

Mark Harvey
Humanities & Social Science
University of Newcastle
Callaghan NSW 2308

Email: mark.harvey@newcastle.edu.au

Lexical change in pre-colonial Australia.

Some major analyses of lexical change in pre-colonial Australia have proposed that diffusion is a pervasive phenomenon.

Diffusion of all kinds of linguistic features has been very extensive ... due mainly to demographic factors such as the rate of interlinguistic marriage. (Heath 1978:1)

Australia provides a prototypical instance of a linguistic area. It has ... a fair proportion of reciprocal exogamous marriages, rampant multilingualism, and an open attitude to borrowing ... There is a basic uniformity to Australian languages which is the natural result of a long period of diffusion. (Dixon 2002:25)

Both analysts link diffusion to high rates of multilingualism, attendant upon high rates of linguistically exogamous marriage (Heath 1978:14-21 is more detailed on these links). Dixon proposes further that over time the effects of diffusion will result in all languages sharing approximately 50% vocabulary with their neighbours (Dixon 2002:27-30). Both analysts propose that proving genetic relationships is difficult across much of Australia because of the effects of diffusion (Dixon 2002:699, Heath 1978:145).

This model, proposing a high rate of diffusion uniformly across Australia, encounters two kinds of problems. Firstly, we show that across much of north-central and north-western Australia – the area designated as “prefixing” or “Non-Pama-Nyungan” – rates of lexical cognacy between neighbouring languages are commonly very low – 20% or less. The only way that these low rates of cognacy can be accommodated within the ‘extensive diffusion’ model is to posit a high rate of change in land – language relations and significant population movements (Black 2005).

A second problem for the model is that there are cases where contiguous and genetically related languages show low levels of lexical cognacy. Thus, Dixon (2002:675) is unable to account for the genetic relationship between Ngan’gityemerri and Murrinh-Patha, which show only an 8% cognacy (Green 2003).

I propose that an alternative model of lexical differentiation is required to account for the patterns found in Australia. Lexical differentiation among genetically related languages may arise either from borrowing or from the creation of new lexemes. I propose that multilingualism in Australia is to be understood as signaling distinct aspects of social personae. Consequently, the social pressure is to maintain and increase lexical distinctiveness. The creation of new lexemes increases differentiation within the overall repertoire, whereas borrowing does not. Over time, the favouring of innovation over borrowing results in low levels of cognacy, which is the situation we find in much of northern Australia.

Black, P. 2005. *Equilibrium theory and nomadic Arnhemlanders*. ALS Conference Paper
Dixon, R.M.W. 2002. *Australian languages: their nature and development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Green, I. 2003. "The genetic status of Murrinh-Patha." In *The Non-Pama-Nyungan languages of northern Australia: comparative studies in the continent's most linguistically complex region*. Ed. N. Evans. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics 125-158

Heath, J. 1978. *Linguistic diffusion in Arnhemland*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies