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

RUUL 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 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://indiglang.arts.unimelb.edu.au

Fieldwork report: Dr Stefan Schnell

This October, I visited the village of Vera’a on the west coast of Vanua Lava, the largest of the Banks Islands in the northern Torba Province of the Republic of Vanuatu, one of Australia’s closest neighbours in the Pacific. Like all other languages of Vanuatu, Vera’a belongs to the group of Oceanic languages within the Austronesian language family.

During my 12th or so stay on Vanua Lava since end 2006, we continued our documentation of local literature and history. We decided to compile an extended edition of stories, and Charity Hope and Markson Vorēs prepared an edition of further stories from earlier spoken versions. Janet and George Atkin translated these new edited stories into Bislama, the creole language that is considered the national language of Vanuatu. Markson also started drawing illustrations for some of these stories. We also collected a few further stories from a number of speakers who we had not recorded before.

A few older speakers recollected accounts of historical events, including episodes from WW2, blackbirding, and the major earthquake and landslide in 1945. The latter is one of the major events in the recent history of Vanua Lava: the landslide destroyed gardens and settlements in an extended area about 10km north of today’s Vera’a village. This area was populated by speakers of two languages, Vera’a and the nowadays moribund language Lemerig. Both groups subsequently resettled to today’s village of Vera’a, where only the Vera’a language was retained, and today Lemerig – though remembered by many speakers of Vera’a – is spoken only by one elderly couple.
CONGRATULATIONS!

We are very pleased to announce some excellent success stories for the RUIL team in 2016. Warm congratulations to the two RUIL PhD students who completed their PhDs during 2016. Isabel O’Keefe’s thesis, *Multilingual manyardi/kun-borrk: Manifestations of multilingualism in the classical song traditions of western Arnhem Land*, draws on linguistic and musicological perspectives to examine the way in which the manyardi/kun-borrk public dance-song traditions of western Arnhem Land manifest and contribute to the linguistic diversity of the region. Bill Forshaw’s thesis, *Little kids, big verbs: The acquisition of Murrinhpatha bipartite stem verbs*, examines the acquisition of Murrinhpatha, a polysynthetic language from northern Australia, based on longitudinal data from 5 children over two years, contributing a new perspective to understanding acquisition and linguistic diversity.

A huge congratulations also to RUIL postdoc Rebecca Defina who graduated with a cum laude at her PhD Defence on 3 November at the Radboud University Nijmegen in the Netherlands.

Two RUIL team members have also received ARC Discovery Project grants for 2017-2020: Barb Kelly, Jill Wigglesworth (along with Carmel O’Shannessy) for “Learning to tell a narrative in Murrinhpatha”, and Jill Wigglesworth (along with Professor Rhonda Oliver; Ms Robyn Ober; Dr Susy Macqueen; Professor Timothy McNamara; Dr Ute Knoch) for “Culturally inclusive language assessments for Indigenous Aboriginal students.”

Linguistics Roadshow visits Broome, Western Australia

In August, community members in Broome, WA were visited by the Linguistics Roadshow - a workshop program developed by RUIL student Katie Jepson and associates Jill Vaughan and Rosey Billington. They were joined this year by RUIL student Pete Nyhuis and also by Amit German.

The Linguistics Roadshow is an interactive showcase introducing the science of language for high-school students. The Roadshow has been funded by the ARC Centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language since 2015, with the inaugural workshops being held at schools in the Wimmera region of western Victoria. This year, the team were invited to visit Broome as part of a writer’s festival, Corrugated Lines: A Festival of Words.

During the visit, the team visited Year 8 and Year 9 students at Broome high schools to talk about linguistics, global language diversity, language variation, and Australia’s diverse linguistic landscape. The students also took part in activities including a Dyirbal language puzzle, an introduction to speech sounds and the vocal tract, and mapping lexical variation in Australian English.

The Roadshow team were also invited to speak at the opening of the festival at the Broome Public Library, and attend other festival events. They enjoyed a visit to Mabu Yawuru Ngan-ga, and heard about the fantastic work being done by the language centre team, and were also treated to a crash course in Yawuru grammar.

