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Maam ngawaala: biindu ngaawa nyanggan bindaayili. **Language centres: keeping language strong**

Anna Ash, Pauline Hooler, Gary Williams and Ken Walker¹

Abstract

We begin by describing the history and main activities of Muurrbay Aboriginal Language and Culture Co-operative and Many Rivers Aboriginal Language Centre. Comments from Elders, language teachers and researchers are included to reflect the opinions of a diverse range of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. We discuss some aspects of research, publishing, language education and information technology. Finally we make some recommendations for groups who are just starting out on this challenging but rewarding road.

This volume was at least partially inspired by *The green book of language revitalization in practice*. There is a chapter in that book called ‘Diversity in Local Language Maintenance and Restoration: A Reason for Optimism’. It emphasises that there is a positive future for the revitalisation of Aboriginal languages:

There is reason for optimism because local language communities all over the world are taking it upon themselves to act on behalf of their imperilled linguistic traditions in full understanding of, and in spite of, the realistic perception that the cards are stacked against them. There is, in effect an international movement in which local communities work in *defiance* of the forces pitted against their embattled languages. It has something of the character of a modern miracle, if you think about it – while they share the goal of promoting a local language, these groups are essentially independent of one another, coming together sometimes to compare notes, but operating in effective separation.

Two factors in our optimism are the very existence of the movement itself and what is sometimes decried as a flaw in the movement: the feature of

¹All authors are from the Muurrbay Aboriginal Language and Culture Co-operative & Many Rivers Aboriginal Language Centre.

independence ... but this is a strength, in fact a true reason for optimism. It is the natural consequence of the fact that local conditions are very particular and, in the final analysis, unique ... The sharing of materials and ideas among language projects and the use of consultants in relevant fields (e.g. linguistics, education and computers) are good and often absolutely necessary, of course, but the structure of a local language program is determined by local considerations. (Ash et al. 2001, p. 20)

We believe there are still good reasons for optimism. It seems to us that right across New South Wales (NSW) there are more and more Aboriginal communities keeping their languages strong. In some places language centres are helping the process along; in other places communities are getting on with it in their own way, utilising help where it is offered from another type of Aboriginal organisation such as a museum, or radio station, or from some schools. This volume is about sharing ideas and materials. Muurrbay Aboriginal Language and Culture Co-operative (Muurrbay) – Many Rivers Aboriginal Language Centre (MRALC) is all about sharing ideas and materials, without forgetting that every community and language is unique. This diversity is a strength that means that there is a broader knowledge base – different people will have different answers to the same challenges.

Muurrbay and the Many Rivers region

Muurrbay began in 1986 when Gumbaynggirr Elders joined together to revive their language. Muurrbay means white fig tree in the Gumbaynggirr language; the white fig played an important role in the Dreamtime. Muurrbay's purpose is to support Aboriginal people, particularly Gumbaynggirr, in the revival and maintenance of their language and culture, and so strengthen their sense of identity, self-esteem and links to country.

Auntie Maggie Morris, founding member and patron of Muurrbay who passed away in early 2005, passionately wanted to pass down the language and traditions of her Gumbaynggirr people. The Elders worked with linguist Brother Steve Morelli to run the first Gumbaynggirr language course in Sherwood, west of Kempsey. Muurrbay is now based in the old church on Bellwood Road, Nambucca Heads, where Gumbaynggirr language classes began in 1997. There are more Gumbaynggirr speakers in 2009 than there were ten years ago. You could say that the language has had its lowest ebb, but now the tide of speakers is slowly but surely rising. We estimate that there are now several hundred partial speakers of Gumbaynggirr. So Muurrbay continues to grow as a centre for Aboriginal community activities including classes in Gumbaynggirr language, arts and cultural practices; specialised workshops on teaching techniques and information and communication technology (ICT); and community meetings.

