

7

Ngapartji Ngapartji: Indigenous language in the arts

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Abstract

Ngapartji Ngapartji is a high-profile arts, theatre and language maintenance and revitalisation promotion project produced by social-change company Big hART. Since 2005 Ngapartji Ngapartji has been operating an innovative and experimental program which includes: the creation of an online interactive language and culture learning website, working with Pitjantjatjara-speaking young people, Elders and linguists; an arts-based community development program; a highly successful touring theatre work which is performed bilingually and a media campaign promoting the development of a national Indigenous languages policy. Ngapartji Ngapartji demonstrates the role the arts can play in the reversal and prevention of further loss of Australia's Indigenous languages. While Ngapartji works primarily with Pitjantjatjara, a relatively vital language, we believe that the key processes and outcomes of the project have practical applications to other language revitalisation contexts.

What is the project?

Ngapartji Ngapartji is a long-term community development Pitjantjatjara language and arts program based on Arrernte country in Mparntwe (Alice Springs). Since 2005 the project has delivered a broad variety of arts workshops in Pitjantjatjara communities, created an online language and culture website, nationally toured an award-winning theatre production and recently produced a documentary.

Arts mentors and producers work alongside Pitjantjatjara linguists, Elders and young language speakers in the spirit of *ngapartji-ngapartji*, which describes a concept of reciprocal exchange. The incredibly diverse range of skills contributed by participants and team – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous – has created a culture of respect and

¹Both authors are from Ngapartji Ngapartji.

a rich ground for creative, collaborative relationships founded in language exchange. This is the culture into which audiences of the website and theatre show are invited.

How does it work?

As well as maintaining an office space in Alice Springs and conducting town-based activities with young participants, every few months various members of the Ngapartji Ngapartji team bundle into the old blue Toyota and travel to remote communities such as Pukatja (Ernabella), Pipalyatjara and Kaltukatjarra (Docker River) to run workshops. These workshops are energetic bursts of activity exploring a range of art forms – filmmaking, performance, music – which are structured to be responsive to community requirements and flexible when working with people dealing with difficult circumstances. Within these workshops, communities create their own content in their own language.

The content that is created feeds back into the website and the theatre show, and is made accessible to communities through the distribution of DVDs and CDs and broadcast on local channels. Within this long-term process Ngapartji Ngapartji has negotiated and crafted its role as an organisation in order to respond to the needs of participants. The role that has emerged is that of an agent in storytelling. In the process of expressing stories of place and identity the essence of what makes art and what makes community is developed and augmented. Ngapartji Ngapartji's role is to facilitate a process driven by participants. One of the most important issues identified by those participants from the beginning is that of language revitalisation among Pitjantjatjara speakers.

About Pitjantjatjara

Pitjantjatjara can be seen as a strong language with over 2500 speakers across northern South Australia, the south of the Northern Territory and into Western Australia. However Pitjantjatjara is still regarded as endangered as it is changing substantially among generations with classical Pitjantjatjara being spoken less and less by young people. The domains of the language are shrinking, especially among young people, and particularly those young people that no longer live on traditional Pitjantjatjara country, but in towns such as Alice Springs, Port Augusta, Coober Pedy and Adelaide where they speak a mix of Pitjantjatjara, English and other Indigenous languages such as Luritja and Arrernte.

As a language project Ngapartji Ngapartji becomes a forum within the community for discussion concerning language and language transmission:

Kuwari tjitji tjuṯa ninti wiya tjukurpa pulka tjuṯaku. Kuwari Pitjantjatjara uti tjuṯa kutju wangkanyi. Ninti wiya. Mungatṯu nyangangu katjangku wangkangu, Ngunytjimalu wangkangu, 'Maḷu anytjapiri mantjila', ka tjitji kutju kunyu puṯu kuliningi, 'Nyaa, Nyaa?' Puṯu alatjitu kuliningi anytjapiri. Tjana ninti wiya, nyanga tjana tjuṯaku,

Pitjantjatjara alatjitu. Maḷu anytjapiri wangkanyi, tangka panya, maḷu tangka munu winki katinyi, palyantja wiyangku katinyi – anytjapiri – whole.

