

# ○ REKINDLING WARM EMBERS: TEACHING ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES IN THE TERTIARY SECTOR

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This paper reviews the teaching of Aboriginal languages in the tertiary sector of Australia, looking at the stronger languages taught in the university sector versus those languages under revival that tend to be taught in the TAFE sector. The paper summarises the status of courses offered state by state, and sets the scene with some historical background. The metaphor of 'rekindling warm embers' is used to describe revival programs, with a focus on the Ngarrindjeri experience in South Australia. The point is made that language teaching programs require the involvement and support of Elders, whether taught in the TAFE or university sector.

## INTRODUCTION

Australia has a long, yet not so proud, history of teaching Aboriginal languages in schools. By contrast it has a very short history of teaching Aboriginal languages in the tertiary sector, with the first university course not beginning until 1968. This paper looks at what language programs are being offered in the tertiary sector, not only in the universities within this country, but more recently in Technical And Further Education (TAFE) institutions. It will reveal that university language courses tend to offer the stronger languages to non-Indigenous students, while TAFE courses tend to serve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who are seeking vocational training in their own languages. The paper gives special focus to the training underway in South Australia, and reflects in particular on the experience of the Ngarrindjeri language situation. But it begins with a brief overview of the teaching of vernacular languages in schools throughout the country, as it was this initiative which largely spawned the need for Aboriginal language programs emerging in the TAFE sector.

## TEACHING ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES BEGAN IN SCHOOLS

Through the insights of some of the very early missionaries, Aboriginal children were instructed in their own languages in mission schools as early as 1827 at Lake Macquarie in New South Wales (NSW), where Awarbakal was taught. In South Australia (SA) Kaurna was taught from 1839 on the banks of the Torrens River in Adelaide, and in the Northern Territory (NT) at Rapid Creek the Larakia language was taught from 1885 (see Gale, 1997; Harris, 1990).<sup>1</sup> Although the missionaries' primary motivation was to accelerate the conversion of their Aboriginal subjects to Christianity, the use of the children's language as their first medium of instruction was actually very sound methodology for educational achievement.<sup>2</sup> But in this post Reformation era, vernacular school programs were inevitably seen as a means to an end. For mission schools the vernacular was seen as a productive means of bringing literacy, and hence the message of the Christian gospels, to their students. Other enlightened schools later adopted bilingual programs as a methodology, with mission schools such as that at Ernabella offering initial instruction in Pitjantjatjara from 1940 (Edwards, 1995). In 1972 five pilot schools began vernacular instruction in the NT (see Gale, 1997), but again it was a means to an end. The primary goal was to effectively educate the children to become successful bilinguals, with well-developed English literacy and oracy skills, and to ultimately participate successfully in the English dominated culture of Australia.

In more contemporary times, the commonwealth government support for Aboriginal language programs has been encouraging, with the introduction of a federal language policy, in 1991, particularly with its Goal 3 promoting the maintenance and development of Aboriginal languages where possible (see Commonwealth of Australia, 1991).<sup>3</sup> A further federal policy followed in 2009, with five elements, including the aim: 'to support and maintain the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages in Australia'.<sup>4</sup> These policies were supported with an injection of commonwealth money to fund language activities in the community, and indirectly to schools through state governments. There have been direct positive outcomes for the tertiary sector in its collaboration with both school and community language activities.<sup>5</sup>

In many SA schools "Mother Tongue" programs are offered to a range of language groups, including Aboriginal language groups, and are aimed at meeting a social and personal need to develop a positive identity among students. Unlike early mission schools, some contemporary schools (and universities) are now offering Aboriginal languages as one of their selected LOTE languages to all students, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students alike. Several such schools in SA are Murray Bridge high school, and Winkie primary school in the Riverland (which teach Ngarrindjeri) and Alberton primary (which teaches Pitjantjatjara).

This is not just because of the social benefits to be gained by its students, but also because of the schools' recognition of each language's intrinsic cultural value and linguistic complexity and uniqueness.

No longer are Aboriginal languages viewed merely as a necessary tool towards an evangelical outcome or a positive educational end, though positive English outcomes are often cited as reasons for establishing such programs in schools.

