

8 *Nils M. Holmer's research on Australian languages*

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1. Introduction

Nils Holmer is—as far as we are aware—the only linguist from a Nordic country to have had first-hand experience with Australian languages through fieldwork, although the Swedish ethnographer Yngve Laurell also recorded a little information on languages of the continent (see Boström, this volume). Holmer's interest in Australian languages was awakened at rather a late age, and when he appeared on the Australian scene he already had a long career in Celtic and Amerindian studies behind him. It is for his research in these fields that he is best known. His work on Australian languages is not very well known, either to general linguists or to Australianists, few of who have more than a vague notion of his contribution to the field. It is primarily to rectify the latter lacuna that we relate in this article the story of Nils Holmer's work on Australian languages.²

The paper is structured as follows. First, in section 2, we provide an outline biography of Nils Holmer. Following this, in section 3, we briefly discuss some features of the type of linguistics he practised, especially those aspects that shed light on his work on Australian languages. Section 4 presents a general overview of Holmer's fieldwork on Australian languages. Then in section 5 we focus on some specific aspects of his research. Section 6 provides a brief conclusion. An appendix winds up the paper with a list of Holmer's publications on Australian languages.

1 We are grateful to Arthur Holmer for additional information on Nils Holmer's life, and for providing us with copies correspondence with Arthur Capell, and of Nils Holmer's works which have been difficult to obtain in Denmark and Finland. Thanks also to members of the audience of our presentation of this paper at the *Fourth International Workshop on Australian Linguistics*, held in the Department of Linguistics, Aarhus University, 24–25 June 2002, for useful suggestions, and to Peter Sutton and Hilary Carey for useful comments on an earlier version.

2 David Malouf's story 'The only speaker of his tongue' (Malouf 1985) is a fictional recount of the meeting of a Nordic linguist and the last speaker of a moribund Aboriginal language that rather nicely captures the feelings a linguist might experience at such a meeting. Presumably Nils Holmer served as the model for this piece. (We are grateful to Nick Evans for drawing our attention to this story.)

2. Biographical information

Nils Magnus Holmer was born in 1904 in Gothenburg (Göteborg), and died in 1994 aged ninety. It seems that even as a child he was fascinated by languages, reading and remembering instructions in foreign languages on imported goods, and trying to decipher names of foreign ships in Gothenburg harbour.

At Lund University he began studying Russian, in which language he gained his BA in 1925. Following this, in 1928–1929, Holmer went to Prague to study Czech. However, he was soon attracted to Celtic languages, and in 1932 was awarded his Licentiate at Lund University on Irish. During 1935–1936, he undertook a field trip to Scotland where he worked on Argyllshire Gaelic. Then for the following two years, 1937–1938, he held the position of Todd Lecturer in the Irish Academy; he worked on Anrtim Irish during these years.

In 1938 and 1939 he participated in a fieldwork expedition in Scotland led by the well known Norwegian Celticist Carl Marstrand. Here also, his focus of interest was on dialectology. Subsequently, beginning in the early 1940s, Holmer published a number of monograph sketches of Irish and Gaelic dialects, including: Holmer (1940, 1942, 1957b, 1962a, 1962b, 1965a). His interests, however, went beyond dialectology to historical-comparative linguistics, on which he also published a number of articles.

Holmer returned to Sweden to take up a lecturing position in the University of Uppsala. Then, in 1949, he was appointed to the chair of comparative linguistics at Lund University, a position he held until his retirement in 1969.

Following the Second World War, Holmer's interest turned to America, although he still maintained an interest in Celtic languages, and returned to Ireland in 1946 to work on the Irish of County Claire. He took part in two expeditions to America with S. Henry Wassén, an ethnographer working for the Gothenburg Ethnographic Museum. The first was to Panama in 1947, where he worked on the Cuna language (Chibchan); the second was to Colombia in 1955, where he worked on Chocó. From these expeditions a number of publications emerged, including not just grammatical descriptions (Holmer 1946, 1947a, 1963a) but also a number of interesting anthropological linguistic pieces, including some co-authored with S. Henry Wassén: text collections (Holmer 1947a, 1951; Holmer and Wassén 1953, 1958, 1963), an ethno-linguistic dictionary (Holmer 1952b), and a work on toponyms (Holmer 1964). Worth mentioning from Holmer's research on Cuna is his investigation of their picture-writing, which he argued does not represent the phonetics of the language (Holmer and Wassén 1953).

In 1948 Holmer turned to North America, where he began field investigations of two Amerindian languages, Seneca (Iroquoian), during a brief visit to the Allegheny Reservation in New York State, and Ojibway (Algonquian) in a visit to Walpole Island Indian Reservation in Ontario (Holmer 1949:4). The early 1950s saw the appearance of his first publications on these languages. Holmer (1952a, 1952c, 1953c, 1954) deal primarily with the grammatical structure of Seneca. Holmer (1954) is a sketch grammar of Seneca, while Holmer (1953b) is a sketch grammar of Ojibway.

Again Holmer's interests on the languages of North America were diverse, and included, in addition to grammatical description, typology, comparative linguistics, semantics (Holmer 1953a, 1953d, 1957a), and toponyms (Holmer 1948a, 1960, 1961).

Arthur Holmer sums up the influence of his father's investigations of Amerindian languages as follows: 'his contact with Amerindian languages was probably the most important single factor which influenced which direction his work was to take' (A. Holmer 1994).

Somewhere around the same time Nils Holmer began working on Basque. In the typological piece that first elaborated his ideas about prefixing vs. suffixing languages he was already using Basque as a primary example of a language of the former type (Holmer 1947b). His first

sabbatical after taking up his professorship in Lund, probably in 1951 or 1952, he spent working on Basque dialectology. And over the years he devoted long periods of time to fieldwork on the language, which was to become one of his major research interests. Ultimately he published a fair number of articles on the language, including Holmer (1950, 1970a, 1977, 1981a, 1981b, 1985).

It was not until 1964 that Holmer began fieldwork in Australia. His first experience was in the area between Newcastle and Kempsey on the north coast of New South Wales, when he undertook salvage investigations of Kutthung (Kathang, Gadang; AustLang recommends Worimi), Dungutti (Thangatti, Dangatti; Dhanggatti is the recommended spelling in AustLang), and Bundjalung (Bandjalang).³ This field trip was financed by the then-recently established Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (now Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies) and by Swedish funds. He was sixty years of age at that time, a rather advanced age to begin fieldwork in a new country. The year after his retirement, Holmer returned to Australia for a second, rather longer stint of fieldwork, this time in Queensland.

It is perhaps worth mentioning at this point one thing Holmer did not do: he did not attend the conference on Australian languages convened by R.M.W. (Bob) Dixon, under the auspices of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, in 1972. He was one of the very few linguists active in the Australian field who did not attend this event.

Nils Holmer was a contemporary of Arthur Capell (1902–1986), who had begun his investigations of Australian languages some thirty years previously. In many ways work of these two men was similar in character. Each undertook numerous fieldtrips in a variety of locations—Holmer in Ireland, Scotland, the Americas, and Australia, Capell in Australia and the Pacific region. And the publications of both men are more remarkable for the breadth of languages covered than the depth of description. In terms of raw numbers of fieldwork languages, Arthur Capell clearly came ahead of Nils Holmer; in terms of geographical and temporal variety, Holmer definitely came out ahead, partly because he was not averse to writing on languages using only secondary sources. Both men also showed a strong interest in typology, and its implications to historical and comparative linguistics, as we will see later.

Holmer's publications on Australian languages number only about ten, including both books and articles (see Appendix)—roughly 10% of his total output in terms of number of publications. Typical of Australianist linguists of late 1950s and early 1960s, his work was largely survey-like in nature, and the grammatical descriptions he produced fall into the 'sketch' category.

The other ninety or so publications of Nils M. Holmer deal with an impressive variety of languages: Celtic, Basque, Austronesian, Hittite, Sumerian and various languages from the Americas. These works include sketch grammars, typological comparisons, semantics, etymological and genetic investigations, and text collections. Many of these publications were based on data he collected himself in the field; however, he also wrote on a variety of topics in 'exotic' languages he had no first-hand experience of, including stress in Maori (Holmer 1966b), consonant alternations in Austronesian languages (Holmer 1965b), and a comparative-typological investigation of the Papuan language Kamoro (West Papua) (Holmer 1971a).

3 As far as possible we employ currently accepted spellings of language names, especially those recommended and used by speakers of the languages. However, not being specialists in languages of the eastern part of the continent we have had to rely on the literature available to us, and what we have been able to find on the web, where we have given priority to information from the AustLang site, at <http://mundula.cs.mu.oz.au:3051/wild>. Where we have been unable to find an accepted spelling we adopt the spelling used by Holmer. We also indicate Holmer's spelling on the first mention of the language name.

According to Hovdhaugen *et al.* (2000:476) Holmer is not particularly well known in Nordic linguistic circles, where if anything he is known for his studies of Celtic and Amerindian languages. However, he is one of the better known Nordic linguists internationally, one of his claims to fame being that he is one of the very few Nordic linguists to have had three articles published in *Language*. These are three short pieces dealing with Celtic: Holmer (1947c, 1947d, 1948b).

Given the minor role of fieldwork in the Nordic countries (with the exception of Finland) Holmer is perhaps most remarkable for being a competent fieldworker (Hovdhaugen *et al.* 2000:465), and more particularly one who worked on ‘exotic’ languages. Hovdhaugen *et al.* (2000:476) sum up his contribution as follows (see however §6 below):

The main significance of his studies today is the vast amount of data from dying languages and dialects that he saved for future generations, recording it so reliably that the data can still be used and trusted.

In international terms Nils M. Holmer can be described as a typical descriptive fieldwork-linguist of his time, engaging in scatter-gun investigations covering a considerable number of languages at a relatively shallow level. In the Nordic context, he was and remains, somewhat unusual for the depth and breadth of his interests in ‘exotic’ languages.

3. General conceptual framework of Nils Holmer’s linguistics

In the previous section we outlined the scope of Nils Holmer’s fieldwork, mentioning along the way various publications arising from his investigations. In this section we discuss some of the major theoretical and topical concerns in his research; we focus on those that provide a backdrop against which his Australian languages research can be better understood. We focus in particular on his notions of comparative linguistics and typology, which were for him, related domains.

