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Language size variation in Cape York Peninsula

The number of patrifilial land-holding groups associated with single (named or unnamed) linguistic varieties in Cape York Peninsula varies from one to about 34. Many fall below the Birdsellian magic reconstructible figure of five hundred people per linguistic variety, even where the linguistic varieties are distinct at the level of language versus dialect. Among the questions this raises are: What kind of sociolinguistic practice has enabled small languages to remain this viable until recently? As a region, is Cape York Peninsula distinctive on the basis of these patterns? Are there ecological correlates for language size there or in pre-colonial Australia generally? Is language size a key factor in the rapid demise of linguistic varieties in the colonial period and just afterwards? Was language shift a constant presence in the old Australia?