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# Awakening or awareness: are we being honest about the retrieval and revival of Australia's Aboriginal languages?

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*Trevor Stockley<sup>1</sup>*

### Abstract

This is a report on the process of language retrieval and revival for some Aboriginal languages in north Queensland in recent years. The writer challenges language workers, language centres and government funding bodies to be honest with language learners about their role in the process of language awakening and revitalisation and the anticipated language outcomes.

Reference is made to the importance of doing language work on country, the practicalities of working to awaken a language there, the retrieval and revival process when preparing and conducting Aboriginal language awareness workshops, and the continuing language learning and revitalisation process through language programs on country. The development of the Warrgamay language program and the Gudjal language program is reviewed, noting some of the difficulties due to the lack of language resources. The writer acknowledges the vital need to work with and respect the position of Elders, and the essential training role embedded within all language learning activities.

The conclusion draws attention to the limited funding available for retrieval and revival language work and the narrow views held by many funding bodies in regard to their understanding of the second language learning process as it applies to these Aboriginal languages. Finally, a metaphor from traditional life at Yirrkala, Northern Territory is used to draw an analogy between fire and the process of language re-awakening through awareness, retrieval, revival and revitalisation.

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<sup>1</sup> Indigenous languages teacher and consultant.

### Awareness, retrieval, revival, revitalisation

Which is the right word? None of these words helps to fully understand and appreciate the intense feelings of joy, empowerment and pride or the strong want and need in a language learner when first hearing and speaking their ancestral Aboriginal language; nor the enormous difficulty, challenges, dedication, frustration and time which will be involved in learning and using, what is in fact, a new second language.

Australia as the modern world knows it has been here a mere 200-odd years, a blink in time for ancient Aboriginal Australia. But these 200 years have been unequally shared with non-Indigenous Australians, speaking a foreign language and living a very different culture. In this short time the Aboriginal languages of Australia, the languages of the land, have for the most part been silenced. The condition of Aboriginal languages varies from the treasured few in the far north and centre of Australia, which are still spoken right through, used for everyday communication and are being learnt by children as their first language; to those languages which are struggling, not being learnt by children anymore and often only being spoken or partially remembered by a few Elders; and then to those languages which are no longer spoken, where the knowledge of the Elders is scarce. These are the language remnants of Australia's Aboriginal language heritage of around 250 distinct languages (Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia 1996, p. 7).

In the past, colonial, commonwealth and state governments have shown little regard for the languages of Aboriginal people, with these languages depicted as inferior and simple, and the speakers shamed and punished. Survivors of the violence and introduced diseases were often forcibly moved off their lands, breaking the bond between country and language. Later government policies of stealing children, breaking up families and punishment for traditional beliefs and values prevented languages from being passed on. A violent colonial history and its overwhelming consequences have left many Aboriginal languages without speakers and learners, and many who would like to be speakers and learners have been left without languages, right across Australia. Today these Aboriginal languages, which have often been inadequately recorded and sometimes went unrecorded, are being revitalised by community-based Aboriginal language groups.

The challenge is to work together to halt the decline of Aboriginal languages, to create an *awareness* of the language remaining in the community, to *retrieve* any language knowledge which has been recorded, to *revive* the language for the descendants of today and to *revitalise* the language for the children of tomorrow. A further challenge is to assist learners and funding bodies to discard the incorrect, preconceived idea inherited from our colonial past that these languages are simple and will be easy and quick to learn. Australian Aboriginal languages sound different when spoken and are constructed in different ways from the Aboriginal English or Standard Australian English being spoken as a first language by the majority of Aboriginal people today. Language learners will find that, even though it was their own ancestors who were

the last speakers, this will not make it easier for them to learn and speak these unique languages (see also Walsh, this volume).

There appears to be a hopeful assumption that Aboriginal languages are still there, sleeping, recumbent, just waiting for a community of speakers to come and make a bit of wake-up noise. In reality the continuing process of culture change and language loss has had enormous effects on Aboriginal people and their languages. We cannot avoid the tough historical reality for Indigenous people arising from the loss of their lands and the denigration of their culture and languages for generations, which has resulted in many Aboriginal languages no longer being spoken in homes. Aboriginal languages in some cases may not have been spoken for a number of years, sometimes generations. As a consequence of this relentless attack on Aboriginal languages their re-awakening involves the processes of language retrieval, revival and revitalisation and will need many years of hard language work and research, and more years of dedicated practice for learners to make new sounds, learn many new words and their meanings, learn new ways to form words and sentences, and to master the different grammar of an Aboriginal language. Language revival, turning the language loss process around, and heading back on the road to language revitalisation, is indeed the process being undertaken but may well only result in partial success. All language learners learn something about their language but only a dedicated few will achieve a strong command of the new sounds and intonation and come to terms with the different grammar and sentence structures involved (see also N. Reid, this volume).

