

32 *Talking language*

PETER SUTTON

Introduction: a little history¹

In 1960 Ken Hale spent 1–17 August at Aurukun Mission, Cape York Peninsula, recording basic materials in five different languages.² Given that he spent such a short time there, it is remarkable that Aurukun people have remembered him ‘talking language’ with them in a competent way, long after the event.

In 1972 Ken sent a taped message for an unspecified audience in one of the languages, Linnghithigh, to Bruce Rigsby at Bamaga. This tape was destroyed during the 1974 Brisbane floods, when it was lodged in Athol Chase’s house near the river. In 1976, Ken sent a new tape in Linnghithigh to Fred Kerindun, the son of Sam Kerindun, the latter having passed away by then.³ Sam had been one of Ken’s main linguistic consultants at Aurukun. His was a phonologically difficult Northern Paman language with little overt resemblance to the Wik

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² These included the northern Paman language Linnghithigh, a Wik variety known as both Wik-Ep and Wik-Me’enh (two others are known as Wik-Ep and Wik-Me’enh, respectively), Wik-Ngatharr, Wik-Mungkan, and Kugu Muminh, the later being a Wik language also and a variety of Kugu Nganhcara. His informants included Sam Kerindun (Linnghithigh), Joe Marbendinar (Wik-Ep–Wik-Me’enh, Wik-Ngatharr, Wik-Mungkan), Jim Henry (Wik-Mungkan), and Billy Ngakapoorgum (Kugu Muminh). The dates of Ken’s visit are derived from the Aurukun Mission Diary. Information about Ken’s informants is from copies of his field notes held at AIATSIS, Canberra. Aurukun is now a local government area township. See Map 1.

³ “All thought it a prodigious achievement” (John von Sturmer, pers. comm.).

languages Ken had also studied in this instance.⁴ The Aurukun people's perception that Ken was able to absorb a language in an extraordinarily short time was no exaggeration.

The Aurukun Mission diary of the day, chiefly maintained by Superintendent Reverend William MacKenzie, was rather more offhand in its response to Ken's visit. Diary entries such as "Grind valves and re-cut seats on kerosene engine" or "repaired broken brake-line Ford Blitz" are typical and indeed more frequent than anything to do with culture, but in this case there are at least the following:⁵

Aurukun Mission diary entries:

Monday 1 August 1960: Watt Leggatt [a boat, probably from Mornington Island] arrived 5.30. Ted Butler, Dr Hale, Gully, Pompey, Prince, Larry and Dick.⁶ Had good trip.

Tuesday 2 August 1960: Dr Hale had Sam Kerindun to help him with Lengitie⁷ Language, also Polly [Blowhard].

Friday 12 August 1960: Dr Hale still working with Sam.

Sunday 14 August 1960: Jack⁸ and Ken Hale went to Wutan afternoon load girls to pick up coconuts.

Wednesday 17 August 1960: Reliance [mission boat] away 7.30. Ted Butler and Ken Hale went up [presumably to Weipa⁹], also 3 Mornington men.

⁴ See Hale (1964, 1966, 1997a).

⁵ Bill MacKenzie was, according to his own record, a "cot case" with ill health for most of Ken's visit, but his diary entries for this period were no different from the usual. It is of note that they move from referring to "Dr Hale" to "Ken Hale" by late in Ken's visit, probably a sign of something positive in MacKenzie's reception of Ken. It is certainly in contrast with his use of the formal "Mr McCarthy" all the way through the Aurukun diary entries covering Frederick McCarthy's ethnological visit to Aurukun of 16–29 November 1962, for AIAS. This visit was cut short when MacKenzie arranged for the manager of the nearby Weipa mine to fly McCarthy out before his expected field time had expired. Earlier MacKenzie had come into conflict with anthropologists then working in the area (Ursula McConnel in 1927–28 and 1934; Donald Thomson in 1933) over their criticisms of the mission regime's severity. Both at times became unwelcome as visitors to Aurukun.

