

The lonely lexicographer – J.G. Reuther’s Diari dictionary

From 1861 to 1906 German missionary Rev. J.G. Reuther worked with the Dieri Aboriginal community in far northern South Australia, creating a 14 volume ethnographic and linguistic manuscript. Four volumes (1,237 pages) comprise a Diari-German dictionary. This was translated into English by Rev. P.A. Scherer in 1974 to produce a 2,180 page Diari-English typescript. By any quantitative measure the dictionary is impressive: 4,262 entries, 15,955 sub-entries, 13,133 notes within entries, and 3,879 example sentences. It stands as an imposing achievement of Reuther and his Dieri teachers.

In this paper we discuss the strengths and weaknesses of Reuther’s work, and our recent research to mark up and add value to a digitised version of the Scherer typescript using XML tags to code for content, plus XSLT and CSS to generate several types of presentation formats. While the dictionary records rich linguistic and cultural knowledge that is of great interest and value to the modern Dieri community, such as 610 idioms and 915 ethnographic notes of various types, it is also lacking in certain linguistic and lexicographical aspects which impact its value and utility. The orthography used by Reuther both under-differentiates consonants and over-differentiates vowels. Various esoteric terminology is included, however terms for everyday items are either missing, incorrectly translated (e.g. *kaku* ‘sister (brother speaking)’ for ‘older sister’), or hidden away as sub-entries of unexpected headwords (e.g. *tindritindri* ‘type of animal’ (actually ‘willy wagtail bird’) appears as sub-entry [114] under item 3270 *tidna* ‘foot’). We discuss the consequences of this for understanding the reference, sense, and contexts of use of Diari words and phrases, and present some proposals for various ways to increase the value of Reuther’s materials. These include creation of a richly articulated stand-off index to the Reuther dictionary that draws together and properly organises disparate and poorly structured and expressed materials scattered through the manuscript. Samples of our recent work on these extensions will be presented and discussed.

References

Reuther, J.G. 1981. *The Diari*. Translated by P.A. Scherer. Canberra: AIAS.