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22

Place names as clues to lost languages? A comparison between Europe and Australia

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1. Introduction¹

It is common knowledge in historical linguistics that place names can conserve elements of languages that have vanished without leaving traces elsewhere. Thus, they can ‘permit historical inferences about languages and the people who spoke them’ (Campbell 2013: 436) for a given area. This strategy has been applied successfully in many cases, e.g. Scandinavian place names of England, which bear testimony to the existence of speakers of Old Norse, as their linguistic material can be related to Old Norse appellatives and place name elements (see Campbell 2013: 436-437 for a brief overview).

This paper explores the viability of this research strategy for Australia’s linguistic past. It is of course well-known that place names introduced by both European and non-European immigrants are overlaid on top of Indigenous names, and there is a substantial body of literature devoted to this topic (see especially the contributions in Hercus & Koch 2009). However, layers of pre-colonial linguistic strata have been investigated to a considerably lesser degree. Such strata may have left traces in the shape of place names connected to languages spoken in a particular area which were already extinct when colonial contact occurred. It is known that the great majority of Australian Indigenous languages belong to one language family, the

¹ It is with much joy and happiness that I offer this contribution to Luise Hercus on her 90th birthday, as she continues to inspire me as a role model in overcoming the greatest difficulties and persevering in the face of the stiffest resistance with the utmost kindness and happiness. I hope that we will have many more birthday celebrations in the future and wish her health and happiness. I would also like to thank two anonymous referees for many helpful suggestions. I agree with their judgement that this paper is speculative. I am fully aware of this fact; it is deliberate, and I do not think that this diminishes its scholarly value. All remaining errors remain my own.

so-called Pama-Nyungan languages, whose area extends over seven-eighths of the Australian continent. In addition, it is commonly assumed that these languages are in most cases not autochthonous to their pre-contact locations, but that they spread across the continent from a particular time onwards, absorbing pre-existing languages (and their speakers) as Evans & McConvell (1998) argue.² However, in all cases nothing is known about these pre-Pama-Nyungan languages, even though it is assumed that they are structurally closer to the non-Pama-Nyungan languages of Northern Australia (and as typologically diverse); see, e.g., Evans (2003: 10). It has been suspected that many Pama-Nyungan languages contain traces of these earlier languages (see, e.g., McConvell 1990: 11), but so far nothing has been substantiated, which is perhaps also because a concentrated and systematic investigation has not been undertaken.

Now, if the general research strategy of using place names to unlock traces of pre-existing languages could be applied here, the hope is that this could give us access to layers of the pre-Pama-Nyungan linguistic stratum. This is exactly what this paper proposes to explore in a speculative way as prolegomena to a feasibility study.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 illustrates the approach with a problem of similar complexity and uncertainty, the so-called Old-European Toponymy. Section 3 applies the case of the Old-European Toponymy to what will be called the 'Pre-Pama-Nyungan Toponymy', i.e. the place names of Indigenous Australia that may perhaps shed light on pre-Pama-Nyungan languages. Section 4 points out some theoretical, methodological and practical issues, before the main results are summarised in Section 5 together with a roadmap towards an investigation of pre-Pama-Nyungan languages through Indigenous place names.

