. It gives one the impression that the presence of Asian ethnic minorities and European seafarers in North Australian settlements contributed greatly to the spread of Pidgin.

5.2 The Shape of Pidgin

Pidgin English is no doubt simple and, lo and behold, more systematic in terms of grammar than common English. Thus, for instance, definite and indefinite articles are dispensed with. The irregularities of English plural (lot-lots, box-boxes, ox-oxen, sheep-sheep, foot-feet, child-children, brother-brothers-brethren, mouse-mice etc.) are reduced to an optional, and very often omitted, regular plural. The highly complex system of English verb has also been largely simplified. For one thing, there is not normally active-passive and perfect-imperfect distinction in Pidgin. Verb tenses are also reduced: future is redundant and present is used instead, in addition to an invariable, regular past tense. Thus:

mi kük 'I cook/I am cooking'
yu go/gon 'you go/you are going'

The past tense marker is invariably a bin (obviously from English been) preceding the present tense form:

mi bin kük 'I cooked/have cooked/was cooking'
yu bin go(n) 'you went/have gone/were going'

But Pidgin has not only simplified the English verb; it has also developed new forms with new functions. Such innovations are, for example, the verbal forms with an -im suffix. Compare the following sentences.

mi kük 'I cook'
mi kükim 'I cook it'
mi kükim mit 'I cook (the/some) meat'
mi bin kük 'I cooked'
mi bin kükim 'I cooked it'
mi bin kükim mit 'I cooked (the/some) meat'
mi rid 'I (am) read(ing)'
mi ridim 'I (am) read(ing) it'
mi ridim buk 'I (am) read(ing) (the/a) book'
mi bin rid 'I (have) read'
mi bin ridim 'I (have) read it'
mi bin ridim buk 'I (have) read (the/a) book'

That is, verbs with the -im suffix imply or indicate (technically speaking) transitive action: implicitly or explicitly, there is a direct object in the sentence. The suffix apparently derives from the English him form (possibly but less probably from them). However, the Pidgin -im has a broader application in that it may refer to any direct object whereas the English him is, by definition, an animate male third person singular (direct) object. Not in Pidgin, though:

mi lukim yu 'I see thee'
yu lukim me 'thou see me'
i mait beltim yu 'he may beat you up'
yu bin gibim mi nating 'Thou gave me nothing'

Pidgin has, among other things, developed a pronominal system of its own:

Singular 1 mi 'I/me'
Singular 2 yu 'thou/thee'
Singular 3 i{m) 'he/she, him/her'
Plural 1 mipela/mifela 'we/us'
Plural 2 yupela/yufela 'you'
Plural 3 impela/imfela 'they/them'

The singular forms call for no comment. The plural forms are made up by means of a -pela or, sometimes, -fela suffix which, needless to say, comes from the English noun fellow/feller. Sometimes in some varieties of Pidgin dual forms may occur like yumi/yuenmi 'thou and I, the two of us' (dual first person) or yuttupela 'the two of you' (dual second person). Naturally, such dual forms would correspond to Aboriginal pronominal patterns distinguishing not only singular and plural but also dual number.

Pidgin has also developed peculiar possessive forms:

mipela belonga (dedi) 'our (father)'
yupela belonga (bulumana) 'your (cattle)'
dedi belonga (papidog) 'father's (dog)'
putjiket belonga (mit) 'the cat's (meat)'

The -pela/-fela suffix occurs not only with plural pronouns (see above) but also with numerals and adjectives:

wanpela 'one'
tupela 'two'
tripela 'three'
tenpela 'ten'
bigpela 'big/large'
tjampela 'some'
longpela 'long/tall'
klinpela 'clean/neat'
Likewise, the English one has become a suffix in Pidgin innovations like diswan ‘this’ or detwan ‘that’.

