Linguistic Fieldwork

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12   The last speaker is dead – long live the last speaker!

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It is increasingly common for primary linguistic fieldwork to be conducted with "last speakers," as swingeing language extinction brings a belated attention to the need to document endangered languages. Data from "last speakers" must, however, be treated with caution, given that the variety they speak may have been simplified through various processes of language death (see Schmidt 1985: 41) – though this is by no means always the case – and/or heavily influenced by interference from whatever other language(s) they use in day-to-day communication. Nonetheless, many detailed and subtle grammars of Australian languages, for example, have been written on the basis of data from a single last speaker; recent examples are Dench's (1995) grammar of Martuthunira, and Harvey's (1992) grammar of Gaagudju.

Such works clearly validate the possibility of carrying out linguistic fieldwork with last speakers, but it is imperative that researchers be aware that the definition and identification of "last speakers" is highly problematic, and prone to constant redefinition from both the speech community's and the researcher's point of view. There are of course rather obvious cases, where the death of one "last speaker" is followed by the fortuitous discovery of another speaker, equally or more fluent, in some other location, or where the community's definition of total linguistic competence adjusts to the erosion of stylistic, grammatical, or lexical complexity, so that in a succession of what the community considers "last speakers" each knows less, in some objective sense (see section 1). However, my main focus in this chapter is rather on the way in which the broader social system determines individuals' perceived right to be a speaker, as well as their actual linguistic performance.

Much of the material in this paper is based on work I have carried out in northern Australia (particularly north-west Queensland and Arnhem Land) over the last two decades; this is augmented by comments and quotes from a number of colleagues. The importance of last-speaker issues to my own research can be gauged from the fact that, of the dozen languages I have been involved in documenting over this period, only two

(Mayali/ Kunwinjku and Iwaidja) are still being learned by children, seven were already down to one or two speakers by the time I began work on them, and the remainder, though boasting over a dozen speakers, have sometimes required concerted efforts to bring speakers together, either to establish a conversational quorum or to bring together people whose skills are complementary (e.g., a Kayardild monolingual with his/her English-monolingual child who nonetheless understands the language well enough to help with translation). My own experience is by no means atypical here, and for accounts of similar situations the reader is referred to Dixon (1984) on his own fieldwork experiences in north Queensland, White (1990), which discusses Luise Hercus' fieldwork, mainly in south-eastern Australia, and Sutton (1992) on his experiences of salvage fieldwork in Cape York.

Obviously, doing fieldwork in such situations is a race against time, and tracking down good speakers before it is too late involves a great deal of detective work. It is common to be told about particular individuals that they are "somewhere over the border in Queensland," "might be they went to Palm Island," or "probably living down Daly River way." Partly owing to these difficulties, many "salvage linguists" have stories of arriving a year too late to work with the last fluent speaker (e.g., Hercus 1969: 190).

Sometimes, of course, one is given detailed suggestions about how much various people know. On one occasion in 1990, I sat in an old shed during a thunderstorm with Big Bill Neidjie, a senior man of the Bunidj clan – who himself speaks Amurdak and some Gaagudju as well as the regional lingua francas Kunwinjku and Iwaidja – while he spelled out a program for what work needed to be done on the languages of the Cobourg peninsula. For each of Marrgu, Garig, Amurdak and Wurrugu he named the one or two remaining speakers. Over the following years, as these suggestions could be followed up by a series of researchers, this information was proved broadly correct, although with a pronounced male bias, an overestimation of the knowledge of some speakers, and an omission of the names of other speakers for reasons I will return to below.

But equally often one's inquiries are held up by the fact that some members of the descendant community either do not know where key people are, or are unaware that they speak the language. Just as important, lack of awareness of the distinction between "language-owners" and "language-speakers" can lead fieldworkers to narrow their search in the wrong direction, since the question "who speaks X?" will often be construed as meaning "who is an 'owner' of language X, and also speaks it?" Mark Harvey, for example, worked for many years on Warray with Doris White of Humpty Doo, a woman who he, and the other Warray descendants

known to him, assumed to be one of the last surviving cohort of speakers (see Harvey 1993 for an interesting account of the field situation). Subsequently he discovered another speaker, Elsie O'Brien, living in Darwin:

Finding out about her was a matter of chance. I was checking genealogies with some people at Humpty Doo, and discovered her as the spouse of an uncle. I assumed that she must be dead, but was assured to the contrary and then informed that she spoke Warray. It took quite a while to find her, and she was quite mistrustful at our first meeting. However she was reassured by family connections and then things just zoomed off. Finding her made a huge difference to what I could say about Warray, as she was pretty much independent from Doris and the others.

The thing was of course that if I had been looking for Kamu people I would have found her easily. That is one point that I think you should make clearly for Australia. Fieldworkers should not necessarily look among language-owners for good language-speakers. In my experience around Darwin there is frequently a mismatch. I wish I had known this when I started work – I have since discovered that a number of now-deceased Wagiman and Kamu people were probably good speakers of Warray, but I never worked with them. (Harvey, e-mail, May 11, 1998)

The difficulties do not stop once one is in the happy position of sitting on the verandah, or on a couple of upturned flour tins, with someone one believes to be a "speaker."

Some of these problems are already familiar in the literature on fieldwork in language-death situations (see Dorian 1986): the decay and (sometimes) restoration of memory in a long-neglected language, the difficulty of knowing whether a given paradigmatic gap or syntactic construction is due to interference from the dominant language or is part of the original system, the difficulties that can arise in establishing rapport as an outsider to the community, and the artificiality of obtaining a fluent and punchy text in a language the audience does not understand. I will mention some of these in more detail below. But a further focus will be on other issues of a more sociolinguistic nature that arise in northern Australia from the particular constellation of multilingualism, small speech communities, assumptions about speakerhood and the social function of language competence and ownership, and restrictions on the social distribution of knowledge. I will also refer to certain types of language competence that I have observed in these communities, which lie outside the conventional taxonomy of speaking versus hearing competences, and which may be harnessed to use in salvage fieldwork.

By surveying such issues, and the way they influence language learning and use in these multilingual but traditionally non-literate speech communities, I hope to help linguistic fieldworkers gathering data on endangered languages to cast their net more widely, slowly and subtly than they might otherwise have done.

1.   Knowing a language versus owning a language

Most of the "last speakers" I will be discussing are members of speech communities in northern Australia which are traditionally characterized by extensive personal multilingualism and a societal emphasis on both language knowledge and language "ownership" as a means of demonstrating clan membership and affiliation to land and sea territory.[1] For example, it is believed that many resources, such as freshwater springs, turtles, and safe passage to particular sites, can only be accessed through correct use of the appropriate language variety (Brandl and Walsh 1982; Trigger 1987); clearly this provides a strong motivation to learn many linguistic varieties.

In areas like northern Australia where the ethic of multilingualism, and striking linguistic diversity, exists alongside widespread shift away from some languages, it is common to encounter "last speakers" who are highly multilingual – and perhaps therefore are the last speaker of a number of languages.[2] Because special talent as a language learner is what enabled such individuals to learn varieties offering limited exposure, they are often excellent informants, but there is also a risk that the variety taught to the linguist has been influenced by other languages they know. This issue will be taken up below.

A second problem arises from the fact that affiliation to language is primarily a matter of social group membership rather than actual competence. As a number of anthropological linguists have argued (e.g., Sutton 1978, Sutton and Palmer 1981, Merlan 1981, Merlan and Rumsey 1982, Rumsey 1989, 1993), the reigning social model over much of Australia posits a direct relationship between land and language, as well as between language and particular social groupings (typically but not always patrilineal clans). Individuals then derive the right to be recognized as speakers of particular languages indirectly, through their membership in clan or comparable groups (Rumsey 1989: 75):

The mediated link is not between language and country (which are directly linked), but between language and people: Jawoyn people are Jawoyn not because they speak Jawoyn, but because they are otherwise linked (by patrifiliation, matrifiliation, or both) to places to which the Jawoyn language is also linked. . . . [N]ot everyone who speaks Jawoyn, even fluently, feels entitled to say "I am Jawoyn" or "Jawoyn is my language" (Merlan and Rumsey 1982: 37). The relevant relationship to language is not one of speakership, but one which is better glossed as language ownership (Sutton 1978, Sutton and Palmer 1981).