2. The 'Old European Toponymy': a link to pre-IE Europe?

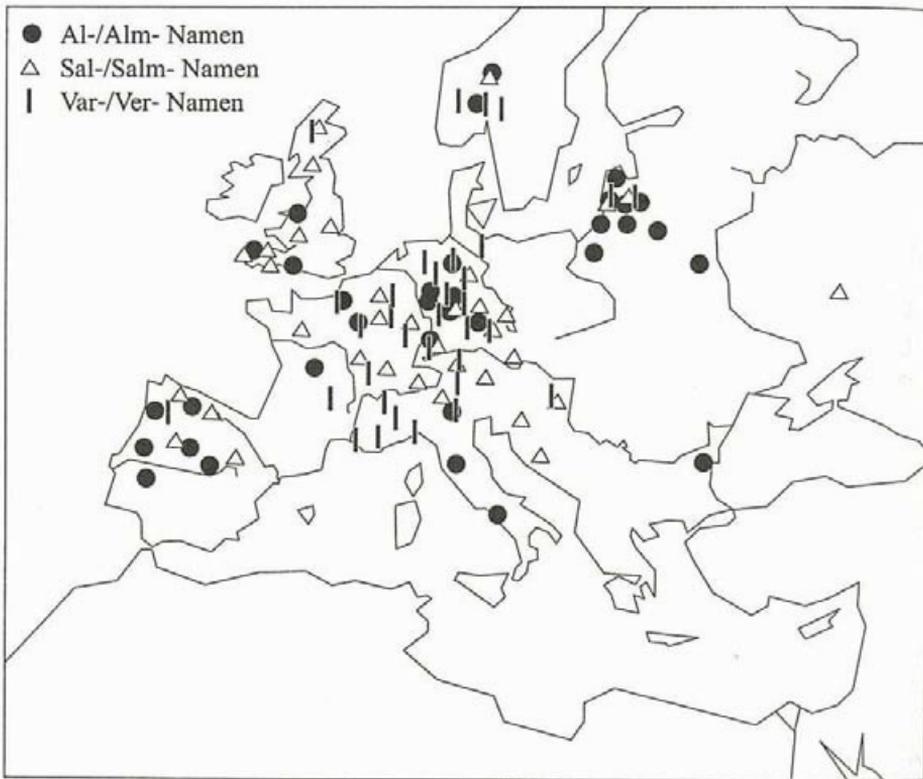
In order to approach what a pre-Pama-Nyungan toponymy might look like and what issues might be connected with its investigation, it seems useful to look at a similar case, both with respect to time depth and availability of historical records.³

² There would have been also sparsely populated areas, mainly in the central south and west, where there would have been less linguistic interaction between the arriving Pama-Nyungan languages and already existing languages, but for the most part the most likely assumption is that there were pre-existing languages and linguistic interaction, given that it is unlikely that the Pama-Nyungan languages developed *in situ* (see Evans & McConvell 1998: 175-179 for further details).

³ A reviewer wonders whether conditions in Europe and in Australia are indeed comparable, given that in Europe it has been possible to identify some likely substratum patterns, whereas this has not been the case in Australia so far. This paper shows where the similarities and differences are; the clearest parallel is that both continents witnessed the spread of at least one language family, which obliterated much of an earlier, genealogically and typologically more diverse linguistic landscape. In both cases we have no records of this earlier linguistic diversity. Given that place names often preserve older linguistic features and lexical material, investigating place names for recurrent features that cannot be connected to the languages we have access to may give us a glimpse of the earlier linguistic situation. The main difference between Europe and Australia is that such investigations have been undertaken in the former but not in the latter case, but there is no reason to assume *a priori* that they would not be successful. It is true, as another reviewer remarks, that some things in historical linguistics are just unknowable, but, as they also remark, that should not stop us from trying. Of course, we must not expect that the answers are indeed 'findable'.

The case of the so-called ‘Old European Toponymy’ is instructive because it may be a way to reach beyond the layer of the Indo-European languages, which is generally believed to be about as old as that of the Pama-Nyungan languages (see, e.g., McConvell 1996: 143). In terms of available historical linguistic records, virtually nothing is known about the linguistic situation before the spread of the Indo-European or the Pama-Nyungan languages. The expansion of Indo-European is as much a mystery as that of the spread of Pama-Nyungan (see Mailhammer 2015 for details).

However, the linguistic investigation of toponyms, especially hydronyms, in Europe is aided by the existence of a remarkable system of names with recurrent structural elements that was discovered by Hans Krahe in the 1950s and 1960s (see Vennemann 1994 with references). Krahe systematically investigated the observation that a number of European river names contained elements that cropped up across the entire continent, and observable variations were suggestive of a morphological system. The map below gives a flavour of this phenomenon.



