

FEL 2003 Laves' Bardi Texts

Claire Bower

Harvard University
305 Boylston Hall
Cambridge, Massachusetts, 02138 USA
[bowern@fas.harvard.edu]

Abstract

In this paper I explore the relationship between the Bardi texts recorded seventy years ago by Gerhardt Laves and the current Bardi oral history project. I offer some thoughts on the role of the outside linguist in a project such as this and describe some of the good and not so good aspects of using the Laves corpus as a basis for modern oral history.

Introduction

Bardi is a Nyulnyulan language of the Dampier Peninsula, North of Broome in Australia's North-West. Only the old people use the language regularly nowadays, although younger people can understand it. The total number of people who identify as Bardi is difficult to calculate, but is probably around 1,000, although the number of fluent speakers of the language is much smaller.

Over the last few years I have been the linguist working with some of the Bardi speakers on an oral history project. The main aim of the project is to document Bardi social history over the last hundred years, the changes in lifestyle that Bardi people have undergone and the effects of mission life on traditional culture. The project was initiated by a few of the senior women and they have been the main contributors to it.

Another part of the project has been the use of texts in Bardi, Bard and Jawi, recorded by Gerhardt Laves in about 1930. The corpus is a major linguistic and cultural resource, although not without its problems. We are incorporating the older materials (with corrections and commentary) into the current project.

This paper has a few different purposes. One is to outline the methodology of the Bardi oral history project participants in dealing with texts of this type and the issues that they raise, so that others may benefit from our experiences. We would also welcome feedback. Another purpose is to present a linguist's view of working as an outsider on culturally sensitive materials. This is not because I wish to exclude Indigenous views of this subject, far from it. The paper is written from this perspective only because the paper had to be put into final form for the conference proceedings before I could discuss these issues and the contents of the paper in person with the relevant community members. I do not

want to ascribe to Bardi community members views that they may not in fact hold, and I do not wish to be perceived as a spokesperson for the Bardi community.¹

The Bardi oral history project

The Bardi Oral History Project is oral history in the broadest sense. The aim is to make a record of the experiences, history and culture of Bardi people, through the medium of the Bardi language. We have focused on recent social history in particular; more generally we have recorded anything that the elders have wanted to talk about or have thought important to include in a documentation of Bardi culture.

The project was initiated by the elders themselves. The oral history text project continues the wishes of one of the senior men (who has now passed away), who was also responsible for instigating the work which led to the publication of the Bardi dictionary, *Ardiyooloon Bardi Ngaanka* (Aklif 1999). A later aim will be to publish a selection of the stories, since the elders feel it is important to show that Bardi is a rich and fully developed language, just as good as French or German (*BOH.37²*), and they feel that their views are not represented in records of Kimberley history. More generally the purpose was to put down on paper and on tape Bardi knowledge that is not being passed on to younger generations. There is a certain amount of bitterness amongst the old people that the younger Bardi people predominantly use English.

Each story has been recorded in Bardi, and usually in English as well. Recording sessions have been informal, taking place at the houses of the storytellers. Stories have been recorded on minidisc and transferred to CD and analog tape for archiving, transcription and so we can provide copies to project and community members.

Recording has focused on stories about the Mission times (reminiscences from the time when Bardi people lived on the Mission on Sunday Island (c 1899 to c 1958). We have also recorded many mythological stories and stories about devils. Another focus of recording has been procedural texts and vernacular definitions of core cultural terms (such as *ninga* 'name', *ingoodoog*

¹ This paper is thus based predominantly on work carried out in 2001.

² *BOH*: Bardi Oral History tape reference.

‘moonlight fishing’). These texts are of interest not only for their value as cultural history; they are also materials for One Arm Point School’s Bardi language program.

Most recordings have taken the form of continuous narratives told by one speaker, ranging in length from 1 to 6 minutes. Sometimes different aspects of the same topic have been recorded, and these will be pieced together to form a longer story. Bessie Ejai has also conducted interviews with some speakers, in Bardi and English.

We have transcribed and checked approximately a quarter of the stories put down on tape. This task is very time consuming and will not be finished before the grant expires. However, this is not so urgent as making a permanent audio record of the stories. There are many younger people in the community who can help with transcription and translation over the next few years, but there are very few storytellers. So far we have produced a 255-page book of stories for internal community use (Bowerman ed. 2002) and I will be at One Arm Point from August to October (2003) to do more work with the Laves texts.

