

On the expression of mistaken beliefs in Australian languages

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This paper explores the expression of mistaken beliefs – as in e.g. the boy mistakenly believes that the turtle is dead (whereas in fact it is alive) – in the languages of Australia. It is shown that some mode of expressing this meaning is attested in around 40% of the languages from a corpus of 144 language varieties. In a significant proportion of the languages showing some mode of expressing the target meaning, it is – or can be – achieved through grammatical morphemes or constructions dedicated to the expression of mistaken beliefs. These include particles, enclitics and various types of complement construction involving general verbs of thinking, which verbs frequently also convey meanings of saying, doing and hearing. In a smallish number of languages, however, the meaning is attested only as a pragmatic implicature from a general statement of belief. To the extent it possible given the limitations of the sources, the paper examines the range of meanings and uses of the morphemes/constructions expressing mistaken beliefs, and proposes grammatical analyses for the various constructions encountered.