Welcome

Welcome to the second newsletter of the Research Unit for Indigenous Language. This newsletter is published twice-yearly and contains details of the research activities, latest news and other achievements of the Research Unit.

Launched in May 2013, the Research Unit consists of a team of researchers from the School of Languages and Linguistics. Led by Professor Gillian Wigglesworth (Director) and Associate Professor Rachel Nordlinger (Deputy Director), the Research Unit is advised by a distinguished Steering Committee consisting of language experts from a range of government, academic, community and other organisations.

Staff within the Research Unit have been active in research into Indigenous languages and the communities where they are spoken. This newsletter presents some of the highlights, and focuses particularly on fieldwork, new and continuing projects, and new grants and publications.

MORE INFO: Full list of all publications, conference presentations and current grants - RUIL website

WORKSHOP: Getting in Touch: language and digital inclusion in Indigenous Communities

The Getting in Touch workshop was held on 8 and 9 April 2014 at the Desert Peoples Centre (DPC) in Alice Springs (NT). It was hosted and supported by The Centre for Australian Languages and Linguistics (CALL) at Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education. This workshop was made possible by funding from the Melbourne Social Equity Institute, First Languages Australia and RUIL.

MORE INFO: ABC OPEN website

RUIL researchers Rachel Nordlinger, Jenny Green and Ruth Singer have successfully completed the first stage of their research project into digital inclusion in Indigenous communities. This 2 day workshop brings together Indigenous community representatives, linguists and software developers to discuss the issues and ideas around the development of digital tools for Indigenous language speakers, and map out the possibilities for future collaborations on the development of such resources.

The workshop was attended by over 70 people—including linguists, software developers, interpreters, educators, media broadcasters, computer scientists and Indigenous community representatives. Indigenous language teams came from across the Northern Territory, as well as WA and South Australia.

For many of the Indigenous participants, this workshop was their first opportunity to engage with language-related digital tools, to begin to think about the types of resources they would like to see developed for their community and to benefit from the exchange of ideas.

An important outcome of the workshop was the excitement and enthusiasm that was generated amongst the software developers, computational scientists and other non-Indigenous participants to collaborate and engage with the development of digital resources for Indigenous communities.

The next stage of the project is to work on the development of culturally and linguistically appropriate digital tools based on ideas arising from the workshop.

Warruwi participant Jenny Manmurulu outside the Desert Peoples Centre in Alice Springs.
**Language Acquisition in Murrinhpatha**

Lucy Davidson recently spent two months in Wadeye, NT, collecting her first batch of longitudinal data for her PhD project, which is a part of the broader ARC Discovery Project, Language Acquisition in Murrinhpatha. She will be investigating the language development of a group of children aged three to five, over a period of eighteen months. Her study’s focus is the acquisition of reference; the ways in which children talk about people and other entities so that their references are correctly interpreted by their hearers.

Lucy worked with various community members already involved in the LAMP project (through fieldwork by Rachel Nordlinger, Joe Blythe, and Bill Forshaw) and also formed new connections with other families in town. People appeared to react very positively to the project, enthusiastic about tracking their children’s linguistic development. (Or, in the children’s case, enthusiastic about being taken swimming.) Thanks to the generous welcome she received from Wadeye locals, and daily language coaching from excitable preschoolers, Lucy had a very productive, enjoyable time. She is looking forward to her next field trip up there, later this year.

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**Rembarrnga Traditional Ecological Knowledge**

Aung Si spent two months (Feb-Mar 2014) in Maningrida, NT, to work with speakers of Rembarrnga and Kune on the documentation of ethnobiological knowledge. During the first month, Aung Si volunteered at the Maningrida Community Education Centre (CEC), producing educational materials, and assisting local teachers with the running of the CEC’s Indigenous Language Program. The second month of fieldwork was spent mostly at Buluhkaduru outstation, with Traditional Owner Charlie Brian and his family, to record aspects of Kune and Rembarrnga language in relation to the natural world.