⁶ These men were probably Gully Peters, Pompey Wilson, Prince Escott, Larry Lanley, and Dick Roughsey, from Mornington Island. Ken Hale spent two months there between July and October 1960 (Ngakulmungan Kangka Leman 1997:3–6). The Aurukun and Weipa trips seem to have been interpolated into this more extensive fieldwork.

⁷ Linnghigh.

⁸ This may have been Jack Walmbeng, also known as Jack Chickenbark (from 'skinbark [canoe]'), or a mission staff member.

⁹ The people Ken worked with at Weipa included those listed below, although no date or place is provided in the field notes that I have seen. I have respelled personal names as most often officially recorded and added surnames where I know who the people were from my own work in the area. As in most other cases dealt with here, the main consultant (informant) is usually both a full owner of the variety concerned (not merely a competent speaker of it) and a, if not the, politically pre-eminent member of his or her land-holding group. I take this to be an index of the cultural and political importance attached to acting in this role. It is notable that many others' linguistic and anthropological consultants have been the 'bosses'. In this case Ken's consultants were Tictic (Yinwum), Frank Moreton (Ngkoth), Andrew Mark (Arritinnghigh), Willie (Mbiywom), Robert Hall (Ndrwa'angith), Monty Motton (Ndra'angith), Arthur Dick (Mamngayth), Hector (Ndrwa'angayth), and Keepas (Alngith(igh)); and, presumably at Weipa, Uradhi (William Ducie), David Cockroach (Mpalitjanh), Joseph Catfish (Luthigh), and [name not recorded in field notes] (Thyanhngath).

And that is it. There is however an intriguing entry about an outbreak of mild bolshevism which occurred just after Ken's departure:¹⁰

Saturday 20 August 1960: People wanted talk with Rev Sweet¹¹ & self. some grievances over no work. mostly of infantile nature. Denny B re store wages. Morrison re wages. Allan re child endowment. Paul re people having children¹²—repercussion from Mornington Islanders. Went on till 1.15. J.R.S. [Rev Sweet] explained shortage of money. Most of the men very loyal. . . . Sam [Kerindun] offered that people's Communion offering be devoted to money shortages. RS [Rev Sweet] very graciously thanked him but that would not be enough.

Cultural implications of 'talking language'

One day in about 1976 a Wik man, Peter Peemuggina, asked me if I knew a 'Doctor Keneyl', and, if so, how and where was he? I had been studying Ken's foundational work on Australian languages since 1969 and in 1973 Ken, Geoff O'Grady, and I had travelled to Darwin while they advised Northern Territory education authorities on the establishment of a bilingual education program for Aboriginal children in schools. In 1974 Ken had taken part in a conference on Cape York Peninsula languages which I had convened, and in 1976 Ken published several of his papers on the Wik region and nearby areas in the conference proceedings.¹³ So I replied to Peter that I did indeed know Ken, who was often at home in America.

This was not the last time Wik people inquired after Ken or brought his name up in conversation, the most recent to my knowledge being in 1999.¹⁴ He clearly made a significant impact on them. They also spoke of the anthropologists Ursula McConnel and Donald Thomson, who had spent many months living among Wik people in the 1920s and 1930s. It was understandable that these two long-stayers would be remembered. Stories about them were told and retold by fires on the long evenings of quieter days, by those who had known them personally. In terms of the time he had spent there, Ken was just another short-term visitor whose name and identity would normally have been forgotten like all the others, but this was not how people saw it at all.

What made the difference, as I understand it, was Ken's ability to speak local languages, at least to an extent and well, in a phenomenally short time. No doubt another factor would have been Ken's capacity to relate to the people from whom he was learning. The very act of approaching their languages with seriousness, and taking the trouble to study them carefully, combined with what was probably a rather startling ability to sound like he was born there, would all have smoothed the way to being memorable.