In Cape York Creole, this distinction is conveyed in the following way (Rigsby 1997): one is said to "speak" one's own clan language but to *mak* (i.e., 'mock' or 'imitate') the languages of other clans.

CLAN OR
INDIVIDUAL ⇔ OTHER SOCIAL ⇔ LAND ⇔ LANGUAGE
GROUP

Figure 12.1. The indirect relationship between individuals and "their" languages.

The social model outlined above is illustrated schematically in figure 12.1. In many areas there is also an ideology that each distinct social group, down to clan level, should have some distinct linguistic features, and there are known cases where the fission of one clan into two leads to the emergence of two distinct "clan lects" or "patrilects" (Sutton 1978), even though the difference between them is confined to a few key vocabulary items (see Smith and Johnson 1986). In many parts of Australia, such as Western Cape York and North-Eastern Arnhem Land, such varieties each have their own name, and a problem facing salvage linguists in such regions, who are trying to get information on a particular language X about which nothing is known, is to find out whether they are dealing with a clan lect very similar to known varieties, a quite distinct language, or such other possibilities as an alternative name for a known variety (see Walsh 1997 for a good discussion of this problem).

Although neighboring groups will sometimes make statements like "that's just like our language – only they take it a bit light" or "we can hear that language – same like ours," there are so many confounding factors (e.g., the effects of multilingualism in promoting passive understanding of distinct languages) that such statements can only be really evaluated when data from self-identifying speakers is obtained. For example, Tryon's (1974) classification of Matngele and Kamu (which he spells Kamor) as sister dialects is based on work with Matngele people who had some knowledge of Kamu as a second-language variety. But later fieldwork by Mark Harvey with Elsie O'Brien, a first-language speaker of Kamu, has shown that they are fully distinct languages.

A corollary of the system outlined above is that people's actual language knowledge, which reflects the accidents of their life history, is a separate matter to the "ownership" of languages conferred on them by descent-based membership of particular social groups, such as clans. Many grammatical descriptions of Australian languages mention the fact that key informants were actually affiliated with groups speaking other languages. Several of Austin's (1981:13–14) key Diyari informants, for example, came from non-Diyari groups: Rosa Warren "whose mother was Aranda and father Arabana was born in 1917 and learned Diyari as a child living among

people who had been at Killalpinna" and Frieda Merrick "was of Wangkanguru descent and learned Diyari as a young woman at Muloorina and Killalpaninna. Her knowledge of vocabulary was probably the most extensive of any speaker with whom intensive language work was undertaken." Recall, as well, the case of Elsie O'Brien discussed above, who though of Kamu descent (and speaking Kamu) turned out to also have a full knowledge of Warray.

This means that many informants will, in terms of social affiliation, come from other language backgrounds. But identifying and working with such people may be problematic, owing to a widespread belief that it is owning a language, rather than speaking it, which is the primary social determinant of one's right to make decisions about who to pass on knowledge about that language to; actual competence need in no way confer social recognition as a speaker. Particularly in the initial phases of investigation, it is often to the person who is regarded as "owning" the language that a linguist is referred, upon inquiring "who speaks X?"

This needs to be borne in mind when doing fieldwork on threatened languages, since the linguist can be faced with a situation in which the person with a right to speak for the language in fact knows very little, while someone else not recognized as having a right to speak for the language may know much more. Consider the following case, from Ian Green's fieldwork in the Daly River area (e-mail, May 12, 1999):

In the early 90s I worked on a Daly language called Warrgat (a.k.a. Merranunggu, Marranunggu, Maranungku). Of the two identified remaining speakers only one, Peter Melyin, known around the place by the nickname "Daffy," was available and willing to teach it to me. Peter was effectively a native speaker of Warrgat – it may not have been his first language, but he had spoken it from an early age – and he was its rightful custodian, with the authority to teach it to others as he wished. However, over the preceding few decades the closely related Marrithiyel language had pushed aside Warrgat as his primary "traditional" language, and as a result he had difficulty recalling its lexicon and constructions clearly. In addition he was having increasing difficulties with his hearing (hence the "Daffy" (< Eng. *deaf*) nickname). So language teaching sessions were slow and frustrating for everyone.

We were lucky to be assisted by Jack Yenmung (a.k.a. Jackie Skewes). Jack was a native Marrithiyel speaker, but had learnt Warrgat as a child and had used it off and on over a period of forty years or more. Jack had previously proven to be a brilliant Marrithiyel teacher, and he sat patiently with Peter and me, gently explaining things to the old man, prompting his recollections and quite often, with great deference, suggesting that there were proper Warrgat alternatives to the Marrithiyel or Marrithiyel-influenced forms that he was coming up with. Nevertheless, the work proceeded extremely slowly.

At this stage, Jack on his own, in the absence of Peter, was very uncomfortable answering questions about Warrgat. However, when Peter was subsequently called away on business, he gave Jack permission to take over the main teaching role with

me. And, without wishing to detract at all from Peter's vast array of knowledge of country and culture, I have to say that the sessions began to fly. Once formally given the authority to talk about the language, Jack proved to be as insightful a teacher in Warrgat as he had been with Marrithiyel.

Shortly after this time both men became too sick to work on teaching language, and both subsequently passed away. Without the happy coincidence of having Jack around, linguists and Warrgat descendants would know a lot less about the language than we do now. It's odd how we as linguists on the one hand observe the fabulously multilingual nature of Aboriginal society but on the other can become very purist in our fieldwork endeavours and feel compromised at the thought of working with second or subsequent language speakers of the particular variety we're interested in. On reflection, I think that I unduly narrowed the scope of my data on the then moribund Marrithiyel dialect by failing to appreciate what fluent but non-native speakers might be able to offer.

The situation may be further muddied by the many political factors associated with both "owning" and "speaking" a language, which work against maintaining this distinction in as clear a form as was outlined above.

On the one hand, people with a peripheral claim to group membership (perhaps through a cross-grandparent, such as a father's mother or mother's father, or through long residence in the absence of a clear custodian, or through earlier adoption or bequest), often seek to strengthen their claim by regular fluent public use of the language associated with the group's country.

On the other hand, in at least some speech communities it may be regarded as a "shame job" for a clan elder to be unable to speak the language associated with their clan, and politically ambitious individuals may often have developed effective strategies for prominent public display of their language skills in a way that can disguise their limited repertoire. The fewer people that know the language, the more effective such a strategy becomes.

For example, one man I knew made a regular practice of short but voluble monologues in his language as he visited the camps of other people in the community, who were speakers of different Aboriginal languages or Aboriginal English. He usually began and ended with the grandiose announcement *ngada burrthangiju!* His performances gained him a reputation as someone who could "speak Q right through."[3] It was only when I became reasonably fluent in a related language that I realized that his oft-repeated flourish simply meant "I will fart!"

As a second example, I was once asked to translate a tape made of a community meeting in which representatives of a number of local clan groups, each with their own language, welcomed and addressed some visiting government representatives. Included in the set of languages were two languages, R and S, each known by at most two people. The speaker of R, who

is reasonably fluent, made a cogent and varied address. On the other hand, the speaker of S, who tended to overstate his knowledge of his language, exploited the free word order that characterizes most Australian languages to eke out his limited knowledge into a speech long enough to give the impression of having a reasonable mastery of the language. His drawn-out delivery of the lines *irtya ngardab wurrad, wurrad irtya ngardab! ngardab wurrad irtya!*, which sounded impressively fluent to listeners knowing no S, actually boiled down to three permutations of a verbless clause: 'this (is) my country, country this (is) mine! My country (is) this!'