Learning your Aboriginal language can make you feel really good about yourself; it can help you to feel comfortable about the world by understanding the effects of history on your language. Understanding and learning language can make you think differently about your identity and self concept, your place in your family and community. It makes you feel proud. These are tremendous social and emotional results from language work but we must be honest, both with ourselves and language learners, about what can be achieved in bringing back these languages through a revitalisation process. We need to be honest about the daunting and dedicated language work necessary and the long-term view required when anticipating a full return of spoken language. This view requires us to look towards generations of language learners, to a pool of future language speakers, writers and readers. It is a view which includes language-speaking communities with families who are maintaining and passing on their languages in the face of the dominance of English and its overpowering role in Australian society. The unavoidable, fundamental and most difficult feature in this language revitalisation process is the basic need to communicate, the need to use the language you are learning. There is a need for other people to converse with, for someone to share with, others to be in a language group with, friends to joke with or swear at, family to be serious with, to care for and to do all this, in your ancestral Aboriginal language.

We know why this language loss has happened and we also know that even those few remaining, fully-spoken Aboriginal languages in Australia are still seriously

threatened by loss due to social upheaval and change of government policy. What we need to know is how to turn this language situation around and find real ways to revitalise languages on country while remaining true to the spirit of the languages, the wishes of the Elders and the hopes of the learners. This leads us to an important question: What do Aboriginal people want to do with their re-awakened languages in the Australian society of today?

### **Language awareness workshops**

In recent years I have worked with the Girringun Aboriginal Corporation and the North Queensland Regional Aboriginal Corporation Language Centre. By using and sharing my teaching skills and the knowledge gained from learning and speaking Gumatj (one of the Yolju Matha languages of north-east Arnhemland), I have been able to help in the continuing process of retrieval, revival and revitalisation of some Aboriginal languages in north Queensland. This is a community-based language movement which was started after consultation with Elders in an attempt to try and fulfil their wishes and dreams to re-awaken their languages and to hear them on country again.

The languages chosen to work with in the wet tropics were the rainforest Dyirrbal languages of Djirrbal, Ngadjan and Girramay, the coastal rainforest languages of Warrgamay and Nyawaygi and, in the dry country around Charters Towers, the languages of Gudjal (and Gugu-Badhun). It is important that all the language work happens on country and this is a central element of our activities. On country language work allows us to show respect to the Elders, to the ancestral voices and to give a context to these languages of the land. The public profile of the languages is lifted with people being aware and interested that language business is happening in their community. The very nature of on-country language work ensures that a greater number and broader spectrum of the community have access and the opportunity to attend language workshops. Attendance at on-country language awareness workshops is high, as most participants are local, avoiding the logistics of transporting a select few learners and Elders to a distant centre. We found that many people including parents, teenagers and younger children could all make it for a day or two at the local hall to have a look and a listen about language. This on-country language retrieval and revival work has generally occurred over weekends in venues such as the local town hall, the shire council training room, a church hall, a community keeping place, out of hours access to classrooms, a display pavilion at the showground and a local club committee room. Following is a list of two-day workshops conducted during 2005–06:

- a Warrgamay workshop for the Warrgamaygan at Ingham
- two Ngadjan workshops for the Ngadjandji at Malanda and Atherton
- two Djirrbal workshops for the Djirrbalngan at Ravenshoe and Herberton
- a Girramay workshop for the Girramaygan at Jumbun

- a Nyawaygi workshop for the Nyawaygi people at Mungalla station
- two Gudjal workshops for the Gudjalbara at Charters Towers.

