Welcome to the latest newsletter from the Research Unit for Indigenous Language.

RUIL consists of a team of researchers from the School of Languages and Linguistics, led by Associate Professor Rachel Nordlinger and Professor Gillian Wigglesworth.

This newsletter presents some of the highlights of the last four months, and focuses particularly on events, fieldwork, and new & continuing projects.

For a full list of all publications, conference presentations and current grants, please visit our website:
http://arts.unimelb.edu.au/indiglang

Fieldwork report: Rebecca Defina

Dr Rebecca Defina is a RUIL team member who began her postdoctoral fellowship in 2016. This April and May, she visited Pukatja (Ernabella) in central Australia for her second fieldtrip as part of the Pitjantjatjara language acquisition project. One of the main parts of this project is building a longitudinal corpus of children talking with their families. Each child in the project is ideally recorded for one hour each month over three years. Last year, Rebecca made initial recordings of six children between the ages of 1 and 4 years. This trip, she returned copies of these to the families and made the second round of recordings. A seventh family also joined the project and they made an initial recording with their 1-year old girl.

The children wear small bags with an audio recorder which captures what they and the people nearby are saying. The bag also contains a camera with a fish-eye lens taking photos from the child’s perspective every 15 seconds (see photos). These photos provide useful information about what the child is currently engaged with. Most sessions are also video recorded, providing wider context information and some gesture information. This trip, Rebecca also worked with her assistant, Sandra Lewis, to transcribe and translate some of the recordings and set her up with the equipment and training she needs to be able to continue this work on her own.

This corpus will help us better understand the extent and nature of Pitjantjatjara language change. It will also allow us to compare the acquisition processes of Pitjantjatjara to those of the more studied European languages.

Image credits:
Rebecca Defina and study participants
Frederick playing in the sand
Renalla watches her cousin investigating the video camera

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Hywel Stoakes in Galiwin’ku

In October 2016 RUIL team member Hywel Stoakes travelled to the island community of Galiwin’ku off Eastern Arnhem Land to talk with Djambarrpuynu speakers about their language. Hywel is currently researching the phonetic patterns of voicing in Yolngu Matha varieties but the focus of this trip was to present a perceptual task to first language speakers of Djambarrpuynu. The aim of the project is to better understand how speakers gather new information in a free word order language and how important pitch is in this system. The experimental design uses eyetracking as the way of inputting a response to presented audio stimuli which are in the form of a short phrase in Djambarrpuynu. This means that a participant doesn’t need to use a mouse or a keyboard to make their choice and consequently many more people were willing to give up their time and participate in the study. This is a pilot for future phonetic studies in Indigenous languages and we hope to use eyetracking extensively in the future. These data are currently under analysis and will complement Katie Jepson’s research on prominence in the language. Hywel would like to thank the Galiwin’ku community for their generosity and patience, particularly Peter Dätjing Burarrwanga, Daisy Gondarra, Ted Gondarra, Johnny Garawirrtja, Mawalan Marika and their respective families; also thanks to Nathan Holt and all at the Literature Production Centre, Shepherdson College.

Background image credit: Pandanas at Sunset, Galiwin’ku N.T. (H. Stoakes)

RUIL small grants: Jenry Mandey

In April, Jenry Mandy visited Melbourne University to work with RUIL team member Tim Brickell. The visit was supported by the RUIL Indigenous Researcher Small Grant Scheme. Jenry has been working with Tim for a number of years, and has frequently expressed an interest in learning more about how to carry out language documentation work on his native language, Tombulu, an endangered language from Minahasa, North Sulawesi, Indonesia. Jenry flew to Melbourne from Jakarta, and stayed here for two weeks. Over this time, he learnt how to use recording equipment, best practice processes for data management, and had an overview of ethics and informed consent. Jenry also had an introduction to linguistic software (ELAN and FLEX). Tim and Jenry are working on a journal article describing tense and aspect in the Tombulu language, and during the second week of Jenry’s visit they worked on a draft of the article. Jenry had a really productive time here in Melbourne, and is looking forward to applying his new knowledge in documenting his language. Thanks for visiting, Jenry!