Compared with its parent-language, Pidgin has a not only restricted but also considerably modified vocabulary. Firstly, a number of words originating from the English children’s vocabulary do not necessarily have any diminutive-endearing connotation in Pidgin. Items like dedi, mami, putji(ket), papi(dog), pigi-pigi, pis-pis refer to father, mother, cat, hound and so on and not puppy, kitten etc. It has also to be pointed out that lots of ‘childish’ words from English have been transferred into Pidgin not because Aboriginal speakers of Pidgin are childish (there is no trace of any ‘childishness’ in the Aboriginal vernaculars) but because the white-skinned champions of Pidgin entertained this general fallacy about Aboriginal people (and non-Europeans in general) and in the course of linguistic communication they magnanimously tried to descend from the pinnacles of their imagined racial superiority — by using childish language.

The number of vocabulary items borrowed from English is rather restricted in Pidgin but the semantic scope of Pidgin words tends to be much wider; put differently, they encompass more meanings and connotations. Thus, for instance, ambag/humbug can be cheating, lying, playing up, fooling about, flirting and so on; humbug can be a person, an animal, a thing, a concept. Likewise, rabit/rubbish may mean something or someone poor, bad, broke, flimsy, inferior, destetable, stodgy and the like. Tjiki/cheeky has been described above (see section 4.2). Plenty or bigmob means much, many, numerous, a lot. Oltaim is always, all the time, every time, each time or often, frequently. Gammon is a lie, swindle, falsehood, deception, hoodwinking, delusion, bamboozling, cheating, a hoax. In Pidgin, one does not cut firewood with an axe or hatchet — one calls it tomahok. Some Pidgin terms, in turn, are strongly ‘Aboriginalized’ English items like buluman(a) for ‘bulk’ or ‘cattle’.

Pidgin is very seldom found in a ‘pure’ form. More often than not it appears to be one of several speech forms spoken in a community, it occurs along with one or another variety of common English or Aboriginal English and normally with one or more Aboriginal dialects, too. The result is of course a blended language. It also works out in reverse: Aboriginal English or common Australian English in the outback and Aboriginal tribal languages also borrow from Pidgin.

5.3 Pidgin As An Emotional And Political Issue

Emotional and political attitudes towards Pidgin vary quite considerably. It has zealous supporters and outspoken opponents alike. Professor Strehlow, for one, does not seem to be particularly fond of Pidgin.

“The general Australian public has been led to believe that the native Australian languages are hopelessly poor and primitive in structure and vocabulary. There are two main reasons for this mistake. In the first place, the average white person who comes into close contact with the aboriginals and thus acquires a smattering of their dialects, is himself rarely well-educated. His own English is often of a poorer type and much more limited in vocabulary than the language of the people whom he despises. Not even master of his own tongue, he cannot do justice to the idiom of the people amongst whom he lives; and of course, there is not the slightest reason why he should take an interest in any uneconomic linguistic studies. Even more harm has been done, however, by some scientists who, in their efforts to find the ‘missing link’ in the Australian aboriginals, have described their language as devoid of all ornaments and graces, and characterized by an almost sub-human simplicity.

This false popular idea of the Australian aboriginal dialects has been fed and encouraged by the universal use of pidgin English as the medium of intercourse between the natives and the whites. Northern Territory Pidgin English is not English perverted and mangled by the natives; it is English perverted and mangled by ignorant whites, who have in turn taught this ridiculous gibberish to the natives and who then affect to be amused by the childish babbling of these ‘savages’.

The following account is intended to bring home the ruinous effect of pidgin English on any moving story. The caricatured tale should be familiar to most readers.

Long time ago ole feller Donkey him bin big feller boss longa country. Alright. By an’ by another feller — him name ole Muckbet — bin hearem longa three feller debbil-debbil woman: them feller debbil-debbil woman bin tellem him straight out — ‘You’ll be big feller boss yourself soon.’ Alright. Him bin havem lubra, ole lady Muckbet.

Alright. That Muckbet an’ him lubra bin askem ole man Donkey come longa them (i.e. their) place one night. While ole man Donkey bin lie down asleep, them two feller bin finissem that poor ole beggar longa big feller knife, — properly big feller knife, no more small one. Bykrise, that ole feller bin loosing too much blood altogether! That Muckbet him bin big feller boss then alright!
By an' by that Muckbet an' him lubra bin killem lubra an' picca-ninny belonga Mucktap, — that Muckbet him too much cheeky beggar already. That feller Mucktap him bin properly sorry longa him mate (i.e. wife) an' that lil' boy.