One of Holmer’s first publications on Amerindian languages (Holmer 1949) was a comparative piece. Holmer believed that the—perhaps better **a**—comparative method could be applied to the Amerindian situation, despite the then-current negative opinion (as he saw it) of the notion among Amerindianists. It should not be a mechanical application of the results of the comparative method as developed in the context of Indo-European investigations, but rather that

learning from European scholars merely that a method is required, according to which every single detail is strictly handled with due regard for the laws of the language; then proceeding quite independently to work out such a method, suitable for the Amerindian languages, on the basis of an intensified study of the separate languages and dialects. (Holmer 1949:10)

This 1949 article, which explores possible contacts between Siouan and Algonquian languages, is thus not an application of the historical-comparative method as such, but is rather less tightly constrained. It admitted typological considerations into the picture, in particular, the contrast between prefixing languages and suffixing languages, which he perhaps first mooted in Holmer (1947b:31–38).⁴ Prefixing languages employ primarily prefixes, suffixes playing a secondary role; suffixing languages use suffixes (almost) exclusively, and prefixes play at best a secondary, derivative role. More importantly, Holmer considered the morphological means of expressing personal desinences to be crucial to the contrast: prefixing lan-

4 Holmer’s terms were the somewhat uncomfortable *prefix* languages and *suffix* languages; we retain the more usual designations.

guages primarily mark person of subjects and/or objects on verbs, and possessors on nouns, by prefixes; suffixing languages, by suffixes. Suffixing languages, according to this scheme, are on the whole less mixed in character than prefixing languages. He employed this parameter in a typological categorisation of North American languages into suffixing languages, which were restricted to parts of the Pacific coast and far north, and prefixing languages, which covered the bulk of the continent and included the Iroquoian, Siouan, and Algonquian languages (Holmer 1949:8–9, 1952a:21–23, 1956; see also Hovdhaugen *et al.* 2000:476).

This parameter is reminiscent of the typological parameter Arthur Capell had proposed some years previously (Capell 1940) for Australian languages, which also distinguished prefixing and suffixing languages. Holmer seems to have been unaware of Capell's previous work, and does not cite him. Interestingly, the relative geographical spread of the two types in Australia is the reverse of the distribution in America. Capell's construal of the contrast was also different (see §4.1 below).

Holmer explicitly denies that his typological classification is an attempt to group the families into a macro-family: despite the typological similarity, as he observes, the actual forms are too divergent. Nevertheless, he did interpret his typological scheme in temporal terms: the lesser morphological consistency of prefixing languages than suffixing languages indicates, he suggests, the greater time-depth of the former (Holmer 1949:9; see also Holmer 1956:21–22).

Holmer's aim was, rather, to demonstrate 'connection[s] between the Amerindian languages at large' (Holmer 1949:10), these connections not necessarily being genetic ones via retentions from a common ancestor, but being through 'direct contact' between the languages and their speakers—in other words, he is advocating a type of areal linguistics.⁵ Some two decades later he suggests more daringly that the analogies between prefixing languages in America and Australia are indicative of 'the existence of an ancient common structural system', apparently implying previous geographical proximity of the languages (Holmer 1970b: 69).

Holmer argued that languages are complex entities that show less consistent internal organisation than do biological units; indeed, he goes as far as to say 'all languages are mixed', indicating that he was by the late 1940s less than happy with the family tree model of comparative and historical linguistics. Nevertheless, different aspects of language show differences in terms of their propensity for change, and Holmer recognised that grammatical elements in general change more slowly than lexical items, and are more likely to be of a greater age than lexical items, especially items referring to material culture—and also numerals, kinterms, body part terms in the Amerindian context.

In Holmer (1949), twenty-five common roots are identified which are shared by Siouan and Algonquian languages. These he considers to represent not retentions from a common ancestor, but rather evidence of contact between the families at some early date, presumably at a proto-language time when they were located near the Atlantic seaboard (Holmer 1952a:

5 This is effectively what he also did in Holmer (1947b), where he proposed that the Ibero-Caucasian type, manifested by Basque and Caucasian languages, represents an archaic linguistic type that predates Indo-European and Semitic languages on the European continent. As we understand him, he was not proposing a genetic link between the former group of languages, but rather that shared typological features were indicative of prior geographical adjacency. He characterises this linguistic type in terms of six typological features: inflection of the final element only of an NP; ergative case marking; use of a combination of case suffixes and postpositions; use of prefixed vowels to specify relation between verb and participants; verb conjugation by prefixes, and remnantal prefixing of nominals; and nominal character of verbs. For the argument to work, of course, these features would need to be fairly resistant to change; they should also be typologically independent.

31).⁶ As we understand it, Holmer was also suggesting in that paper that similarities amongst the two families in terms of parallelisms in morphological structures also reflected contact at a great time depth, and thus that not only could languages in contact share forms through borrowing, but also more abstract grammatical patterns; this notion is quite widely accepted today.

4. Nils Holmer's fieldwork on Australian languages

As already mentioned, Nils Holmer's fieldwork on Australian languages began in the northern New South Wales region in 1964. What took him there? It is possible to reconstruct a partial story from correspondence from Arthur Capell (kindly made available to us by Arthur Holmer). It seems that sometime in 1962 he began corresponding with Arthur Capell about Australian languages, perhaps initially in relation to his first book on the languages, Holmer (1963b).⁷ The timing was fortuitous: the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (as it was then called) had been established the previous year, and Arthur Capell was on the linguistic advisory panel.⁸ Capell's letter of 23 July 1962 in fact raises the possibility of a student being interested in doing fieldwork; the next letter from Capell, dated 11 March the following year, makes it clear that by then Holmer had conveyed his intention of undertaking the fieldwork himself.

One gets the impression from Arthur Capell's 'History of research in Australian and Tasmanian languages' (1970:689–690) that Capell himself was instrumental in Holmer's decision to work on these languages: he remarks on his own knowledge of the precarious state of the languages, and the poor state of knowledge about them. In particular, it seems that he wanted to know whether the Kutthung language really showed such extreme simplicity as portrayed in earlier work by W.J. Enright (Enright 1900).

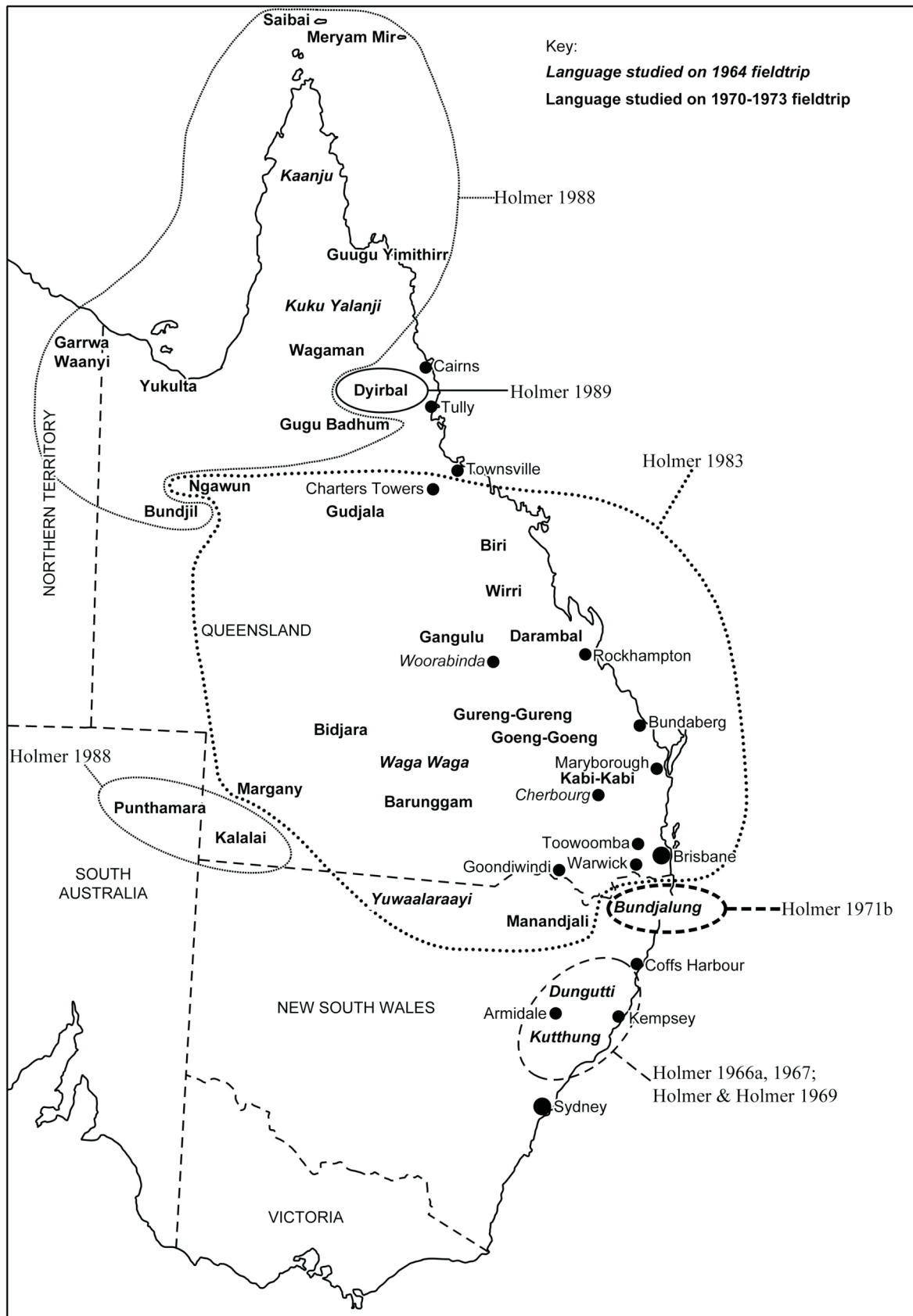
Correspondence between Capell and Holmer reveals that the decision was less one-sided. A letter dated 11 June 1963 indicates that Holmer may have expressed some preference for Kutthung and Dungutti and 'languages of a certain type'. This would presumably have been prefixing languages—in which case he must have been disappointed with the choice. Capell cautions about the probable difficulties in obtaining sufficient information on the languages. A following communication, dated 23 August 1963, indicates that although Capell's own preference (based on discussions with Stephen Wurm) was also for languages of the east coast of New South Wales, a more viable alternative would be western New South Wales. A letter from 8 October indicates that Holmer had agreed to this, and Capell encourages him to put in an application for funds. Nevertheless, Holmer did not go there, but went instead to the north coast of New South Wales.

