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Language centre as language revitalisation strategy: a case study from the Pilbara

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Abstract

Community language centres are a significant feature of the language revitalisation landscape in Australia. In the early imaginings of community groups and language policy planners alike, language centres had vast potential to direct and coordinate language revitalisation efforts on a number of fronts. Over time language centres have evolved a very specific set of functions that constitute their language revitalisation process. This paper will examine several case studies that demonstrate the variety of approaches employed by Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre to respond to the different language situations in its region. Common elements emerge across the case studies such as the provision of specialists, training of language workers, coordination of resource production, and maintenance of an accessible archive. These elements form the core of the language centre's own language revitalisation strategy, and determine the nature of the language centre's enduring role within a larger network of partners in the language revitalisation challenge.

Language centres first began to emerge in Australia in the mid-1980s as communities started recognising the need for a coordinated intervention in their radically changing language ecologies. The first centres were grass-roots projects, sometimes involving strategic collaboration with key outsiders such as linguists, language professionals or teachers. Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre (Wangka Maya) was one such organisation.

This was also a time of a national linguistic awakening on behalf of the Australian government, following the establishment of both bilingual schooling and the School

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of Australian Linguistics (now the Centre for Australian Languages and Linguistics at Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education [BIITE]) in the Northern Territory. Australia's Indigenous languages were a key focus of the first national language policy adopted in 1987 (House of Representatives Standing Committee of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs [HRSCATSIA] 1992). This was the first time that the right of Aboriginal people to have equal access to their traditional languages in a range of settings was recognised in federal government policy. Central to this policy was the sustained federal support of regional language centres, as it was recognised quite early on that a language landscape as diverse and rich as Australia's would require a response largely coordinated from the regions. Thus the number of language centres around the country expanded quickly in the following years with the support of federal government funding.

Numerous policy documents, submissions and reviews outlined an ambitious number of roles that language centres were thought to be in an advantageous position to perform (for a good summary see HRSCATSIA 1992). These centred around four main areas. Firstly, providing support for language programs in the schools from initial advocacy on behalf of communities through to providing curriculum support, teacher training and making resources. Secondly, providing support for work on Aboriginal languages at the community level, including employment and training of language speakers, strategic planning, provision of specialists, archive maintenance, and acting as a production centre. Thirdly, continuing the research and documentation of Aboriginal languages via the coordination and management of linguists. And, fourthly, providing coordinated administrative support to the region including the training and development of administrative capacity in other organisations.

For those of us who work in or directly with language centres, at least some of these activities are now common practice and may seem self-evident. But this is quite a broad charter and language centres have never really been funded to achieve all of these objectives. This perhaps explains why language centres currently differ from each other in terms of their main language revitalisation activities. For example the Diwurruwurru-jaru language centre in Katherine has always been instrumental in the coordination of language classes in primary schools, whereas Wangka Maya has largely left this to the education department and instead supported schools through the development of school-appropriate learning materials.

This volume presents a good opportunity for us to reflect on the evolution of the role of language centres in the language revitalisation challenge. We have decided to take a case-study approach outlining a variety of language revitalisation projects. We then examine the common themes running through each of the case studies to highlight the key features of Wangka Maya's underlying strategy. By doing so we hope to highlight how the initially broad range of expectations for language centres have been refined into a continually viable model of language revitalisation.

Ngambunjarri: Thalanyji plant names and uses

Thalanyji, the traditional language of the Onslow area, would now be categorised as a severely endangered language on the indicators (Australian Institute of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Studies 2005, p. 125). The language is used fluently by six old people while, among the parent generation, there are varying degrees of use, fluency and comprehension. Children are not learning it as their first language but they are sometimes exposed to Thalanyji when they are with their parents or grandparents. Work to document, promote and learn this language has taken various forms over the past 15 or so years: schools programs, formal training programs for language workers (via the Pundulmarra Technical and Further Education campus in South Hedland), recording of oral histories, and the production of various children's resources. The primary linguistic fieldwork was carried out by Peter Austin and included the publication of the first Thalanyji dictionary (1992b).

