

GEOFFREY O'GRADY: PIONEER OF AUSTRALIAN LINGUISTICS

DARRELL TRYON AND MICHAEL WALSH

Geoff O'Grady ranks as one of the pioneers in the field of Australian linguistics, his formidable reputation built largely on his comparative work in the vast Pama-Nyungan family of languages, a fact attested by many of the contributors to this volume. In the 1940s and 1950s the number of people working on Australian languages could be numbered on one or maybe two hands—depending on how liberal one's judgement. By the mid-fifties O'Grady had already gained a reputation for his study of Nyungumarta as this early, somewhat colourful, report (Snedden 1955:52) indicates:

Much invaluable work has been done by and assistance given Dr. Petrie [sic] and his aide by Geoff O'Grady of Wallal Downs Station. Geoff has been closely studying and learning the native language for the past five years. Some idea of the scope and magnitude of this work can be realised by the fact that an educated native would have a vocabulary of thirty-five thousand words in comparison to the white's six thousand.

Apart from simply being early on the scene Geoff O'Grady has pioneered a number of very significant directions for research into Australian languages. One of the more significant is his foreshadowing of the Pama-Nyungan group in his BA thesis at the University of Sydney (1959, supervised by A. Capell and S.A. Wurm). In that thesis he was able to show that geographically quite distant languages like Thalanyji from the Pilbara area of Western Australia and the YolNu bloc of north-east Arnhem Land present striking similarities. Moreover, these similarities are much closer than those between Thalanyji and its neighbours to the east. This interest in language relationships was followed up by his proposal of Proto Nuclear Pama-Nyungan (1979) and his major work on comparative Pama-Nyungan (1990a, b, c, d, e, f).

In 1960, after a research trip to Western Australia with Ken Hale, O'Grady moved to Indiana University where he produced his doctoral dissertation, the well-known grammar of Nyungumarta, in 1963, under the supervision of C.F. and F.M. Voegelin (see O'Grady 1964). This association resulted in a rather ambitious project to outline the relationships among all of the Aboriginal languages of Australia (O'Grady, Voegelin & Voegelin 1966). As Black (this volume) comments:

One aspect of this [comparative] work about which he must surely have developed mixed feelings was his role in a large-scale attempt to classify all Australian languages on the basis of the wretched data available some thirty years ago...The classification was a major step forward, but at the same time it was full and explicit enough that it could soon be challenged by others able to gather better data or even just able to subject the early records of one particular area or another to more careful scrutiny.

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Dixon (1980:263) observes that, while the 1966 classification had shortcomings—especially in terms of the quality of the data used:

For northern and western languages the sources appear in many cases to have been field notes of Hale and O'Grady, and the classification here is useful.

This comment raises two issues which represent constant, closely related themes which characterise O'Grady's work: a strict attention to the quality of linguistic data and a critical interest in the methodology of comparative linguistics. We can be confident that O'Grady was aware that the quality of the linguistic data which underpinned the large-scale comparative project was quite varied. It was when he could mainly rely on his own data that an enduring contribution such as his 'Proto-Ngayarda phonology' (O'Grady 1966) could be ensured. We can also be sure that he was pondering the applicability and validity of analytic tools in comparative linguistics.

In the 1966 project much use had been made of the lexicostatistical method. Earlier O'Grady had questioned the content of the comparative wordlist (1960a) and later described some of the difficulties associated with the method (O'Grady & Klokeid 1969). His awareness of the shortcomings of linguistic data is borne out by a masterful survey of the state of Australian lexicography (1971; see also Goddard and Thieberger, this volume). The lexicographical survey reflects O'Grady's strong interest in lexical semantics. O'Grady's maxim has been that one must first pay strict attention to phonological correspondences and then consider the possibility of relationship no matter how seemingly unlikely the semantic connection might be. This has led to intriguing hypotheses about semantic connections between such pairs as 'egg' and 'brain' (O'Grady 1990d; Evans, this volume), and 'mother' and 'sun' (Wilkins, this volume). O'Grady is the first to emphasise that there is a simultaneous need for caution and boldness in this kind of approach: the caution is reflected in the title of one of his papers 'Wadjuk and Umpila: a long-shot approach to Pama-Nyungan' (O'Grady 1990f) while the boldness is reflected in his attempt to draw out possible Austronesian connections (O'Grady & Tryon 1990) and in some of the scenarios he has proposed for the migrations and peopling of ancient Australia (O'Grady 1979; see also Walsh, this volume). McConvell (this volume) very aptly sums up this approach:

Yet it seems to me that progress depends on scholars, if not exactly 'throwing caution to the winds', sometimes at least conveniently setting aside caution for a later date, and producing hypotheses both challenging and likely to be challenged. O'Grady has been a master of this approach, and it is in the fascination engendered by his ideas that important currents in contemporary Australian historical linguistics and linguistic prehistory have had their beginnings.

In this and a number of other ways O'Grady has been a trigger for further research. Breen (this volume) acknowledges that his interest in the nature of rhotics was triggered (at least in part) by O'Grady's work. Similarly Sharpe's study of Bandjalang (this volume) was inspired by conversations with O'Grady, while Evans (this volume) records his debt to O'Grady for his work on diachronic semantics and its contribution to our understanding of Australian prehistory. Even more direct fostering of further research by others is reflected in the work of O'Grady's students (Fitzgerald, this volume) and in his unselfish provision of data acknowledged by, for instance, Austin (this volume) and Wurm (this volume).

One other area that should not be neglected is O'Grady's keen interest in the speakers of Australian languages. This is reflected in such works as his brief account of a 'secret language' (1956), in the acquisition of loan words (1960b) and in teasing out the

sociocultural correlates of linguistic traits (1959). In his excellent description of Nyangumarta (1964) there is an early (perhaps the first) graphic display of Australian dialectology (Map 2). In 1974 he participated in a consideration of bilingual education in the Northern Territory (O'Grady & Hale 1974) and here as elsewhere (1976:66) he was insistent that native speakers should occupy a more central role:

We can only stand appalled at many linguists' (including O'Grady's) failure in their past research on Australian languages to involve the interested native speaker and there are many, as fully and meaningfully as possible.

Finally it should be said of Geoff O'Grady that one of his greatest contributions to other practitioners in the field is his unique blend of humility and enthusiasm. This is a combination which is endearing, infectious and all too rare.

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