Australian Indigenous languages featured in ‘Blood’ exhibition

Science Gallery Melbourne and Science Gallery London have their first cross-network season from now until 5th October 2017. This season has the theme Blood: attract and repel, and explores blood from a multitude of perspectives: with 22 works exploring six themes (taboo, stigma, identity, giving, health, future), this is not an exhibition for the faint hearted! The Melbourne season is especially compelling as RUIL has been involved in the development of one of the works featuring the word(s) for blood in over 120 Australian Indigenous languages. Find out more at https://melbourne.sciencegallery.com/blood/melbourne/
A visit to Kakuma Refugee Camp

In May, RUIL associate student Jonathan Moodie and RUIL team member Rosey Billington travelled to Kakuma Refugee Camp in northern Kenya to collaborate with members of the Lopit community living there. Lopit is an Eastern Nilotic language traditionally spoken in the Lopit Mountains in South Sudan, but because of ongoing instability in South Sudan, much of the recent work towards language documentation and maintenance has been taking place among communities in the diaspora. Building on their work with the Lopit community in Melbourne, Jonathan and Rosey visited Kakuma to work on a project assisting the Kakuma Lopit community with their goals to create records of Lopit language and culture. They brought audio and video recording equipment and offered a team of community members training in how to use the equipment and plan their recording activities. The community intends to use the equipment to document Lopit stories, songs, and dancing, and the recordings will also be drawn on to develop written materials in the Lopit language.

The community recently established a Lopit library in Kakuma (the first Lopit library in the world). It already houses a small selection of Lopit stories written down by community members, which Jonathan and Rosey printed and transported to Kakuma, but there is room for many more to be added.

Outreach at Nagle Pre-School

Recently, RUIL team member Debbie Loakes did an outreach activity with three groups of 3 and 4 year old children at Nagle Pre-School in the Bayside area. Whilst in Mildura carrying out fieldwork for her project on Aboriginal English, Debbie met Della Walker who is a Yagedl woman working as a kindergarten assistant employed by Mallee District Aboriginal Services. Della teaches Aboriginal culture to pre-schoolers around Mildura, and she passed this activity on to Debbie to try out in Melbourne. The children enjoyed learning the meaning of the colours of the Aboriginal flag, as well as some Barkindji and Latji Latji words. Debbie also played the children some Gunditjmara words recorded and presented by Joel Wright (VACL) at http://moyjil.com.au.
A virtual window onto South Pacific languages

In May 2017, RUIL participated in a Digital Humanities showcase for Melbourne Knowledge week. On display was a Virtual Reality experience which provides the viewer with the opportunity to navigate through a birds-eye view of Southern Pacific islands, listening to a ‘forest of language’. The linguistic diversity in this region is phenomenally high, and this immersive experience provides invaluable insight into the linguistic environment of both Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea. When viewing through a virtual reality headset, each language is represented by a shard of light (see inset, right), and when the viewer focuses on these they can hear a recording of the language where available, as well as viewing other information as stored in the Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Languages (PARADISEC). This project was the innovation of RUIL team member Dr Nick Thieberger and co-collaborator Dr Rachel Hendery (University of Western Sydney), and was recently featured in an article in The University of Melbourne’s Pursuit magazine. To read more and to see a short video of the simulation in action, visit: https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/islands-of-language-enter-virtual-reality

Fieldwork report: Tim Brickell

RUIL team member Tim Brickell started with us in late 2016, through the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme. In June and July this year he spent time in the villages of Silian and Kali Oki’ in the Tonsawang/Toundanow (Malayo-Polynesian > Western Malayo-Polynesian > Philippine > Minahasan) speech communities situated in Southeast Minahasa province, North Sulawesi, Indonesia.

During this time Tim recorded a number of culturally and economically relevant activities, some of which are no longer being passed on to younger generations. These videos are being edited and narrated in indigenous languages before being distributed locally and online, and are also used as elicitation stimuli for linguistic data collection.

One traditional undertaking is the collection and utilisation of sap from the palm sugar (Arenga pinnata) tree. Tim recorded this in a location approximately 15 kms from Silian village, near the base of the Mt Soputan volcano. Recent heavy rain made access difficult as the trails were extremely muddy. Filming was also challenging due to uneven terrain, insects, and intermittent rainstorms.

To collect the sap, a branch high in the tree is prepared and cut so as to allow the sap to drain into a container which is later collected. The person tasked with this is 16 year old Krisna Pangau (pictured, right) who regularly climbs trees up to 20 metres tall barefoot without any safety equipment. He has been doing this difficult and dangerous work since he was 12 years old.

The palm sugar sap has various uses. It may be drunk directly after being collected as palm sugar wine, or tuah, which is mildly alcoholic and gets stronger as it ferments. It is also distilled into high-alcohol palm brandy, or sopi; or alternatively boiled in a large wok until it thickens, cools, and hardens into the reddish coloured palm sugar or gula méha’. All these products are then sold and are consumed within the community.

From left - Ariel Pangau, Jan Peleng, Tim Brickell, Marten Pangau

Krishna Pangau