In addition to such cases, where the motivation for maintaining a facade as a fluent speaker is to bolster one's identity as a leader of one's clan or tribal group, it may happen that the use of traditional language, in circumstances predisposed to mystify or exclude understanding by a younger generation, is part of a trajectory from language as the shared vehicle of everyday communication to language as restricted ritual knowledge, comparable to ceremonial sacra not to be divulged to the uninitiated. Tamsin Donaldson (1985) describes something like this as occurring between the oldest remembered generation (the *ngurrampaa*) of Ngiyampaa speakers and their children:

> But in not speaking Ngiyampaa in front of younger people its remaining speakers are also drawing on traditional values within their own culture. Earlier generations died in possession of untransmitted ceremonially-derived knowledge because there were no younger people appropriately prepared through other, prerequisite, ceremonial experience to receive it. Someone now in her sixties described to me how in her youth she had overheard members of the *ngurrampaa* generation talking Ngiyampaa together "like music." They would drop their heads in sudden silence . . . at the approach of children. . . . The language itself was becoming in some respects like ceremonial knowledge. . . . The old people were becoming elegiac custodians of what was now primarily a cultural property, a heritage rather than the unselfconscious vehicle of daily life. (Donaldson 1985: 135)

Once language knowledge becomes identified with ritual or ceremonial status in this way, as happens in many situations of language death,[4] certain individuals can have a stake in misrepresenting their own level of knowledge so as to gain status in the community.[5] In searching for last speakers one can easily follow false leads as a result of this. However, as we shall see in section 2, one cannot simply conclude, when you finally sit down with a "speaker" and find them unable to give much language data, that they do not know the language: there may be other reasons for their reticence.

It should be noted here that the politics of language ownership often survives the death of its last speakers. Although I do not normally find the testing of sentences for acceptability a very enlightening procedure in

Aboriginal speech communities,[6] I have often had to cross-check sentences that I recorded from other speakers or half-heard "on the fly" during conversations. The commonest response to such queries is "Who told you that?" And the nature of the response to cross-checked sentences, which may range from "yeah, that's right, you've got it" to "never heard anyone talk like that" or "bit twisted, that one," often depends on how the original author of the utterance is regarded in the community, or more specifically by the evaluator, as much as on any structural characteristics of the sentence itself. What is more, this effect can shift over time, since certain dominant individuals whom no one dares criticize as long as they are alive may be negatively re-evaluated once they die.[7] To avoid being too misled by such currents, I regularly include a couple of test sentences, of whose status I am sure, in order to check out the sympathies of particular informants before passing to items of which I am genuinely unsure. However, the problem cannot be entirely avoided, and any grammar, dictionary or text collection in which speakers are identified as the source for words or sentences can expect to draw some criticism as to why a particular "wrong" form was included. Maintaining one's intellectual integrity while defending these inclusions to community representatives is one of the many tricky communicative challenges that a linguist faces in such communities.

The status attached to arcane language knowledge means that community definitions of who speaks their language will often change through time: speaking a language gets redefined from having a full command of all registers, to having a good command of the language but some gaps in grammar and lexicon and a compressed stylistic range, to knowing a certain number of fixed phrases and words, to knowing a few score vocabulary items, down to remembering a couple of words with an anglicized pronunciation. This is very much a continuum, and such linguist's labels as "full speaker," "semi-speaker," and "rememberer" at best label clear bench-marks along it. While working on Kungarakany in the decade between 1985 and 1995, I heard the label "the last Kungarakany speaker" applied three times by members of the speech community to different individuals: firstly, to a woman who was close to being a fully fluent speaker; secondly (after her death) to a man whose grammatical knowledge was less complete; and thirdly (after his death) to a woman who had a good knowledge of the lexicon but whose grammar and pronunciation were limited. The Kungarakany group were marked by strong interest on the part of many younger members in recording, writing, and practicing their language, and at any point there was always someone regarded as the most senior and knowledgable custodian. This trend continues today with other, even younger speakers.

Three important reservations need to be borne in mind by the field linguist as they decide where potential language speakers fit on this spectrum.

First, it is not possible to give an objective, language-independent definition of the transition from "full speaker" to "semi-speaker," since this depends on how far the structural changes and simplifications that accompany contact with a dominant language like English result in a common code used by a substantial body of speakers.

The results of such simplifications may of course be of lessened interest for syntacticians or typologists: young people's Warlpiri (Bavin and Shopen 1985) may lack the famous flexible word order of traditional Warlpiri; Neo-Tiwi (Lee 1987) may lack the striking polysynthesis of traditional Tiwi; New Lardil (Hale 1997) may have lost the tense-sensitive object-marking of traditional Lardil; and Young People's Dyirbal (Schmidt 1985) may no longer be syntactically ergative, and may have simplified the complex semantics assigning nouns to classes.

But viewed from other subdisciplines of linguistics they still have much of interest to offer, in terms of language contact, the emergence of new linguistic codes, the sociolinguistics of variation, and structure of semantic categories. Unless one has extremely focused theoretical interests – and I personally believe that it is difficult to carry out successful linguistic fieldwork from such a narrow interest base – then there is still great value to recording data about such emergent varieties. And, as mentioned above, with data from a single speaker it is difficult to decide whether one is dealing with a semi-speaker or a speaker of an emergent new variety – indeed, it remains an interesting theoretical question how far and where such categories can be distinguished.

Second, imperfect language acquisition may have different effects according to a language's structural type. Consider the simple sentence "The dog bit him." In a language where each constituent is represented by a separate word, with subject and object marked by case, the first effect of language simplification is to destroy the case system, but speakers are still able to construct sentences by putting together uninflected words. For example, a typical attempt at translation by young semi-speakers of Kayardild would be to say *dathina yarbud – baaja – niya*, literally 'that dog – bit – he'; this is understandable, and differs from traditional Kayardild only in the lack of object marking on the pronoun, which should be *niwanji* instead of *niya*. In a language like Marrgu, on the other hand, where both subject and object pronominals are marked by prefixes to the verb, and there are in addition a large number of portmanteau forms as well as further suppletions depending on the verb chosen, the effect of imperfect acquisition is much greater. When I asked the late Mick Yarmirr how to express the above sentence in Marrgu, he simply balked and said "I can't get that one": failure to learn the correct pronominal prefix combination left him unable to use the verb at all in this context.[8] Yet his fluency in Marrgu

was not bad, and for other subject/object combinations, with other verbs (e.g., 'I want money' or 'The old people used to eat that'), he could immediately give a translation. In this case, then, the head-marking structure of the language exaggerated the effects of imperfect acquisition. (He had been removed from his Marrgu-speaking family on Croker Island at the age of seven to attend a mission school on Goulburn Island, so that though he learned Iwaidja, Maung, and Kunwinjku, his knowledge of his "own" language was limited.)

Third, field linguists must always bear in mind that their own technical definitions of "language," "language death," "semi-speaker," and so on may not correspond to the categorizations made by the speech community or the wider society. As mentioned above, over time communities may revise their criteria for what counts as being a speaker. As well as having important ramifications for their own identity, such redefinitions will be relevant in such issues as whether the community can demonstrate "continuity of tradition" in a Native Title claim, how far it can claim resources for bilingual or language-revitalization programs, and whether community members have a right to interpreting assistance in court. Given our current lack of understanding of which processes and strategies are most successful in promoting language revitalization, the demonstrated advantages of "compromise" over "purity" in assuring language maintenance (Dorian 1994), and the broadening of academic interest within linguistics to encompass non-canonical varieties, field linguists had best not be dogmatic in applying such terms as "semi-speaker" and "last speaker" to the communities they work with.

Before leaving the topic of how to determine who is likely to be a good last speaker, a couple more observations are worth making.