During his first fieldtrip—which extended from January to August 1964—Nils Holmer worked mainly on two moribund languages, Kutthung and Dungutti. The region around Kempsey and Coffs Harbour was the focus of his fieldwork; however, because speakers were

6 Unfortunately, the forms are almost all monosyllabic, increasing the probability of accidental similarity. And when in Holmer (1952a:31) the Iroquoian languages are added the correspondences become so weakened that one could easily add English or Capell's Common Australian, and infer prehistoric contact.

7 The earliest letter we have access to from Arthur Capell is dated 23 July 1962, and makes clear that there was prior correspondence, perhaps going back some years.

8 Coincidentally, this was also about the same time that Michael A.K. Halliday was corresponding with Capell, in view of doing fieldwork on an Australian language himself. As it turned out, he was offered a position he very much wanted (Michael Halliday, pers.comm.), and negotiated to send a student in his place. Thus the appearance of R.M.W. Dixon on the Australian scene in 1963.



Map 8.1: Nils Holmer's fieldwork languages

scattered over a wide region, Holmer also travelled west to Armidale, and north into the Northern Rivers District and thence to southern Queensland, as far as about Murgon (north of Brisbane), in search of speakers. During these excursions he also made contact with speakers of other languages, and recorded some information on them. These languages include Bundjalung in the Northern Rivers District, and, near Murgon, two languages of the Cape York region Kaanju (Kantyu) and Kuku Yalanji (Gugu-Yalanji).

Six years later, Holmer returned to Australia. On this occasion, he went to Queensland, where, during a period of two and a half years between 1970 and 1973, he undertook a lengthy fieldtrip. In the course of this fieldtrip, he covered a large area of the state, working mainly on the coastal strip between Brisbane and Tully, and extending a hundred to two hundred kilometres inland. He worked on a considerable number of languages (Holmer 1983: vii), according to the availability of speakers. Thus, he found in the region speakers of various languages from other places, such as the Gulf region and Torres Strait Islands—including the Papuan language Meryam Mir (Mer). Again his fieldwork can be characterised as primarily salvage investigations.

It seems that Holmer's intention had originally been to work on the languages of the south coast on New South Wales during this fieldtrip, and that he had applied to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies for funds for a fieldtrip in 1969 (letter from Arthur Capell dated 26 October 1969). However, Capell was not in favour of this plan, though he does not specify an alternative location. A letter from Capell dated 18 May 1970 indicates that by then Holmer had decided on Queensland as his fieldwork site.

The range of Holmer's fieldwork languages is shown in Map 8.1, which also indicates the time of his investigations, to the extent we have been able to determine them. Also indicated are the subsequent publications dealing with the languages.

Nils Holmer does not explicitly discuss his field-methods in any of his publications. The only information we have is that standard elicitation procedures were employed, information was recorded in a notebook, and the fieldwork sessions were recorded on tape (Arthur Holmer, pers.comm.)—see Plate 8.1. It is clear, however, from remarks scattered throughout



Plate 8.1: Nils Holmer doing fieldwork in northern New South Wales in 1964.
Photograph courtesy Arthur Holmer.

his publications that not every session was tape recorded, though it is not clear under what circumstances the machine was switched on. It seems that the (presumed) degree of control of the language by the interviewee was a consideration: only the better speakers were recorded, at least during the 1964 fieldtrip.⁹

The only comment to add to this is that 'he was good at getting even reluctant informants to "open up"' (Arthur Holmer, pers.comm.). This might seem a relatively minor consideration, but one must remember that things were not always as they are today. New South Wales and Queensland of the 1960s and 1970s were much more overtly racist places than they are today, and it is not surprising that many Aborigines might have experienced some compunctions against working closely with a white linguist (see also Hercus, this volume). Thus Capell says in relation to fieldwork in the coastal region of New South Wales that '... we were told by one "informant" that: "the language was not to be wasted on whitemen!"' (letter from Arthur Capell to Nils Holmer, 23 August 1963).

5. Specific aspects of Holmer's investigations

Nils Holmer normally published rapidly after doing fieldwork on a language, generally within the space of just a few years, and not infrequently in the following year or so; only rarely did his publications begin emerging after a longer interval. He did, of course, return to some languages in subsequent publications. Generally speaking, the type of documentation he provided was a shortish sketch grammar of no more than a hundred or so pages, and a collection of texts. These were normally published as separate monographs. As a rule he also published a wordlist in the language, sometimes as a part of the grammatical sketch, sometimes as a separate monograph. This pattern was maintained in his first investigations of Australian languages, although his subsequent investigations tended to be rather less detailed, becoming, in the 1980s, effectively minimally-edited fieldnotes.

Aside from this, he often published separate articles or monographs of a more theoretical nature on specific topics arising from the descriptive investigations. Works of this type had, however, virtually dried up by the time of Holmer's Australian period. His monograph on Oceanic and Australian semantics (Holmer 1966c) was the only general work of this nature drawing on his Australian experiences, and this was from his earliest fieldtrips.

5.1 Holmer's *On the history and structure of the Australian languages*

Holmer's book on Australian languages (Holmer 1963b), was written before he ever came into direct contact with an Australian language—and indeed, according to O'Grady, Voegelin and Voegelin (1966:8–9), before he had even spoken with any experts in the field. Despite this, it is in many ways his best publication on Australian languages, and can be seen as a precursor to the general texts on Australian languages that appeared in the following decades, Wurm (1972), Vászolyi (1976), Dixon (1980), Blake (1981), and Yallop (1982). Nothing else of similar quality and accessibility was readily available at the time. There were, of course, Capell's *New approach* (1956) and Nekes and Worms' *Australian languages* (1953), and, from an earlier era, Wilhelm Schmidt's *Die Gliederung der australischen Sprachen* (1919). But these were all research monographs, rather than overviews of the current state of knowledge.

9 What has happened to the field notebooks and tapes is uncertain; it seems that only a fraction are held in the archives of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

Holmer (1963b) appeared at the dawn of the modern era of linguistic investigations of Australian languages, if not actually prior to the appearance of the first modern grammars, then at least largely without the advantage of their contribution. Almost all of the works he made reference to only indirectly (if at all) made use of the notions of the phoneme and morpheme. He seems to have been unaware of the SIL-inspired structuralist grammars employing these notions that had begun to appear in the 1950s, including Oates (1953), Moody (1954), and Douglas (1957/1964). The only structuralist work Holmer cites is Douglas' paper on the phonology of a Western Desert variety (Douglas 1955, dated wrongly in Holmer's bibliography as 1935), and he only became aware of Capell (1956) after completion of his text. Nevertheless, Holmer was able to pull the threads together into a consistent and basically correct structuralist story.

The book, which amounts to a little over a hundred pages in all, is organised into a dozen short chapters: introduction; tribes and languages; phonology; 'word structure' (see below); language types; prefixing languages; suffixing languages; morphology; semantics; place names; texts; and historical-comparative. Holmer stresses the non-uniqueness of Australian languages—that they do not display any unique peculiarities unattested elsewhere in the world—and in many places comments on structural correlations with languages from elsewhere in the world (Bantu, Dravidian, Caucasian, Amerindian, Indo-European, etc.). He employs a practical orthography that is roughly identical with widely used orthographies, the major deviation being his use of *r* for the apical tap/trill and *rr* for the retroflex continuant, apparently motivated by pattern congruity. He reserves diacritics for narrow transcriptions. The following are a few remarks on some of the more interesting features of this book in a historical context, organised chapter by chapter.

Chapter I is a brief introduction that outlines some of the work then available on Australian languages. Strehlow's grammar of Arrernte is singled out as the outstanding work (see Moore, this volume); Holmer also comments on the paucity of textual material. The question of whether the languages are primitive is raised, and some space is devoted to discussion of the notion. Holmer notes that there are two possible meanings for 'primitive': a subjective one involving value judgements, and an objective one free of such judgements. Holmer is aware of the dangers of using the term and says he will try to avoid it. Nevertheless, it comes up quite often in the book as well as in his later publications—though often in double quotes.

Chapter II presents some basic information on the status of 'tribes'—this vexed term goes unquestioned—in the contemporary context; there is some misinformation here concerning the significance and location of certain groups (largely resulting from the way they were portrayed in the literature). Holmer correctly observes that the name of the group and the name of the language is usually the same, and observes that often this is a word meaning 'man' or 'people'. Alternatively, the term may include in it a component element with this or a similar meaning (e.g. 'tribe', 'language', etc.). While this is true, it is not the only way groups and languages were named, and Holmer misconstrues a number of derivational affixes (e.g. *-burra* 'denizen of' (sometimes a comitative), and the widespread comitative marker *-jarri*) as nominals meaning 'man' or 'people'. The bulk of the chapter is taken up by a survey of the languages of the continent, beginning with a brief outline of two of the major classifications, Schmidt (1919) and Capell (1937). The survey divides the languages into groups that are in most cases geographical, in accordance with the scheme presented in Salzner (1960).

An outline of Australian phonologies is presented in Chapter III. Holmer correctly identifies a number of recurrent phonological generalisations: the lack of a voicing contrast in stops; the recurrent five or six distinctive points of articulation shared by stops and nasals; the almost universal absence of sibilants and fricatives; the predominance of CV(C) syllables;

and typical initial stress. He also notes the correlation between interdental and palatals, manifested in cross-dialectal correspondences and differences in transcriptions by various authors. As for vowels, Holmer is less clear, implying that five vowel systems represent the usual number of distinct phonemes, with three vowel systems perhaps being the norm at one time. The problem here is partly due to inadequacies of the pre-phonemic sources, which frequently over-differentiate vowels. With regard to Arrernte, Holmer suggests initial epenthetic vowels—thus explaining stress on the second syllable of vowel-initial words. This idea leads him further astray, as we will soon see. Overall, however, Holmer's presentation of Australian phonologies is correct.

