

The Yan-nhaṅu Language Documentation Project: Aims and Accomplishments
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The linguistic and geographical background

- Yan-nhaṅu: Yolṅu (Pama-Nyungan) language of North-Eastern Arnhem Land
- 6 patrilineal varieties (3 Dhuwa, 3 Yirritja), including Maḷarra and Gurryindi.
- approx 10 fluent speakers, ages 40-75
- approx 150 heritage owners (those with ancestral connections to Yan-nhaṅu language, land, sea and culture (incl *Maḍayin*)); and a further 120 Yirritja Burarra/Yan-nhaṅu Gamal people with language owning affiliations who primarily speak Burarra.
- Prestige languages in the area include varieties of Dhuwal(a), Burarra and English; all are exerting pressure on Yan-nhaṅu. (Most Yan-nhaṅu speakers are multilingual in Dhuwal(a) and/or Burarra; many speak at least some English and most also know something of other more distant languages in the region, including Rembarrṅa and Gunwinygu)

Previous research on Yan-nhaṅu

- Mentioned by L.W. Warner in 1926
- Patrigroup names recorded by Donald Thomson in 1935, 1949.
- Brief recording of Gamalaṅga patrilineal (Wood 1971)
- Brief recordings by Barry Alpher in 1977 with Buthugurrulil. (Alpher 1977)
- A few short texts through the Milingimbi Literature Production Centre (reference)
- A wordlist recorded by Arthur Capell (which is not Yan-nhaṅu!) (Capell n.d., 1942)
- Song recordings by Alice Moyle and Ian Keen. (Moyle 1962; 1974; Keen 1974)
- Yan-nhaṅu narrative recordings by Bentley James (James 1999)
- *Draft dictionary* (c 1800 items) compiled by Bentley James and the Yan-nhaṅu language team; edited by Salome Harris (James 2003)
- *Marine resource use, cultural mapping* (in Yan-nhaṅu); James' PhD. (James forthcoming)
- *Learner's Guide and grammatical elicitation* by Bower, funded by ELDP (Bower et al 2005)
- (+ ongoing research including this summer)

The linguistic prospects for language revitalization

- Yan-nhaṅu language learning not a high priority for heritage owners (although some other aspects of culture are more so: "I like going to Murrunga because there's lots to do there. At Milinjinbi it's boring, there's only TV" – Anita (14 year old Yan-nhaṅu heritage owner to CB, June 2004)
- Gupapuyṅu/Djambarrpuyṅu (Dhuwal(a)) or English are completely dominant in community, church, school and local government. Both (with Burarra) are regional *lingue franche*.
- Yan-nhaṅu speakers have mostly married Burarra or Djambarrpuyṅu speakers (continuing the tradition of preferred exogamy).

What, therefore, is the point in running a revitalisation project when it is almost guaranteed not to produce any more Yan-nhaṅu speakers?

Successes

- Raising of profile of Yan-nhaṅu in Milingimbi community. Increased recognition in relation to sites (terrestrial and marine), e.g. through Northern Land Council site research (perhaps leading ultimately to the filing of a Native Title claim).
- Increased awareness of the existence of Yan-nhaṅu in the anthropological and linguistic literature.

- Presence of linguist/academic has raised Yan-nhaŋu self-confidence, particularly in using Yan-nhaŋu in public (e.g. Allison Warrŋawun's funeral speech, July 2004 – Bower field tape 14)
- Increased confidence in asserting rights to traditional country.
- Motivation to continue with e.g. outstation movement (education in traditional country) – keeping contact with the land and passing on cultural knowledge (e.g. botanical knowledge, resource management, etc)
- Transferral of literacy skills from Gupapuyŋu to Yan-nhaŋu (e.g. through Bower's informal training)
- Positive experiences working with linguists have led the Yan-nhaŋu speakers to go to extraordinary lengths in working on the documentation program.
- More activity with involvement of Yan-nhaŋu people (leading to more employment); e.g. the negotiation of a sea ranger project, turtle and dugong management plans.
- This led to large amounts of material being recorded: The last six-week field trip resulted in (amongst other things) the recording of all the material for the learner's guide, extensive dictionary expansion (approximately another 1500 items), and textual recording and transcription. If and when heritage learners want to learn Yan-nhaŋu in future, they will have much more materials to work from.

Summary

- “Language” revitalisation projects can do good even if they don't achieve the ‘rebirth’ of a language
- Therefore ‘rebirth’ shouldn't be the (only) measure of whether a program succeeds or fails (cf. Amery 1997)
- In this case, intensive documentation has not relegated the language to a “museum piece” (Reyhner *et al.* 1999). On the contrary, enthusiasm for the project remains high.
- The situation has changed from a moribund language with almost no documentation to a moribund language with good basic documentation, whose speakers are now better off than they were before.
- This is the last chance to make these recordings.
- A relatively happy ending.

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