Linguistics 203 - Languages of the World
Dyirbal and other Aboriginal Australian Languages

Dyirbal
- Belongs to Pama-Nyungan language family
- Spoken in North East Queensland in Australia
- About 40 speakers remaining in the 1980s (www.ethnologue.com)

1. Until the 1930s, had ‘mother-in-law’ language for speaking with ‘taboo’ relatives.

- All nouns belong to one of four classes and are preceded by a class marker
- Membership in a noun class is not random

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>class marker</th>
<th>semantic category</th>
<th>examples</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 bayi</td>
<td>men, kangaroos, possums, most snakes and fishes, some birds, most insects, the moon, storms, boomerangs, money, mats, rainbows, some spears</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2 balan</td>
<td>women, fire and water (and things related), bandicoots (type of marsupial), some snakes and fishes, most birds, dogs, platypuses, echidna (anteaters), fireflies, hairy mary grub, snails, grasshoppers, crickets, the sun, stars, shields, some spears, some trees</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 balam</td>
<td>(edible) fruits and vegetables, trees bearing (edible) fruits, cigarettes, wine, cake</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 bala</td>
<td>everything else; e.g. trees without edible fruits, grass, sand, mud, stones, bees, meat, wind, tomahawks, noises, languages, body parts</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

- despite semantic classes, nouns may belong to an unexpected class for various reasons
  i. myth or belief associates a noun with a characteristic of some noun class
  ii. subset of nouns bearing characteristic lacking in rest of set (*harmfulness* being the most common such characteristic)
  iii. one’s domain of experience with an object
‘Speaking’ vs. ‘Owning’ a language (Evans 2001, discussing fieldwork northern Australia)

- Multilingualism is the norm.
- There is a societal emphasis on language knowledge and language ‘ownership’.
- Language ‘ownership’ shows clan membership and status, and land affiliation.
- Right to be called a ‘speaker’ of a language derived through clan membership or land ownership.
- Language ‘owners’ are not always the best speakers.
- Politics plays a role in language ‘ownership’, right to speak it, etc.
- Speakers judged others’ speaking ability based on external factors like opinions of the person, language politics, etc.
- New speakers sometimes appeared after ‘last’ speaker died.

References


