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The rebirth of Wergaia: a collaborative effort

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Abstract

This paper describes the methodology used in the reconstruction of the Wergaia language and its renaissance in the classroom from the perspective of the linguist involved, with additional comments from the group of Wotjobaluk students who learned their heritage language. I was asked to assist in the revitalisation of the language by the Wotjobaluk people of the Wimmera region. Some members of this group expressed their desire to learn the language via the Victorian Certificate of Education study design, *Indigenous languages of Victoria, revival and reclamation: Victorian Certificate of Education study design* (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2004) with me as their teacher. This enabled them to actively collaborate in the reconstruction of Wergaia, documented in the consultation copy of the *Wergaia Community Grammar and Dictionary* (Reid 2007). They are now able to write simple Wergaia sentences, translate Dreaming stories into their heritage language, and teach Wergaia to other community members.

The transmission of Victorian Aboriginal languages ceased abruptly after the establishment of government and church missions where Aboriginal people were forbidden to speak their language, or practise their culture, under threat of having their children removed. Victorian Aboriginal languages are no longer spoken as the primary means of communication though people are familiar with some words or phrases from their heritage language, often without realising it.

> What meant the most to me was the start, when a fellow worker [Peter Shaw-Truex] came to me and asked about language in the Wimmera, and how we went about following the (cultural) protocols to LAECG [Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group] and Land Council. That's what people forget. (Marjorie Pickford)[2]

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2 The student comments in this paper are the result of a survey instrument designed for this

In 2005 members of the Wotjobaluk community invited Dr Heather Bowe and me, two linguists from Monash University, to participate in a workshop to discuss the possible reclamation and revival of their language, Wergaia. Representatives from the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages (VACL), the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA), the Victorian School of Languages (VSL), and the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) also attended the workshop. At the end of the two days the community decided that they would like to reclaim their language and asked me if I would assist them. This was to be the beginning of one of the most rewarding experiences of a lifetime for all involved.

Getting started

Once the decision to undertake the reclamation and revival of Wergaia had been made the community appointed volunteer Jennifer Beer, a Wotjobaluk woman living in Horsham, as the project coordinator and a workshop was held in Horsham to which all Wotjobaluk community members were invited. One of the primary aims of the workshop was to decide on a spelling system to be used by the linguist when compiling the Wergaia wordlist. There was much discussion about when and how to begin both work on the language and the Wergaia language class. The optimum situation would be for the community to be involved in the development of the wordlist and the proposed grammar. Several people attending the workshop expressed their desire to learn Wergaia as soon as possible, but a language class could not begin without further work being carried out by the linguist and funding was needed to undertake this work. The community applied for and received funding from VACL to develop a Wergaia wordlist. It was agreed that workshops would be held in Horsham when there was sufficient material to warrant feedback from the community.

However there were practical problems to be dealt with before any language learning could take place. The prospective students lived in Horsham and Ballarat, and the linguist lived in Melbourne, and they needed a way to conduct regular, weekly language classes necessary for successful language learning. Many people wanted to learn the language in a community setting but with the linguist in Melbourne, more than 300 kilometres away, it was not possible to hold such classes on a weekly basis. There was also the question of an appropriate curriculum to ensure that the students received the highest standard of education available. The first issue was solved through the generous assistance of the VSL, a state government secondary school specialising in languages and distance education. It was decided that the most appropriate method of delivery would be video-conferencing, with a classroom in Horsham, another in Ballarat, and the teacher–linguist in Melbourne. The weekly two-hour classes were supplemented by regular, one-day workshops held in Ballarat,

purpose by Kylie Kennedy, a member of the class. Once I had finished the paper, Kylie chose and inserted the comments where she felt they were most appropriate, to allow readers some insight into the students' experience.

which is midway between Horsham and Melbourne. Although this form of delivery was not always ideal, particularly during thunderstorms that caused the video conferencing link to drop out, it proved successful.

In 2004 the VCAA accredited the *Indigenous languages of Victoria, revival and reclamation: Victorian Certificate of Education study design,* specifically designed to teach Aboriginal people the fundamentals of language reclamation. It was developed by a group of educators, linguists and Aboriginal people to include the production of language resources for future students. However the proposed course's status as a VCE subject caused some consternation among those wishing to learn the language. It was eventually decided to use the study design, acknowledging that those finding it unsuitable would be able to withdraw at will. The study design proved to be successful, in fact, far more than ever envisaged by any of those involved.

