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[55] ***Primitive Languages, Linguistic determinism and the description of Aranda eighty years on***

David Moore (University of Western Australia).

The view that Australian Aboriginal languages are primitive endured into the twentieth century and is still widespread in popular thinking about Aboriginal languages throughout the Australian community. 'Primitive languages' were a means of using linguistic evidence from a language to prove that its speakers belonged to primitive cultures (Henson 1974:9). A number of deficiencies were found with 'primitive languages': the lack of abstract nouns, grammatical categories, numerals and colour terms. Sparse accounts of Australian languages enabled speculative views about 'primitive languages' to become widespread. Evolutionary anthropology sought information about humans at an earlier stage of development e.g. Tylor 1889. The Aranda of Central Australia (a designation covering speakers of a number of varieties, including Western Arrarnta, Central and Eastern Arrernte) were a 'scientifically important people' (Basedow 1925:xiv). Aranda appears to have been the language that was most frequently identified as 'primitive'. The research of ethnographers Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen and the missionary linguist Carl Strehlow informed the armchair theories of Frazer in Britain and Durkheim, Mauss, Levy-Bruhl and Freud in Europe. In this paper I explore a controversy which followed the publication, over eighty years ago, of an armchair study of Aranda, a language which was primitive in the opinion of a leading international scholar (Sommerfelt 1938). This episode in linguistic history shows how intensive fieldwork, deep understanding of Aboriginal languages and Donald Laycock's use of linguistic records (Laycock 1960) enabled to counteract ideas about Aboriginal languages which persisted even in scholarly publications. References

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