That ole woman, lady Muckbet, him (i.e. she) bin walk about night time. Him bin havem candle. Him bin sing out — 'Me properly sorry longa that ole man me bin finishem; him bin havem too much blood, poor beggar; me properly sorry longa him'. Him (i.e. she) bin finish then; no more (i.e. she is no more, she is dead), — finish altogether.

Alright. That Mucktap him bin come along then. Him bin havem big feller fight longa that Muckbet, — oh properly! Him bin killem that Muckbet, him bin choppem off him head, finishem him properly. That's all.

This pidgin English account of the tragedy of Macbeth reveals the injustice and the insult that is done to any story told in this medium. The old tale immediately becomes utterly childish and ridiculous. All details are omitted. Even the general outline of the story is by no means accurate. Only a few characters are mentioned by name; and their names are distorted till they become merely funny. The whole account is an inadequate, untruthful, and malicious caricature of a great story. It would be impossible, even for a great writer, to compose a serious tragedy with it an important position in view of the fact that they could communicate with white men and speak for their fellow tribesmen who were ignorant of the language; it also enabled such natives to obtain coveted employment with white employers that was barred to natives not knowing Pidgin. Last but not least, it put such natives into a position to communicate with their Pidgin-speaking counterparts in other tribes, which became increasingly important with the spread of pacification and the consequent replacement of hostilities between tribes by friendlier relations. In addition, Pidgin, being essentially a native language in its structure and mode of expression, and created as a means of expressing native ways of thinking, could be learned by natives with great ease and in a relatively short time. At the same time, Pidgin is deceptively easy looking to speakers of English who in consequence are quite willing to try to use it, which has again given the language a prestige boost in the eyes of the natives, even though the "Pidgin" spoken by the majority of the white population in the Territory constitutes a very poor effort indeed.

In addition to this, many natives have in recent years begun to develop what may well be termed a nationalistic pride in Pidgin. With increasing frequency, one hears natives refer to Pidgin as "our language" ("tok bilong mipela") in contrast to the white man's language, i.e., English, and they are greatly impressed when hearing a white man speak Pidgin native fashion, and are proud and flattered at hearing him speak "their language" so well. It appears therefore that Pidgin has all the makings of being the obvious choice for becoming the national language of the emerging Papua-New Guinean nation. However, Pidgin has for a long time been the target of criticism and objections and even defamation and abuse, both in the Territory and, even more, outside it, and the idea of its becoming the national language of a Papua-New Guinean nation may appear quite monstrous to a good many of such objectors.

Before dealing with the nature of these objections in detail, it may be pointed out that they come, inside the Territory, from the English-speaking white population, to a very great extent, and only to a comparatively very small extent from sections of the native population with a vested interest in the importance of their own language, like the Motu for instance. A few native leaders may, at the same time, share the white population's contempt for Pidgin for reasons similar to those prompting non-white members of the United Nations to look upon Pidgin with disfavour (see below, the third of the major criticisms of Pidgin).

It has to be borne in mind that the choice of its national language is most certainly a matter for the nation in question itself to decide upon — i.e., in the case of the Papua-New Guinean nation, of the native population of the Territory that will constitute this nation. If, therefore, criticisms of and objections to a language that seems to fulfill all the requirements necessary for making a language a suitable candidate to becoming the national language are made and raised largely by members of the nonnative alien population that is ruling the Territory at present, and not by the native population itself, these criticisms and objections seem to be intrinsically inapplicable and unsuited for being regarded as arguments of validity. At the same time, it appears that even if the situational inapplicability of these criticisms and objections is disregarded, they are in their substance largely incorrect and
None of these criticisms have objective validity. Pidgin is not English, not any more than English is French because of its containing an abundance of words of French origin. In its structure and functional principles, Pidgin is a Melanesian language, and in this respect quite different from English, just as English is structurally different from French. It is true that the percentage of the English-derived content of the vocabulary of Pidgin is considerably greater than that of the French-derived vocabulary of English, but it is not greater than the Latin-derived vocabulary content of French and Italian. But nevertheless, nobody will call present-day French or Italian corruptions of Latin, though they owe their historical origin to exactly that, just like Pidgin owed its birth to such a corruption of English, but in its present-day form, constitutes an established language when judged from the linguistic point of view.

