

BEYOND FORM: INCORPORATING LANGUAGE FUNCTIONS IN LANGUAGE DESCRIPTION

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Most published descriptions of Australian Indigenous languages have almost completely ignored everyday language use. Rather, documentation has typically focussed on structural properties of languages (phonology, morphology and syntax), as well as lexicon. Dixon's grammars, such as those of Dyirbal (Dixon, 1972) and Yidiny (Dixon, 1977) have often been used as a model or template by others. Comparatively little attention has been given to the documentation of language functions or to the documentation of the most commonly occurring speech formulas. Speech formulas are often culturally-specific and idiomatic and cannot be reliably reconstituted from a knowledge of grammar and lexicon alone. Recorded texts have tended to be myths, Dreaming narratives or texts about traditional culture, though a number of contact history stories have also been admitted. As a result, recorded texts have been predominantly monologues of limited use to those who might seek to relearn their languages. Conversations, except in the context of Dreaming narratives or contact history stories, scarcely appear. Texts drawn from everyday life, especially in non-traditional contexts (such as a medical consultation with an Aboriginal Health Worker) are seldom recorded, much less used as the basis for language description.

Many linguists and lexicographers seem to have an implicit relic view of language. It is as if linguists have been trying to capture the 'pure', 'unadulterated' language uncontaminated by language and culture contact. Accordingly, borrowed terms and neologisms are typically omitted or under-represented in their dictionaries and wordlists. Yet, it is precisely language use in non-traditional domains which is going to be most useful to future language learners, because it is here that we see how speakers of the language have adapted it to incorporate new concepts and a changed way of life.

Just how useful is current practice to those who may one day wish to re-learn their language on the basis of linguists' recordings and analyses? How can we ensure that our published language descriptions are maximally useful, not only to linguists but to the people most closely associated with the language?

The author will make some suggestions that researchers might bear in mind when documenting and describing languages. These include working in a programmed fashion in a range of contexts and in collaboration with a range of experts in specialised fields (such as health, law, botany etc). Considerable time will be needed to produce a maximally useful description of a language and its uses. Many of these suggestions emerge from first-hand experience working with Yolngu and Pintupi people in non-traditional domains as well as from attempts to reclaim and re-introduce the Kurna language on the basis of written 19th century documentation (notably Teichelmann & Schürmann, 1840; Teichelmann, 1857) and other observers (see Author, 2000).

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Teichelmann, C.G. and C.W. Schürmann. (1840) *Outlines of a grammar, vocabulary, and phraseology, of the aboriginal language of South Australia, spoken by the natives in and for some distance around Adelaide*. Adelaide. Published by the authors at the native location.

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