It is often the case that last speakers have often had either special life-circumstances or display special talents for language-learning. This can mean that there is not always a simple relationship between age and language fluency – against expectations. Younger speakers sometimes know more than their elder relatives, if they were gifted language learners or simply more interested in traditional matters. In other cases, an age difference of just a year or two makes a vast difference to fluency. And speakers of about the same age can differ widely in their language competence because early missionaries decided one was young enough to benefit from going to the mission school (and was hence placed in a dormitory where they were cut off from exposure to their language), while the other was deemed too old and continued to lead a relatively traditional existence.

A maverick factor at work in many parts of Australia is the role of white parentage. Under Australian law until well after World War II, children with white fathers were often separated from their mothers and placed in

special schools or with adoptive white families simply on the grounds that they were "part white." To minimize the risk of this happening, such children were often kept out bush by their mothers and other Aboriginal relatives, and ironically sometimes ended up having a more traditional life than their darker-skinned siblings and cousins. (See the biographical notes on Algy Patterson, the main informant for Alan Dench's grammar of Martuthunira, in Dench (1995), and also the notes on some of Bob Dixon's main informants for Dyirbal and Yidiny in Dixon (1972, 1977).)

2.   "Now we can talk": competence and performance of last speakers in sociolinguistic perspective

We now pass from problems of social categorization to the dynamics of individual language capability. In working in salvage situations, linguists must pay attention to a range of factors that can condition significant alterations over time, both positive and negative, in speakers' apparent mastery of the language.

For a range of reasons, last speakers are rarely comparable in fluency and range to speakers in healthy speech communities, and this reduction in fluency and associated simplification constantly throws up analytic questions. Examples from work on Australian languages are the issue of whether the language had a rhotic contrast (/r/ versus /ɹ/) prior to simplification (see Donaldson 1980 and Austin 1986 for discussion with respect to Ngiyambaa and Kamilaraay, respectively), of whether defective verb paradigms reflect imperfect language learning (see Harvey (in press) on this problem in Kamu), or of whether there is no formal marking of subordinate clause status.

Especially where little or nothing is known about the language, large domains of one's description are potentially open to three types of interpretation: that the speaker has simply failed to master the full complexities of some grammatical, phonological, or semantic domain; that the variety they mastered had already undergone simplification through contact with the replacing language; or that the language was in fact like that all along, and the speaker has actually mastered it as perfectly as speakers one hundred years before. In some cases parallels from related or typologically similar languages described in more favorable circumstances, or earlier recordings of the same language, can be used to resolve these issues. But in other cases such data is not available and an assessment of the speaker's overall competence may be the only evidence one can bring to bear.

Even more important is the way in which how the research is done can actually improve or depress the quality of what the speaker produces. Clearly the best results will be obtained when the dynamics of competence

and performance, as embedded in the speaker's own culture, are well under-stood. Patient long-term work by the fieldworker may even enable the speaker to regain fluency through the renewed practice afforded by interaction with the investigator.

As with any speaker in advanced adulthood, competence will be shaped by the playing out over time of processes of learning, use, and forgetting, and this is something that should never be assumed to be simply frozen at a given level. In addition – and this relates to our earlier discussion of the relationship between "owning" and "speaking" a language – changes in the micro-politics of a community, as deaths and absences alter community perceptions of who has the right to give information about a language, can lead to certain speakers stepping forward who had previously been silent, or reluctant to speak, about their abilities. Finally, one needs to take note of a specific type of language competence found in north Australian communities that has not been recognized in the literature – I shall call it "amplifier competence" – which will also be affected – negatively, in this case – by the loss of other members of the speech community.

2.1   Extension of competence through renewed practice

Numerous cases have been reported where an elderly person, who on first encounter thought they had almost forgotten a language through lack of use, gradually recovers their fluency once regular interaction with a linguist affords an occasion for practice. Luise Hercus gives the following example:

After many futile efforts it became possible to locate three people . . . who could recall one short song and a few words of Maḏimaḏi. Hopes of getting any further had been abandoned, when Dr. Ellis discovered that Jack Long, originally known as "John Edwards," a full-blood Maḏimaḏi living at Pt Pearce in South Australia, remembered some of his language. Over a series of visits by Dr. Ellis and the writer he recalled more and more, and showed no confusion with any South Australian language, although he was over ninety and had left the Balranald district long ago. He had been a fluent speaker of Maḏimaḏi as a young man, and had been able to understand the related languages, Wadiwadi, Narinari, Njerinjeri, Ledjiledji and Wegiwegi, as well as Yidayida-Daḏidaḏi. He was a person of outstanding intelligence. Most of the work on Maḏimaḏi is based on his evidence, corroborated by the minor speakers. (Hercus 1986: 102)

Bob Dixon's account of his experience working with Mbabaram speaker Albert Bennett is similar:

In 1964 I searched extensively for speakers of Mbabaram. Mick Burns (aged at least 75) was living in Edmonton, near Cairns, and gave about 50 words. Albert Bennett (then aged about 60) was contacted at his home near Petford, in the heart of traditional Mbabaram country. A first visit on 23 February 1964 yielded just 20 words, in

a language Bennett had not used or heard spoken since his mother died, a score or more years before. I visited him again on 4 July, 26 July and 1 August 1964, obtaining about 200 words in all, and just a little grammatical data. . . . I saw Bennett again on 26 March 1967, 3 December and 14 December 1970 and 10 December 1971; he died in 1972. As he grew older and thought back more to his youth, Bennett's competence in the language improved. (Dixon 1991: 353)

Interference from another language may specifically reduce the use of constructions particular to the disappearing language. Tamsin Donaldson (1980: 115) reports how the last speakers of Ngiyambaa had abandoned a special "caritative" construction, as in (1), in favor of a transitive construction involving the English loan word *wandid-ma-l* 'want', as in (2). Donaldson notes that the caritative construction "slowly revived, once it had been elicited."

(1) *ŋadhu   yuwan-ŋinda   ga-ṟa*
     I + NOM   bread-CARIT   be-PRES
     I want (some) bread.

(2) *ŋadhu   yuwan   wandid-ma-ṟa*
     I + NOM   bread + ABS   want it-VBLSR-PRES
     I want (some) bread.

There are three types of method that investigators should use to encourage the return of fluency and constructional range in such situations.

First, it is clear that the more quickly field linguists themselves can gain some communicative competence in the language, the more opportunity the speakers will have to regain their fluency through conversation, and the more natural it will seem to them to tell stories that utilize the full resources of the language. (A salutary exercise that will help put you in the position of a last speaker working with a linguist investigator is to try telling your favorite anecdote, complete with colorful embroiderings and humorous flourishes, to someone whose English is limited to a few words, and see how far you get.) It is also a way of making sure that the linguist is not being given simplified "foreigner-talk" versions of the language, although this is more likely to be a problem in a fully-functioning speech community. The late Steve Johnson told me that on the last day of his first field trip working on Kugu Nganhcara he happened to overhear a verb form that did not correspond to those he had been given in elicitation. When he asked his language teachers about it, they replied "oh – you want the REAL language now?" At the level of fluency he had attained, they had only judged him ready for the simplified, foreigner-talk version of the language.

Second, they should do their best to locate other speakers who can be brought together to converse. For example, the Dalabon speech community is particularly fragmented (the ten or so best speakers are scattered over at least

eight locations), so that they rarely get the chance to tell stories to a maximally appreciative audience; bringing speakers from different communities together for sessions of talk and story-telling has been a very productive way of getting texts with flair and color. However, even where multiple speakers can be located, there are many practical obstacles to doing this with older people, including infirmity, cost, distance, and sometimes personal enmity or rivalry.

Third, the existence of multilingual conversational norms, plus a tolerance of asymmetrical language choice, means that certain speakers may be in the habit of talking their language to acquaintances who "hear" their language even thought they do not speak it.[9] It has sometimes been asserted that last speakers become dysfluent as a result of having no one else to talk to. With the above sociolinguistic norms, however, a last speaker may get daily practice in the use of their language, even if they lack the pleasure of being fully understood. Charlie Wardaga, for example, regularly talks Ilgar to his children, wife, and other younger relatives, some of whom listen with great interest.[10] Many of these younger people understand quite a lot of what he says, through a combination of lengthy exposure and knowledge of closely related languages (in this case Iwaidja, which is about as close to Ilgar as Czech is to Slovak). Likewise, I have recordings of Alice Bohm telling lively Dalabon stories to an audience who do not speak Dalabon, but who speak the closely-related language Kunwinjku (about as close as Italian to Spanish) and have varying degrees of passive knowledge of Dalabon.[11] In such cases, then, it pays the investigator to work out the ecology of language choice in conversation, and bring both younger members of the speech community and members of other speech communities in regular contact with the solitary speaker.