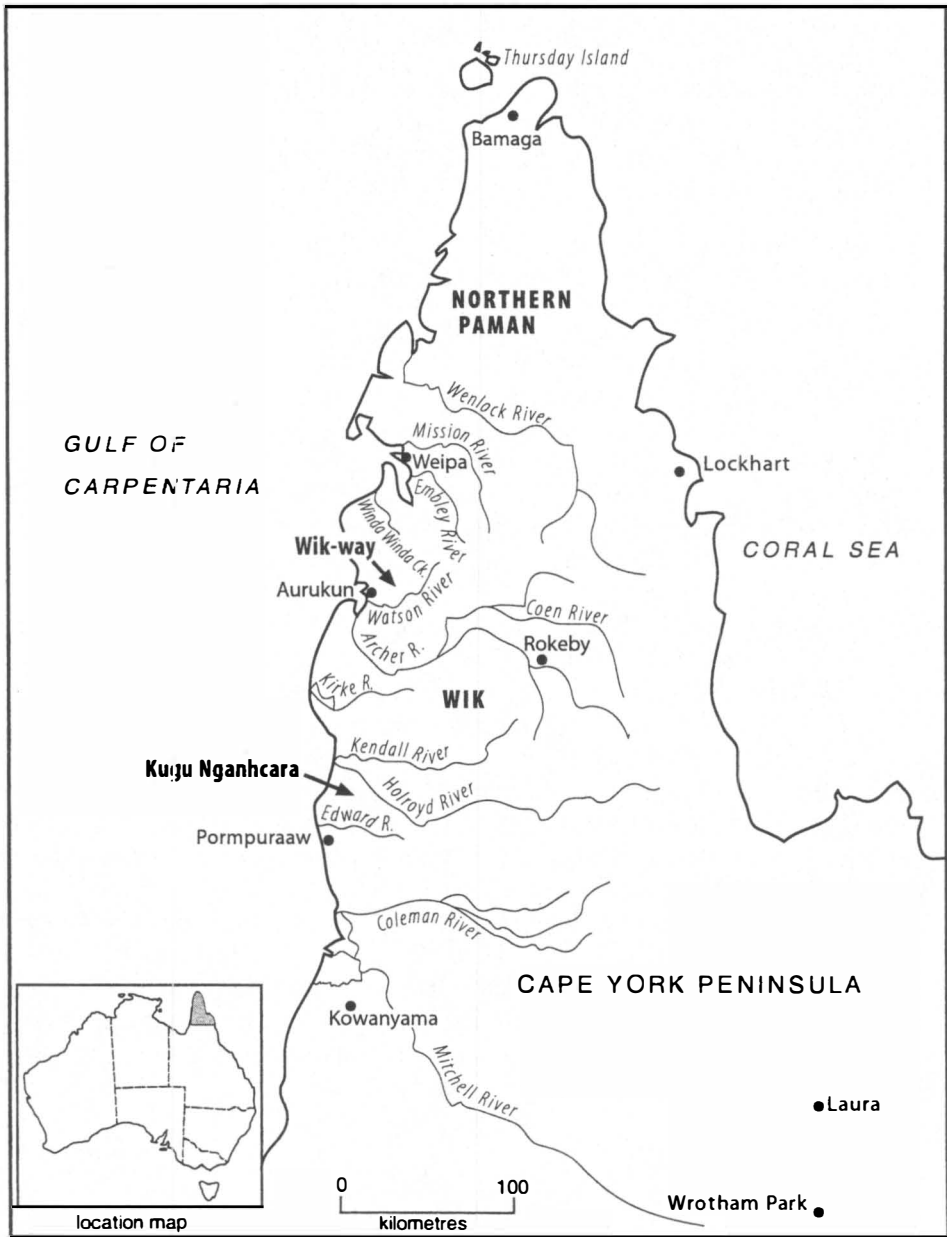
¹⁰ As a matter of context, the MacKenzie regime was very autocratic and morally strict and at times involved corporal punishments decided upon by the Superintendent.