These days children do not understand complex words. These days they are only speaking really basic Pitjantjatjara. They lack knowledge. Recently this person's son was saying, 'Go and get *maḷu anytjapiri*' and the child he was speaking to apparently couldn't understand and was saying, 'What? What?' He couldn't understand it at all, *anytjapiri*. They don't understand these kinds of words, real Pitjantjatjara. If you say *maḷu anytjapiri*, it means, you know, cooked kangaroo that you would carry together, not yet divided up – *anytjapiri* – whole. (Milyika Carroll, pers comm., 2008)

Ngapartji Ngapartji participants include young people from Alice Springs town camps such as Abbott's Camp, Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) land residents who have shifted to Alice because they or their partners are in need of renal dialysis, and both young people and Elders from remote communities – in particular Ernabella, on the APY lands. The project has worked with around 300 participants since 2005 and about 25 of those have come on one or more of the nine national tours of Ngapartji Ngapartji.

By developing activities that are driven by an engagement with Indigenous language such as music recording, filmmaking and travelling to cities to deliver a bilingual theatre show, the domains in which the language is used are increased. Both younger and older Pitjantjatjara participants engage with broader dialogue concerning language, and in discussion around emerging conceptual realms regarding the experiences that are being shared. By conducting dialogue concerning project development bilingually, the language is revitalised through broader contextual relevance and increased use.

Focused translation and interpretation through the process of creating art, theatre and film leads to detailed examination of classical language use and the documentation of words, ideas, phrases, grammar, story and song. Through producing work that engages multiple age groups from the community, an intergenerational exchange occurs with a language focus. *Ninti Mulapa* translates as highly knowledgeable and is the name given to the language reference group made up of senior Pitjantjatjara people who advise and consult on aspects of Ngapartji Ngapartji, in particular the Ninti website, created as a language and culture learning forum. Through the process of reviewing film and other content created by young people both in town and out bush, these senior people are able to re-engage with communities from which they are separated, consult on subject matter and monitor language use. Ninti Mulapa combines traditional knowledge with contemporary creative processes.

This activity-based reciprocal approach has been an effective means to resist language shift. Instead of simply preserving the language (in dictionaries, footage of classical speakers, and so on), speakers themselves are revitalising it, and at the same time participating in a discourse about the importance of language which extends across generations. The project therefore does not see language in isolation but recognises the relationship between language and cultural continuity at every level.

Language pride not language shame

Community ownership over the project is high and reflected in changing attitudes to the Pitjantjatjara language, especially among younger project participants. The Ngapartji Ngapartji touring show, especially the popularity of its recent tour to Ernabella, has strengthened the sense of pride in the language among native speakers. Aspects of the show make it popular and significant for younger generations, not least in their capacity to build content. In particular the use of theatre and new media together are targeted to enhance and develop traditional storytelling and contemporary media skills among participants.

Lead actor Trevor Jamieson's energetic demonstration of a capacity to walk two ways – to uphold pride in his language and culture, fighting its loss through displacement, while also sparring skilfully with the English-speaking world – inspires young people to reposition their language in the framework of cultural power. Within the Ngapartji Ngapartji model of exchange, the conflict between 'traditional' and 'mainstream' life choices may be negotiated, if not averted.

Young people

Engagement with the mainstream or Western ways is often seen by senior Pitjantjatjara people and observers as a cause of language loss. However this engagement is both necessary for the survival of communities and in changing the attitudes of young people toward their language. Young people's fascination with and participation in popular culture is inevitable and desirable. Using the forms of popular culture to produce language-related content therefore creates a high level of credibility for language material. Young people become proud of producing content in Pitjantjatjara because of the status associated with the project and the content that has been made to date. This content goes on to gain recognition for the importance of Pitjantjatjara from the exposure to theatre and language-learning audiences. The popularisation of language content in partnership with multigenerational engagement in this way has applications across the field of language revitalisation.