To describe Pidgin as revolting and debased, as being full of insulting words, and sounding ridiculous and extremely funny to listeners, is the result of looking at it with an outside yardstick of values that is based on the nature and content of a different language, i.e., English. In such a manner any language closely related to another in part of its vocabulary, or in both structure and vocabulary, could, when looked at from the point of view of this other language, be described as being revolting, debased, full of insulting words, and as sounding ridiculous and extremely funny to listeners — i.e., to listeners speaking this other language, and not the language in question itself. Dutch people and Germans, Spaniards and Portuguese, members of the various Slavic nations and others can potentially find themselves in such situations quite frequently — quite a few of the words in such closely related languages are quite similar in form and to speakers of one such language, they appear to be easily recognizable when uttered by speakers of the other language, but their meanings may in fact be rather different, and a quite harmless word in one language may be a highly insulting one in the other, though it may sound nearly the same. Spanish and Portuguese and Slavic languages provide good examples of this. Educated members of two such speech communities who are aware of this problem do not blandly describe each others’ languages as being full of insulting words. Why then, one may wonder, do speakers of English describe Pidgin as being full of insulting words; though they ought to be aware of the fact that these words, which bear formal resemblance to insulting words in English, have perfectly harmless meanings in Pidgin? It may be taken into account, as a partial explanation for this seemingly unreasonable attitude, that some English speakers are, as a result of their continued adherence to a Victorian heritage, perhaps more sensitive to and emotional about what they regard as insulting words than members of most other speech communities. Also it has to be considered that English is not a member of a pair of very closely related major languages like those mentioned above so that most English speakers have never been exposed to a language sounding much like theirs in many respects, though curiously, and sometimes revoltingly or funny, differing from it in many instances (that is if the cases of minor dialectal differences like those between British and Australian English, or British and American English are disregarded, though these cases provide a few examples similar to those referred to above, like the basically harmless British English word “cock” when viewed from the Australian English point of view). It seems that if Pidgin is taken into account, English can be said to be a member of just such a pair of languages that are closely related in some respects — i.e., vocabulary. At the same time, only a very small proportion of the speakers of English ever come into contact with, or are aware of the exact nature of, Pidgin, which helps explain the exaggerated reaction of the majority of English speakers on first contact with this, to them, unfamiliar and strange sounding idiom. Characteristically, the most ardent, emotional, and vociferous critics of Pidgin are largely persons who know very little about it, whereas many of the established Territorials who have a good knowledge of the language are prepared to either regard it impartially and dispassionately or have a lot to say in its favor.

One last word about the argument that Pidgin sounds ridiculous and extremely funny to listeners, i.e., speakers of English unfamiliar or only a little familiar with it: one cannot help wondering if it has ever occurred to people holding this view how ridiculous and extremely funny much of English sounds to a French speaker who hears hundreds of corrupted French words tumbling from the mouth of an English speaker in what to a Frenchman appears as a jumble of either largely incoherent references, or worse still as an occasional sequence of, to him, extremely funny connotations. To help an English speaker realize this, he may be advised to consider his own reactions to a Frenchman’s using corrupted English words derived from “camping”, “weekend”, etc., when speaking French, or, to the English listener, “mispronouncing”
scores of familiar words like "repetition", "miserable", "original", and so forth. But of course, familiarity with these facts has traditionally blunted the Englishman's and Frenchman's reaction to these "ridiculous" matters that are under the dictates of their cultures, so that they are no longer regarded as ridiculous by members of the two speech communities. On the other hand, it is culturally in order for the speakers of English to think of Pidgin as a ridiculous and extremely funny language, and at the same time, to regard it as nothing more than a revolting and debased corruption of English.

