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 second half of 2015, 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 Barb Kelly

Over the past five years Barb Kelly has been immersed in discovering what she can about the acquisition of Murrinhpatha, spoken in Port Keats (Wadeye) in the north west of the NT. Together with members of the Language Acquisition in Murrinhpatha (LAMP) project she has been investigating how children acquire a complex polysynthetic language with a rich morphological system.

Barb’s research has focused primarily on how speakers of Murrinhpatha guide children in their early language use and how children then develop the language. On her third and most recent field trip to Wadeye in October, she enjoyed creating mirth for adults and children alike as she attempted to approximate Murrinhpatha words, especially names for footy teams. During this trip she spent time with primary carers, mainly mothers and grandmothers, learning about local beliefs and attitudes toward language development and how children learn their first language(s). This work, with PhD student Lucy Davidson, builds on earlier research investigating the use of directives and prompts in Murrinhpatha. As with other communities worldwide, carers have a diverse range of ideas around language learning. The pervasive belief is that children develop language through interaction, with some carers stating that proficient speakers need to model language use or “tell em what to say”.

Charcoal drawing at Kurrangu
**RUIL Indigenous cadet: Harley Dunolly-Lee**

Harley Dunolly-Lee is a linguistics and archaeology student at Monash University and has been working with RUIL as part of the Faculty of Arts Indigenous cadet program.

Harley is a proud and passionate Dja Dja Wurrung man. He grew up in Bendigo, and began learning the language of his ancestors when he was 16. There is not much availability of language resources that are accessible to his community, and Harley is working to change this.

Harley is spending his internship working on a Dja Dja Warrung dictionary, building on the work of linguist Barry Blake, and creating a digital database of current knowledge. This will then become a dictionary, which will be created with the Dja Dja Warrung community. Harley says that working to revitalise his language is incredibly important to him, and to his family and community.

**First precious box of cultural materials on its way to digitisation**

In an exciting stage of the ARC Linkage project ‘Re-integrating Central Australian Community cultural collections’, the first box of recordings has been handed over to PARADISEC for digitisation. This ARC project (LP140100806) is a partnership between the Central Land Council (CLC), the peak Indigenous representative body covering the southern half of the Northern Territory; the University of Sydney and the University of Melbourne.

This project will apply current research methods in archiving and community access to help find practical solutions to managing the large amounts cultural and linguistic material held by the Central Land Council. A central aim of the project is to digitise the material and enable Central Australian Indigenous communities better access to their cultural records. The project will identify and integrate information in a common database, work with community members to create a prioritised list of at-risk materials, apply locally meaningful categories for managing the archival materials, and develop strategies to support ongoing sustainability of the collections. As well as safeguarding at-risk materials, it will support Central Land Council strategic activities in land management and intergenerational knowledge transfer, and provide a framework for repatriation policy development.

*From left: Myfany Turpin (USyd), Jennifer Green (UMelb), Anna Yeo (CLC), Brian Connelly (CLC), Linda Barwick (USyd), Rachel Nordlinger (UMelb) & Petronella Vaarzon-Morel (USyd), with the first box to be digitised*
Chau accompanied RNLD trainers Margaret Florey and Katerina Forrester on a two-day training workshop in Shepparton, where they worked with an enthusiastic group of people dedicated to revitalising the Yorta-Yorta language. Chau learnt a lot in the two days and greatly enjoyed the experience. There was a strong focus on avoiding the use of English in these sessions in order to maximise the use of Yorta-Yorta, and the whole workshop was centred around the participants using the language as much as possible.

Alongside the process of learning new vocabulary is the opportunity to practice teaching each other. The participants worked in small groups, taking turns to teach each other the Yorta-Yorta language. In addition to consolidating their knowledge, they also developed an understanding of how to teach the language. Throughout the sessions, the trainers taught linguistic tools necessary for the participants to explore their own language structures.

Chau says “the experience was very empowering. The pride and dedication the participants have for their language not only inspire me to learn more about languages in Aboriginal Australia but also the languages of my own country that are in danger of dying out.”
Introducing Dr Debbie Loakes
A sociophonetic study of Aboriginal English

Dr Debbie Loakes is looking at speech production and perception by Indigenous people in Warrnambool (and surrounds). One of the major findings of Debbie’s previous research is that Australian English listeners perceive speech somewhat differently depending on their regional background. The aim of this project is to include Indigenous speakers of English in the study because there has been relatively little work done on the phonetics of L1 (first language) Aboriginal English, and equally, little is known about speech perception in this variety. Her work also includes an exploration of social factors regarding speech: that is, what motivates people to sound a particular way. The project will compare how Indigenous and non-Indigenous people behave linguistically, and how each group conceptualises language and community.

Public Lectures: Professor Diana Eades (UNE) and Paul Paton and Mandy Nicholson (VACL)

The second half of this year saw RUIL present two public lecture events. In August, Professor Diana Eades presented ‘Indigenous language and communication matters in the law’, using a case study from Western Australia to illustrate the challenges faced by Aboriginal speakers of English, and the importance of intercultural awareness and communication. In October, representatives from the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages (VACL) presented on ‘the revival of Victorian Aboriginal Languages’, outlining the great work VACL does in Victoria. A recording of VACL’s lecture can be viewed at: http://arts.unimelb.edu.au/indiglang/resources

Congratulations

Congratulations to RUIL Masters (research) student Brighde Collins, who recently submitted her MA thesis ‘Aspectual expression in Ngandi: past and present’.

Brighde is now working as the Project Officer for RUIL until mid-2016, so if you get in touch with us here, you will most likely be speaking to her!

From everyone at RUIL, we wish you a safe and happy festive season, and a wonderful summer.

Participant engaged in perception test at Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners corporation (Heywood)

Hopkins Falls, a place of significance to Aboriginal people in the region

From left to right: Cherry Daniels, Brighde Collins and Betty Roberts

From everyone at RUIL, we wish you a safe and happy festive season, and a wonderful summer.