

Foreword

The Dyirbal language has been documented over a period of sixty years by Professor R. M. W. Dixon. It is by virtue of his unstinting work that it is now one of the best known Indigenous languages of the world. Dyirbal has many fascinating characteristics. It has ergative morphology and Dixon's thorough account has had wide repercussions in linguistic theory.

The system of four genders is widely quoted. Added to the familiar masculine, feminine, and neuter, there is a fourth gender used just for vegetable foods. Working with scientists in CSIRO, Dixon recorded 560 names for plants in the thick rainforest; 180 of these are judged to be edible and belong to the fourth gender.

As with many other Australian languages, there was avoidance behaviour between certain kinship pairs, such as mother-in-law and son-in-law. There was a special style of speaking called Jalnguy which must be used in an avoidance situation. Dyirbal may be unique in that every word is different between Jalnguy and the everyday speech style (Guwal). However, the grammar and pronunciation are the same. Dixon worked with the last three elders who remembered back to the time when Jalnguy was in daily use. This book presents and analyses the copious materials he collected.

When he began this work in 1963, no one attached much importance to it. Over the decades since, attitudes and priorities have shifted. Today, both First Nations and non-First Nations people place great value on the work he was able to do.

The Dyirbal language is still spoken, but to a much lesser degree than before. There is now no-one with a knowledge of Jalnguy. This book records, for future generations, the amazing nature of this aspect of Dyirbal culture, and our rich heritage.

Language is the symbol and the repository of our identity and culture as Dyirbal people. This book owes much of its materials to Chloe Grant, my grandmother, and also to George Watson, and Molly Raymond. Chloe was instrumental in revealing to Dixon the marvels of our language and culture.

As a proud member of the Dyirbal nation, I am immensely delighted to introduce this important study. Professor Dixon's work is not only incredibly important to me but to all future generations of the Dyirbal nation as language is the key to unlocking our culture.

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