

# 31 *Learn Yir-Yoront*

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Transcription, translation, and annotation by Barry Alpher, on the basis of fieldwork at Kowanyama.

Kowanyama is an Aboriginal community near the mouth of the Mitchell River on the Gulf coast of Cape York Peninsula (see Map 1 in Sutton, this volume). There in 1978, most people lived away from their traditional lands and received no governmental support in trying to get back to them; alcohol and violence occupied the adult generations; a substantial part of authority over children was ceded to the school, whose personnel were however rotated out of the community every two years; the contexts for use of the indigenous languages of the community were shrinking; and the children were rarely heard using their Aboriginal languages. In many communities faced with these situations, members turn away from recognition that problems exist and that seemingly unrelated problems are connected. But there are some who see rather clearly what is being lost and who devote time to thinking what to do about it. The foreseen loss of a language is a painful prospect, but the problem of renewing is mystifying and daunting. Suppose that it is conceded that education is to take place in the school. What do you teach? How do you begin? Not necessarily where a highly trained linguist would think to begin.

Ngerr-Thuy (Jack Bruno 1909–81) was a Yir-Yoront-speaking Kowanyama resident who had considerable sophistication in the ways of the outside world, including the prison system. He was uncomfortable with the Kowanyama School, both its personnel and its building, a large very white rather fortress-like structure whose construction was said to have been subsidised by the military for easy conversion to a headquarters in a potential attack. He would not go unaccompanied into the building's precincts. Notwithstanding his fear and distrust, however, he saw the school as the place to begin. Quite independently, he turned his attention to the problem of teaching language to the children of the community in a school setting and set about on his own initiative designing the beginnings of a pedagogy. Although an adept at the decontextualised sentences of the linguist's informant session, Bruno preferred to contextualise bits of language whenever possible. He would no doubt have tremendously enjoyed working with Ken Hale in this respect as well as others.

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Jane Simpson, David Nash, Mary Laughren, Peter Austin, Barry Alpher, eds,  
*Forty years on: Ken Hale and Australian languages*, 447–452.  
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During one of Alpher's extended absences from Kowanyama, Bruno created the following language lesson. He imagined these lines as the speech of a child (or perhaps of a parent to a child) and recited them as a jingle: the pronunciation of each line as transcribed here lasts about as long as that of any of the others. It is intonation-contour-timed verse. The jingle terminates neatly with the rhyme of *ngopol* and *nhoqol*. The numbered parts are stanzas, and the pause between them is slightly longer than the other pauses. These lines should not be thought of as written in stone (or written at all). Bruno recited stanza 1 on a second occasion as *Ngele thonorr kurrtha ngopol, ngart wanyyle*—with words in a different order and with no intonational break except that after *ngopol*.

### Learn Yir-Yoront<sup>1</sup>

1	<i>Ngele</i> — weINDU	You and I—
	<i>ngopol</i> — weINPL	all of us
	<i>thonorr</i> — together	together,
	<i>kurrtha</i> ; forage:IMP	let's go fishing,
	<i>ngart wany</i> /l+e. fish throw+PRP	to catch fish with hook and line.
2	<i>Poy</i> n 'ngopol— by.and.by weINPL	By and by we,
	<i>i+pal</i> — there+hither	from out there,
	<i>morr-nguwl</i> — afternoon	late afternoon,
	<i>thal/nh+wa+l</i> 'ngopol— return+go+IMP weINPL	we'll come back
	<i>pen-kith/a</i> — camp+LOC	to camp,
	<i>nhoq/o+l</i> . here+LOC	to this place.

<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations used in glosses are as follows: ACC – accusative case; CNT – continuative aspect; DC – dependent (adjoined relative) clause marker; DSD – desiderative ('want to, will'); DUR – durative (predicate describes a lasting state); EMPH – 'emphasis': following verb carries new information; EXDU – exclusive dual; gP – general past (often imperfective); IMP – imperative; INPL – inclusive plural; INDU – inclusive dual; LOC – locative (function of ergative case); nP – non-past tense; P – past tense (never imperfective); PRP – purposive ('in order to'); TR – transitivity (forms a transitive verb from an intransitive one). Notational conventions for interlinear glosses are: X:Y (colon), the expression of grammatical categories X and Y is morphologically fused; X.Y (full stop), the English words X and Y are part of the gloss of a single Yir-Yoront form. See the end of the paper for notational conventions used in the Yir-Yoront text.

