

Language landscapes of children in remote Australia

Jane Simpson

Department of Linguistics, The University of Sydney
Transient Building F12, Sydney, 2006, New South Wales
Tel +61 2 9351 3655
[jane.simpson@usyd.edu.au]

Abstract

Many Indigenous communities in remote Australia are multilingual, and often the languages being spoken in the community are rapidly changing. Traditional languages are spoken by some people, but at the same time new languages are being developed based on the interaction of traditional languages, English and an English-based creole. These new languages vary along a continuum. At one end, the way of talking is close to the way many people in rural Australia talk. At the other end are mixed languages, in which the structure of the new language contains words and features of several languages. In the middle of the range are varieties of an English-based creole. Children in these multilingual communities grow up in language landscapes that are often undergoing rapid change. In this paper I report on some findings from the Aboriginal Child Language Acquisition Project, a longitudinal study recording interactions between pre-school children and their care-givers in some remote Indigenous communities. I consider the findings about language shift in the light of national Census data on the demography of remote Indigenous Australia. I also consider the implications of government policy towards Indigenous Australians for language shift.

Introduction

Michael Clyne has said that linguists and language professionals have a social responsibility to advise people and governments about the advantages of having a multilingual mindset:

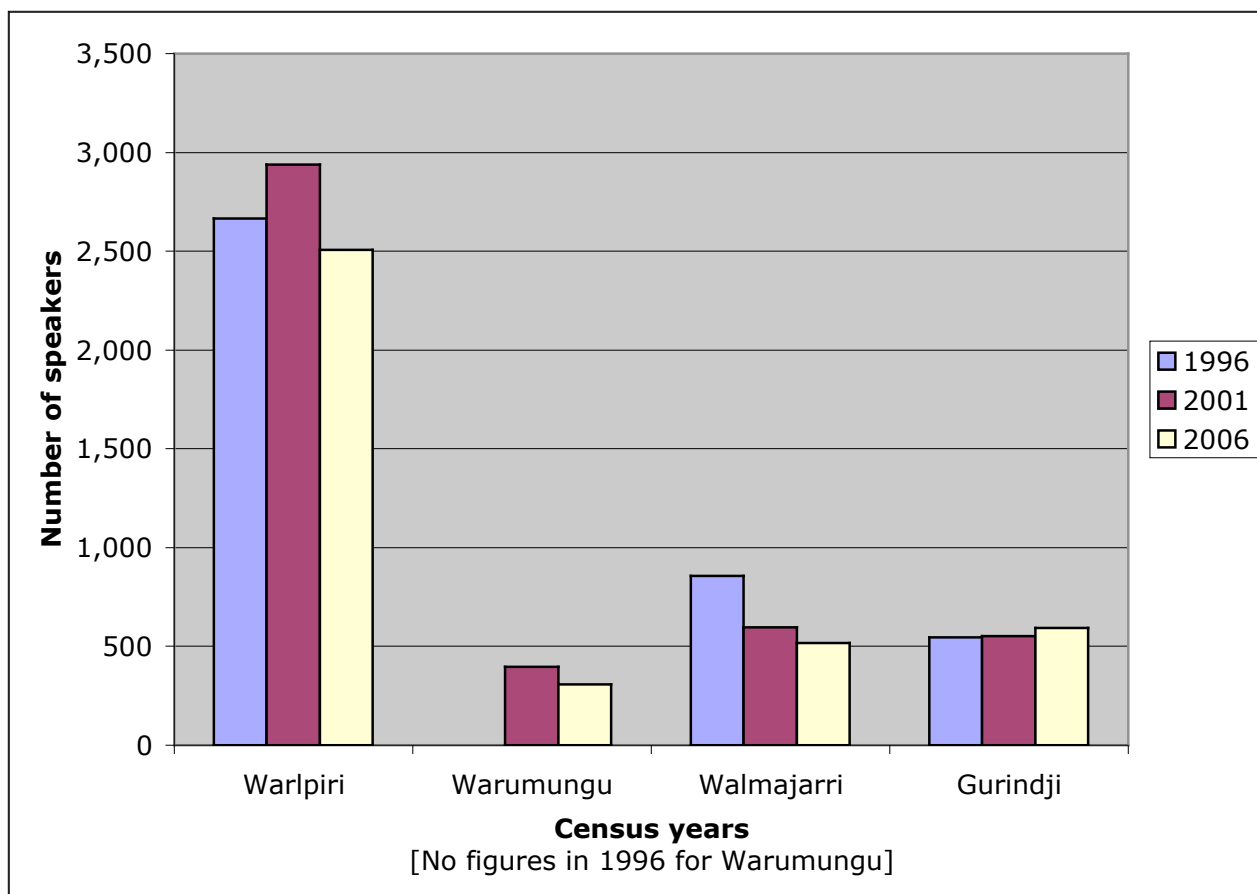
“Helping to make Australia a more language-aware society freed of a complacently monolingual mindset is one of the many exciting tasks confronting Australian linguists today.” (Clyne, 2006)