¹¹ The Reverend James R. Sweet.

¹² The four persons just named were Denny Bowenda, the late Morrison Wolmby, the late Alan Wolmby, and the late Paul Peemuggina, all Cape Keerweer men.

¹³ See Hale (1976a, 1976b, 1976c).

¹⁴ Amanda Reynolds (pers. comm.).



Map 1: Cape York Peninsula: places and language groups referred to.

I doubt, though, that even this feat alone would perpetuate such memories of a brief visit four decades later. I think a deeper and specifically Aboriginal cultural factor is also at work here.

In a small-scale society it is possible, and in fact in Cape York Peninsula it was highly likely under classical cultural conditions, that an adult would personally know and be genealogically related to everyone else who shared a common primary language affiliation, especially at the level of the named language variety.¹⁵ In the Wik region this was the case whether the affiliation was at the level of the small patrilineal clan groups which averaged around twenty or so members and which are dialect-holding entities, or at the level of the proper-named linguistic varieties held by a number of different clan groups, or even at the level of linguistic macro-groupings which are based on a recognition of degrees of grammatical and lexical similarity between sets of separately named varieties.

In at least several areas of Cape York Peninsula the small countries classically held by patrilineal groups constituted the elemental linguistic unit in terms of language-related territories, and the groups holding them (loosely: 'clans') were the smallest formal sociolinguistic groups in local ideology. In the Wik region the speech variety allotted to such a clan at the foundation of the world was typically known as '*Wik X*' (in the south, '*Kugu X*'), X being in each case the name of a principal totem of the clan, but these are descriptive phrases rather than proper names as such.¹⁶

Examples of terms for clan patrilineals include *Nguungk Piith* 'Grassbird Language' and *Nguungk Chiynchiyn* 'Bushrat Language'.¹⁷ Proper names of linguistic varieties shared by a number of clans (sometimes possessed by only one clan) are instead built on lexical items which are characteristic of the named variety. This is not to say that these lexical items are unique to the variety, merely that the variety is distinctive from certain relevant other varieties in the specified way. Such relational terms usually fall into contrast sets of several like-named entities such as *Wik-Me'enh*, *Wik-Keyenganh*, *Kugu Muminh*, and *Kugu Uwanh*, all meaning 'language + move'. People also recognise that some such differently named varieties belong to macro-groupings, although these are not always perfectly aligned with a linguist's technical ideas of subgroupings as they do have considerable geopolitical content. Notable macro-groupings in the area discussed here are *Kugu Nganhcara* in the

¹⁵ Actually, not all Cape York Peninsula language varieties had names, but in those cases known to me the different varieties could still be identified by salient linguistic characteristics, or by references to the main totem of a clan owning the variety, or by a 'big country name' for one of the areas the language belonged to.

¹⁶ I hyphenate proper names of linguistic varieties such as *Wik-Mungkan* or *Wik-Ngathan* because they are single phonological words with primary stress on the first syllable. A clan 'patrilineal' label (Smith and Johnson 2000:358) such as *Wik Thuulk* (Brolga Language) or a southern Wik variety name such as *Kugu Muminh*, by contrast, consists of two phonological words. This alternation is found across a much wider region. *Guugu Yimithirr* (north of Cooktown) is two phonological words, but *Gugu-Badhun* (upper Burdekin River) is one.

¹⁷ *Nguungk* is the respect form appropriate to a totemic reference, but not obligatory, and *wik* is the unmarked form, in this language (Wik-Ngathan). Both mean 'language, speech, story', as also does *kugu* further south, within the Wik subgroup.

south and *Wik-Way* in the north.¹⁸ Even at this level an adult would normally have known and been related to all other adults in the same macro-grouping.