Chapter IV, dealing with 'word structure' is, in hindsight, the poorest chapter of the book. Despite the title, it does not deal with morphology, but with the phonological structure of roots. It is in fact a brief excursus into comparative linguistics, which identifies various apparent cognates in modern languages, proposing original root structures. Based primarily on forms cited in Schmidt (1919), Holmer identifies a number of recurrent nominal and verbal root-forms, the bulk of which are plausible cognates. He concludes that these can be traced back to monosyllabic or disyllabic roots, with augments ('derivations') in some modern languages. He further suggests that these roots are defined in particular by two or three consonants that are distributed over two or three syllables. From there Holmer goes rather astray, proposing that the consonants themselves are the 'fundamental carriers of meaning', apparently invoking the possibility that something like the consonantal template specifications of roots in Semitic languages could be set up on a cross-linguistic basis in Australian languages. As a result, although he observes that Luritja *kulpa* 'return' is cognate with Arrernte *alp-* 'return', he interprets this as indicating *-lp-* as the significant consonants, presumably reflecting the proto-form. The Luritja form would then involve an augment. Thus he misses the process of initial loss in Arrernte, first recognised by Hale (1962). We find in this chapter some slippage between the synchronic and the diachronic.

In Chapter V Holmer presents his version of the by then well-established prefixing-suffixing typology for Australian languages, according to the distinction he had previously made for Amerindian languages (see above). He also observes that the relative dominance of the two types on the two continents is reversed. His definitions are effectively the same as those adopted by Nekes and Worms (1953), and concern the placement of the person and number markers on nominals and verbs.¹⁰ An unfortunate consequence of this definition is that a good number of Australian languages would be of either 'mixed' types or neither type. Like Nekes and Worms before him, Holmer fails to appreciate the significance of the way Capell set up the typology, with the distinction between languages with prefixes only (prefixing) and languages with both prefixes and suffixes (suffixing). Although this typology is explicated in detail in some works of Capell referred to by Holmer, this important aspect of Capell's thinking is not referred to at all.¹¹

As in the North American context, Holmer suggests that the prefixing languages represent the oldest strata of indigenous languages, spread not just over Australia, but also nearby islands such as Papua New Guinea. The suffixing languages are associated with a younger strata-

10 Holmer's characterisation of the prefixing-suffixing contrast was refined somewhat over the dozen or so years following its first formulation. Thus in Holmer (1949:8–9, 1952a), the distinction was not pinned down so narrowly to the personal desinences, which appear in these earlier works more as diagnostic than defining features. Further refinements can be found in more general works such as Holmer (1956, 1969), which include other grammatical parameters.

11 Arthur Holmer remarks (pers.comm.) that Nils Holmer's motivation for doing this was that 'He was not trying to recreate a typology for Australia, but rather to place Australia into a typological context which he had already developed. ... He did not make his purpose particularly clear.'

tum. Holmer's approach is reminiscent of the approach to linguistic and demographic prehistory advocated by Johanna Nichols (Nichols 1992, 1997), though she uses a different and larger set of typological parameters, and the scenario she proposes is rather different to Holmer's. Later on, Holmer presents the background for his case in the following words: 'concrete vocabulary is, as a rule, much more exposed to the dynamic forces of linguistic evolution than are structural features' (p.96), apparently suggesting that shared structural features can take us back further in time than cognates.

The next two chapters, VI and VII, focus in turn on the Australian prefixing and suffixing languages. The discussion of prefixing languages is reasonable given the then state of knowledge of these languages. Holmer, tends to assign personal prefixes to single consonant forms, treating the following vowels as separate prefixes. It is not clear whether the latter are actually morphemes or just meaningless augments. We suspect this analysis is motivated by the observation that it is often just these consonants that remain unchanged by morphophonemic processes (see p.53). But in many cases a better solution is to treat the prefixes having a vowel in underlying form, the quality of which is affected by the operation of morphophonemic processes.

Holmer observes that many northern prefixing languages have noun classes, and goes on to reject language classifications according to the number and nature of these classes—seemingly here construing language classification as necessarily genetic (pp.54–55).¹²

The treatment of suffixing languages is less satisfactory than the prefixing ones, since they fit Holmer's prototype less well—few have pronominal suffixes to verbs let alone possessive pronominal suffixes to nominals. Failing to adequately appreciate the status of bound pronominals in Western Desert—despite Trudinger's (1943) very clear and succinct explanation—he ends up concluding that the 'suffixes' derive historically from prior prefixes to verbs (p.58). No explanation is offered for why the bound pronominals should go onto the end of a verb if it is the first word of a clause. Worse, from examples with reflexive enclitics attached to initial verbs, he concludes that the reflexive derives from reanalysis of a prefix to the following nominal. The inevitable conclusion is that Western Desert languages illustrate the case of suffixing languages deriving from an earlier prefixing language.

There is also some discussion of ergativity in this section,¹³ and Holmer correctly observes that ergative marking in some languages does not extend to all nominal types—not to pronominals in some languages; at the same time he does not notice that pronominals (along with certain other nominals) in some languages make a nominative-accusative distinction, and wrongly asserts that Australian languages are unusual in world terms in this regard (p. 60).

Without a doubt the most surprising idea in this chapter is the suggestion (p.59) that nouns and verbs display—or originally displayed (Holmer equivocates on this point)—little difference! Partly this is a consequence of a failure to notice derivational affixes, and partly due to the failure to understand the principles of bound pronominal attachment. Later on the fact that some case markers can be attached to verbs is used as evidence for the same point.¹⁴

12 This is a strange critique, since Holmer's interpretation of his own prefixing-suffixing typology is explicitly non-genetic, though he does consider it to have historical or at least temporal relevance.

13 Holmer uses, somewhat confusingly, the three terms agentive, active, and ergative in reference to this case form. He appears to be one of the first Australianists since Wilhelm Schmidt (1919) to use the now accepted term *ergative*.

14 As Arthur Holmer observes (pers.comm.), this idea doubtless comes from Amerindian languages. He goes on to say that most probably Nils Holmer was primarily concerned with bound morphemes that ignore the distinction between nouns and verbs, attaching with equal facility to either—'bivalent' affixes in the terminology of Dixon (1976)—and thus grouping them into a single category. There is certainly some truth to the

Chapter VIII deals with some of the basic features of morphology; the discussion is quite detailed (it is one of the longest chapters in the book), and it is impossible to comment on every aspect of this treatment. Holmer observes that grammatical relations in both suffixing and (many) prefixing language are marked by case-marking suffixes (which he equates with postpositions), never by prefixes. He correctly notices that in many languages the marker goes on just one word of a phrase—though he incorrectly states that it is necessarily the last word that it goes onto. There are a good number of languages (e.g. from eastern Australia) where every word is inflected, and he does not remark on these. Holmer also correctly observes that in many prefixing (and some suffixing) languages systems of verbal ‘agreement’ perform the same function.

He is also right in observing that the distinction between nouns and adjectives is ‘an artificial one’, that does not correspond to a category underlying ‘the Australian mind’. What Holmer has in mind here is clearly the contrast between etic and emic. And he elsewhere cautions against etic interpretations, and proposes that grammatical categories in Australian languages be addressed from the point of view of the languages themselves, and by doing this we might perceive underlying semantic unity. Clearly this is what he is attempting to do with his discussion of case categories (pp.65–66), though this is not very clearly stated.

Also in the morphology chapter is a discussion of classification by generics (‘classifying words’) which Holmer contrasts with noun class systems as another type of noun classification system. He also observes that these generics can grammaticalise into class markers, citing the Marrithiyel *mi-* vegetable class prefix which he suggests is likely to be cognate with the common term for vegetable food, *mayi*. Likewise, Holmer recognises the grammaticalisation of the widespread *bula* ‘two’ to a dual suffix in some languages, sometimes to a conjunction (in NPs), as in Arrernte and various other languages, thereafter to a comitative marker, and ultimately perhaps a locative suffix.

This chapter concludes, somewhat unexpectedly, with a discussion of word order. Holmer comments on its freedom, and on the predominance of SOV order in suffixing languages.

Missing from this chapter is detailed discussion of verb morphology as such, either in suffixing or prefixing languages. Some information is to be found scattered elsewhere in the book—for instance, verb agreement by prefixes or suffixes—but we do not get a coherent picture of verbal structure as a whole, or of typical verbal categories such as tense, mood and aspect. What we do get, however, is brief discussion of auxiliary verbs, serial verb constructions, switch-reference, and associated motion constructions in Central Australian languages—without these more recently devised terms, of course.

Chapter IX, a brief excursus into semantics, begins by expounding a somewhat Malinowskian view of semantics (although Malinowski goes unmentioned) that stresses the context-sensitivity of semantics. A given lexical item can (as in all languages) have different senses in different contexts of use, indicating their ambiguity. Holmer then goes on to suggest that Australian languages tend to resemble one another in terms of the range of those senses that are linked together by lexical items. In this regard they are semantically more similar to one another than they are to European languages; nevertheless, some of these semantic commonalities can be found elsewhere, e.g. in some Austronesian and Amerindian languages.

Holmer employs the structuralist notion of *semanteme*, construed as a grouping of senses under a single lexeme, to identify recurrent patterns in Australian language semantics. He

proposition that bound morphology in some Australian languages fails to respect this major category distinction. Indeed, in some languages it is impossible to characterise the two major word classes simply in terms of disjoint classes of morphemes they collocate with, as has sometimes been suggested; rather, it is necessary to characterise them in terms of recurrent patterns of differences in the collocate sets (e.g. McGregor 1990, 2004).

discusses various examples—including the well-known ‘fire’, ‘firewood’, ‘wood’ conflation—suggesting an underlying semantic unity. However, he rests content with mentioning the correspondences and alluding to possible links. He does not attempt to explicitly draw out general principles behind the correspondences, such as the source-product conflation (or polysemy), perhaps first identified as such by Geoffrey O’Grady (1960), or to show how the contextual senses derive from the more abstract inherent senses through the influence of context.

