

# Language is the Carrier of Our Culture : language documentation as revitalisation in Badimaya and Warriyanga

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## Abstract

Language documentation in Australia started when European colonisers began interacting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The purpose of documentation has changed throughout time, now focusing on preventing further language loss and strengthening language use in communities. Bundiyarra – Irra Wangga Language Centre (BIW) works with seven languages of the Midwest, Murchison and Gascoyne regions of Western Australia. BIW's work is driven by its community, meaning that solely documentation projects are uncommon and projects combining documentation and revitalisation take precedence. We will explore documentation as revitalisation through case studies of projects in two languages under BIW's purview: Badimaya and Warriyanga.

**Keywords:** Indigenous languages, language documentation, innovative revitalisation techniques

## Wanggayi

Ngunhaburra, walybala nhugurrarrija ganyarawu wagabardi. Guwardi, wirribuga waghina yurnu bagalyaninuru waghiniyawu. Language centre nhugaarrarringu ganyarawu wagabardi ngurra bagalya. Language centre gurlgayinhu nganhurranha ganyarajarri waghiniya warrinthe gurlgabaabaarringu. Nganhurra waghiniya thanala thanangu yirra, warri watharnu nganhala. Nganhurra waghiniya nhurragarrala nganhurrawu yirrawu, nhurragarrawu yirrawu bagalyaninuru Badimayawu, nganhurra yirrawu bagalyaninuru Warriyanggawu Thiinmawu.

## 1. Introduction : language documentation and revitalisation in Australia

Language documentation<sup>1</sup> in Australia started almost as soon as European colonisers arrived and began interacting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander<sup>2</sup> people. For many early European arrivals, this documentation process was necessary to communicate with the original inhabitants of the continent. Language documentation as both an academic sub-field as well as practice has developed to suit the needs of the time, place and people, and since the 1960s and 1970s, it has developed in tandem with language revitalisation efforts. Now, through the advent of language centres and a concerted effort of communities to reclaim their languages, the description and production of materials in endangered languages (as most Australian languages are designated (HRSCATSIA 2012:1)) has become a part of the language revitalisation process (Shulist and Rice, 2019:36).

This paper seeks to examine the changing context in which language documentation has taken place previously, and the emerging context in which it takes place in the present day. We will use two case studies, both projects of the Bundiyarra – Irra Wangga Language Centre, to demonstrate the evolution of language documentation as revitalisation, and to demonstrate how inquiry-driven academia and language community members can work together to conduct research and create resources that would not be possible without such collaboration.

### 1.1 Context of language documentation in Australia

There has been discussion about the commodification of languages in the context of language documentation (Dobrin, Austin and Nathan, 2009; Shulist and Rice, 2019, amongst others), which centres around the treatment of language as something to be exploited, divorced of the context in which it is given by speakers and commodified for the purposes of “grant-seeking and standard-setting” (Dobrin, Austin and Nathan, 2009:41). The ideologies that yield this commodification can be observed in the way language documentation projects are often assessed, where quantifiable linguistic information such as number of native speakers or levels of fluency supposedly indicate the success of a revitalisation project that does not purport to improve either of these things (Shulist and Rice, 2019).

The influence of the socio-political context in which the need for language documentation has arisen in Australia cannot be understated, as this underpins the dynamic of the relationships between language speakers and documenters. Indigenous Australians face significant barriers to equal participation in Australian society: an average 10.7 year gap in the life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians demonstrating one, very serious barrier (The Lowitja Institute, 2019). Ongoing disadvantage in health, education and other outcomes presents a demonstrable inequality in power

<sup>1</sup> This paper uses the term ‘language documentation’ generally to mean the process of language collection and analysis; it is not solely the academic field as discussed by Austin (2013), Shulist and Rice (2019) and others, though that meaning may be included in the discussion in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> The authors have elected to use the terms ‘Aboriginal’ to denote the Indigenous population of mainland Australia and ‘Indigenous’ to denote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people collectively throughout this paper.

between Indigenous communities and the often non-Indigenous people working to document their languages.

While much of Australia's language policy nowadays is largely *de facto* and ostensibly aimed at supporting the rights of Indigenous people, historically, policies affecting Indigenous people and the use of Indigenous languages in Australia were outright assimilatory (Truscott and Malcolm, 2010). Years of direct and indirect policies discouraging or banning the use of these languages continue to wield an effect on remaining speakers, many of whom are reluctant to speak their languages outside of familial settings, including with documenters, for fear of punishment or ridicule. For many language communities, including our own, it is a struggle even to document languages, let alone revitalise them.