In 2003 the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) Many Rivers Regional Council commissioned a report on the Aboriginal languages of the region. Councillors recognised the importance of language and cultural maintenance and wanted to develop a more strategic and long-term plan that made best use of limited

funds. The report made ten recommendations, including that a working party investigate establishing a regional Aboriginal language centre, that further training be provided for Indigenous language teachers, and a scholarship be established for an Aboriginal linguistics student to conduct research in the region. In 2004 ATSIC councillors supported the setting up of a regional language centre, and Muurrbay was asked to oversee it. It was hoped that the positive developments in language revitalisation achieved by Gumbaynggirr people could also occur for other language groups of the region. These included language research, publishing a dictionary–grammar and teaching resources, and developing an appropriate adult language course so that adults could then teach the language to children.

The New South Wales context

In 2004 the NSW government was the first state government to launch an Aboriginal languages policy. The NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) through its Community Languages Assistance Program has supported many language programs across NSW, including several of Muurrbay’s publishing ventures and the Aboriginal Languages Summer School.²

Several reports refer to the important role played by regional language centres. For example, the NSW report *Strong Language: Strong Culture* recommended that NSW ATSIC support the development of regional language and culture centres. Many Aboriginal people were consulted; their feedback included the comment that language centres should ‘cater for more than one language in order to service whole communities’ (Palmer 2000, p. 39). They could be distributed evenly across the state, one for each of the six ATSIC regions; a prime function would be the nurturing of Indigenous linguists and development of local expertise. As has happened elsewhere in Australia ‘the creation of language centres and their support should form a key component to any language strategy in the state’ (Palmer 2000, p. 39).

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) *National Indigenous Languages Survey Report 2005* recommends ‘Regional Indigenous Language Centres should operate in all areas of need to provide infrastructure and technical support to Community Language Teams’, and notes:

One of the most important initiatives of the 1980s was the creation of Regional Indigenous Language Centres ... to provide good services on a local and face-to-face basis to a variety of locally supported projects ... They employ (or should employ) Indigenous or non-Indigenous trained linguists, and Indigenous language workers who can assist with the production of both applied (community and school) material and language and culture documentation in the sense of ‘documentary linguistics’.
(AIATSIS 2005, p. 7)

² A community-based language learning fest held annually at the Koori Centre, University of Sydney since 2007, under the auspices of Muurrbay-MRALC.

MRALC shares many features with the well-established regional language centres of the Northern Territory and Western Australia, such as Diwurruwurru-jaru in Katherine and Wangka Maya in Port Hedland (see Olawsky and Dixon & Deak, this volume), conducting research on several Aboriginal languages and supporting people to learn and teach their languages. These language centres were established in the late 1980s–early 1990s when the Aboriginal languages of southern states were being sorely neglected. Thankfully, in the last decade, the Australian government has increasingly recognised the importance of Aboriginal languages to people of southern states, and has funded language centres or smaller language projects in these areas. One main difference is that in NSW and Victoria, most language research relies quite heavily on archival records and audio recorded some time ago, rather than quite recently.



Figure 1. Languages supported by Muurrbay–MRALC

MRALC overview

MRALC provides strategic support for Aboriginal communities of the Many Rivers region who want to revitalise their languages. Seven languages are supported, which cover the NSW coastal strip from the NSW-Queensland border to the Hawkesbury River. From north to south these are the Bundjalung–Yugambah dialect chain, Yaygirr, Gumbaynggirr, Dhanggati, Gathang (Birrbay, Warrimay and Guringay), Hunter River and Lake Macquarie Language (Awabakal–Wanarruwa), and Darkinyung. Language revitalisation refers to situations in which the language is no longer being fully passed down from one generation to the next. While this applies to all the languages of this region, there are some situations in which individual speakers are passing on their language knowledge.