### **ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES IN UNIVERSITIES**

It has taken a long time for the tertiary sector to realise the intrinsic value of teaching students to speak an Aboriginal language and learn about the wealth of cultural knowledge that is embedded within these diverse languages. Although universities have been teaching general linguistics for many years, with quite a number of universities offering specialist courses in Australia's Indigenous languages (with the Australian National University being one of the first)<sup>6</sup>, there are not many universities that actually offer a particular Aboriginal language as a subject of study. There have been several one-off opportunities to learn a language in some universities over the years, such as at the University of Melbourne, where Raymattja Marika taught her Yolngu clan language Rirratjingu, and at the University of Queensland where Janet Nakamarra Long taught Warlpiri from central Australia in the 1990s (see Amery, 2007). But there have also been a few universities where students have been able to enrol for extended periods of time to formally learn an Aboriginal language in the tertiary sector. These rare opportunities have been described in Amery (2007), and are reviewed below.

### **PITJANTJATJARA IN SA LED THE WAY**

The first Aboriginal language to be taught in a university was Pitjantjatjara, which (unfortunately) is the only remaining Aboriginal language in SA being learnt as a first language by children. It is spoken in the desert, alongside a close dialect form Yankunytjatjara, in the remote north west corner of the state. Pitjantjatjara was introduced at the University of Adelaide in 1968, through the Department of Adult Education, and offered as a three week summer school (see Edwards, 1995). A set of tapes and an accompanying 28 unit handbook was produced by the linguist Ken Hale, providing practice with language drills. Because such language courses are so dependent on finding capable teachers, the course soon moved institutions. So around 1980 the Pitjantjatjara course moved to an available teacher at the Torrens College of Advanced Education, where Bill Edwards (the past superintendent of Ernabella mission) had begun lecturing, later with the Antikirinya/

Yankunytjatjara woman Mona Tur. This institution was soon amalgamated into the South Australian College of Advanced Education, which in time became the University of South Australia (UniSA). By 1986 the course had expanded from a single subject Pitjantjatjara Language 1 with 28 students, to five undergraduate term long subjects (Pitjantjatjara language1-5) plus a Graduate Diploma in Pitjantjatjara Language and Culture, with a total of 53 student enrolments (see overview in Edwards, 1995).

Over thirty years after its first introduction, a Pitjantjatjara course is still taught at UniSA, but in a very much diluted form. For many years, Pitjantjatjara could be studied at the UniSA as a major within the Bachelor of Aboriginal Studies, with semester-long courses being offered internally each semester. The development of language learning resources, such as the *Wangka Wiru* language kit produced by Brian Kirke in the mid-1980s, also enabled the course to be offered externally. The course was often taken up by trainee teachers, or others who intended to work in the remote Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands (APY Lands) (see Edwards, 1995). Today the course is only offered as an intensive summer school, and it is no longer available for academic credit. The clientele tend to be Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people employed by the SA government in the many government services who are trying to Close the Gap (the SA version of the NT National Emergency Response) in the remote communities in the APY Lands. The current course runs for two weeks, is very expensive, and only offers a certificate of participation for those who complete the two week intensive in January each year<sup>7</sup>. This marginalisation of the course happened over time, beginning with Edward's semi-retirement in 1994, and Tur's eventual retirement in 2008. However, the course is still very capably taught each summer by Paul Eckert (who has worked in the APY Lands for 35 years translating the Bible into Pitjantjatjara) and a small team of Anangu, regularly including Mary Anderson. Like Edwards, Eckert teaches the finer points of grammar to the class, while the Anangu teachers concentrate on pronunciation and demonstrating the conversation components of the course.

## BUNDJALUNG AT MONASH UNIVERSITY

The Aboriginal linguist, Eve Fesl introduced the Bundjalung language as a subject at Monash University in Melbourne in 1987. Bundjalung is a language from northern NSW for which a course had already been developed by Margaret Sharpe in Lismore in 1977. Fesl originally contemplated offering Pitjantjatjara, but reconsidered on the basis that Bundjalung is a coastal language, and culturally closer to the Melbourne context (see Amery, 2007). At this time, the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages (VACL) had not been formed, and the various Victorian language revival programs that are operating today had not yet commenced. The Bundjalung course was taught by the local Gunnai woman Lynnette

Solomon-Dent, with the assistance of Bundjalung speakers (see McKay, 1996). In 1996 the Bundjalung course ended at Monash University, largely because of the departure of Solomon-Dent and other Koorie staff.<sup>8</sup>