Chapter X is a brief discussion of toponyms, that seems to be based largely on Worms (1944). Holmer begins by suggesting that toponyms are often simply general names for the geographical feature type. Doubtless many, if not all, examples of this sort are cases of mistaken identity, when a term for a topographic feature was elicited instead of a toponym. He also mentions naming in accordance to some characteristic of the place such as animal or plant species endemic to the place, or that have totemic associations with it. Various other principles are mentioned, including the use of body part terminology, usually via some mythological connection with an ancestral being, and ‘sentence names’, i.e. names that describe events occurring at the place (e.g. Luritja *Warulutarban’gu* (his spelling) ‘(where) the rock wallaby entered into the water’). Holmer concludes with the rather puzzling, not to say highly dubious, statement:¹⁵

Names of the latter type [i.e. the sentence name type—WBM & MM], especially, tend to make it quite clear to us that the native Australian toponymy has not by far reached the official status of ‘geographical name’ or in any sense become fit for handy gazetteer entry, as it has among us. (Holmer 1963b:83)

Chapter XI, entitled ‘metasyntax’, concerns what comes after syntax in linguistic investigations, that is, what is actually said by people, rather than the ways things can be expressed. This domain is not rule-governed, Holmer avers, suggesting that it is entirely a matter of ‘chrestomathy’—one can do no more than collect instances and display them for purposes of edification. Thus he fails to make any generalisations concerning the structure of narratives. He gives a few examples of texts in Aboriginal languages: the emu and the bustard (Yuwaalaraayi (Yualeai, Jualrai)), the red kangaroo and the euro (Arrernte (Aranda)), and the goanna (Wandarrang (Wandarang)). What he provides are fairly literal word-by-word translations of sample texts into English, with the occasional word from the source language thrown in; the original source texts are not given. Holmer makes the point that the sort of mythological texts found in Australian cultures have rather different social roles than do their corresponding genres in English. He also discusses one instance of a text about the goanna (in Yangman (Jangman)) that is told in the first person—which he attempts to explain through the idea that the narrator would have enacted the myth in the ceremonial context.¹⁶

Chapter XII concludes the book with speculations on the history and migrations of Australian languages, and possible relationships to languages outside of the continent. He begins by mentioning the characteristic feature of mythology whereby the movements of ancestral beings are traced along long paths, and raises the question of interpreting these as indicating previous population movements. He concludes that more evidence is required. From there he

15 As Peter Sutton observes (pers.comm.), the Western Desert is unusual in the extent to which nonce-toponyms are used ‘that may vary between occasions and be typically descriptive in character, or where the same place may so often have a plurality of names depending on informant.’ Myers (1986) makes a similar observation in relation to the Pintupi, another Western Desert group. As Sutton goes on to remark, this variability may be indicative of recent occupation of the region.

16 More likely this is a reflection of the widely reported phenomenon in which an individual identifies themselves with their Dreaming.

goes on to mention some recurrent characteristics of Australian Aboriginal languages suggesting their underlying unity. These include: the widespread *ng* diagnostic of first person singular in both prefixing and suffixing languages; and case markers such as the genitive-dative *-ka*, the accusative *-nha*, and the purposive, dative, etc. *-gu ~ -ku*. He also remarks on some widespread lexical correspondences, giving half a dozen items from Capell's 'common Australian'. In this connection he observes that some of the cognate body-part terms appear with inherent prefixes in prefixing languages.¹⁷

Holmer concludes by mentioning some lexical correspondences with languages of the Americas, and elsewhere. All are problematic, he recognises, and involve sporadic similarities (p.97). Equipped with his notion of the diachronic significance of the prefixing-suffixing typology, Holmer suggests as one scenario that the prefixing languages of northern Australia and Papua New Guinea region might represent the earliest tongues of the region.¹⁸ Just as the suffixing Austronesian languages took over in parts of the Papua New Guinea region, so might the suffixing languages of Australia have represented a migration subsequent to the migration of speakers of prefixing languages. They were subsequently forced further south on the Australian continent, consequent to a vigorous cultural growth in the northern prefixing languages.¹⁹ How this scenario fits with Holmer's expressed opinion of the unity of Australian languages is not clear.

To sum up, Holmer (1963b) is in many ways an interesting book for its time. Given that, at the time of writing, the author had no first-hand experience with Australian languages, one must conclude that he did a creditable job of understanding and interpreting the descriptions at his disposal. It is perhaps a pity that the book was not more widely known by the 1960s generation of Australianists. The book does, however, illustrate in some places how preconceptions can negatively influence analyses, and prevent one from seeing the situation in the most obvious terms. This does not greatly mar the book. Holmer's descriptive passages are generally quite reasonable, and usually display a good understanding and synthesis of those works available to him. It is primarily in his historical interpretations that he is led astray. But even there he throws out some interesting suggestions that bear a clear relation to ideas put forward a generation later by Johanna Nichols. One can also criticise Holmer for sometimes confusing (at least in his expression) the diachronic and the synchronic.

5.2 Holmer's first-hand investigations of Australian languages

5.2.1 Holmer's work on languages of northern New South Wales

From the fieldtrip Holmer undertook in 1964, three publications emerged treating Kutthung (also called Worimi) and Dungutti (Holmer 1966a, 1967; Holmer and Holmer 1969). Both of these languages are today classified as belonging to the Kuri subgroup of Yuin-Kuric, and are spoken in Eastern New South Wales (Map 8.1). Both were moribund at the time; Kutthung had just one fluent speaker (now deceased). Holmer describes the language situation as he found it in 1964:

17 Holmer cites examples from Schmidt (1919) of 'eye' in the 'Ord River dialects', replicating an error of that source—the forms are actually Nyulnyulan.

18 He also makes the observation that the simplest assumption in archaeology need not always be the correct one: perhaps Australia was not populated from the north-west.

19 Holmer's conclusion is thus diametrically opposed to Nichols': she suggests that 'in the languages of the Australian desert and the New Guinea highlands we see reflected the structural type of the languages spoken by the first humans to set foot on ancient Sahul' (Nichols 1997:168).

The latter [i.e. the language rather than the culture—WBM & MM] many times seemed to be the last distinctive trait to be lost; the Aboriginal languages, even in this part of New South Wales, appeared to be still spoken—although to a large extent mixed with English—and old people would actually address the children in the native language (this was observed at Bellbrook), who would understand them, although they probably did not speak any other language than English. Native words were, of course, universally used in cases when outsiders were not supposed to understand. It was also easier to obtain such elements of the language as pertained to the local form of civilization, or rather ways of thinking, resulting in general difficulty to obtain native terms for any English term wanted at any particular moment (for instance in order to fill in a questionnaire, which latter therefore sometimes would get a rather monotonous appearance), whereas the richness of the native language consisted in the use of several words for one term in English. (Holmer 1966a:5)

Holmer worked with a number of speakers of the two languages, scattered over a rather wide region, and who displayed varying degrees of fluency. They were, according to Holmer, ‘detrribalized’—unaware of traditional law and customs; all were bilingual, and presumably fluent speakers of Aboriginal English. Because of the socio-linguistic situation, there was heavy dialect mixture in their speech, which contributed to the difficulty of the fieldwork. Holmer lists ten principal informants for Kutthung, and seven for Dungutti. Two of the Kutthung speakers are singled out as most knowledgeable, Fred Bugg and Eddie Lobban (‘really “the last of the Kattang”’), along with three of the Dungutti speakers, Lenn Duckett, Doug Scott, and Lachlan Vale (Holmer 1966a:8). It seems that only these persons were tape recorded.

In *An attempt towards a comparative grammar of two Australian languages* (Holmer 1966a), Holmer presents structural descriptions of Kutthung and Dungutti.²⁰ Kutthung had been reported (Enright 1900) to be a very simple language in terms of morphology, and one of Holmer’s initial motives was to find out whether this really was the case (see above). His conclusion was that its simplicity had been overstated. Kutthung was indeed like the typical Pama-Nyungan language, showing tense-mood-aspect marking on verbs and case inflections on nominals; it differed little morphologically from Dungutti. Apparent simplicity could be attributed at least partly to language loss; moreover, in Holmer’s opinion, the languages had approached one another structurally due to contact. In the end, Kutthung and Dungutti are characterized as ‘simplified type of suffix languages’ (in the terminology of Holmer 1963b), or ‘the “Palaeo-Eurasian Suffix type”—formerly and still rather popularly referred to as the “agglutinative” type of languages’ (note 9, p.95). The comparative aspect promised in the title of the book goes largely unfulfilled, and is more or less left to the reader.

The phonologies of Kutthung and Dungutti are typical for Australian languages, with a single ‘devoiced’ series of plosives (p.12),²¹ six distinctive places of articulation for consonants (labial, dental, alveolar, retroflex, palatal, velar), and a three-vowel system (/a/, /i/, /u/); vowel length is stated to have some importance. The section on the structure of the word is actually phonotactics, as is the similarly titled section in Holmer (1963b). *Notes on historic phonology* (pp.28–32) is the only section where a comparative analysis is attempted; just a few isolated points are treated.

20 Nils Holmer apparently sent at least one preliminary draft of this work to Arthur Capell for comment. In a letter dated 20 September 1965, Capell suggests use of phonemic spelling (it seems from the content of the message that Holmer had been hesitating as to whether to use a phonetic or phonemic representation), as well as a few relatively minor comments.

21 This term (perhaps due originally to Hermann Nekeš under the influence of Fr. Wilhelm Schmidt’s (1907) phonetic text, and later approved by Arthur Capell) appears to denote a stop with zero voice onset time.

As just remarked, the two languages are said to have a single series of stop consonants. It appears that following short vowels 'stop sounds seem not only more clearly voiceless ..., but also somewhat lengthened' (Holmer 1966a:17). This is evidently allophonic conditioning. However, in Dungutti there are a small number of words where in this environment the stops are not realised by these voiceless and lengthened allophones. There are even a small number of minimal pairs. At this point the exposition becomes somewhat murky due to the author's failure to distinguish phonetic and phonemic representations by standard bracketing conventions; nor is the discussion helped by the absence of a tabulation of the phonemes and the orthographic symbols representing them. In the end Holmer opts for a geminate contrast, at least for the peripheral stops, and represents the geminates by the voiceless symbols, reserving the voiced symbols for the corresponding non-geminates.²²

This analysis is questionable. It seems from Holmer's exposition that, following a short vowel, the lengthened and unvoiced phones are the more common than the non-lengthened phones for peripheral stops, and the only variants of apical and laminal stops. This leads one to suspect that it is the short peripheral stops that are the odd man out, the marked members of the opposition, and thus that some other opposition than gemination (for example, tenseness), may be preferable analytically.