In recent years two very dedicated language workers, Anne and Shirley Hayes, have been working in partnership with Wangka Maya to document Thalanyji and increase their own knowledge of the language. In late 2005 they approached Wangka Maya with an idea to create an ethnobotanical plant book that would showcase both the depth of traditional knowledge surrounding plant use and the Thalanyji language as the vehicle for transmitting this knowledge. Since there were few full speakers left the need to document this knowledge was felt to be a matter of considerable urgency.

The language workers coordinated all of the documentation of language and traditional knowledge on this project. They spent many hours listening to the Elders talk about the plants in Thalanyji and using the language to elicit specific information. As a result they demonstrated enormous growth as language speakers and writers over the course of the project. By the time the book was launched in July 2008, one language worker who was renowned for her shyness in front of crowds of strangers (in any language) had the confidence to get up at the launch and give part of her speech in Thalanyji. There is also much anecdotal evidence that this increase in Thalanyji language use has spread throughout the community, including among children. Likewise the writing skills of the language workers have increased dramatically with the consistent practice the project afforded.

The language workers and their native title representative body, Buurabalayji-Thalanyji Association, used their royalties from BHP Billiton to fund the publication of the book. The Association also provided logistical support and additional support personnel for the duration of the project. Wangka Maya provided the support of a linguist to help with writing down the language and collating and structuring the information. The linguist also trained the team on the use of various types of recording equipment and methodology, and facilitated access to botanical specialists who helped with plant identification. Wangka Maya also managed the production of the book and took it through the editing, layout, graphic design and printing phases.

The final product, *Ngambunyarri* (Hayes & Hayes 2008), is a high-quality publication, well placed to showcase the Thalanyji language and traditional knowledge, and guarantee that this knowledge will be available for subsequent generations of Thalanyji people. For many the book has created a sense of pride in Thalanyji language and culture, not only among the Thalanyji people, but also in the broader community. This positive atmosphere will hopefully pave the way for many more future activities to promote the Thalanyji language.

Ngarluma Language Project

Ngarluma is the language of the traditional owners of the coastal Pilbara region, which encompasses the towns of Roebourne and Karratha, and extends inland to the Millstream-Chichester National Park. On the NILES indicators it would be classified as severely endangered, with the approximately 20 full speakers belonging to the grandparental and older adult generations, and varying use throughout the adult and child age groups. There has also been considerable shift towards another dominant Aboriginal language, Yindjibarndi. Over the past century there have been varied and discontinuous efforts to document the language (from wordlists collected by early European settlers, to the fieldwork of linguists Kenneth Hale and Carl von Brandenstein), but only a few projects that were directly aimed at revitalising the language.

The Ngarluma Language Project arose directly out of a renewed interest at the community level in promoting Ngarluma language and culture. A partnership was formed between Wangka Maya and the Ngarluma native title representative body, which was keen to put some staff and resources towards language and culture initiatives. Thus a language team emerged and work began on several different smaller projects, all with the main aim of increasing the amount of Ngarluma used in the community, especially with and among children.

These projects included more traditional language materials such as a dictionary, children's picture dictionary, and sketch grammar. These were deemed important resources in the long term for many people in the community who would hopefully want to learn the language. In addition it was felt that they could form the building blocks of more text-based resources, such as a learners' grammar, which would be needed if Ngarluma were to be eventually taught in the school.

The team's main focus, however, was on the production of resources that would showcase and promote spoken language. So they developed a range of short films and language-learning DVDs based on day trips around Ngarluma country. The results ranged from short film bites that were posted on YouTube and swapped on mobile phones, to short films (on fishing, bush tucker, kinship, and local sites) that were distributed on DVD throughout the community. Film was deemed an excellent vehicle for the Ngarluma community for several reasons:

- it is extremely accessible with most households having a TV, DVD player and mobile phones

- DVDs are a highly valued and traded commodity in the community
- spoken language could be promoted (as well as written via the use of subtitles)
- local kids found the DVD and mobile phone formats familiar and engaging.

