Understanding Pama-Nyungan

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Understandings of the history of Australian languages, and especially Pama-Nyungan languages, remain debated despite significant progress and points of agreement (cf. Bowern 2023). For example, while almost all Australianists agree that the Pama-Nyungan languages form a language family, Dixon (2026) continues to argue against its genetic status, and there remains on-going debate regarding the nature and extent of contact-induced language change and/or language shift in Pama-Nyungan linguistic histories (Dench 2001, Miceli and Dench 2017, Miceli 2015, Bowern et al. 2025). Further to this, although there is wide consensus on Pama-Nyungan as a language family, there nevertheless remains disagreement regarding its composition and internal structure (see e.g. Harvey 2009 on the status of Garrwan), the age of the family (O'Grady and Hale 2004, Bouckaert, Bowern and Atkinson 2018, Evans 2020), how Pama-Nyungan languages may have spread across the continent, and how the linguistic histories of Pama-Nyungan form part of the broader cultural and social past of Indigenous Australia (see e.g. Evans 2020 on different proposed models of language relationships, Harvey and Mailhammer 2017).

Debates around Pama-Nyungan do not simply relate to how narrative histories of the languages and their speakers are reconstructed, but rather are underpinned by divergent understandings of theories and models of language across time, and how the traces of Pama-Nyungan linguistic histories in attested languages are therefore best interpreted. For example, the paucity of evidence of systematic sound change (Miceli & Round 2022, Bowern 2022), and so the unexpected pattern of recurrent but identical sound correspondences, has been interpreted in different ways. Should the presence of *recurrent* sound correspondences be interpreted as evidence of a shared ancestry, or does the presence of mostly *identical* sound correspondences point to different kinds of histories of Pama-Nyungan languages, as well as raise questions on the nature of language change (cf. Miceli & Round 2022 and Harvey and Mailhammer 2017)?

The aim of this workshop is to focus on current debates about Pama-Nyungan histories and their contribution to theories and principles of historical linguistics. The workshop centres on the core question of what Pama-Nyungan is, considering how the evidence supports - or not - its status as a language family, the remnants of extensive ancient language contact and convergence, or a set of typological or chance resemblances. The workshop will bring together Australianists to present on and discuss questions such as:

- What are the relationships among Pama-Nyungan languages?
- How old is Pama-Nyungan?

- What were the mechanisms that have resulted in the spread of Pama-Nyungan languages, including shared ancestry and diversification, language contact, language shift?
- What is the evidence for Pama-Nyungan's closest relatives?
- What were the roles of social factors, such as kinship, exogamy, regional ties, and language ideologies, in shaping the transmission of Pama-Nyungan languages?
- How should different lines of inquiry and sources of information and knowledge be brought together to understand the deep past?

Discussion of these questions will also focus on questions of theory, method and interpretation of evidence, and so include scholars with expertise on non-Australian languages as discussants to enrich the conversation around the questions and contributions that the Pama-Nyungan past bring to general understandings of language histories and their reconstruction.

While the workshop aims to explore a single set of research questions around Pama-Nyungan, the goal is to bring together researchers with a broad range of perspectives with no expectation that the discussion will result in a shared perspective or full agreement on the histories of Pama-Nyungan languages. Rather the workshop's value is in participants' discussion of and reflection on the evidence and argumentation that support different responses to the above questions, and so on what Pama-Nyungan is. Our hope is that the workshop results in some plans for next steps in further developing narrative histories of Pama-Nyungan languages, as well as diversifying how we understand and apply methods and models of language change.

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