Involving younger members of the speech community has other rewards, too, since such people may have unsuspected abilities in offering translations. In my most recent work on Kayardild, for example, I discovered that Ben Gabori, who when I began work in the 1980s appeared to have little speaking ability (he was then around thirty) and not much passive knowledge either, knew far more than I initially thought and was able to help in the translation of obscure words that some older speakers could not explain properly. I do not know whether this is due to increases in his knowledge over the last seventeen years, a change in his confidence as he has acquired elder status, or some combination of the above. Likewise, some of Charlie Wardaga's sons, who had told me they "couldn't speak Ilgar," eventually turned out to understand a great deal when they were able to contribute this knowledge in a low-key situation, such as sitting at some distance away on the same verandah while Charlie was talking, and not being asked directly.

Indeed, such junior members of speech communities may share with their elders a belief that they will, one day, come to speak their language.

12.2 Charlie Wardaga at Minjilang, Croker Island, in 1995.

Here we need to suspend certain assumptions about "critical periods" in language acquisition that have become dogma in psycholinguistics without being tested in small, multilingual, non-literate speech communities – and which are at variance with the belief and practice in many north Australian communities, where people keep learning new languages right through life. When Charlie Wardaga was asked in Federal Court (in the context of a Native Title hearing) why his sons could not speak his language, he replied "they too young yet." His sons ranged in age from late teens to mid-thirties.

I do not believe that such a view is totally unrealistic. For example, I have witnessed a case of a young woman who, though she grew up around Mayali-speaking people (including her mother), did not speak the language until she was seventeen, though she had a good passive knowledge; when I asked her about why she did not speak, she attributed this to "being shame" – a mixture of shyness and embarrassment. At this time she decided it was important to start speaking, and she began to spend time with older women working on traditional handicrafts. Within six months she became a fluent speaker. Many commentators on traditional Aboriginal learning styles in a range of domains (e.g., learning traditional craft skills) point to the existence of a long dormant period between the onset of observation and the onset of action (see Harris 1984). Applied to language learning, this can mean a much longer lag between passive and active competence than we are used to, and this can often be exacerbated by a feeling of being too junior to speak in public.

For such reasons, it is worthwhile for field linguists to try and enlist the interest and participation of younger members of the speech community. Depending on the circumstances, this is sometimes best done in an oblique way, since shyness may lead such people to demur if asked directly, saying they don't know anything. It is often more effective to get them to come along to sessions on some other pretext, or to stage elicitation sessions in places where younger family members frequently pass or gather for various reasons, giving them a chance to unobtrusively drift up and listen.

2.2   *Loss of constructions through simplification for the benefit of non-speakers*

Ironically, it may happen that a "purer" form of language, uninfluenced by the displacing language, is encountered when there is no longer a living speech community serving as a reference point for speech norms. Where, on the other hand, a sizable number of speakers, all past a certain age, must accommodate to another language spoken by younger members of the community, certain constructions may disappear totally under the influence of the dominant language.

An example of this occurred with Kayardild between the early 1960s and 1982 (Evans 1995). When I began working on Kayardild in the early 1980s the language was in regular use by about forty people, all middle-aged or older. Some of these were Kayardild–English bilinguals, while the oldest ten or so spoke practically no English. Although the Kaiadilt[12] speech community made its first contacts with English speakers in the 1940s, people under forty spoke only Aboriginal English, and the only language used in interaction with non-Kaiadilt was English (in various forms, ranging from pidgin through Aboriginal English to standard Australian English). In conversations between old and young Kaiadilt, the elders would use a (modified and simplified) form of Kayardild, and the youth a (simplified) form of English. As a result, by the 1980s certain English-derived constructions had found their way even into the Kayardild of monolinguals, displacing the original Kayardild expressions.

In related languages, the negative imperative consists of a special verbal suffix (cf. Yukulta *warra-ja!* 'go!', *warra-na!* 'don't go!'; Lardil *were-ne wangal!* 'don't throw the boomerang!'). But when I tried to elicit this form, I was always given a construction that combined a particle *namu* (< English 'no more', Kriol *namu*) with the positive form of the imperative (cf. *warraj!* 'go!', *namu warraj!* 'don't go!'),[13] and even in conversation between Kayardild monolinguals the expected form *warrana* was never heard. Yet on tapes made by Stephen Wurm during fieldwork in the 1960s the negative imperative suffix *-n(a)* regularly occurs, e.g., *kurrkana wangalk!* 'don't take the boomerang!' Wurm's informant, a woman named Alison Dundaman, was still alive in the 1980s; then in her late forties, she was a fluent Kayardild–English bilin-

12.3 Kaiadilt men on Mornington Island, 1982. From left: Darwin Moodoonuthi (deceased), Dugal Goongarra (deceased), Pluto Bentinck.

gual. When I asked her about the *-na* forms, and played back tapes to her, she said they were correct and that she used them. Other older speakers concurred. But this did not lead to any revival of the *-na* form by anyone in the speech community, and I never heard it used spontaneously.

This, then, is an example of a construction dropping out of the speech of a particular individual, between the ages of (roughly) twenty-five and forty-five, and at the same time disappearing from a whole speech community, even the oldest monolingual speakers, as part of a process of radical language shift. A crucial part of this process is likely to have been the fact that all Kayardild speakers made a number of modifications to their grammars to facilitate communication with younger, non-Kayardild-speaking members of their community, and that the continued salience of Kayardild ↔ English conversational dyads set new grammatical norms affecting even the monolinguals in the speech community. The hypothesis that at least some "last speakers," isolated from these effects by the fact that they do not use their language at all, will in some cases be less influenced by grammatical interference from the dominant language, is one that needs further examination.[14]

2.3   *Temporary factors*

Other, more temporary factors may give a misleading impression of the level of competence. Gavan Breen (1990: 67–68) tells how, on his first encounter with Yandruwandha speaker Bennie Kerwin, "he was on the

grog and not very useful," but some years later, having met him in different circumstances, he discovered that "Bennie Kerwin was the best informant I had in any language until I moved to the Northern Territory and became involved with still viable languages." Peter Sutton (e-mail, March 30, 1999) gives a further example:

I know of two people, brother and sister, who (according to their own adult offspring) lost their English when close to death, and spoke only in a language they had spoken when very young and regretted having "lost." This is unusual but perhaps reflects how deep language memory can be. I knew both of them over many years and was aware that the sister had retained some tiny bits of the language (Flinders Island) at a conscious level, and her brother had retained a little of at least another (Barrow Point), but he had not used it much for most of his life.

Treatable medical conditions, hunger, exhaustion, or temporary memory loss and disorientation after minor strokes may all take their toll. As far as possible salvage linguists need to be on the look-out for such problems, and contacts with local medical staff are often invaluable in addressing them. Sometimes special strategies need to be devised: Bill McGregor's grammar of Nyulnyul is based almost entirely on material elicited from Mary Carmel Charles, who is completely deaf, by using written English prompt sentences (McGregor 1996: 7).

It would be wrong to imply that such temporary factors are always physical. As mentioned earlier, there is also a strong ideology of local appropriateness in Aboriginal Australia – the belief that particular languages are intimately linked to, and suitable for use in, particular places. This can lead people to feel hesitant about using their language "in other people's country," which is of course where many old people end up living out their lives – this is especially true of old people's homes and hospitals. I have observed dramatic improvements in the fluency of younger Kaiadilt[15] when travelling back with them to their own islands in the South Wellesleys, away from the mission on Mornington Island which is in Lardil country. On stepping out of the boat onto the beach they made statements such as "I can talk language alright now – I'm in my own country." With older people it can also happen that the intense emotions associated with visiting certain places from their youth will revive memories of stories and conversations they heard there, which may not surface anywhere else.

