

Loss and Renewal: Australian Languages Since Colonisation

edited by Felicity Meakins and Carmel O'Shannessy

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This book originated from a 'Language Contact Symposium' held at The Australian National University in Canberra, 6–7 March 2014, organised by the volume editors as part of an annual Australian Languages Workshop. Although written by linguists and largely for linguists, the book should nevertheless be of interest to students of Aboriginal history. Its topic deals with the after-effects of the European colonisation of the continent, in particular how the advent of English to Australia has impacted on traditional Indigenous languages. Considerable attention has previously been given to the decline and loss of traditional languages, as Indigenous people have given up their languages in favour of English (e.g. Schmidt 1985, 1990; McConvell and Thieberger 2001; Marmion et al. 2014), as well as issues of language maintenance and revitalisation (McKay 1996, Walsh 2014, Hobson et al. 2010).

In place of this narrative of loss, the book under review devotes its attention to the processes and products of change that have led to new forms of language, whether new varieties of English (Aboriginal English), alterations to traditional languages, or new languages that combine material from both English and Australian languages (pidgins and creoles). In this review I summarise the contents in relatively non-technical language for a readership of non-linguists, and at the same time provide a sample of the kinds of changes to language that have taken place throughout Australian post-contact history.¹

1 I follow an order of presentation that differs from that of the book.

The most striking early result of contact between English and Australian languages was the creation of New South Wales Pidgin, a hybrid and at first rudimentary code used for communication between the European immigrants and Aboriginal people, and eventually also as a medium of communication between Indigenous people who did not know one another's languages. The vocabulary of NSW Pidgin was largely drawn from English, although a considerable number of words from the Sydney language also became part of the new code. The pronunciation and grammatical features, however, were heavily influenced by traditional languages (see Troy 1994, Amery and Mühlhäusler 1996, Koch 2011).

Meanwhile, English words were borrowed into Australian languages and Australian English received loanwords from Australian languages. Especially prominent among the latter were Indigenous placenames, which were adopted by settlers as names of the properties they established. David Nash ('Placenames evidence for NSW Pidgin'²), in the only chapter that deals with Pidgin, demonstrates for the first time the likelihood that a number of placenames, especially in New South Wales, were jointly constructed by Europeans and Indigenous Australians using the medium of NSW Pidgin. Thus names like Boree Cabonne and Boree Nyrang use the Pidgin terms *gabun* 'big' and *ngarang* 'small' (both derived from the Sydney language), with the word order (adjective after noun) characteristic of NSW languages.

NSW Pidgin spread out with the moving frontier, including into Queensland. By the twentieth century most Aboriginal groups had shifted from speaking both traditional languages and NSW/Queensland Pidgin to varieties of 'Aboriginal English' that contained traces of both their traditional languages and the earlier pidgin. Furthermore, many Indigenous people were displaced from their traditional homelands and relocated on government reserves, alongside people with different heritage language backgrounds. Ilana Mushin and Janet Watts ('Identifying the grammars of Queensland ex-government reserves: The case of Woorie Talk') study the variety of English now called 'Woorie Talk', that was spoken at the Woorabinda reserve near Rockhampton. They try to tease apart features (a) that continue the earlier Pidgin, (b) that reflect the input from English as spoken in Queensland, (c) that may reflect traditional languages from which the residents came, and (d) that may derive from the speech of other Queensland reserves, given the mobility between these communities. They make a case that varieties of Aboriginal English can be expected to differ in different locales depending on the specific patterns of language contact, which

2 I cite the chapter titles in the form given in the chapter itself, which in a few cases differs from that given in the Contents and the Introduction.

in turn reflect the distinctive social history of each community. Thus 'Aboriginal English' cannot be treated as a uniform kind of contact language (see Eades 2013 for an overview of Aboriginal English research).

NSW Pidgin spread in the nineteenth century from Queensland to the Northern Territory. In the Roper River area it developed into a creole language, now called Kriol, when in the first part of the twentieth century it became the first language of some Aboriginal people in an area where a considerable number of traditional languages were spoken (Sandefur 1979, Harris 1986). This volume includes five chapters devoted to aspects of Kriol.

Greg Dickson ('Rethinking the substrates of Roper River Kriol: The case of Marra') addresses the question of which local languages provided the main input into the Kriol centred at the former Roper River Mission, established 1908 (now the Ngukurr community). He makes a strong case that Marra was the language which provided the most local vocabulary. His new data comes from the lexical domains of kinship terms, ethnobiology (bush medicine plants and lizard names), and especially verbs. His recent PhD research identified 50 previously unrecognised Kriol verbs, of which the majority come from Marra (and to some extent two other related Marran languages, Alawa and Warndarrang). These findings provide a more nuanced view of the influence on Kriol from local languages than previous studies (e.g. Munro 2004), which assumed equal influence from a number of languages.

