

Mama and Papa in Australian Languages
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Anthropologists and linguists following Murdock (1959) and Jakobson (1960) have explained the high frequency of words like 'mama' and 'papa' respectively for 'mother' and 'father' around the world, as spontaneously recurring inventions, in the case of 'mama' related to sounds made by an infant while breast-feeding. This type of explanation has tended to make linguists generally suspicious of finding deep etymologies for such words or reconstructing them to proto-languages.

At the other extreme there are linguists of the 'long-range-comparison' school who believe that they can reconstruct a number of 'proto-world' or 'proto-Sapiens' kinship terms, and include *mama and *papa among this set (Mathey de l'Etang and Bancel 2002, 2005).

As a corrective to both these approaches we want to look at the kinship roots mama and papa which are widespread in Australian Indigenous languages. In investigating the distribution and varying meanings of these roots we use the on-line database of Australian kinship terms AustKin which has been compiled as part of an ARC Discovery Grant based at ANU (CIs Harold Koch and Ian Keen, PI Laurent Dousset CREDO/CNRS France <http://austkin.pactific-credo.fr>)

Contrary to some versions of both the 'baby-talk' and 'proto-world' approaches, mama in Australia is mostly found as 'father' not 'mother', and papa is found as mother in some areas. Mama is a possible candidate for proto-Pama-Nyungan 'father' but its distribution is mainly in the west of the continent and in Victoria. In the north of Western Australia, it shifts meaning to 'elder brother'. Elsewhere versions of papa are found sporadically for 'father' and also for '(elder) brother'. The paper discusses whether this change from 'father' to 'brother' is motivated by any known principles in kinship change. Pap(a) is also found as 'mother' mainly in Victoria.

Other kinship roots (for grandparents) have been shown to have a split distribution with one root dominating in the east and one in the west for what is apparently a single proto-meaning. The distribution of mama and papa is not so clear-cut, but we outline how it can be accounted for in terms of inheritance from proto-languages within Australia, rather than recurrent invention or inheritance from some putative proto-world ancestral language.

References:

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