The structural analyses adopted in Holmer (1966a) are to a large extent reminiscent of Holmer (1966b); see also §5.3 below. Three word classes are identified: nominals, verbals and particles. There is no formal distinction between nouns and adjectives, nor between intransitive and transitive verbs. In Holmer (1966a), however, verbs and nominals are treated as distinct parts-of-speech, defined by simple morphological criteria. Particles include adverbs, postpositions, and subordinating conjunctions (the latter two are in fact suffixes); coordinating conjunctions do not exist. The languages have no personal inflections, but the verb does inflect for aspect. The case inflection on the noun is stated to be rudimentary and originally the case suffixes were postpositions. The case suffixes also appear on verbs, where they express modal meanings (Holmer 1966a:8). As is typical of Australian languages, the numeral system is minimal, with words for 'one', 'two', 'three, few', and 'many'. In general, Kutthung and Dungutti are stated to be typical Australian languages of the region.

Holmer suggests 'the notion of time does not properly exist in our sense among the Aborigines' and thus that it is inappropriate to talk of the grammatical category of tense in Australian languages. Richard See (1968:173) cites this notion approvingly, in relation to the Whorfian hypothesis, concluding that Holmer understood that the 'semantic correlates of verbal categories are primarily spatial rather than temporal'. Holmer does not, however, make a clear case for this, or explore the matter in detail.

His second publication on Kutthung and Dungutti, *An attempt towards a comparative grammar of two Australian languages, part II indices and vocabularies of Kattang and Thangatti* (Holmer 1967), consists of complete vocabularies of the materials gathered in 1964. These vocabularies also serve as an index to Holmer (1966a). The entries consist of the word in the Aboriginal language, possibly a reference to a section in Holmer (1966a), a translation of the term in English, possibly some examples, and, in some cases, the initials of the informant. At the end of the book is a list of errata and corrections to Holmer (1966a).

The third book, *Stories from two native tribes of Eastern Australia* (Holmer and Holmer 1969), which contains texts from Kutthung and Dungutti, was jointly authored by Nils Holmer and his wife Vanja E. Holmer, who was with him for a part of the fieldtrip. There are

22 The apical and palatal stops do not show this contrast; and since they are realised by lengthened 'devoiced' allophones Holmer opts to represent them by the voiceless symbols. This is not an entirely happy choice since it would seem to suggest these belong phonemically with the geminate peripheral rather than the ordinary peripherals.

20 Kutthung texts (16 in Kutthung with translations and 4 in English) and 12 Dungutti texts (11 in Dungutti with translations and 1 in English; plus one Dungutti text in English given separately in an appendix ‘as it seems to have no direct connection with the other material from the Thangatti tribe’). Comments are provided for the texts, and some references are made to Holmer (1966a). The aim in this book is to give ‘an idea of the morphology, syntax and “metasyntax” of these languages’ (p.8). There is no interlinear gloss line, and hardly any linguistic analysis, the comments being mostly about other things (mostly on the context where the text was told). The book is not very user-friendly, and to get anything out of the actual Kutthung and Dungutti texts, the two previously discussed publications must be consulted. This dramatically decreases the chances of the collection achieving its stated goals.

Overall, the main value of the three volumes is that they provide documentation (see Himmelmann 1998), if not comprehensive descriptions, of the two languages. Hale (1970) opines that the second volume is perhaps the most valuable for comparative purposes. In terms of actual comparative analysis beyond descriptive facts, their contribution is rather meagre. Richard See (1968:172) considers Holmer (1966a) to ‘reflect the level of analysis reached when data are organized after an initial period of field work’. Nevertheless, to situate it within the framework of descriptive work on Australian languages of the time, he goes on to say that ‘since the bulk of published material of the Australian languages is even more difficult to interpret, I would include this monograph with the handful that could be recommended to anyone interested in getting some idea of what the Australian languages are like’. Furthermore, Holmer manages to show that the languages are indeed closely related, even though earlier classifications treated them as belonging to different groups—see e.g. Schmidt (1919:99) on Kutthung, and (1919:124) on Dungutti.

Holmer did rather less fieldwork on Bundjalung (how much is impossible to divine from his publications). During his first fieldtrip of 1964, he worked with two speakers, Mrs Evelyn Ferguson and Mr Bill Turnbull, both of who lived at the time near Coffs Harbour. Both came from the vicinity of Coraki, and had lived as children at Doonoon, near Lismore. According to Holmer, there were no marked differences between their dialects, and both were fluent speakers of the language.

Holmer (1971b) is a fifty page sketch of Bundjalung, divided into three parts: a brief description of the grammar; a selection of texts; and a word list. The sketch grammar, which makes up just over half the work, covers the basics of phonology, morphology, and syntax. A few remarks on specific details of this book follow.

Comparison with other descriptions indicates that the short treatment of phonology is basically correct. Holmer correctly distinguishes just a dozen consonants—there is a single apical and a single laminal series, and just one rhotic—and three vowels with a length distinction. Holmer provides a quite reasonable discussion of the allophonic variation of the phonemes, remarking for instance on the fricative realisation of *b* and *g* in intervocalic position (see also Sharpe 1994:3).

Holmer distinguishes concrete words from particles, according to whether or not the word takes inflections. The former include nominals (nouns, adjectives, and numerals), articles, pronouns, and verbs; the latter include postpositions and connectives. The bulk of Part I is taken up with a discussion of the morphological potential of these items, with just a few remarks on word order.

The section on nominal morphology gives basic information on derivational suffixes,²³ and the allomorphy and usage of the seven cases Holmer identifies: nominative, ergative, ac-

23 The derivational suffixes are a mixed bag, including diminutives, a variety of nominalising suffixes (no glosses), as well as stem-final segments identified as suffixes by language-external comparison.

cusative, possessive/genitive, locative, ablative, and allative. One infers that a three-way case distinction is made for nominals with human reference (the accusative is stated as used only for human nominals (p.8)) and for pronouns (pp.10–11).²⁴ For other nominals, the distinction is two-way, ergative-absolutive (Holmer's nominative, which is unmarked or zero marked). (Remember that Holmer was writing before Silverstein's important paper on ergativity, Silverstein 1976.) Holmer states that it is difficult to precisely draw the line between postpositions and case suffixes, though it appears that the former may occur one per NP, while the latter must occur on every word of an NP. (Strangely, while noting their status as enclitics, he writes out most of the postpositions as separate words.)

The most unusual part-of-speech in the language according to Holmer's description is the category of articles, which is a group of four words/enclitics (their status seems unclear, and Holmer gives both possibilities) that mark the gender (masculine vs. feminine) and number (personal plural, or collective) of the preceding nominal, which is not declined for case. Insufficient information is provided to permit one to be certain what these words actually are, and what their functions might be.

Part II includes nine textlets, mostly of just a few sentences each. Included is a short conversational interaction, a song text, descriptions of everyday activities, and a myth. Again only free translations are provided, without interlinear glosses. Some comments are given on grammatical matters—for instance, it is remarked in connection with text 1 that the nominal *baigal* 'a man' occurs without the accusative suffix even though it serves as a direct object, indicating that the suffix is optional. This information, unfortunately, is not incorporated into the grammatical description itself.

Part III includes the entire set of words and morphemes collected in the field, amounting to roughly 700 items. Each entry refers to a section of the grammar, and provides a gloss (if it is a lexical word), or basic classificatory information (if a bound morpheme).

5.2.2 Holmer's work on Queensland languages

Results of Holmer's second fieldtrip to Queensland took rather longer than usual to appear, the first being published about twelve years after his return from the field, the second and third a further five and six years later. One further article—a copy of which we have been unable to obtain—probably deals with Meryam Mir and Saibai, which are also dealt with in Holmer (1988); this paper eventually saw the light of day in 1992 (Holmer 1992).

Overall, the publications resulting from the 1970–1973 fieldtrip are sketchier, descriptively weaker, and less insightful than those that emerged from the 1964 fieldtrip. They are clearly very much salvage studies, and are on the whole of less value than the three publications on Kutthung and Dungutti, which retain their worth because they have not been superseded. By contrast, many of the descriptions of Holmer's later publications were superseded before they even appeared, by publications based on post-1973 research.²⁵ For these reasons we provide sketchier treatment of these works, and rely more on the judgement of experts in the languages.

24 Something interesting seems to be going on in the pronouns, whereby 'the distinction of a **nominative** and an **ergative** tends to disappear' (p.10). It seems that the unmarked nominative of the first person singular is sometimes used instead of the ergative (p.11), though it is not stated what the situation is for the other pronouns—whether or not the ergative suffix is optionally omitted, or the ergative form extends to cover intransitive subjects.

25 This does not hold for all of the descriptions given in the later publications. For instance, it was not until the new millennium that a good modern sketch grammar of Darumbal (Darambal) appeared (Terrill 2002).



Plate 8.2: Nils Holmer on his second fieldtrip to Australia, Cherbourg, in 1970-1973.
Courtesy Arthur Holmer.

Holmer (1983) contains sketches of a number of languages of south east Queensland. The book is divided into three parts. Part I deals with seven languages of what he refers to as the Wakka group of the south-eastern part of Queensland (Waka-Kabic in O'Grady, Voegelin and Voegelin 1966:50): Waka Waka (Wakka-Wakka and Wuli-Wuli), Barunggam, Gooreng Gooreng (Goreng-Goreng), Gubbi Gubbi (Kabi-Kabi), and Butchulla (Batjala). Part II deals with seven languages spoken in a region a bit to the north and west of the Wakka languages, roughly in Central Queensland: Kungkari (Gunggari), Bidjara, Margany (Marganj), Gangulu, Wiri (Wirri), Biri, and Ngawun. These languages belong to what Holmer dubs the Gunggari group—Pama-Maric in O'Grady, Voegelin and Voegelin (1966:51–52). Part III discusses four other languages not belonging to either group: Nunukul (Nunagal), Manandjali, Yuwaalaraay, and Darumbal.

