

## The importance of understanding language ecologies for revitalisation

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### Abstract

Most language revitalisation models are pitched at people who are either monolingual or who are multilingual but separate languages according to different functional domains, such as home, school, church, or public functions like opening ceremonies. Yet many children and adults in northern Australia do not speak one language, nor do they use only one language in single utterances. For example in the Victoria River District of the Northern Territory code-switching between a traditional language and Kriol is a pervasive and longstanding practice. McConvell (1988) documented code-switching between Gurindji and Kriol at Kalkaringi in the 1970s. These code-switching practices continue, and younger people in the Victoria River District now speak youth languages which are fossilised forms of code-switching (Meakins 2008b; McConvell & Meakins 2005). These mixing practices represent grassroots and informal forms of language maintenance (Meakins 2008a). Understanding these kinds of language ecologies is essential to tailoring an effective language revitalisation program. If language mixing is a common practice even of older people then the goal of fluent monolingualism in the target language requires not only language learning but also changing communicative conventions. This is an unfortunate goal if it means undermining the mixing practices that have been successfully maintaining aspects of the traditional language. The approach I present works within the framework of the speakers' own mixing practices. Language programs that take into account these informal language maintenance practices can augment them with the staged introduction of new words and grammar (see Amery 2000).

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The aim of language revitalisation is to breathe life back into a language in danger of no longer being spoken. Typically the language only has older speakers and no child language learners (Amery 2000, p. 18). Such degrees of language endangerment have many causes but are most broadly the result of the profound domination of one group over another. This degree of power imbalance has been shown to have a detrimental effect on languages all over the world. In this paper I focus on the southern Victoria River District (VRD) in Australia and the communities of Kalkaringi, Yarralin and Pigeon Hole. The VRD consists of the land surrounding the Victoria River that is bounded by the Victoria and Buntine Highways (Figure 1). The languages associated with this area are Ngarinyman, Bilinarra, Karrangpurru, Mudbura and Gurindji, however all of them are highly endangered. Indeed Karrangpurru has not been spoken for some time and Bilinarra has no full speakers remaining. Instead Kriol is gaining currency with younger generations. Generally speaking, the younger the person the less they speak of their traditional language and the more Kriol they use.

Although this situation represents a devastating loss of traditional languages, informal maintenance practices are the norm. Among older people these maintenance practices involve switching between a traditional language and Kriol. Youth languages have also formed from these mixing strategies as the result of systematically combining a traditional language with Kriol. In this respect younger generations are demonstrating a commitment to the maintenance of their language. Formal language revitalisation programs have also existed in a number of schools in the VRD including Pigeon Hole (2000–present) and Kalkaringi (1980s, 1996–99), most recently structured under the Indigenous Languages and Culture (ILC) component of the Northern Territory Curriculum Framework (2002). Although the suggested structure of ILC programs includes the development of aural, oral, reading and writing skills, typically most programs are reduced to wordlist learning via English or the vernacular language, usually Kriol. This type of language teaching strategy has faced much criticism, which can be summed up by the question: What's the point of only learning words? Indeed no child can learn a language from an hour a week of wordlist learning. Immersion models that expose children to greater amounts of language have been proposed as better alternatives.

In this paper I discuss the language situation at Kalkaringi, Pigeon Hole and Yarralin, characterising these communities as fluid bilingual speech communities where language mixing is the unmarked and customary language practice. I also examine how the school-based language revitalisation programs work within this language ecology. I then present some immersion models such as language nests and the master–apprentice model which have been used in similar situations of language loss, and therefore may be considered to have some potential for the VRD. The reason for my focus on immersion models is that they are constantly being toyed with by linguists and education department people in the Northern Territory (NT) as a better alternative to current language learning models. Yet I show that, while these immersion models have some advantages, they have two problems: (a) they are based on the idea of monolingualism and language purity, and (b) they are top-down models which do