River names containing the element Al(m)- (from Vennemann 1994).

The interpretation of the linguistic origin of these river names suggested by Krahe was that it is Indo-European, and mainstream toponymic research has followed him in this respect. Under this view these ‘Old European’ – as Krahe termed them – river names cannot tell us much, if anything, about the pre-Indo-European history of Europe.

However, if the ‘Old European Hydronymy’ (Krahe’s term), and by extension, the ‘Old European Toponymy’, was not Indo-European, it would

actually be a linguistic record reaching back to pre-Indo-European times. This is not the place to discuss the linguistic provenance of this name system in any detail (see papers in Vennemann 2003; Udolph 2013). I confine myself to a brief summary of the arguments. The main point Vennemann (1994: 155-157) makes is that a morphological analysis that is ignorant about the language of at least some of the relevant river names shows that not all affixes Krahe reconstructed are likely to be of a CV-shape but of a VC-shape. For this and other reasons, Vennemann (1994: 156) doubts the Indo-European nature of the Old European Hydronymy. Contributions in Udolph (2013) and elsewhere have mounted ardent defences of an Indo-European provenance. Without commenting any further about this discussion, it is noteworthy that the morphological analysis by Vennemann is not actually falsified anywhere. Rather, it is simply asserted that his segmentation is incorrect (Kitson 1996: 83), or that this methodology is illicit, as the Old European Hydronymy can be analysed as Indo-European (Anreiter 2013; Schmid 2013). It is also worth mentioning that even defenders of the Indo-European origin of the original Old European Hydronymy have noted ‘many problems’ around it, especially concerning the phonological make-up of the names and their distribution (Anreiter 2013: 22).

This matter will not be decided here, but there is another indication that it is unlikely that the Old European Hydronymy in its entirety, and perhaps also European place names in general, are all Indo-European. Europe was re-populated after the last Ice Age and had been occupied by humans for several thousand years when the Indo-European languages appeared on the scene (see Mailhammer 2015 for a synopsis of the chronology). Thus, it is likely that in fact all places had already been named by the existing population, and it is to be expected that the newcomers did not completely re-name everything but that in fact many parts of the previous – non-Indo-European – toponymy survived even if with added Indo-European elements. This is what is generally found in similar situations in antiquity, e.g. in the Roman Empire, and in modern times, as in North America and Australia. As a matter of fact, this point is actually conceded even by otherwise staunch defenders of an Indo-European Old European Hydronymy (see in particular Anreiter 2013: 63; Schmid 2013: 180).

As a result, even if Krahe’s Old European Hydronymy is not wholly pre-Indo-European, it is highly likely that it and Old European place names in general represent a window on pre-Indo-European times. What makes the Old European Hydronymy/Toponymy so interesting is that it comprises all of Europe (but not, e.g., India) and that it is linguistically very homogenous, with recurrent morphological structures. This has generally been interpreted as a trace of a linguistic system, i.e. the recurrences are unlikely to be accidental (Anreiter 2013: 27). Such a system must have shown a certain degree of homogeneity – basic lexical material and typological features – and if it is not wholly Indo-European, this points to a linguistically relatively homogenous layer of language(s) at a point before the spread of Indo-European. I have argued elsewhere that it is likely that this layer is relatively old, i.e. immediately post-Ice Age when Europe was re-populated (Mailhammer 2015).

Identifying the linguistic origin of this layer is a difficult task given the almost total lack of evidence. Since it is generally agreed that Basque is the only living

pre-Indo-European language in Europe (Mailhammer 2015: 37 with references), it is a candidate that can be probed for a linguistic connection, and this is what (Vennemann 1994 *et passim*) has done. For reasons of focus I will not consider this approach, but note that the research strategy in principle appears to be sound enough to transfer it to similar cases.