Parts I and II begin with brief outlines of the main features of the two groups, with discussion of the geographical location and overall language situation, orthographic conventions, and brief remarks on shared phonological and morphological characteristics of the groups.

Basic outline descriptions of each language are given, ranging in length from just two to a little under fifty pages, depending on the amount of information Holmer was able to collect. Effectively the same structure is adopted for each description, including the descriptions of Part III: introductory remarks locating the language and providing some indication of the language situation, etc.; a list of informants providing some brief biographical information; a section on phonology; and a section on morphology. The phonological sections are a mixture of synchronic descriptions and diachronic proposals concerning the evolution of the modern systems. The morphological sections are, by contrast, principally synchronic descriptions that cover the major parts-of-speech and their morphological variations, as well as (in most cases) brief remarks on syntax (going under the heading of 'construction'). There is a good deal of comparison between the languages (especially in Parts I and II) as regards their phonology and morphology, and the descriptions in many cases focus on the inter-language differences, thus reducing repetition. The resulting work does not, however, come across as a comparative pan-varietal grammar.

A consolidated wordlist is provided for each subgroup of the two groups, organised alphabetically according to headwords in one of the languages, specifically the language Holmer considered the most significant member of the group; lexemes from the other languages are included and distinguished by abbreviations. In Part III, a separate wordlist is provided for each language. Under each headword can be found information on part-of-speech membership and a basic gloss; additional information sometimes includes attested inflected forms, brief example phrases or clauses, and reference to the relevant section of the grammatical description in which discussion can be found. One perhaps useful feature of the work is that cited words and larger units are sourced by informant when not supported by independent evidence from other speakers. Unfortunately, no sample texts are provided for any language.

According to Terrill (1998:1), Biri, Wiri, and Gangulu are in a dialectal relationship with one another. As regards Holmer's work on these languages, Angela Terrill remarks that his phonological analysis was unusual in that he denied the existence of a distinct interdental series, which is clearly present in the languages (Terrill 1998:5–6). She also comments that his morphological analysis differs somewhat from that of another source on the languages, Beale (1974) (not cited in Holmer's reference list), although she does not discuss details of the differences.

Available information on the Gangulu dialect is quite poor, especially the morphology (Terrill 1998:78). Holmer's records are amongst the most extensive, but unfortunately, Terrill cautions, due to the poor reliability of his studies of the other dialects, one cannot be certain how reliable his work on Gangulu is, especially since little supporting data is provided in Holmer (1983). Holmer suggests that there are two Gangulu dialects, A and B, though he does not substantiate the claim, or give a systematic description of the differences. He identifies five nominal cases, comitative, privative (two affixes), ergative, locative, and allative, which Terrill (1998:82) suggests is more likely to be a dative.

Holmer (1988) provides basic grammatical information on ten or so more Queensland languages not covered in the 1983 book: Meryam Mir; Saibai; Kuku Puyun (Gugu-Bujun), a dialect of Kuku Yalanji;²⁶ Kaanju; Kuku Yalanji (Koko-Yalandji); Guugu Yimidhirr; Yukulta (Gangulida); Bundjil; Waanyi; Garrwa; Bundhamara (Punthamara); and Galali. The eight chapters of this book, which range from five to about thirty pages, provide brief information on the location and provenance of the languages, the informants, phonology, and basic morphology. Each chapter also contains an alphabetically-organised word and morpheme list that specifies the part-of-speech category; a gloss; where relevant reference to a section of the grammatical sketch; and sometimes examples of usage. Various morphological forms of some words are given, sometimes under different headwords, sometimes under a single headword. Perhaps the lists represent the entirety of Holmer's lexical corpora, though this is not stated.

In her review of Holmer (1988), Luise Hercus (1991) is overall quite unimpressed, evaluating the book effectively as 'fieldnotes' that have not been checked against any other information available on the languages. The book, she says, 'is written as if in a vacuum', completely ignoring not only detailed investigations of the languages covered subsequent to Holmer's investigations of the early 1970s, but even Capell 1956! On a more positive note, she remarks that the sections on Bundhamara and Galali are more complete, that one 'can see some of Holmer's perspicacity as a linguist', and that Holmer's materials on these languages remain useful despite subsequent work.

Her conclusion is that 'It remains nevertheless open to doubt whether there is justification for an uncritical edition of any scholar's fieldnotes' (p. 180). Ultimately, this is at least as

26 We thank Peter Sutton for putting us straight on the identity of this language.

much a reflection on the publication policy of Pacific Linguistics at the time as it is on Holmer as an author. All of Holmer's later works would have benefited from serious editing and the inclusion of extensive commentary. The inclusion of facsimiles of his fieldnotes might have made them even more useful as historical documents.

Holmer remarks that during his 1970–1973 fieldtrip he went to Tully on the advice of Biri informants, who reported 'a language of the same type in the North-East along the coastline between Townsville and Cairns'. This turned out not to be the case, though Holmer did collect data on the languages he found, and presented it in Holmer (1989). These languages he refers to as follows: 'Murray Upper (*mariaba*); Tully (*gulɲaj*, *gurɲaj*, etc.). Also: *ɲumaj*, *ɲurmaj*, *muɲaj* (Tully; at Davidson); *d'irbal* (at Murray Upper); *giramaj* (at Cardwell).' (p. 135). In fact these are all dialects of Dyirbal (see below). In addition to the introduction listing the dialects and the main informants, the article is divided into sections on phonology and morphology; it also includes a vocabulary, which takes two thirds of the roughly thirty pages of the article. There is no bibliography (the article does not contain a single reference!). In the brief section on phonology, the phonemes are listed (three vowels and thirteen consonants), and a couple of phonetic processes are described. In the section on morphology, Holmer treats nominal derivation, declension, articles, personal pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, interrogative-indefinite pronouns, verbal stems and derivation, as well as conjugation. In the vocabulary, the entries contain some morphological information, translations for lexical items and references to sections in the text for grammatical morphemes, examples in some cases, and often initials of informants.

Like many of Holmer's later publications on Australian languages, Holmer (1989) is sketchy and lacks in analytical depth. In a discussion note, Dixon (1992) criticises the article for not being very reliable and for completely ignoring previous work; in the same note he addresses a similar critique to Holmer (1983) and Holmer (1988). Despite the fact that Dixon's grammar of Dyirbal (Dixon 1972) was published 17 years before Holmer's article, Holmer does not mention it or any other work on the language. Holmer does not refer to 'the Tully dialects' as Dyirbal (though one of his dialects is called *d'irbal*). According to Dixon, the article was included as a chapter in the manuscript submitted to Pacific Linguistics which appeared as Holmer (1988). The chapter had been omitted then because it had many errors and contained nothing new to what had already been published on Dyirbal.²⁷ Nevertheless, Holmer published it as a separate paper the next year. Dixon points out some shortcomings in Holmer's analysis, and notes that the forms and meanings of words are often given erroneously. Dixon's critique seems fully justified. Dixon could, however, have indicated some places where Holmer does not go wrong, especially since he only takes up a couple of points in Holmer's analysis, and since few readers of *Studia Linguistica* are experts on Dyirbal.

5.3 Semantics

Semantics played an important role in Nils Holmer's thought, and in 1966 he published *Oceanic semantics (a study in the framing of concepts in the native languages of Australia and Oceania)* (Holmer 1966c). This is a study in comparative semantics, geographically encompassing the whole of Oceania (including Australia) as well as insular south east Asia, and including Austronesian, Papuan and Australian languages. Holmer's interest in comparative semantics can be traced as far back as the 1920s when he translated Turgenev's *Fathers and sons* (A. Holmer 1994). The difficulties he encountered in trying to find appropriate terms led him to a conclusion that permeated his subsequent work: 'The difference between speakers of

27 R.M.W. Dixon had been involved in this decision, being a referee for this chapter.

different languages is not only how they say things; it is also what they say.' (A. Holmer 1994:115). Holmer was thus from early on interested in how meaning categories differ across languages. This also hinges on what Holmer calls 'metasyntax' (see §5.1 above). In the introduction, Holmer introduces the term *semanteme*, but does not apply it in the actual analyses, and the approach is not explicitly that of structural semantics, which was strong at the time. The substance of the book is divided into three sections: *Morphological concepts and categories*, *Lexical concepts*, and *Phraseological points*, each of which is treated in turn below.

The first part, *Morphological concepts and categories*, discusses the semantics of grammatical categories, i.e. grammatical meaning, although mainly concentrating on the categories expressed morphologically. In the introduction Holmer notes that (linguistic) semantics is usually mostly concerned with the lexicon, but reminds the reader that the morphological concepts expressed by a language should receive equal attention. In this section Holmer treats various grammatical meanings, only some of which will be discussed here. As in Holmer (1963b) (see above), nouns and verbs are again stated to be poorly distinguished, this time in the whole of Oceania. Another surprising claim is that the notion of time is not a prominent feature of Australian languages, and TAM inflection is primarily aspectual rather than temporal. (Australian languages are said to show an analogy with older Indo-European languages, which thus share this feature attributed to primitive languages by Holmer, see below.) More significant is the observation that TAM inflections have a nominal origin.

Holmer observes, not entirely correctly, that neither Australian nor Austronesian languages use regular plural noun inflection; i.e. nouns are unspecified for number. The elaborate personal pronoun and demonstrative systems are also discussed, and it is noted that personal inflection is rudimentary. It is stated that case inflection is entirely local, that there is nothing corresponding to the three important non-local cases (nominative, genitive, accusative) of Indo-European and Semitic languages. (But see below on the existence of an agentive (ergative) and accusative case in various Australian languages.) A hint of the accusative system is, Holmer admits, found in pronouns in some Australian languages: 'Some Australian languages do have a case form corresponding to the Latin accusative in certain cases, but it is used in a rather limited way (possibly of persons only).' (p.67, note 24). The question of whether passive constructions exist is addressed, but antipassives are ignored. The non-distinction between indefinites and interrogatives is seen as a peculiarity, though from a modern typological perspective this is hardly surprising (see e.g. Mushin 1995; Haspelmath 1997).