> There is no other system that supports revival and reclamation of languages except the VCE units … We just wanted the skills to be able to speak and write our language. VCE was a barrier for some people who didn't want to attend something that formal; the classroom environment wasn't a culturally appropriate setting. However it did give us a framework and because it was a formal setting we were able to get funding for tutors, teachers and resources. (Jennifer Beer)

> Using the VCE system meant we could begin immediately and resulted in the publication of the *Wergaia Community Grammar and Dictionary.* Although this method was hard on some of our community members … we had to push ourselves and I don't think another course would have achieved so much. Without this we would not have speakers now. (Richard Kennedy)

> The VCE system was so structured that it didn't leave time to spend on any one thing. (Marjorie Pickford)

> We were able to explore all aspects of language revival and reclamation … [the barrier was] meeting the timeline requirements versus working full time. (Bronwyn Pickford)

> To start with I wondered why we spent so much time learning about other Australian Indigenous Languages (AIL) rather than Wergaia. However, by understanding theories about the origins of AIL, learning about grammatical structures, and even vocabulary of other AIL, we understood Wergaia much better. It helped us to be able to create new words for the modern world, by understanding the connections Wergaia has to neighbouring languages and how inter-related most AIL are. (Kylie Kennedy)

> The VCE system was actually one of the best ways that I can think of to have learnt our language. Not only did we learn the basics and the process of revival and reclamation, but also how to recognise and break down words that are similar and create new words using the correct processes. Very rewarding! (Natasha Kennedy)

At the commencement of the project I had a list of words believed to be Wergaia compiled as part of an earlier project (see Blake and Reid 1998), and a copy of Hercus' (1986) grammar and vocabulary of the language based on her 1960s audio recordings of individuals. These two factors greatly reduced the time taken to reconstruct the language. Before work on the wordlist could begin all sources needed to be carefully re-examined and compared to ensure that they were indeed Wergaia sources. This process saw a few, small sources removed from the list. Once this was completed the sources were combined in a database and individual words were reconstructed using the historical sources, information from surrounding languages and general knowledge of Australian languages.

As the study design began with information about Australian languages in general, it was decided to begin the classes during the word reconstruction phase to allow the class to participate in the process. It was agreed at the outset of the course that any decisions made by the class were for the class and not for the community at large. It was up to the community to make their own decisions in relation to the language. Each week a list of words was presented for comment. Sometimes there were words that were familiar, particularly to an Elder participating in the class, who remembered some words that her mother had used. However it took a great deal of work for me to keep the reconstruction process ahead of the class. The students were keen to begin using more than just individual words and it quickly became obvious that this would be necessary to keep them motivated.

Funding had been sought to develop a grammar to be used in conjunction with the wordlist, and this was provided by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). The grammar written by Hercus (1986) was used as a starting point to begin teaching the class the structure of words and sentences in Wergaia. At the same time I compared all of the grammatical information in the sources, to ascertain as much information as possible about the language. When there were issues where a choice needed to be made these were discussed with the class, and it was the latter that decided which path to take. For example there is evidence for two possessive constructions, probably dialectal. The class chose to learn both constructions.

After the language reclamation project commenced there were disputes in the community and, despite several requests, no workshops were permitted to allow feedback from the entire community. However there was continuous community feedback through the students in the class, several of whom were Elders. In March 2008 consultation copies of the *Wergaia Community Grammar and Dictionary* (Reid 2007) were printed and distributed to the many community members who attended an open workshop in Horsham. It was hoped that this would elicit feedback from those at the meeting.

A successful collaboration

Languages can be reclaimed and revived. The extent to which this is successful directly relates to the quality and quantity of the historical records of the language; the grammatical information that can be retrieved via the language reconstitution work carried out by linguists using the rigorous, academic techniques of language reconstruction on the available data; and the commitment of the Aboriginal community undertaking the process.