The few Indigenous languages that are still spoken by children are at risk from the monolingual mindset of Australia, from the imperatives of demography and traditional practices of child raising, and from government policies. In this paper I discuss some of the causes of language endangerment in Australia. I describe how the language landscapes for Indigenous children in northern Australia have changed over the last ten years, starting with some examples of language use and language change in four remote Aboriginal communities. I then show how the language landscapes have changed over the last ten years, using Census data. Here I consider traditional Indigenous child raising practices. Finally I look at the likely effects on Indigenous languages of the changes in Government policy in 2007 which are aimed at encouraging Indigenous people to leave remote communities for towns and itinerant work. I conclude that the language landscapes are likely to change considerably and quite rapidly, as more people shift away from speaking traditional Indigenous languages.

Children in four communities

In this section I describe what is happening with respect to children's language landscapes in some remote Indigenous communities which we studied in the Aboriginal Child Language Acquisition project (Simpson and Wigglesworth, in prep.). The aim of this project was to study how people were talking to children and what children were saying back to them. We worked mainly with three communities in the North of Australia, with comparisons to a fourth. Samantha Disbray, Felicity Meakins, and Karin Moses visited one community each twice a year for three years and worked with community researchers to collect and analyse data from 8 families focussed on a young child in each family, who were aged between 18 months and 2 at the beginning of the project. We followed their language development over three years, recording data in school-type settings, home settings and on bush trips. The three communities are Kalkaringi, which is in Gurindji country (Felicity Meakins and Samantha Smiler Nangala-Nanaku), Tennant Creek which is on Warumungu country (Samantha Disbray and Betty Nakkamarra Morrison), and Yakanarra, which is on Walmajarri country (Karin Moses). We also made comparisons with Lajamanu, a Warlpiri speaking community, where Carmel O'Shannessy has been working.

In all four communities some people speak the traditional languages, but the number of speakers varies. (Figure 1).



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics¹, and National Indigenous Languages Survey

Figure 1: Traditional Indigenous languages in project communities: total speaker numbers 1996 - 2006

The children in our study have loving caregivers, and large networks of siblings and cousins who play with them, and take great responsibility for younger children. Many of the children spend times with grandmothers and great grandmothers. In Kalkaringi the most common family grouping is family living with grandmother who takes care of the children when mothers are working or studying. In Tennant Creek children spend time with grandmothers and great grandmothers when the mothers are working or studying. In Yakanarra there is no common family grouping; some people live in nuclear families (although there is a lot of interaction between families) and some people live in extended family groups. As Musharbash points out for Warlpiri children, they learn early the importance of family relations and the need to keep contact with them (Musharbash, 2001).

At school, children in these communities are taught in standard English, mostly by non-Indigenous teachers. At home, the families and children speak in a range of ways, from the way many country people talk, rural non-standard English, to varieties that sound like the well-known Ngukurr Kriol, to **mixed languages** probably formed by code-switching an English-based creole with traditional language, e.g. Gurindji Kriol.

At Lajamanu, Carmel O'Shannessy has shown that people talk to children in Warlpiri and in a new mixed language Light Warlpiri (O'Shannessy, 2006). Children normally talk Light Warlpiri, but can talk Warlpiri, and this has been supported by school Warlpiri language programmes. It seems likely that intervention by Lajamanu people together with a dedicated principal and teacher linguist in the late 1980s may have halted the shift. None of the other three communities have had

¹ Cat. No. 2068.0 - 2006 Census Tables, 2006 Census of Population and Housing, Australia (Australia), Language Spoken At Home (Australian Indigenous Languages Only) By Sex, Count of persons, Based on place of usual residence.

the same level of resourcing on language work in schools.

At Kalkaringi a new mixed language, Gurindji Kriol, has developed (Meakins and O'Shannessy, submitted), whose sources are Gurindji and Kriol. It has auxiliaries from Kriol, verbs from Kriol and from Gurindji coverbs, nouns from both languages, and uses both prepositions and case suffixes (Charola, 2002; McConvell and Meakins, 2005). Here is an example of a mother-child conversation at Kalkaringi:

(1) MO ca 21, CHI ca 4:
MO: dat guana garra kom gedim yu baitim yu-mob
That goanna's gonna come and get you and bite you all
i garra kom **rarraj** dijei **nyawa kankula**.
It'll come running this way this one above
i garra baitim yu-mob binij
It'll really bite you all.

CHI: i-l be **katurl** im inti Mam
It'll really bite won't it Mum?

MO: hmm yu-rra **katurl** im.
Hmm you'll bite it.