After initial consultation and agreement with Elders to proceed with each workshop, preparation by the language teacher begins in earnest and includes many hours of reading, research, language learning and writing. When preparing I make use of all available language materials including linguistic sources, recordings of speakers, dictionaries, historical accounts and past projects. As I work with these resources, putting them into plain English, I produce a handbook and soundbook for each language to be used in the workshop and for future reference.<sup>2</sup> This is undertaken with the aim of bringing back Aboriginal language knowledge in a suitable place on country and in a more easily accessible, understandable and respectful way, while still incorporating an appropriate level of language difficulty. For the rainforest Dyirrbal and coastal rainforest languages I used the linguistic work of Dixon (1972), Dixon & Blake (1981) and previous language resources by Grant & Reppel (2000). For the dry country languages I used the dictionary work of Santo (2006) and the linguistic work of Sutton (1970, 1973), including recordings of Fred Toombah.

During the workshops we raise the participants' awareness and understanding of their traditional language and its historical relationship with contemporary Australian society. It is vital that learners get the sounds of the language right as we are not learning another kind of English, so we spend considerable time on their language soundbook, to become familiar with the tongue positions of new sounds and getting used to hearing and saying them correctly while starting to learn a bank of vocabulary. The workshops are videorecorded to provide later reference for the group and a resource for future learners. Although we only have two days a lot of Aboriginal language knowledge is discussed in the workshops as we work through the handbook and soundbook, including:

- Aboriginal languages before the invasion
- language change and borrowed words
- writing and spelling the particular Aboriginal language
- sounds and pronunciation of the Aboriginal language
- some grammar and rules of the Aboriginal language
- traditional kinship names and relationships
- local Aboriginal placenames
- useful and useable words, commands, phrases and questions
- time, location and number words
- strategies for learning Aboriginal languages.

It is important to quickly develop positive teaching and learning relationships and

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<sup>2</sup> Locally published materials available from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Studies library.

an environment where people feel relaxed and comfortable while still working hard on their language learning. We aim to achieve this by working on country; showing respect to Elders and their language knowledge; working together on language learning; and sitting, eating and talking together in informal settings at tea breaks. We try to create a social feeling in the workshops and utilise the fact that most of the learners are locals, family and kin. The catering for the workshop is organised by a language co-worker with the help of the local community. The workshops conducted so far have been successful and well received by Elders and learners, with all participant evaluations being positive. Below are a few responses from language speakers and workshop participants after the Girramay workshop at Jumbun in 2006:

I haven't heard this many people speaking my language for 40 years.

I remember when the old people used to talk like this.

Last night I had a dream where my father came to me and talked in our traditional language, telling me to pick it up and speak it properly.

Too deadly. When will we do this again?

By working closely with Elders I ensure that these are the people who are recognised and respected as being the holders of the local Aboriginal language knowledge and traditions. These workshops are an important catalyst for further language revitalisation projects for the community. After the workshops various ideas have been suggested, all involving using and learning more language.

- Take your language knowledge home and share it with family and friends
- Approach the school and gain support for teaching the local Aboriginal language, possibly as a Language Other Than English (LOTE) subject
- Approach the preschool and child care groups in town to encourage language songs, displaying pictures and words for animals in language
- Have more culture days and visits to schools, preschools and childcare centres by Elders and parents
- Continue with the interest and energy of the community language group and run local language meetings
- Develop a language program and hold a series of language classes on country.

The Djirrbal people liked the school LOTE idea which worked well while there was enough supportive staff at the school and language teachers available. The Nyawaygi people decided to continue with local language meetings while the Girramay, Warrgamay and Gudjal people all made the decision to start work on language programs.

### **Language programs**

The next step in the language revitalisation process was the research, writing and appropriate delivery of on-country Aboriginal language programs:

- Warrgamay (Stages 1, 2 and 3): 20 full days of lessons in Ingham
- Gudjal (Stage 1): six full days of lessons in Charters Towers.

A lack of linguistic resources, language materials and records can make revitalisation work difficult and this will be the likely situation for many languages, as it was not until the 1960s that linguists really started working with and recording Aboriginal languages. For some languages this was too late to get the whole linguistic picture, so other language retrieval strategies must be used to find an Aboriginal solution to this dilemma. As I worked to retrieve Gudjal language knowledge, while writing the Gudjal language program, I realised that there were insufficient resources available to make a good attempt. This led to discussions with the Gudjal Elders about how we could find a resolution and continue with the program. The Gudjal Elders negotiated with the Gugu-Badhun Elders, who are traditionally a close family and speak a sister language to Gudjal. The Gugu-Badhun Elders agreed to permit the use of their more complete linguistic resources, such as Sutton (1973).