Several papers discuss grammatical features of Kriol. They demonstrate both the continuity of forms from English and how they have been reinterpreted in modern varieties of Kriol, whether under the influence of Australian traditional languages or by means of the natural mechanisms of language change, or a combination of both factors.

Denise Angelo and Eva Schultze-Berndt ('Beware *bambai* – lest it be apprehensive') discuss the function of the particle *bambai*. Although it derives ultimately from English *by and by*, (via Pidgin) meaning 'later', in Kriol it has developed a further usage, which corresponds to the 'apprehensive' of Australian languages. This grammatical category signals that an event may take place which is undesirable, with the implication that some other action should be taken to avoid it. They discuss alternative scenarios, relevant to the models of language contact, of how this meaning, characteristic of Australian languages, came to be attached to the *bambai* which came into the language through the earlier Pidgin.

Sophie Nicholls ('Grammaticalization and interactional pragmatics: A description of the recognitional determiner *det* in Roper River Kriol') explores the use of the grammatical word *det*, which derives from the English demonstrative *that* via

NSW Pidgin. She shows that in modern Roper River Kriol it no longer functions as a demonstrative ('the one there') but rather more like an article ('the') but especially with a recognitional usage ('the one that I assume you are familiar with') – a function which has been transferred from traditional Aboriginal discourse practice.

Maia Ponsonnet ('Reflexive, reciprocal and emphatic functions in Barunga Kriol') studies recent developments in the Kriol variety spoken in Beswick/Wugularr of the forms *miself*, *mijelp*, and *gija*. The first two forms both derive from English *myself*, in the informal pronunciation *meself*, but refer to all persons (myself, yourself, himself, herself, ourselves, yourselves, themselves). The last form derives from English *together*. The *-self* form has split into two separate words, each with its own function. *Miself* is an exclusive adverb, indicating 'by myself, yourself, etc.', 'alone', 'separately'. *Mijelp*, with an older, less English-like pronunciation, after verbs marks the functions of both reflexive ('VERB myself, yourself, etc.') and reciprocal ('VERB each other, one another'). This dual function copies a pattern characteristic of many Australian languages. *Gija*, which formerly signalled co-participation (cf. English *together*), has been reinterpreted as a marker of reciprocal (like *mijelp*), but only for participants which are not the direct object of the verb (so 'to/with each other'). The coexistence of two markers of reciprocal has been exploited to make a rare kind of distinction between direct and indirect reciprocal object marking.

While the three papers on Kriol grammar demonstrate that the Kriol has evolved over time, the chapter by Rikke Bundgaard-Nielsen and Brett Baker ('Fact or furphy? The continuum in Kriol') challenges an earlier view (e.g. Sandefur 1979) that the variable pronunciation of Kriol may be described in terms of a 'continuum' of slightly different phonological systems ranging from a basilectal system that contained only the phonemes of traditional languages to an acrolectal system identical with Standard Australian English. On the basis of acoustic, perceptual and production experiments with native speakers of Roper Kriol, they find that Kriol has indeed a stable system of distinctive sounds that incorporates features from both English and the local traditional languages but is identical to neither. (For example, there is no contrast between *s* and *z* in Kriol, unlike English, but there are retroflex consonants as in local languages, but not English.) They explain the previously observed wide variability in pronunciation by the fact that there are many Kriol speakers for whom Kriol is not a native language, and these speakers substitute many pronunciations from their native languages.

There are two chapters that deal with mixed languages, a rare type of language that has attracted much attention in recent years by students of language contact. In the latter part of the twentieth century, children in Gurindji-speaking communities and the Warlpiri-speaking Lajamanu community (all in

western parts of the Northern Territory) developed a new linguistic code that consists of grammatical elements from both their traditional language (Gurindji or Warlpiri) and Kriol (Meakins 2011, O'Shannessy 2005). In these two new languages, called Gurindji Kriol and Light Warlpiri, within a single sentence the verb and markers of tense and subject pronouns are derived from Kriol and the inflection of nouns (number and case suffixes) largely continues the forms of the traditional language. The two papers on mixed language in this volume explore ongoing changes within these new codes.

