



**“I talk...she copy with me”**

**Carer language-learning beliefs in Murrinhpatha**

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# Aim

To investigate Murrinhpatha caregiver attitudes to language development and their beliefs regarding what children need in order to learn a first language.

# Indigenous CDS

Children hear a range of different input (e.g. Byers et. al 2012, Reeders 2008, Loakes et. al 2013).

Reports of modified speech registers (*babytalk* or *CDS*) to children in Indigenous Australia (e.g. Hamilton 1981).

Cross-linguistically there are few studies of parental beliefs and understanding of language development (e.g. Bouchard 2014)

# Research Questions

1. What beliefs do Murrinhpatha-speaking primary caregivers hold regarding how children develop language?
2. What beliefs do Murrinhpatha-speaking primary caregivers hold regarding the use of a modified speech register to children?
3. What does Murrinhpatha input look like, in light of (1) and (2)?



# Murrinhpatha



- Spoken by approx. 3000 people in and around Wadeye NT (Port Keats)
- Polysynthetic, head-marking, non-Pama-Nyungan
- Dominant community language still being acquired as L1 (Kelly, Nordlinger & Wigglesworth 2009)
- FLA work on polysynthesis (Kelly et. al 2014, Forshaw et. al forthcoming, FLA & fieldwork (Kelly et. al 2015))



# Data

## Language Acquisition in Murrinhpatha (LAMP)

<http://languages-linguistics.unimelb.edu.au/current-projects/lamp>

## Participants

Primary caregivers of infants and pre-school-aged children.

All participants have ongoing relationships with the researchers.



# Data

Observation:  
Field-based + over 40  
hrs of recordings



Guided interviews:  
12 semi-naturalistic interviews



Spontaneous interactions:  
@2hrs from LAMP corpus



# Guided interview prompts

Questions motivated via the literature (e.g. Bouchard 1992, 2014, Slobin 1967). These included:

- Do kids learn language quickly? How?
- Do they already know language when they're born?
- When do they learn Murrinhpatha 'right through'?
- What sounds do they make first? First words?

# The language learning child

- Infants and young children are treated by older Murrinhpatha speakers as social partners.
- People greet infants and children, talk to them and sometimes play with them.
- Babies are considered an individual person with independent behaviours and tastes.

# RQ1 Findings

**Overall, language development is viewed as one of several developmental milestones.**

**As to how children learn language, beliefs varied substantially.**

**4 elements were mentioned as being key to language learning:**

- Explicit teaching or modelling**
- Hearing others use language**
- Participating in interactions with others,**
- Imitating others**

# Developmental trajectory

- Children can think before they talk and biological development leads to speech
- Children's first sounds are produced before teeth come in (early words: pipi, mama)
- Children begin speaking MP right through at around puberty (but this differs with age of caregiver respondent)
- Participants can point to good speakers, e.g. Elsie (at proto-word stage) speaks Murrinhpatha, Nan'githemerri and English

# Differences in Language Ideologies

## Primary language ideology 1

- Children need to be explicitly taught language
- (1) “*you gotta tell em what ta say*”. (Tania)
- Elicitation routines employed for this teaching, often involving the prompt *thama* ‘you (sg) say/do’

# Differences in Language Ideologies

## Primary language ideology 2

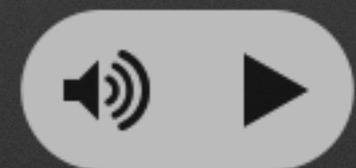
- Children learn through listening to others
  - (2) *“when they’re crawling, and walking they’re always listening to what everyone is saying”*. (Nora)
  - (3) *“just listen maybe old lady and old man ... doing just sit and story”*. (Valerie)
  - (4) *“just listen kardu ngalla ngalla [to older people]”*. Lauren)

# Imitation

- Irrespective of ideology, the majority of participants noted imitation as being a key feature of language learning.

(5) *“When I talk and then Walet-ka she copy with me”*  
(Annunciata)

(6) *“When Julie growl at her [the child] she growl back at her. Julie she swear at her she swear back”* (Sarah)



# Interaction

Numerous respondents linked children's participation in interactions to language learning, again irrespective of language ideology



(7)

*S: But Thabat he does understand what Daddy said to him in Themerri [Nan'githemerri]*

*R: yeah*

*S: and then he just go and grab that thing (hm) and when my mum talk to him Murrinpatha he speaks lots of Murrinpatha.*

*R: Mmm*

# Later development

- Speech errors are expected to decrease with age.
- (8) “*They* [young children] *understand but they talk babytalk*” (Carla)
- Late development: a child aged 4;5 being born premature and thus still talking like a baby; a child is a *pari pari* (spirit child).  
  
(9) “*Some kids do and some don’t*” [learn to speak early]  
(Annunciata)

# RQ2 Modified register?

- There is special register or vocabulary set used exclusively with children.
- 6 participants say they modify their language to children (up until around 3 years).
- 6 participants believe that adult modified CDS assists children, even if they don't modify language themselves.

# RQ 3: Input in Murrinhpatha

## Prompts:

(10) kanam pangudangu thama  
3s.be(4) over.there 2s.say(34)  
*say, "he's back over there"* (Tania > Belinda 3;6)

(11) murrinh thama yawu,  
speech 2s.say(34). hey

da purtek ngay=wa kanhi=yu thama  
place land 1s=emph here=cls 2s.say(34)  
*hey say it, "this land is mine", say it!* (Carla > Julia 3;2)

# CDS: Prompts

	CP	EP	TT
Prompt	19	24	79
	young mid old	young mid old	young mid old
	9 4 6	11 7 6	65 13 1

Adapted from Kelly, Mansfield & Forshaw (in prep)

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# Prompting



RQ1: How do children learn?

- Interacting
- Imitating
- **Modelling**
- **Listening**

# Conclusions...

RQ2: Is there a modified register?

Some modification in CDS

- not necessary
- not a speech register

RQ3: What is Mp input like?

- favouring modelling links to more prompts

*“She’s gonna learn it ; she can speak it when she’s ready - bigger...”*

(Martha)



- Wadeye child and parent participants
- Australian Research Council: ARC DP110100961, 2011-2015, From little things big things grow: how children learn a morphologically complex
- Research Unit for Indigenous Languages (RUIL)