In another example the Gudjal language group needed to look at ways to ‘find’ missing words they required. We needed the word for ‘name’ to be able to ask different Gudjal questions and this word had not been recorded in either language. As I was working on a number of languages in the region I compiled a list of words for name looking for the traditional connections among people, country and language:

- The Gudjal word for tooth is *rirra* (or *riyala* or *wurriya*)
- The Warrungu word for tooth, seed and name is *rirra*
- The Gugu-Badhun word for tooth and seed is *rirra*
- The Djirrbal word for tooth, seed, and name is *dirra*
- The Warrgamay word for tooth, seed and spear point is *yirra*.

We did not have resources for the languages to the west but the language and land connections can be easily seen moving among Djirrbal, Warrungu, Gugu-Badhun, Gudjal and Warrgamay. The question was, that if *dirra* and *rirra* mean tooth, seed and name in all the close languages, could this meaning be stretched and included into the Gudjal meaning of tooth, so that *rirra* (or *riyala* or *wurriya*) means tooth, seed and name in Gudjal? These are language revival issues for Elders and learners that entail many hours of discussions, to make informed decisions by considering language, family, history and linguistic issues all together.

The Elders and learners involved in the Warrgamay language group also had to make decisions about their language. One such decision concerned the orthography to be used when writing and whether to use the International Phonetic Alphabet symbols or the Roman alphabet. The Warrgamay decision was mixed; using ŋ for ng, changing j to dj; aa to a:, ii to i:, and uu to u:, while retaining ny.

The Warrgamay language program consisted of three stages for which the group organised the catering, retaining the important social and relaxed learning environment established at their initial awareness workshop.

Stage 1 (eight days) saw high attendance with many age groups involved. Elders, teenagers, children, sisters, cousins and aunties were all involved or spent a day passing through. Everyone who turned up gained some Warrgamay language knowledge and gave life to the group and their efforts in reviving their language. The first session in the morning was always centred on the soundbook, so all learners could feel comfortable in a structured group activity with sound and word repetition exercises. In the session after morning tea the language learning became more demanding, learning greetings and farewells, body part names, songs and games and simple questions and answers, such as asking the name of people and things. The afternoon session again involved sounds work and usually a point of interest for example, kinship which was an interesting project covering a number of weeks and involved looking at the old Warrgamay skin names and kinship structure, learning to say kinship terms, playing a kinship card game as a group, and developing a family tree for each learner using traditional Warrgamay relationship names. This activity needed the help of Elders and clearly demonstrated to younger learners how family and kin are still connected to each other and country.

Stage 2 (six days) began with nine learners. We continued to use the soundbook sharing the lead role, encouraging learners to self-correct by thinking about where their tongue should be, saying the words out loud and working in pairs. Attendance started to fall off as the language content became more difficult requiring more commitment and some serious language learning strategies. Learners improved their reading and writing skills in Warrgamay and some learners were using their language and practising regularly. Sessions included easy questions and answers, suffixing rules to show movement and location, word order, learning vocabulary for the construction of short sentences, using personal pronouns, fluency and intonation.

Stage 3 (six days) saw the group become a core of three adults and one teenager. These dedicated learners came to every language lesson, putting in long hours reviewing language knowledge and learning vocabulary while keeping word order, fluency and intonation in mind. They did their out loud practice at home and were good at correcting each other. Learners needed to think about, talk about and use their language for a serious amount of time every day. There are great demands in learning a second language but these learners, who all lived on country and had strong family links along with language memories from the past, overcame the difficulties and persevered, being rewarded as language connections were made and their understanding and confidence started to grow. Their language learning has become a part of their life as a Warrgamay person. Topics included extending the work started in Stage 2 and new work such as questions using possessive pronouns and the ownership/purpose suffix, suffixing rules for verb tenses, the ergative rule and learning more vocabulary.