To sum up this section, Europe is a case in which place name data is likely to be a witness we can call upon for a glimpse of a pre-Indo-European past. What is needed is to rigorously and objectively tease apart Indo-European from non-Indo-European elements, and to systematically find recurrences that can then hopefully be tied to languages we have data on. It is somewhat surprising that only a handful of researchers have attempted to follow this path in the face of the likely significance of this data for the linguistic prehistory of Europe.

3. Indigenous place names as a window on pre-Pama-Nyungan Australia?

The linguistic landscape of Australia displays an obvious asymmetry, namely that roughly one-third of Australian Indigenous languages, spoken in the north of the continent, display a far greater typological diversity than the remaining two-thirds, spoken in the rest of Australia. Congruently, while it has been shown convincingly using established historical linguistics methods that the languages in the second group are genetically related and thus descend from one common ancestor, this has not been demonstrated for the first group (see especially Campbell & Poser 2008; Evans 2003), even though it is commonly assumed in mainstream Australianist linguistics (see Mailhammer 2015 with references). The more homogenous, genetic group is called ‘Pama-Nyungan’, and conversely the remaining languages are defined *ex negativo* as ‘non-Pama-Nyungan’. However, the homogeneity of the Pama-Nyungan languages is relative, and there is considerable diversity; but more importantly in this context, the homogeneity is also distributed unevenly, as Evans & McConvell (1998: 178) point out:

Within Pama-Nyungan itself, there are also strong asymmetries of distribution. Virtually the entire western half of the Pama-Nyungan region is occupied by the relatively homogeneous Nyungic group, and the plains between the Great Dividing Range and the Darling Basin also host groups occupying large areas. Other regions (such as the southwest of the Gulf of Carpentaria, and the southeastern corner) are much more diverse. The nearest relatives of the Nyungic group are yet to be determined, but McConvell (1997) has demonstrated distinctive semantic shifts (from ‘fish’ to ‘meat’) suggesting close connections between Nyungic languages and those of the interior of Queensland and New South Wales.

The linguistic evidence has been interpreted as follows. According to the ‘Pama-Nyungan Offshoot’ model (see Evans 2003: 9-11), the non-Pama-Nyungan languages are more conservative, i.e. they preserve a prior, pre-Pama-Nyungan, state of affairs, while the Pama-Nyungan languages constitute an innovative language family as in Figure 1.

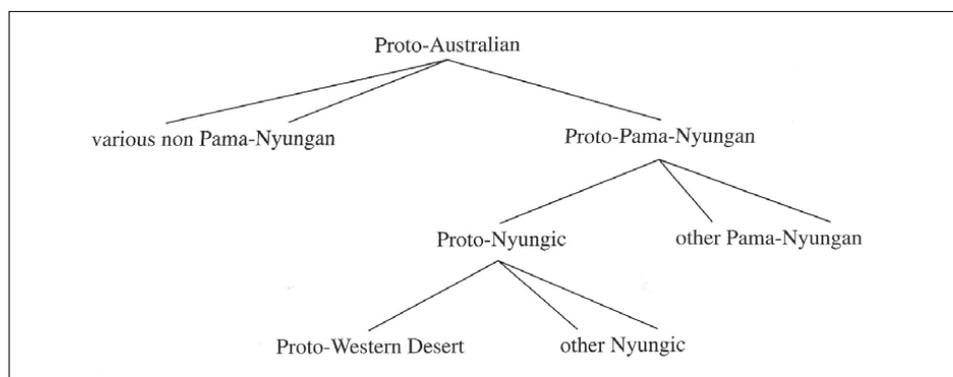


Figure 1: A simplified representation of the 'Pama-Nyungan Offshoot Model' (from Evans & McConvell 1998: 174).

