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Reassessing Karnic: A Reply to Bowern (2009)*

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This paper is written as a response to Bowern (2009); however, it provides an opportunity for me to correct errors in Breen (2007). Bowern's paper has also had the positive result of forcing me to make a stronger case for my modified lexicostatistical method first outlined in Breen (1990 Chapter 7); however, this has grown into a second paper (referred to below as 'the companion paper') which goes far beyond considerations of Karnic languages. Other matters discussed include misunderstandings of my writings, perhaps not entirely the reader's fault, and lack of care and thoroughness in research.

Keywords: Australian Languages; Comparative Linguistics; Research Methodology; Karnic; Lexicostatistics

1. A Correction

I welcome this opportunity to correct a mistake I made in my 2007 paper:[1] in Table 6, following Austin (1990) and disregarding my own Ngamini transcripts, I gave *ngali* as first person dual exclusive and *ngalku* as first person dual inclusive for Ngamini and Yaluyandi. These should have been the other way around; I cannot confirm this for Yaluyandi from my own material, but this is the way Bowern (1998) has them and I am sure it is correct. Furthermore, I guessed in 2007 that Mithaka *ngali* was exclusive on the assumption that it would conform with these two closest relatives, and I would guess the other way now. Also, for similar reasons, I would change my guess about Karruwali *ngalu* now. In fact, in the case of Mithaka I have some evidence: when I asked Maudie Naylon the word for 'us two, you and me' she said '*Ngali kulila*, me and you sitting down, *kulari*' [(Tape no. 156, side 2, 1969). I cannot explain the two versions given for the verb; it appears that she is using Yandruwandha

* I am grateful to an anonymous referee for helpful comments.

[1] Which, incidentally, is in volume 27 of the *Australian Journal of Linguistics*, not in volume 25 as in Bowern's list of references.

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Table 1 Central Karnic pronouns

	Diyari	Ngamini	Yaluyandi	Mithaka	Karru	Yawa	Yandru
1sgN	*nganhi*	*nganyi*	*nganyi*	*nganyi*	*nganyi*	*nganyi*	*nganyi*
1sgE	*ngathu*	*ngathi*	*ngathi*	*ngathu*	*ngathu*	*ngathu*	*ngathu*
2sgN	*yini*	*yini*	*yini*	*yini*	*yini*	*yini*	*yini*
2sgE	*yundru*	*yindi*	*yindi*	*yundu*	*yindu*	*yundru*	*yundru*
1du.in	*ngaldra*	*ngali*	*ngali*	*ngali*		*ngaldra*	*ngaldra*
1du.ex	*ngali*	*ngalku*	*ngalku*		*ngalu*	*ngali*	*ngali*
2du	*yula*	*yulku*	*yulku*	*yula*		*yula*	*yula*
3du	*pula*	*pulku*	*pulku*	*pula*		*pula*	*pula*
1pl.in	*ngayana*	*nganyudu*	*nganyudu*			*ngandra*	*ngandra*
1pl.ex	*ngayani*	*ngayini*	*ngayani*			*ngana*	*ngana*
2pl	*yuda*	*yuda*	*yuda*	*yuda*		*yuda*	*yuda*
3pl	*thana*	*thana*	*thana*	*thana*		*thana*	*thana*
who	*wara*	*wara*	*wara*	*wara*	*wara*	*wara*	*wara*
what	*minha*	*minha*	*minha*	*minha*	*minha*	*minha*	*minha*
where	*wardayadi*	*warratha*	*warada*	*wardali*	*warda-*	*yilanggi*	*yilanggi*
when	*wintha*	*wintja*		*wintjala*		*wintjama*	*walpi*

inflections on a Mithaka root.] Mrs Naylon was a native speaker of Wangkangurru, in which *ari*[2] is exclusive (as is *ngali* in Yandruwandha). She and her husband were the informants for the study of Ngamini and spoke it well; they made mistakes sometimes with the pronouns in elicited sentences and answers to questions, but the most convincing evidence, not in elicited material but in a story, makes it clear that *ngali* is inclusive and *ngalku* exclusive. As for Mithaka, there is no justification for Bowern's statement (1998: 134–135, 2009: 341, note 4) that there is no inclusive/exclusive distinction; we simply do not have the data.

Table 1 is a correction of Breen's (2007) Table 6.