The Ngarluma team's success is an exceptional example of a community-driven language project largely founded on their access to and utilisation of the full range of skills and resources at their disposal. For example, media editing skills were provided by a local Ngarluma man who was employed by the native title representative group and seconded to the language project; film equipment was sourced by utilising the representative body's mining connections; and the representative body itself provided a comfortable and welcoming space in which to work as well as access to extra vehicles.

What role was left for the language centre? Wangka Maya provided a linguist throughout the project who helped in several important ways. The linguist coordinated the dictionary and sketch grammar work, which was essential to the team's long-term goals of greater adult learning and inclusion of the language in local schools. The linguist also provided ongoing training in the standard orthography and transcription, and helped structure the language learning components of film resources. Wangka Maya had several templates for language resources, and access to production facilities that allowed resources such as the picture dictionary and 100 Words in Ngarluma DVD (see below) to be made with relative ease and at no expense to the language team.

As the work progressed Wangka Maya agreed to apply for and received funding on behalf of the team. This allowed the team to access funding that otherwise probably wouldn't have been extended to a 'new' group. The language centre's national network of contacts also allowed the team to tap into the exciting new work being done on mobile phone dictionaries (see Wilson, this volume) and the Ngarluma mobile phone dictionary is now in prototype form.

Ngajumili muwarr wanikinyarni partanyja wirtujatinyankanu mirtanyajartinyi: my life story

Nyangumarta is one of the strongest languages of the Pilbara with several hundred speakers, including children who are learning it as their first language at home. It probably approaches the 'safe' degree of endangerment on the NILS indicators. Nyangumarta is commonly spoken in Port Hedland as both a first language and an Aboriginal lingua franca. It also has prestige in the non-Indigenous community and there are regular requests for Wangka Maya to run Nyangumarta courses.

For a number of years there has been considerable support for Nyangumarta within the local government and independent school system. The Strelley Literacy Centre at the independent bilingual school in the Strelley community produced storybooks, encyclopedic books, audiotapes and some videos in the Nyangumarta language. More recently Nyangumarta has been taught at three local primary schools. Considerable

documentation has been undertaken by teacher–linguists and through the auspices of the Summer Institute of Linguistics’ bible translation work.

William (Nyaparu) Gardiner first approached Wangka Maya wanting to record his life-story (Gardiner 2006). A Wangka Maya linguist recorded him yarning about his life, and he transcribed the recordings himself. A talented artist, Gardiner drew a series of ink illustrations depicting various episodes in his life. A Wangka Maya Nyangumarta language worker translated the stories into English. He then worked together with the language worker and a linguist to structure the book, which was published and launched in May 2006 as one of the activities in the 1946 Pilbara Pastoral Workers’ Strike 60th anniversary.

Gardiner is a strong believer in the importance of literacy in maintaining language and knowledge. He takes pride in his own literacy skills, which he learned first through schooling in English and later transferred to Nyangumarta and several other Pilbara languages. Writing down his stories was an opportunity for him to maintain his Nyangumarta literacy skills as well as giving other Nyangumarta speakers something to read and maintain theirs. As it is a relatively strong language Wangka Maya agreed that there would be a demand for developing a higher level of written literature in Nyangumarta and that it would build on the resources already available for children.

In fact this outcome was also achieved through the process that was used to make the book, as the interaction between Gardiner and the much younger language worker gave the language worker an opportunity to use her own Nyangumarta language skills. This process gave her a deeper knowledge of the idiosyncratic variation possible within her language, as well as some of the differences between Nyangumarta and English and the challenges this poses for translation.

Hundred words in ... DVD series

One of the most common requests to the language centre is for resources that will help people pronounce words in Pilbara languages. In response to this Wangka Maya decided to embark on producing some new audio resources to complement our dictionary and text-based productions. DVD was chosen as the format as it allowed the simultaneous presentation of written word, spoken word and image.

