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Revitalisation strategies for Miriwoong

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Abstract

This chapter discusses details of the language revitalisation program pursued at Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring (Mirima place for talking) in Kununurra, Western Australia. Typical strategies employed here include traditional style language lessons as well as the development of an experience-based learning approach. Further activities include a master–apprentice program based on the model introduced by Hinton (1997). Most recently, employment is also used as an additional incentive for young people to touch ground with their traditional language again. Apart from an account of the strategies and activities employed at the language centre, the issues of success and failure are analysed and recommendations made to render the process more successful. This study is supported by the traditional owners of Miriwoong country. It is their desire to learn from others and to pass on their experience so that others may learn from them. *Waniya meljeb-bebe beniyawoon, jirrijib yirriyan berri* (They watch and listen, we show them).

Miriwoong is a non-Pama-Nyungan language and classified as a member of the Jarrakan family. Other Jarrakan languages include Gija (Kija) and Gajirrabeng (Gajirrawoong), a closely related language now nearly extinct. The heart of Miriwoong country is the wider Kununurra area in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia that stretches up to about 100 kilometres eastward across the border into the Northern Territory. Towards the west of Kununurra, Miriwoong land extends for another 20–30 kilometres beyond the Ord River. The northern parts of the former landmass now covered by Lake Argyle are also part of Miriwoong territory.

The first revitalisation efforts go back to the early 1970s when a group of Miriwoong elders formed the Mirima Council and started a number of initiatives, including

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working with a linguist. When the Miriwoong people started to realise their language was in peril they made arrangements for it to be documented. Eventually a language centre was constructed in 1991. Today Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring (MDWg) employs a full-time linguist, a part-time linguist plus a number of support staff. MDWg also has five language workers employed part-time through the National Jobs Package (NJP). They are the backbone of MDWg's work, dealing with a wide range of tasks, most of which are related to language documentation and teaching. They function as teachers in language lessons, plan and prepare classes and engage in activities such as archiving, documentation, consultation, and field trips. As the language workers are partial speakers of Miriwoong they very much depend on the advice from senior language speakers for detailed language-related questions and studies. Elders are engaged as consultants on a regular basis.

Most of the early linguistic work on Miriwoong was done by Frances Kofod, the linguist who initially started work with the Miriwoong people. In 2007 Kofod completed a dictionary of Gajirrabeng with the help of Keeley Palmer who started work at the language centre in the late 1990s. A Miriwoong dictionary was completed in 2009.

Language status

Based on the Language Endangerment Status Indicator from the *National Indigenous Languages Survey Report* (Australian Institute of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Studies 2005), Miriwoong can be classified as severely to critically endangered. According to Fishman's (1991) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale for Threatened Languages, Miriwoong would rank somewhere between Stage 7 and 8. All fluent speakers who use Miriwoong as their first language are 60 years of age or older. There are only a handful of moderately fluent speakers in the 40–60 age group but Miriwoong is not their primary language and they do not have comprehensive grammatical proficiency. While many Miriwoong people have a passive understanding of a range of words, they are not in a position to use language structures in context or interact fully in Miriwoong with each other. The knowledge of Miriwoong in children is limited to those words borrowed by the local variety of Kriol.

Most if not all languages traditionally spoken in the Kimberley region are gradually being replaced by the use of Kimberley Kriol. Though Kriol still lacks wider public recognition it has come to dominate as a lingua franca over traditional Aboriginal languages. Many families have also shifted to using Aboriginal English as their first language. While the Kriol variety spoken in Kununurra contains some Miriwoong vocabulary the impact of its use on Miriwoong has been devastating.

One of the most serious challenges faced by MDWg is the fact that the process of revitalisation is a race against time. With only a small number of fluent speakers left, all of whom are elderly, major efforts must be made to gather as much linguistic information as possible and to pass on this knowledge to learners of other age groups. As this requires the combined efforts of linguists, the community and partners, the provision of financial resources is a crucial factor. Most government-based funding

programs are not flexible enough to meet the specific needs of individually tailored revitalisation programs. While government agencies increasingly see the need to support Indigenous communities, language work is often regarded a luxury given the urgent need for other crucial services such as health, housing, or general education. As a result language centres throughout Australia are struggling to get their modest share of a limited national budget put aside for language revitalisation.