Source material

The historical sources used in language reclamation are generally books, articles and notebooks written in the 18th and early 19th centuries in which government officials and private citizens recorded words they had learnt from local Aboriginal people, with each recorder using their own spelling system, not the standardised International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) used by linguists today. While some of this material was published at the time it was collected and is available in the reference collections of major libraries, manuscript material is generally only available in research libraries or on microfiche. This makes accessing source material a difficult and expensive process.[3]

Modern studies of some of this material have been undertaken by linguists, including Hercus (1986), Dixon (1980, 2002), and Blake and Reid (1998), all of whom have classified Victorian languages into groups. For example the Kulin language group covers much of central and western Victoria and is, in fact, so named because these languages all use a form of the word *kulin* for man or people. In some instances linguists have analysed the material for a particular language and written sketch grammars and wordlists for that language. Many of these are now available in published books and journals including work on Woiwurrung (Blake 1991), the language of the Warrnambool area (Blake 2003a), Bunganditj (Buwandik) (Blake 2003b), Pallanganmiddang (Blake and Reid 1999), Dhudhuroa (Blake and Reid 2002), the Colac language (Blake, Clark & Reid 1998), Wathawurrung (Blake, Clark & Krishna-Pillay 1998), Yorta Yorta, Bangerang and Yabula Yabula (Bowe, Peeler & Atkinson 1997: Bowe & Morey 1999), and Ganai (Fesl 1985). Although most of the linguistic descriptions of these languages are available, non-linguists often find them difficult to understand because they are written in an academic style. Indeed, community members are often not aware of their existence.

> Before we started I had absolutely no idea that our language even existed. Now I can look at other languages and see similarities. (Natasha Kennedy)
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> I didn't know information existed (on Wergaia) or how to access it. (Katrina Beer)
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> I remember growing up hearing Uncle Walter and others speak language as a small child, but I didn't know he had been recorded. When I heard his voice

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3 See Bowe, Reid & Lynch, this volume for a discussion of how this problem has been addressed.

> on the tapes, I had a deep sense of pride and it brought back lots of memories.
> (Jennifer Beer)

The Wotjobaluk people have several advantages in relation to the sources for Wergaia. Firstly there is Hercus' (1986) work, which includes Wergaia. The people she interviewed did not use the language everyday but recalled what they could from their childhood. Hercus was able to write a comprehensive sketch grammar of Wergaia based on the material she recorded. Both Hercus (1986) and Blake & Reid (1998) found that Wergaia, a Western Kulin language, is closely related to Wemba Wemba, another Western Kulin language for which Hercus (1986) wrote a detailed sketch grammar. Traditionally Australian Aboriginal languages borrow extensively from neighbouring languages, particularly after a person dies and their name becomes taboo, so Wemba Wemba provides evidence to substantiate some of the words recorded as Wergaia words. Indeed other Kulin languages also provide a good reference point when sorting through the various *tokens*, a name that indicates that the word is spelt as it was in its original source. For example the Wergaia word *wutyu* (man) was recorded by many people using the following tokens: *wootyoo, wudju, woot-cha, wootye, wootcha, wood tehoo, watye,* and *wut-yo*. This does not mean that only recognised Kulin words are correct, nor that they are the same in all Kulin languages. If this were the case then all Kulin languages would be the same. Linguists see resemblances that non-linguists often do not. For example the word for eat in various Kulin languages takes the forms *thaka, tjakili, tjawa, tjakela, tjika, thawa, tjaka, tjaki*, and *thanga* (Blake & Reid 1998, p. 36). We call words like these *cognates* which means they are related somewhere in the history of their languages. Languages also have to have words that differentiate them from related languages and we call these *shibboleths*. The Wergaia word for a stone tomahawk is *badyik,* but in Wemba Wemba it is *dir*. This is one of many words that indicate which language a source belongs to. Grammatical information found in the various sources is also compared when determining which sources belong to a language. Hercus' work provided a benchmark against which the other sources could be compared, saving possibly years of work in the reconstruction of Wergaia.

Blake & Reid (1998) compared over 200 sources to develop their classification of the languages of central and western Victoria and, of these, 35 sources are Wergaia. Unfortunately some languages have only a couple of sources, which means their traditional owners have much less material to work with when reconstructing their language. Although most of the comparative work was done by me the Wergaia class did learn about, and participate in, this process particularly when there was any doubt about a source. For example the class compared three unnamed sources and, unknowingly, came to the same conclusion that I had. They decided that source A belonged with source C, not source B. Source A was Mathews' Wuttyabullak Language (Mathews 1902–03), source B was Wergaia and source C was Djab Wurrung, another Western Kulin language.