Eight languages were chosen to represent a spread of Pilbara language families and levels of endangerment. These languages were also chosen because in most cases there was some language work happening in the Pilbara at the time (for example the Ngarluma Language Project above), so there was the added value of supporting existing activities. The centre then picked 100 words covering a range of semantic domains and word classes, as well as some useful phrases. A Wangka Maya language worker used the centre’s dictionary databases to translate the list into each of the eight languages. Language workers and linguists worked with speakers to check the lists and record them being spoken clearly. The images were sourced from the image archive and supplemented by a few new photographs. The Wangka Maya media

trainee created the DVD template into which the audio and text for each language was added.

The result is a resource that can be used both by language speakers who want to teach their children or improve their own skills, and by non-Indigenous people who are interested in learning some language.

Payungu picture dictionary

Bayungu² is no longer a fully spoken language, although many people use partial Bayungu alongside their English. It is the traditional language belonging to the coastal country between Carnarvon and Exmouth. There has been relatively substantial documentation of the language, mainly by linguists Geoffrey O'Grady (for example O'Grady 1967) and Peter Austin (for example Austin 1978) when the old people were still alive in the 1960s and 70s. Peter Austin helped develop a Bayungu program for Carnarvon Senior High School which was used during the 1980s, and in 1992 he published a dictionary for Bayungu (Austin 1992a). Since that time Wangka Maya has produced a fuller Bayungu dictionary and a sketch grammar (Wangka Maya PALC 2007; 2008).

The development of the Payungu Picture Dictionary (Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre 2006) is primarily the story of one Wangka Maya language worker. She is a Bayungu woman herself and is comfortable with speaking and understanding basic Bayungu. When she first approached Wangka Maya for work and training she explained that her primary goal was to create tangible resources for learning the language. These resources would help her improve her own skills in Bayungu, and prompt other adults to do the same. More importantly the resources would allow future generations to have access to their heritage and, in the short term, they would help her teach her own children some Bayungu. A picture dictionary and accompanying audio CD was seen very much as a first step along this path.

The language worker used a picture dictionary that was created by Wangka Maya for another language as a template for her own work. She tapped into the Certificate in Aboriginal Language Work at Pundulmurra College, and supplemented this with the ongoing support of Wangka Maya linguists and language workers to develop her language description and documentation skills. Because the Wangka Maya archive contained the field recordings made by O'Grady and Austin with her family members, she immediately set to work listening to and transcribing these recordings.

As there were no longer speakers with whom to check the material, these recordings and the existing dictionary formed the basis of the picture dictionary. Listening to recordings also proved a useful way to get in touch with the language and dramatically improved the language worker's vocabulary and confidence in constructing a variety of basic sentences. Wangka Maya colleagues provided support in developing a range of auxiliary skills such as the use of a variety of recording equipment and computers.

2 Since publication of the *Payungu Picture Dictionary*, the Bayungu people have elected to change the orthography so the sound that was previously written as p is now written as b.

Even before the *Payungu Picture Dictionary* and accompanying audio CD were launched there was growing interest among Bayungu people in the finished product, and Wangka Maya fielded many requests for copies. At the launch many Bayungu people expressed their desire to improve their language skills. The language worker has gone on in subsequent years to produce many additional resources for the language including an information booklet on Bayungu lifestyle and culture, and a phrasebook. She has completed both the Certificate and Advanced Certificate in Aboriginal Language Work at Pundulmurra College and is currently enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts (Language and Linguistics) at BIITE in the Northern Territory.

Common themes and the revitalisation process

The case studies presented above demonstrate some of the wide variety of activities in which Wangka Maya has been involved, from language documentation and dictionary making, to publishing adult literature and multimedia learners' materials that focus on the spoken language. This variety results from the fact that every language situation is different. The case studies, therefore, also demonstrate that language centres are well placed to respond to language situations ranging across the spectrum of language endangerment indicators. Yet, despite the obvious differences among the language situations described in the cases studies, there were several common threads running throughout. These threads, woven together, constitute the Wangka Maya language revitalisation strategy.