2.4   *Coming forward after the funeral*

Another time-bound factor on fluency is the question of who else is around – either in the broader sense of who else is alive at all, or in the narrower sense of who is in earshot, or in an influential position in the community. This follows from our discussion of the importance of being established as

an "owner" of a language before one is accepted by the community as having the right to pass on information about that language, and from a general ethos of being unwilling to put oneself forward as an authority on some matter if there are others around perceived as having more right to that knowledge. In some cases this can mean that an individual A, who knows more of some language L than another individual B, has less of a right to be an owner of L than B has, so that B is publicly viewed as "the last speaker of L" despite his or her imperfect knowledge of the language. Then, following the death of B, A may come forward as a speaker, since the political impediment to them openly professing their knowledge has been removed.

Consider another example from the community of Minjilang on Croker Island in the Cobourg Peninsula region. Charlie Wardaga, as mentioned above, is one of the last speakers of Ilgar, and I began work with him on the Ilgar language in 1994. At this time I asked him which other languages he knew and he listed a number of others: Iwaidja (the numerically dominant language at Minjilang and lingua franca of the Cobourg Region for the last few generations), Kunwinjku (the lingua franca of Western Arnhem Land more generally, with a sizable population of speakers at Minjilang, as well as being the language of his wife and one of his grandmothers), Garig (spoken on part of adjoining mainland and a sister dialect of Ilgar), Manangkarri (the almost extinct language of Goulburn Island, still undocumented but said to be very close to Maung), some Marrgu, the language of Croker Island itself, and some Indonesian as well as (rather idiosyncratic) English.

Since I had done some work on Marrgu before, but had not found anyone with a full knowledge of this language, I asked him a bit about Marrgu and recorded a few words, as well as a few sentences of Manangkarri. He was unhappy giving Marrgu information, however, said he didn't know it properly, and later that day it became clear why: a senior Marrgu man came to visit me and asked me what I had been working on with Charlie. When I told him, he said "You can work with him on Ilgar, he knows that alright, but Marrgu isn't his language. If you want to ask about Marrgu, you come to see me." In fact I had done a few days work with him before, which had been less than satisfactory, owing to his restricted knowledge of the language, and this was becoming even more difficult owing to his increasing deafness. But I agreed I would come and work with him some more; he had an excellent knowledge of Marrgu place names, for example. Next day Charlie, who had obviously heard about the conversation, began by saying to me that we had better leave Marrgu, that he only knew a few words anyway, and that we should concentrate on Ilgar.

A bit of background on the clans and languages of the region will be

useful here. Ilgar is the language belonging to Charlie Wardaga's clan, the Mangalara; the Mangalara estate comprises a number of small islands and their associated waters to the east of Croker Island: Grant, Oxley, Lawson and McClure Islands. He and other members of the Mangalara clan are also in the last stages of succession to the estate formerly belonging to the Yangardi clan (Peterson and Devitt 1997), which is nearly defunct owing to the lack of male descendants. The Yangardi estate comprises Darch Island, just off the east coast of Croker Island, plus some of the south-eastern portions of Croker itself. The process of settling the succession to the Yangardi estate has not been entirely straightforward, however, since the Mandilarri-Ildugij clan claims rights over Darch Island, as well as over some parts of the Mangalara estate (namely Oxley and Lawson Islands). The Mandilarri-Ildugij clan estate covers most of Croker Island, and although most members of this clan now speak Iwaidja, its traditional language was Marrgu, which is usually said to be the real language associated with Croker Island itself. This territorial tussling naturally created a background where being a language-owner of Marrgu took on a special political significance.

Some time later the senior Marrgu man died. It seemed to me at the time that this was the death of the last speaker. There was still some work I could do with a couple of middle-aged people – one woman, for example, though unable to talk spontaneously, had sufficient knowledge of the language that I could at least check wordlists recorded in the 1960s, and this was useful in improving the phonetic accuracy of our recording of interdental stops, working out the status of certain phonetic approximants, and of the large class of liquids which includes (at least phonetically) a flapped versus non-flapped contrast for laterals at three points of articulation, and three rhotics. Fragments of a couple of tapes made in the 1960s could also be transcribed with the help of these people. And I had the impression that they had become more willing to assist with this sort of work, following the death mentioned above. Overall, however, it looked like it would now be impossible to get any further with working out the complex verbal morphology of the language.

Around this time, however, Charlie Wardaga, with whom I had been continuing to work on Ilgar, began to volunteer Marrgu equivalents of Ilgar phrases and words. Often this would happen when sons of the former Marrgu speaker had drifted up to listen to our sessions, and they showed interest, sometimes repeating bits of Marrgu. As time passes it is becoming increasingly clear that he probably knows more than the late "last speaker" had – he is capable, for example, of giving mini-texts and, although the research is still at an early stage, shows no sign of being anywhere near the limits of his knowledge.

There are some phonetic differences in how he pronounces Marrgu. For example, where the other speaker would use a lamino-interdental fricative in a word like [inḓat] 'turtle', Charlie uses an interdental stop, pronouncing it [inḏat]. At this stage of research it is not clear whether this is an "accent" reflecting a transfer of pronunciation from Ilgar or Iwaidja, which lack interdental fricatives (and have only a tiny number of interdental stop tokens); whether it is due to dialect differences in the type of Marrgu they learned; or whether it is the type of norm-difference often found among different last speakers as the decline in interaction reduces the convergence of norms that occurs in a full speech-community.[16] In the case of his Kunwinjku, the reasonable level of documentation of that language allows us to clearly identify his Iwaidja/Ilgar accent, manifesting itself through the neutralization of the mid- versus high-vowel and short versus long stop distinctions and the failure to pronounce glottal stops. But in the case of his Marrgu, it is much more difficult to decide whether we are dealing with a less-than-perfectly-learned third or fourth language, or an authentic rendition. The only real way this might be resolved is if our work on the phonology and grammar can progress far enough that it then becomes possible to go back and transcribe the old tapes made in the 1960s from people who were clearly fluent speakers. Meanwhile, certain relevant biographical details have emerged that make it seem quite natural that Charlie Wardaga should know Marrgu. He grew up on Croker Island, for some reason was not taken away by missionaries to Goulburn Island and therefore remained in regular contact with Marrgu speakers. It also appears that Marrgu speakers used to visit the smaller islands in Mangalara territory quite regularly. And the fact that his mother belonged to the Minaga clan, whose estate lies on the western side of Croker Island and which appears to have been associated with Marrgu as well as Iwaidja, also gives him secondary rights to the Marrgu language, which count for more now that key individuals with primary rights are deceased. These biographical details suggest that he may have been learning Marrgu regularly from childhood.

The above example illustrates the ways in which a speaker's apparent knowledge can vary over time according to changes in who else is regarded within their community as having primary rights to speak for a particular language.[17] To show that this situation is far from unique, I will briefly mention two rather similar cases recounted to me by colleagues.

The first case, reported by Gavan Breen, arose during his work on Kuk-Narr. Here the relevant fact appears to have been first- versus second-language status rather than official "language-ownership":[18]

Roth . . . collected a short vocabulary of what looks like Nar or Nhang around the turn of the century and published it under the name Kundara; the name, but not the vocabulary, seems to correspond to the modern Guandhar, recorded by Sommer

(1972) . . . Gog-Nar was (re-) discovered by Miss Sandra Newland (1968[b]) . . . and she recorded about 1 1/2 hours of tape from the last native speaker, Michael Richards, in Normanton (1968[a]). Sommer (1972) recorded Richards, and soon afterwards he was taken to the Eventide Home in Charters Towers. I recorded ten hours from him there in August, with Saltwater Jack, who speaks it as a second language, helping and prompting but refusing to act directly as an informant. In October, Michael Richards died, at the age of about 90. In 1973 I recorded five hours with Saltwater Jack, also about 90 years old and now, in the absence of his friend, a willing informant. . . . (Breen 1976: 243)

According to Breen (p. 243), "the informants proved willing, friendly, patient and helpful, but both had most of the deficiencies one would expect in men of their age." What is relevant here, though, is that "as far as I can remember (more than a quarter of a century ago now) Saltwater Jack was about equal to Michael Richards" (Breen p.c.).