Carmel O'Shannessy ('Entrenchment of Light Warlpiri morphology') compares children's production of language in 2010 to that of 2005, with respect to noun suffixes. She finds an increase in shorter forms of the suffixes that mark dative case ('to', 'for') and ergative case (subject of transitive verbs). The dative uses more instances of just *-k* (or *-ik*) in place of earlier *-ku* or *-ki*, while the ergative has more frequent *-ng* (or *-ing*) in place of the longer *-ngku* and *-ngki* and largely generalises *-ng* for words that earlier used an alternative ergative suffix *-rlu* (or *-rli*). These changes make Light Warlpiri more different from Warlpiri. On the other hand, the ergative subject marking is used more consistently in 2010 than in 2005 – a change which makes Light Warlpiri more similar to Warlpiri.

Felicity Meakins ('No fixed address: The grammaticalisation of the Gurindji locative as a progressive suffix') illustrates a surprising change in Gurindji Kriol. A locative suffix (meaning 'at'), which in Gurindji is attached to nouns, is found in Gurindji Kriol on verbs, marking that the event is in progress. She shows how (and by what intermediate steps) this kind of grammatical change, which is not without parallels in other languages, is likely to have taken place in Gurindji Kriol.

Traditional languages which have survived the onslaught of English typically show changes. Some of these result from the fact that they are not being learned as well as previously because their speakers use another language (English or a creole) as their primary language. Other changes are attributable to borrowing from English. Two papers in this volume are devoted to changes in traditional languages.

Earlier studies have explained changes in terms of language 'obsolescence' or decline (e.g. Austin 1986, Schmidt 1985). Here Felicity Meakins and Rob Pensalfini ('Gender bender: Superclassing in Jingulu gender marking') describe recent changes in the gender-agreement system of Jingulu, which is now only spoken by a few elderly people and is no longer being learned by children. They argue that the documented changes are not random effects of language loss but are shaped by the semantic structure inherent in the class system and follow patterns of change found in non-obsolescent languages. Specifically, they reveal

that in the four-class system of Jingulu masculine is dominant over feminine for animate nouns, and neuter over vegetable class for inanimate nouns, and that masculine is the ultimate default class.

John Mansfield ('Borrowed verbs and the expansion of light verb phrases in Murrinhpatha') explores the effect of English on a traditional language which is still actively spoken. Borrowing from English by young people in the Wadeye (Daly River area) community in recent decades has resulted in a massive increase in a kind of verb phrase construction that was formerly quite marginal in the Murrinhpatha language; for example, 'I'll record you two' is rendered as approximately 'recording I'll-do-for-you', where *recording* is a separate word from the rest of the complex verb.

Two of the papers refer to language contact in precolonial times and find possible parallels with the kind of changes that have been documented in the postcolonial era.

Patrick McConvell ('Kinship loanwords in Indigenous Australia, before and after colonization') calls attention to the prevalence of borrowing of kinship terms, both in European languages and in precolonial Indigenous languages, and the general finding that in-law terms and collateral terms (uncle, aunt, cousin) are more readily borrowed than lineal terms (parents, siblings). Where the English terms for 'uncle' and 'aunt' are accepted into the speech of Australian Aboriginal people, they take on the semantics of traditional languages, with 'uncle' being confined to mother's brother, since father's brother is terminologically a father, and 'aunt' being likewise restricted to 'father's sister', while *mami* may refer to mother's sisters as well as mother. The widespread modern term *pantyi* or *bunji*, which is thought to derive from the archaic English *fancy-man*, a woman's lover, has taken on kinship meanings such as 'spouse', 'sibling-in-law', and even 'cross-cousin', following principles of Aboriginal kinship classification. McConvell wrestles with the puzzle of how the English term *cousin* (*kajin*) has come to mean 'mother-in-law' in Kriol and varieties of Aboriginal English.

Nicholas Evans ('As intimate as it gets? Paradigm borrowing in Marrku and its implications for the emergence of mixed languages') discusses the strange case of Marrku, a language formerly spoken on Croker Island, where it appears that two verb paradigms ('work' and 'want') have been borrowed in their entirety from the nearby languages Iwaidja or Garig. It is usually thought that borrowing inflections like this is hardly possible – although a few similar cases are known. This situation may provide a clue to how some mixed language structures attested elsewhere got started.

An introductory chapter by the editors ('Australian language contact in historical and synchronic perspective') provides an orientation to the history and study of Australian contact linguistics and summarises the contents of the chapters. The book is amply illustrated with some 50 figures, including maps, and over 40 tables of data, and is provided with an index. A 14-page preface dedicates the volume to Patrick McConvell, summarises his career, lists his publications, highlights his contributions to topics relating to language contact, and emphasises his impact on research in this area of study.

Altogether these studies bring together into one volume a rich sample of the evidence from Australian languages that is being brought to light by current research and which contributes to contemporary worldwide research interest in the processes and results of language contact. At the same time they provide a perspective on Australian postcolonial history from the viewpoint of the linguistic consequences of colonisation.

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