

Stephen Adolphe Wurm (1922–2001)

On 24 October, 2001, the internationally renowned linguist Stephen Wurm passed away in Calvary Hospital after an extended period of hospitalisation. Stephen (as everyone called him) was the former professor in, and head of department of the Department of Linguistics in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at the Australian National University, a position he held until he retired in 1987 when the University appointed him Professor Emeritus.

Stephen was born in Budapest, Hungary, on 19 August 1922. He enjoyed a childhood in which languages played a major part. He grew up speaking German and Hungarian as his mother tongues but over the years added to his repertoire most of the major languages of the world and some of its lesser known ones, including Australian Aboriginal and Pacific ones. He claimed to have a working knowledge of around fifty languages.

Stephen was educated in Vienna where he went on to complete his PhD in 1944 at the Oriental Institute of the University of Vienna in Turkic languages and anthropology with a thesis entitled *Der özbekische Dialekt von Andidschan*. In 1945 he was offered a lectureship in Altaic linguistics at the University of Vienna, a position he held until 1951. It was during this time that he became interested in the languages of Papua New Guinea, an interest that was later to become his life's major focus. In pursuit of that he established contact with the Rev. Dr A. Capell, then the foremost anthropological linguist in Australia, who held a position in the Anthropology Department at the University of Sydney. Capell had been to Papua New Guinea some years earlier and collected data on a number of hitherto unstudied languages from the Central Highlands, amongst others. These highlands languages were collectively referred to as 'non-Austronesian' (without any implication as to their interrelatedness) in contrast to 'Austronesian' the name of the family that includes most of the other indigenous languages of the Pacific, Indonesia and neighbouring areas (excluding Australia), in fact, the geographically most extensive language family in the world. Capell's survey showed that contrary to current belief some of these highlands non-Austronesian languages were indeed inter-related. He encouraged Stephen's interest and loaned him his field notes on Kiwai (a large non-Austronesian language spoken around the mouth of the Fly River and beyond in Western Papua New Guinea). Stephen used these notes to write up and publish a monograph on the language in 1951.

Towards the end of his time at the University of Vienna the position of Government Linguist in Papua New Guinea was advertised and even though he applied for it and was offered the position, he could not take it up because the offer arrived after he had accepted a contract from the British Foreign Office and St Anthony's College, Oxford, to help set up the Central Asian Research Institute in London. As this contract drew to a close Stephen accepted a position in 1954 with Dr Capell in Sydney as Research Fellow in Oceanic Linguistics. While there Stephen travelled extensively on fieldwork in New South

Wales and Queensland to study Australian Aboriginal languages, an interest which he maintained throughout his life. During this time also Stephen was appointed to the position of Research Fellow in Linguistics in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at the then Research School of Pacific Studies (now the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies) within the Institute of Advanced Studies of the Australian National University in Canberra. This was a research position which gave Stephen the long awaited opportunity to expand his interest in the nature, distribution and interrelationships of the languages of Papua New Guinea. In 1958 Stephen (and his wife Helen) made what was to be the first of many field trips to Papua New Guinea. He spent almost nine months in the Central Highlands, where Capell had been some ten years before, collecting data on over 50 languages, the majority of which were unwritten and previously unstudied. Stephen established the existence of a very large group of related languages extending across the area surveyed, thus confirming Capell's earlier findings and extending them. He reported his findings to the New Guinea Society in 1959 in an address entitled 'Is New Guinea a babel?' This pioneering work set the scene for his later major interests and directed his energies towards clarifying the linguistic picture of New Guinea and the surrounding area which at that time was a virtual *terra incognita*.

In 1968 when the new Department of Linguistics was established within the Research School of Pacific Studies Stephen was appointed its first Professor and Head of Department. He was then able to gather around him a staff of experienced field workers who pursued a research agenda that lasted for the next two decades. In this Stephen led the way although his role gradually changed from being a co-participant to a synthesiser of results. Stephen retired in 1987 but remained an active researcher and commentator on the languages and language issues of the Pacific region. He continued to work on academic papers and participate in international meetings right up until the last year of his life.

