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 Associate 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/

Fieldwork Report: Dr Brett Baker and Dr Rikke Bundgaard-Nielsen

Brett and Rikke are currently pursuing two research projects.

Firstly, they are wrapping up their 3-year ARC Discovery Project ‘Learning to talk whitefella way’, which investigates the sound system of North Australian Kriol and how this affects children’s learning of Standard Australian English. As part of this project, they travel to Numbulwar and Beswick, NT, to work with adults and primary school-aged children. In 2015, they were accompanied by a student from the University of Arizona, Elise Bell, on an 8 week internship funded by the National Science Foundation (US) and Australian Academy of Sciences.

Last year, they tested children aged 5-12 with a new set of Kriol speech production and Kriol-based phonemic awareness tests which showed that children’s voicing categories in Kriol reflect adult Kriol behaviour (see image). The tests also showed that even young children have a canonical Kriol lexicon and systematically reject Kriol word mispronunciations - an important finding because it suggests that Kriol words do not vary in pronunciation as much as is sometimes claimed and that Kriol-speaking children have age-appropriate phonemic awareness when tested in their own language (Kriol).

The team’s other current research project focuses on the internal word structure in the traditional language Wubuy, spoken in Numbulwar on the Gulf of Carpentaria. In 2015 and early 2016, the team piloted two psycholinguistic experiments probing the awareness of internal word structure by Wubuy speakers. The results so far suggest that speakers do indeed have opinions about the natural and meaningful ‘breaks’ within complex words in this language. This has implications for how we describe this structure and teach it to children.

Merelda (and community members) from Numbulwar, modelling the testing set-up
A visit from Wadeye youth language worker Madjarra Luke Parmbuk

In October 2015, The University of Melbourne’s linguistics department was visited by Madjarra Luke Parmbuk, who came for a week to work with RUIL team members on Murrinhpatha transcription, phonetics and grammatical structure. Madjarra is a 27-year-old Marri Ngarr man from Wadeye, N.T., whose everyday language is Murrinhpatha. He has done extensive language work in Wadeye over the last 3 years, and was very excited to continue this work in Melbourne. His dedication to language work is especially impressive, given that young men from Wadeye often lack the confidence to participate in formal work or education.

During his time in the linguistics department, Madjarra worked with multiple RUIL team members on a variety of projects. With John Mansfield, he worked on translating and transcribing extensive archival Murrinhpatha narratives recorded in the 1970s. In addition, they also created some contemporary recordings: both of these will go toward John’s project, ‘The dynamics of Murrinhpatha across three generations’. Madjarra also generously assisted experimental phonetician Hywel Stoakes with the ultrasound imaging of tongue dynamics in Murrinhpatha consonant articulation.

Madjarra also provided pilot data for a forthcoming study by Rachel Nordlinger and Evan Kidd, which investigates the correlation between the process of sentence planning (as reflected through eye movements) and the grammatical structure of the language being spoken. This study complements and builds on research by PI Steve Levinson and his colleagues at MPI Nijmegen by extending it to the polysynthetic and ‘free word order’ languages of Australia.

Madjarra was fascinated by the multi-ethnic population of Melbourne, and by the sheer number of people in one place. He suggested that he might be able to overlook the burrurr ngalla ‘intense cold’ in considering a repeat visit.

Welcome to RUIL’s new faces

We have new faces at RUIL! A warm welcome to the following wonderful people who will be working with the RUIL team to widen the scope of our research into some really interesting areas. Keep an eye out for updates in this newsletter and on our website as their research develops over the next few years.

First up, we have two post docs starting in 2016. In the first half of the year, we have been joined by Anna Stephen, who will be working with Indigenous children who have or have had Otitis Media in the NT. In mid-2016, Rebecca Defina will begin working on Indigenous children’s acquisition of Pitjantjatjara in the Central Desert.