CHI: ai-rra katim **nyanawu** xxx **knife-jawung**.
I'll cut this thing xxx with my knife. [FM041.C]²

The mother starts by using only words shared between Kriol and Gurindji Kriol, but then introduces words shared with Gurindji *rarraj* (running), *nyawa* (pronoun) and *kankula* (above). Her next utterance has no Gurindji words and uses the Kriol verb *baitim*. The child repeats the idea, switching to English *be*, and then a Gurindji word *katurl* for 'biting'. The mother responds using *katurl* but switching the subject to address the child with the Kriol pronoun *yu*. The child then utters a sentence with a Gurindji pronoun *nyanawu*, an English noun followed by a Gurindji case-ending *jawung* meaning 'with'. The child's deliberate choice of a partial synonym shared with Gurindji but not Kriol, for words the mother uses which are shared with Kriol shows that the child has mastery of the synonyms, and, at least on this occasion, is experimenting with the Gurindji source form. The mother listened to this sequence and noticed that the child used the Gurindji word for 'bite' where she used the Kriol word. She suggested to Felicity Meakins that this might have been because the child was spending more time with her grandmothers.

The word order in Gurindji Kriol appears to be influenced by information structure requirements which are likely to match those of the traditional language, Gurindji. Consider the following example, in which expressions translating 'a lot of fish' occur in different orders.

(2) Pretending to fish.
*CHI: bigija **yawu** dij mob.
There's a lot of fish

*GRAN: ma garra **big mob wayi yawu**.
Is there a lot of fish?
ma **big mob yawu** yu mob garram
You've got a lot of fish
big mob yu garram **yawuyawu wayi?**
Have you got a lot of fish?
yu garram hiya **jarrwa ma**.
You've got many here. [FM044]

There is considerable variability as to word order, but initial position is important for emphasising information. This use of initial position is a property of the traditional language Gurindji, and of many other Australian languages, and has been taken over into the new mixed language.

In sum what Meakins found at Kalkaringi is that people mostly talk to children in Gurindji Kriol, a mixed language, and that children mostly talk in Gurindji Kriol. Children may hear older adults using Gurindji amongst themselves, and have some understanding of Gurindji. (Meakins and O'Shannessy, submitted).

In Tennant Creek, Samantha Disbray found that children hear varieties of Wumpurrarni English (WE) (a name some people give to the creole that is used in Tennant Creek), and/or English, with a little Warumungu and other traditional languages (TIL) (Morrison and Disbray, 2007). Children mostly speak in WE, but can switch (e.g. when pretending to be doctors) to speaking close to standard English. (3) shows an adult talking WE.

(3) ADULT:
it no gud fo yu ulkuman,
It's no good for you, old lady
yu **mungku** no gud,
Your stomach's no good.
wangu mungku yu gatim.
Bad stomach you have [SD104C]

There is some use of Warumungu nouns, *wangu* and *mungku*. It is much rarer to find people using Warumungu verbs or Warumungu words expressing actions or feelings. Notice that the object of the sentence *wangu mungku* 'bad stomach' is put at the start of the sentence. Items which are emphasised may be placed initially in sentences as in Gurindji Kriol and in Warumungu, but there is considerable variation.

² Codes such as FM041.C refer to the recording and transcript made in the ALCA project, ultimately to be archived at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies..

In Yakanarra, Karin Moses found that, while people are multilingual and shift with varying degrees of facility between Walmajarri, Kimberly Kriol and English, people mostly talk to children in Kriol and English and a limited number of Walmajarri words. Language directed to children is determined by situational factors including location, purpose, participants and language skills, and age of the interlocutor. Children normally talk in Kriol, but they can switch to English.

Of the Walmajarri words used, twelve were used by only one speaker. Only eleven were used by ten or more speakers. These words are all words for things or people. They don't include words for actions or feelings. In fact most of the 48 words denote objects.

	Number of words in the category
Animals	16
Bodyparts	11
Environment and plants	8
Humans and spirit world	4
Food and drink	3
Material culture	2
Actions	2

Table 2: Semantic categories of the 48 most frequently used words

The influence of traditional ways of presenting information can still be seen in the way people talk at Yakanarra. In this example, the mother first puts the object, the big yellow cake, at the end of the sentence, then in the next sentence she puts it at the beginning.

(4) MOTHER
 ai meik _im _bat big yelo yelo keik .
I'm making a big yellow cake.
big yelo keik ai _l meik _im.
A big yellow cake I'll make.
yelo _wan keik fo ola kid dei angri.
A yellow cake for all the kids who are hungry. [KXM 092B]

In summary, in our data, leaving aside Lajamanu, across the other three communities, no one talks to children solely in a traditional Indigenous language, or solely in standard English. Instead, people use a broad range, from mixed languages like Gurindji Kriol, to traditional languages, to a variety which is close to non-standard rural English. They often switch between these languages, sometimes in a single sentence. This has consequences for the children's future language development. While children in Lajamanu can still produce traditional Warlpiri, in the other communities children are not likely to use the traditional languages in full sentences. Particularly in Kalkaringi, children understand everyday talk in their traditional language. But, if present trends continue, the children in all three communities are unlikely to develop a good active command of these languages. This in turn means that

when they have children, they will be unlikely to pass on the traditional language to those children.