Following the Big hART model, Ngapartji Ngapartji has used the profile of the touring theatre work to generate interest in the maintenance of Indigenous languages among non-language speakers. The project also campaigns for the development of a national Indigenous languages policy. In this way it hopes to create a legacy for all Indigenous languages, not just Pitjantjatjara.

The idea to push for a policy emerged after discussions with many language workers, linguists and the Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages. Over the last three years the Ngapartji Ngapartji team have researched the status of language support in each state and put together a position paper on language policy. Every touring season politicians, advisors, language workers, academics, linguists and other influential people are invited to watch the show and encouraged to consider the importance of Indigenous languages. This has resulted in substantial national media

coverage on television programs such as *SBS News*, *ABC News*, *Sunday Arts* and *Living Black*, as well as on ABC Radio National and in newspapers such as *The Age* and *The Australian* – all of which have highlighted the importance of Indigenous languages.

Broader applications

While Ngapartji works with Pitjantjatjara, a relatively vital language, the innovative approach has had outcomes and involved processes which could be employed in other language revival contexts.

For example: Ngapartji Ngapartji has worked collaboratively with young people to create living language tools. Through embedding the use of Indigenous language in engaging activities such as music recording and filmmaking, popularity is generated in content that is relevant and holds personal interest for participants, thus increasing the currency of the language and the appeal of participation. Creating popular culture content in an Indigenous language, especially film and music that is accessible via the internet and mobile phone, attracts young people – the future generation of language speakers and revivers.

We suggest that the creation of media by young people is a strong identity-building activity which, when linked with language that is being revived or revitalised, results in a reinforcement of participants' association with that language and a relationship between self-worth and their language.

The engagement of young speakers in developing content in their own languages in turn empowers communities. A multigenerational approach enhances language use as a broader part of cultural continuity. Engaging young community members through language-based activities gives access to Elders who have the relevant cultural and life experience to understand the importance of language revitalisation, whilst legitimising the cultural forms to which young people are attracted.

If media content created by young people is of the same high standard as other media with which they engage, then their own language content will always be more popular – we have observed this hands down with Ngapartji Ngapartji.

There is genuine and widespread interest in and concern for Indigenous languages in mainstream Australia. This is evident through the success of Ngapartji Ngapartji (every ticket to every show has been sold, with over 30 000 people seeing the show to date), the huge popularity of singer/song-writer Gurumul Yunipingu, the success of films such as *Ten canoes* and *Samson & Delilah* and the interest shown by non-Indigenous students learning Indigenous languages in schools and adult learning contexts.

Ngapartji Ngapartji has exposed the general public to Indigenous language in an emotive context – theatre – providing a platform for meaningful engagement and giving liberty to understanding. Through the creatively-presented telling of a personal narrative, a level of intimacy is created which is vital to the actual shift towards engagement with the movement.

By integrating recognised cultural forms such as popular music with Indigenous language, as Ngapartji Ngapartji has done by translating the music of Bob Dylan, Talking Heads and others into Pitjantjatjara, accessibility and affinity is engendered (but see also McNaboe & Poetsch, this volume, for the pitfalls of language revitalisation using English song structures). This could be a powerful tool in language re-awakening and applicable to multiple generations.

The Ngapartji Ngapartji project has sought to actively engage the general public in the language maintenance and revitalisation movement via information provided on the website and through events associated with the theatre show, such as panels and letter-writing campaigns. Not every project should necessarily try to replicate the scale of Ngapartji Ngapartji or seek to create a touring theatre work. However, engagement with the mainstream, through media coverage or the web presence of language content that projects have produced, can leverage further interest in revitalisation within communities when they feel that there is wider interest and concern for their language from outside.

The project embraces contemporary technologies at the same time as it revitalises traditions, breaking down dichotomies that can create shame and stymie language preservation. The participant-driven, reciprocal model of working embodied in such a project builds pride and further leverages significant exposure in the mainstream.

The Ngapartji Ngapartji project, which was always designed to be discrete time-wise, is now complete. It ran from 2005 to 2010. A 'memory basket' and a documentary titled *Nothing Rhymes with Ngapartji* have been produced as legacies of the project and these are available at libraries nationally.