

# Linguist/Community Relations in Northern Australia

Claire Bower and the Yan-nhaŋu Language Team (Gamlan̄ga and Mälarra tribes, Milingimbi)

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**Abstract:** The Indigenous communities of Northern Australia have been visited by linguists for almost a hundred years now. The relations between the research participants have changed greatly over this time, and with these changes there have come new issues, challenges and opportunities for all concerned. In this poster we summarize the current situation and provide some suggestions for overcoming the obstacles to ensure effective outcomes for all participants in the language recording process.

**Aims:** This handout contains the text from the poster and the captions to the photographs. Our aim in presenting this poster is to stimulate discussion over the role of the linguist in a documentation/revitalization process, and what makes a program succeed or fail.

## A. Factors which can shape community expectations

### 1 Researcher/Community Dynamic

- Long tradition of “being studied” and general feeling of exoticisation
- Assumed to be a “dying race”
- one consequence of this is that linguists have tended to come to such communities with the aim of documenting what’s there “for posterity” and “for science” rather than acting as a consultant for the speech community.

Photograph of the front cover of *The Passing of the Aborigines*, by Daisy Bates, 1938 (fifth printing, 1972).

### 2 Cultural theft

- appropriation of art without proper attribution of copyright/royalty payments
- assumption that no one publishes books except to make a profit.
- ‘rip-off’ assumption
- Non-aboriginal people ‘stealing our language’ by learning it and not giving back to the community (in appearance or in fact)

The Australian \$1 note (now out of circulation) featured art of David Malangi, a Manharriŋu man from Arnhem Land. Its alleged unauthorized use was the subject of the first court case involving Aboriginal copyright.

### 3 General antagonism between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people

- Widespread assumptions of racism on both sides, and general ill feeling
- Limited contact between Aboriginal people in remote areas and non-Aboriginal people, leading to misconceptions on both sides (stereotypes of the sort “White people don’t keep promises” vs “Aboriginal people are lazy”)

Post to a “white-pride” chat-room, 8/24/05, and a press release by Michael Mansell 12/09/05, representing two extremes of the spectrum.

### 4 Previous Positive Experiences

- positive experiences of previous language work sets a precedent.
- (and negative experiences, of course, decrease the likelihood that people will want to work with linguists again)

The front cover of the draft Yan-nhaŋu dictionary, compiled by Bentley James.

### 5 Other factors

- how people get on with each other at a personal level
- wish for success - how much of a stake people have in the outcome and how much they want it to succeed
- wish to document language or create language teaching materials

Members of the Yan-nhaŋu language team.

## B. Suggestions for overcoming obstacles

### 6 Strong Community Involvement – in the Planning

- adequate consultation of stakeholders
- continuing consultation
- informed consent
- respecting the decisions
- it shouldn't be the linguist's project alone

Murrunga, June 2005, community meeting to discuss a fish identification project and ranger program with the Northern Land Council.

### 7 Strong Community Involvement – in the Documentation Process

- recognition that different people have different strengths and different potential for contribution
  - transcribers
  - story-tellers
  - heritage owners who nonetheless have cultural knowledge
  - artists
  - kids
  - teachers
  - ...
- spreading the workload

Some of the members of the Yan-nhaju language team, including Baymar-wana, the most senior Yan-nhaju speaker.

### 8 Concentration on Culture – Contemporary and Traditional

- Variety of techniques in elicitation
- Inclusion of different generations where appropriate

- Avoiding the tendency to exoticize and to pigeon-hole; not creating a museum piece!

Rita Gularrbanga holding a mat she made. The making of the mat was filmed, from the gathering, peeling, dyeing and drying of the pandanus fronds to the weaving and finishing. The video has a commentary in Yan-nhaju.

### 9 Two-way Knowledge Exchange

- Exchange of knowledge
  - other classification systems (**exchange in ethnobotanical knowledge**)
  - Documentation procedures, e.g. use of recording equipment (**exchange in technical knowledge**)
  - linguistics, e.g. language history, elicitation techniques (**exchange in linguistic knowledge**)

Muwat holding up a blanket to lessen the glare of a computer screen during a fish identification session.

### 10 Clearly Defined Goals

- What are the likely outcomes?
- How will you know if you were successful?
- Interim results to keep up interest

The front cover of the Yan-nhaju learner's guide, one of the results of the language team's project to document the Yan-nhaju language.

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