

## Phoenix or Relic? Documentation of Languages with Revitalization in Mind

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The description of Indigenous languages has typically focussed on structural properties of languages (phonology, morphology, and syntax). Comparatively little attention has been given to the documentation of language functions or the most commonly occurring speech formulas. Speech formulas are often culturally-specific and idiomatic and cannot be reliably reconstituted from a knowledge of grammar and lexicon alone. Many linguists and lexicographers seem to have an implicit relic view of language, as if they have been trying to capture the “pure” language uncontaminated by language and culture contact. Accordingly, borrowed terms and neologisms are typically omitted or under-represented in dictionaries. Recorded texts have tended to be myths or texts about traditional culture. Conversations and texts about everyday life, especially in non-traditional contexts, are ignored. How can we ensure that language descriptions are maximally useful, not only to linguists, but to the people most closely associated with the languages, who may wish to revive them? Considerable time is needed to produce a maximally useful description of a language and its uses. Suggestions made here emerge from first-hand experience working with Yolngu and Pintupi people in non-traditional domains, as well as from attempts to re-introduce Kaurna on the basis of nineteenth-century documentation.

**1. INTRODUCTION.** As descriptive linguists, we have the skills to document and analyze languages. That is what we are trained to do. But what is it exactly that we should document? Whom are we documenting the languages for?

It is often the case that linguists are writing primarily for other linguists. For example, at the Australian Linguistics Society (ALS) annual conference in Brisbane in 2006, while there were many linguists sharing the results of their research on Aboriginal languages, not one Aboriginal person was present. The writings of linguists are often largely inaccessible to speakers and custodians of the languages because they are written in technical language. Unfortunately, in Australia few speakers and custodians of Aboriginal languages are trained in linguistics.

The underlying agenda in writing a description of a language is often historical linguistics to determine the degree to which the language under study is related to neighboring languages. The other main agenda for linguists is language typology, where linguists have been keen to investigate the system of nominal classification, ergativity, switch reference systems, etc., in the context of broader linguistic theory.

R. M. W. Dixon, who taught many Australianists, employs a standard kind of formula in the writing of his grammars of Australian languages. This is exemplified in his grammars of Dyirbal (Dixon 1972) and Yidiny (Dixon 1977). There are chapters on “The language and its speakers” (including surrounding languages), phonology, parts of speech, morphology, syntax, lexicon, and linguistic prehistory (in the case of Dyirbal). Sample texts (Dreaming narratives and autobiographies) are also included. Dixon and Blake’s (1979,

1981, 1983, 1991, 2000) *Handbook of Australian Languages* series reveals the same kind of formula for the sketch grammars published there. Any sentences in the language included are there to illustrate a syntactic structure. The functions of language are typically completely ignored. Even if there were many functionally useful sentences included in a grammar, we would not be able to find them easily, embedded as they are within grammatical description. In reading a good academic grammar of an Australian language we would expect to find a phoneme inventory and description of allophones, a comprehensive list of case suffixes and other grammatical morphemes, and a good coverage of syntactic structures, but we would not necessarily find a greeting or leave-taking, let alone a compliment, an expression of sympathy, an admission of guilt, or a pardon (a point also made by Himmelmann [2006:18], writing of language description in a wider context).

Material gathered in the field, from which Australian grammars have been written, has been obtained primarily from traditional domains. As noted above, texts are typically Dreaming narratives, autobiographies, accounts of a traditional way of life (e.g., fish trap construction), or, occasionally, early contact history stories. Conversations are notably absent (unless they happen to come up, as the conversation between ancestral beings within a Dreaming narrative). Tamsin Donaldson does include one short invented dialogue, “The Whinger,” among the eleven texts included as appendices in her Ngiyambaa grammar<sup>1</sup> (Donaldson 1980:327–329). Few observations have been made of language use within non-traditional domains, such as community council meetings,<sup>2</sup> within the health clinic, school, community garage, mining or earthmoving operations, or any other of the numerous areas of non-traditional life where Aboriginal languages are actually spoken. Rather, what is most keenly sought is the “pure,” unadulterated language as used prior to language and culture contact with speakers of English.