The shift from traditional languages follows roughly the same pattern. First, the words for actions and feelings go, along with the auxiliary system if there is one (or else, as in Lajamanu Light Warlpiri, the Kriol pronoun system is pressed into service to do something similar). Then, the case endings go. Then, the nouns are reduced to those expressing objects, such as animals, plants, bodyparts. However, the use of initial position for expressing salient and prominent information appears to stay for a while.

Census data on languages spoken at home

What is happening in these communities is happening across Australia. The number of speakers of traditional Indigenous languages is declining. An index of language endangerment based on whether children are speaking Indigenous languages was developed in the most recent major work on the state of endangerment of Indigenous Australian languages, the National Indigenous Languages Survey Report 2005 (NILS report) (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages, 2005), prepared by Patrick McConvell, Douglas Marmion and Sally McNicol. This report contains a study of the 1996 and 2001 census data for Indigenous languages, comparing them with other figures on numbers of speakers of Indigenous languages.

Since the NILS report, some of the results of the 2006 Census have appeared online on the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) website (<http://www.abs.gov.au/>). The relevant question is "Does the person speak a language other than English at home?" Unfortunately the online site doesn't yet give the crucial information for the language endangerment index of the ages of the speakers of Indigenous language. However, enough data is given to provide a preliminary picture of the changes in numbers of Indigenous languages over the last ten years. Table 3 compares the language figures from 1996 to 2006.

	1996 Census	2001 Census	2006 Census
Speaks English only	82% 14,564,924	80% 14,875,072	78.5% 15,581,334
Speak other language:	2,657,767	2,841,210	3,146,194
Australian Indigenous Languages	48,193	50,978	55,698
Language not stated	530,138	872,026	1,127,760
Total	17,752,829	18,588,308	19,855,288
Number identifying as Indigenous	352,970	401,916	455,028

Source: ABS 2006³

Table 3: Census data 1996-2006 on languages spoken at home in Australia, and on number of people identifying as Indigenous.

The table shows that most people claim they speak English only at home, although this has decreased slightly over the last ten years. There are far more speakers of immigrant languages like Chinese in Australia than there are of Indigenous languages. Note also that the 2006 figure of 55,698 Indigenous languages speakers covers more than a hundred languages. There is apparently a small increase in speakers of Indigenous languages over the 10 years. But this is an illusion.

Before explaining why the number is an illusion, I shall briefly discuss some necessary cautions on relying on census data on Indigenous languages. The caveats fall into three types - problems with the data collection, problems with the coding, and problems with interpreting the data.

On the data collection and coding, a research team who shadowed the administration of the 2006 census in some northern Indigenous communities (Morphy, in prep.)

³ Cat. No. 2068.0 - 2006 Census Tables 2006 Census of Population and Housing Australia, Language Spoken At Home(A) By Sex For Time Series. Count of persons. Based on place of usual residence.

Cat. No. 2068.0 - 2006 Census Tables 2006 Census of Population and Housing Australia. INDIGENOUS STATUS BY AGE BY SEX FOR TIME SERIES. Count of persons (excludes overseas visitors) Based on place of usual residence. ABS 2001 Census of Population and Housing Australia. Language Spoken at Home by Sex. Count of persons. Based on place of usual residence. ABS 1996 Census of Population and Housing Australia. Basic Community Profile.

noted there was under-counting and over-counting because Indigenous respondents were quite mobile. There was also under-counting of children. They also noted that some of the questions were not understood by the census administrators and the people responding to the census. As well, the ABS note that there has been some miscoding of the census data to do with languages. For example, the 2006 census lists 118 Dhay'yi speakers, compared with 3 people in 2001, apparently because 84 persons who reported that they spoke 'Dari' or 'Thai' at home were miscoded as 'Daii', and included in the Yolngu language Dhay'yi⁴.

On the interpretation of the results, I point to three problems. The first has to do with differences of names of languages - the numbers of speakers of Yolngu Matha, Djambarrpuyngu, Dhuwaya have varied greatly across the three census counts, according to which name was most popular at the time. Some languages, especially the new ones, don't have well-established names. The new mixed language Gurindji Kriol has 4 speakers in the 2006 census; it has far more speakers, but people have not had a name to describe the language they use. As a result they may have recorded themselves as speaking Gurindji or perhaps Kriol or English. This would result in overcounting of Gurindji and Kriol speakers.

The second problem concerns what speaking a language at home means: language of regular communication, versus language of occasional or ceremonial communication, versus language which is being learned (e.g. the 2006 census lists 34 people as speaking Kurna at home, but, since Kurna is a language which has been revived largely from nineteenth century sources, the range of these people's use of Kurna is different from that of the 25% of Yolngu Matha speakers who say they don't speak English well, or the 48 people who speak Warlmanpa at home, and who heard Warlmanpa spoken around them as children). As well, there may be an overestimate of the number of children speaking Indigenous languages, since parents who speak an Indigenous language at home may be taking their children's ability to understand an Indigenous language as equivalent to speaking that language.