not take account of already-present informal language maintenance strategies. In communities such as those in the VRD where monolingualism is not the norm I claim that these immersion models are unlikely to be effective. Instead I suggest rather than disregarding ILC programs and opting for a completely new model,<sup>2</sup> ILC programs can provide an effective framework for language revitalisation if they are tailored to suit existing language ecologies and take into account already existing informal community language maintenance strategies. I argue that ILC programs should only be designed after an initial survey of community language practices. In places where language mixing is common, teaching strategies such as wordlist learning can be used to augment existing maintenance strategies by introducing a greater repertoire of language material to community mixing practices. Wordlist learning can be viewed as a beginning point for introducing new material and can be further supplemented by the gradual inclusion of phrases and structural material. In this respect I follow Amery (2000) in arguing for a staged introduction of traditional language material. The focus of such a language revitalisation program is not full monolingual control of the traditional language but rather supporting existing community maintenance practices.

### **Language mixing in the Victoria River District**

As in other parts of Australia the colonisation of the VRD had devastating consequences for the Aboriginal people and their traditional language and culture. In late 1855 the first party of European explorers, led by Francis and Henry Gregory, arrived from the north. They followed the Victoria River and its tributaries and came upon the VRD (Makin 1999, p. 43 onwards). The area is mostly a black soil plain, which made it attractive cattle country for the European colonists. Bilinarra, Ngarinyman and Karrangpurru country were the first to be stocked with cattle in 1883. In the process the colonists brought with them diseases that Aboriginal immune systems and traditional bush medicines could not cope with (Rose 1991, p. 75 onwards). The settlers further decimated the Aboriginal population of the VRD in a series of massacres in an attempt to gain control of the land (Wavehill 2000). The aim of the killing sprees probably would have been complete genocide had the settlers not realised that Aboriginal people would make an excellent source of cheap labour. As a result they survived and were put to work as stockman and kitchen hands on the cattle stations, where they also lived in fringe camps. By the 1960s discontent was running high among the Aboriginal workers. On August 23rd, 1966 a Gurindji elder called Lingiari gathered his people and they walked 16 kilometres to Jurnani (Gordy Creek) and later another ten kilometres to Daguragu, which is eight kilometres from Kalkaringi and now an established Gurindji settlement (Hardy 1968). In 1975, after nine years of persistent campaigning and a change to a more liberal federal

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<sup>2</sup> See Hobson (2008) for some arguments for working with existing language learning syllabuses that have government support, rather than being drawn to new quick-fix solutions to language loss which require diverting funds and retraining language practitioners.

government, Prime Minister Gough Whitlam flew to Daguragu to grant the Gurindji a lease for 3236 square kilometres of land around Daguragu. Twenty years later, in 1986, they were granted the security of inalienable freehold title under the *Aboriginal Land Rights [Northern Territory] Act*. Further small claims followed around Pigeon Hole and Yarralin. Nonetheless much of the land in the VRD remains privately owned cattle stations with the Gurindji, Bilinarra, Ngarinyman and Mudbura people living in a small number of Aboriginal communities including Yarralin, Pigeon Hole, Kalkaringi and Daguragu (Figure 1).