Murrumbidgee–MRALC provides technical, linguistic and administrative support for many community initiated language projects. We work closely with Aboriginal people from the Tweed to the Hawkesbury River including Elders, language teachers, professionals, language workers and linguistic students and anyone interested in their language. MRALC has particularly strong links with several organisations having worked closely with them to publish grammar–dictionaries or run community-based language programs; Dhanggati and Darkinyung Language Groups; Bundjalung, Guiwan (Taree) and Ulugundahi (Yaygirr) Elders groups; Thunghutti Tiddas Aboriginal Corporation; Ngarralinyi Radio and Wonnarua Nation Aboriginal Corporation.

MRALC researched the meanings of Yaygirr/Yaegl placenames in the Lower Clarence for an Indigenous signage project, in collaboration with Yaegl Elders, North Coast Institute of Technical and Further Education (TAFE), Clarence Valley Council and the North Coast Computer Project. According to Bernie Francis, the coordinator of the North Coast Computer Project, this ‘has breathed new life into our community and regenerated interest for the importance of this community’s language program. The first village sign of *Illarwill* [black duck] is already up with others soon to follow!’ (pers. comm., 19 March 2009). We have also supported a Dhanggati group to produce illustrated language teaching resources, and are currently supporting a Bundjalung group to record an Elder.

Our main activities include:

- research; compiling written and audio archival records; documenting knowledge of Elders and analysing grammar
- producing grammars and dictionaries through extensive community consultation, for example several community-based language groups have been formed that advise projects and hold copyright of published works
- developing language learning resources and courses for adults and supporting school programs.

Aboriginal Elders, teachers and linguists speak up

Bundjalung Elder and language speaker, Uncle Charles Moran has acknowledged that language centres can be useful:

I am writing in support of the Muurrbay Language Centre who I have had dealings with. Being a language speaker from the Bundjalung Nation I am very aware just how important it is to teach our Indigenous language in schools and communities. (pers. comm., 16 February 2009)

Uncle Charles stresses the importance of young people learning to pronounce language properly:

Bugal mulligan – good morning. Jingeewahla wutha behanye – how are you today? Nganyah nyarry Charles Moran. Ngay Bundjalung barry – I am Bundjalung fellow, from the far North Coast of New South Wales. I grew up learning language from two old tribal brothers who hardly spoke English. When they conversed with each other it was only language they spoke, and I was privileged enough to have them teach me. Because I spent time with them they taught me about culture, language and bush skills. These two old brothers were custodians of the Clarence River and the Rocky River at Tabulam. I find language and culture go together, it gives me great pride to be able to speak my language and understand it. It also makes me feel proud to be Aboriginal ... I also find a lot of people speak language but can't pronounce the words properly around here. I would like to see language taught in schools where there maybe teachers come out of it. I think language would give young people something to be proud of, give them an identity, maybe teach them to respect themselves and to respect others. (pers. comm., 16 February 2009)

Uncle Charles also points out that, at times, teaching language has been a problem 'because some linguists don't understand the significance of the language' (pers. comm., 16 February 2009). In the past Bundjalung was taught off country and some Elders disagreed with this. If linguists are operating within an Aboriginal organisation and under the direction of an Aboriginal board or committee, then these sorts of incidents will be avoided. This is reinforced by Diana Eades who recorded Uncle Harry Buchanan speaking Gumbaynggirr in the 1970s: 'The model of Aboriginal leadership and ownership of the languages and cultures of the region, combined with collaboration with non-Aboriginal experts in language and education, is producing outstanding publications and educational programs.' (pers. comm., 12 February 2009). Muurrbay-MRALC is directed by the Muurrbay board which has 23 years experience in language revitalisation.