I will argue that this limited view of linguistic description, while it may answer questions of genetic affiliation or language typology, does not well serve the needs and interests of those who identify with the languages, should they need to relearn the language from documented sources. Certainly a grammar and lexicon is needed. But that is only part of the story. Once a language is no longer transmitted from one generation to the next, it takes a massive effort to re-introduce it. A grammar-driven approach is not the best way to do that. I have proposed the “Formulaic Method” (Amery 1998; 2000:209–212; 2001:200–204), in which well-formed, high-frequency utterances are learned, starting with minimalist utterances, such as stand-alone question words and one-word responses to questions that can be dropped into English conversation, but still maintain the grammatical integrity of the language. Hinton and Ahlers (1999:60) advocate something similar.

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<sup>1</sup> When Donaldson researched Ngiyambaa it was no longer actively used to any great extent, and it was not possible to record natural conversation—hence the invented dialogue. Efforts are now being made to revive the Ngiyambaa language.

<sup>2</sup> Community Councils in Australia are elected bodies that represent Aboriginal communities in dealings with government, mining companies, researchers, and other outsiders. They typically discuss matters such as the provision of services, mining, etc. They are often quite distinct from traditional authority structures.

**2. THE RELATIONSHIP AMONG DOCUMENTATION, DESCRIPTION, LANGUAGE REVIVAL, AND LANGUAGE TEACHING.** Language documentation is a rapidly developing and expanding field with innovations facilitated by recent technological developments. Himmelmann (2006:1) defines language documentation as “a lasting, multipurpose record of a language” and goes on to say that “the net should be cast as widely as possible. That is, a language documentation should strive to include as many and as varied records as practically feasible covering all aspects of the set of inter-related phenomena commonly call a *language*” (Himmelmann 2006:2). Of course time, finances, and a host of other constraints mean that only a fraction of language use is ever actually documented.

Language documentation provides the raw data that underpins description. There has been some debate as to whether description should be done concurrently with documentation, or whether description is an unwarranted distraction from the often urgent task of documentation. Some argue that analysis of data can take place at a later date, while others maintain that it is essential to analyze data as it is collected in order to be able to clarify misunderstandings and uncertainties and to inform additional documentation. As discussed above, academic description has typically taken a rather narrow approach to analyzing and describing structural properties of language. Many linguists might regard language functions and language use as belonging in a pedagogical grammar, learner’s guide, or other language learning/teaching resources.

Certainly pedagogical grammars are written for a different audience than are academic grammars, which means that they need to be written in a different way. But I wish to make the point here that academic grammars should expand their scope and include at least a range of basic language functions alongside the usual chapters on phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon, etc.

Since the 1980s a number of learners’ guides have been produced in Central Australian languages, beginning with Cliff Goddard’s (1981) *A Learner’s Guide to Yankunytjatjara*. Since then, learners’ guides have been produced in Ngaanyatjarra, Pintupi/Luritja, Arrernte, Anmatyere, Warlpiri, and Warumungu. These learner’s guides have been produced primarily for outsiders (often non-Aboriginal persons involved in service provision to Aboriginal communities). They have not been produced with language documentation in mind. Eckert and Hudson’s (1988) *Wangka Wiru* is basically a pedagogical grammar, also written explicitly for “anyone who wishes to learn Pitjantjatjara as a foreign language or who needs it for projects in Pitjantjatjara speaking communities” (Eckert and Hudson 1988:xiii). It includes a substantial chapter titled “Getting Started,” where a number of basic language functions are covered. Main subsections are “Initiating a Conversation,” “Maintaining a Conversation,” “Mistakes,” “Polite Speech,” and “Simple Sentences and the Verb ‘to be’.” However, the remainder of *Wangka Wiru* is organized around the grammar, treating each part of speech in turn.

Now, in the case of a “strong” language, it would certainly be feasible to write a pedagogical grammar and other language learning resources that are informed by a standard academic description, so long as native speakers are on hand to answer questions of the kind “How do you say X in your language?” However, in the case of language reclamation, where fluent native speakers no longer exist, the pedagogical grammar, learner’s guide, and other language teaching/learning resources will be dependent on the extent and nature of

language documentation and language description. If needed vocabulary and expressions have not been recorded, then we are forced to invent them.

