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 Professor Rachel Nordlinger and Associate Professor Nick Thieberger.

This newsletter presents some of the highlights of the last 5 months, and focuses particularly on events, fieldwork, new and continuing projects, and new grants.

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

YÄKU GA RIRRAKAY (SOUNDS AND LETTERS)

Jill Wigglesworth spent 10 days in Yirrkala in early March, just before COVID-19 cut off contact with communities and disrupted flights. Jill visited to work on the final stages of an app designed to teach children phonological awareness in their language, Dhuwaya. Phonological awareness is a crucial skill for learning to read and ongoing literacy acquisition since it means children are able to manipulate sounds by separating them and blending them, and associate them to relevant letters. The school at Yirrkala is bilingual and were keen to work on developing this Dhuwaya app, which has been a joint venture with Yalmay Yunupingu, Jake Stockley, Robyn Beecham, the app developer Fardin Elias, and Jill. For this visit, Fardin also came, and it was agreed that having the developer on site and able to make immediate changes was enormously helpful. Jill and Fardin had also developed a short 20 question app to test the children’s current level of knowledge about phonological awareness in Dhuwaya based on the app developed some years ago by then RUIL PhD student Gemma Morales.

In addition to finalising the app, the team managed to test 75 children from preschool to year 6 on their phonological awareness skills, which will be an important baseline to determine how effective the teaching app is for their learning development down the track. The next steps will be for the children in Transition through to grade 3 to be introduced to the teaching app and to work with it over a number of weeks both independently and in conjunction with the teacher in classroom teaching activities. At the end of this period, the children will be retested to determine how much their phonological awareness in Dhuwaya has improved. Ultimately, the app will help with their transition to English literacy in year 3 since phonological awareness skills are easily transferred to other alphabetic languages once they have been acquired in a child’s first language.

This project has the potential to make an enormous difference to literacy acquisition for these children in both Dhuwaya and English, and it is hoped that this will prove to be a useful model for developing literacy skills in other Indigenous languages as well.
Place-based cultural knowledge – of ceremonies, songs, stories, language, kinship and ecology – binds Australian Indigenous societies together. Over the last 100 years or so, records of this knowledge – audiocassettes, photographs, films, written texts, maps, and digital recordings – have been accumulating at an ever-increasing rate. Yet this extensive documentary heritage is in many cases dispersed. The Indigenous people who participated in the creation of the records, or their descendants, may have little idea of where to find the records or how to access them. This new book, *Archival Returns: Central Australian and beyond*, discusses these issues and strategies that are being developed to overcome some of these problems. There are 16 chapters, including several written by RUILers. The book was launched at the Australian Languages Workshop on Minjerribah on the 28th February by Jane Simpson from ANU who said, “In sum, this book is a wonderful collection showing how some of the intangible cultural heritage of Aboriginal groups and of Australia has been collected, catalogued, made accessible, returned and re-used.”

The cover painting, by Anmatyerr artist and educator April Campbell Pengart from Ti Tree in the Northern Territory, represents a coolamon which “is used for looking after things, just like archives hold our knowledge”. The designs on the coolamon represent the landscape of the land and the languages.

The collection is co-published with Language Documentation & Conservation and Sydney University Press, and is available for free digitally or in hard copy.

**Murrinhpatha Language in Darwin prison**

This February–March, Murrinhpatha elder Nguluuyguy Margaret Perdjert, with the help of Murrinhpatha linguist Nguvudirr Jeremiah Tunmuck and RUIL member John Mansfield, trialled a new type of language activity in Darwin prison. Speakers of Aboriginal languages in northern Australia are greatly over-represented in Darwin prison. But while prison sentences are a difficult time for prisoners and their families, they can be used as an opportunity for positive activities, rehabilitation and healing. Providing activities for prisoners in their own language is a great way of doing this.