One thing to note is that the production of learners materials has not been a very high priority for the project. Nicolas’ (1998) learner’s guide, if published and revised, will fill that gap in the record of Bardi. There are also many school materials and basic learning aids, produced by One Arm Point School the Kimberley Language Resource Centre, and the Catholic Education Office in Broome. Our educational aim has been to give the more advanced learners and fluent speakers something to read in the orthography developed by the community, in a font size and layout that older speakers with cataracts can read. The aim has also not been to make these texts linguist-friendly for people who do not know the language. We have not, for example, provided interlinear glosses. The speakers don’t need them, I don’t need them, and while some of the learners find them helpful (and we have prepared interlinear glossing for a few texts) there are other already-glossed texts (e.g. those recorded in Hercus and Sutton 1986). Our priority was adding to the corpus.

As part of assembling the current record of Bardi and working out what to add to the corpus, I looked into previously recorded materials which might be useful to incorporate. Gedda Aklif and Toby (CD) Metcalfe had also worked on the language intensively and we did not want to spend time recording stories that others had already told and transcribed. The dictionary entries for Bardi in Nekes and Worms (1953) provided a further source of vocabulary prompting. We also listened to and annotated a tape of the wax cylinders made by Yngve Laurell in 1911 which contained an anecdote and a number of songs belonging to the area (see further Bowerman 2002, Boström 2002).

The Laves materials

A large portion of the previously recorded materials on the Bardi language are in the collection of Australian language materials recorded by Gerhardt Laves. Laves

was a student of Edward Sapir at the University of Chicago and came to Australia for the period 1929-31, as a post-doc, to do fieldwork on Australian languages. He created detailed notes on six languages as well as collecting less comprehensive materials on other languages (the languages studied in detail were Bardi and Karajarri in the North-West, Gumbaynggir and Nganyaywana in NSW, Kurin (Goreng) in Southern Western Australia, and Matngele and Ngan’gimierri in the Northern Territory).

Laves spent most of the wet season on Sunday Island and at the nearby Bardi communities of Cape Leveque/Boolgin and Lombadina). He wrote down stories of many different genres from Bardi people, including the parents and grandparents of the current participants in the Bardi oral history project. Over 160 texts are recorded from three dialects of Bardi, with cultural and grammatical information totaling well over 1,000 manuscript pages. The texts cover many different subject areas, from jokes to mythological stories to recent history to (a few) instructional narratives.

The collection also contains a few texts in Nyikina (another Nyulnyulan language) and in Worrorra and Ngarinyin.

The texts fall into five broad subject areas:

- ♦ traditional law and the right way to behave, and what happens when the law is broken;
- ♦ ceremonial practices and terminology;
- ♦ explanatory texts about traditional ceremonies (often in English)
- ♦ dreamtime stories and mythology;
- ♦ stories about people and things that happen to them.

There are notes throughout the texts dated to 1932, showing that Laves began to work further on his Bardi materials after the field trip, but he never published the materials. There are also references to vocabulary slips, although these are not part of the current collection.

Almost all the stories are accompanied by a “resumé” (summary) in English of the characters and the action of the story. It usually follows the Bardi text quite closely, although from the texts where it does not it is probably that Laves had the speakers tell the story twice, first in English and then in Bardi. The Bardi texts are glossed in English and annotated with Laves’ own shorthand symbols. Not all words are glossed, and some of the Bardi words are glossed by their Karajarri equivalents. There are also occasional notes in German. A sample page of one of Laves’ notebooks is given in the appendix to this paper.

Advantages of the materials

An archive such as this creates many opportunities. In the Laves corpus we have a wonderful chance to record vocabulary items and grammatical constructions no longer in active use, as well as to find out about Bardi people and customs which were not passed on because

of the social disruption which Bardi people suffered in the 1950s.

Phonologically the texts are quite reliable, although there are a few oddities. Vowel length, for example, is often marked but not consistently. The word for ‘man’, *aamba*, for example, appears both as *aamba* and as *amba*. The marking of retroflex consonants is also quite inconsistent in the earlier texts. Laves’ marking overgeneralises retroflexion, unlike most other early records, which consistently fail to write it.