Semester 1 2016 has also seen three new PhD students begin their time here:
- Carly Steele will be working with Indigenous Kriol speaking children in educational settings (supervised by Gillian Wigglesworth)
- Peter Nyhuis will be working in the area of phonology and morphology of a language spoken in East Arnhem Land (supervised by Brett Baker)
- Maria Karidakis will be working on language in end-of-life communications in an Indigenous Australian context (supervised by Barb Kelly)
Launch of Ruth Singer’s book: The dynamics of nominal classification

RUIL team member Dr Ruth Singer has published a new book, *The dynamics of nominal classification: productive and lexicalised uses of gender agreement in Mawng*. Launched at the annual Australian Languages Workshop in early March by another linguist working on Iwaidjan languages, Dr Robert Mailhammer, and published by Pacific Linguistics, this book is the result of years of in-depth research, conducted mainly with community members from Warruwi, South Golburn Island, NT. This book will be of interest to anyone interested in nominal classification or cross-linguistic approaches to idioms. Well worth a read, and worth ordering for your library!

Upcoming RUIL Public Lecture: Aboriginal memories of inundation of the Australian Coast

Join our guest lecturer Associate Professor Nicholas Reid (UNE) as he shares the research he has carried out with geographer Patrick Nunn, into the manner in which post-glacial rises in sea levels have been passed down through the oral history storytelling traditions found in Aboriginal culture. This fascinating research links stories with geographical evidence, resulting in the ability to assign these some of these stories an age range of around 7000 years old.

**When:** 6pm - 7pm, Wednesday 25th May 2016

**Where:** Theatre A, Elisabeth Meyer building, The University of Melbourne, Parkville

For further information and to make bookings (essential), please visit: https://events.unimelb.edu.au/events/6351-aboriginal-memories-of-inundation-of-the-australian-coast
We are sad to learn that Chester Street, Catholic missionary and linguist, died on 11 November 2015. Street was instrumental in documenting and decoding the Murrinhpatha language of Wadeye, NT, focusing on community literacy and education. He maintained a close relationship with Murrinhpatha people, and continued work on a dictionary of Murrinhpatha until the final months of his life.

Street is survived by his wife Lynette, with whom he did much of his language work. The Streets did not study linguistics academically, but rather took the practical training course provided by the Summer Institute of Linguistics in the early 1970s. They began their work by surveying languages in the north of Western Australia, before arriving in Wadeye in May 1973 and forming what would become a life-long relationship with the community. They lived in Wadeye for more than a decade, and Chester reached a level of fluency in Murrinhpatha that has been achieved by few if any other non-Aboriginal people.

The Streets’ two towering achievements are the translation of large portions of the Bible into Murrinhpatha, and the documentation of the Murrinhpatha verb conjugation system, which is one of the largest and most complex such systems documented for any language. They were also instrumental in developing the writing system and bilingual education program, while Chester’s dictionary, still a work-in-progress, is also a major achievement. The importance of these documentary achievements is equalled only by the depth of kinship and engagement the Streets invested in the Wadeye community, where they are remembered with enduring love and respect.

In January 2016 RUIL team member and Melbourne University Post Doctoral Fellow Jenny Green and Indigenous Discovery Award recipient Elizabeth Marrkilyi Ellis (ANU) participated in the first ever Theoretical Issues in Sign Language Research (TISLR) conference to be hosted in Australia. The team also included Margaret Carew from the Batchelor Institute; April Pengart Campbell, Clarrie Kemarr Long and Janie Perrwerl Long from Ti Tree; Alice Gaby (Monash University) and Anastasia Bauer (University of Cologne). In addition to their paper on ‘alternate’ sign languages in Central Australia and the Western Desert they also had a poster presentation comparing kinship signs from the Western Desert, Central Desert, Cape York and Arnhem Land. April, Clarrie and Janie were recipients of RUIL’s Indigenous Researcher’s Small Grants Scheme, an initiative which provides financial assistance to enable Indigenous researchers a chance to travel to Melbourne and work with a RUIL team member (in this case, Jenny Green). Thanks also to Karen Mezentsef, a University of Melbourne Honours student studying sign language from Ti Tree, who also attended the conference and kept the women company.