The third problem has to do with willingness to admit speaking a particular language, which also relates to having a name to describe the variety a person speaks. There has been a large increase in the number of people

saying they speak Torres Strait Creole (Yumpla Tok) and Kriol, as I shall discuss below.

Bearing these reliability concerns in mind, we return to the question of understanding the apparent increase in language speakers. Considering the number of Indigenous people overall, and comparing the 2006 census figures with the census and NLS report figures for 1996 and 2001, it appears that the number of people identifying as Indigenous is increasing rapidly (13% increase from 1996 in 2001, and also in 2006), but the number of people saying they speak an Indigenous language at home (5% increase from 1996 in 2001, and 10% increase in 2006) is not keeping pace with the increase in people saying they are Indigenous. There's no evidence of a drop in birth-rate in remote Aboriginal communities where Indigenous languages are spoken, and so we might posit that fewer children are learning Indigenous languages. However, the difference in rate of increase of speakers and rate of increase of people identifying as Indigenous is merely suggestive, since the latter could be affected by greater willingness among adults to identify as Indigenous. A proper study would require a community by community study comparing numbers of Indigenous language speakers in different years.

We turn now to those languages which have more than 1000 speakers, given in Table 4. Even for these relatively large languages, the absolute number of speakers is small. For these languages, however, other evidence from community members and linguists suggests that there is a core of people still speaking these languages as a first language, and almost all have a solid number of children speaking them (NLS Report 2005).

<i>Language name</i>	<i>2006 census</i>
Ngaanyatjarra	1,000
Anmatyerr	1,002
Wik Mungkan	1,050
Burarra	1,074
Kalaw Kawaw Ya/Kalaw Lagaw Ya	1,216
Anindilyakwa	1,283
Luritja	1,480
Alyawarr	1,664
Tiwi	1,716
Murrinh Patha	1,832
Warlpiri	2,507
Pitjantjatjara	2,657
Djambarrpuynu	2,766

Arrernte	2,835
Kriol	4,213
Aboriginal English	488 ⁵
Torres Strait Creole	6,042
Total people Indigenous languages	55,695

Source ABS⁶

Table 4: 2006 Census: Number of people speaking major Indigenous languages (1000+ speakers)

A point to notice from Table 4 is that over 10,00 of the speakers are in fact speakers of new Indigenous languages, Kriol or Aboriginal English or Torres Strait Creole (Yumpla Tok). Comparing the figures for 2006 with 2001 (Table 5), we can see that there has in fact been a drop in the number of people saying that they speak traditional languages.

	2001	2006
speakers of "Kriol"	2990	4,213
speakers of Aboriginal English		488
speakers of Torres Strait Creole	1240	6,042
speakers of other Indigenous languages	46,748	44,952
Total:	50,978	55,695

Source: ABS and my calculations

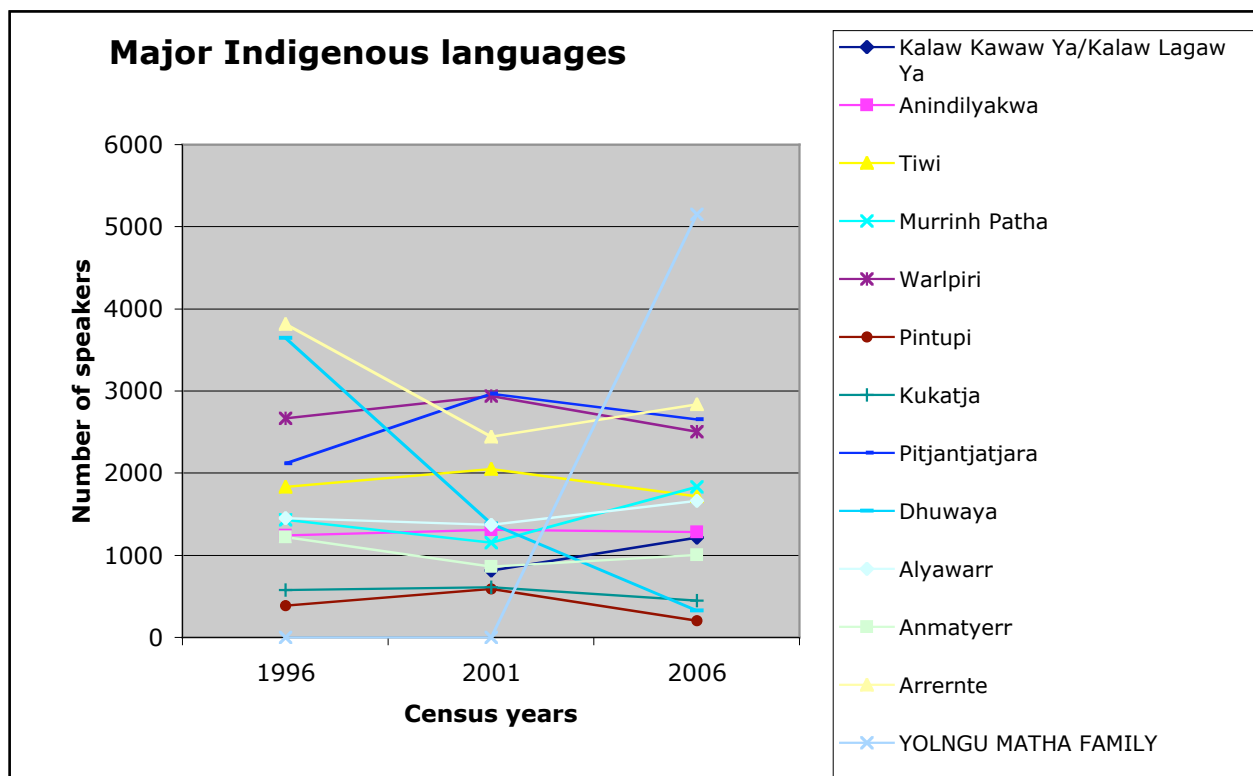
Table 5: Comparison between speakers of new and traditional Indigenous languages, 2001 and 2006

