

Language contact and children's bilingual acquisition:
learning a mixed language and Warlpiri
in northern Australia

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Preface

Written permission to conduct the study was granted by Lajamanu Community Government Council and written permission to work with the children was granted by a main carer (usually a parent) in each of the children's families. Permission to be in Lajamanu Community was granted by the Central Land Council. I spoke to a main carer in each family and explained the content of the permission form orally before the carer signed the form. A sample of the form is included in Appendix F. The video data is archived at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics (MPI), Nijmegen, The Netherlands. Members of Lajamanu Community have access to the data through the MPI archive web-site, and DVDs of children's narratives are archived at Lajamanu Community Education Centre, the local school. Families of the children in the longitudinal study were sent samples of the video data after each field trip.

I am greatly indebted to Lajamanu Community members for teaching me Warlpiri and trusting me to work with their children. In particular, thanks are due to the families of the focus children, who remain anonymous, and my main Warlpiri teachers: Lily Hargraves Nungarrayi, Liddy Nakamarra Nelson, Gracie White Napaljarri, Markkirdi Rose Napaljarri, Steven Patrick Jampijinpa, Elizabeth Ross Nungarrayi and Leah Johnson Napaljarri. Tanya Hargraves Napanangka and Leah Johnson Napaljarri taught me about Light Warlpiri, as well as the children, especially JoyJoy Hargraves Nakamarra, Janice Burns Napurrurla, Deandra Burns Napanangka, Keisha White Nakamarra and Tameeka Walker Napurrurla.

Before beginning this research I lived in Lajamanu Community for four years, working in the Warlpiri-English 'Two-way learning' program in the school, and learning Warlpiri. During this time I noticed that the children spoke in a way which was not exactly Warlpiri, Aboriginal English or Kriol and which resembled code-switching between these, but also seemed to have some other elements. I thought that it would be useful for the school and the community to have an assessment made of the children's language situation. After obtaining the necessary permissions, I conducted an initial study, funded by the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, Canberra, and the Department of Employment, Education and Training, Northern Territory (in the form of study leave). Following this I decided to investigate the children's language learning further as a PhD project. During field trips I presented sample methods and interim results to the Lajamanu Community Government Council and conducted several workshops with teachers at the school about issues arising from my project, including the emergence of Light Warlpiri and recommendations for teaching English and Warlpiri. Many people helped me by assisting with the recording and transcription

of both languages. In particular I wish to thank: Tanya Hargraves Napanangka, Matrina Robertson Nangala, Roseanne Dixon Napangardi, Noressa White Napurrula, Geraldine Gallagher Nangala, Audrey Baker Nakamarra, Belinda Baker Nakamarra, Steven Dixon Japanangka, Steven Patrick Jampijinpa, Marlkiridi Rose Napaljarri, Agnes Donnelly Napanangka, Elizabeth Ross Nungarrayi, Sabrina Nelson Nakamarra, Leah Johnson Napaljarri, Valerie Patterson Napanangka, Elaine Johnson Nangala and Gracie White Napaljarri. Thank you also to the principals and staff of Lajamanu CEC for much logistic help, especially Frank and Gina Atkinson and Maria Maher.

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Abstract

This dissertation documents the emergence of a new language, Light Warlpiri, in the multilingual community of Lajamanu in northern Australia. It then examines the acquisition of Light Warlpiri language, and of the heritage language, Lajamanu Warlpiri, by children. Light Warlpiri has arisen from contact between Lajamanu Warlpiri (a Pama-Nyungan language), Kriol (an English-based creole), and varieties of English. It is a Mixed Language, meaning that none of its source languages can be considered to be the sole parent language. Most verbs and the verbal morphology are from Aboriginal English or Kriol, while most nouns and the nominal morphology are from Warlpiri.

The language input to children is complex. Adults older than about thirty speak Lajamanu Warlpiri and code-switch into Aboriginal English or Kriol. Younger adults, the parents of the current cohort of children, speak Light Warlpiri and

code-switch into Lajamanu Warlpiri and into Aboriginal English or Kriol. Lajamanu Warlpiri and Light Warlpiri, the two main input languages to children, both indicate A arguments with ergative case-marking (and they share one allomorph of the marker), but Lajamanu Warlpiri includes the marker much more consistently than Light Warlpiri. Word order is variable in both languages. Children learn both languages from birth, but they target Light Warlpiri as the language of their everyday interactions, and they speak it almost exclusively until four to six years of age.

Adults and children show similar patterns of ergative marking and word order in Light Warlpiri. But differences between age groups are found in ergative marking in Lajamanu Warlpiri - for the oldest group of adults, ergative marking is obligatory, but for younger adults and children, it is not.

Determining when children differentiate between two input languages has been a major goal in the study of bilingual acquisition. The two languages in this study share lexical and grammatical properties, making distinctions between them quite subtle. Both adults and children distribute ergative marking differently in the two languages, but show similar word order patterns in both. However the children show a stronger correlation between ergative marking and word order patterns than do the adults, suggesting that they are spearheading processes of language change.

In their comprehension of sentences in both Lajamanu Warlpiri and Light Warlpiri, adults use a case-marking strategy to identify the A argument (i.e. $N^{+erg} = A$ argument, $N^{-\phi} = O$ argument). The children are not adult-like in using this strategy at age 5, when they also used a word order strategy, but they gradually move towards being adult-like with increased age.

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