Firstly, we identify what our role will be in revitalising a language through a process of consultation. Language centres can either lead projects or take a supporting role, depending on what is appropriate for the situation. Sometimes it is appropriate for Wangka Maya to directly lead projects and this is usually the case for projects aimed at indirectly promoting language revitalisation. An example of this was given in the '100 words in ...' case study. The desire of non-Indigenous people (such as teachers, nurses and other community workers) to learn a Pilbara language was recognised as having the potential for positive flow-on effects throughout the community, in terms of improved provision of key services (especially in the health and education spheres), as well as increased awareness of Indigenous people's language rights. Both outcomes increase the prestige of Pilbara Aboriginal languages and create space within the broader community for language revitalisation to occur. The project achieved the additional and compatible outcome of producing an excellent resource for the revitalisation of each language by the speakers themselves.

These kinds of language centre-driven activities are undertaken as opportunities arise and are actually a minor aspect of Wangka Maya's work. Language revitalisation cannot happen without speakers and, as such, we are fundamentally led by language speakers. This means that we develop our work plans to complement interest or activity that is emerging from the community. Furthermore, as an institution, Wangka Maya does not see itself as the controlling force of language work in the Pilbara. As testament to this the centre often works in formal partnerships with other

community organisations, such as native title representative groups (shown in the Thalanyji and Ngarluma case studies), schools, colleges (*Payungu Picture Dictionary*) and community councils. Such partnerships allow all parties to make the most out of all the opportunities for resourcing, funding, and community energy that exist in the vibrant Pilbara region. They also ensure that the language community always retains control and ownership of the language revitalisation process.

Fundamental to revitalisation partnerships is deciding what specific support the centre will provide. Some key themes emerge from the case studies in this regard. Probably our most important support work is the employment of individual language speakers with the goal of equipping them to lead the revitalisation of their own language. We use mentoring and careful scaffolding of training that allows language workers to develop a range of core and auxiliary skills (the *Payungu Picture Dictionary* is a good example of this). This approach is based on a sustainability principle that sees the direct transfer of specialist skills into the community as the best way of ensuring long-term value from the language centre's activities. This, in turn, increases the likelihood of language revitalisation at the community level.

The employment of such individuals can be part of a broader community attempt to revitalise a language. It can also arise from the fact that there are some situations where language work is more likely to be performed by individual speakers. These individuals are often unlikely to find the financial means or professional support to work on their language outside of a language centre. William Gardiner's biography demonstrated that the production of adult-level literature in a relatively strong language depends on the interest and commitment of individuals to tell, transcribe and translate their stories. The *Payungu Picture Dictionary* demonstrated how, at the opposite end of the language endangerment spectrum, it takes one person to take the first step in order to inspire others to revitalise a language that is no longer fully spoken.

One of the roles we are most consistently asked to fill is as a provider of specialists to help with different aspects of language revitalisation. So it is fair to say that the strategic use of specialists is central to our language revitalisation strategy. Because Wangka Maya is a long-term, stable entity it has been able to build up a vast network of specialists in various fields. When a new specialist is brought into the network for one project they then become a resource for other language groups. The most commonly requested specialists are linguists, and so Wangka Maya retains several in full-time positions and a large network of contractors. Linguists are typically asked to provide support with a wide range of tasks including orthography training, recording and transcribing language, making dictionaries, training language workers, creating learners' materials, and advising on language revitalisation projects.

Wangka Maya usually suggests to speaker groups that, in addition to providing the specific service requested, linguists should work on documenting, describing and analysing the language. This is especially recommended when a high proportion of the activity on a project easily overlaps with the activities of language research. For

example, the recordings made for the Ngarluma language DVDs were later analysed for the production of the dictionary. The linguist made efficient use of the time spent with speakers writing subtitles for the DVDs to ask questions about the language that would also help with its description.