The number and proportion of speakers saying they speak a new language (Kriol, Torres Strait Broken, Aboriginal English or Gurindji Kriol) has increased substantially since 2001. This could be because more people are feeling confident enough and knowledgeable enough about what they speak to claim it. Or it could be because there are more people speaking it.

Figure 2 shows the changes in numbers of speakers of the larger Indigenous languages since 1996 (not all languages are named the same way in each census year which results in some strange distributions, particularly with respect to the Yolngu languages).

⁵ Aboriginal English is included because it is likely to include both creoles and non-standard English.

⁶ Cat. No. 2068.0 - 2006 Census Tables 2006 Census of Population and Housing Australia Language Spoken At Home (Australian Indigenous Languages Only) By Sex.



Source: ABS and NILS Report

Figure 2: Changes in numbers of speakers of the larger Indigenous languages since 1996

The speakers of most languages have remained the same or gone down since 1996. Murrinh Patha and Kalaw Kawaw Ya/Kalaw Lagaw Ya are the only languages with substantial increases. Languages whose speaker numbers have gone down, or remained about the same, since 1996 include Tiwi, Warlpiri, Anindilyakwa. Of the three big language groups, among the Arandic languages, Arrernte and Anmatyerre have gone down, while Alyawarr has a slight increase. Among the Western Desert languages, Pintupi and Kukatja have decreased, while Pitjantjatjara has a slight increase. It isn't clear what's happened to the Yolngu Matha group, since Dhuwaya speakers appear to have started calling their languages by other names in the 2006 census, and so I have given the overall Yolngu Matha figure for 2006. The fact that even these strong languages have mostly failed to increase their numbers is a matter of grave concern, since the number of Indigenous people has increased.

A final important factor to consider is the age distribution of the Indigenous population. All the speech communities are so small that the survival of the languages is precarious. Take a community such as Lajamanu in the Northern Territory. Table 6 shows language use by Indigenous people from the 2006 census.

Speakers of Warlpiri	488
Speakers of unidentified Indigenous languages	5
People who speak English only	61 (10%)
Language not stated	57
Total	614

Source: ABS⁷

Table 6: Language spoken at home by Indigenous people, Lajamanu, 2006 Census

Leaving aside the questions of whether the people who claim they speak Warlpiri are speaking traditional Warlpiri or the new mixed language Light Warlpiri (O'Shannessy, 2006), and of whether the people who claim they speak English are speaking standard English or non-standard English or Kriol, 10% of the Indigenous

⁷ Cat. No. 2068.0 - 2006 Census Tables, 2006 Census of Population and Housing, Lajamanu (CGC) (Indigenous Area) - NT, Language Spoken At Home By Proficiency In Spoken English/Language. Count of Indigenous persons. Based on place of usual residence. Figure excludes Indigenous speakers of languages other than English and Australian Indigenous languages

population claim they speak English only at home. This is not such a concern for language maintenance when the community is large, but it is when the community is small, as their influence can be quite strong. Table 7 shows the age distributions at Lajamanu.

Total Indigenous population	613
People under 15	214 (35%)
People under 15:	Min. in year: 5
Range of number in year cohort	Max. in year: 20

Source: ABS⁸ and my calculations

Table 7: Age of Indigenous population, Lajamanu, 2006 Census

35% of the population is under 15. But the number of children at each year level is small - for each year there may be from between 5 and 20 children of that age in class at school. One or two popular children who insist on speaking English may be all it takes for a whole class to shift to speaking more English, or, equivalently, for maintaining Warlpiri.