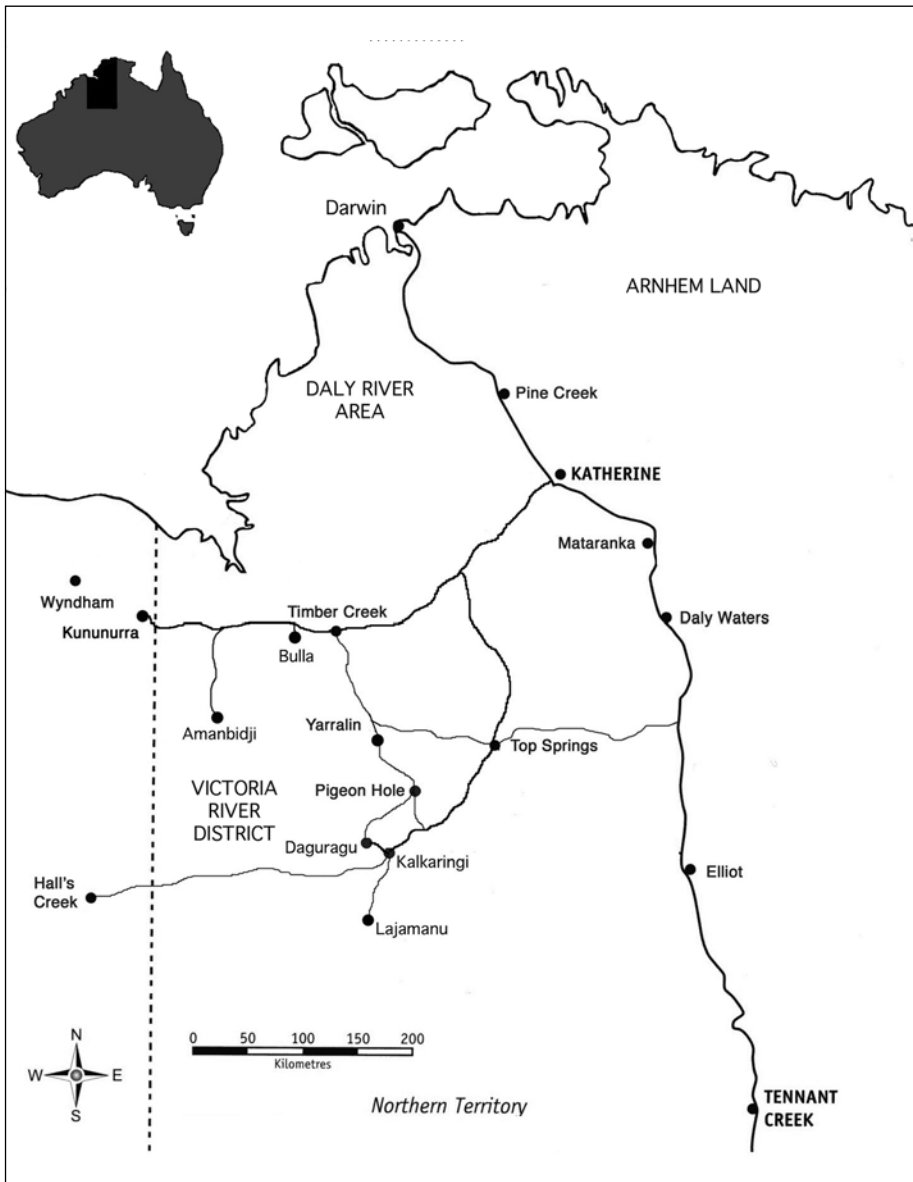


Figure 1. Victoria River District (NT).

The colonisation of this area has had a significant impact on the traditional languages. The language of Kalkaringi and the surrounding area, Gurindji is now highly endangered with approximately 70 full speakers remaining (Lee & Dickson 2002). Most middle-aged Gurindji people have a good knowledge of the language, but they are only partial speakers. Gurindji people below the age of 35 understand Gurindji but do not speak it in its traditional form. Instead they speak a youth variety which has been called Gurindji Kriol (Charola 2002; McConvell & Meakins 2005; Meakins 2008b). The situation for Pigeon Hole and Yarralin is very similar. Pigeon Hole lies in Bilinearra country and Yarralin in Ngarinyman country. No full Bilinearra speakers remain in Pigeon Hole, however many middle-aged people speak some Bilinearra. Elderly Ngarinyman speakers can be found in Yarralin and the middle-aged people also speak some Ngarinyman. As in Kalkaringi, younger Bilinearra and Ngarinyman people speak a youth version of their language that has a large Kriol component. It does not differ much from Gurindji Kriol, which is not surprising given that Gurindji, Bilinearra and Ngarinyman share a lot of grammar and vocabulary.