Some revitalisation activities and strategies

Similar to other Australian language centres MDWg pursues a variety of strategies aimed at the revitalisation of Indigenous languages. The situation at MDWg slightly differs from the one at regional language centres in that the main focus is on one language, Miriwoong, with marginal support for nearby or related languages such as Gajirrabeng, Ngarinyman and Jaminjung where the need arises.

The traditional focus of language centres towards revitalisation is the promotion of documentation, literacy and oracy, as well as the encouragement of cultural activities. In addition to the classic task of organising language classes a new initiative involving specially structured excursions has become an important part of MDWg's activities. Employment is another factor that has become relevant for the revitalisation program. Furthermore the development of bilingual public signage represents an important role for MDWg's revitalisation strategy (see Olawsky, this volume). The following pages characterise details of these activities.

Documentation

Documentation and archiving occur on an ongoing basis and are designed to provide the necessary data for the development of teaching materials, as well as creating the theoretical foundation for language teaching. A Miriwoong dictionary is one important project in this area currently in progress, and it is designed to function as a major resource for semi-speakers. The structure of the dictionary puts the use of Miriwoong in a learner's context as most entries show examples of how a word is used in a sentence and relevant cross-references are listed throughout. A possible further development will be the production of a digital version with images and sound recordings. The use of technology seems a feasible approach as most young Miriwoong are becoming increasingly familiar with the use of computers. The development of a digital dictionary will also provide increased user-friendliness, since the use of the print version depends on the acquisition of literacy skills.

Literacy and oracy

Most literacy- and oracy-related activities involve school-aged children and young adults between eight and 16 years. Among the typical regular activities are some that promote literacy and oracy in a classroom situation, and others which focus on the transfer of language skills in a cultural setting.

The spelling system developed for Miriwoong is entirely consistent as it mostly reflects a one-to-one match between writing and sound. Literacy is promoted by conducting weekly language classes with groups from the Aboriginal learning programs of the local school. MDWg also offers young Miriwoong adult classes on a voluntary basis. Cultural protocol prescribes that male and female learners be taught separately.

Formal language lessons focus on transferring literacy and oracy skills in Miriwoong. The majority of participants are of Miriwoong descent with a minority of learners from other Aboriginal groups. The level of literacy in English varies considerably among individual students.

The language course begins with an overview of the Miriwoong sound inventory and alphabet. Subsequent lessons typically involve a general theme for one or two sessions in sequence, such as trees, birds, water animals, things around the house. The most popular teaching method involves a multimedia-based approach using slide shows, which include single words in writing, image, and sound. After introducing a series of new words, exercises follow in order to encourage the interactive use of materials by learners. Examples include word sleuths, word puzzles, memory games, and a variety of exercises aimed at strengthening phonological, orthographic, and semantic recognition and production.

The classes are taught by language workers who are partial speakers of the language themselves, but are also exposed to various kinds of language input including tasks such as revising and adding dictionary entries, data entry, or the development of new language lessons and exercises.

Bush trips

Lessons also focus on the simultaneous teaching of language and culture. As part of this project MDWg organises bush trips with elders and young people. Some of these excursions are overnight trips, usually to a remote area away from distractions that are prevalent in town. Activities include hunting and fishing skills, making of artefacts and the practice of traditional music. Each component is accompanied by oral presentations of the vocabulary related to the respective theme.

Master–apprentice program

In the second half of 2009, MDWg started a Master–Apprentice Language Learning Program (MALLP) based on the model developed by Hinton (1997). The project involves six teams each composed of a senior, fluent speaker and a partial speaker. The one-on-one immersion takes place on a part-time basis as speakers spend an average of two hours per day together. While this activity is still at its initial stages, the potential outcomes are promising: most of the junior participants are language workers at MDWg and also engage in language teaching for non-speakers. The input they receive through their work with the elders is expected to have a strong impact on their language proficiency, which will further enhance their role as language trainers and role models inside and outside the classroom.

