

# 3

## The research project

### 3.1 Why did I want to do this research?

As can be seen, there is much to do with respect to our ethical practices before we really have field methods in linguistics that are complete and inclusive, not only of the collaborator but of the community itself. I suggest, from personal experience, that one's social conscience and the collection of linguistic data in minority languages should be inseparable actions in which teaching should be mutual and collaborative, not only with respect to collaborators but with respect to the community as a whole.

Pérez González (2021, p. 143)

My decision to undertake this research was primarily based on my own experiences of studying linguistics as an Indigenous person. Throughout my time both studying linguistics and working in the field, I observed the huge disparity between what Indigenous people strive for in our efforts to regain and maintain control over our languages and cultural knowledge, and the practice on the ground in the field of linguistics that has served to take away from Indigenous people the control of their languages and cultural knowledge and misrepresent or under-represent Indigenous peoples in academic publications.

### 3.2 How did I do it?

The research project was qualitative in nature and involved a small set of in-depth interviews with three Indigenous linguists and language activists and three non-Indigenous linguists. I formulated a detailed questionnaire

that was used as the basis of generating discussion around the issues in an interview with each of the participants. The questions varied slightly for Indigenous participants and non-Indigenous participants but only so that the questions would be relevant to each group; otherwise, they were identical. All participants agreed to be identified in the research and their verbatim responses were sent to them for checking prior to writing up and publication. These interviews formed the basis of all of the primary data I collected.

The participants were selected on the basis that they had an awareness of and a deep desire to address the issues in a constructive and collaborative way. I did not seek alternative or antagonistic viewpoints, as the aim of this research is to focus on identifying the issues from both an Indigenous and non-Indigenous viewpoint and to endeavour to find common ground and a way to progress towards practical solutions, rather than gaining a broad range of views or opinions. Although, some alternative viewpoints do come out in the data and review of the literature.

I have chosen to avoid overly technical language as there are two specific audiences for this book: Indigenous linguists, language activists, language workers and interested Indigenous people more broadly; and non-Indigenous linguists. All participants agreed to being identified in this research.

As an Indigenous person undertaking research that includes Indigenous people, I have a responsibility to the broader community to not put myself forward as the expert but to allow the participants to claim their own statements and opinions. However, I have chosen to include my own opinions and voice in the research as an Indigenous linguist with experience both within the academy and in my own community and many of the communities in the Pilbara region of Western Australia.

I have chosen a semi-narrative approach to presenting the interviews; this sees Chapter 4 give privilege to the voices of the participants. It is necessary for me to be respectful to all participants and especially to the Indigenous participants and the broader Indigenous community in this regard. This is in line with the emerging Indigenous research methodologies that consider traditional knowledge and ways of being as a primary standpoint (Janke, 2009).

### 3.3 Who did I talk to?

I worked with three Indigenous linguists and language activists and three non-Indigenous linguists, who I will briefly introduce here. In the discussion that follows, I have divided the responses into two groups:

1. Indigenous participants: Jeannie Bell, Jaky Troy and Vicki Couzens = group A
2. Non-Indigenous participants: Margaret Florey, Kris Travers Eira and Felicity Meakins = group B.

**Jeannie Bell** is a Jagera and Dulingbara woman from south-east Queensland. She is a language custodian, long-time community linguist, language activist and educator who has lived and worked in Queensland, Victoria and the Northern Territory. Jeannie gained an MA in Linguistics from the University of Melbourne for her thesis, *A Sketch Grammar of the Badjala Language of Gari (Fraser Island)* (Bell, 2003), and has done work on reviving Badjala, a variety of the Gabi-Gabi language of south-eastern Queensland. Jeannie attended Monash University and, after graduating, she spent three years teaching linguistics at the Yipirinya school in Alice Springs, Northern Territory. She also trained Aboriginal interpreters for the Institute of Aboriginal Development. She was a senior lecturer in the Centre for Australian Languages and Linguistics at Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education.

**Jakelin Troy** is a Ngarigu woman from the Snowy Mountains of New South Wales and director of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research at the University of Sydney. She completed a doctorate in linguistics at The Australian National University on the development of pidgin in New South Wales (Troy, 1994). Jaky's research and academic interests focus on languages, particularly endangered Aboriginal and 'contact languages', language education, linguistics, anthropology and visual arts. Jaky has extensive experience developing curriculum for Australian schools, focusing on Australian language programs. She studied in Mexico and Japan, developing her interest in those countries' art, culture and languages. Jaky's current research is focused on documenting, describing and reviving Indigenous languages. More recently she has a focus on the Indigenous languages of Pakistan, including Saraiki of the Punjab and Torwali of Swat. Jaky is interested in the use of Indigenous research methodologies and community engaged research practices.