**3. REVIVAL OF SLEEPING LANGUAGES: PHOENIX OR RELIC?** If “sleeping” or so-called “dead” or “extinct” languages are to be revived, what kind of language will the revived language be? Are we to attempt to speak a museum piece that is unchanged from when it was last spoken on an everyday basis? This is certainly the view of some Indigenous people who object to any new terms for technologies that were not a part of Aboriginal life in pre-contact times. But this is certainly not the view of Aboriginal people with whom I work in Adelaide, though I have heard it expressed by some members of neighboring groups. If we don’t allow the language to change and adapt and incorporate new concepts, it will be most unsuited to talking about so many aspects of modern daily life, a fact also observed by Hinton and Ahlers (1999:61). If a language is to be revived as an unchanging relic, it is probably suited for little more than ceremonial use. Language as a relic does not satisfy some of the widely accepted properties of language, such as creativity, openness, and productivity.

For members of the Kurna community with whom I work, the aim of language revival is to have their own language to converse in, think in, and put out there for all to see and hear as a daily reminder of a distinctive language and culture that belong to the Kurna people and are intrinsically linked to the Adelaide Plains (Kurna traditional lands). The revived language is one that draws on the old, but is transformed to meet the needs of the future. This new language reflects modern cultural values, including changed attitudes to gender, equality, religious values, behavioral norms, etc.

Indigenous societies throughout the world are being profoundly transformed as the outside world, English and other major world languages, and majority-culture institutions impinge on traditional values and ways of life. Consequently, many languages are changing rapidly to reflect these changes. This is most pronounced with the addition of new terms and in the ways in which ideas are expressed, but there may also be phonological and grammatical changes as well. In the context of language revitalization, “authenticity” is a hotly contested topic (see Amery and Rigney 2004; Couzens and Eira forthcoming; Hinton and Ahlers 1999; Wong 1999). There might be some tension between speakers of the traditional language and second language learners. Hinton and Ahlers (1999:57) quote a Māori educator saying “the elders complain, ‘Sure we have a new generation of speakers—but all they talk about is English concepts’.” Wong (1999) discusses a similar dilemma in Hawai‘i, where traditional Hawaiian is spoken by a dwindling number of *kūpuna* ‘elders’ on the one hand and an emerging group of young people on the other who speak Hawaiian as a first language, themselves taught by teachers who learned Hawaiian as a second language.

In order to lay the best foundation for a revived language that is truly a phoenix, an entity that satisfies all the properties of a dynamic, living, changing language that reflects the cultural values of its speakers, then we need to think about documenting language use, especially language use in non-traditional domains.

**4. WHAT SHOULD BE DOCUMENTED?** Documentation of language use is not exactly a new idea. This notion underpins the ethnography of speaking promoted within anthropo-

logical linguistics. As Duranti (1997:95–96) points out, almost a century ago when Malinowski began to promote ethnography through participant observation, he had in mind the documentation of a comprehensive account of the way of life of a people. The ethnographic approach advocated by Hymes (1972) and Saville-Troike (1989) sees language as a social phenomenon. Within this paradigm language documentation “should be based on observing and/or participating in situated speech events ... in real and spontaneous speaking situations” (Messineo 2008:276). Johnson (2004:144), in a discussion of the archival goals of language recording, includes “conversations: anything that’s not gossip or too personal, e.g., conversations about a recent school event or holiday” among various genres of a more traditional kind (ceremonies, chants, narratives, field notes, etc.) as likely candidates for archival preservation. Himmelmann (2006:7) stresses the importance of obtaining

specimens of observable linguistic behavior, i.e. examples of how people actually communicate with each other. This includes all kinds of communicative activities in a speech community, from everyday small talk to elaborate rituals, from parents baby-talking to their newborn infants to political disputes between village elders.