Laves also recorded our only phonologically reliable data for dialects of Bardi other than that spoken at Lombadina or Sunday Island/One Arm Point. Laves recorded eight texts from two speakers in Jawi³ and Bard.⁴

The texts show vocabulary items which have not been recorded elsewhere, such as *moolayi* ‘torch’ and *jardoolmarra* ‘little grey kangaroo’. There are also new meanings of already-recorded words, and new inflected forms with unpredicted semantics, such as *jalarrgarra* ‘just any sort of thing’ (*jalarra* is recorded meaning ‘emptiness, nothingness’ by Metcalfe (nd)).

The texts themselves contain a mixture of stories known to the elders (such as mythological stories), stories about people whose names are known but whose activities are often not known in detail, to stories about people whose names are no longer remembered. The stories give us a unique insight into the day to day life and interests of Aboriginal people a hundred years ago, and they give flesh to the memories of the oldest Bardi people, who know the names of the characters in the stories but little of what they did.

How we are using the materials

The Laves texts are being incorporated into the Bardi oral history project. The stories are used as a prompt and form the basis for further recording of history and narratives.

The following set of points gives an outline of our procedure in annotating the texts:

1. Resumé/summary read aloud by me to a small group of elders, starting with the names of the characters (or a suitable circumlocution) to make sure it is appropriate for the people present to hear the story. If not, a new story is chosen.
2. The whole story is read aloud in Bardi by me, line by line/sentence by sentence. Unglossed words are clarified (note made for gloss, word or phrase flagged for further work). Unknown words are checked for spelling. This part of the session is not usually taped.

³ The language spoken on Sunday Island before extensive settlement of the area by Bardi people following the establishment of the mission. It is mutually intelligible with Bardi.

⁴ The North-Western and Western dialect of Bardi spoken in the Goolarrgoon, Cape Leveque and Lombadina areas.

3. More general discussion of the text, characters and events by elders. Sometimes new stories are remembered from these sessions and are recorded, stories which are related to the story under discussion or about the same people. In this part of the procedure, I act as recorder only; I take little part in the discussion except to reread sections of the text if required.
4. Further questions by me about (especially cultural) aspects of the story I don’t understand (e.g. ‘why did he respond in this way when X said this?’)
5. Further grammatical analysis and dialectology questions (usually at a later date after the story has been typed and I have formalized the translation).

This method of working on grammar and text and context simultaneously is worth highlighting. I (and I think the speakers too) have found it much more productive and stimulating as a source of previously unrecorded vocabulary and texts. By working this way we are creating a net of words, sentences, texts and ideas.

End products

Since the materials are so extensive, the texts are being typed as we go. Although everything is heavily referenced to the original manuscript page numbers, we are not trying to reproduce the format or pagination of the handwritten manuscript. The texts are being typed into Shoebox, in Bardi orthography with notes on any different spellings. Laves does not provide free translations (which we are providing) but a note is made is any word is glossed differently from what we expect. The resumé and text are presented together, with the resumé beginning the text, along with any extra information we know about the context of the events in the story or about the story’s characters from either Laves’ notes or from the Bardi elders.

The texts are typed into Shoebox and can be exported to Word. The backslash codes used are given in Table 1 below:

label	Usage
Metadata fields	
\ref	Text number (primary key for Shoebox; Laves’ numbering retained)
\rdt	Date text analysed with speakers
\sp	Speaker/storyteller (if known)
\sp2	Speakers with whom the text was discussed
\pl	Place recorded (if known)
\dia	Dialect/language (if known)
\brf	Title (if given)
\trf	Tapes (if relevant)
\tdt	Date last modified
\so	Source: full details of pages in the Laves handwritten originals
\nrf	Reference to notebook or computer file for additional information
\st	Status of text
\srt	Sort field (subject area)

Data fields	
\ln	Line number
\lg	Bardi text
\ge	English gloss (not used for most texts)
\ft	Free translation
\res	Laves' resumé (summary of the story)
\int	Introduction (written by me and the elders, incorporating all the information given to me about the text and its background by Bardi speakers).
\eng	Part of the story told in English
Note fields	
\nt	Misc. notes; theories by me about the solution to mistakes, etc
\Int	A note made by Laves
\tg	Tag field - interesting constructions or a point for the dictionary
\nq	question for me to ask speakers
\ng	Grammar notes
\np	phonology notes
\txt	free form text field.