Several people have acknowledged the role of Muurrbay-MRALC in providing communities with access to well-qualified and experienced staff, namely language workers-researchers, teacher-linguists and ICT experts. Wanarruwa man, Rob Lester states that 'MRALC assists organisations such as ours with the expertise of specialist staff in our journey to revive our language of the Hunter Valley Region ... [it] is

invaluable to our communities' (pers. comm., 10 February 2006). Jeremy and Tracy Saunders of the Biripi–Gathang language group emphasise that it is about the language centre supporting community aspirations:

Muurrbay has provided an invaluable service to the Biripi Nation. Their professionalism and assistance helping us reconstruct our language was amazing, and their continued support and assistance is very much appreciated. Money cannot buy what Muurrbay has given the people of the Biripi Nation. (pers. comm., 10 February 2009)

Deb Brown, then secretary of the Thunghutti Tiddas Aboriginal Corporation, acknowledges that it is also about language centre staff respecting Elders' essential and valuable role in any language work: 'Your willingness to travel to our community to discuss our needs and your preparedness to consult with Elders as intellectuals in the field has been very encouraging and has assisted the promotion of Dhanggati culture for our young people' (pers. comm., 15 February 2006). Dhanggati man Ray Kelly has worked on several projects with MRALC:

The language centre has assisted in administering a small grant, but more importantly in supporting my language education and in beginning a dialogue about language and how it is used. I am developing my own insights about Dhanggati language that may be of interest to other people. When I first started working on language it seemed such a difficult task when there is so much anxiety in the community. I realised that we can approach language work with good faith and as much research as possible. Now I look forward to an ongoing dialogue about the usefulness and value of Aboriginal languages: how we can use them to make sense of where we are today. (pers. comm., 19 February 2009)

Muurrbay–MRALC advises various organisations including local Aboriginal land councils, schools, TAFEs and universities, NSW Department of Environment and Climate Change, NSW Aboriginal Languages Research and Resource Centre, NSW DAA, local councils, the Office of the Board of Studies NSW and NSW Department of Education and Training (DET). Representatives from government organisations and consultant linguists acknowledge the role played by language centres. Mari Rhydwen is the Aboriginal languages consultant based at the Curriculum K–12 Directorate of the NSW DET since 2005. Her job is to support Aboriginal language programs in NSW schools and she has found benefits in collaborating with language centres such as Muurrbay–MRALC:

Developing and supporting school programs for Aboriginal languages is a painstaking and challenging task. Unlike other language programs that draw on a substantial range of published resources like textbooks, dictionaries and computer software to use in the classroom, teachers in Aboriginal language classrooms must produce their own. During the year, staff at Many Rivers–Muurrbay have continued to develop teaching resources for Gumbaynggirr as well as advising on resources for other language groups ... It is clear that working

with linguists at Muurrbay has enhanced the skills of [Aboriginal language] teachers. This was particularly evident at the Nambucca workshop where a team from Muurrbay, including [Anna Ash] and Julie Long gave a presentation. This included bringing a bus full of children so that Michael Jarrett could do a demonstration class as well as organising for the school principal to participate. In addition the presentation by the Bellbrook Thunghutti Tiddas, in conjunction with Amanda Lissarrague, made very clear the contribution linguists can make. In addition you arranged for Gary Williams to provide a Welcome to Country ... The ongoing work on Bundjalung, Dhanggati, Gathang, HRLM and Wonnarua, Darkinyung and Yaygirr by Many Rivers linguists makes a vital contribution to the school language programs. (pers. comm., 30 November 2005)

Teacher-linguist Andrew Ingram writes that the existence of a language centre enables him to work on language revitalisation in northern NSW:

While work in the field of language revitalisation can be a personally and professionally rich and rewarding experience, it is a daunting prospect for the individual. Many of the factors that make it so can be minimised through the assistance of a well-run language/cultural centre. One of the main issues facing the language worker is sourcing of sufficient funding – for wages for all involved in the project, for equipment, and for developing resources. Funding from a language centre for revitalisation projects can either be direct, where the centre itself provides funds, or indirect, where the language centre assists in applying for funding and auspices a particular community-based project. Language centres also play a strategic role in the language worker developing relationships with community, in terms of introductions to key community members. They are also a good way for communities to access appropriate language workers. Language centres also provide much needed logistical support, organising meetings, workshops and other group activities, allowing the language worker to concentrate on their immediate tasks. They also provide access to library resources, recording equipment, and sometimes access to the publishing process. (pers. comm., 17 March 2005)