If the geographical distribution and the diversity of the different groups is factored in, this translates into a historical scenario, that has been sketched in Evans & McConvell (1998: 178-9) as follows:

To summarize the linguistic picture: over the deeply etched mosaic of linguistic differentiation, still found in the northwest and presumably once found across the whole continent, there has been superimposed the relatively homogeneous Pama-Nyungan family, whose similarities point to a Mid-Holocene expansion date. A second, more recent expansion (possibly around 2000-1000 BP) appears to have carried Nyungic speakers across the western half of the Pama-Nyungan region. Whatever led to the expansion of Pama-Nyungan, it does not appear to be linked (at least directly) to external contact since there have been no conclusively demonstrated loanwords [...] or other linguistic influences from non-Australian languages into Proto-Pama-Nyungan.

That is, it is assumed that the Pama-Nyungan languages spread in two waves across the entire continent into areas that were already inhabited by speakers of other languages (in addition to previously uninhabited areas). As a result, it is likely that there was some linguistic interaction between the incoming Pama-Nyungan languages and the already existing languages, as McConvell (1990: 11) surmises:

If Pama-Nyungan languages did not immediately take over in some regions but rather faced an extended period of societal bilingualism or multilingualism involving the older indigenous languages of the region, linguistic borrowing and a degree of convergence between the languages would be expected to take place. [...] In fact there is possible evidence of substratum influence in languages which are Pama-Nyungan in many features but aberrant in some features [...], and such languages do occur in precisely those places where the local environment would have supported large populations which could have resisted and slowed the takeover by the incoming groups for longer periods, such as the Murray River valley.

Given that none of these pre-Pama-Nyungan languages survived the spread of the Pama-Nyungan languages, we must assume that these processes of language contact eventually resulted in the Pama-Nyungan languages taking over completely by replacing and/or soaking up pre-existing languages. Judging from the perceived homogeneity, it seems that the main process appeared to have been a language shift by the speakers of pre-Pama-Nyungan languages. Thus, McConvell is certainly right to posit what has been commonly called ‘substratum’ influence in Pama-Nyungan languages. However, although he mentions ‘aberrant features’ in the above quotation, little tangible evidence that would point to pre-existing languages has been produced to date. This is, however, not an unusual observation. In fact, pinning down substratum influence is often quite difficult, especially if the contact (substratum) language is unknown.⁴ One reason why this might be is that the process of language shift can be drawn out with long periods of bilingualism at whose end the shifting speakers are effectively native speakers of the language they shift to (see, e.g., Winford 2003: 79-80). There are a significant number of cases that point in this direction, e.g. the shift to Latin by speakers of unrelated languages such as Etruscan or Punic within the Roman Empire, which often left no traces at all (Adams 2003). And even if there are features that are in fact ‘aberrant’, then it is not always possible to clearly identify the source language due to the complexity of the contact situation or because they arose through language-internal change. For instance, in varieties of Aboriginal English in Australia, possible influences range from various forms of contact languages (English and non-English based) to Indigenous languages and varieties of English and other languages. Thus, a feature may have come into a variety of Aboriginal English from several sources and it is not always possible to tease these apart (Mailhammer & Birch 2014).

Given these problems, investigating place names may be another way to get to pre-Pama-Nyungan languages. If one applies the conclusions drawn from Europe and other places where place names give evidence of an older linguistic situation – and the post-contact toponymy of Australia is a prime example of this – it follows that it is possible that local Indigenous place names in Pama-Nyungan areas contain elements that point to an earlier, pre-Pama-Nyungan linguistic layer.⁵ The next section will explore possible avenues for pursuing this line of research.