Table 1: Backslash codes used

An example of the beginning of a text with its metadata is given in Figure 2 below:

```

\ref 155
\rdt Not yet analysed
\sp Not known
\pl Not known
\dia Bardi
\brf
\trf
\tdt 15/06/03
\so 4267-4275; 2.16. Original story precedes.
\st Resume typed. Text not checked
\srt people
\int We don't know who told this story to Laves. It's about |fv{inkana} (taipan).
\res <omitted here>
...

```

Figure 2: Sample metadata

For final formatting, the texts are numbered line by line, with the Bardi in boldface in a larger font and the English indented and smaller, one line under the other. We did consider other options (such as the English and Bardi side by side, or all Bardi and then all English) but this was the layout that the speakers preferred. (Everyone who had a preference preferred this layout.) Notes are presented in the margin in italics. Questions are bulleted with a ✂ character set into the margin.

Currently the texts are being typed in the Bardi orthography and notes have been made where Laves has a different spelling (e.g. different vowel length), or when Laves records a *u* vowel as long (*u* and *uu* are both written *oo* in the orthography). *nk* has been substituted for Laves; *ng* (*ng* is the digraph used for in the Bardi practical orthography).

A sample of formatted text is given in Figure 3.

015

“Waibin ay way gala,” injoonina bornamin gaarriini.

“Ok, let’s go,” said his uncle in reply.

Note lenition of j in gaarra-jin(i) ‘his uncle’.

✂ Gloss of bornamin? related to *barn*?

016

Ginyinggon gilgil ingarrarna baarla.

Then they cut paperbark.

barla for baarl(a) in text.

017

Gadigad ingarrarna niimanagiji ingarramanirr jaarr ingirrin barda gala Marrgoonngan.

They cut a huge pile of paperbark, put it together in a pile and brought it back to Marrgoon.

Figure 3: Sample section of formatted text

Some challenges

While the Laves material is a wonderful resource, there are challenges in using the corpus and many problems are raised. While the use of these old texts is a very successful way of conducting field research and producing a corpus of material that is useful on different levels to different people, there are particular difficulties with the use of such a corpus that I will now turn to.

Technical problems

The first problems are with the medium of the corpus. Laves’ notes are handwritten, with shorthand notations and sometimes cryptic English glossing. The orthography is also different from that used to write Bardi now, and one must have some linguistic training to know the symbols. The Bardi is written in cursive and common words are abbreviated (such as *ginyinggi* ‘this, he, she, it’ to *g.*, *ginyinggon* ‘and then’ to *g.on.*). Thus one must already know quite a lot about the Bardi language (and have good eyesight!) in order to use the texts to their full potential. This makes them immediately inaccessible to all but two or three people. The thousand-odd pages of scrawl makes this a daunting corpus.

Another problem lies in the glossing itself. In some cases the guesses are simply wrong; for example at 4296/7 *irrgardarr* is glossed as ‘a type of fish’, whereas it is really just a collective term meaning ‘big things’ (in this case, it refers to a pile of large fish). At 3518 the word *lalin* glossed as ‘right now’, but it means the ‘warming up time’ in November/December, the lead-up to the wet season when the turtles are mating. The

mistake is useful in that it gives us an idea of the time of year Laves was working on Sunday Island, but the words which are not recorded elsewhere need careful checking to make sure of the correct gloss.

Laves began to analyze the texts and to make etymological guesses and do internal reconstruction even as he was writing the stories down. The comitative case *-nyarr*, for example, is taken to be a verb related to *-inya-* ‘to catch, to pick up something’. This in turn has (I suspect) influenced his transcription of *-inya-* on occasions as *-inyar-*. A further example is the sentence connective clitic *=amba* which is frequently glossed as ‘man’ (*aamba*), leading to confusion in the vowel length of *aamba* ‘man’.⁵

Textual problems

The texts also frequently appear without context, and the materials are much less useful without an in-depth knowledge of the characters of the stories. Thus the oldest people in the community are the only people who can properly decode the stories, their context, and the behavior of the characters.

Content problems

Another more serious problem lies in the content of the notes and the texts themselves. There are two main problems: firstly, that some of the content is inappropriate to discuss in front of some community members, and secondly, that some of the content should not be read by the only person who can decipher the handwriting.