Warlpiri is a relatively strong language, and Lajamanu is a relatively large and homogenous language community. But even so, it is very easy to see how little it would take to cause a language shift there. O'Shannessy's thesis documents a shift over the last 25 years or so from children speaking traditional Warlpiri to children speaking a mixed language, 'Light Warlpiri', which has a Kriol verb spine and Warlpiri case suffixes. Nonetheless, they can still speak traditional Warlpiri to some extent, and this may be attributable to the school Warlpiri language development programme.

We have seen how young the population at Lajamanu is. Table 8 shows that this is true more generally of Indigenous communities. And note that in remote communities the number of children is likely to have been under-estimated rather than over-estimated (Morphy, submitted).

	Australia		Northern Territory	
	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous
1996	40%	21%	38%	23%
2001	40%	20%	36%	22%
2006	38%	19%	35%	20%

⁸ Cat. No. 2068.0 - 2006 Census Tables 2006 Census of Population and Housing, Lajamanu (CGC) (Indigenous Area) - NT Age By Indigenous Status By Sex. Count of persons. Based on place of usual residence. Excludes those who made no comment on Indigenous status.

Source: ABS 2006⁹ and own calculations

Table 8: Percentage of population under 15 [excluding those who made no comment on Indigenous status]

Thus for the last ten years and perhaps earlier, just under half of the Indigenous population have been language learners. A related point is that lots of girls are having babies in their teens. The percentage of young mothers (under 24) is much higher than in the general population. Many of the under-15-year-old children recorded in the 1996 census are now parents. Their children will be listening to how they talk, as well as how their playmates talk. A possible brake on language shift are if the primary caregiver is actually a grandmother or great grandmother who is a strong speaker of the traditional language. However, this effect is often cancelled out or diminished by the fact that many older people endure poor health, including dementia at younger ages (Broe, Jackson Pulver, Flicker and Curnow, 2007), and untimely deaths. They also suffer from the social dysfunction in some of the communities and the large number of demands on the time of capable people.

A final factor relates to child-rearing practices. It appears that in many Indigenous communities, children's independence and right to decision-making are highly valued (Hamilton, 1981; Hamilton, 1982; Shaw, 2002), and force is rarely used by parents against children. Parents accede to children's requests (Kaberry, 2004), and are unlikely to enforce speaking a traditional language instead of a creole or English. As well, children take responsibility for younger children, and spend a lot of time with other children. The peer group pressure is very strong. (Kaberry, 2004).

When the fact that in many traditional Aboriginal communities children are encouraged to be independent and to spend time with other children is coupled with the fact that television and street lights make it easier for children not to spend time listening to older family members at night, this all reduces the time children spend listening to traditional languages. It is thus likely that the effect of the peer group on Indigenous children in remote communities like Lajamanu will be even stronger than on migrant children living in nuclear families in cities.

Thus the small size of the communities, the young age

⁹ Cat. No. 2068.0 - 2006 Census Tables 2006 Census of Population and Housing Australia. Indigenous Status By Age By Sex For Time Series. Count of persons (excludes overseas visitors) Based on place of usual residence. Converted to percentages.

of the population, young mothers, the independence of children and the importance of the peer group mean that if language shift takes hold among children, the spread to the next generation can be very rapid.

Social landscapes

The state of Indigenous languages in Australia is precarious at the moment. But their state is likely to become more precarious in the next few years, as a result of the interplay of new government policies with the factors listed above (the monolingual mindset of Australia, the demography of communities, and child rearing practices). In 2007 the Australian Government started introducing social welfare policies which are aimed at making it hard for Indigenous people to stay in remote communities, where most children who speak Indigenous languages as their first language live.

Remote communities are attractive to many Indigenous families as places to raise children, because, while some are dysfunctional, many offer the security of home, cheap accommodation, free child-care from family members, a safety net of relations to provide support, ready access to the bush for gathering and hunting, and a relatively safe place for children to roam around, since there are few strangers. Remote communities also have more Indigenous people controlling organisations and services. There are, however, undeniable social problems. People are poor, they have poor housing, and poor health. They are in constant mourning for relations who have died young. There are few jobs on remote communities. Many children miss many days of schooling. There are many causes for this: ill health, poor schools, high mobility of parents, mourning, as well as a failure to enforce school attendance by parents and by home liaison officers. There is considerable violence.

The Australian Government's 2007 solution to this rests on the assumption that the cause for the social problems is the lack of employment and education and services available on remote communities. The cost of providing these on remote communities is high. And so, instead they have decided to make the costs of living on communities higher, so as to outweigh the benefits Indigenous people find from living there. This is happening in several ways. First, they are cutting off the supply of money and services to people living on remote communities, by abolishing 'work-for-the-dole' schemes in communities of fewer than 100 people, and by abolishing the Community Development Employment Programme which provides extra wages and services in many communities. Incidentally, this will probably also result in the loss of Indigenous language workers' jobs in language centres and schools. Second, they are exerting more control over people's lives in remote communities, by installing government business managers and quarantining welfare payments. This is to encourage people to find paid work, which, almost inevitably, will lead to a move to town.