Despite the different languages, what is characteristic of these three communities is the language practice of mixing. Although it is common to hear some monolingual sentences in traditional language, Gurindji, Bilinearra and Ngarinyman are rarely found in longer stretches of speech without some mixing with Kriol. This language mixing occurs in two different ways: *code-switching* among older people and a *youth language* used by younger people (Meakins 2008b). First, code-switching involves changing languages within one speaker's sentence. Often a speaker inserts a word from one language into the sentence of another language. Some examples from Kalkaringi are given below. In (1) the speaker inserts a Kriol verb *jouim* (show) into a Gurindji sentence.<sup>3</sup> In the second example, the Gurindji noun *kartiya-lu* (whitefella-ERG) is inserted into a Kriol sentence. In other cases of code-switching, an utterance begins with a clause in one language and finishes in another. This is shown in (3) where the speaker alternates between languages. She begins in Gurindji and finishes in Kriol, as indicated by the slash.

(1)

*nyawa-ma mangarri na ngu-ngantipa ngu-rnalur-la jouim jayingana.*  
 this-DIS veg.food FOC CAT-our CAT-we-to.her show give.PRS

This is our food. We're showing it to her.

(2)

laika *kartiya-lu* wen jei putim tar yu nou langa bityumin.  
 like whitefella-ERG when they put tar you know on bitumen

Like the roadworks mob when they put tar, you know, on the bitumen.

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<sup>3</sup> Note that in all of these sentences the Kriol and English elements are in plain font and the language words and suffixes are italicised.

(3)

*nama-ngku kangarni ngu wuyarnani ngu /laika weya wi kilim*  
 bee-ERG take.PST it throw.PST it /like where we hit

The bees took it and put it the wax there /like here where we knock it off.

Code-switching is not a new language practice in the VRD. Code-switching between Gurindji and Kriol was observed in the mid-1970s (McConvell 1988). Code-switching was regularised by new generations of Gurindji people and led to the youth language, Gurindji Kriol (McConvell & Meakins 2005). An example is given below. The degree of mixing can be seen from the alternation of italicised words (Gurindji) and words in plain font (Kriol).

(4)

*nyila jinek im gon yapart la im kajirri-yu.*  
 that snake it go sneak to her woman-DAT

That snake sneaks up on the old woman.

In this youth language a large amount of Gurindji is preserved including nouns, verbs, demonstratives (such as *this* and *that*) and many other parts of the grammar. Although this form of mixing looks like code-switching, it is different because it is very regular; and many words, although they are derived from Gurindji and Kriol, are used in different ways in the youth language (Meakins 2007). These kinds of mixing practices can also be seen at Pigeon Hole and Yarralin.

In many respects these code-switching practices and the youth language can be considered an informal way that traditional languages are being maintained by the communities, despite immense functional pressure from both Kriol and English (Meakins 2008a). Despite these maintenance practices, both young and old people in these communities are aware and acutely concerned about the rapid shift away from traditional languages. For example Bidy Wavehill, a Gurindji elder from Kalkaringi, is unhappy with the children's use of particular word stems and endings.

*Ngurnayinangkulu kurru karrinyana karu yu nou kula-lu marnana jutup.*  
*Ngulu marnani 'Nyawa-ngkirri'. Nyawangkirri-ma, nyampayila ngulu marnana*  
*'Murlangkurra'. 'Kawayi murlangkurra,' kuya yu nou. An 'Pinka-kirri,' jei tok rong*  
*jarran. 'Pinka-kurra,' kuya. 'Pinka-kurra kanyjurra'. 'Nyawangkirri,' dat not rait*  
*word jaru. Ngurnayinangkulu kurru karrinyana kuya laik ngurnayinangkulu jutuk*  
*kuya-rnangku jarrakap brobli-wei.*

We listen to the kids, you know, and they don't talk properly. For example, they are always saying *nyawangkirri* for 'that way'. They always say *nyawangkirri* not *murlangkurra* which is wrong. You should say *murlangkurra*. And they also say *pinka-kirri* for 'to the river' which is wrong. They should say *pinka-kurra*. *Nyawangkirri* is not proper Gurindji. We listen to the kids and they don't talk as well as I am talking to you. (pers. comm., 20 August 2008)