Under the first category of problem is naming restrictions: some of the stories contain names that should not be spoken in front of certain community members (for example, the name could be the same as a close relative who has passed away).

Another issue is that the materials and texts are Laves’ own notes to himself, and they contain (in addition to all the language and culture) his personal comments on the people that he worked with. Some people might be offended by what he says in some cases (Laves does not always come across as a particularly patient and understanding field worker). The texts also use ways of referring to Aboriginal people which were acceptable in the 1930s but are offensive to many people nowadays.

Although Laves’ purpose and methods were rather similar to the oral history project’s methods (such recording texts to record culture, describing the language through natural rather than elicited or translated speech), his research priorities appear to have been rather different. His focus is mythology and ‘ethnology’, and particularly those aspects of Bardi culture and traditional law which are different from Western behavior. His aim in the texts appears to be to record the formal apparatus of culture rather than write a more general ethnography. There are notes dismissing

⁵ In fact *=amba* is an allomorph of *=jamb(a)*, and although *jamba* appears a few times in the Laves corpus Laves does not make the connection between *=jamba* and *=amba*.

certain texts (mostly about things that happened to individual people) as “rubbish” or “of little anthropological value”. However, these are the stories that are of most interest to the Bardi people I have worked with, since they shed greater light on names and characters that are now only dimly remembered.

Because of these problems, I would argue that in these cases an outsider may be useful as a buffer between the materials and the elders. In such cases the linguist can act as a ‘spam filter’ to avoid offence to the old people.

The second problem, however, is more difficult. As in most Australian Indigenous cultures, there are aspects of Bardi culture which are gender-restricted. Scattered throughout the Laves material is information on men’s business, including stories and what happens in certain ceremonies. The material is not flagged since most of the texts do not have any subject information other than the full resumé.

Position of the linguist

These problems that arise in dealing with older sources have important implications for the relationship between the linguist and the community.

As the participants at this conference know first-hand, linguists working on highly endangered languages in remote areas have a rather ambiguous job description. On the one hand we are advised by our grant organizations to ‘involve the whole community’ and ‘get approval from the community’ before undertaking our work. On the other hand, it is seldom clear who “the community” actually is. Once we are working on the language as linguists we hover between the roles of consultant and manager, often simultaneously director and directee. Amery (2000) and Wilkins (1992) provide some discussion of these issues, however this question is seldom directly addressed in the revitalization and fieldwork literature.

My position as linguist on the Bardi oral history project shows all these ambiguities. On the one hand this is not ‘my’ project; I am following the wishes and advice of those elders who commissioned the project and who have the biggest stake in its succeeding or not. On the other hand, responsibility for finding and copying the old materials, maintaining and working the recording equipment, applying for and administering the grant money, being accountable to funding bodies, and so forth, is ultimately mine, and involves making decisions about materials which some in the Bardi community might feel that I am not qualified to make, as someone who is neither Bardi nor an owner of the language. In some cases the linguist make act as a ‘filter’, but in others the linguist may be perceived as a barrier.

Language and identity issues

The subtitle of the conference is ‘language, identity and the land’. I have shied a way from addressing this topic directly until now, but there are a few questions that come to mind regarding ‘language and identity’ in the relation to the use of old materials. I have no answers for any of the following questions, but I raise them

anyway, on the philosophy that if there were easy answers the questions probably would not be worth asking.

Firstly, how can we interpret the phrase 'language and identity' when it comes to old materials such as the Laves texts? There seem to be three main directions we can head in:

1. To what extent is the corpus and the language it contains a reflection of Bardi identity when it was recorded?
2. What are the implications of the corpus for the interpretation of current Bardi identity?
3. What is the role of the linguist in this sort of project, when the linguist is the bridge between the old material and the modern community? How can we mitigate the feelings of distrust and anger that can ensue when the tools and people who were in part responsible for the endangerment of the language in the first place are now the path to its revival?

The first question will of course be never answerable. We know that the corpus was shaped by what Laves wanted to know about, what he asked about, and what people were prepared to tell him⁶ – it is not an accurate and balanced reflection of Bardi life 80 years ago. It is, however, the largest collection of texts and cultural information we have from the era before mission life dominated the old ways.