> I picked up a book a few years ago which said it had Wotjobaluk language
> in it. I copied all the words out to take home and practise. I realise now that

> you can't just pick up a source and trust that it will be correct, or that it's the language it says it is as people often recorded things incorrectly, or used people as resources who spoke a totally different AIL, a visitor! Julie has taught us to critically analyse the sources we read and hear; how to check if it's Wergaia or not. I have confidence that in the future I will know how to recognise my own language. (Kylie Kennedy)

Many of the sources for Wergaia were of a relatively high standard, having been written by experienced amateur anthropologists like R.H. Mathews and missionaries who had lived with the Wotjobaluk and learned their language. Some of these contained grammatical as well as lexical (vocabulary) information. Even at the level of single words the class had much to discover. For example the concepts of one language do not translate directly to another language. The kinship system used by Europeans is quite different to that of traditional Australians. Your biological mother and her sisters are all addressed as *bap* in Wergaia, only your father's sisters are addressed as *ngaluk* (aunt).

> One of the first things I remember learning is about kinship; I remember sitting in Horsham with Auntie Jenni figuring out how to call her Auntie and Auntie Jenni trying to figure out niece. And having Uncle Peter there and realising that traditionally he is also my dad definitely made me feel more connected. (Natasha Kennedy)

Grammatical information

The grammar of Australian languages is very different to that of English, the first language of the Wergaia students. For example in English when we use the word *we* it means the speaker plus others, but we do not know who the others are, which can lead to some embarrassing situations. Wergaia, like most Australian languages, makes it very clear who *we* includes. Consider the various Wergaia interpretations of the English sentence: 'We slept in Ballarat'.

Gumb-in- angul   *Ballarat- ata.*

Sleep-past-1.du.in   Ballarat-loc.

You and I slept in Ballarat.

Gumb-in- angulung   *Ballarat- ata.*

Sleep- past-1.du.ex   Ballarat-loc.

She and I slept in Ballarat.

Gumb-in-angu gulik   *Ballarat-ata.*

Sleep-past-1.tri.in   Ballarat-loc.

You two and I slept in Ballarat.

Gumb-in-andang gulik   *Ballarat-ata.*

Sleep-past-1.tri.ex   Ballarat-loc.

Those two and I slept in Ballarat.

Gumb-in-angu   *Ballarat-ata.*

Sleep-past-1.pl.in   Ballarat-loc.

You all and I slept in Ballarat.

Gumb-in-andang   *Ballarat-ata.*

Sleep-past-1.pl.ex   Ballarat-loc.

They all and I slept in Ballarat.

By the end of the first unit, the class understood the importance of learning about Australian languages in general as part of trying to reclaim their own language.

> I found the pronoun system very difficult to understand because I did not have a great understanding of the English system, although I could use pronouns competently. The use of bound and free pronouns is still confusing but the distinctions (between subjects and objects) are a lot clearer in Wergaia than in English. (Richard Kennedy)

Community commitment

The third requirement for successful language reclamation is the motivation and commitment of the language learners, in this case the Wotjobaluk people in the Wergaia class. To say that the task they had undertaken was hard is an understatement. They were faced with new concepts in both English and Wergaia; grammatical terminology most had never encountered; words that were difficult to say because they contained sounds the students had never heard before; sentences that did not resemble anything they had ever heard or read; and a linguist who warned them that she would, as the knowledge gleaned from the sources grew, need to change things like the recommended spelling or word meanings. The class found themselves in an alien world – a language class.

The class were all adult members of the community. At the original workshop the Elders had decided that it was important for the adults to learn the language first. This was a very wise decision as this was no ordinary language class. Unlike people learning French there were no dictionaries, movies, books, or even speakers to aid their learning. The members of the class are the modern pioneers of the language. They grappled with many strange and unexpected problems in order to participate in the reconstruction of the language, to learn Wergaia, and to create resources as

they learned so that other community members would have an easier task when they learned Wergaia. It required determination, self-discipline, and the ability to keep moving forward despite the difficulties encountered both inside and outside the classroom.