Due to concerns about language loss, informal maintenance practices such as code-switching and youth languages have also been supplemented by formal school-based language revitalisation programs. Kalkaringi has had the longest history of school language programs, though it has been sporadic. Missionaries ran a Gurindji school program in the 1980s. Gurindji also figured very strongly in church life at that time. Many hymns were translated into Gurindji as was the Eucharist and other church sacraments. Diwurruwurru-jaru Aboriginal Corporation (DAC) started the school language program again in 1996 and it ran until the end of 1999 when the principal discontinued it. The community's desire to reinstate the Gurindji language program has been hindered by the English-only policy of subsequent principals. Pigeon Hole School has had a shorter but more consistent Bilinarra language program supported by DAC linguists. This language program was set up in 2000 and has been running since then, albeit with a number of short breaks, for example due to the death of a senior Bilinarra woman. Yarralin has not had a formal Ngarinyman program at the school though various attempts have been made to set one up. Stronger and more consistent language programs are desired in these communities. For example Violet Donald, a Gurindji elder, says:

*School-jirri ngurnayinangulu yanangku. Jarrakap ngurnayinangulu marnangku. Jarrakap ngurnayinangulu marnangku, jaru-yawung. Ngulu pinarri too karrinyana nyarralu-ngan. Tumaji kula-lu marnana jaru-ma punyu. Nyatparrak-wei ngulu marnana.*

We want to go to school. We want to be talking to them there. We want to talk to them in Gurindji. They have to learn Gurindji as well as English because they don't speak Gurindji well. They are talking any which way. (pers. comm., 20 August 2008)

These language programs are run by a language team minimally consisting of a speaker and a language worker who are supported by a DAC linguist. The language worker is a younger person who is not a full speaker of the language, but is often literate in English and has some teacher training or at least an understanding of formal learning strategies. The structure of the classes largely follows the ILC component of the NT Curriculum Framework (2002). The classes are based on themes such as body parts, bush medicine and fishing and they aim to develop listening, speaking and writing skills in the children's traditional language. Though the aural parts of the classes involve listening to stretches of traditional language, for example stories, the speaking and writing components have only focused on individual words, usually nouns and verbs, and short phrases.

These school-based language programs have faced a number of problems including the lack of commitment from principals; the sporadic nature of funding; the lack of language resources; the mobile nature of the community, including students and the language team; the lack of commitment by the language team; and the distance from DAC which supports the language programs from Katherine approximately 500 kilometres away. Children are also rarely assessed for their language abilities. In fact

they are often judged by new teachers and linguists as knowing less than they do know; as a result lessons such as body part names are often repeated unnecessarily and new material is slow to be introduced. These problems are common to these types of programs (Schmidt 1990, p. 88 onwards). With regard to the lack of commitment, the main reason has often been given as a frustration with the teaching strategy. The focus on wordlists is rightly seen as not being the way back to language competence. Indeed children are not immersed in the language for long enough to develop their language competency. As a result these language programs can appear to be no more than tokenistic. The solution may be to seek out alternatives to ILC programs suitable for the language situation in the VRD. The next section will present some models and assess their appropriateness. What I will ultimately demonstrate is that ILC programs which have been tailored to the specific linguistic practices of the community, and which include wordlist learning as a teaching strategy, can prove valuable in tapping into the already existing language maintenance practices of younger generations.

