

From Pama to Nyungan: change in Australian kinship terminologies from the north-east to the south-west

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Geoff O'Grady, who recently passed away, bequeathed to us a great idea: the Pama-Nyungan family of languages covering most of Australia. One of his major concerns was the linking together of cognates whose meanings were apparently quite disparate, and providing innovative explanations often based on specific metaphors and associations in Australian indigenous thought. Sometimes these hypotheses were, on his own admission, adventurous to the point of lacking caution, but the debate engendered is the spur to progress.

When it comes to kinship, semantic change is commonplace both worldwide and in Australia. The specific focus here is the Pama-Nyungan languages. Some of the semantic changes are universal as aspects of kinship are universal but others reflect specific types of social system in indigenous Australia. So a single root may have different meanings in different languages and the problem is what meaning or meanings to reconstruct to various proto-languages, including proto-Pama-Nyungan itself.

Various approaches have been proposed to answer such questions. One was that of Dyen and Aberle for the Athapaskan languages, but that has been criticised as too mechanistic and not sufficiently attuned to regional cultural factors by Blust and others. A number of proposals both old and recent have suggested that certain types of changes to systems are unidirectional. Other approaches see changes in meaning as proceeding via changes in usage and pragmatics, and an intermediate stage of polysemy (Evans and Wilkins). If we put this together with what we know of the constraints on types of kinship systems worldwide and in particular regions like Australia, the hypotheses about how systems might have developed and particular terms changed meanings are considerably narrowed down together with our choices of proto-meanings.

This paper looks at the types of meaning change found in Australian languages and how this fits together with general theories of kinship semantics and semantic change. Then a couple of examples are examined in detail to illustrate how this approach can enable us to arrive a stronger hypotheses about the meanings of proto-terms and the systems they form part of. These examples are illustrated using the AUSTKIN on-line database and mapping system.

(1) The terms *tyam(p)V and *ngatyi which have reflexes in many Pama-Nyungan and in the the case of the first at least, Non-Pama-Nyungan languages. Reflexes of these roots have a number of meanings in different languages and sometimes in the same language including preponderantly Mother's Father, cross-cousin (related to MF by the alternate generation equivalence principle) and spouse/sibling-in-law (based on cross-cousin marriage). It is implausible however that there should be two terms with the same meaning (MF) in a single proto-language so ways out of this impasse are discussed.

(2) The term *kaala- means Mother's Brother (or younger Mother's Brother) in north-eastern languages and cross-cousin/spouse elsewhere. Here there are also languages in which there is polysemy with both meanings, following what is known as Omaha skewing. This provides the bridging context for the change from uncle to cousin.