Elder Poppy Harry Walker works with teacher Sharon Tucker on the Bundjalung Language Program at Bonalbo Central School. Sharon acknowledges the support that language centres can give a school program:

Muurrbay-MRALC have been crucial to our introduction of Bundjalung as our Year 7 LOTE subject. We have relied on the staff for advice and guidance on orthography, lesson development and community consultation; this needs to be ongoing for us. Muurrbay is also involved in a community language project with our Elder, Poppy Harry Walker, which not only is revitalising the Western Bundjalung language but also is providing the resource basis for our school language program. (pers. comm., 19 March 2009)

The role of language centres in collaborating with many organisations is emphasised by university lecturer Caroline Jones, 'Muurrbay and MRALC ... [have] a wealth of

staff talent and commitment, effectively supporting community groups, productively collaborating with government, universities, TAFE and schools, and consistently delivering high quality teaching and landmark teaching resources and reference material.’ (pers. comm., 11 February 2009).

Publishing language materials

Muurrbay–MRALC began by focusing on language research and over the last three years has published many language resources including grammar–dictionaries, teaching resources and short stories. Researchers make use of ICT such as Transcriber³ (for listening to and transcribing CDs), Toolbox⁴ (for analysing data, interlinearising and making dictionaries) and Audiamus⁵ (for compiling audio CDs together into a library or corpus). It is important that communities have good access to research results and a percentage of all books are distributed free of charge. The books are carefully researched and reviewed with extensive community consultation undertaken before we progress to publication. Desktop publication using Adobe InDesign ensures good quality publications which reinforce the status of these languages and encourage positive attitudes in the general public. Muurrbay–MRALC has produced grammar–dictionaries for the languages from the Hunter River and Lake Macquarie, Darkinyung, Dhanggati, and Gumbaynggirr, with Gathang and Yaygirr to come next. All languages change all the time. After seven years a second edition of the Gumbaynggirr dictionary was published which reflected all the work that had been done since the first, including a slight change in the spelling system, more information about the way the language works – its grammar – and information about new words that had been created to talk about things to do with many areas of modern day life, including office and household goods.

Language centres throughout Australia play an important role in distributing draft documents and publishing language resources. Researcher and author Jim Wafer notes of Muurrbay–MRALC:

Their brief covers an enormous area, from the Hawkesbury to the Queensland border, and for this region they carry out community consultation, language teaching, research and publication. My interest is particularly in their publication record: four highly professional dictionary/grammars, six books of teaching resources, and a state-wide guide to the languages of NSW, all over a period of about four years. (pers. comm., 20 March 2009)

The authors of *A handbook of Aboriginal languages of NSW and the ACT* approached Muurrbay to publish this excellent resource, as they wanted an experienced Aboriginal publisher and copyright holder and for any profits to go back into language

3 See trans.sourceforge.net/

4 See www.sil.org/computing/toolbox/

5 See www.linguistics.unimelb.edu.au/thieberger/audiamus.htm

revitalisation. Several teaching resources have been published including the *Barriyala: Let's Work*, *Gumbaynggirr Language Student Workbooks* and *Mayalambala: Let's Move It*, a poster-based teaching resource. These teaching resources have been created so that they will be useful for more than one language. *Barriyala* is available electronically in Microsoft Word so other language groups can adapt and use it. *Mayalambala* is based on pictures, so can be used for any language. Story books for children such as *Dulaybam Dunggir* and *Bamay Possum's Party* are also valuable for children.

Language teaching and other activities

Language learners have varying needs. Muurrbay delivers full-time Certificate II and IV Gumbaynggirr language courses. Other courses have been delivered more informally for those who just want to pick up some lingo and pass it on to their family and friends.

