

Language revival

This is a very brief introduction to the important and challenging project often called language revival.

For many years Gamilaraay and Yuwaalaraay declined in use, so that by the 1990s most people were using only a few words. A few had a little more knowledge, but had few opportunities to use their language.

Then a dramatic reversal began. GY people began to reclaim and reuse their languages. In this they were marching with Indigenous people around the world who were asserting their rights and relearning and reusing their languages. In Australia, Kurna and Gumbaynggirr were already on the way. GY people also went to the United States of America and Aotearoa/New Zealand to look at language revival there.

It is wonderful to see how quickly and widely reviving languages are being used – by individuals and families, in schools and even in parliaments. This is a major change. However, most of the language used is simple, for instance greeting, songs such as ‘heads, shoulders, knees and toes’ and welcomes to and acknowledgements of country.

A common revival pattern is for a small group to begin the process. The group often consists of local Indigenous people and one or more linguists. They work with the historical materials to find words and patterns of the language, then begin using and teaching what they have learnt. Others, including other Indigenous people, governments and education bodies often become involved. An important part of this process is adopting a spelling system. Fortunately the system already used by other Aboriginal languages is suitable for newly written languages, sometimes with minor adaptations.

The following sections look at some of the many challenges that arise in moving beyond simple language use. One of them is that learning any language is a challenging task, generally taking many thousands of hours, including trying the language with fluent speakers, who can refine

the learner's use of language. The task of learning is greater in reviving languages because there are no fluent speakers, generally very few courses, and few resources such as texts, literature and videos.

A related challenge is finding or creating the opportunities to practise the language. The need for ongoing practise, ongoing language use, is clear when Gamilaraay 1 students do their course-final conversation assessment. They have learnt many features of the language, but it is a great challenge to use them in conversation. The students can, when focusing on one thing, use it; for instance, word-initial *ng*, correct word-order or the right case forms. However, they rarely develop the instinctual knowledge that enables them to focus on meaning rather than on details.

Another challenge is to describe the language so that, when courses are available, people can learn it. The following examples illustrate the difficulty of describing the language, the tendency to lose traditional features and to adopt English patterns in the revived language.

One feature of the language that has been recently described, but is rarely learnt, is the more complex use of pronouns. Looking at just one pronoun, the *Gamilaraay, Yuwaalaraay & Yuwaalayaay Dictionary* (referred to in this textbook as the *Dictionary* (Ash, Lissarrague & Giacon, 2003)), has *ngali* 'we(2)'. The more complete recent description (Giacon, 2017) points out that this is the inclusive form ('we' is the speaker and listener). If 'we' refers to the speaker and someone other than the listener GY does not use *ngali*, but *ngalinya* or *ngalilu*, depending on the type of verb. Currently only those doing more advanced GY courses are likely to learn this important traditional feature. They then need to keep using it so that it becomes instinctual.

While we have learnt more about *ngali*, other features of the language await a fuller description. For example, the dictionary has *manuma-li* 'steal', and an example sentence involving a dog stealing bones. The assumption was that there was one GY word that was in all circumstances the equivalent of English 'steal'. We now know that the *ma-li* in the verb implies 'action done with hand', and a dog stealing a bone would *manudha-li* (*dha-li* 'do with mouth'). It seems logical that there would be other words to translate 'steal'. For instance, Wangaaybuwan, a very closely related language, has *manuma-li*, *manundha-li*, as GY has, but also has *manungga-li* and *manumbi-li*. We do not know the detailed meaning of the last two. Wangaaybuwan also has *-dhi-li* 'do with foot', so presumably

a soccer player taking the ball from the opposition would *manudbi-li* it. Since GY and Wangaaybuwan are quite similar it is quite likely GY also had five or more words for 'steal'. If there were a fluent speaker they would be able to tell us all the traditional GY for 'steal'.

In an ideal world there would be a GY committee overseeing language research, a linguist or linguists doing the research, a process for making a decision and then a process for communicating that decision to GY speakers. Until those structures are created, most people will use the existing dictionary, and will wrongly assume there is a GY word that has the same meaning as English 'steal'. This will be changing traditional GY.

In the case of pronouns and 'steal', ongoing research has found some traditional patterns that can now be learnt. There will be other areas where traditional knowledge has not been recovered, and so the simplified language will be used, language which has often adopted English patterns.

In summary, the challenges facing GY, and other reviving languages, include understanding as much as possible of the traditional language, deciding what to do when there are gaps in knowledge, communicating new language knowledge, and making it possible for people to study the language in depth.

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