

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Language type

Gooniyandi¹ is an Australian Aboriginal language spoken by about one hundred Aborigines in the southern Kimberley region of Western Australia. It was classified in the lexico-statistical surveys of the 1960s as a member of the Bunuban (Bunaban, in the earlier spelling) language family, a small family consisting of just two languages, Bunuba being the other member (O'Grady, Voegelin and Voegelin 1966:28, 35, Wurm 1972:123). This classification accords with the earlier classification of Capell (1940:244), who grouped Gooniyandi and Bunuba together, on typological grounds, as "prefixing languages without noun classification". To date, genetic relationships have not been definitely established with any other language family in Australia (or elsewhere), Dixon (1980:3) notwithstanding.

The language shows many characteristics which have come to be regarded as typical of Australian languages, but is in a number of other respects atypical. For the initial orientation of the reader, I will mention a selection of these typical and atypical features. It is not suggested that they represent a significant typologising of the language.

¹ The language has usually been referred to in the anthropological and linguistic literature as Gunian; in my earlier writings on the language I used the spelling Kuniyanti. (For a full list of the variant spellings, see McGregor 1988e.) However, speakers generally feel the term Gunian to be a shortening (see below page 72), and prefer that the full form Gooniyandi be used in written reference to the language and people (Street and Chestnut 1984).