Cockatoos, Chaining-Horsemen, and Mud-Eaters

Terms for "Policeman" in Australian Aboriginal Languages

William B. McGregor

Abstract. – This paper discusses in detail the means by which lexical resources have been developed in Australian Aboriginal languages to designate an introduced human phenomenon, the Western institution of police. All three major processes of neologism formation are attested, and widely deployed: borrowing, extension of meaning of existing terms, and coining of new lexemes with the grammatical resources of the language. Around half a dozen semantic themes are repeatedly invoked; these all have a strong experiential basis in terms of perceived characteristic qualities, associations, or activities of the police. Few terms are based on affective meaning associations. *[Australia, Aboriginal languages, cross-linguistic studies]*

William B. McGregor, Dr., presently guest fellow in the Max-Planck-Institut für Psycholinguistik in Nijmegen, Netherlands. His main research interest is Australian Aboriginal languages, specifically Kimberley languages, on which he has been working for the past two decades. He has published grammars or sketch grammars of four of these languages (Gooniyandi, Gunin/Kwini, Warrwa, and Nyulnyul), and over eighty articles on various aspects of grammar, sociolinguistics, and anthropological linguistics.

> Who are these people?
> Some people call them cops
> Some people call them police
> Back home in Broome
> We call the linjoo
> (M. Manolis, Linjoo Blues)

1 Introduction

Every introductory textbook in linguistics repeats the truism that all human languages have lexical resources sufficient to permit speakers to talk about anything in their natural and social environments, and that means will quickly be adopted for dealing with anything novel. European colonisation of Australia brought many new items and activities into the worlds of the indigenous inhabitants, who did indeed quickly develop ways of speaking about and referring to them. Most recent dictionaries and wordlists of Aboriginal languages include indication of how at least a few of the more important such items are dealt with. General introductions to Australian languages such as Blake (1981) and Dixon (1980) contain some discussion of the topic, and a few studies describe the ways in which particular languages have dealt with a range of new items (e.g., Worms [1938] on Nyulnyulan languages of Dampier Land, and nearby Pama-Nyungan languages; O'Grady [1960] on Nyangumarta; Simpson [1985] on Warumungu; and Bohemia et al. [1993] on Gooniyandi). Nevertheless, it remains true that the field has not been very extensively investigated, and broad-ranging cross-linguistic studies of particular items or concepts are few. Only a few items have been studied in depth: terms for "horse" (Walsh [1992] and more briefly in Reynolds [1981: 11 f.]), grog terms (Nash 1997),[1] and fairly cursorily, "musket" (Reynolds 1981: 13 f.). This paper is a contribution to the latter domain of investigation, and surveys the ways in which Aboriginal languages have dealt with the need for terms for "policeman."

---

1 David Nash provides a list of the terms themselves in an appendix to Brady (1998).