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 Professor Gillian Wigglesworth.

This newsletter presents some of the highlights of the last four 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

Important study into Indigenous children’s ear health and phonological awareness

Aboriginal children tend to suffer from ear infections at a much higher rate than the majority of the population. This can affect their hearing and impact on their language and education. Jill Wigglesworth and her collaborators, Mridula Sharma and Katherine Demuth (Macquarie University) are investigating the relationship between the hearing of Indigenous children in the Northern Territory, and their performance on early literacy activities with the goal of providing evidence-based advice for teachers and parents.

Mridula and Jill have now made three trips to the NT to visit three different schools. Together with a rotating team of five final year audiology students, they have now tested 170 local school children aged 5-7 years to determine their hearing and auditory processing ability as well as their phonological awareness. The preliminary results suggest that children’s phonological awareness improves with age and that Indigenous children tend to have significantly poorer hearing than the greater population. More seriously, a significant number of children had ear infections, and these children were referred to the local health centre for further appraisal. To date a correlation between ear health and phonological awareness has not been found, although not all the data has been analysed. The results of this research may help to uncover some of the factors that impact school readiness in Indigenous children.

Jill and Mridula also gave presentations at the schools including approaches to enhancing children’s hearing abilities in the classroom by making classroom more “hearing friendly” by including soft furnishings, including material, carpets and netting to stop sound from bouncing off the walls. The project also provides audiology students with their first taste of working with Aboriginal students in remote communities, giving them the chance to consider the possibility of working as audiologists in the NT when they complete their study.

Image: Banbapuy Whitehead and a student working on a literacy activity test in the classroom.

Research Unit for Indigenous Language
School of Languages and Linguistics
University of Melbourne
Victoria 3010 Australia
RUIL-contact@unimelb.edu.au
arts.unimelb.edu.au/indiglang

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@indiglang
In early March, funded by the RUIL Indigenous Scholar Scheme, Indigenous researchers Makinti Minutjukur, Katrina Tjitayi and Umatji Tjitayi visited Melbourne to present at the 2018 Australian Languages Workshop (ALW) with RUIL postdoc researcher Rebecca Defina. The four researchers have been working together on a joint project investigating recent changes in the Pitjantjatjara language as spoken in Pukatja (Ernabella). Makinti, Katrina and Umatji are celebrated educators and artists currently working with the Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Education Committee. They have been increasingly concerned by changes they have observed in how people are speaking Pitjantjatjara and enthusiastically joined Rebecca Defina in a collaborative effort to document these changes. Makinti, Katrina and Umatji were all highly engaged by ALW. They attended most presentations and took a lot away from them. Katrina was particularly interested in the talks on hand signs and made pages of notes comparing Western Desert signs she knew with others being discussed in the talks. They were all fascinated by Kriol and we had many lengthy discussions about its status as a language and relationship to other languages. The trip broadened Makinti, Katrina, and Umatji’s ideas of what is possible in language work and gave them new connections to help them implement these new ideas in the APY communities. On the first day of the workshop between talks, Makinti, Katrina and Umatji created three incredible artworks depicting the relationship of language with members of their family and the broader community. These paintings are now in pride of place on level 3 at the School of Languages and Linguistics, along with the story belonging to each painting and a bio of the artist. Make sure you drop by and take a look!
Cris Edmonds-Wathen in Warruwi

RUIL postdoc Cris Edmonds-Wathen has been working with Warruwi Community School in Arnhem Land on a project to extend children’s proficiency in spatial language in Mawng. Cris has been working with Jacobina Gumurdal, an Assistant Teacher in the Early Years class, to develop mathematics lessons in Mawng that focus on sequencing in time and space. Jacobina has begun teaching the lessons, emphasizing to the students that they need to learn “Maths Mawng” as well as English maths. Developing the foundation to talk about mathematical ideas in their first language in a school context is hoped to be beneficial for the students’ future learning in both Mawng and English. This project is extending Jacobina’s teaching capabilities, and forms part of the school’s enriching of its Indigenous Language and Culture program.

Cris has also been assessing the children’s current spatial language proficiency in both English and Mawng, and plans to re-assess the children later in the year to determine the impact of the teaching program. The children’s interviews ask the children to place objects in response to verbal instructions and to describe object arrangements. Some interviews have been conducted by Rachel Meyinbara in Mawng, and some have been pre-recorded in Mawng and English. These assessments will provide valuable information about the learning of spatial concepts by Mawng children in two languages.