2. The second argument frequently leveled against Pidgin is that it is an inadequate, restricted language unsuited for the expression of thoughts on an advanced level.

Before this argument is taken up on the specific level, it must be pointed out that the question as to whether a language is "adequate" or "inadequate" is in itself quite unsound. If "adequacy" is to mean the suitability or otherwise of a given language for the expression of, and reference to, cultural concepts, it has to be considered that a question concerning this adequacy of a language is only meaningful if the culture is named for whose expression the language is being thought of. Since every natural language constitutes a reference system for the culture within which it has been developed, it stands to reason that every language is adequate for the expression of, and reference to, the sum total of the cultural concepts making up the culture to which it belongs, and undergoes changes in accordance with changes of this culture. It stands equally to reason that any language is inadequate for the expression of a culture to which it does not belong, this inadequacy increasing in direct proportion with the degree of difference between the culture to which the language belongs, and the one which it is expected to express.

Turning to Pidgin in this connection, it must first be examined whether Pidgin is a fully adequate medium for the expression of the cultural concepts of the people of Papua-New Guinea who have been using it as their lingua franca. This examination is necessary: it is true that Pidgin is resorted to by natives in multilanguage situations as the almost exclusive means of intercommunication between them in all situations concerning the multilanguage group as a whole, or at least a multilanguage section of it. However, there are numerous culture situations involving members of one tribe only in which the language of intercommunication is never Pidgin, but always the tribal language, and for which Pidgin is definitely inadequate — understandably so, because it has no connection with that specific part of tribal culture that is often ritual in nature. One must add, at the same time, that a language other than Pidgin would also be inadequate, English probably more so than Pidgin because of the alienness of the culture to which English belongs, to the cultures of the native population of the Territory.

The cultures of the native population of Papua-New Guinea are rapidly changing, much of them getting lost and being replaced by something that is approaching uniformity. It seems clear that the language serving as a reference system for this new growing uniform element in the cultures of the population is Pidgin. Being the means of expression of this new set of cultural concepts, it is naturally adequate for this task. The most obvious proof for the adequacy of Pidgin as a means of expression for this modern Papua-New Guinean culture is the existence of thousands of natives in the Territory whose mother tongue, i.e., first language, is Pidgin, and who certainly find Pidgin fully adequate for the expression of all aspects of their culture.

It may well be argued that Pidgin is not adequate for the expression of the concepts constituting a sophisticated western culture like the Australian toward an approximation of which the Papua-New Guinean culture is believed to be heading. The first part of this argument is undoubtedly correct for the present moment — no native language can a priori be adequate for the expression of a western culture, and the Pidgin has to be regarded as a native language. However, it is unlikely that the basic culture of the emerging Papua-New Guinean nation will ever become just a copy of the Australian — it will most certainly become something with a character decidedly its own, and what will have been absorbed into it from the Australian culture will only be a component element that will have undergone drastic changes and adaptations making it rather different from the original. As this basic culture will develop and become richer and more complex, the language serving it as a means of expression will develop with it and become richer and more complex, in step with the culture to which it belongs. Assuming that this language is Pidgin it can draw without limit on the word-stock of English, just like English used to draw profusely on the word-stock of French and Latin many centuries ago when the Anglo-Saxon language proved inadequate for the expression of a culture that was moving toward greater complexity and refinement. These French and Latin words were adapted to the sound-structure of English — one expects new English loan words in Pidgin to be adapted to the — totally un-English — sound-structure of native Pidgin. The suggestion that, if such a large-scale adoption of English words into Pidgin becomes necessary, Pidgin might just as well be replaced by English, seems about as justified as the argument that, centuries ago, the Anglo-Saxon speakers would have done better to adopt French wholesale
rather than filling their language with French loan words, or that the Japanese who during the westernization of much of their culture had hundreds of English loan words entering their language, might have done better to switch to English entirely instead. This suggestion concerning Pidgin is of course largely caused by the erroneous assumption held by so many that New Guinea Pidgin is not a language in its own right, but just a sort of incorrect English.