It is integral to the continuing process of revitalisation that language be supported, celebrated and used in the community and by families in everyday life. Since the language awareness workshop and language program, the profile of Warrgamay



language in the general community has increased. This is important and the learners foster this regularly when interacting with language learners and non-learners, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Remember that question: What do Aboriginal people want to do with their languages in the Australian society of today? Well, some ways which the Warrgamaygan have used their *Warrgamay mayay* include:

- providing names for Warrgamay children
- providing country names for a local walking trail, Wallaman Falls and Girringun National Park
- speaking Warrgamay during Welcomes to Country, public functions and events such as the opening of the Ingham Heritage building and the Tyto Wetlands environment in Ingham
- using Warrgamay body part names and songs at pre-school and youth camps
- organising bush trips to experience and learn Warrgamay flora, fauna and country names
- laying a commemorative plaque in Warrgamay at a local school
- using Warrgamay at the local carols by candlelight
- using Warrgamay greetings and farewells in public and with family
- using Warrgamay placenames
- using Warrgamay words in general conversation
- answering the phone with Warrgamay greetings and farewells
- putting Warrgamay messages on their answering machines
- using Warrgamay words and names in email addresses and correspondence
- using Warrgamay questions and short commands with each other
- putting up Warrgamay signs around the home and office.

The most powerful and positive outcome has to be the increased number of Warrgamay words being spoken and heard on country again. Although this is not a return to full use it is definitely a revival of language, entailing lots of hard work, confidence and pride, and represents a satisfying level of language understanding and use for the learners. These learners, these new speakers, would like to be involved in a full return of language use with others to speak with, listen to, learn from and answer their questions. They are willing to have a go and are brave beacons of Aboriginal language use, often in places where it can still be difficult to use your ancestral language in public.

The language awareness workshops and the graduated language-learning program are two real and successful ways to raise the public profile of the languages and to raise peoples' language abilities. The training of language workers within the program directly reflects the wishes of Elders in their determined struggle to uphold and pass on the unique value and importance of these Aboriginal languages, and is integral to the continuation of the revitalisation process. Being a language teacher doesn't always

mean standing at the front of a class. Some people do that kind of teaching well, but all language learners are teachers when they share bits of their knowledge with their family, friends and other learners. Warrgamay language learners need to encourage other Warrgamay people by using and regularly talking about their language learning and by encouraging and participating in community and family language activities.

## Conclusion

Government funding bodies must recognise the importance of Indigenous languages and develop strong policies, in collaboration with the people, to support *all* Indigenous languages. Funding bodies must understand that any language revitalisation program, including those described above, are part of an intergenerational language re-awakening, a revival process which needs ongoing and adequately allocated funds to keep the learning cycle continuing. For example Warrgamay Stage 4 has not yet been delivered; Stage 1 should have already been delivered again to bring in more learners; Gudjal Stage 2 has not yet been delivered. The Girramay people, who also decided on a language program, have not yet had any lessons delivered.

No matter how hard learners and teachers try, there is no quick and easy way to learn to speak an Aboriginal language; it takes dedication, time and practice. Knowing a few words of your language may make you feel proud, however it does not constitute speaking or revitalising a language (see also Hobson and, for a contrasting view, Meakins, this volume). Languages will not be revived with respect and understanding in a short period of time, with one-off language programs and unrealistic expectations of fluency. Adopting a short-term attitude towards funding the revitalisation of Aboriginal languages does not do justice to the efforts of the learners and Elders, nor does it give respect and regard to the voices of these important ancestral languages. There is a crucial need for understanding and adequate funding, as well as a need for cooperation and collaboration, to utilise the skills and knowledge of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal language teachers, Elders, linguists and language workers in an effort to recognise and achieve community expectations of the revitalisation process.

When I lived at Yirrkala in Arnhemland one of the many things my teacher and mentor, Dhuwanydjika Burarrwaja taught me was a Yolŋu idea about fire. Back in the old days a fire was always kept burning, sometimes blazing for warmth and comfort and at other times kept as coals for cooking and relaxing around. When Yolŋu were travelling across country a particular wood was used which could be held and carried while the pith inside still smouldered. This fire was carried from place to place to be shared, nurtured and kept alive. It was always ready to use. By blowing on and caring for this smouldering coal you could readily have a fire, warmth, comfort, a hearth and a home wherever you camped. You tried not to let your fire die out as it would mean getting out your firesticks and beginning the process of making fire again or, if you were lucky and family were nearby, you would ask your kin to share their fire.

The lesson tells us that it is always easier to rekindle a fire by blowing on still-smouldering coals, rather than letting the fire go out and starting anew. It also reminds

us of the tradition of sharing with kin and that it may now be words which need to be shared. The language fire in many communities today is not a blazing fire but resembles a quiet fire of just warm coals. The time for action is now, while there are still some coals. There is an urgent need to work with Elders who still remember how to blow on those old coals to re-kindle the language fire, to give warmth and comfort to their people, their families and their children and to hear Aboriginal languages on country again.

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