

## **Part Three**

### **Language centres and programs**





# Introduction

## Language centres and programs

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Language centres have been an important component in language revitalisation since they came into being in the mid 1980s. Mostly these centres have been a focus for the linguistic aspirations of a number of languages in a region. This is certainly the case for the Kimberley Language Resource Centre (KLRC), the Many Rivers Aboriginal Language Centre (MRALC) from New South Wales and the Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre (Wangka Maya). However this section also describes the activities of two centres whose primary focus is on just one language: Miriwoong in the case of Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring, and Gumbaynggirr in the case of the Muurrbay Aboriginal Language and Culture Co-operative.

The Muurrbay Co-operative began in 1986 and has been a significant success story (Walsh 2001; 2009). We know that some initiatives have not been so successful (Walsh, this volume) so it is instructive to look at the details of ongoing activities as presented in this section. In particular, the contribution on the Kimberley Language Resource Centre is quite explicit about the structure of the organisation, its management approach and its strategic planning.

Ash, Hooler, Williams and Walker provide basic accounts of Muurrbay and the Many Rivers Aboriginal Language Centre supplemented with statements from Aboriginal Elders, teachers and linguists. The statement from Muurrbay Chair, Ken Walker, has a general application for language centres anywhere, even though he was particularly referring to one initiative of which he was an early leader:

It's a hard road to hoe, but you gotta start somewhere, and don't expect miracles first up. It doesn't work. We started in '85 and we're still going, we're still learning. Don't give up, don't lose heart because the rewards at the end are beneficial for you and your community.

This modest call to arms underplays the very significant advances made by Muurrbay and Many Rivers in recent years in terms of resource production, training and language education across the communities.

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Dixon and Deak's chapter on the Wangka Maya centre addresses the important issue of scope in relation to the range of activities undertaken by language centres. They point out that language centres are expected to handle a multitude of different tasks but in the end must make strategic decisions about how to prioritise. To underline the variation in approaches they present five case studies involving different languages: Thalanyji, Ngarluma, Nyangumarta and Bayungu as well as a group of eight Pilbara languages with five different foci and outcomes. The first showcases traditional knowledge of plant names and uses and was partly funded by a local mining company. The second resulted in the production of a range of materials that will eventually underpin a school-based program. These materials have capitalised on new technologies with greater appeal to younger language learners (see also Wilson, this volume). The third, a life-history of a prominent Nyangumarta man, emphasises literacy skills and is illustrated by the narrator, a talented artist. The fourth presents 100 words on DVD in eight Pilbara languages combining audio, visual and written material. The fifth is a Bayungu picture dictionary in which a template for another dictionary is recycled – this being one of the strengths of a regional language centre: materials created for one language can be shared and adapted for another.

The engagement of the Wangka Maya centre with a local mining company for one of its projects raises the issue of autonomy. KLRC reminds us of the need to consider ownership of the language revitalisation process or, in their terms, self-determination in language continuation. They complain that Western academia's views on appropriate measures for language revitalisation take precedence over those of Aboriginal people. This has significant implications, they would argue, for funding and support from grant bodies and puts strain on their quest for self-determination. Does one yield to outside forces in order to be better resourced or go it alone and be under-resourced? Such issues are by no means restricted to the Kimberleys or to Indigenous Australia in general (for example Rice 2009). They form part of an ongoing debate on the interaction between linguists and language activists.

Olawsky's paper deals with another language centre in the Kimberleys: Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring but from another point of view. It raises the important issue of employment possibilities in connection with revitalisation and presents evaluations of some of the revitalisation strategies adopted. Interestingly they have attempted to apply a master-apprentice model in the local context but, like some other attempts in Australia (for example Hobson & Laurie 2009; Hill & McConvell, this volume), it has had limited success to date. The Miriwoong centre demonstrates once again how language centres throughout Australia struggle to deliver effective outcomes while seriously under-resourced but have nevertheless achieved significant results. We can also see that the problems encountered and the issues to be addressed show considerable similarities across a varied range of contexts: the Kimberleys, the Pilbara and one portion of New South Wales.

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