2. 'Fringe Languages'

Bowern seems to assume that by 'fringe languages' I meant languages that might be Karnic but there was not sufficient evidence to prove it. I was not intending to introduce a new linguistic term when I used it (but it has been useful). What I was thinking of was languages more or less sandwiched between Karnic, as I understood the term then, and Mari, and not really looking as if they belonged to either. Breen (1971) had assigned southern languages Garlali[3] and Badjidi to Karnic, on the basis of a figure of 59% cognate between Punthamara and Garlali and 56% between Garlali and Badjidi, but I no longer had this belief. I thought then that they could be the remnant of a group of languages which had been broken up by the expansion of the large language groups to the east and the west. (Actually, the northernmost 'fringe language', Kalkutungu, is not contiguous with either Karnic or Mari, and the southern end one, Badjidi, is contiguous with Garlali, Darling languages, and Mari;

[2] This is *adi* in the spelling I use; the consonant is an alveolar tap and the word is cognate with *ngali*.

[3] I am using Bowern's spelling for this name since I need to quote it from time to time. In any case, it may well be more correct than my current spelling [which I explain in Breen (2007, note 17)].

perhaps they were squeezed out of the ends.) They are indeed not well studied, apart from Kalkutungu, but they don't show much sign of belonging to either Karnic or Mari, although there are still, and will probably remain, uncertainties. There are tantalizing hints that some of them might be related to one another (Breen 1990: 2–3, but see also Chapter 7), but this has already been shown to be unlikely for the best-known two, Kalkutungu and Yalarnnga (Breen & Blake 2007, Chapter 5), and so there is little chance that it can be proven for the others.

Incidentally, Bowern is not correct in stating that, in Kungkari 'there are lexical data but little or no pronominal or morphological forms recorded'. Most of the nominative pronouns are recorded, as are the main interrogative words and all the major nominal inflections: ergative, locative, dative (which also marks an owner), allative, ablative. Information on verbal morphology is somewhat confused. Reference will be made to Kungkari in the companion paper.

3. Charlie Phillips and his Languages

Bowern asserts (p. 245) that the language used by Charlie Phillips and described by McDonald and Wurm (1979) is 'actually Punthamara'. To find the justification put forward for this statement we must go to Bowern (2001: 256, note 24). This note says, in part: 'This has been confirmed by the last speaker of Garlali, Mr Peter Hood (pers. comm. March 1999)'. It is not altogether clear what has been confirmed, but the preceding sentences say:

> For example, Charlie Phillips, the informant for McDonald and Wurm's 1979 grammar, was bilingual in Punthamara and Garlali (he was a Punthamara or Wangkumara man but grew up in the area of Thargomindah, in modern Garlali country). He had a preference for speaking Punthamara and would do so even when asked for sentences in Garlali.

(Bowern did express some doubt here, as to whether it was Punthamara or Wangkumara, but this doubt has apparently disappeared now.)

There are two things that can be said here. Firstly, Peter Hood was the youngest of the Garlali speakers or partial speakers to have been recorded. I first heard of him (I don't doubt that it was the same person) in 1968 when a policeman at Hungerford told me of one Peter: '. . . last of his tribe . . . initiation scars . . .', and later the same year I met him at Kihee Station in far southwest Queensland. I did not record him, nor did I mention him in my field trip report, and my 'People and places' file has the comment: 'knows nothing, not old' against his name. I met him again in 1976 in Cunnamulla and recorded him briefly; perhaps he was emboldened to admit some knowledge then after the death of most of the older informants in the previous few years. He was not able to form sentences in Garlali, and could remember perhaps half of the words I asked him for. To summarize, he was not very knowledgeable.[4]

[4] A reviewer informs me that, while he did not know much language, he did seem to have more knowledge on other matters, such as language territories and boundaries.

The second point is that it is common (in my experience) for a speaker of a language to name an adjacent language by the name of the nearest dialect (geographically) to his (or her) language, or the one most familiar to him. I suggest that Hood had no knowledge of the dialect situation in the language of which Wangkumara and Punthamara are dialects, and used the name he was accustomed to apply to the language as a whole. [In fact, as Luise Hercus (p.c.) points out to me, even senior people were sometimes inconsistent in their use of these two names.]

So do we have any evidence that the dialect spoken by Phillips was Wangkumara and not Punthamara? The title of the book is not good evidence; it was called Wangkumara because when I listened to some of the tapes not long before the book was due to be published I had said (and provided evidence) that the language described was Wangkumara, not Garlali.