Creation of employment opportunities

Recent governments have focused on the creation of employment for Indigenous people. This has become crucial for obtaining funding, and language centres are encouraged to work towards creating employment opportunities where resources can be made available. In addition, employment related to language and cultural work represents an incentive for young people to connect with traditional values rather than working in the mining or agricultural sectors.

MDWg has been developing training and employment opportunities on a small scale with some success. At this stage several young people aged 18–24 are employed as assistants on the bush trips described above. They not only function as practical assistants to the elders but are also viewed as role models for younger participants. They have obtained training in a variety of activities and have acquired a basic vocabulary related to each theme. In the longer term these assistants could enter into more regular employment with the possible expansion of the project.

Another initiative has been developed in collaboration with the Western Australian Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC). This project aims at training a group of young people (aged 18–26) as interpretive officers at the local Mirima National Park and several other jointly managed conservation areas. In this capacity they will conduct regular guided tours for visitors and provide Miriwoong names of the fauna and flora of the park as well as explain selected traditional customs related to the area. Trainees undergo a 40-hour program that provides them with the relevant linguistic and other theoretical knowledge required for this task, supplemented by a series of on-site sessions. Most participants have very limited knowledge of Miriwoong as they start the training, and the prospect of obtaining paid employment functions as an incentive to acquire language proficiency to some extent.

Public language use

A further revitalisation strategy used at MDWg is the promotion of Miriwoong language on a public platform. This includes the development of public signage and several other forms of relating to the wider community (see Olawsky, this volume).

Successes and challenges

The activities and efforts made by MDWg have had varying degrees of success over the past years. In this section the impact of MDWg's various activities is evaluated as challenges and achievements are singled out.

Evaluation of documentation efforts

So far the grammar of Miriwoong has been scarcely documented. A sketch grammar by Kofod (1978) describes some aspects of the language but additional research is necessary to provide more comprehensive documentation. The absence of grammatical components in language teaching must also be perceived as a major obstacle in the

revitalisation process. In order to improve this situation more linguistic research needs to be conducted to produce a pedagogical grammar, and the overall number of language classes must be increased. A project that commenced in July 2009 aims at engaging linguists in grammatical research as well as training a larger number of language teachers.

Evaluation of classroom teaching

Language teaching in a formalised environment, such as lessons taught in school, plays a vital role in MDWg's revitalisation program in that it provides the setting for a regular, sustained transfer of language. Students experience the lessons as an integral part of their education and see members of their own community using and teaching the language. However weekly lessons tend to suffer from irregular attendance, which is a general problem also occurring within the public school system. As a result a different group of learners may be present each week which disrupts the sequential progression of lessons. The worst-case scenario is of a learner who keeps attending the first lesson over and over again and subsequently loses interest in the language. Due to truancy issues discontinuous teaching of language sessions has become a challenge. As a general result the level of language competency taught so far is at a relatively low level, mainly comprising lexical knowledge – single words or short phrases.

Evaluation of bush trips

Obviously, low attendance numbers are related to motivational issues, which are a general challenge for the revitalisation of Miriwoong. Under the influence of a western lifestyle, traditional culture has become less appealing for many young people, and this affects their choice of language. This is being addressed by offering a more attractive learning environment – bush trips. While the costs for these excursions are relatively high, involving one-off investments such as 4WD vehicles and camping equipment, as well as recurring expenses such as fuel, consultant salaries and food, the outcome is exceptional. The knowledge transferred during these trips clearly exceeds the classroom transfer of purely lexical knowledge and literacy. Joint trips of elders with young people offer possibilities that cannot be achieved in the classroom:

- Language is intertwined with the knowledge of country and nature. Displaying an image of a specific area matches in no way the experience of being in touch with the land and simultaneously learning about the words related to it.
- Miriwoong elders feel more at ease using the language in full sentences when moving around freely rather than sitting behind a desk in a classroom atmosphere.
- The educational value experienced by young participants is longer lasting than the one resulting from classroom teaching as a larger number of senses are involved in an outdoor experience.
- Concepts that are hard to explain on a whiteboard can be demonstrated through active involvement of the learners.