### **Models of language immersion**

Many different methods have been proposed for revitalising endangered languages. The appropriateness of these methods depends on the health of the language. The health of a language can be measured by a number of factors including the absolute number of speakers, whether the language is still being learnt by children, the isolation of the language community, the economic and political status of the speaker community, the institutional status of the language (whether or not it is used in government, religion, schools), and the attitudes of the speakers themselves to their language and the dominant language of the region (see McKay 1996, p. 226 for the Australian situation). Fishman (1991, p. 87 onwards) uses these indicators of language health to set up an eight point scale which grades language disruption. It ranges from languages that are strong, that is languages which are still learnt by children and are used in government and universities, to languages which have only a few elderly speakers and have no institutional status. Fishman also provides suggestions for revitalisation models for each of these levels of language viability. The languages of the VRD fall into Fishman's Stage 7 because only adults beyond child-bearing age such as grandparents are full speakers. Fishman recommends language immersion as a method for reversing this language shift. Language immersion involves providing an environment where learners will hear and speak only the endangered language. A number of immersion models exist, including language nests and the master-apprentice scheme. These models are appropriate for revitalising languages that only have speakers in the grandparent generation.

#### *Language nests*

Language nests have been one of the most successful examples of immersion programs used in the school context. These programs have been operating in New Zealand and Hawai'i since the early 1980s and are based on Canadian French immersion schools. For example *Te Kōhanga Reo* are early childhood language immersion programs

developed by Māori communities to reverse the continuing loss of the Māori language. The model was born out of two observations: (a) most Māori speakers were often beyond child-rearing age and (b) children are the best language learners. Te Kōhanga Reo aimed to close this generational gap by teaming up older speakers with young children, thereby providing Māori children with the input they needed to acquire the language (Biggs 1968; Irwin 1991; King 2001). The Hawaiian story is similar; the model was replicated as *Pūnana Leo*, with the first centre opened in 1982. In 1987 these preschool immersion programs were extended through to Grade 12 (Huebner 1985; No'eu Warner 2001; Reinecke 1969; Wilson & Kamana 2001).

Both New Zealand and Hawai'i had the capacity to set up these language nests partly due to the presence of a good number of speakers who were young and trained in teaching methodology, and partly due to structural and institutional support. New Zealand and Hawai'i also both have one main traditional language that is enshrined in the constitution. The governments are therefore compelled to symbolically recognise these languages, for example in signage; and provide funding for education, interpreting, translation and media services. Other areas in the world suffering severe language loss do not have the same numbers of speakers or the institutional support for language nests, at least not within official institutions such as schools. Smaller scale projects have been designed, however.

#### *The master–apprentice model*

The master–apprentice model was developed in California in 1992. It aims to reverse the devastating language loss of native languages by pairing young Native Americans with older native speakers thereby crossing the generation gap in much the same way as the language nests. One important difference is the context of learning. Where language nests are school-based immersion programs, the master–apprentice model operates in everyday situations such as cooking, washing, as well as more traditional activities. The focus of the master–apprentice model is oral transmission and developing conversational skills. Both the speaker and learner are not allowed to use English, even for translations. Context and other non-verbal forms of communication such as gesturing help the learner understand utterances. The end aim is slightly different from the language nests. Where the language nests have aimed to create a whole new generation of Māori or Hawaiian speakers, the master–apprentice model can only hope to keep language alive within a small group of people over successive generations (Hinton 1994; 1997; 2001).

#### **Problems with immersion models in language mixing contexts**

The language nest model is the most appropriate language immersion program appropriate to school-based learning. The master–apprentice model is geared towards the individual language learner which is not possible in the school context. While languagenests can operate within schools, they require enormous time and commitment. In the NT this time and commitment is not available within the education system. The

ILC component of the NT Curriculum Framework is the only non-compulsory part of the curriculum which has translated into sporadic government funding. Of course immersion can be achieved outside of the school system as the master-apprentice model demonstrates; however, it must be noted that school already occupies six hours of a child's waking hours, making this difficult. Pressing social issues also hinder the implementation of immersion models (and indeed all community development programs) in the Australian situation. For example, overcrowding, substance abuse and poor health in communities all contribute to low energy levels in language teams and child learners. This means that language revitalisation can have a low priority in the life of the community (Schmidt 1990, p. 90).