## 1.2 Language documentation *and* revitalisation

The notion that language documentation can itself be an act of revitalisation is not a new one (see, for example, Shulist and Rice, 2019). The production of a technical document, such as a grammar, or a dictionary, does not in itself constitute revitalisation, and there remains a gap between documentation and reviving the language in a community of speakers (Shulist and Rice, 2019). Revitalisation requires a different skill set from documentation because it is "about people, not language" (Gerdts, 2017) and so a different approach is needed. Models for integrating the strengths of documentation for the purpose of revitalisation have "emphasized "collaboration" and "participation"...to bridge the gap between the technical goals of academic linguists and the practical needs of speakers (or would-be speakers) of endangered languages" (Shulist and Rice, 2019, discussing K. Rice (2013) and Czaykowska-Higgins (2009)). In Australia, many Indigenous language centres (and Indigenous-led language programs<sup>3</sup>) are leading the integration of documentation and revitalisation.

## 1.3 Indigenous language centres

Australian Indigenous language centres emerged as the political climate in the late 1980s and early 1990s changed to recognise Indigenous peoples' rights to use their languages (McConvell and Thieberger, 2001:31). Curiously for the authors, language centres as we understand them are an Australian innovation (McConvell and Thieberger, 2001:3; Truscott 2014), borne from the confluence of social empowerment of Indigenous communities, political recognition of the rights of Indigenous people and the timely availability of government funding.

All language centres are different, being by their nature responsive and responsible to their communities. Some have an extensive history of documentation and production of technical resources such as grammars; others

are focused on community-driven revival or education as a vehicle for language transmission (Truscott, 2014: 386).

However, despite differences in approach, most language centres share some common experiences. Most are a conduit between their communities and the complex web of policies that provide funding for language projects. Most are subject to the ups and downs of community life, including losing elderly language speakers, dealing with unrest or disagreements in the wider community and working with communities struggling with disadvantage and trauma. Perhaps most importantly, most language centres document and store not only languages, but also "rare and valuable historical materials to which family members may have access" (Truscott 2014: 385). For many communities, language centres have photos, audio recordings and even videos of their Elders<sup>4</sup> and deceased relatives; highly precious material for many communities who face continual loss of language and knowledge as old people, who through much of their lives were forbidden by Australian government policy to pass their knowledge onto their children and grandchildren, pass away. Language centres, then, become repositories of the history and knowledge of communities – a heavy burden, and often one which goes unacknowledged in the broader context of language work.

## 2. Bundiyarra – Irra Wangga Language Centre

The Bundiyarra Irra Wangga Language Centre (BIW) is a regional language centre located in Geraldton, Western Australia. BIW services the Midwest, Murchison and Gascoyne regions of the State, an area of approximately 500,000 square kilometres (Truscott, 2014). It is funded by the Department of Communication and Arts Indigenous Languages and Arts program to support seven languages – Badimaya, Maglana, Ngarlawangga, Nhanda, Wajarri, Warriyanga and Yinggarda – and has at times supported language work and research on other languages, where requested and/or funded by the community. Each of these languages are critically endangered, and whilst a survey of language speakers in the region has not been conducted for some time, anecdotal evidence suggests at least three of these languages no longer have any living full speakers, with the remaining languages having between one and 50 speakers remaining.

The BIW linguist is the primary documenter at the centre, meaning they are often the ones with whom language speakers spend the majority of their time and effort, and who, in this setting, often conceptualise and deliver language projects (see a great summary of this experience in Truscott, 2014:403-404).

Language speakers are often elderly, with competing demands on their time from family, work,

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<sup>3</sup> Language centre vs language program is used to distinguish dedicated organisations whose programs are primarily language documentation and revitalisation activities from language activities that are programs of more general organisations, such as Registered Native Title Bodies Corporate, schools or cultural centres.

<sup>4</sup> 'Elder' is a term with specific meaning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. While it often refers to someone who is *elderly*, it more specifically refers to someone with accepted knowledge and experience of cultural matters who can provide guidance to other people within the community.

deteriorating health and cultural obligations, amongst other things. As such, their interactions with the language centre are often limited in some way, meaning that each interaction is critical. The urgency to both record and harness their knowledge has exponentially increased in the last 10-20 years, as speakers have passed away and prized knowledge has passed with them. The relationships language speakers form through documentation work naturally lead to the design of projects that they find interesting and engaging, and with time pressure, these projects become hybrid and wide-ranging.

It is with these pressures in mind that BIW operates to preserve knowledge of those who have and wish to share it, whilst also ensuring that the knowledge does not disappear. It is through this circumspect, relationship-based documentation process that BIW works to revitalise languages, and it is in this setting that the below case studies were developed.

### 3. Nganang Badimaya Wangga

Nganang Badimaya Wangga<sup>5</sup>: Yarns with Gami Ollie George (NBW) was a project some 20-years in the making. Mr O. George (dec) was a Badimaya man from Kirkalocka Station, near Mount Magnet in the Murchison region of Western Australia. For 20 years, Mr George worked with language centres and linguists to document Badimaya language for (in his own words) “*his children and grandchildren*”.