Written out as normal language:

*Ngele ngopol thonorr kurrtha, ngart wanyvle.  
Poyn ngopol i pal morr-nguwl thalnhwal ngopol,  
pen-kitha nhoqol.*

This dictated and transcribed, it was tried out in some language lessons to adult non-Aborigines at Kowanyama: "Memorise this". It was an engaging start for a programme for children and adults that might have been, given some lasting official support. What it 'meant', however, was not obvious to an outsider and, prodded, Bruno created "'Don't leave me": a father indulges his son': children's talk, early days—a follow-up to 'Learn Yir-Yoront'. The child is first stipulated as a son, but by line 17 it is clear (as Bruno improvises) that at least one daughter as well as at least one son is involved. It is a lesson not only in language but also in community norms: children are not abandoned to violence; their father indulges them; their mother gets the work.

### Don't Leave Me

Mother to son:

- |      |  |   |
|------|--|---|
| 1    | <i>"Thuwa;<br/>son<br/><br/>ngorto nhoq pen-kith/a.<br/>you here camp:LOC</i>                                      | "Son,<br><br>you [stay] here at the camp.                                       |
| 2    | <i>Ngelen Ping yarra kurrtha+rr;<br/>weEXDU father away forage+nP<br/><br/>ngart wany/l+e."<br/>fish throw+PRP</i> | Father and I are going out<br>fishing,<br><br>to catch fish with hook and line. |
| Son: |  |   |
| 3    | <i>"Ping— nginhi ngala tharr.<br/>Fa me:ACC don't leave:IMP</i>  | "Father! Don't leave me!  |
| 4    | <i>Nginhi nga@ thonorr ya+rr nguwl.<br/>me:ACC don't together go+IMP weINPL</i>                                    | Me—Let's go together.   |
| 5    | <i>Nginhi yarra kurrtha/rr+on.<br/>me:ACC away forage+TR:IMP</i>   | Take me out fishing.  |
| 6    | <i>Pen-kith/a kar nhilin/n+v/ng 'y.<br/>camp:LOC not sit:CNT+DSD I</i>   | I don't want to keep sitting down<br>about the camp.                            |
| 7    | <i>Ngul nginh pam powvlow+l oq.<br/>then me:ACC because hit:CNT+nP here</i>  | Because then they'll<br>beat up on me here.                                     |
| 8    | <i>Lerrn an yamar.<br/>children here many</i>  | There are many children here.   |
| 9    | <i>Ngopol thonorr.<br/>weINPL together</i>   | Let's be together.  |

- 10 *Ngart ng'n pala/l+v ngoyo, ngi+korr;*  
 fish DC eat:CNT+DSD I there+back  
*Ping#/"*  
 Father
- Father:
- 11 *"HaNQ kuwa;*  
 yes let's.go  
*thonorr kurritha nguwl;*  
 together forage:IMP weINPL  
*Ngama+lon;*  
 mother+with  
*kurritha nguwl yirr."*  
 forage:IMP weINPL away
- Son:
- 12 *"A-woy, Ping— ngopol-lon;*  
 yes father weINPL-with  
*kurritha+rr, yarra nh ngart wany/l+e."*  
 forage+nP away DC fish throw+PRP
- Narrator:
- 13 *Lerrn awr, worryvrrl,*  
 Children those long.ago  
*kar+w tharr/l+nh+y.*  
 not+DC leave+gP+DUR
- 14 *Pam+l-pirr+l a kurritha/rr+on/n+nh.*  
 father+ERG EMPH forage+TR+gP
- 15 *Lerrn awr a pay/l+nh,*  
 children those EMPH cry+gP  
*kirr/i+rr nh.*  
 behind+LOC DC
- 16 *"Ping, nginhi ngala tharr;*  
 father me:ACC don't leave:IMP  
*nginhi ngala tharr."*  
 me:ACC don't leave:IMP
- For I want to eat fish round  
 about out bush there,  
 Father."
- "All right, let's go;  
 let's go fishing together;  
 with Mother as well;  
 let's go off fishing."
- "Yes, Father—all of us together,  
 will go fishing, out to catch  
 fish with hook and line."
- The children, in the old days,  
 [we] never used to leave them  
 behind.  
 [Their] father would take  
 them fishing.  
 Those children would cry,  
 back there.  
 "Father, don't leave me,  
 don't leave me!"

