

## **Taking the Australianist perspective** *A view of TAM from down under*

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As a matter of fact, and in spite of some recent efforts in that direction, (cf. e.g. (Stirling and Dench 2012)), Australian languages offer a wealth of still imperfectly understood TAM phenomena. The intrinsic difficulty of working on such understudied data is compounded by its almost necessarily sparse nature, particularly because of the cost of fieldwork 'down under' and the dwindling numbers of speakers of Aboriginal languages. The difficult and seemingly exotic nature of much of the data encountered in Australia has made Australianists (Dixon 1971; Ameka, Dench, and Evans 2006) especially wary of 'a priori' conceptualizations (cf. e.g. (Haspelmath 2007)), even in a somewhat extreme fashion (Evans and Levinson 2009). While it is certainly good to stay clear of a strong 'aprioristic' approach in order to avoid theoretical misconceptions, I will argue that cultivating a strict division of labour between descriptive, language-specific approaches, and typological/theoretical approaches can be just as perilous – thus, the resulting descriptions of TAM phenomena in these languages are sometimes quite idiosyncratic, much to the distress of the eager theoretical linguist attempting to work on them.

The talk will proceed as follows. I will first provide a short review of some common and striking TAM features among Australian languages (productive Aktionsart composition by complex predicate systems, rich TAM inflexions, unusual types of derivational TA marking...), before setting to show how the descriptive and theoretical (typological or formal) study of TAM phenomena in Australia can benefit from a better trade-off between detailed, non-aprioristic empirical work, and more adaptable comparative concepts than have been sometimes used in existing typological or theoretical work. I will strive to show how certain seemingly 'exotic' Australian TAM facts, such as e.g. the purported absence of 'perfect' tenses on the continent (Dahl and Velupillai 2011) or the use of so-called 'converbal constructions' to order events in Iwaidjan languages (Singer 2006, 132), can be re-appraised by connecting them with other facts in well- (or at least better) described languages, both in terms of parallelism and difference.

This talk is essentially a plea in favour of combining (first-hand) empirical work with cautious but substantial theoretical conceptualization, and balancing language-specific, descriptive concerns with cross-linguistic, theoretical concerns, each of them inviting some kind of perspective-shift in the other. I will essentially argue that when adequately mediated by flexible comparative TAM concepts, Australian data become much less 'exotic', and can bring us to consider in a new light other facts in better-described languages (as well as the reverse, of course) – and from there, enrich our general theoretical knowledge.

### **References**

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