A Typology of Absolute Frames of Reference in Australia

Dr. Dorothea Hoffmann

This paper presents the results of a detailed survey of absolute directional systems across Australia on the basis of published and unpublished material as well as fieldwork data of 117 languages. It provides the first systematic overview of such systems in Australia.

The typological overview takes into account cultural (Hoffmann, 2019) and specifically geographic salience (Palmer, 2015, Palmer et al., 2017) while also revisiting existing classifications of absolute systems. The focus of this paper is threefold:

Firstly, descriptions of spatial systems in published grammars are usually limited in scope and often assume a correspondence to compass-based Western systems of four-point axes of north-south-east-west as in Nunggubuyu (Heath, 1984). However, under scrutiny, some of these assumptions might not hold. Additionally, cultural salience might play a role. Closer inspection of many systems reveals a much greater variety and possible systematic correspondence to environmental and cultural features than what has been noted in grammatical descriptions and dictionaries.

Secondly, careful analysis of which absolute systems typically co-occur within one language expands the typology further.

Thirdly, I investigate to what extend environmental features determine the choice of absolute systems within a language as predicted by the sociotopographic model (Palmer et al., 2017).

In sum, this paper sets out to create the first systematic typological overview of absolute systems in Australia taking into account cultural (Hoffmann, 2019) and geographic salience (Palmer 2015; Palmer et al., 2017) and revisiting existing classifications of absolute systems in many languages. As a result, the study provides an important basis for more in-depth investigations into the geographic and cultural roots of individual language's systems.

References:

Heath, J. (1984). *Functional grammar of Nunggubuyu*. Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Darwin.

Hoffmann, D. (2019). Restrictions on the Usage of Spatial Frames of Reference in Location and Orientation Descriptions: Evidence from three Australian Languages. *Australian Journal of Linguistics,* 39(1):1-31

Palmer, B. (2015). Topography in language. In Busser, R. D. and LaPolla, R. J., editors, Language Structure and Environment: Social, cultural, and natural factors, volume 6, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 179–226.

Palmer, B., J. Lum, J. Schlossberg & A. Gaby. 2017. How does the environment shape spatial language? Evidence for sociotopography. *Linguistic Typology* 21(3):457-491