



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 franca 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 patrification, matrification, 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.



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 muddled 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 knowledgeable 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 *nivanji* 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