At this point one wonders why Holmer uses Indo-European languages almost exclusively as his *tertium comparationis*. This is surprising given his expertise in a wide variety of languages, including Native American ones. The discussion of relative clauses and comparatives is also marred by an Indo-European perspective. Since the functions are not expressed morphologically, the categories do not exist for Holmer. He does discuss functional equivalents, but concludes that they are not really comparatives or relatives. As shown by Stassen (1985), the Standard Average European comparative construction is 'exotic'. Holmer is aware of its rarity. He does discuss functional equivalents, but concludes, in contrast to today's functionalist views, that these constructions are not really comparatives.

The second part, *Lexical concepts*, turns to lexical semantics. In this section Holmer discusses some lexical concepts and their uses and associations in the languages of Oceania. The idea behind the comparison is that 'certain associations of ideas are more direct and immediate in certain languages or linguistic areas and more indirect and more vaguely felt in some others' (Holmer 1966c:31). The difficulties of a systematic study of lexical meanings is acknowledged, and it is stated that the emphasis is on the facts discovered more than on defining a group of languages. In discussing the concept 'eye', Holmer makes the dubious remark that

in modern European languages its uses are mostly anatomical, but that more ‘primitive’ peoples extend its use to denote different non-anatomical concepts such as ‘sun’, ‘water hole’, etc. (see e.g. Austin, Ellis and Hercus 1976). The same ideas surface in the discussion of many other concepts, e.g. ‘arm’. In modern cognitive terms we would talk about metaphorical and metonymic uses, but in Holmer’s times these terms were not part of the linguist’s basic tool kit, though they were firmly entrenched in traditions of rhetoric and literary studies. Instead, Holmer uses the term ‘derived concept’ to refer to these extended uses, but notes that for the speakers these are single concepts.

From today’s perspective, equipped with the notion of embodiment, we would take the concrete anatomical uses as primary, at least diachronically. There is no discussion of diachrony, although the term ‘derived’ implies some kind of ordering between the different uses. In the discussion of ‘body’, it is noted that this concept also covers some aspects of the concept of ‘self’. These aspects could have been discussed in the section on grammatical meanings where similar meanings were taken up; seen from the modern perspective, this is interesting, since we now know more about the role of terms like ‘body’ in reflexive constructions. Kinship terminologies are discussed, and it is noted that they are not based on genealogy as in Europe, but rather on proximity. In connection with time and space, it is again noted that they are not differentiated as in Indo-European languages, and that there is no abstract term for time in Australian languages; time thus means little to the Aborigines. There is discussion of ideas that are distinguished in Europe but not in Australia, e.g. ‘do/make’ vs. ‘say’, ‘hear’ vs. ‘think’, but no mention of concepts distinguished in Australia but not in Europe. In general, the section on lexical concepts is little better than the one on grammatical meanings, but is less outdated, due largely to the fact that grammatical categories and their meanings have received a lot of attention in comparative and typological studies, while lexical typology still is in its infancy.

The third part, *Phraseological points*, concerns syntax. It treats issues such as auxiliary constructions, negation, possession, and connectives. In this section semantics moves somewhat to the background, and formal aspects gain ground. Negators are stated to be lexical items rather than unanalysable grammatical morphemes, but at least for the examples given from Australian languages, the etymologies cannot be shown. The connection of negation and irrealis, so common in Australian languages (see Miestamo 2005:192), is not mentioned. Holmer notes the absence of the verb ‘to have’—which is only partly true—and says the situation is ‘more or less as in Gaelic, Finnish or Russian still today’. Interestingly, in Holmer (1963b:76) we find that the absence of such a verb is a typical property of ‘primitive’ languages; see Stassen (2005) for the world-wide distribution of the different types of predicative possession. Somewhat daring is the claim about the connective *ka* being one of the most widely used particles in the world, especially well represented in America and Oceania, having a similar semantic range in all parts where it occurs. Some problems of understanding and translation are addressed in the end of the section, and here we come back to the original motivations of Holmer’s interest in semantics and language use. Separating ‘phraseology’ and morphological concepts is not a very good solution, and the organisation of the book would have been better with only two sections, *Grammatical concepts*, and *Lexical concepts*. Some topics would then have found their place more naturally.

One question to be addressed is whether Oceania constitutes a linguistic area in terms of semantics. After all, Holmer is engaged in a kind of areal semantics in this study, and briefly speculates on the role of language contacts.²⁸ Holmer finds many similarities (and few differ-

28 But recall that, as noted above, at least as far as lexical concepts are concerned, Holmer’s goals are in establishing facts rather than in defining a linguistic area.

ences) between Australia and the rest of Oceania (in practice Austronesian languages), especially as compared to European languages. But given Holmer's biased *tertium comparationis*, no conclusions can be drawn. Maybe the European languages are the 'exotic' ones, rather than Oceania forming a unified whole. As we know today, for many of the points discussed, this is indeed the case. This is further supported by the existence of similarities between Native American languages and languages of Oceania.

For Holmer, the similarities between the languages of Oceania and the Americas are evidence of their being remote marginal areas in linguistic evolution. Prehistoric contacts are mentioned as a possible source for the similarities (more space is devoted to this question in Holmer 1963b; see §5.1). The evolutionary perspective resurfaces at many points in the book. Holmer argues that no language is primitive in the sense that it be less effective as a tool of communication; rather languages are just different. Yet, despite his warnings against the use of the term 'primitive' (Holmer 1963b; see §5.1), Holmer uses it all too readily—as already seen, many properties found in Oceania are typical of 'primitive' languages for Holmer.

At some points Holmer shows Whorfian aspects in his thinking (albeit without reference to Whorf). For example in connection with cause and effect (p. 29) he doubts whether speakers can grasp the difference between English 'if' and 'after', as these are not distinguished in Oceania. In the conclusion to the book, Holmer dwells briefly on the idea that the conceptual structure of a language affects the myths and beliefs of the speakers.

As is evident from the preceding discussion, the role of Indo-European languages as the *tertium comparationis* is strong; thus the perspective is not typological in the modern sense. This is surprising, given Holmer's expertise in languages from diverse parts of the world, and renders the comparative semantic approach somewhat less interesting.

As to the languages dealt with, Austronesian and Australian languages are—understandably—much better represented than Papuan ones, and often the generalisations concerning Australian languages are based on the languages that Holmer has first-hand knowledge of, viz. Kutthung and Dungutti. Compared to the brief chapter on semantics in Holmer (1963b), written before Holmer had done any fieldwork in Australia, the database for Australian languages is better in the sense that he now has direct contact with the data. But it is also more biased.

6. Conclusion

Overall, reviews of Nils Holmer's descriptions of Australian languages were not wildly enthusiastic; indeed, they have sometimes bordered on the negative. Holmer's descriptions certainly do suffer from being brief—often skimpy—sketches lacking in analytical depth, as observed by reviewers. His work on Australian languages began at the cusp of the modern period of investigations, in the early 1960s (see McGregor, this volume). Within the Australianist tradition, his published research would seem to be not atypical of those times—it is not noticeably worse than the majority of grammatical sketches of the 1950s and early 1960s—as acknowledged even by negative reviewers such as Richard See. In terms of quality, it seems consistent with Holmer's earlier work on Amerindian languages. One criticism is that there is little evidence of development in the descriptions over the years. Holmer did not move with the times or keep up with the significant improvements in the quality of descriptive grammars of Australian languages that began in the 1960s and intensified in the 1970s.

Holmer's publications are not very user-friendly, reducing their documentary value. His grammatical descriptions suffer from an almost exclusively prose layout: tabulations and

graphic displays such as maps are rare, and examples are almost always embedded in the text without morpheme-by-morpheme glosses. This not only reduces their usefulness, but also imposes a heavy burden on the reader. On the other hand, the descriptions are not marred by dated theoretical approaches unimaginatively applied, accompanied by opaque symbolisation—a criticism that can be levelled at some descriptions from the same period, (e.g. O’Grady 1964; Coate and Oates 1970; Glass and Hackett 1970).

From today’s perspective, the main significance of Holmer’s work in Australia is in providing documentation for endangered languages, especially Dungutti and Kutthung,²⁹ but also some Queensland languages. We have seen that this documentation is not always as reliable as portrayed by Hovdhaugen *et al.* (2000:476) (see §2 above), particularly his late work. But this advises caution in using his corpora, rather than ignoring them.

Unlike the majority of his earlier publications, Holmer’s last works all took a considerable time to appear; and when they did appear, they did so in almost unedited form. This raises concerns about appropriate modes of dissemination of materials gathered during fieldwork on poorly documented and moribund languages, and in what form. To return to Luise Hercus’ criticism of Holmer (1988), is it better to have relatively easily available compilations of a scholar’s fieldnotes on such languages, even if uncritical, than for it to remain relatively inaccessible? Nils Holmer believed so. These days, electronic media offer an alternative way of facilitating access to relatively undoctored fieldnotes while acknowledging the substance of Hercus’ observation.

Finally, the general works (Holmer 1963b, 1966b), though now outdated, were significant for their times, and especially the former deserves to have been better known. Some of Holmer’s typological ideas also deserve to be more widely appreciated.

Appendix: Bibliography of Nils Holmer’s publications relevant to Australian languages

As the following bibliography reveals, Holmer’s list of publications on Australian languages is exceptional in the sense that he starts from the general works and ends with what are effectively fieldnotes, the mirror image of what one would normally do.

Holmer, Nils Magnus, 1963, *On the history and structure of the Australian languages*. Uppsala: Lundequist.

1966, *Oceanic semantics: a study in the framing of concepts in the native languages of Australia and Oceania*. Uppsala: Lundequist.

1966, *An attempt towards a comparative grammar of two Australian languages*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.

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29 Recent events bear out this observation. It has been brought to our attention by Harold Koch (pers.comm., 22 March 2007) that a revised version of the Kattang texts in Holmer and Holmer (1969) was produced by Amanda Lissarrague in 2005 for the Many Rivers Aboriginal Language Centre, for the Kattang community. The texts are reproduced in the modern orthography, and morpheme divisions and glosses are added.

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