⁴ I disagree with a reviewer who says that it is impossible to pin down substratum influence if the substratum language is unknown, as there is no linguistic evidence. Not knowing the substratum language is not the same as a lack of linguistic evidence. The linguistic evidence may be there in the shape of features that are atypical for a given language. This does not, of course, prove or even suggest that these features are the result of contact-induced change, but it is possible to come up with typological features of a hypothetical contact language, and these features may then be used to identify such a contact language (see, e.g., Evans 2010: 107-9 for the case of the Khoisan languages giving an insight into pre-Bantu southern Africa, and Güldemann 2014: 11 for further details). However, it is of course also possible that these features are the result of purely internal language change; but in the absence of any clear indication in any one direction, it should be justifiable to investigate both avenues (see Mailhammer 2013 for discussion).

⁵ Hercus (2014: 213) views place names as belonging to the oldest layers in the lexicon of Australian Indigenous languages, and they have also a specific relevance to Aboriginal people, who believe that they are a key part of the vocabulary (Garde 2014: 97).

4. Issues, problems and possible approaches in the etymological investigation of Australian Indigenous place names

The first issue is to connect a place name to a language as unambiguously as possible. Harvey (1999: 162) mentions two criteria that can be used, namely evidence of a phonological structure that is characteristic for a particular language and a meaning that is at least partially transparent in one language but not in others. One might want to extend the first criterion to formal properties in general. For instance, the morphological structure could be telling, e.g. having prefixes rather than suffixes, or the syntactic ordering of place name elements, e.g. head before dependent, could provide information about the language a place name is from (see McConvell 2009 for an application). One might also want to view the meaning more broadly: if a meaning can be connected to, say, the cultural complex of one language but not the other, e.g. a particular story, then this can be a reason to argue for a link.⁶ Specifically, in the context of Australian Indigenous languages, it has to be borne in mind that there is a considerable degree of phonological similarity across all Australian languages, which can make it hard to find distinctive phonological patterns. However, there is a good number of cases in which this works (see Harvey 1999: 162-169 for details and examples). Further, meaningfulness might also be problematic, given that there was and still is a practice of translating place names from one language into another, so that a transparent place name may not necessarily say anything about the linguistic affiliation of that name (Harvey 1999: 173). Likewise, the fact that a name is semantically opaque does not mean it is not potentially affiliated with another language, as place names (words in general) can become structurally opaque. But in general, opacity points to either an older or 'foreign' place name in a given area (Clendon 2009: 347). However, if place names are meaningful, but display formal irregularity, this can be an indication that the affiliation of a place name with the particular language is not recent (Harvey 1999: 173), though cases have to be investigated carefully, as names in general may behave irregularly with respect to language change, or display general morphological differences to appellatives.⁷

These criteria are similar to those that have been applied in the case of the European toponyms, mentioned in Section 2 above. And it is demonstrable that they work in principle. For instance, *Rruwirrk* is a place name on Croker

⁶ It is important to mention that in any case the oldest attested form of a place name has to be recovered in order to work out its origin or linguistic affiliation. This frequently involves a great deal of reconstruction and philological methodology, and is not a trivial problem (see, e.g., Hercus 2014: 222-3).

⁷ A good illustration are the county names ending in *-shire* in England, e.g. *Yorkshire*, *Devonshire*, etc. The vowel in *-shire* is a monophthong that has essentially retained its pre-Great Vowel Shift quality (and perhaps even its quantity). This is in contrast with the pronunciation of the word *shire*, which patterns with *wire*, *fire* etc., i.e. with a diphthong. Note also, that these county names are not opaque to speakers, as mispronunciations of *-shire* like *shire* are still understood (see Black (2009) for Kurtjar suffixed morphology attested only in place names but not in appellatives).

Island, Northern Territory, that is unlikely to be associated with two of the main languages used there today, Iwaidja and Mawng, as words beginning with an alveolar tap are quite infrequent, and in a considerable number of cases are Macassan loan words. However, in one of the languages traditionally associated with Croker Island, Marrku, this is a fairly common word-initial phoneme, which also serves to differentiate cognates with other Iwaidjan languages, e.g. Marrku *rrana* ‘moon’ versus Iwaidja *kurrana* (Central Iwaidjan) and Amurdak *urrana* (South Iwaidjan). This suggests that the place name *Rruwirrk* is associated with Marrku on the grounds of its phonology. But this case also illustrates another potential problem, and this is that place names with a phonology that is aberrant in one language may be adapted so that it fits within the sound system of this language. In the case of *Rruwirrk*, younger Iwaidja speakers often pronounce the word with an initial lateral.