There is already a drift to towns, triggered by greater access to services such as dialysis machines, as well as to entertainment and alcohol. Moving to town will have a great impact on children, as they will suffer from the greater access to alcohol, as well as from reduced access to activities such as gathering and hunting in the bush. Having parents who work mean that children will be even more influenced by their peer group. What happens at school may also influence them, depending on the effectiveness of the home liaison officer and the punishing of parents if children miss school.

Moving to town will also result in fragmentation of speech communities, as it may not be possible for people to find houses near family speaking the same language. It is also unlikely that, given the number of language groups involved, town schools will have the resources to run proper Indigenous language programmes. Unless the strong effects of peer group pressure are countered by effective English as a Second Dialect or English as a Second Language teaching, and by a feeling of partnership between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, it is likely that children will switch to speaking a creole, rather than standard English. This will not help the children's access to further education and employment.

Conclusion

Fewer and fewer children are growing up speaking a traditional Indigenous language of Australia. Their number is set to decrease sharply as a result of a lack of support for Indigenous languages at schools, demographic factors, child-rearing practices, and the likely effects of government policies aimed at moving Indigenous people out of remote communities and into towns or itinerant work. By the time the Australian Constitution¹⁰ is rewritten to include a mention of Indigenous languages as part of heritage, it may be that most of those languages will no longer be used by Indigenous people in everyday talk.

Acknowledgements

This paper owes much to my fellow researchers in the ARC-funded Aboriginal Child Language Acquisition project (Samantha Disbray, Patrick McConvell, Felicity Meakins, Betty Nakkamarra Morrison, Karin Moses, Carmel O'Shannessy and Jill Wigglesworth), as well as to the organisers and participants in the Indigenous Languages Conference (Adelaide, September 2007) and

¹⁰ John Howard "A new indigenous settlement". 12/10/2007 *The Australian*.
<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,2256993-9-7583,00.html>. Accessed 23/10/07.

the AIATSIS seminar (October 22 2007). I thank Maggie Brady, Patrick McConvell and David Nash for valuable discussion.

References

- Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages. (2005). *National Indigenous Languages Survey Report 2005: Report submitted to the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts*. Canberra: Department of Communications, Information Technology&theArts.
http://www.dcita.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/35637/NILS_Repport_2005.pdf.
- Broe, Tony, Jackson Pulver, Lisa , Flicker, Leon and Curnow, Venessa. (2007). Is dementia a problem for Aboriginal communities? National Dementia Research Forum, Sydney.
- Charola, Erika. (2002). Verb phrase structure in Gurindji Kriol. Honours. University of Melbourne, Melbourne.
- Hamilton, Annette. (1981). *Nature and nurture: aboriginal child-rearing in North-Central Arnhem land*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.
- Hamilton, Annette. (1982). Child health and child care in a desert community 1970-71. In J. Reid (Ed.), *Body, land and spirit : health and healing in Aboriginal society* (pp. 48--71). St. Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland Press.
- Kaberry, Phyllis. (2004). *Aboriginal woman: sacred and profane*. London and New York: Routledge.
- McConvell, Patrick and Meakins, Felicity. (2005). Gurindji Kriol: a mixed language emerges from code-switching. *Australian Journal of Linguistics: Special number* edited by Margaret Florey and Patrick McConvell, 25(1), 9-30.
- Meakins, Felicity and O'Shannessy, Carmel. (submitted). Ordering arguments about: The interaction of word order and ergative marking in two Australian mixed languages. In W. McGregor and J.-C. Verstraete (Eds.), *Special Issue of Lingua*
- Morphy, Frances. (in prep.). Agency, contingency and census process: Observations of the 2006 Indigenous Enumeration Strategy in remote Aboriginal Australia. Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, The Australian National University.
- Morrison, Betty Nakkamarra and Disbray, Samantha. (2007). Children talking in Tennant Creek. Indigenous Languages Conference, Adelaide:
- Musharbash, Yasmine. (2001). Indigenous families and the welfare system : the Yuendumu community case study, stage two. Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University.
- O'Shannessy, Carmel. (2006). Language contact and children's bilingual acquisition: learning a mixed language and Warlpiri in northern Australia. PhD. University of Sydney, Sydney.
- Shaw, Gillian. (2002). An ethnographic exploration of the development in child rearing style among the Ngaanyatjarra people from the pre-contact era to the present. Masters. University of New South Wales, Sydney.
- Simpson, Jane and Wigglesworth, Gillian. (Eds.) (in prep.). *Children's language and multilingualism: Indigenous language use at home and school*. London: Continuum International.