This dovetailing of community-driven activities with more research-oriented work is an important part of Wangka Maya's long-term language revitalisation strategy. It gives added value to each project, providing the basis for more in-depth language resources. For example, sketch grammars were developed by the consulting linguists in the Thalanyji and Ngarluma projects, and these will now form the basis of learners' grammars. Our approach ensures that this vital research work continues and that it does so with the full participation and consent of the speaker community.

Other specialist services in our network include anthropologists, ethno-botanists, media personnel, graphic designers, illustrators and printers. Wangka Maya can provide the human resources management of such personnel and ensure that they work to ethical standards, particularly with respect to intellectual property and copyright of traditional Indigenous knowledge. It is worth highlighting that, because Wangka Maya works across multiple projects all the time, it can support some trainee specialist roles such as media and graphic design officers on a permanent basis. This not only means that all projects can make use of these services in-house and at low cost to each project, it also opens up exciting employment paths to local Indigenous youth.

Related to this, Wangka Maya is also frequently asked to oversee the production of specific resources, something that can be daunting for groups unfamiliar with the publication process. We do this through a combination of our in-house publishing capabilities (which we use to print our dictionaries for example), and external printers for the higher end print and multimedia productions (for example the Thalanyji plant book). This provides cost-effective solutions for the production and distribution of language materials.

Importantly, Wangka Maya serves as a repository for language work done in the region. We can advise groups on archiving materials and standards, and actively reproduce or repatriate to the Pilbara copies of pre-Wangka Maya materials held in other archives. Some Pilbara languages are no longer fully spoken and archival materials are the only substantial records of the language. Speakers of such languages rely on having ready access to archived records for their language work to commence in the first place – this was highlighted in the production of the *Payungu Picture Dictionary*. So, for some language groups, the fact that we maintain an accessible archive is a key step in their language revitalisation process.

The final component of our language revitalisation strategy is good administration. The fact that Wangka Maya is able to manage many different sources of grant funding and its own income-generating enterprises, results in a greater capacity for us to achieve our core business of language revitalisation. Key to the present discussion is

that the administration is firstly accountable to the community through its committee structure and, secondly, that it is accessible to the wider community. That is, Wangka Maya is able to provide administrative support for language groups so that they may increase their access to various funding pools. This was illustrated in the Ngarluma project case study.

The language centre as model of language revitalisation

All of the features outlined above constitute the underlying basis of Wangka Maya's own language revitalisation strategy. The centre provides a core set of resources, specialists and facilities, from which speakers – whether individuals or groups – can draw to create language revitalisation projects that suit their particular circumstances. In fact, if we take a broader perspective, the funding of language centres itself constitutes an essential component of any national strategy to promote and revitalise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. Hence the reason for the title of this paper: the language centre as language revitalisation strategy. For, even at the most basic level, the very presence of a language centre that is active in the community in a variety of ways (including activities that are additional to their core language work such as running cultural awareness training, or providing graphic design and media services) increases the presence and prestige of Aboriginal cultures and languages. At its very best, as we have attempted to show, the language centre is much greater than the sum of its parts.

Compared to the broad range of expectations that made up the vision of those early language centre pioneers and language policy makers, Wangka Maya has developed a strategy of language revitalisation centred around a smaller set of core functions. These restricted functions have evolved to fit the needs of the Pilbara language ecology and, as such, represent only one strategy in an array of potentially valid approaches (see also Kimberley Language Resource Centre, this volume). All voices need to be heard in the process of re-imagining the role of language centres. What is clear is that no language centre has been able to do it all. We would therefore suggest that the future development of language centres should focus on how each language centre fits in as a strategic partner within each language ecology, and how they empower individual language groups to take charge of their own language revitalisation. By doing so, language centres have the potential to be an enduring and central strategy in Australia's response to the diminishing linguistic diversity of this country.

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