

Speaker age and language choice in child-directed speech in a multilingual Australian Indigenous community.

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ABSTRACT

This poster reports on a study conducted at a remote, multilingual, Indigenous Australian community in the Kimberley area of Western Australia.

The study focuses on language input to pre-school aged children, by four different age groups (older children aged 7-12, and three adult groups).

We address the way that language input varies in relation to age of interlocutor within this community, and discuss the implications of this for the children's language acquisition.

CONTEXT

- Research into child language acquisition tends to focus on dyadic mother-child interaction, despite the fact that the majority of the world's children growing up in polyadic situations (e.g. discussion by Lieven 1994).
- In Indigenous Australian communities, children are brought into a "world [which] is highly social, interactive and verbal" (Kral and Marrkilyi Ellis 2008: 156). Children have frequent contact with a large extended family and community members.
- In Indigenous Australia, language change is rapid, and little is known about how children use and acquire language(s).

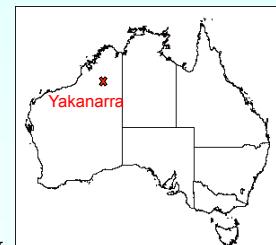


Figure 1. Fieldwork location.

This study:

- Provides a snapshot of the current situation in Yakanarra (Australia) for young children learning their first language.
- Addresses a call by Tomasello and Mannie (1985: 916) - "[f]uture research should investigate more thoroughly the nature and the effects of the total range of language models available to beginning language learners".
- Seeks to understand the language(s) that children in Yakanarra are learning, to aid understanding of language shift, loss and change.

Yakanarra (see Figure 1)

- Remote rural community, primarily Indigenous population. Community = 121 people (88% Indigenous). Languages = Kriol, Walmajarri (traditional language) and English.

AIMS Identify the language/s young children in Yakanarra are exposed to from different aged interlocutors, and in turn how they speak to different aged interlocutors.

Use some standard measures to assess language use by and to the focus children (MLT, MLU, conversational load, type token ratio).

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

- Five focus children (2;5 - 4;7), twenty interactants across four age groups:
Older children aged 7-12, Adults 19-34, 35-50, 50+.

CORPUS

- Twenty transcripts (annotated in CLAN): 5 focus children x 4 interactants.
- Transcripts 100 lines each, video and audio-recorded interactions (play/ reading).

DATA AND RESULTS

n.b. we report averages, individual variation is also evident and is described in a written version of our paper (under review).

LANGUAGE TYPE (see Tables 1 and 2)

- Kriol is the main language for all participants. Walmajarri usage increases with the age of the interactants
- Walmajarri/Kriol code-switching common in the older generation (who acquired Kriol as a second/ subsequent language).

LANGUAGE USE TO FOCUS CHILDREN. Markedly different usage b/w 7-12 and 50+ ppts (others pattern together).

- Child interactants:** much longer utterances (Fig. 2, and extract 1), more complex sentences (Fig. 3), greater conversational burden (Table. 3). Accords with cross-linguistic studies showing that child-child speech tends to be monologic (e.g. Lieven 1994).
- Lexical diversity: Both 7-12 and 50+ participants use somewhat less repetition than the other two adult groups.

LANGUAGE USE BY FOCUS CHILDREN (CHILD SPEECH).

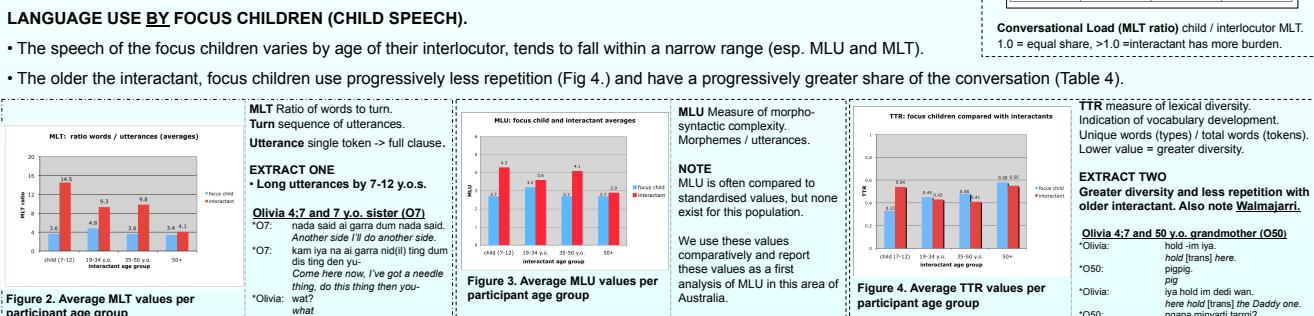
- The speech of the focus children varies by age of their interlocutor, tends to fall within a narrow range (esp. MLU and MLT).
- The older the interlocutant, focus children use progressively less repetition (Fig. 4.) and have a progressively greater share of the conversation (Table 4).

	Walmajarri	Kriol	English
interloc. child (7-12)	0	99.7	0.3
19-34	2	95.7	2.3
35-50	1.5	96.6	1.9
50+	16.1	82.8	1.1
average	4.9	93.7	1.4

	Walmajarri	Kriol	English
interloc. child (7-12)	1.5	97	1.5
19-34	2.1	97.2	0.7
35-50	8.1	89.5	2.4
50+	33.2	66.1	0.7
average	11.3	87.5	1.2

	7-12 year old	19-34 year old	35-50 year old	50+ year old
Conversational Load (MLT ratio) child / interlocutor MLT.	0.27	0.50	0.49	1.0

Conversational Load (MLT ratio) child / interlocutor MLT.
1.0 = equal share, >1.0 = interlocutor has more burden.



CONCLUSION

- Language type: decline in multilingualism evident in just a few generations). Kriol is the main language of the community. English is reserved for formal situations and contact with non-Indigenous people (problematic for schooling, which is conducted in English).
- The sociable and interactive environment in which the children in Yakanarra are raised exposes them to a range of speech styles.
- This is the first study of its kind in Australia, illustrates some of the complexities surrounding language use in the region. Snapshot of actual language usage.

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