INTRODUCTION

Aboriginal languages have long intrigued linguists and historians alike. Their number, distribution and diversity raise interesting questions about their relationships to one another and to languages in other parts of the world and consequently, about their ultimate origin. Unfortunately, however, their importance as vehicles of Aboriginal culture and thought has only gradually been appreciated. The lateness of this development is to be regretted because so many of the languages, particularly those in the more closely settled areas of Australia, have become extinct in the meantime and others are now on the verge of extinction.

The aim of the present volume is not to describe or analyse Australian languages, however. Rather it is to show how studies of them may be used to contribute to a better understanding of Aboriginal history. To illustrate this the volume brings together eleven papers written by linguists focussing on different aspects of language and history. These fall naturally into three fairly distinct, although partly overlapping, groups: those dealing with oral texts and history (Austin and Tindale, Hercus, Kelly and Evans, Muecke, Rumsey and Wirrunmarra), those using historical linguistic techniques to attempt to probe deeper into pre-historical aspects of Aboriginal origins, distribution, and culture (McConvell, Sharpe), and those describing sociolinguistic aspects of language use and change (Donaldson, Harris, Haviland, Sandefur, Shnukal).

Yet the volume is more than just a presentation of different aspects of what linguistics has to contribute to Aboriginal history — it also provides insights into, and comments on (more or less directly) the Aboriginal condition today as well as on the Aboriginal response to a constantly changing world. Thus the papers dealing with oral texts and history are just as much about change and death as are those about specific languages and their speakers. Other papers show how adaptable Aborigines have been in adjusting to the new circumstances they have found themselves in following contact with Europeans — new languages were developed for example, and their own modified to meet new requirements. This is important for being rarely recognised, as is the Aborigines' skill in using whatever linguistic resources are at hand to build intricate communicative systems which few Europeans ever get to observe let alone understand. This is illustrated by John Haviland's article on the linguistic situation at Hopevale in North Queensland, for example. Haviland not only shows how Europeans have been misled into thinking that the traditional language of the area, Gugu Yimidhirr, is dead, or just about so, when it is in fact very much alive and plays a subtle role, together with English and other Aboriginal languages, in interpersonal communication between members of the Hopevale community. Still other papers give an insight into ways of Aboriginal thinking and the way they viewed various events of significance. Thus there are eye-witness accounts about how Wangkangurru people left their home in the Simpson desert at the turn of the century and how the Kaiadilt people saw a would-be settler make a systematic attempt in about 1918 to eliminate them by 'shooting down everyone except the girls he intended to rape'.

Finally, the volume is about history itself, about how texts become historical documents. For this reason four of the papers include texts transcribed in their original form. The publication of the original is by no means superfluous. Even when the language is traditional and few if any readers are likely to know it, a mere translation is not enough: the text with the gloss is, after all, the closest we can get to what people said and thought. In the field of oral history, it represents an historical document.

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