Linguistic organisation in a small-scale society¹⁹

The number of patrifilial groups identified with each proper-named linguistic variety in the *Wik-Way* area is not large. Some figures on the number of clan estates identified with each proper-named linguistic variety in the area between the Embley and Archer Rivers will illustrate the point:

¹⁸ *Wik-Way*, 'language difficult/bad', is originally a term for the languages north of the Archer River along the coast, as spoken of in the languages of people from south of the Archer to about the Kendall River, i.e. it is an exogenous term by origin, although it has been adopted as a self-descriptor in recent decades by people from much of the area between the Archer and Embley Rivers, especially those resident at Aurukun. *Wik-Way* languages are members of Hale's Northern Paman subgroup, which extends from the Archer to the tip of Cape York Peninsula (see below). Here I also include data for some other languages of the same subgroup which come from areas just east of the coast, but which are not now necessarily classed as *Wik-Way*, e.g. Anathangayth, Ngkoth, Mbiywom. The *Wik* languages 'proper' come from the area between the Archer and Edward Rivers and inland to about Rokeby in the north and south-east across to Stewart River and Running Creek on Princess Charlotte Bay (see below). They belong to Hale's Middle Paman subgroup, along with certain other languages of the Peninsula's east coast and hinterland. The *Wik* languages proper include Kugu Nganhcara (= *Wik-Ngencherr* in some other *Wik* languages). They may be referred to in a gross sense and by members of neighbouring groups as 'Mungkan' and the people as 'Mungkan-side' or 'Mungkan mob'. Since the *Wik* native title claim, the use of *Wik* as a cover-term has spread from academic usage, where it has been long established, to those described. Some Aurukun usage, however, is now distinguishing 'Wik' from 'Kugu' areas and peoples within the academically defined *Wik* domain. McConnel (1930:97) had referred to "a group of tribes, characterised by names formed with the word *Wik*, signifying 'speech' . . ." and to the "*Wik* tribes" (McConnel 1936:455); Thomson (1936:374) wrote of the "*Wik*-speaking peoples"; others have continued the usage. *Wik-Mungkan* was already something of a lingua franca in at least the north-western sector of the *Wik* region in the early twentieth century, before most people from that area settled at Aurukun, but it has become even more so in the last seventy or eighty years. The semantics of its name ('language + eat') puts it into a labelling contrast set that runs right across the middle Peninsula. Other 'eat'-based linguistic labels are the east-coast macro-grouping terms *Yangkunya* (covering Kuuku Iyu, Kuuku Ya'u, and Uutaalnganu) and *Kanthaanyu* (covering Umpila and Kuuku Yani) (Thompson 1976). It is possible that a south-western variety, *Ogunyjan*, in which *og* is 'speech' and *unyjan* is a participial form of 'to eat', also forms part of this contrast-set (Barry Alpher, pers. comm.).

¹⁹ The main source of the information in this section is Sutton et al. (1990), which is based on fieldwork by myself, David Martin, John von Sturmer, Roger Cribb and Athol Chase, and further unpublished field data from prior to 1990 (see below). That report has been supplemented by substantial additional fieldwork since 1990 by myself, Martin, and von Sturmer.

Table 1: WIK-WAY (Subset of Northern Paman: from Archer River north to Weipa Peninsula)²⁰

Named variety	No. of estates ca 1900
Adithinngithigh	1
Alngith	2
Anathangayth	1
Andjingith	8 (+ two possibles)
Arraythinngith ²¹	1
Latumngith	1
Linnngithigh	4
Mamangathi ²²	1
Mbiywom	4 (+ two possibles)
Ndrra'ngith	2
Ndrangith	1
Ngkoth	1
Paach (Wik Paach)	4 ²³
Total	31 (35)
Average	2 (possibly 3)
Median	1

