Belief and thought complements in Australian languages: Typology and theory

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Rather little has been written on the grammar of complement constructions in Australian languages. Grammars rarely provide much information, and few articles (let alone books) treat the topic either in particular languages or cross-linguistically. In this presentation I address this lacuna with a typological and theoretical investigation of belief and thought complements – as in *he believes/thinks that the turtle is dead* – in Australian Aboriginal languages. The study is based on a corpus of about twenty languages, partly a convenience sample (depending on available information and my own expertise) and partly a representative one (the major geographical regions and some major families are included, albeit unevenly). I argue that in some languages there is evidence of a separate construction type that codes propositional beliefs or thoughts. In a number of languages the construction is employed to express mistaken beliefs or thoughts, raising the issue of whether this meaning is coded or implicated by the construction. This seems to be one dimension of typological variation in Australian languages. I also address the issue of the grammatical relation between the clause representing the thought or belief and the matrix clause. I argue that there is no evidence that the clause of thought serves in an argument role in the matrix clause, and thus that the construction is not a complement construction in the traditional sense. Rather, I propose that a particular type of grammatical relation is involved, distinct from both embedding and dependency. I outline some of the properties of this relation and argue that it is a relation belonging to interpersonal grammar.