And he further emphasizes that “the goal is to create a record of a language which leaves nothing to be desired by later generations wanting to explore whatever aspect of the language they are interested in” (Himmelmann, 2006:3). In practice, of course, it is simply not possible for a researcher to document everything, so anthropologists have tended to concentrate on areas that were exotic or of particular interest to anthropological theory (e.g., kinship systems). Mundane areas of everyday life have been taken for granted and largely ignored, especially with regard to language use in these domains, but these are precisely the most useful areas if future language revitalization goals are taken into account.

Among the many approaches to second and foreign language teaching are functional/notional approaches (Wilkins 1976), where the entire curriculum is organized around language functions. Van Ek (1977) compiles lists of notions and functions for English. Perhaps we should investigate these approaches further in order to produce a checklist of language functions for Indigenous languages as a guide for those engaged in language documentation. A manual written to guide linguistic fieldwork in Australia (Sutton and Walsh 1979) contains an inventory of likely phonetic symbols needed for transcription, lists of morphological and syntactic categories likely to be encountered, and a lexical inventory for which to seek counterparts. However, no mention is made of language functions, speech acts, or speech genres. Perhaps this manual should be updated and republished with such a list included. A recent guide to linguistic fieldwork (Bowerman 2008:116–117) does provide a short list of “brainstorming ideas” for eliciting texts, but something much more comprehensive is needed.

Restricting language documentation to traditional domains and focussing on the “pure” precontact form of the language is not necessarily in the best interests of those who may one day attempt to revive it. We see in the language as it is used in non-traditional domains how speakers incorporate new concepts (see for instance Amery 1986a, 1986b). Documentation of language used within the home, at council meetings, schools, health clinics, machinery workshops, building sites, sports events, etc., will provide a better platform on

which to base a revived language. It is fortunate in the Kaurna case, discussed in detail later, that well over one hundred new terms for new things (e.g., *nurlitti* ‘key’) were documented in the 1830s and 1840s (see Amery 1993). Bower (2008) focuses on traditional lexical domains, though under “artefacts and everyday items” (Bower 2008:109–110) she does at least advise researchers to “ask about everyday items as well as the exotic. Don’t just concentrate on traditional items. If you are trying to learn to speak the language you will need to know the words for everyday items.” I suggest that it would be worth adding a detailed list of such everyday items to the wordlists included in Sutton and Walsh 1979 to ensure that reasonable coverage is obtained.

With the information technology revolution, the tools needed to document language in use are readily available. Digital sound recording, digital video, and digital photography can easily be combined with text in multimedia displays. Compiling a rich archive of numerous aspects of daily life, including language use, is now an achievable possibility, and language documentation is moving in this direction.

**5. REINTRODUCTION OF KAURNA.** I now wish to explore the issue of language documentation through the lens of Kaurna, a language that is being re-introduced from written sources alone (Amery and Gale 2000). Members of the Kaurna language group from the Adelaide Plains, together with linguists and an ethnomusicologist, have been reclaiming the Kaurna language since the late 1980s. In the Kaurna case, very little of the language has been passed down in the oral tradition. A handful of terms for body parts, fish terms, place names, etc., are remembered, but little else. By and large the Kaurna language movement has been forced to rely on documentation of the language by two German missionaries, Clamor Schürmann, who worked with the Kaurna language from October 1838 until August 1840, and Christian Teichelmann, who arrived with Schürmann, but continued working on the language until 1858. Teichelmann and Schürmann published a sketch grammar in 1840, including two hundred example sentences, while Teichelmann continued to compile a compendium vocabulary laced with example sentences and phrases. He refined some of his understandings of aspects of Kaurna grammar. They were both careful to record sentences that they had heard Kaurna people utter and did not take shortcuts by filling in gaps in paradigms according to regular patterns. Their record of the Kaurna language, in an era before sound recording devices were invented, is a fantastic achievement if we take into account the conditions under which they were working. Many of the sentences are indicative of life in the early years of colonization and culture contact. Consider these sentences, for example:

*Gadla bitti kundando, yellakan'inna mai atto yunggota.*  
‘First cut wood, then I will give you food.’

*Gadla wappeurti, pari turtu-trukkaringu ngu.*  
‘Do not touch the wood, or the rice there will be easily upset.’

*Ngando katteta ninker litya paper? – Yokurlo.*  
‘Who will take the paper (letter) to your father? – The ship.’