> I feel pride and greater confidence. I discovered an untapped talent – my linguistic skills. (Bronwyn Pickford)

> Learning Wergaia has increased my self-esteem, strengthened my pride, health, wellbeing and confidence in myself; it enabled a stronger identity and recreated a strong bond within my family. (Richard Kennedy)

> I was able to add a giant piece of the puzzle regarding my history, culture, community and identity. (Katrina Beer)

One of the most difficult tasks of all was learning how to compose a sentence in Wergaia. Not only is the order of the words different but most words have one or more suffixes attached to them. Suffixes are additions that are used repeatedly on words of one particular category, to give more information. For instance in English we have a suffix {-s} that we add to words of the noun category (names of things) which speakers recognise as meaning plural (more than one), for example one cat, two cats. This is the plural suffix in English. Reconstructed Wergaia has over 80 suffixes at the present time. There would have been more in traditional Wergaia but they have been lost. These suffixes have to be added in a specific order and used only in specific situations. The simple English sentence: 'A big man threw a boomerang from a redgum tree' looks like this in Wergaia:

Yungg-in	*gurrung-u*	*wutyu-ku*	*gatim-gatim*	*bial-ang*
Throw-past	big-erg.	man-erg.	boomerang	red gum tree-abl.

 A big man threw a boomerang from a redgum tree.

The past tense (time) suffix {–in} indicates that the action took place before the sentence was spoken, and erg. stands for ergative, a suffix used in most Australian languages to indicate who carried out the action. It is on both gurrung (big) and wutyu (man) to show that it was the man who was big, not the boomerang or the tree. The ablative suffix {-ang} (from) tells us that the boomerang came from a tree; it did not go towards it or into it. From is not a separate word in Wergaia as it is in English. You will also notice that the English indefinite article 'a' does not occur in Wergaia, nor does the definite article 'the'. If we wrote the sentence in English, but using Wergaia word order, it would be: 'Threw big man boomerang red gum tree from'.

The class wrote and translated countless Wergaia sentences. They would email their first draft to me and I would let them know that, say, the word order was not right or that they needed a case suffix. They would then try again and the process would be repeated many times, as the students were determined to get it right.

> One of the defining moments for our class was a visit to the Brambuk visitor centre in Gariwerd. We spotted a sign written in an Indigenous language, a

neighbouring language to our own, and began interpreting it. The spelling was different to the agreed-upon spelling we've used in class and in the Grammar and Dictionary, but we were able to see past that to find the meaning of the word. This was a proud moment for us as a class and as part of the wider community. (Kylie Kennedy)

When the class began to write stories they realised how limited the language information they had was, and were concerned about the authenticity of the reconstructed language. They asked whether traditional Wotjobaluk people would be able to understand them. Linguists know that a reconstructed language will never be exactly the same as the original but, with good sources and lots of hard work, it should be a good approximation. It could be likened to someone with basic school French communicating with French speakers in Paris. It might not be quite right but the message should still get across. Also communities need to keep in mind that all living languages change, constantly. Even within our own lifetime the meaning of English words like gay has changed; we have borrowed words like *yum cha* from other languages, and we have created new words such as 'googling', 'skyping', and 'texted', using common processes for word creation. This was, and still is, the next big challenge for the Wergaia students who have created all of the new words needed in the classroom to date.

The words and sentences recorded in the sources for Wergaia are mostly simple sentences using traditional words for traditional concepts. The class has several methods of word creation available to them when they need new words. The simplest is the traditional practice of borrowing words from neighbouring languages, or even unrelated languages. While borrowing from a neighbouring language is easy because they are already able to communicate with their neighbours, borrowing from a completely different language requires some adaptations. For example if the class chose to borrow the English word 'flash' they would need to make several changes before it would fit into the Wergaia sound system. There is no /f/ in Wergaia, so you would need to find the closest existing sound which would be /p/ or /b/. Wergaia words only begin with voiced sounds which means you would probably choose /b/. The sequence of sounds /bl/ does not occur in Wergaia so you would need to insert a vowel between them. The vowel sound in flash is not found in Wergaia but the /a/ sound in car is, so you could use that. Unfortunately the sound represented by sh is also not found in Wergaia so you would need to use the closest Wergaia sound which is spelt *ty*. Therefore the word flash, when borrowed into Wergaia, would look something like *balaty, bulaty,* or *bilaty*, depending on what the class decided to use for the first vowel. A check of the Wergaia dictionary shows that *balaty* is already the word for a cherry tree so the choice would be narrowed down to either *bulaty* or *bilaty*.