The second question amounts to 'What will we (Bardi people and others with access to it) do with the information contained in the Laves texts once it is usable and legible?' The aim of making the information available is not to tie Bardi people to one version of the past or to a set of stereotypes. It is certainly NOT to create a museum exhibit of the language and the people to whom it belongs. But if the opportunity to investigate the texts is passed up now, it will be gone forever. The current old people are the last generation with direct memory of the people who contributed to the Laves corpus and the events that it covers.

My third question, as is apparent, relates to the position of the linguist and the issues I raised in the previous section. Language ownership and identity are intimately linked in much of Aboriginal Australia (see Amery 2000, for example), but in the work of a linguist we have the situation where an outsider learns to speak the language but at the same time makes no claim on ownership or the identity that speaking that language would confer. The only way out of such a situation, I believe, is for all the language work to be under Indigenous control.

⁶ There are indications throughout the corpus that information on certain topics was consistently withheld; several times Laves has notes that speakers said they did not know some point of basic cultural information, whereas it is quite likely that the speaker was simply reluctant to tell him the answer.

Conclusions

The Bardi Oral history project is ongoing and will continue for as long as there is interest. We have a long way to go on the Laves texts before they are all typed, analysed and annotated. Other texts have been transcribed, translated and circulated within the community but not further disseminated at this stage due to concerns among some in the Bardi community that they could be used inappropriately.

There are continued problems in using the Laves Bardi texts, both because of the difficulties inherent in using the materials themselves and because of the political questions which arise when someone who is not a member of the community is the only person with access to the materials.

Despite these difficulties the Laves texts are a wonderful source of materials for the oral history project. They both enrich the corpus and serve as a springboard for further documentation of Bardi life and language.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the One Arm Point community for their hospitality, and in particular to my Bardi teachers, Nancy Isaac, Jessie Sampi and Bessie Ejai for their tireless patience, understanding and enthusiasm. The Bardi oral history project was funded by AIATSIS grants 2001/6505 'recording Bardi social history' and 2003/6761 'Bardi grammar research', and by a grant from the Endangered Languages Foundation. Thanks also to the Kimberley Language Resource Centre, Joe Blythe and Joyce Hudson for administrative and other support. Thanks also to David Nash for pointing out that Laves had worked on Bardi in the first place.

References

- Aklif, Gedda (comp). (1999). *Ardiyooloon Bardi Ngaanka: One Arm Point Bardi Dictionary*. Halls Creek: Kimberley Language Resource Centre.
- Amery, Rob. (2000). *Warrabarna Kaurna! Reclaiming an Australian Language*. Lisse: Swets and Zeitlinger.
- Boström, Mathias. (2002) Paper presented at the Fourth International Workshop on Australian Languages, Århus, Denmark.
- Bowern, Claire. (2002). History of research on Bardi and Jawi. Paper presented at the Fourth International Workshop on Australian Languages, Århus, Denmark.
- Bowern, Claire (ed). (2002). *Jiiba Nganman Jawal... I'm telling this story*.
- Hercus, Luise and Sutton, Peter. (1986). *This is What Happened: Historical Narratives by Aborigines*.
- Metcalf, C.D. (nd). *Bardi Dictionary*. ms. 350 pp.
- Nekes and Worms (1953). *Australian languages*. Microbibliotheca Anthropos. vol 10
- Wilkins, David. (1992) Linguistic Research Under Aboriginal Control: A Personal Account of Fieldwork in Central Australia. *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 12. 171-200

Appendix: Sample page of Laves' notebooks

(The page is reproduced at actual size.)

- 139 -

niman emboring eringirinans
 many people mt. - 33a [yandji]

yalgurdnyan lawarnaryan.
~~place~~ little crab
 country - to

(on 33a).
 gon iguru luru nu nuru fire
 that time 33a light up

buridjaryan. be-wa bilfyars-
 big children now 33a -

-maniz gal baru be-lon
 -manis-33 this one -country shok-at
 place

bu.djiriz. gon ruwil ijirinjan
 to 33a that time week 33a yandji

binidjiriz bars lawarnaryan
 mother(s) 33a-33 away little ant

igergardinsnamb 3.
 33a disappear men

gon igiriluyan v-lards
 that time 33a [yandji] (yandji) pitchi

winji igergardins djiriz
 33a-33

FS