Stephen is probably best known professionally for three main achievements: his contribution to the study of non-Austronesian, or as they are now more commonly referred to, Papuan languages; the development of *Pacific Linguistics*; and his series of colourful and detailed atlases.

As already indicated, Stephen's primary research focus was the study of non-Austronesian or Papuan languages. As knowledge of the distribution and interrelatedness of these languages became better known Stephen was kept busy writing revised reports that updated the findings. In that and his other activities he was an excellent publicity machine for the discipline, the Department, the Research School and the University. The results of this research work, together with that of other scholars and postgraduate students, were mostly published in the Department's publication series *Pacific Linguistics*. Once the linguistic picture of New Guinea and the surrounding area had become clear, however, Stephen engaged the cooperation and support of his staff and others to synthesise and present the results of his research programme in three

massive volumes entitled *New Guinea Area Languages and Language Study*. These volumes appeared between 1975 and 1977 and are still a major reference work in this area. Following their publication, Stephen set about, again with the cooperation and support of his staff and others and that of a brilliant cartographer, Theo Bauman, updating and representing the results in a set of magnificently coloured atlases. The first of these was the *Language Atlas of the Pacific*, the first volume of which appeared in 1981. Nothing quite like this atlas had been produced before or is likely to be produced again for a very long time. Buoyed by the success of this project Stephen launched into a second atlas project, the *Language Atlas of China*. As with his first atlas this one was also sponsored by the Academy of the Humanities and co-sponsored by the Japanese and the Chinese Academies respectively. The most extensive of the atlas series that Stephen undertook, however, was the three volume *Atlas of Languages of Intercultural Communication in the Pacific, Asia and the Americas* which appeared in 1996. He followed this with the smaller *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing*, the second edition of which appeared just a few days before he died. These atlases will long remain essential reference works and an enduring memorial to Stephen's vision, enthusiasm, drive, and team management abilities.

When Stephen came to the Australian National University linguistics was a very new discipline in Australia. He was a driving force behind the formation of the Linguistic Circle of Canberra, the first such professional organisation in the country. This organisation also served as a useful publishing outlet for the results of research by members of this group and others. The first volumes appeared in 1963. As time passed the number of volumes increased and the name was changed to *Pacific Linguistics* to better reflect its scope. This publication series now boasts some 500 volumes which include grammars, dictionaries, collections of conference papers and other materials on languages of Australia, the Pacific and Southeast Asia. There is no other series like it in the world and it is justifiably one of the most enduring memorials to Stephen's far-sightedness, enthusiasm and dedication to a cause.

Stephen was not only a professional linguist, he was also a working academic. As such he served on various university committees, acted as Director of the Research School from time to time, and supervised increasing numbers of PhD students. He was also a foundation member of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (now the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies) and later a member of its Linguistics Committee. He was this latter committee's Chairman and member of the Executive Council of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies between 1966 and 1972. He also helped in the establishment of independent teaching departments of Linguistics in different Australian universities from 1965 to 1975, including one in the Faculty of Arts at the ANU in 1970.

Reference has also already been made to Stephen's primary role in the formation of the Linguistic Circle of Canberra. As the number of linguists in

Australia grew this organisation outgrew its usefulness. Stephen was again heavily involved in organising a replacement organisation on a national scale, the Australian Linguistic Society. He was elected both interim and first President in 1967. In 1977 he was elected a Fellow of both the Australian Academy of the Humanities and the Academy of the Social Sciences. A decade later he was elected President of the Academy of the Humanities. His presidency was a busy one, spanning as it did the year of Australia's bicentenary celebrations. He also represented the Academy in the Union Academique Internationale in Brussels and the Australian Linguistic Society at UNESCO's Comité International Permanent de Linguistes (CIPL) with which body the Australian Linguistic Society is affiliated. Despite all this "outside" activity, however, Stephen continued to publish widely on languages and increasingly, language issues, of the Pacific region.

Stephen was a great boss and an outstanding linguist and scholar. He will be sorely missed by his many friends and colleagues around the world. His publication record, atlases and *Pacific Linguistics* live on as a fitting memorial.

Tom Dutton