- 20 There are other Northern Paman languages beyond Weipa to the tip of Cape York Peninsula, but they are not discussed here. Of the varieties listed here, and particularly considering shared phonological developments and lexicon, Hale presents evidence that they may be subgrouped as follows (some would say as five technically defined languages): Alngith-Linnngithigh, Mamangathi [-Thyanhngayth-Ndrwa'ngayth-Ndrra'ngith], Ngkoth [-Trotj], Arraythinngith, and Mbiywom (Hale 1966:163ff.). However, the first two subgroups appear to belong to a dialect chain (Hale 1966:175) such that each shares at least 80% of basic lexicon with at least one of the other varieties, but at the opposite extreme two of the chain's members, Thyanhngayth and Linnngithigh, share only 54%. Relations between the others are not as yet clear, to me at least.
- 21 Known as Arrithinngithigh (in Linnngithigh) and Arrithinngayth (in Ndrwa'ngayth, both Hale 1966:166), I can confirm that it is also known as Arraythinngith (possibly in Ndrra'ngith) and as Arreythinwum (probably in Yinwum). It probably had several other names as well—one expects there to have been a Wik version something like Wik *Arrithangathi, for example. Given that Adithinngithigh and 'Arrithinngithigh' seem to have been identified with only one estate each and the names are so similar, it might be tempting to consider their distinct spellings a mere artefact of the recording process, but the names are indeed distinct and moreover the relevant estates are noncontiguous and owned by different people (my own fieldwork). Basically, McConnel's (1939–40:55) rough map seems to have been the first to get it right, showing 'Adetingiti' separate from 'Aritingiti' (in spite of demurrings by Sharp 1939:265fn.). Similarly, Ndrra'ngith and Ndrangith estates are noncontiguously located and have distinct custodians. Separate again are Ndwa'ngith and Ndrwa'ngathi, the countries connected with the latter two lying too far north to come within the purview of the mapping research referred to here.
- 22 According to Hale (1966:165), Mamngayth (Mamangathi) is one of three virtually identical dialects subsumed under the title Awngthim. According to Crowley, Mamangathi is referred to as one of several 'groups' speaking the Awngthim language, and the implication is that these were exogamous clan groups rather than dialect groups per se (see Crowley 1981:150). The data I have suggest that the name Mamangathi (Mamngayth, Mamangithigh etc. depending on the language in which it is being named) functioned as the name of a linguistic variety and was not just a clan name. I am not aware of clans being formally named in the region.
- 23 Of these estates, two were also probably affiliated with Andjingith. They are also included under Andjingith above.

Note the generally low number of clan estates per named language variety. These estimates can be complemented by population estimates.

In the area between the Archer and the Embley, an estimate based on 15–25 people per clan multiplied by 31–35 clans comes to a rough population estimate of 465–875 people. Given there are 13 named language varieties in this case, that comes to about 35–60 persons per named variety. Even if we were to assume an average of 35 persons for each of 35 clans, that would still result in an average of only 94 persons per named variety in this area.

It is hard to say how many technically defined languages were in this small area, but a figure of six or more seems not unreasonable, given the comparative data already published by Ken Hale.²⁴ At a figure of six such ‘technical’ languages the estimate of how many people there were on average per language comes to a range of 78 to 146 using 15–25 as the clan average. Assuming 35 as the clan average the average reconstructible population for each technically defined language would be 204 persons. These are extremely modest figures, and even more dramatically than in the Wik case fall well below the rule of thumb figure of about 500 people per Australian ‘tribe’ that has at times been used, such as Dixon (1980:18), a figure which may derive from the work of Joseph Birdsell.²⁵

Among several examples of ‘small tribes’ Tindale cited the Wik area and what in this paper has been referred to as that part of the Wik-Way area immediately to its north.²⁶ However, the smaller the area covered by a language variety name, the more Tindale seems to have been inclined to regard it as a ‘sub-tribe’, more or less on principle. In his catalogue of tribes he listed the Wik (proper) language names as separate tribes, but from the Archer River to just north of the Embley he listed the names of twelve language varieties as “hordes or incipient small tribes” under the “valid embracing name” of Winduwinda.²⁷ It seems likely that the origin of the term Windawinda (Winduwinda) is essentially geographical, centred on the Winda Winda Creek area and covering groups with lands between the Archer and Mission Rivers.²⁸ But there are ‘valid embracing names’ for many congeries of language groups, and Tindale’s preference for entering the Wik-Way languages under Winduwinda seems unmotivated, except perhaps as a means of dealing with exceptional regions which fell outside his figures for average sizes. In any case, he decided not to be too dogmatic about this particular arrangement.²⁹

²⁴ Especially Hale (1966:163–76).