Pulyunna meyu tittappeurti, pindi meyu nurruttoai.  
 ‘Don’t hang the black man, that the European be not charmed (or  
 enchanted).’

While we are not told who actually uttered these sentences, it is not hard to work out what was probably going on, especially if we have some knowledge of early events. We know from other sources that Kurna people were often engaged by the white settlers to cut firewood in exchange for food, and the word *gadla* refers specifically to ‘firewood’, rather than *taralye* ‘sawn or split timber’. The third sentence could well have been addressed to Teichelmann or Schürmann when one of them was writing a letter to his family back in Germany. The fourth sentence was probably uttered by Kadlitpinna (‘Captain Jack’). We know from Schürmann’s journals that Kadlitpinna tried to act as mediator when Aborigines from the upper reaches of the River Torrens were taken into custody for the alleged killing of two shepherds. Members of the captives’ group had threatened to work sorcery on the River Torrens, upon which the colonists depended, in revenge.

Some recorded sentences, such as *Warruanna padni* ‘go out of doors’ (i.e., ‘Go outside!’) are immediately useful today. Others provide a frame or grammatical template that can be usefully employed through simple lexical substitution.

As it turns out, the German missionaries, unlike some linguists today, did record a fair number of utterances immediately useful in conversation, and included some of them in their twenty-four-page sketch grammar (Teichelmann and Schürmann 1840). These include some speech acts, such as apologizing (*Yakka alya!* ‘I am sorry’, or ‘I beg pardon’ when one person has accidentally hurt another), thanking (*Ngaityo yungandalya!* lit. ‘My brother!’ meaning ‘I thank you’), and leave-taking (*Yaintya wandinga; ngai narta pad-neota* ‘You remain here; I shall now go’ meaning ‘good night’), which are generally not found in traditional Aboriginal languages. Some of these expressions may well have arisen in the context of intercultural communication in changed circumstances. Whether they are truly traditional Kurna expressions or not, nonetheless they are documented.

In 2000, a series of Kurna language development workshops were initiated, where phrases and expressions for use between parents or other caregivers and babies or young children were developed. If intergenerational transmission is to be re-established, parents need to know what to say to their children in the language. The only sentence recorded in the historical materials that relates to this area is the following:

*Ngaityaii! Ityamaii pa warro warrondo.*  
 ‘Mamma! The Ityamaii<sup>3</sup> her do call’  
 (Teichelmann 1857)

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<sup>3</sup> Ityamaii was the name of a female child, daughter of Ityamaitpinna or “King Rodney.” She attended the school taught by the missionaries at Piltawodli and appears to have been the most literate of all the children.

Almost all the needed utterances had to be invented or developed, and in the process some terminology, including words such as *wornubalta* ‘nappy’ (i.e., diaper), *ibitti* ‘shower’, and *tadlipure* ‘soap’, was also engineered.

In 2006 and 2007, a learners’ and teachers’ guide was written in collaboration with many Kurna people (Amery with Pintyandi 2007). It turned out to be a pedagogical grammar and much more. An attempt was made to explain the phonology, writing system, morphology, syntax, and semantics (including time and space, number, color, and naming systems) in terms that would be understandable to non-linguists. Seven chapters on language functions were also included:

- Ch. 5 Useful Introductory Utterances
- Ch. 11 *Nepuityangga Wanggandi* – ‘Talking with Friends’
- Ch. 12 *Wodlingga* – ‘In the Home’
- Ch. 13 *Ngartuityangga Wanggandi* – ‘Talking with Children’
- Ch. 14 *Burkaiyangga Wanggandi* – ‘Talking with Elders’
- Ch. 15 *Tidnaparndo* – ‘Football’
- Ch. 16 *Kuya Pirri-wirkindi* – ‘Fishing’

Among the “Useful Introductory Utterances” we included greetings, introductions, welcomes and acknowledgements, thanking, leave-taking, requests, and commands.

