

Equilibrium and punctuation: small language survival and large language expansion on a hunter-gatherer continent

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There is no simple and obvious generalisation available about the 'sizes' of Australian Aboriginal language-affiliated groups, except that they vary enormously. Past theories about a mathematical relationship between effective rainfall and the size of Aboriginal sociolinguistic territories now seem much in danger. There are plenty of cases from the tropical north where the maximum number of reconstructible estate groups per language only ranges between 1 and 5, with an average of around 30 people per estate group. The number of people thus holding primary affiliation to such a language is very unlikely to have exceeded 200. In many cases would have been demonstrably fewer (e.g. 75). At the other extreme are languages like Western Desert or Wiradjuri – the former under many dialect names, the latter under a common indigenous rubric – whose speakers numbered in the thousands at colonisation. In between are the many languages with a few hundred 'owners' at the onset of conquest.

This paper explores two questions: What sociological conditions of this hunter-gatherer society allowed distinct languages to persist at such extremely low population numbers? And were the super-languages differently underpinned socially, or were they merely cases of recent expansion, thus bolstering a theoretical model of punctuated equilibrium?