²⁵ For example, Birdsell (1953, 1957:53, 1958:196, 1968:230, and 1973:339). However, as Birdsell himself pointed out, Krzywicki (1934) had derived a mean value of Australian tribal populations “as approximating 500 persons on the basis of data collected from the literature” (Birdsell 1973:339). Even earlier, however, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown had used the figure of 500 in order to make tribal estimates in at least one case. With regard to the estimation of previous Victorian population figures he said, “If we allow only 500 persons for a tribe or language and only 100 to 120 for a dialect, . . .” (Radcliffe-Brown 1930:693), thus prefiguring Birdsell’s ‘magic number’ of 500 by over twenty years.

²⁶ Tindale (1974:112–13).

²⁷ Tindale (1974:188–90).

²⁸ See also W.E. Roth (1910:96 and Pl. XXXI; more detail in the MS version 1900:2–4), McConnell (1939–40:62), and Hale (1966:176), on Winduwinda/Windawinda. The term has become archaic.

²⁹ “Those who feel inclined to regard the Winduwinda and Jupangati [Mapoon area] assemblages as having full tribal status may add a further dozen or more to the number of Australian tribes, bringing the total to over 600 tribes” (Tindale 1974:113). Writing about his fieldwork on the same area, Lauriston Sharp (1939:264) said: “Again in this area of small tribes it is not easy to distinguish local groupings, clans, or slightly differentiated linguistic groupings from tribes”.

Patterns of diversity in the wider Wik region

Especially in the coastal and pericoastal areas, it is clear that in the wider Wik and Wik-Way region linguistic diversity was both real at a technical level and also highly valued and marked culturally.³⁰ Even near-identical dialects could have distinct autochthonous names.

Just over half the thirteen named Wik-Way varieties for which reasonably good mapping is available were intrinsically associated with just one estate each. This was within an area approximately 100 kilometres north–south by 75 kilometres east–west. In the past this concentrated Babel represented a challenging prospect for any newcomer, in spite of the regional tradition of highly skilled multilingualism. Although there were some marriages between Wik-Way and Wik proper prior to the effects of colonisation, one reason given for the difficulty of arranging such marriages was that Wik people from south of the Archer were daunted by the difficulty of the languages to their north.³¹ Certainly the Wik-Way languages are phonologically much more complex than Wik ones, but their sheer number and diversity would also have been a problem for those not brought up there, given the necessity to be a polyglot in order to survive socially, and to treat one's kin with respect, in this part of the world.

The area just south of the lower Archer River thus represented a rather abrupt transition between two regional *Sprachbünde*, one demanding greater multilingual competence than the other.³²

Conclusion

In the Wik and Wik-Way region, as in so many other parts of Aboriginal Australia, the mere fact that someone can speak the same language as oneself is usually taken to imply that the other person must be kin, related to ego somehow or another, in either an actual or a classificatory sense. In the absence of disputation the default relationship to one's kin is one of underlying amity. There is also a common view that linguistic competence in an Aboriginal language by a non-Aboriginal person must imply not only cultural competence and understanding, but also an acceptance of the worth of Aboriginal culture itself.

When a non-Indigenous person is heard speaking an Aboriginal language—a situation still rare in Australia outside the Western Desert—Aboriginal people are usually quickly of the view that this person has in some significant way entered into their world of values, their web of relationships, and their patchwork of country identities, and furthermore that this is someone who does not look down on them, who is not 'stuck up'.

