

LEXICAL COMPARISON AND LANGUAGE DYNAMICS IN THE KIMBERLEY

Patrick McConvell and Claire Bowern

The paper looks at ways of comparing lexica in indigenous languages of the Kimberley region, W.A. and immediate neighbours in the NT. There is background discussion of the language families and subgroups in the region including recent work by the authors and others on classification and reconstruction. The paper then focuses on detection of loanwords and their direction, levels and types of borrowing in the region, and what this can tell us about the spread of languages and types and time-depths of contact between groups. Our results are based on the comparative method and identification of loanwords through deduction from (amongst other things) irregular sound correspondences.

Three contact regions are examined:

- (1) the Eastern Kimberley (Ord River Basin) and Victoria River District;
- (2) the Central Kimberley (Fitzroy River Basin) and the desert fringe to the south.
- (3) the West Kimberley, especially contact between the Dampier Peninsula and the Kimberley/Pilbara hinterland.

In all cases there is significant lexical borrowing between Pama-Nyungan languages (eastern and western Ngumpin and Marrngu in 1, 2, and 3 respectively) and the Jarragan, Bunuban and Nyulnyulan languages to their west, north and north-east respectively. The cases are dissimilar in that the eastern one (1) is characterised by a high volume of loans from the Non-Pama-Nyungan languages into the Pama-Nyungan subgroup, whereas in the western cases (2) and (3) there is a more moderate level of borrowing and also a higher level of loans from Pama-Nyungan into Non-Pama-Nyungan. This paper attempts to model historical sequences which might explain the differences.