

OBITUARY

ARTHUR CAPELL (1902 - 1986)

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Linguistics in Melanesia lost one of its founding fathers, and linguists one of their mentors, when Arthur Capell passed away on August 10, 1986, after a series of illnesses.

Born in 1902, he graduated from the University of Sydney as the University medallist in Classics in 1922. He taught high school for three years, and was then ordained, in 1925, as a minister in the Church of England.

For ten years after his ordination he carried out pastoral duties in the diocese of Newcastle, New South Wales, but also continued his linguistic studies, graduating with an Honours M.A. in Classics from Sydney in 1931. He left Australia in 1935 to pursue doctoral studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London, and graduated with the Ph.D. in 1938. (His thesis, The Linguistic Position of South-Eastern Papua, was published in 1943).

Returning to Australia, he carried out two long stints of survey work in the north and north-west, interrupted by a period in Fiji, before joining the Department of Anthropology at the University of Sydney in 1944 as an acting Lecturer. He was appointed Lecturer in 1945, and promoted to Reader in 1949, a position he held until his retirement in 1967.

His breadth of interest was immense. He researched and published widely on Australian, Papuan and Austronesian languages and linguistics. Within the Austronesian field the languages of Melanesia attracted his main attention, but he also published on Micronesian, Polynesian, and Western Austronesian languages. His

publications include descriptive, sociolinguistic, and comparative studies, and include a number of dictionaries (among them Fijian, Palauan, and (West) Futuna). He published also on theoretical issues, and on language policy and language and education. He wrote a number of textbooks, and also produced field-guides for those intending to work on or learn both Australian and Papua New Guinea languages. In addition, he has a number of anthropological articles to his credit.

If one had to point to one area where his contribution was particularly outstanding, it would be his pioneering work on Australian languages and the Australian linguistic situation. His studies in the north-west brought to light the existence of languages typologically quite different from those of the rest of Australia. This was followed up by work of a broadly comparative kind, laying the foundations for the tremendous advances in Australian linguistics which the last decade or two have seen.

In the Melanesian area, his studies of the languages of the New Guinea Highlands just after World War II were probably the first to demonstrate the error in the earlier view that there were no groupings of Papuan languages of any significant size. Again, we find here Capell laying the foundations for later scholars, whose subsequent work has enormously expanded our view of inter-relationships among Papuan languages.

In the Austronesian field, his publications include grammatical and lexicographic studies of a number of languages, mainly in Melanesia. He was also very deeply interested in comparative studies, especially with a view to the reconstruction of the linguistic prehistory of the region. Many of his propositions in this area attracted a great deal of criticism. For example, his view that the "aberrant" nature of many Austronesian languages of Melanesia was due to the influence of different Papuan languages on Indonesian languages belonging to different migrations - dubbed the "Pidginization Hypothesis" by its critics - was

roundly attacked by a number of scholars in the 1960s. More recent studies, however, have shown that much of what he had to say on this topic was very much on the right track: that although the separate Indonesian migrations theory may not be tenable, Austronesian-Papuan contact does appear to explain some of the aberrancies.

His theory that the Polynesian Outliers represented early "stopovers" of Polynesians migrating through Melanesia into Polynesia also stimulated debate. Ultimately, his theory has been proved wrong; but his preparedness to put forward and try to justify an unpopular view forced other scholars to critically examine the evidence for the contrary view, and thus led to our better understanding of this particular aspect of Pacific prehistory.

His contributions to the establishment of linguistics as a discipline in Australia should also be noted. In addition to teaching linguistics and linguistics-related courses within the Department of Anthropology, he also established a separate Linguistics program as such, in collaboration with Professor G.P. Shipp of the Department of Greek. His courses were innovative in that they did not follow the traditional mould of relying heavily on Indo-European languages for examples, but exposed students to a much wider variety of languages. His well-known textbooks, Beginning Linguistics and Studies in Socio-Linguistics, both published in 1966 reflect this catholic approach. The eventual establishment of a Department of Linguistics at Sydney, under Professor M.A.K. Halliday, was one reward for his efforts to put linguistics on the academic map in Australia.

Dr. Capell (I know of no one who called him Arthur) was a reserved man, with a dry, wry sense of humour and a fondness for obscure puns. As a student of his I can well recall his meticulous, rather formal style of teaching, even in one year when I was the sole member of the class. But this surface formality belied a great

interest in and concern for his students and his colleagues. His generosity with his field-notes was well-known, and his trust in his students in this matter was total - many a verbal paradigm had been hastily scribbled on the back of a letter or a circular and placed in a loose file, which could have so easily been lost by a student! He corresponded voluminously with scholars, missionaries and others all over the world, and it was with considerable sadness that he realised a few years ago that his illness would force him to curtail this.

Dr. Capell was closely associated with a number of professional societies and organizations, including the Anthropological Society of New South Wales, ANZAAS, the Linguistic Society of Australia, and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. He held editorial responsibilities in journals such as Mankind and Oceania, and was responsible for the production of the Oceania Linguistic Monographs. He attended numerous national and international conferences, even well after his retirement.

His contributions to our knowledge of the languages and linguistic history of this region stand as a fitting memorial to a man whose long life was devoted to Pacific peoples and their languages.