To ascertain what the dialect actually (or most likely) was we must go back to 1967, when I recorded Charlie Phillips in Bourke. He told me that he was born at Thargomindah (in Garlali country) and his native language was Garlali but that he knew Wangkumara better. So I recorded him in Wangkumara (see Breen 1967–1974).

Previously he had been recorded in Canberra by Wurm, and later he was recorded in Dubbo by Janet Mathews, and in both cases he gave the language name as Garlali. So why did he call the language Garlali on these occasions, but not when I recorded him? I suggest that it was because my recording was done in the Bourke Aboriginal Reserve where people, notably his wife, knew the facts. Mrs Phillips was a member of a well-known Wangkumara family (Luise Hercus p.c.); her sister Mrs Laura Dixon was perhaps the main contributor to our knowledge of that language. When he was in Canberra or Dubbo people didn't know, and so he felt no need to distinguish the language he knew best from the language of his own people. (I assume his wife was not with him in Canberra; she was certainly not with him in Dubbo.)

Charlie Phillips' identity as a Garlali man is confirmed by Luise Hercus (p.c.) who had been told so 'many times' by George Dutton; see also the article on him in the *Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia* (Horton 1994: 863) which was written by W.J. Cameron of the Bourke Historical Society. [For George Dutton see the article by Jeremy Beckett in Horton (1994: 311).]

4. Modified Lexicostatistics

Bowern's lack of understanding of Breen's modified lexicostatistic approach to comparisons is made clear by her references to it in her sub-section 2.7 and especially by her footnote 8 (p. 345) where, referring to the statement that I had found 12 Garlali correspondences in a list of 20 of Austin's (1990) proto-Karnic forms, she says: 'One might point out that a 60% lexicostatistical figure was used earlier in the paper (Table 4, p. 184) to argue for subgrouping Pitta-Pitta and Wangka-yutyuru with Arabana-Wangkangurru, although the number of items was larger'. In fact, there is no figure 60 anywhere in that table and the reference is presumably to the Wangkangurru/Pitta-Pitta figures which (since revised) were then 32% overall and

40% for verbs. However, the important thing is that any reference to a single figure in this table is not particularly meaningful. Only by looking at the two figures, 32 and 40, together, do we get some important information. As stated in the introduction to this proposed method of comparison of languages, (Breen 1990: 155): 'The actual figures themselves are not the most significant thing; rather, it is the relationship between them'. Bowern is partly correct in saying that the original explication is 'rather poorly founded' in that it is not made clear what languages are involved; it can be inferred, but is not clearly stated, that they are languages for which Breen (1971) gives vocabularies, but further details are not given (and, of course, ought to have been) and I do not know them now. They are a subset of a much larger number of counts I did and have the figures for, but I don't know what the subset comprised. However, I still maintain that it would be much more fruitful to do similar counts for other groups of languages than to try to check these original figures, and I report some such counts (many of which are certainly updating original counts) in the companion paper.

5. Garlali as Karnic

To end her paper, Bowern lists 17 forms which 'could be considered innovations in an Eastern Karnic with Garlali as a member'. I take this to mean words which are common to Wangkumara (understanding this to include the other dialects of the same language, such as Punthamara) and Garlali but are not found in other languages unless they could be plausibly explained as loans in those other languages. They are divided into three lists, numbered (3), (4) and (5) but I do not understand the information given about their sources. Perhaps the above quotation does not refer to the last two items. I will not discuss the list in detail. A couple of items could be innovations in such an Eastern Karnic (*ngarni* 'father', *murru* 'black'), but most are not—areal forms, or Karnic at a higher level (and likely loans in Garlali)—and this is often acknowledged in Bowern's notes. I don't understand the point of these two pages, which seem to prove nothing. [Garlali (Kalali) is considered further in the companion paper.]

6. Conclusion

Sections 1 and 3, especially, point to the necessity for thoroughness and care in research. In Section 1 I point to my own overlooking of a rather small but important item of data, correctly reported in Bowern (1998) and in contradiction to a generalization made by Austin (1990), and also to my lack of thoroughness in extracting data from my transcripts. Section 3 deals with Bowern's acceptance of incorrect information from an unreliable source on a matter on which several reliable sources of correct information, including the person concerned's own words, were available. Section 4 deals with a matter on which Bowern's misunderstanding is perhaps shared by some other linguists, and I hope this will be cleared up by the

companion paper. Section 5 deals with a section of Bowern's paper that I find obscure, and Section 2 deals with a fairly trivial matter, a (useful?) term I used without definition and which has been misunderstood.

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