

Speaker: **Claire Bowers**
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Title: **Top-down and bottom-up: Pama-Nyungan in context**

Date: Monday, February 04, 2008
Time: 4:00pm
Place: Rosenfeld Hall (corner Temple & Grove)

Abstract:

Ever since serious work began on Australia's Indigenous languages, there have been arguments about their exceptional status. This exceptionality has come into focus no more clearly than in historical linguistics and prehistory. The Pama-Nyungan family, for example, is Wichmann's (2006) main exception to correlations between language family size in hunter-gatherer communities (see also Wichmann et al 2007). Others have claimed that the very notion of a 'family' is largely untestable in Australia, due to millennia diffusion of features between language groups (e.g. Dixon 2002); other arguments highlight Australia's long isolation from the rest of the world, implying that there is no reason to expect methods elsewhere to be applicable here (Clendon 2006). Conversely, O'Grady and Hale (2004), Alpher (2004) and others deny the exceptionality of Pama-Nyungan, arguing instead that gaps in scholarship and data are responsible for the picture of exceptionality.

In this talk I examine the arguments for the 'exceptional' status of the Pama-Nyungan family and place them in the context of wider studies in historical linguistics. If Pama-Nyungan is indeed exceptional, the reasons it stands outside existing models are important. I focus here on a single subgroup of Pama-Nyungan, the Karnic languages (formerly spoken in the Lake Eyre Basin in Central Australia). I use the dual approach of 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' reconstruction to argue that the Karnic facts are expected in a model which combines areality and dialectology. In the bottom-up approach, I show that reconstruction by the comparative method (as expected) allows the differentiation of borrowing and descent with a high degree of plausibility, using the same methods employed elsewhere in the world. However, such reconstructions do not lead to neat family trees. Comparing top-down results from different various models -- including punctuated equilibrium, tree-like evolution and the wave model -- is also instructive. I conclude here that the best explanation for Karnic (the one that most plausibly fits the linguistic and archeological data and which is also compatible with knowledge from elsewhere) is that potential subgrouping results from late long-standing non-bunching isoglosses.