Even with time and commitment from the community for language revitalisation work, these immersion models present two related problems for language revitalisation in the context of the VRD: (a) the 'purity' of the input, and (b) the lack of acknowledgement of existing maintenance practices.

With regard to the first problem, even if language nests were set up for children in schools, it is unlikely that the end result would be fluent monolingual speakers of Gurindji, Bilinearra or Ngarinyman. The reason is that older speakers themselves generally do not speak the language without some mixing with Kriol. Language purity cannot be an expectation of learners if it is not a practice of the teachers. Yet insisting that speakers speak only their traditional language would result in stifling natural interaction and discouraging learning. Similar problems were noted by Hinton in the master-apprentice model when speakers were expected not to use any English (Hinton 1994, p. 243).

Secondly the immersion models take a top-down approach, imposing a model on a language situation without sensitivities to the language ecology. They do not take account of the way a community may already be maintaining languages, through language mixing. For example the language mixing practices found in the VRD can be viewed as a sign of language decay. Indeed this is the belief of older community members. Yet they can also be seen as language maintenance. Young Gurindji people believe that their youth language represents a new Gurindji identity, which cannot be achieved through the sole use of Kriol. The maintenance of Gurindji is important to this, though the use of the full language is not required. In fact the Kriol component of the youth language is necessary as it evokes a *modern* Gurindji identity which is connected with other north Australian Aboriginal people (Meakins 2008a). A good revitalisation program should tap into these grass-roots maintenance practices and aim to augment these practices rather than change them. A whole-language approach that is purist and imposes itself on an existing language ecology which is characterised by mixing is unlikely to achieve any discernable results.

Given these concerns, it is worth looking again to the framework that ILC programs can offer, particularly because these programs have the advantage of some institutional support within the NT Department of Education and Training. Unlike immersion models, ILC programs can be tailored to take account of community

mixing practices. They can be used to supplement the traditional language content of children's everyday talk by identifying what children know and don't know and targeting the gaps. Unlike immersion models, ILC programs allow lesson delivery in the vernacular language. This means that new content can be introduced into the children's repertoire through the mixed structures already used by the children. Indeed this is not a new concept. One method that promotes language mixing as a teaching methodology is the formulaic method (Amery 2000, pp. 209–15). The formulaic method is aimed at language reclamation, that is reviving a language that has not been spoken for at least a generation. This approach was developed for Kaurna, an Adelaide language which no longer has full speakers. The method introduces language back into the community by the 'staged introduction of well-formed utterances' (Amery 2000, p. 209). This begins with one-word utterances such as commands, questions and interjections. Longer and more complex expressions are gradually introduced with the aim of slowly replacing dominant language. In this respect the dominant language, English in the case of Kaurna reclamation, is not banned or discouraged and what emerges is code-switching between English and Kaurna. The code-switching is encouraged if it promotes natural language use. So naturalistic conversation is promoted over language purism. This methodology is not at all at odds with the ILC structure.

### Language teaching through language mixing

Amery's formulaic method may have some applicability to language revitalisation work in the VRD where the traditional languages are more vital and language mixing is a practice already widespread. Children are already being immersed in language at home, albeit largely mixed with Kriol, and this practice can be supported by a well-designed staged learning model based on the already familiar wordlist learning models. Such an approach would build on knowledge children already have. Following the formulaic method, the ILC program would begin with individual utterances and gradually introduce more grammatical material while using the children's own language, Gurindji Kriol, as a base. The much-maligned practice of wordlist learning provides a strong place to begin. To give an example, children from Kalkaringi, Pigeon Hole and Yarralin know many verbs of body posture such as *makin* (lie, sleep) and *kutij* (stand). They use them within their own language, Gurindji Kriol:

(5)

|     |                |    |              |                  |
|-----|----------------|----|--------------|------------------|
| dat | <i>warlaku</i> | im | <i>makin</i> | <i>tri-ngka.</i> |
| the | dog            | it | lie          | tree-LOC         |

The dog lies under the tree.