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**Baniyala Garrangali School**

Gemma Morales (PhD student) and Gillian Wigglesworth visited Baniyala Garrangali School in late April where Gemma is collecting data for the Aboriginal Child Language Acquisition (ACLA) project over the next two years. Baniyala is a Homeland Community 200km from Nhulunbuy. The community, which is closely involved in school decision-making, has elected an English only curriculum. Gemma will be collecting data from children at school speaking English, and at home speaking Yolngu Matha. This will inform our understanding of how children transition from the home to the school language.

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**Yirrkala Community School**

Gemma Morales, has recently returned from a three-month trip to Yirrkala, NT. Gemma’s research project investigates the early literacy development of children attending Yirrkala Community School (YCS), a bilingual remote Indigenous school. Students from YCS are initially taught literacy skills in Yolŋu, their home language, and later transition into English literacy in year 4. Gemma recorded students reading short story books in both Yolŋu and English as well as retelling stories from sequences of wordless picture cards.

In July Gemma and Gillian Wigglesworth will have a meeting with Yolŋu community elders and YCS teacher linguist to discuss the development of a Yolŋu language early literacy assessment tool. Gemma hopes to pilot the assessment tool on YCS transition students during her next trip to Yirrkala in September. Gemma is very grateful to the community for welcoming her so warmly and is looking forward to her next visit.
REPORT: PROJECTS

PROJECT UPDATE: The Somali Dictionary App

This is the first comprehensive and free Somali-English dictionary app for mobile devices. The app was developed after a Melbourne-based Somali artist, Nadia Faragaab, contacted Nick Thieberger and suggested building on her existing pilot dictionary app for Somali. They jointly worked on getting content for the app from a published 1980 dictionary before being granted a 2013 Vice Chancellor’s Staff Engagement Award to develop the app.

The model they selected was Ma! Iwaidja, a phone app developed for the northern Australian language Iwaidja by Bruce Birch and his team. That model is being opened up to other dictionaries and the 26,000 headwords of the Somali dictionary were a challenge that it has been able to deal with. The present version is the most comprehensive dictionary of Somali and its functions include a set of audio files, and the ability for users to upload their own audio for inclusion in future versions. Crowdsourced additions to the content will make the app responsive to current usage of the language.

NEW PROJECT: Digital Daisy Bates

Nick Thieberger has been involved in the pilot project of digitising vocabularies of Australian languages from the Daisy Bates collection and placing them into a usable system. Some 3,300 pages of typescripts have been keyboarded and can be searched, viewed on a map, and are linked to the images of the original manuscript.

This image shows the word for ‘sister’ in all of the Bates lists. Clicking on a word takes you to the text of the manuscript, and that allows you to see the original typescript and then the manuscript questionnaire that was filled out by hand. Each of the words in the lists can be found by selecting from a dropdown menu. This is the first version of the Digital Daisy Bates project, but it has already had all the typescript vocabularies keyboarded into a Text Encoding Initiative XML format, ready for various forms of delivery.

PROJECT UPDATE: RNLD Student Volunteers

A partnership between RUIL and the Resource Network for Linguistic Diversity (RNLD) has begun with planning for up to five University of Melbourne linguistics students to participate this year with RNLD’s Documenting and Revitalising Indigenous Languages (DRLI) training program.

After completion of the community-based workshop the student will work on a voluntary basis to provide ongoing linguistic support for members from that community.

Plans are in place for the first student to attend a session in Halls Creek (WA) in late June; and one student to attend sessions in Swan Hill and Shepparton in September. MORE INFO: RNLD website

REPORT: WORKSHOPS

Kids, Creoles and Classrooms Symposium

A symposium focusing on teaching children coming from creole speaking backgrounds was co-convened by Charles Darwin University and the Research Unit for Indigenous Language in Darwin on 8 and 9 April, together with the Northern Territory Association of English Speakers of Other languages. MORE INFO: CDU SYMPOSIUM website

The ‘Kids, Creoles and Classrooms’ symposium was designed to bring together teachers, education specialists, researchers and academics from across Australia to share the latest research on Aboriginal English and creoles, and to learn about best practice in education for speakers of these varieties.

