• Collection [1]

This is the earliest attempt to show the distribution of Aboriginal languages spoken across Australia. The map was drawn-up by Austrian linguist and anthropologist Wilhelm Schmidt and published in Vienna in 1919 [3]. It was the first large-scale classification of Australian languages. Schmidt had not visited Australia, instead relying on the linguistic work of missionaries, public servants, settlers and others who were interested and able to document Aboriginal cultures.

Schmidt used the maps showing the boundaries of Aboriginal language groups that were published in The native tribes of south-east Australia [4], in 1904, by explorer and natural scientist Alfred William Howitt.

Early descriptions of Aboriginal languages were largely compilations of vocabulary or word lists. The most comprehensive was the 4-volume tome, Curr’s Australian Race [5], published by Victorian squatter and writer Edward Micklethwaite Curr in 1886-1887.

Missionaries such as Lancelot Threlkeld and William Ridley were among the first to describe the grammar of Aboriginal languages in NSW. Threlkeld established a mission at Lake Macquarie in 1825 and was active in recording the local Awabakal language. Threlkeld's principal publication was An Australian Grammar ... of the Language, as Spoken by the Aborigines ... of Hunter's River [6], published at Sydney in 1834. Ridley published Gurre Kamilaroi: or Kamilaroi Sayings [7] in Sydney in 1856.

- Ronald Briggs, Curator Research & Discovery

Links