

# Foreword

Lyle Campbell

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**Australian Languages: Classification and the comparative method**

**Edited by Claire Bower and Harold Koch**

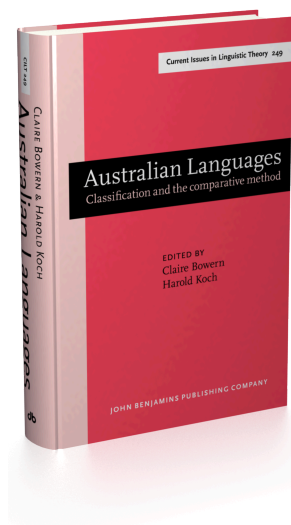
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## FOREWORD

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It has far too often been claimed that the Australian languages are somehow 'different' in ways that challenge fundamental assumptions of historical linguistics. The relationships among the languages have long been argued to display a 'special nature' which renders the application of standard methods of classification and reconstruction impossible or at least in need of modification. Because the historical linguistics of Australian languages is not widely known, such challenges have led non-specialists to regard the Australian linguistic situation as enigmatic. As the papers of this volume show, such a view is wrong and unjustified.

Here sixteen linguists (including the late Ken Hale) address genetic relations and how they are determined in ten groups of languages— including the controversial Pama-Nyungan family, six subgroups of Pama-Nyungan, and three groups of non-Pama-Nyungan languages. The cohesiveness and distinctiveness of some of these groupings are demonstrated by rigorous application of the comparative method. These studies demonstrate that historical linguistics is indeed alive and well among Australianists, and that the standard methods and procedures work here just as elsewhere. This was very evident at the 15th International Conference on Historical Linguistics (held in Melbourne, 13-17 August 2001), where most of the papers of this volume originated in a 'Workshop on Reconstruction and Subgrouping in Australian Languages', for which I had the privilege of being the official discussant.

This volume is significant both for the interpretation of Australian linguistic prehistory and for historical linguistics in general. Its primary importance is methodological. The studies in this book apply the traditional methodology, in particular the comparative method, to issues in the classification of Australian languages, and in so doing, they demonstrate the genetic relationship among languages and establish subgroups within families of languages.

I commend the editors and contributors for their important contributions and fully expect them and their Australianist colleagues to continue to push this work forward in future investigations. I recommend the book to students and practitioners of historical linguistics who are interested in language classification and its methodology. It is rewarding to read.