An example involving irregularity is the name *Balambij* for a small island off the Top End opposite Croker Island. It is translated as ‘head of the snake’ (referring to the Rainbow Serpent). Now, this is in fact transparent if one takes into account a slight phonological irregularity, namely the fact that the first word should be pronounced [bauɣa] ‘3sg head’, not [bal]. The velar approximant [uɣ] does in fact delete in casual speech in the appellative *baharl* ‘3sg head’, but it will be present in hyperarticulation. But this is not so in the case of the place name, where speakers do not produce a hyperarticulated *[bauɣaɰ]. This suggests that the toponym is not a recent creation, because of the phonological dissociation with the relevant appellative with which the first element of the name shares the meaning.⁸

The case of *Rruwirrk* also shows that speakers are quite happy to keep using names they do not understand, even though they may eventually integrate them into their phonological system. This is certainly not unique to Australian Indigenous place names, but common, as formally and semantically fully opaque toponyms like *London*, *York*, *Paris* and *Berlin* demonstrate. And names can be re-interpreted through folk etymologies to a point where the same place name can have more than one current meaning (see, e.g., Hercus 2014: 222-223).

If the formal and semantic properties of a place name can offer no clear clue to its meaning or its linguistic affiliation, it can still be possible to perform a formal analysis in order to perhaps isolate meaningful components. What would be helpful is to know something about Indigenous naming strategies, so that perhaps common elements can be expected. For instance, in Europe, toponyms often include the referent, e.g. ‘river’ or ‘hill’; therefore a morphological analysis would recover common recurring elements that could potentially be tied to geographical features. Unfortunately, naming strategies in Australian Indigenous languages do not lend themselves to such a simple strategy. Topographic names do occur, but they are by no means the most frequent. One frequent strategy is to name places after characters and mythical stories (see the examples in Hercus 2014; Koch 2009), where common semantic elements are not expected.

⁸ I would like to thank Bruce Birch (pers. comm.) for the examples of *Rruwirrk* and *Balambij*.

There are other issues to be considered: For example, there are cases in which more than one name exists for the same place (e.g. ‘big’ and ‘small’ names given in Garde 2014). Moreover, there is a high density of place names (see, e.g., Clark 2009), which makes a particularly fine-detailed investigation necessary. There is also of course a dearth of reliable historical and synchronic linguistic data, which presents a general challenge.

In order to investigate Australian Indigenous toponyms further, aiming at peeling back the layer of Pama-Nyungan languages, it seems promising to conduct a locally clearly delimited pilot study for an area where the documentary data is of a relatively high quality. The key objective would be to find recurrent formal or semantic patterns and irregularities that cannot be connected with languages spoken in the area. It is possible that non-Pama-Nyungan languages can help shed some light on some of the data, because it is to be expected that at least some of the pre-Pama-Nyungan languages are related to the non-Pama-Nyungan languages of Northern Australian, but this need not be the case.

5. Conclusion

This paper set out to explore a potential research strategy to investigate a possible linguistic layer that predates the expansion of the Pama-Nyungan languages. Compared with the case of the Old European Toponymy and the spread of the Indo-European languages, it seems that it may be fruitful to conduct a systematic pilot study of an area with reliable data. However, it is by no means clear that this will lead to the desired outcome. Especially the practice of renaming place names through translation and the general phonological similarity of Australian Indigenous languages demands caution. Nonetheless, it seems an endeavour well worth pursuing, given the special status of place names as a means of access to (pre-)history.

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