People who can 'talk language', as it is so often put in Aboriginal English, speak what the ancestors spoke. The ritualised process of talking to the spirits of the 'Old People' when visiting particular places is itself often referred to in English simply as 'talking language'—

³⁰ On the prehistory of developments within the Wik subgroup, see Hale (1997b), a revision of which will appear as two chapters of Sutton and Hale (n.d.).

³¹ Another reason, and a major one, must have been the fact that the Wik and Wik-Way peoples had significantly different prescriptive marriage rules (see e.g. McConnel 1939–40:60).

³² I discuss the pattern of linguistic diversity of the Wik region south of the Archer in considerable detail elsewhere; see Sutton and Hale (n.d.).

because the ancient ancestors did not know English.³³ To 'talk language' is not merely to make evident one's linguistic education, but in a sense it is also to reproduce the characteristic voice of the Old People who were ancestral to some particular network of kin.

A common shorthand Aboriginal expression of this recognition of outsider skills in insider matters is to say of the person that he or she 'knows'. In classical Aboriginal thought there is more to this 'knowing' than mere grammatical competence or cultural familiarity. In the Wik area, as has been documented over much of Australia, languages are held by their Aboriginal owners to have been implanted in specific countries at the foundation of the world, by heroic ancestral figures or, as they are known in Cape York Peninsula, 'stories'.³⁴ A small clan of anywhere between one and a few score people, in Wik thought, is itself considered a microlinguistic group with its own unique variety of speech,³⁵ a variety that is typically specified by naming a principal totem of the clan, as explained above. Language is, in this sense, at once both spiritual and political.

The first people spoke these respective varieties when the world was young, and their descendants ideally speak the same way today, or at least used to.³⁶ The highly emotional and spiritual links between one's principal ancestral language variety and the deepest reaches of local identity were made clear when naming that variety by means of the primary totemic symbol of each descent group. This, as well as the intrinsic connection between that variety and a passionately held clan country or homeland, meant that choice of speech variety was no casual matter in this society. To choose any Aboriginal speech variety, especially one other than a lingua franca, was to immediately implicate specific areas of country and to demonstrate links to their particular people.³⁷

In 1960, into this intense world where speech varieties resonated daily not only with the people's geopolitics but also with their cosmogony and ontology, stepped a young American who almost overnight began to speak and sound like one of their own. This was a unique experience for the people of Aurukun, as it probably was for others elsewhere. Those who were old enough to appreciate the import of it and who are still with us at the time of writing continue to regard Ken Hale with enduring interest and respect, and with not a little awe.

33 That is, 'talking language' is sometimes a shorthand idiomatic way of referring to the addressing of ancestral spirits. Many times I have heard people say: "We go to place X, we talk language", i.e. "When we go to place X, we will address the spirits in an appropriate local language". In my experience, spirits are only rarely addressed using English.

34 One legendary account of the creation of Wik languages is provided by Noel Peemuggina in Sutton (1997). In that legend the named varieties are implanted estate by estate as the two culture heroes move across the landscape establishing totemic centres in each clan's estate. In a number of other accounts referred to in that paper, drawn from other parts of Australia, Dreaming (story) beings implant or recognise specific languages across whole linguistic territories, typically beginning to speak a new language as each linguistic territory is entered and switching to another on departure.

35 Sutton (1978:138), von Sturmer (1978:325–6), Smith and Johnson (2000:366–7).

36 While a number of Wik varieties such as Wik-Me'enh and Wik-Ep are moribund, and Wik-Ngathan and Wik-Elkenh–Wik-Ngatharr have only adult fluent speakers, Wik-Mungkan is the first language of most children at Aurukun, and some Kugu Nganhcara varieties persist well, especially at Pormpuraaw. Wik-Way varieties seem now to have only senior adult speakers of any competence.

37 Conversely, to mainly employ a lingua franca and abandon use of one's own speech variety also has its motivations, although in many community situations it is hard to separate motivation from necessity in this domain.

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