

YUWAALARAAY/GAMILARAAY LANGUAGE REVIVAL IN WALGETT

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This article gives some background, traces some of the recent history of Australian (Aboriginal) language study in Walgett, looks at the hoped for and actual impact, and discusses the possible future of this important field of study. It will focus mainly on Walgett because the author has worked there and knows its recent language history well. Other towns are mentioned, but it would need more input from them to speak fully about their situation.

General Background

The town of Walgett is near the junction of the Namoi and Barwon rivers. Not far downstream they become the Darling. The town is near the boundaries of several language areas, now known as the Ngiyambaa, Gamilaraay and Yuwaalaraay. Each of these names covered a number of dialects, especially Gamilaraay, and like most Australian words, these names been written in a multitude of different ways in English orthography.

The Aboriginal people of Walgett come from a wide range of areas, and many trace their history through missions at Brewarrina, Angledool, Pillaga, and Walgett, through settlements on properties in the area, through the stolen generation, Kinchela and Cootamundra homes, and various other paths.

Until extremely recently Australian languages were frowned upon, or worse, in schools, and they were not used in any public ways, though the names of many towns and properties do have Australian language origins.

Some Aboriginal people have kept elements of language alive in the family circle, and quite a few words remain in use in the general Aboriginal community, sometimes without their original meaning being known. The last fully fluent speakers of Yuwaalaraay died around 1960, and earlier for Gamilaraay. In the 1970's substantial recordings were made of two old men who still remembered a lot of the Yuwaalaraay, thought they had also forgotten a lot because they had not used it for many years.

Yuwaalaraay and Gamilaraay are quite similar languages, and cover an area from Walgett, West to Narran Lake, North to Goodooga, along the Queensland border past Goondiwindi, South past Tamworth, West to Coonabarabran and along the Namoi to Walgett. This is the second largest language area in NSW, with Wiradjuri being the largest. There is much more information available about Yuwaalaraay – 1500 or so words compared to around 600 in Gamilaraay, and there is much more grammatical information available about Yuwaalaraay, as well as the tapes.

The languages have been kept alive by a small group of people, often with no encouragement and often with little indication that their efforts would bear any fruit. In Walgett Uncle Ted Fields has been involved for many years in working with students and some teachers at Walgett Primary School.

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This Language Program

In 1996 the Catholic Schools Office received added federal Indigenous Education funding and was able to appoint a part time teacher/linguist to St Joseph's Walgett – the author of this article. The CES and later ATSIC have funded two Aboriginal Language Workers (ALW), John Brown and Laurence Dennis, and Uncle Ted to work on a Yuwaalaraay program there. The procedure was, and is for the teacher/linguist to do his own work on understanding Yuwaalaraay/Gamilaraay, then to work with the ALWs on linguistic material and teaching methods. They then work with primary students. At the same time uncle Ted worked on the language, but also on the cultural and historical side of the program.

In the beginning of 1997 a similar program began at Goodooga Central School, funded by ATSIC, directly and through the DCEP. It operated in much the same way as Walgett, and the ALWs from both programs had a day of joint classes per week.

Auntie Rose Fernando of Collarenebri has also been very active in the language area, doing work in local schools and chairing a Board of Studies committee which developed an Indigenous Language Syllabus framework. The other major language program in the Yuwaalaraay/Gamilaraay area is at Toomelah/Boggabilla, where the local community organised for a language teacher to be employed. That teacher has worked in those schools for the last few years.

In 1997 Walgett community meetings supported the introduction of Yuwaalaraay/Gamilaraay. Marianne Betts, a teacher at WHS, developed a year 7/8 course which has received Board approval, and she and John Giacon are writing a text book for the course.

There are currently three Yuwaalaraay courses at Walgett TAFE. The DSE funding provided for Aboriginal Educators to have time to study the languages, and they have a one day per week course. Koolyangarra Pre School also expressed interest in teaching some Yuwaalaraay/Gamilaraay, and so a two hour a week TAFE course was developed for their staff, and later the same course was run at another time for teachers from Walgett Primary and community members who also wished to learn the language, or to increase their knowledge of it.

The school courses have had very positive results. While evidence at this stage is anecdotal, many have reported that Aboriginal students are keen to be involved, are proud of the language and are likely to work better at school because they feel more at home there. This seems to be because of the language itself, and also because of the increased Aboriginal presence that has often accompanied language teaching. Students will often use Yuwaalaraay/Gamilaraay words with their language teachers, and are keen to sing songs in language.

There has been quite a dramatic increase in the amount of Yuwaalaraay/Gamilaraay taught in the last two years, quite a few songs written and spoken in the language, and a dramatic increase in the number of educators learning it, and a lesser increase in the number of community people also learning it.

Some other issues

The results so far support the call from many reports for increased effort and attention to Australian languages. There are many educational reports which have this recommendation and the Deaths in Custody report and the Stolen Generation report are just two of the others which make similar strong recommendations.

However this is by no means an easy area. The Aboriginal community sees so much that is theirs taken away that there can be a reluctance, justifiable, to trust others with something as precious as language. There is also the question of the relationship of language as a school/education matter to its use in the community. Will school use do anything to really help the community reclaim its language, or will it further isolate the community from it?

Then there is the question of how to increase knowledge of the language. There are no fluent speakers of Yuwaalaraay/Gamilaraay, no full grammar and no dictionary, although there are a number of wordlists. There is no one to ask "How do you say this?" So the major tasks include compiling the historical material, doing a full analysis of it and so developing the dictionary and grammar. You can buy textbooks and resources of German or Japanese or Indonesian, - all languages taught in Yuwaalaraay/Gamilaraay country - go to a University course in them and then spend time in Bali or elsewhere putting on the finishing touches. For the teacher/linguists in Yuwaalaraay/Gamilaraay the first step is to learn the basic grammar that has been written, get some skills in the language by listening to the tapes and talking to yourself, then set about developing usable resources because the present grammar is in technical linguistic terminology.

This is an expensive process, because it requires many hours of work at different levels - analysis, resource development, training, and in each of these areas much of the work has to begin at the very beginning. Governments have shown some recognition of the importance and size and cost of this task, but there is need for much more than has so far been committed.

Australian languages can make a great contribution to the culture of this land, in fact they already do so, but in places like New South Wales they will do much more if greater work is needed, in my opinion, is the recognition that this revival is a major task for each language where it is to be undertaken.

The major elements in the task are for the local Aboriginal community to decide it wants work done on the language. Then the linguistic work needs to begin, along with teaching of adults and younger people. It is very important that Aboriginal people own and control the process, and with a bit of luck, with a lot of luck, there will be some degree of language revival.

In the early post-invasion years Australian Languages were alive and developed many new words to describe new experiences. It will be a great day if those same languages are being spoken fully again, sung again, and are creating new words again.

Postscript

On 7 November, the Yuwaalaraay Language Project was honoured to receive the Harris Sutherland Award from the Australian College of education, New England Chapter. Present on the night were Uncle Ted Fields (Gamilaroi elder), Laurence Dennis and John Brown, all language workers in the program currently being run at St Joseph's Primary School, Walgett in western NSW. Also assisting with the program are Br John Giacon (Coordination) and Br John Wright (Principal of St Joseph's), both Christian Bros there.