The second case, reported by Roberto Zavala (e-mail, December 7, 1998) from his work in Mexico on Olutec is a little different. A father had singled out his son as the person to whom the language should be taught, and while the father was alive only the son would speak Olutec, which he did fluently. It therefore appeared that he was the only member of the family who still knew the language, and likely to end up as the last speaker since the approximately thirty other speakers of Olutec were all older than he was (barring some semispeakers and rememberers in their fifties).

However, when Zavala was working with the son after the father's death, his younger sister turned out to be a comparably good speaker:

Antonio Asistente (73) and Alfredina Asistente (65) were the two Olutec speakers I was telling you about. Seferino Asistente was the father who died in 1994 before I even meet them. The first time that I noticed that Alfredina was also a speaker was one evening when Antonio and me were working in one of the paradigms and I asked him for 1:2 combination and he replied with a 2:1. Then Alfredina, who was preparing us a meal, said the combination 1:2 from inside the house. Antonio was completely confused and later on he explained that *he* did not know that she could speak since she never did that when their father was still alive. That is, she was not supposed to speak the language. In many other circumstances Alfredina corrected Antonio and provided a lot of information to our dictionary. Even though she also said that she did not speak the language. However, in my last field trip she was always participating in conversations when I invited speakers from other households to their place. I realized that she was completely fluent.

The literature on the ethnography of communication discusses a phenomenon sometimes called "the competence of incompetence" (Saville-Troike 1989: 25–26). In some speech communities, communicatively appropriate behavior involves speaking incompetently, ungrammatically, or hesitantly, as a way of showing deference to one's interlocutors. The examples discussed in this section illustrate a similar principle: that a variety of ways of

deferring to respected senior members of a community can lead others to hold back from showing their actual language competence. This may be because they do not have primary rights as a "language-owner" (as in the case of Charlie Wardaga's knowledge of Marrgu); because their "second-language-speaker" status makes them hesitant to step forward as a knowledgable informant in the presence of "first-language speakers" (as in the case of Saltwater Jack); or because they are deferring to wishes expressed by a senior person such as a parent (as in the case of Alfredina Asistente). Such cases illustrate that it is rash to make pronouncements on who is a "last speaker," and that patience, and repeated visits to a community over time, can often reveal a higher level of knowledge in some individuals than one originally suspects.

2.5   Amplifiers

We now pass to what is, in some senses, the opposite phenomenon: when the fluency of certain types of partial speaker disappears completely following the death of someone who knows the language better.

Aboriginal people often say, of some language, that they can "hear it" but can't "speak" it. This appears to align with linguists' concepts of active and passive knowledge, or of speaking and hearing competence, but in fact the situation is more complex, and can encompass a further type of knowledge I will call "amplifying." To give an example: when working in 1987 with another "last speaker," this time the late Butcher Knight, who spoke Umbugarla, I found it very hard to make out his pronunciation, owing to his great age and frailty. A somewhat younger man, Talking Billy (now also deceased) came to my aid, sitting with us as we worked and repeating Butcher Knight's mumbled utterances with sufficient clarity that I could make a reasonable phonetic transcription. I therefore inferred that he was at least a partial speaker of Umbugarla, and a couple of years later, some time after the death of Butcher Knight, returned to do some more work with him on Umbugarla. Without having Butcher Knight there to make the initial utterance, however, he was totally unable to recall any Umbugarla.

This is not the only time I have witnessed this situation. I experienced a similar situation when working on Kungarakany with its last full speaker, Madeline England, in the presence of a Malak-Malak man, Jimmy Tapnguk. Again, Tapnguk could repeat Kungarakany sentences when Mrs. England was the prompt, so to speak, and even gave me the impression (at a point where I did not know the language well enough to judge accurately) that the two were engaged in a relatively even dialogue. However, when recontacted some years later, after the death of Mrs. England, he was unable to give any Kungarakany at all.

Such cases are the opposite of what was described in the last section: here the death of one speaker precipitates a decline, rather than an improvement, in the abilities of another (special type of) speaker.

3.   Conclusion

My main purpose in this paper has been to show how many complex factors come into play when doing linguistic fieldwork on an endangered language. This makes it hard to assess how many speakers remain, who the best speakers are, and where to find them, and patient and sensitive detective work over a wide area will often be rewarded. In fact one can never be sure who knows how much, and certainly the first statements one is given about who speaks what can prove quite unreliable, in both directions. In multilingual regions, various seemingly unlikely people may turn out to have learned a language that is thought to have died out, while other individuals may maintain an unjustified reputation for knowledge they do not have.

Throughout the paper I have stressed that field linguists will have more success documenting endangered languages if they are sensitive to the sociolinguistics of the situation, and bear in mind that all sorts of factors determine people's ability and willingness to employ their language. Experiment with the mix of people present, such as by bringing in younger people or even speakers of other languages with a "hearing knowledge" of the language under investigation. In this way you can form an audience that will stimulate a good performance or encourage others to come out of the woodwork who may help with translation or who will repeat utterances more clearly. Don't give up on people who may deny knowing the language because they are not regarded as having the right to be authorities, and be aware that such people may feel happier giving information if inquiries are not addressed directly to them but to an official language-owner who may actually know less.

Do not make snap judgments of how much people know, but try returning to them later, or gradually bringing back their knowledge of the language through repeated sessions. Remember that all sorts of temporary factors may interfere with the difficult task of remembering a language that may not have been used for years, that they may be downplaying their knowledge (consciously or unconsciously) out of concern for other individuals, and that changes in the social situation may remove barriers to them taking on a teaching role.

Wherever possible take people to the places which may be vividly linked in their memories to using the language.

And bear in mind that nothing encourages a teacher more than a good pupil. Speakers may have their own ideas about how to teach you, and in

what order, and they are more likely to judge your progress – and be encouraged to move to the next level of difficulty – by how far you can hold a basic conversation with a reasonable accent, rather than by your skill in constructing complex sentences. Their ideas about what to teach you may even extend to decisions about what order in which to teach you languages:

Finally at Marree we met a very old lady called Alice, the last full Kuyani. But our hopes were dashed again: she said that her Kuyani relatives had been dead so long that now she could only speak Arabana. She and Maudie Lennie, who was looking after her, would both be delighted to teach me Arabana.

Nobody could teach me Kuyani at that time. As it turned out, one day more than ten years later when I had become fluent in Arabana, Alice suddenly said "And now I will teach you my language, Kuyani." (Hercus 1994: 1)[19]

While I certainly would not want to argue that field linguists should simply wait to be taught in whatever way the speakers want to teach them – in many cases this would leave huge paradigmatic gaps, for example – setting up a rhythm where each takes it in turn to decide on the shape of the session can be encouraging to both sides. Ultimately, after all, it depends on the speaker to determine when, and what, they will teach.

However urgent the linguist may regard the task of documenting an endangered language, it is almost certain to be counter-productive to dash around and force the pace of elicitation beyond what the speaker is happy with. Instead, an enduring friendship and apprenticeship, played out in a range of social and geographical settings over what can be quite far-flung regional networks of people from different clan or tribal affiliations, and with a broad interest that takes in ethnographic as well as linguistic questions, is the most likely method of teasing out the fragile language knowledge which can so easily pass from long unspoken to forever unheard.

discussed problems of field linguistics and ethnography with me, particularly Peter Austin, Paul Black, Gavan Breen, George Chaloupka, Alan Dench, Jeannie Devitt, Bob Dixon, Murray Garde, Ian Green, Ken Hale, Robert Handelsmann, Mark Harvey, Luise Hercus, Penny Johnson, Patrick McConvell, Bill McGregor, David Nash, Annette Schmidt, Jane Simpson, Peter Sutton, and David Wilkins. Particular thanks to Gavan Breen, Ian Green, Mark Harvey, Peter Sutton, and Roberto Zavala for sending me the accounts of some of their field experiences that I have cited here, and to Gavan Breen, Ian Green, and Peter Sutton for editorial comments on the manuscript.