Chapters were included on football and fishing, not only because these activities are popular among Nungas (Aboriginal people from southern South Australia), but also because they are useful strategically in the re-introduction of a language. In both football and fishing, needed utterances are often short, and they often stand alone and do not require a verbal response. In the case of football, they are typically commands, exclamations, and sometimes requests. They are needed spontaneously in the heat of the moment, and there is the added incentive of being able to give an instruction in a language that the opposing team does not understand. Fishing, on the other hand, provides a situation that is calm and quiet, where there is usually plenty of time to formulate the needed expression. This situation is ideal for beginners.

Using Kurna language within these domains would have been so much easier had a range of expressions been recorded that could have been directly applied in these situations. Knowing what one’s ancestors would have said when they had caught a fish, rather than having to develop the expression *Ngatto kuya mankondi!* ‘I’ve got one’ (lit. I+ERG fish getting/having), would have given Kurna people today a much greater sense of authenticity than is possible now. While *birri* ‘fishhook’ had been recorded, we had to think long and hard about words for ‘sinker’, ‘float’, ‘bait’, etc. Undoubtedly there would have been terms for these things that simply went unrecorded.

Kurna people had a traditional game of football, which many believe has given rise to our distinctive “Australian Rules” football, where the ball is kicked high into the air. The *parndo* was a ball made from stuffed possum skins. But apart from *parndo*, no other specialized vocabulary or expressions related to the game have been recorded. It would have been so much easier to develop suitable utterances for use in the twenty-first century, had a full description of the traditional game and the kinds of expressions used within it been documented. Serendipity has enabled the use of an old expression *mekuamarti* ‘may the



crows pick out your eyes'. It so happens that one of the two main Adelaide teams is called the Crows. We developed *karndo kundarna!* 'let lightning strike' for supporters of the opposition, Port Power, whose logo features a bolt of lightning.

Funerals have also been used as a strategy for re-introducing Kaurna. They are almost a weekly occurrence for Kaurna people, partly because of the high mortality rate, but more so reflecting the large extended family networks that are largely intact. Funerals require the use of much formulaic language, and often the same favorite hymns are sung again and again—good reinforcement for beginning language learners. In developing Kaurna funeral protocols, we drew on the few terms and expressions that were recorded, as well as on documented descriptions of traditional Kaurna funerals and funeral practices for more background information (see Amery and Rigney 2006). By necessity, the actual funeral service transcript consisted largely of translated texts (hymns, prayers, and liturgy). We also designed sympathy cards with Kaurna text.

**6. DISCUSSION.** It is perhaps surprising that in some ways we are probably better off with the description of Kaurna left by the German missionaries, with their limited knowledge and exposure to the language, than we might have been with a modern grammar. While modern grammars would be far more accurate and comprehensive in their treatment of phonology, morphology, and syntax, they might not be very useful in telling us what to say and how to say it.

I began to raise these issues at the UNESCO meeting in Melbourne in April 2001 (see Amery 2006). In that paper I argued for including neologisms in published wordlists and dictionaries, for documenting language in use, and for including commonly used speech formulas and speech acts in documentation. I also argued for the need for intensive language development in the case of all endangered languages.

We can expect to find a complete phoneme inventory, a comprehensive account of nominal, verbal, and other morphology, and an account of the major syntactic constructions in any respectable linguistic description of a language. We would not expect a dictionary of a language to be complete. If we dig around for long enough we will always come across words that have been missed. Nonetheless we would expect to find a reasonably comprehensive account of basic vocabulary across a wide range of semantic categories. However, given the state of current practice, we would not expect to find even the most basic expressions used frequently within everyday conversation. Of course it is very difficult to provide a comprehensive account of even the most basic frequently used expressions, but I think it is time that we did develop a kind of checklist of basic expressions for inclusion within our published descriptions of a language. In other words, we should be able to expect to find at least a chapter on these within any published language description.

Of course, a language is much more than a stockpile of speech formulas. No matter how large the stockpile of recorded utterances, sooner or later language learners must take the plunge and formulate expressions for themselves. And of course, the culture and the situation in which a people exist fifty or a hundred years from now, when they might be in a position to revive their language, will be vastly different. But the knowledge of what their forebears actually said in a range of similar situations will greatly enhance their sense of an authentic language and will provide a solid foundation from which to rebuild.

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