Yet there are many words where they will use the Kriol form such as *jidan* (sit) instead of a Gurindji word. A staged introduction approach would use the general Gurindji Kriol frame, as in (5) and add new words such as *lurlu* (sit), *wulujurr* (sit with legs out), *jarrap* (sit cross-legged) and so on. This vocabulary building can extend to all

areas of a child's lexicon including developing their knowledge of animal and plant names, which contain more cultural content than postural verbs. While children are still speaking Gurindji Kriol, they are using more and more Gurindji content and gradually replacing Kriol words with Gurindji words.

This staged introduction of traditional language material can also be extended to the grammar. In the VRD there are some parts of traditional language grammar that children do not use such as pronouns and the inflected part of a two-part verb that contains tense, mood and aspect information. There are other parts that they do know and use, but which show signs of Kriol influence. For example children generally use Gurindji case markers to indicate spatial relations, but are beginning to use Kriol prepositions more than their parents (Meakins 2008a, p. 90). In (5) the Gurindji locative case marker {-*ngka*} is used to indicate where the dog is in relation to the tree, however in (6) the Kriol preposition *langa* (LOC) is used instead.

(6)

|     |                |    |              |                    |
|-----|----------------|----|--------------|--------------------|
| dat | <i>warlaku</i> | im | <i>makin</i> | <i>langa tri</i> . |
| the | dog            | it | lie          | LOC tree           |

The dog lies under the tree.

Language lessons structured within the ILC program can be used to reinforce the traditional language grammar where children are beginning to use Kriol elements such as prepositions. This can strengthen the language component of Gurindji Kriol and help prevent the shift to Kriol. Gradually a stepped program would reintroduce language structures which children no longer use such as pronouns and inflecting verbs. By this stage the language classes would have buttressed the knowledge that children already have of their traditional language and added items to word classes that children already use such as nouns and verbs. This technique builds on the knowledge that children already have and values this knowledge by operating within the language maintenance practices that they have already developed themselves.

This type of teaching technique can be applied to many other situations in northern Australia. Youth languages such as Gurindji Kriol have also been observed in Lajamanu where a new form of Warlpiri which includes large amounts of Kriol and English is spoken (O'Shannessy 2008). Other forms of language mixing such as code-switching can be found among younger people in the north. One of the characteristics of Wumpurrarni English spoken in Tennant Creek is the insertion of Warumungu words, particularly nouns, into sentences which use a contact form of English (Disbray 2008). Another example comes from Timber Creek where young people use Jaminjung or Ngarinyman verbs and nouns in Kriol sentences (Schultze-Berndt 2007). See Figure 1 for the location of these places.

## Conclusion

This paper has discussed the pitfalls of ILC language programs in the VRD. However it does not consider immersion models such as language nests and master–apprentice as appropriate alternatives. Instead I advocate ways of improving ILC programs using Amery’s formulaic method. It is worth noting that, except in a very long-term application of this model of staged learning, full fluency in a traditional language is an unlikely outcome. Thus such a model requires clarification of aims by the language community about what can be reasonably achieved in the limited time given over to traditional language teaching in the schools. I have been witness to many moments in language classes where children are rebuked for not speaking properly. These outbursts from language teachers are largely the result of disappointment at the rate of learning and a lack of understanding of the mechanisms involved in second language learning. Unfortunately these comments usually act to silence children further. Indeed this view has also been held by some academics who have been disparaging about revitalisation programs which aim for anything less than complete fluency (see, for example, Fishman 1991, p. 397). Yet, as Amery (2000, p. 207) argues, all forms of revival in situations of language loss should be valued. Students should not be blamed for something they have no control over, that is their lack of rich language input, and should be encouraged within an environment that nurtures learning. All participants in such a program including the language team and students need to have a good understanding of the mechanisms of second language learning. Additionally they need to know what can be reasonably achieved at the various stages of such a stepped program. In this way, the language maintenance strategies already present in a language community can be built on with more formal teaching approaches.

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