The Roadshow team with the team from Mabu Yawuru Ngan-ga: left to right Maya, Mick, Amit, Pete, Katie, Rosey and Coco. Photo: Rosey Billington.
The DalyLanguagesProject

2016 saw the establishment of an exciting new repatriation project run by RUIL Director Rachel Nordlinger and Dr Ian Green. From 1980 until the mid-1990s, Ian conducted linguistic fieldwork in the Daly region in the Northern Territory. During this time he created an extensive collection of audio recordings, field notes and analyses on many of the languages in the area. Most of these languages are no longer spoken by more than a few elderly speakers, and there has been very little published on any of them, making Green’s collection a treasure trove of precious language material.

The Daly Languages project makes this incredible collection available to the communities that Ian worked with, as well as the general public, via a website portal http://www.dalylanguages.org. This portal provides direct links to the digitized audio recordings, and also includes (where possible) other resources on the languages, as well as a map contextualising the language area, the historical relationships between the Daly languages and some brief grammatical sketches. This portal is the first of its kind for Australian Indigenous languages, and represents a new direction in packaging and making easily accessible legacy linguistic material.

In July 2016 Green and Nordlinger travelled through the Daly region on a repatriation trip, visiting the family members of the speakers and returning copies of the recordings via USB (see photos, below). In an excellent article in The University of Melbourne’s Pursuit, Rachel reflects that “for Indigenous languages a lot simply has never been recorded and that which has been recorded has mostly been the work of linguists. So it is extremely important to return what we’ve taped because in so many cases it is the last chance for people to access this knowledge”.

To read more about Rachel and Ian’s reflections on the trip and the project, visit http://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/preserving-precious-indigenous-languages.

WELCOME!

A warm welcome to RUIL’s two new staff members. Tim Brickell joins us through the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme, carrying out documentation work on Tonsawang, an endangered and undocumented language of North Sulawesi, Indonesia. Cris Edmonds-Wathen has just started a position funded by the Research Unit for Indigenous Language, working on language and education in the Australian Indigenous context.
First computer game in Ngaanyatjarra under development

Teenagers spend a lot of time on computer games, but few computer games draw on Indigenous languages and cultures. Building on ideas generated at the RUIL Getting in Touch workshop in Alice Springs in 2014, the ‘Tjaa Yuti – Western Desert Verbal Arts’ team, together with the ARC Centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language (CoEDL), is creating such a game through the Game Maker: Ngarlpuputju project.

Ngaanyatjarra linguist, CoEDL Research Fellow and ARC Discovery Indigenous Fellow, Elizabeth Marrkilyi Ellis says the endless runner game Tjinari (meaning ‘someone always on the go’ in Ngaanyatjarra) is delighting Ngaanyatjarra schoolchildren during its development phase. “The whole process is exciting for them and us. We have recorded the children's voices for the game so when they go to play the game, it will be their own voice or a friend’s voice that gives the warning ‘palayi’, meaning ‘watch out’ and when they successfully complete a task or navigate the obstacle they will hear their own voice saying ‘walykumunu’ meaning ‘excellent’.”

The students at the Warakurna Campus of Ngaanyatjarra Lands School in Western Australia are continuing to help the team refine the game and adding ideas as they go along. It is an exciting project producing a unique Aboriginal language game, which everyone hopes will become an open source template for other Aboriginal languages. When completed the game will be available to download onto Android devices and tablets.

A project like this needs the collaboration of people with different skills. Elizabeth Marrkilyi Ellis is working with linguists Inge Kral (RUIL Associate and Steering Committee member) and Jane Simpson at ANU. Conor Tow, a student at the ANU School of Art, has drawn all the images to depict desert landscapes, plants, animals, monsters and concepts. He is working with programmers Jiamou Sun, Qiancheng Wang, Jixuan Cao and Shuaichen Song as part of the ANU Research School of Computer Science ‘TechLauncher’ initiative. Project management and inspiration are supplied by ANU student, Alexandra Grant. Team members meet regularly and are using modern collaborative software development practices and tools.


Season’s Greetings!

We hope you all have a lovely summer break.

Thank you for your support and engagement over 2016: we look forward to sharing our news and achievements with you in 2017.