**Vicki Couzens** is a Gunditjmara woman from the Western Districts of Victoria. Vicki acknowledges her Ancestors and Elders who guide her work. Vicki completed her PhD in language and culture in 2017 at RMIT in Melbourne (Couzens, 2017). She has worked in Aboriginal community affairs for almost 40 years. Her contributions in the reclamation, regeneration and revitalisation of cultural knowledge and practice extend across the 'arts and creative cultural expression' spectrum including language revitalisation, ceremony, community arts, public art, visual and performing arts, and writing. She is Senior Knowledge Custodian for Possum Skin Cloak Story and Language Reclamation and Revival in her Keerray Woorroong Mother Tongue. Vicki is employed at RMIT as a Vice Chancellor's Indigenous Research Fellow, developing her project '*Watnanda koong meerreeng, tyama-ngan malayeetoo (Together body and country, we know long time)*'. Vicki is rebuilding the Gunditjmara grammar to facilitate a new phase of language learning through immersive experiences and home-based, family clan self-directed learning. She is currently writing plain-language resources for this community learning.

**Margaret Florey** is an Australian linguist whose work has focused on documenting minority Indigenous languages and training linguists and Indigenous community members in methods to reclaim and revitalise languages. Florey completed her PhD at the University of Hawaii at Manoa in 1990 (Florey, 1990). She co-founded the Resource Network for Linguistic Diversity, now known as Living Languages, in 2004. From 2009 until 2017, Margaret developed and managed RNLD's Documenting and Revitalising Indigenous Languages Training Program (DRIL) that delivers grassroots training across Australia to Aboriginal people in family groups, communities and Indigenous organisations.

Florey's training work has also taken her to international training institutes. She was a founding member of the InField/CoLang Advisory Circle,<sup>1</sup> and taught workshops at InField 2008 and 2010 and then at the Institute on Collaborative Language Research (also known as CoLang) in 2016. She also taught at the First Nations and Endangered Languages Program at UBC, Vancouver, in 2009, and at CILLDI (Canadian Indigenous Languages and Literacy Development Institute, Edmonton) in 2009 and 2010. Prior to her work with the RNLD, she taught linguistics in academic roles for 18 years, including at Monash University from 2000 to 2008.

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1 CoLang is the Institute on Collaborative Language Research, formerly known as the Institute on Field Linguistics and Language Documentation or InField.

**Kris Travers Eira** completed a PhD in linguistics at the University of Melbourne on language standardisation and the Hmong in 2001 (Eira 2000). Kris worked with Aboriginal people reclaiming their languages for nearly 20 years, mostly with people of Yorke Peninsula, South Australia, and as the community linguist at the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages. They found that, in this work, it was clear that there were wide differences in approach between linguistics, professional practice and the priorities and pathways of people of Indigenous language communities. It was also clear that massive issues of post coloniality stood in the way, time and time again, of the perspectives and practices of the one group being understood by, useful to and embraced by the other group. Eira was responsible to and able to speak for only one side of this tension, so they spent considerable time in that 20 years theorising alternative positions for linguists that they hoped would enable linguists to work with what was happening in language revival communities, rather than the standard positions, which asserted predetermined views of what was and was not authentic language, and thereby maintained linguists as outsider authorities—out of touch with community business and offensively reproducing colonial power imbalances. They are not sure that they succeeded in this attempt—partly because it may be impossible to critique one's own discourses in public without being written off as holier than thou, not to mention unscientific, and partly because the grievous weight of post coloniality is bigger than any, or many, individuals, so that we are still not able to see its legacies clearly enough.

**Felicity Meakins** completed her PhD on Gurindji Kriol in 2008 at the University of Melbourne (Meakins, 2008). She has worked for 20 years in northern Australia as a community linguist as well as an academic, facilitating language revitalisation programs, consulting on native title claims, and conducting research into Indigenous languages. She became an Australian Research Council (ARC) Future Fellow in Linguistics at the University of Queensland and a chief investigator in the ARC Centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language. In these roles, she has led teams of students, postdocs and community members to document the languages of the Ngumpin-Yapa family, under the direction of First Nations communities, especially in close collaboration with First Nations organisations such as Karungkarni Arts. Meakins has also written over 50 papers on language endangerment and change in Australia, in particular the development of new Australian languages, such as Gurindji

Kriol. Underpinning all of these projects are a number of aims, including to honour First Nations languages and to recognise new ways of speaking by younger generations.

**Amy Parncutt** and **Jess Solla** are both non-Indigenous linguists and were interviewed with Margaret Florey as a part of the RNLD team. While I have not included all of their responses, I have included one or two that were critical to the discussions.

This text is taken from *Something's Gotta Change: Redefining Collaborative Linguistic Research*, by Lesley Woods, published 2023 by ANU Press,  
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

[doi.org/10.22459/SGC.2022.03](https://doi.org/10.22459/SGC.2022.03)