There is a good present-day example of a Pidgin-type language being successfully adopted as the national language of a newly emerged nation: Indonesian. A type of low Malay had become the lingua franca in a good part of what constitutes present-day Indonesian, although it came from outside the area. It had been, in a simplified form, used by the Dutch during their rule, and it spread through most of the area now occupied by the new country. After independence, this language was adopted as the basis of the new national language, Bahasa Indonesia, in spite of the fact that there was a large regional language, Javanese, in the new country that was spoken by almost one-half of its entire population. It has undergone a steady process of enrichment and enlargement of vocabulary and form to remain adequate for the expression of the Indonesian culture that is growing in complexity with the absorption of new ideas and technical and other features from outside cultures.

The Indonesian example may be considerably different in detail from the Pidgin situation in the Territory, but it demonstrates that it is perfectly feasible for a Pidginized language to become a national language. It may also be taken into account in this comparison that the resistance to Indonesian on the part of the native population in Indonesia has been much greater than that of the native population of the Territory to Pidgin.

3. The third criticism of Pidgin is that it constitutes a sorry heritage from the days of colonial oppression, and that it has been used as a language accentuating, emphasizing and perpetuating social and racial distinctions, i.e., it has been used by the white masters in speaking to members of the native population to keep them in their place.

Parts of this argument are true as far as the bygone past is concerned, though the fact is overlooked in it that by far the greater portion of the use of Pidgin as a means of intercommunication has been from native to native, and not from white man to native.

The views outlined above are largely held by some white and quite a few non-white members of the United Nations Assembly, and also by a few white persons, as well as by some very few native leaders, in the Territory itself. However, it appears unrealistic, to say the very least, to hold such a view for the present or the future and its only justification may lie in the fact that it constitutes a topical and convenient political slogan. Many languages that in the past used to be characterized by just those social features ascribed to Pidgin in the above argument, have become the national languages of nations. Indonesian again is the classical example: it may be remembered that until the middle of the last century natives in the then Dutch East Indies were forbidden by law even to learn Dutch so they could be kept linguistically, and in consequence socially, clearly separated from the white rulers. Nevertheless, the linguistic tool of this separation has become the national language of the new Indonesian nation.

Concerning Pidgin it must be noted that, as has been pointed out above, many of the natives in the Territory, including some of the members of the House of Assembly, are beginning to develop something akin to a nationalistic pride in Pidgin, and do not regard it as a means of social suppression, but rather as a means of self-identification. This attitude can safely be expected to spread further, and clearly demonstrates that the third criticism of Pidgin mentioned above is no longer applicable.

The foregoing rather lengthy discussion of Pidgin should not be taken as meaning that the author strongly recommends the choice of Pidgin as the future national language of the emerging Papua-New Guinean nation. The choice of its national language will be made by the new nation itself, and it is not to be expected that a recommendation by the author, even if he was to make one, would have the weight to influence their decision in the slightest. However, the author feels that because he is a professional anthropological linguist, it may be his task and duty to give the reader an opportunity to hear the opinion of a politically disinterested outsider expert on the suitability or otherwise of Pidgin as a potential national language of the future Papua-New Guinean nation, and his views of the validity or otherwise, of the main criticisms leveled against this language by so many.

The third language that may be regarded as a candidate for becoming the future Papua-New Guinean national language is English. There is no doubt that this language has at present the highest prestige value of all the languages in the Territory, and many of the natives are very keen indeed to learn it. This interest is very largely motivated by practical considerations: English constitutes in their eyes the key to advancement and betterment of their positions, something with the help of which they hope to advance to the level of the white rulers. Although there may be a measure of truth in these assumptions, one cannot help wondering if these

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natives are not tending to overrate the advantages and benefits they are expecting to derive from a successful mastery of English on their part, and one is left wondering what their reaction may be once they arrive at the realization that the knowledge of English alone is only one, though an important, step towards the fulfillment of their hopes. There is no doubt that for years to come, English will constitute the sole key for Papua-New Guineans to higher education that in turn is the backbone of a modern nation. Their nationalistic feelings are on the verge of awakening to counterbalance the very important fact that English is the language of its present day alien rulers who belong to a different race.” (Wurm/1968: 355-362).