National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Curricula Project

Rachel Nordlinger attended a stakeholder roundtable meeting at Parliament House in Canberra on Thursday March 29 2018, as part of the expert panel for the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Curricula Project. The goal of this project, led by Professor Marcia Langton, is to create innovative ways to bring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content into the school curriculum in ways that are easily accessible by teachers, and which showcase the wealth of knowledge and expertise of Australia’s First Peoples. The initial proposal developed by Prof. Langton and the expert panel was presented to the meeting, which was attended by Senator the Hon Simon Birmingham, Minister for Education and Training; Senator the Hon Nigel Scullion, Minister for Indigenous Affairs; members of Prime Minister & Cabinet; and representatives from State and Territory Education departments. The proposal was extremely well received, and the project will now move into the next phase of testing, consultation and resource development. Watch this space!

The Sounds of Australian Aboriginal Languages: video series coming soon!

RUIL team members Brighde Collins and Hywel Stoakes have been working hard to create a series of short videos focusing on the sounds of Australian Aboriginal languages. With a relaxed interview-style format and some very daggy attempts at humor, the videos introduce some the sounds found in Aboriginal languages that are different to those in Australian English. Have you ever wondered how to pronounce that tricky word? Want to hear the different ways people say things - and what position the mouth is in to say it? These videos may be for you. The first four videos are: word initial velar nasals; vowels; palatals; and taps and trills. Soon you’ll be able to view the finished products here: http://arts.unimelb.edu.au/indiglang/training/australian-indigenous-languages/sounds-of-aboriginal-languages.
Stefan visits Japan

In March this year, Stefan Schnell has been visiting the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies to work with Asako Shiohara, Keita Kurabe (pictured) and Yukinori Kimoto on the finalisation of annotated corpora of spoken narratives from Sumbawa (Indonesia), Jinghpaw (Myanmar) and Arta (Philippines). While both Sumbawa and Jinghpaw still have many thousands of speakers, the Luzon language Arta is essentially moribund, being fluently spoken by only ten elder speakers. Each corpus comprises about a dozen spoken narratives that were originally collected to document the literary traditions of the respective communities.

The annotations added during this visit target the continuous identity of characters and things talked about in narratives, in addition to their form of expression and their position in sentences. This expanded set of annotations allows for more detailed investigations of how speakers of different languages introduce new things to talk about into a narrative, and possible impacts of related patterns on language change. It also enables investigation of how speakers keep track of things they talk about. Both of these aspects are relevant to Stefan’s collaborative corpus-based typological work on discourse and grammar. The three new and expanded corpora are part of the multilingual corpus Multi-CAST ([https://lac.uni-koeln.de/de/multicast/](https://lac.uni-koeln.de/de/multicast/)) and will be accessible online soon.

Katie on fieldwork in Milingimbi

RUIL PhD student Katie Jepson was in Milingimbi in August and September last year, on a fieldtrip for her PhD project. Katie’s research is centred on finding out about the speech sounds of Djambarpuyŋu, one of the languages spoken in Milingimbi. On this trip, Katie recorded people speaking lists of words, narratives about the moon, and ran a perception study. The wordlist recordings contribute to Katie’s continuing study of stress in Djambarpuyŋu, and in the future, she will investigate how speakers use melody and rhythm when telling stories through analysing the moon stories. Katie hopes to speak with the story-tellers next year about waystosharetheseengagingstorieswithotherfamiliesinMilingimbi.

Twenty speakers of Djambarpuyŋu took part in the perception study which was designed to investigate how people process speech sounds. The perception study was motivated by results from Katie’s previous work. The aim was to find out how listeners use the duration of vowels and consonants when deciding which word they heard. After completing the task, a number of people who took part noted other aspects of how words are said that would be interesting to investigate in further perception studies, too.

Welcome and farewell!

The first few months of 2018 has seen a number of new arrivals to the RUIL team: we welcome Dr Jill Vaughan, whose project, funded by the Endangered Languages Documentation Project, is focusing on dialectal variation in Burarra. Welcome to Jill! We are also very pleased to welcome two new PhD students. Sasha Wilmoth will be working on intergenerational variation and change in Pitjantjatjara; and Leonard Freeman, will be investigating NAPLAN testing in Indigenous communities.

We are also farewelling some of the RUIL team in the first quarter of this year. Anna Stephen departed in February; Hywel Stoakes (pictured right in his new habitat) has just begun a position at the University of Auckland; and our Project Officer Brighde Collins (pictured left) will be starting a new role at the Groote Eylandt Language Centre (yep, this is my last go at editing the RUIL Newsletter! Thanks to everyone for your support over the last 3 years, it’s been fun, folks!).

Background image: Returning from a hunting trip, Dhipirri outstation. Photo: Katie Jepson