PREFACE

Martuthunira is an Australian language of the Pama-Nyungan family. Originally spoken by the peoples inhabiting the coastal plain between the Robe and Fortescue rivers in the Pilbara region of Western Australia, the language now has (as this book goes to print) just one remaining speaker. However, the loss of the language is not a consequence of the speakers giving up Martuthunira in favour of some other language. Martuthunira has been lost because its speakers have all died: through misadventure, massive social upheaval, and a plethora of introduced diseases and vices. It is too late to save Martuthunira. Already it is a language serving no social purpose and all too soon will survive only as a collection of tape-recorded and transcribed texts and elicitation sessions.

My approach to description is eclectic – the discussions of phonology and morphosyntax, while informed by theoretical debate, deliberately avoid reference to the constructs of any current theoretical model. My belief is that, as a result, the language will have a better chance of speaking for itself and the grammatical description will have a longer life. For the same reason I make very little use of constructed language examples but have attempted to make maximal use of examples taken from 'natural' text. My hope is firstly that something of the idiomatic beauty of the language will reach the reader by osmosis and, secondly, that readers will be given the best possible chance of finding things in the language that I have not, as well as the data from which to question my analyses.

Martuthunira is of general typological interest for a number of reasons. First, like other members of the Ngayarda subgroup of Pama-Nyungan, it has a consistent nominative-accusative pattern of case-marking and a productive passive voice. In this it stands in contrast to the larger number of (ergative) Australian languages. Second, it evidences a high degree of 'multiple case-marking', a phenomenon in which nominals bear a sequence of case suffixes, each indicating the role of the marked constituent in increasingly complex levels of structure. Third, it has a particularly rich system (by Australian standards) of multiple-clause syntax, the result of the combination of a number of types of subordinate clause pattern, the voice system and switch-reference. It is one of very few languages in the world which combine switch-reference with the use of an active-passive voice distinction in complex sentences.

There are few field linguists who can resist the opportunity to embark on the voyage of discovery represented by a previously uncharted language, but it is only fair to say that recording Martuthunira was not my idea. I first met Algy Paterson in January 1980 when he was introduced to me at an initiation meeting on Peedamullah Station. At the time, I was learning Panyjima and Algy asked me to find the time to record Martuthunira. He saw himself as the last fully competent speaker of his mother's language and was desperate to pass on that knowledge. Two months later he made the hundred-mile journey into Onslow and we made our first recordings. Since then I have made a number of trips to the Pilbara and have lived with Algy and his wife Mabel at Warramboo homestead and travelled with them throughout Martuthunira and Kurrama country. Only a small part of what they have taught me in those fourteen years is represented in this book, and I owe them both an immeasurable debt.

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