Words can also be created by extending the meaning of an existing word to include another meaning, in cases where there can be no confusion, such as using *gurrak* (sand) to refer to sugar. After all you would never put sand in your tea! Compounding

is another popular way of creating words like babysit, which puts the words baby and sit (with) together to create a word with a new but similar meaning. Finally the suffixes referred to above can be used to create new words as the ancestors did. The word for echidna in Wergaia is *yulawil*, which is literally *yula* (spike) plus {*-wil*}, a suffix that means having. The class carefully examined the recorded words for examples of this last type so that they could use the same suffixes when creating new words. At times this required a great deal of mental gymnastics.

An area yet to be explored in the renaissance of Wergaia is complex sentences. Sentences such as: 'I told you to tell her that we could not go with her' are currently too difficult for reconstructed Wergaia. Work needs to be done on the meagre material available for complex sentences in Wergaia. This is also a good example of where a thorough knowledge of Australian languages is essential. If you know what to look for when examining these sentences you will have a better chance of getting it right.

The effort the Wergaia class put into the reconstruction of their language is nothing short of amazing. These people, some of whom did not finish school, have gone from knowing almost nothing about the language to being able to write simple sentences, translate Dreaming stories and teach other community members their heritage language in just two and a half years. There were times when they wanted to quit, when they felt they would never understand and that it was all just too difficult, but they continued anyway supporting each other throughout the course. They have achieved something that is worth recording in the history books. When the class began there were 13 students some of whom chose not to continue within the first few weeks. Sadly two very valuable class members were forced to discontinue for health reasons. In December 2008 nine people completed the *Indigenous languages of Victoria, revival and reclamation: Victorian Certificate of Education study design* with Wergaia as the community language for the first time. Several class members are also VCE top scorers. This is an outstanding feat by anyone's standards and one that will not be easy to replicate. However the journey for other Wotjobaluk people wanting to learn Wergaia will be much easier as, thanks to the dedication and sheer hard work of this group, there are now resources that new students can use, and community members able to explain and teach the difficult concepts underlying their heritage language.

> I would like Wergaia to be documented as a 'strong' language; a journey of many Wotjobaluk traditional owners to restore pride amongst our people by further awakening a language that slept for so long. (Bronwyn Pickford)

> I wish that [the community] were all learning and sharing Wergaia; to one day hopefully be able to teach this to our people. (Marjorie Pickford)

Conclusion

The current outcomes of the Wergaia reclamation and revival project are, firstly, a consultation copy of the *Wergaia Community Grammar and Dictionary* (Reid 2007) funded by VACL and AIATSIS; and, secondly, a group of Wotjobaluk people who

are now able to write simple sentences, translate Dreaming stories and teach other community members their heritage language. They have produced resources for teaching the language that they intend to publish. This is clearly an excellent result, made possible by the availability of good historical and academic resources and the collaboration of members of the Wotjobaluk community and a linguist, all of whom share a passion for the language and the commitment and determination to bring that language into the modern world. The revival of Wergaia has a long way to go before it can claim to be successful but, if there are other community members willing to show the same commitment as their predecessors to the reclamation and revival of Wergaia, the language has a bright future.

> Learning Wergaia has not been a commitment but a necessity, as though there is some kind of force propelling me to learn Wergaia, like I'm in a desert and Wergaia is my water. The classes and the Wergaia language brought me closer to my family – a friend of mine commented that Wergaia has brought my extended family together in a way that the English language never could. (Kylie Kennedy)

> Learning Wergaia has meant everything to me! Having been involved in the native title process it sparked my interest to do more … the language program didn't grab me right away, when I saw how much it was doing in terms of confidence for *mamek* (my father) I thought maybe I could give it a go. And now I feel like our family is so much closer and I have skills that I never thought would be possible! And I am keen to share the knowledge as I am so proud of our language being reclaimed. I want to get the language into the community, to share it with everybody, to create resources so that it never dies! (Natasha Kennedy)

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