Much of the documentation of Badimaya was done between 2011 and 2014 by Mr George and former BIW linguist James Bednall, with whom Mr George forged a strong relationship. This intensive documentation process, which resulted in the publication of the Badimaya dictionary and topical wordlist book, required Mr George to recall detailed and complex language alone (other Badimaya language speakers, most of whom were Mr George’s family, had passed away years earlier). In order to guide Mr George through that process, James would ask questions about his life, and Mr George would in turn tell fascinating stories and anecdotes spanning his childhood, adolescence and working life. Upon completion of the dictionary and wordlist book, it became clear that BIW had amassed a precious collection of stories about Mr George’s life, as well as Badimaya culture, local knowledge and national history.

#### 3.1 Designing with community for revitalisation

In discussions about what to do with these stories, it became clear that Mr George hoped to leave a tangible legacy, and showed immense interest in the production of a resource that might transmit his significant linguistic and cultural knowledge to his descendants. Mr George’s health had begun to deteriorate (he was 81 when he began working on NBW) and so the BIW project team agreed that this project should capture all facets of his knowledge, from as

many angles as possible, to create, as Austin describes, a “multipurpose record...[that] is multi-disciplinary and draws on theoretical concepts and methods” from a variety of fields (2013).

Mr George had previously been the subject of short films about his life and knowledge and had enjoyed the process of filming and seeing his stories in film, a format he observed to be more appealing to his target audience (his descendants). His animated storytelling style also created a rich visual mindscape of long-passed events and people, which were of course impossible to film.

BIW had developed a good working relationship with several local creatives, and so enlisted them to assist in capturing these other dimensions of Mr George’s knowledge. Chris Lewis, a filmmaker with the local Australian Broadcasting Corporation station, created a short film about NBW and Mr George, and Brendan Penzer, an experienced curator and visual artist who had worked in the remote township where Mr George lived, coordinated the participation of local artists to create 22 paintings representing some of the stories Mr George told.

At the completion of the project, NBW had recorded approximately 20 additional hours of audio as well as subsequent additional linguistic information, including new entries in the Badimaya dictionary database, created a book depicting the stories told by Mr George in Badimaya and English (printed in sound<sup>6</sup>), produced an art exhibition that has since travelled across the country and created a legacy for Mr George and his family that has continued to restore prestige and pride in Badimaya language.

#### 3.2 NBW to WOC : designing Warriyanga on Country

This approach has become a hallmark of BIW’s method of designing projects: observing and understanding the unique abilities, preferences and interests of language speakers, as well as their goals for recording their languages; working with its extended network to coordinate a project team with the specialist skills to fully capture the knowledge of those speakers; and using the materials recorded, create resources for use by the intended audience of the language speaker. Following the success of NBW, BIW has worked to replicate this model of responsive language project design with other language speakers.

In 2017, BIW began working with Warriyanga Elder and language speaker, and co-author of this paper, Peter Salmon. Mr Salmon had not participated in language work before and his interest in sit-down, tedious documentation tasks was limited. However, his knowledge of language was and is unparalleled, except perhaps by his knowledge of country and culture. Well into his 80s, Mr Salmon was interested in documentation tasks that focused on narratives, both autobiographical and cultural, describing the natural features of Warriyanga country, or

<sup>5</sup> Translation: My Badimaya Language

<sup>6</sup> BIW works with PrintingAsia, a printing company that prints books on specially coded paper that is then read by an audio

reading device resembling a pen, enabling text to be accompanied by the original audio that has been transcribed.

telling stories of his working life – tasks that, to him, represented a recording of knowledge he wanted to pass onto his descendants. The parallels between the knowledge, the goals and the potential of both Mr George and Mr Salmon were significant and encouraging.

BIW has considered these preferences in co-designing (with Mr Salmon) a documentation and revitalisation project that builds off the successful model exemplified in NBW. The project, Warriyanga on Country (WOC), commenced in October 2019, and brings together a cross-disciplinary team of linguists, an anthropologist, an ethnobotanist, a photographer and videographer to record his knowledge in a variety of media, for the creation of both project materials and a database of the vast knowledge he has of his language, culture and country, which will be available for his descendants long after he has passed away. This team will work with a multimodal team of visual artists and a book designer who will create project materials including an exhibition and a storybook. Perhaps most significantly, WOC will include members of Mr Salmon’s family in documentation, helping to demystify the process and building in community ownership of the project and materials produced; a key part of the method to bridge the gap between linguists and would-be speakers (Shulist and Rice, 2019).

#### 4. Conclusion

The best model of ethical language documentation in the community in which BIW works is one that combines documentation with responsive, community-driven revitalisation projects. Many Australian languages face losing their last speakers in the coming decade, and such a model, if used in other settings, would continue documentation and expand revitalisation efforts. Documentation can continue, whilst increasing the capacity of the community around speakers whose knowledge is being documented. This model by continuing knowledge transfer between generations, contemplates a future where members of that community become the speakers who are in turn documented themselves. We look forward to it.

#### 5. Acknowledgements

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