The Murrinhpatha trial program ran for four weeks, with 12 Murrinhpatha prisoners attending. Program activities included literacy, sharing traditional bush knowledge, and discussing how to express elements of the daily prison routine in both English and Murrinhpatha. All activities were done using digital tablets, allowing participants to quickly produce ebook materials combining voice, text, and images. An example of a participant’s work is pictured above.

The trial program was very well received by participants. All participants produced highly creative materials, with highlights such as illustrated explanations of seasonal changes in plant and animal behaviour. Spelling was also surprisingly popular!

Additional trial sessions have been conducted in the Tiwi language by elder Pirrawayingi Puruntatameri, and further trials are planned for the Kunwinjku language. The Northern Territory Department of Corrections is now examining how Aboriginal language activities can be included more extensively in prison programs.
MANINGRIDA KIN SIGN POSTERS

Four sign language posters on the theme of kinship have recently been published by Batchelor Press. They represent Maningrida/Central Arnhem Land languages Ndjębbana, Gun-nartpa, Burarra, Kuninjku, Kune, Wurlaki, and Djinang. The posters feature a range of kin signs, including those for husband/wife, siblings, parents, grandparents, in-laws, cross-cousins and avoidance kin such as ‘poison cousins’. The posters were illustrated by Jennifer Taylor and the poster design was by Chris Storey.

The production of these posters brings together a number of organisations and individuals who have worked together over several years, including over 30 language speakers working with Lúrra Language and Culture at Maningrida College, along with linguists and language workers. The Maningrida Action Project was coordinated by Margaret Carew (Batchelor Institute) and Jennifer Green (University of Melbourne, RUIL, CoEDL) with the assistance of Carolyn Coleman (Lúrra Language and Culture) and supported by an Australian Research Council DECRA Award.

ACQUISITION SKETCH MANUAL

RUIL members Barb Kelly, Rebecca Defina, and Lucy Davidson are working with international collaborators including Birgit Hellwig, Shanley Allen, and Evan Kidd to prepare a Acquisition Sketch Manual to inspire and support language documentation researchers in developing initial descriptions of child language acquisition in lesser-studied languages.

A comprehensive theory of language acquisition must explain how infants can learn any one of the world’s 7000 languages. However, theories of language and cognitive development are grounded in data from only around 100 languages (i.e. 1-2% of the world’s languages). Moreover, this sample is strongly biased towards major European languages. There is increasing concern over the limitations of this skewed data, yet the research needed to fill this typological gap is often seen to pose daunting methodological obstacles. Our goal is thus to facilitate the creation of initial descriptions of language acquisition of many lesser-studied languages around the world. This has led to the development of the Acquisition Sketch model – a description of the acquisition of a language based on 5 hours of recordings with children aged two to four years.

In conjunction with the development of the Acquisition Sketch Manual, a team of researchers are working on a set of example Acquisition Sketches, including a sketch of Pitjantjatjara by Rebecca Defina and Wanyima Wighton (honours student).
COVID-19

Our thoughts and support are with our friends and collaborators isolated in remote communities during this time. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, especially those living in remote communities, are at greater risk from COVID-19. We fully support the closure of communities and while we miss our colleagues we are respecting social distancing advice to ensure we do not put any Indigenous communities at risk during these tough times. We are all looking forward to returning to business as usual, but not until we can feel confident that it will be safe for everyone. In the meantime, we are exploring other ways in which we can continue to collaborate and support ongoing language work in remote Indigenous communities.

For language resources (such as this ‘Wash Your Hands Protect Your Family’ poster in Mudburra) visit the Research Unit for Indigenous Language’s COVID-19 Resource page.

Let’s get through COVID-19 together!

Language Word Search

We have created a word search using the 50 words website as the resource. You can find 15 words in Awabakal – good luck!

koyiyang (fire) baato (water) wipe (wind)
panal (sun) yeleana (moon) moroko (sky)
biintan (father) wonai (child) bangai (today)
keyawai (no) makoro (fish) bayiibayii (emu)
tibin (bird) nukuro (nose) woolang (head)