- Distractions such as telephones, people walking by or other interruptions do not affect the gatherings out bush, as there is no mobile phone coverage after travelling more than ten kilometres out of town.

Teachers and supervisors have to ensure that such trips are carefully organised and the desired outcome is planned beforehand. Generally the vocabulary most likely to be used during such a trip is introduced a few days before during a preparatory language lesson.

Challenges to this strategy mainly concern the time, effort and costs required to organise this project. While the motivation for attendance is much higher compared to the classroom approach, individual trips with an appropriate selection of elders and learners are not easy to coordinate and a lot of time is spent on logistics such as transport, food and the selection of participants. The climate in this part of Australia has a further impact on the organisation of a successful trip as most roads become impassable during the wet season.

While the strength of this strategy lies in the quality of teaching, it probably suffers on the side of quantity. In order to achieve a measurable outcome the frequency and length of language and culture learning trips need to be increased.

Evaluation of employment approach

While the creation of employment is a useful component of the overall revitalisation approach at MDWg, it is also an initiative utterly dependent on the availability of funding. As long as funding can be sourced this strategy can be pursued. However the number of people involved in training employment programs is expected to be relatively low in the short and mid-term. From a longer-term perspective employment opportunities arising from tourism-related business could become self-sustaining and possibly help fund other revitalisation activities. While these will probably have limited impact on the use of Miriwoong in the community, ongoing linguistic training of young motivated Miriwoong individuals has the potential of generating role models.

Outlook, opportunities and recommendations

Despite the challenges described in the previous section there is a chance to revitalise the Miriwoong language, if at least some of these difficulties can be mastered. The reason for this optimism is not only based on the successful components of the revival program but also on the fact that the Miriwoong people have preserved a strong sense of cultural identity. The task of language activists, elders, partial speakers, and the language centre is to ensure that this sense of identity be inseparably linked with the use of the Miriwoong language. As the number and intensity of activities that assist learners in recognising the value of traditional language correlates to increased language awareness in young people, it is critical that these efforts be multiplied.

Stronger short-term efforts will be required to fight the battle against time. It must be understood that once the language is no longer spoken, revival efforts would be much more costly and less likely to succeed.

The lack of motivation in students and subsequent discontinuous learning are very persistent challenges. These are the areas that need most attention and concepts must be developed outside the linguistic field to make the language learning experience more appealing. Given the difficult general environment in which most learners grow up, combined efforts of social services, the education system and language experts will be required.

Bush trips that involve a strong component of language and cultural learning have proven to be an efficient way of skills and knowledge transfer. While these represent an expensive strategy for language revitalisation the results suggest that this method be consistently applied.

Language-related employment is another avenue to ensure young people are continuously exposed to Indigenous language use. While this approach is also cost-intensive, there is the possibility of it developing into self-sustaining activities by engaging in high-growth sectors such as the tourism industry.

Recent expansion of MDWg's work is promising in this regard; funding has been made available for a building extension to accommodate the increased level of language-related activities. While the language centre has started to independently generate income from some of its activities, further funding has been approved for an Action Plan for Miriwoong Language Survival, which will encourage an expansion of the master-apprentice-style program.

The use of Miriwoong language as the primary means of communication inside the family, and the subsequent development of diglossia, remains a long-term goal. The circumstances that have led to the shift from Miriwoong to Kriol and English cannot be simply reversed. Therefore other strategies must be sought in order to re-introduce the traditional language to the heart of Miriwoong communities. These include informal learning approaches such as community-internal activities or family-oriented excursions that implement the use of Miriwoong. These efforts will have to be accompanied by a formal language education program, initially through the language centre and followed, ideally, through the public education system. While the latter remains on the wish list of linguists and language activists at this stage, other avenues as discussed herein will continue to be pursued.

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