The languages of Cape York Peninsula, Australia (Jean-Christophe Verstraete)

This series of four talks provides a survey of the languages of Cape York Peninsula (CYP) in northeastern Australia. The talks focus on what is interesting or remarkable in these languages, both from an Australian perspective and a broader typological perspective. We use examples from our own fieldwork on Middle Paman and Lamalamic languages of CYP (e.g. Verstraete 2012, Verstraete & Rigsby 2015), as well as the better-described languages of CYP (e.g. Haviland 1979, Crowley 1983, Alpher 1991, Smith & Johnson 2000, Gaby 2006).

1. Introduction (April 8, 2015)

This talk provides a general introduction to CYP and its languages. We first discuss the region’s prehistory (dating back to 37.000 BP; David 1993) and contact history, as well as its general ethnographic profile (clan-country-language relations, marriage exogamy etc; Rigsby & Chase 1998). This is followed by an introductory survey of CYP languages, dealing with genetic classification (subgrouping of Paman languages in the greater Pama-Nyungan family; Hale 1964, 1976a, b), sociolinguistics (patrilects, personal multilingualism; Sutton & Rigsby 1978, Verstraete & Rigsby 2015), phonology (thorough-going changes in and phoneme inventories and word structure; Alpher 1976) and morphosyntax (at NP and clause levels).

2. Morphosyntax (April 15, 2015)

This talk focuses on clausal morphosyntax, specifically the domains of case and agreement. We provide a survey of patterns of case marking and verbal agreement in CYP languages, with a special focus on their functions. In the domain of case, we show that case marking is not merely determined by syntactic functions, but also by information structure and aspects of discourse structure (Gaby 2010, Verstraete 2010). In the domain of agreement, we focus on ‘irregular’ patterns of agreement that serve to mark experiencer roles, and that have extensions towards valency-changing functions (e.g. Verstraete 2011a, b).

3. Sociolinguistics and language contact (April 22, 2015)

This talk focuses on patterns of personal multilingualism in CYP, and the types of language contact resulting from them. We show how the marriage rule of clan exogamy leads to a distinctive type of personal multilingualism (Sutton & Rigsby 1978), which is difficult to accommodate in classic typologies of multilingual behaviour. This type of multilingualism facilitates intensive language contact in the region, leading to contact-induced change in grammar in some areas, often accompanied by relatively little lexical borrowing. We discuss the example of intensive contact between the Middle Paman and Lamalamic languages in the Princess Charlotte Bay area (Rigsby 1997), using evidence from pronominal morphosyntax (Verstraete 2012) and from multilingual placename sets.

4. Phonology (April 29, 2015)

This talk focuses on the phonology of CYP languages, which has long been regarded as one of their most distinctive characteristics in the wider Australian context (e.g. Dixon 1980). We illustrate the profound differences in phoneme inventories and word structure found in this region by analysing the synchronic and diachronic phonology of the Lamalamic language Umbuygamu, in contrast with its more conservative Middle Paman neighbours Yintyingka and Umpithamu (Verstraete & Rigsby 2015).

References


Verstraete, J-C. 2010. Animacy and information structure in the system of ergative marking in Umpithamu. Lingua 120: 1637-1651.