Administrative staff have supported community-based language projects by administering small grants from DAA. In 2005–06 we hosted two regional language conferences that raised a lot of interest in language revitalisation and allowed people to share ideas, get inspired and get started. Since then we have focused on research and delivering workshops for specific languages so that people can learn more about sounds, spelling and grammar, and have input into the research. Language staff have the knowledge and cultural awareness to provide language advice to Aboriginal people in general, as well as those studying language teaching and linguistics. We receive many requests for language advice from Aboriginal people and organisations that are using language in many areas, including educational, ceremonial and in the workplace. We advise on:

- translating speeches such as a Welcome to Country, acknowledging country and Elders, as well as songs, prayers and eulogies
- translations for signage (places, houses and buildings, such as TAFE colleges and medical centres), naming babies and events
- teaching resources and ideas; advice on selecting words when there is more than one word to choose from for any given thing, providing CD recordings that can be used as pronunciation guides, sample lesson plans, teaching activities and worksheets.

Language revitalisation 'three step'

This is a formula that has worked for us in the Many Rivers Region, so it may be worth considering if your group is just starting out.

Step one: language resources

Find out everything that is known about your language:

- Record speakers

- Collect all written records, old wordlists, placenames and grammars
- Collect all language recordings.

Step two: language analysis

Analyse your materials to find out how your language works. You will need people with training in linguistics to do this. Linguists and language researchers should be able to assist.

- Sounds and spelling: work out the sounds of your language and a standard way to spell them. Aboriginal languages and English have some similar sounds such as a, i, u, m, n, l, w, y. Other sounds are quite different, for example most Aboriginal languages have an ‘rr’ like Scottish Robby Burns (trill/flap), allow ‘ng’ to start a word, and don’t always need to distinguish between pairs like b/p, t/d and k/g in the spelling
- Language is more than just lists of words. So how do we put words together so that we can talk in sentences? This is the grammar or rules of the language. The grammar of Aboriginal languages is very different from English. We want to remain true to the language; we don’t want to be influenced by English.

Here is a Gumbaynggirr example showing how to indicate location. English uses a separate word – a preposition of location, such as in, at and on to show where something is positioned, while Aboriginal languages use a *tag ending* or suffix.

nguraa-la

house-in

in the house

Another Gumbaynggirr example shows that word order is used differently:

marlamgarl-u *yiinyjan* *jumbaal*

dingo-ERG bite-PAST python

The dingo bit the python.

This same meaning can be shown with a different word order:

jumbaal *yiinyjang* *marlamgarl-u*

python bite-PAST dingo-ERG

The dingo bit the python.

Following analysis which utilises software such as Transcriber and Toolbox, and extensive checking, a wordlist or dictionary and grammar can be produced.

Step three: learning language and developing teaching resources

Once the basic language resources of dictionary and grammar have been produced the focus is then for community members to learn more language so they can teach kids

in school, community classes, TAFE and at home. Classes can be informal or TAFE-accredited but, in either case, time needs to be spent designing them. Along the way various teaching resources can be developed such as a learner's guide to help explain the grammar, songs, tapes, computer-based resources, games, story books and comics.

You gotta start somewhere

Muurrbay Chairperson, Ken Walker was interviewed for a DVD, *It's a Hard Road to Hoe but You Gotta Start Somewhere: Designing a Community Language Project*. Ken provides advice on all aspects of language revitalisation, from setting up a language program to finding funds, staying with the language and reaping the rewards:

The benefit of that [research] now, all that process we went through, is shown in the children we teach and in the adults we teach, because it gives them a sense of pride, and esteem in their self and their culture and their language that never existed before. Work for language is never ending, it's always going on, there's something new happening all the time. You've got to modify and move with the times. You've got to be flexible in your language use, so it's a continuous thing ... Muurrbay or places like it will never really die out if the people don't want it to. 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. (NSW Board of Adult & Community Education, 2006).

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