The father says to his wife:

- 17 “*Lerrn i, Puth+Kiwrr i,*  
children those daughter there  
*Puth+Pam i, nga yam.*  
son there EMPH carry:IMP  
“Those children: Daughter there,  
Son there, bring them.
- 18 *A kurrtha/rr+on ngel.*  
EMPH forage+TR:IMP weINDU  
Let’s take them fishing.
- 19 *LoQ@ awr @ low i kith @*  
there crying there  
*kithkiyw pala+l inhn,*  
incessantly cry:CNT+nP there:DC  
*low inhn.*  
crying  
Crying there—  
because they won’t stop  
crying there,  
that crying there.  
there:DC
- 20 *A kuy/l+aw.*  
EMPH call+go:IMP  
Go call them.
- 21 *Yarra kurrtha/rr+v nguwl;*  
away forage+DSD weINPL  
*Puth+Pam +lon;*  
son also  
*Puth+Kiwrr +lon;*  
daughter also  
*kurrtha/rr+v.*  
forage+DSD  
Let’s all of us go out fishing,  
including Son,  
including Daughter,  
let’s go fishing.
- 22 *Ngart i+korr pala/l+v.*  
fish there+back eat:CNT+DSD  
We want to eat fish round  
about back there.
- 23 *Poyn morr-nguwl thallan/n+v*  
by.and.by afternoon arrive:CNT+DSD  
*nguwl i+pal.*  
weINPL there+hither  
By and by in the late  
afternoon we’ll be calling  
back in from out there.
- 24 *Mel-wiqi@ larr-mel-wiqi thallan/n+v#*  
twilight twilight arrive:CNT+DSD  
We’ll be coming in at twilight.
- 25 *I+korr ngolngonm/nh+v#*  
there+back stay:CNT+DSD  
*ngonm/nh+wa/l+v.”*  
stay+go+DSD  
We’ll stay around for a while out  
there;  
we’ll go and stay.”

The evident longing for more responsible times reflects an unease that was by 1978 quite old. Some time in the early 1930s, while most Yir-Yoront speakers lived most of their lives away from the direct influence of Mitchell River Mission (later Kowanyama), a twelve-year-old boy murdered a four-year-old boy while they were alone in camp, their elders having gone off to hunt. The young boy had heard voices saying he was to die, and/or the

older boy had heard voices saying he was to kill him. The older boy was speared nonlethally as a traditional punishment; nonetheless the police picked him up and sent him to Palm Island, where he spent the rest of his life. People knew even then that society was coming unglued. Jack Bruno in 1978 was not inclined to compartmentalise language lessons separately from the state and needs of society.

Notes to 'Don't Leave Me', by line number:

6. Or "I don't want to keep staying at the camp."
8. Or "These children are numerous."
17. A woman could also use these kinship terms in the same form speaking to her husband.

Notational conventions for sounds, other than the usual practical-orthographic conventions:

- N (after a vowel symbol) nasalisation  
 q the phoneme glottal catch  
 Q glottal catch other than the phoneme

Notational conventions for intonation:

- ' (straight apostrophe) main clausal stress (centre of intonation) on the following form (not written if the stressed form immediately precedes a verb)  
 #/ fall-rise terminal intonation contour  
 . (full stop) final fall  
 ; final fall (phonetically identical to full stop, but with following material possibly in a syntactic relation with the preceding)  
 , (comma) half-fall and quick continuation  
 % half-fall  
 — mid to high level tone throughout intonation contour; 'e—' is a drawn-out vowel with non-falling pitch at the end of one of these ('recapitulation') contours  
 @ hesitation (usually with glottal catch)

Notational conventions for separation of Yir-Yoront morphemes:

- X+Y (1) X is stressed relative to Y (word stress for the sequence) or (2) Y is an inflectional suffix; (2) is always reflected as "+" in the glosses, but (1) is reflected only when separate English glosses for the parts make sense.  
 X-Y Y is stressed relative to X (compound, or phrasal, stress for the sequence). Not reflected in the glosses.  
 X|Y Y has no morphological value and is present as a thematic vowel or for phonological reasons only. Not reflected in the glosses.  
 X:Y Y is an inflectional category of X, but they are morphologically sufficiently fused as to render a written boundary arbitrary.