

Bowern, Claire, Harold Koch, eds, 2004. *Australian languages. Classification and the comparative method*. Amsterdam: Benjamins. Pp xii+376+CD-ROM. ISBN 90-272-47617.

Reviewed by Gerhard Leitner, Freie Universität Berlin

The linguistic study of Australia's Aboriginal languages is something for the specialist and this book addresses issues that almost fall outside the domain of Australian Studies as an interdisciplinary area. However, languages have proven to be crucial elements in our understanding of Aboriginal cultures, social structure, cultural transmission and to an understanding of the settlement and diffusion of people. It is therefore important to know whether they have a single ancestor whose history can, like that of the Indo-European languages, be explained on the basis of a *stammbaum* or family tree model. That model has a long ancestry and goes back to a proposal by William Schmidt's in 1919. It has been refined often and has led to a distinction between Pama-Nyungan and non-Pama-Nyungan languages. The former cover some 80% of the southern part of the continent, Cape York and two coastal languages in east Arnhem Land. The latter cluster in the remaining northern area, extending from close to Cape York, Arnhem Land on to the Kimberley. That claim has been challenged single-handedly, one might say, by R.M.W. Dixon (*see e.g. review in GAST Newsletter 17, 2003*), who dismisses it and argues that all that can be found is small clusters of genetically or typologically related languages. Instead of languages dividing into others as a result of separation – such as Europe's Germanic languages – all we have is the diffusion of features through contact or separation through the lack of it. As both hypotheses extend to what we know or would like to know about theories of settlement, cultural diffusion, etc., we can't get a clear picture.

The present volume is a reassessment by the *family tree* model. It contains 14 papers, a language and subject index, a huge bibliography and a CD-ROM with additional data to make the book a bit less technical. Central papers are the introduction by the editors and a methodological history by Koch. Both papers set the scene, provide research background and define the tasks ahead. The other papers provide minute data-based analyses of what we know about Pama-Nyungan languages. At the end of the book we get a diffuse picture: of course the model is reconfirmed, a lot is learnt about the type of languages investigated – but final proof cannot be given in all cases.

The book is written for the theoretical and empirical linguistic specialist. There is no discussion of socio-historical data, such as on migration, which could have bolstered up some of the far-reaching claims. All papers are revised versions of talks given at a conference in 2001. The often peculiar Australian tenor of speech is retained – as in O'Grady and Hale's paper (*see p 69*) – which is, to say the least, unhelpful to the *mate outside*.