Presenters from across Australia presented at the symposium, with Gillian Wigglesworth presenting the opening plenary. In a series of talk and practical workshops, participants explored a range of issues and approaches to pedagogy as well as strategies for teaching and learning in areas including language, literacy and mathematics.
NEWS: GRANTS & AWARDS

• ‘Stephen Wurm Graduate Prize’. Aung Si has been awarded the 2013 Stephen Wurm Graduate Prize for Pacific Linguistic Studies by the ANU College of Asia and the Pacific for his PhD thesis.

• ‘Mawng Ngaralk - a digital resource on the Mawng language’. Ruth Singer was awarded $48,000 from the Indigenous Languages Support program, New Media grants scheme, Federal Ministry of the Arts. This grant is administered through West Arnhem Shire Council (2013-2014). Ruth has been working with Mawng speakers at Warruwi Community for over a decade and has a long-term commitment to maintaining the vitality of the Mawng language, a small language of only 300 speakers. She was the linguist on the 2010-2011 MILR-funded Mawng language project that documented Mawng plant and animal knowledge and produced three educational posters on the topic. This new project will produce a comprehensive digital resource on the Mawng language through a range of integrated collaborative activities that include the production of new digital resources, recording of new materials in the Mawng language, making existing materials more accessible and Mawng literacy education.

• ‘Preservation of Solomon Islands analog recordings’. Nick Thieberger has been awarded $19,000 from the Endangered Archives Programme at the British Library.

• ‘Varieties of Kun-barlang, a language on the edge: Towards a comprehensive documentation project’. Ruth Singer has been awarded GB£10,000 from the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Program, School of Oriental and African Studies, London. This is a highly endangered language traditionally spoken in northwestern Arnhem Land, Northern Australia, for which there are only around 60 remaining speakers. Almost all of the speakers are above the age of 40 and most are very elderly. Kun-barlang speakers now live in various multilingual Indigenous communities in northwestern Arnhem Land (Warruwi, Minjilang, Maningrida and Oenpelli) and in Darwin. The aim of this project is to create a community- and research-accessible corpus of Kun-barlang. Audiovisual recordings and documentation of new and existing Kun-barlang materials will be made in intergenerational teams with elderly speakers and younger Kun-barlang people.

Dynamics of Language (Centre of Excellence)

Research Unit Director, Gillian Wigglesworth, Deputy Director Rachel Nordlinger, and staff Janet Fletcher and Nick Thieberger have been successful in a collaborative bid for an ARC Centre of Excellence ‘The Dynamics of Language’. The new Centre is led by Australian National University’s Prof Nick Evans, with University of Melbourne as a major research partner. Other major partners include the University of Queensland and the University of Western Sydney. The new centre will receive $28 million funding for a period of 7 years, and will commence late 2014.

MORE INFO: PARADISEC Blog website

NEW PUBLICATIONS

• Green, Jenny. 2014. Drawn from the ground: sound, sign and inscription in Central Australian sand stories. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Jenny will present a public lecture/book launch at the University of Melbourne on 16 September.

• Nordlinger, Rachel and Felicity Meakins. 2014. A Grammar of Bilinarra: An Australian Aboriginal language of the Northern Territory. Berlin: Mouton. This book is distinctive in that it includes sound files associated with over 1,000 example sentences, so that readers are able to hear the original recordings directly. In the ebook these sound files are embedded in the pdf, making the sound files accessible with a simple click of the mouse. It is, as far as we are aware, the first published grammatical description to use this technology.


EVENTS

Fairfield Primary School (VIC)

Rachel Nordlinger visited Fairfield Primary School in May to speak to grade 3 & 4 students about Australian Indigenous Languages.