NOTES

1 An interesting exception is Kayardild (Evans 1995), where a long isolated existence on the South Wellesley Islands created a totally monolingual speech community. When forcefully moved to the (then) Presbyterian mission on Mornington Island, no one beyond puberty ever learned a significant amount of English or Lardil (the local language), while those born on Mornington Island learned English and at most a limited amount of Kayardild. Only a handful of people, all aged between three and fifteen at the time of the move, became Kayardild–English bilinguals.

   A second (partial) exception is exemplified by the Kunwinjku/Mayali speech community, which with over 1,000 L1 speakers and at least another 1,000 L2 speakers is by far the biggest Aboriginal language in Western Arnhem Land. In my experience, very few L1 speakers of this dialect chain speak another Aboriginal language fluently, reflecting a typical "large-language" belief that members of other groups will know one's own language. This belief is in fact self-perpetuating in the sense that the number of Mayali/Kunwinjku speakers is growing as children whose forebears speak other neighboring languages, such as Dalabon, Umbugarla and Rembarrnga, have switched to speaking Mayali/Kunwinjku.

2 The situation portrayed in Werner Herzog's film *Where the Green Ants Dream*, in which the monolingual last speaker of an Aboriginal language addresses a courtroom in the only language he knows, and which no one else understands, is thus highly atypical, although the famous case of Ishi working with Kroeber on Yana may approximate this.

3 I have concealed or disguised the identity of a number of the individuals and languages mentioned in this paper, out of consideration for the speakers or their family.

4 Cf. Dorian (1986: 562–63): "In some communities where a language is nearing extinction, familiarity with the ancestral tongue may have special value for the few remaining speakers since it qualifies them, and them alone, to perform certain special rites or services. This in turn entitles them to particular respect as a link with a more intact ethnic past. . . . In the absence of a speech community large enough and vital enough to permit the investigator either to become a skilled speaker him- or herself or to obtain convincing community consensus regarding relative abilities of the remaining speakers, the investigator can find it all but impossible to determine which of the few speakers available are the most reliable and most skillful."

5 It is likely that the effects of ceremonial status on judgments of language knowledge are not confined to language death situations. Ian Green (e-mail, May 9, 1999) points out that "[i]n the Daly, as elsewhere, ritual verbal learning is very important ceremonially, and, should an initiate be under the charge of a teacher from a different language background, this will often involve learning the rituals in a new language and acquiring some ability to engage in basic conversation with the teacher in the new language. Initiates in these circumstances can be attributed by other community members with an unwarranted mastery of the language."

6 Again this reflects the dominance of social considerations. Responses to made-up sentences that I have proffered have ranged from acceptance of absolutely anything (two old Kayardild men used to react this way) to rejection of anything known to have been made up by me (even if I knew from a cross-section of other speakers that it was correct), on the grounds that I was too junior and lacking in any rights to the language to be allowed to make up new sentences as opposed to repeating sentences my classificatory father or other teachers had taught me. Attempts to camouflage the fact that I had constructed such sentences myself, by saying things like "I heard that sometime last week – I can't remember who from" simply met with disbelief, and attempts to get around this problem by saying I might have heard them from particular named speakers then tapped in to the social judgments outlined in the rest of the paragraph.

7 An example of such a change in the Cayuga speech community in Brantford, Ontario, which has a dwindling number of speakers, all past middle age, was recounted to me by Hans-Jürgen Sasse (p.c.). As long as Reggie Henry, a prominent member of the community, was alive, saying (truthfully) that a particular sentence or word-form came from him would guarantee that other speakers would accept the sentence. Once he died, however, this no longer worked, since they no longer felt bound by his rather prescriptive stance on how the language should be spoken.

8 It is an interesting question why he did not simply use the verb root, or generalize a form prefixed for some other person combination (e.g., *I > him*) and then use it with the appropriate free pronouns. The unavailability of an extracted verb root probably results from the complex morphophonemics in the language, which make roots hard to segment. His failure to employ the second alternative suggests he knew there was a form, was purist enough not to want to use an incorrect form, and as a "last speaker" was not in a situation where he had to devise a way of solving this problem in order to communicate regularly.

9 This can be linked to the insightful analysis of Australian Aboriginal communi-
   cative norms by Walsh (1991), who derives many conversational practices in
   northern Australia from a "broadcast" model of conversation, that makes the
   decision and ability to tune in or not the prerogative of the hearer.

10 On the other hand, he never talks it to his two sisters, both of whom do speak
   Ilgar, because of a strict taboo on conversation between opposite-sex siblings.
   This leaves him in the odd position of talking his mother-tongue to people who
   don't speak it, and not talking it with the couple of people who do.

11 Ian Green (e-mail, May 9, 1999) gives a further example from the Daly River
   region: "Bill Parry for a while presided over a mixed Marrithiyel and
   Ngan'gityemerri camp. Conversations would regularly involve Bill and one of
   the older women speaking in Marrithiyel, with the other two older women
   making their contributions in Ngan'gityemerri. Similarly, at Woollianna, I wit-
   nessed quite a number of MalakMalak – Matngele exchanges between two of
   the senior men."

12 Here, as elsewhere, I use the established ethnographic spelling Kaiadilt for tribal
   group, and the spelling Kayardild (phonemic, in the practical orthography) for
   the language name.

13 See Evans (1995: 387–88) for other examples of English-derived particles used
   instead of verbal inflections, such as *baymbay* (< *bye and bye*) instead of the
   apprehensive inflection plus the modal oblique case, and *marrbi* (< *might be*)
   instead of the irrealis use of the verbal past plus the modal ablative case. In these
   cases, however, the two constructions coexist among older speakers, rather than
   the particle totally displacing the verbal inflection as happened with the negative
   imperative.

14 Gavan Breen (e-mail, April 1, 1999) offered the following comment on this
   point: "I think a last speaker could well speak the language better than a speaker
   of a living language because s/he speaks the language as s/he knew it thirty or
   forty years ago when it suddenly went out of use (because, for example, most of
   the speakers were carted off to Cherbourg or Woorabinda or Palm Island). For
   example, my Antekerrepenh informants at Dajarra hadn't been affected by the
   anglicisations that have affected Arrernte here [in the Alice Springs region –
   NE]: using possessive with body parts, using "come" versus "go" in the English
   way, replacing native vocabulary with loans like *mape* (mob)."

15 These speakers were between the ages of 20 and 45 at the time, i.e., below the age
   of the youngest fully fluent speakers.

16 Cf. Schmidt (1985: 42), who comments that "[t]he fragmentation of Dyirbal
   norms is directly associated with the breakdown in Dyirbal communication
   network," and proposes the more general schema: "reduced social function
   leads to lack of uniformity leads to fragmentation of grammatical norms."

17 Obviously a definitive assessment of this case would be premature since it will
   depend on how far we get with our work on Marrgu over the years to come.

18 It is difficult to determine, now, exactly what "second-language" status would
   have meant at the time.

19 Gavan Breen (e-mail, April 1, 1999) gives another example: "Barry Blake
   recorded Mabel Garghetty in Wakaya in 1966, and so I recorded her in the same
   language in 1967, '68 and '69. I recorded another person in Bularnu in the same
   three years. I didn't get the opportunity to work on Bularnu in '70 and '71, and

then in 1972 Mabel (who wasn't a very communicative person) got round to
telling me that her own language was actually Bularnu."

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