All pros and cons considered, Pidgin seems to be a controversial language, after all. In conclusion, to give the reader a chance to judge for himself, here is a Pidgin translation of Anthony’s speech from Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar, Act III, Scene 2:  


Caesar ia pren bolong mi tru. Gupetla tasol long mi. Brutus kolim em mangal. Tasol Brutus gupetla man tu. Im i giaman? Olosem wonem?

Caesar pasim planti man moa, biringim kalabus long Rom baembai wantok baem kot belogen na moni bolong gauman i pulap I nosave pasim moni. Olosem wonem? Pesin ia, bolong Caesar, i mangal?

Long taim ol rabisman tarongu kraikrai, Caesar tu im I sore na krai. Mangal noken olosem; im i had moa. Tasol Brutus kolim em mangal tumas.


Aidono Brutus.

Tasol mi nolaik tok nogut long Brutus. Mi nolaik korosim em long giaman bolongen. Tasol mi toktok long samting hai bolong mi yet i lukim, samting mi save tru. Mi no ken haitim.

Long taim bipo yu yu pula long Kaesar. Em i stret. Watpo yu noken sore longen nau?

Agni, yu yu olosem waipig. Nogat save. Bel bolong yu pula long kunai tasol!!


Finally, a report on recent developments of PNG Pidgin in The Australian, Saturday, 28th February, 1976, page 9:

“A new language, an Anglicised version of pidgin English, has emerged in Papua New Guinea — and is unintelligible to a large proportion of the population. Linguists are concerned because traditional pidgin is disintegrating, especially in the cities where there is close contact between the local population and Western English speakers.

Urban speakers have borrowed words directly from English, creating a language which is totally meaningless in the country areas where the old pidgin is in wide use.

Professor Stephen Wurm, head of the linguistics department at the Australian National University in Canberra, says the disintegration process is causing severe communication problems in the newly-independent country.

He says technical information on crop production, for instance, issued by a Government body in an Anglicised form of pidgin, can be completely misunderstood by a village farmer.

Similarly, because of the great number of new, Anglicised terms used in the House of Assembly, many Government decisions can be meaningless to large sections of the population.
In a government technical paper on agriculture written in Anglicised pidgin the word ‘nurseri’ — meaning in English or Anglicised pidgin a place where seedlings such as coffee beans are raised — was taken by a small group of rural coffee growers to mean something to do with hospital,’ Professor Wurm said yesterday in an interview with The Australian.

‘The broad interpretation by many of the coffee-growers was probably some place to take sick plants’. The disintegration process was being caused by the borrowing of English words to cover, in pidgin, new concepts and situations.

Professor Wurm says assumptions that pidgin structurally is very close to English are wrong.

‘It is because of this structural difference between pidgin and English that straight borrowing from English can lead to the pidgin structure and its lexical system and can cause serious misunderstanding in communication,’ he said.

Professor Wurm quoted other examples of misunderstandings between city and rural dwellers.

He said: ‘A Government publication could quote a ‘board of management’ which would be written in the Anglicised version of Pidgin as ‘bot ov menesmen’.

‘To villages this would, at best, mean a ‘boat’ and a ‘man’ with the words, ‘bot’ (boat in non-Anglicised pidgin) and ‘men’ (man), connected by two syllables completely unintelligible to them.

Professor Wurm quoted one example of how pidgin terms were created to meet new concepts.

‘Three years ago a famine occurred,’ he said, ‘but the word ‘famine’, which was used by the officials, was meaningless to rural people who created a new pidgin word, ‘bikhangre’, or ‘big hunger’, which means famine.’

Professor Wurm said that most urban dwellers could speak both types of pidgin but unless the Government continued its efforts to check the trend the next generation of urban residents would be able to speak only the Anglicised version.’”

6. REFERENCES