## **DJAMBARRPUYNGU IN DARWIN, NT**

Djambarrpuyngu is the most widely spoken clan language from within the Yolngu language bloc of North East Arnhem Land, with up to 6,000 speakers. It is the language sung by the now famous solo singer Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu, who also played for the once popular rock band *Yothu Yindi*. In 1992 the teacher-linguist Michael Christie (Australian of the Year in 2011 for the NT) introduced Djambarrpuyngu as a subject of study at the Northern Territory University, renamed Charles Darwin University in 2004. This course is now well established and can be studied by either external or internal mode. The course is taught by Yolngu people either live through Skype or face-to-face at the Casuarina campus. Their teaching is supported by up-to-date web-based language learning materials. This teaching program has been able to piggy-back on the language materials that were generated over a period of decades by literature production centres that were operating during the boom years of bilingual education in schools in the 1980s and early 1990s. Ironically these same school programs (which produced the Yolngu teachers who are now teaching their language at CDU) have now been de-funded by the NT government, who legislated for an English-language policy to be introduced into NT Aboriginal schools in 2008.<sup>9</sup>

CDU has predominantly non-Aboriginal students from all over Australia and the world enrolling in the Djambarrpuyngu classes, with students enrolling in a number of different level courses, from bachelor degree through to post-graduate certificate and diploma level. One such degree is a Bachelor of Indigenous Knowledges (BIK) with a specialisation in 'Yolngu Culture and Languages'. Just three of the semester courses which could be studied are: 'Introduction to Yolngu Languages and Culture', 'Yolngu Languages and Culture II' and 'Yolngu Texts and Conversations'.<sup>10</sup>

The reasons are various as to why this particular university language course has forged ahead, and gained the student numbers to sustain its operation. One major factor is there are many people who can be called on to teach the course, as it is the Yolngu themselves who are teaching it, whether it be from a remote beach in Arnhem Land via Skype, or in a classroom at Casuarina. The university system, both implicitly and explicitly acknowledges these teachers' language and cultural skills, whether they have a formal qualification or not, which gives them employment as well as the pride and willingness to share and teach their language to others. It

has also helped to have the backup of quality on-line resources, which takes the pressure and burden off the teachers to provide all that is needed to successfully run their classes.

## **KAURNA AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE**<sup>11</sup>

The Kurna language of the Adelaide Plains is well documented as an exemplary case of what is possible for an urban language revival situation (see Amery, 2000, 2007). Kurna was introduced to the University of Adelaide by the linguist Rob Amery as a subject of study in 1997. The subject was called 'Kurna Language and Language Ecology', and at the request of Elders, was more a course 'about' the social context of the Kurna language and its source materials, rather than an opportunity for students to learn the Kurna language itself (see Amery, 2007). This is in sharp contrast to the intention of the long term Pitjantjatjara courses offered at UniSA. Most Kurna Elders appreciate the interest that non-Aboriginal people show in their language, and can see the process of reconciliation at work in language classes as non-Aboriginal and Kurna people congregate together regularly to learn their language. But there is still a mild sense of concern that if non-Aboriginal people learn to speak Kurna well, before their own Kurna people relearn their language, a sense of injustice and resentment may re-emerge, along with the accusation that 'our language has been stolen' once again.

The language course at the University of Adelaide continued for five years, until Amery's contract ended, and he was appointed to UniSA. He took the Kurna course with him, where it sat alongside Pitjantjatjara within the Unaipon School. Numbers were small when it was offered from 2002 as a semester long course, but picked up when it was offered in 2004 as a summer school. By this stage Pitjantjatjara was also offered as a summer school, and Amery offered some conversational elements to the second intensive week of Kurna to degree and community students. In 2006 Kurna returned with Amery to the University of Adelaide, and is now taught to a small number of students as a semester unit every second year, under the name 'Reclaiming languages: a Kurna case-study'. A special case had to be mounted to allow the course to continue, as the University is undergoing economic rationalisation of its courses, whereby only those courses with large numbers are taught.

## **BATCHELOR INSTITUTE OF INDIGENOUS TERTIARY EDUCATION**

Since the early 1980s, Aboriginal students have been studying their own languages at the School of Australian Linguistics at Batchelor in the NT, later known as the Centre for Australian Languages and Linguistics (CALL).<sup>12</sup> Courses giving students the opportunity to intensify their knowledge of their own languages, or to consolidate their literacy skills, have

brought students from all over the country to Batchelor. Adult students from South Australia, for example, travelled to Batchelor for several intensive blocks in the mid-1980s to study their own language Ngarrindjeri with the linguist Steve Johnson. Together they assisted Johnson in compiling a Ngarrindjeri wordlist, and listened to tapes made of their language in the 1960s, to clarify the finer points of pronunciation, as they embarked on the first stages of reviving their language. Other students came from the north of the country, such as Arnhem Land, to study their own stronger clan languages, with a number later gaining employment in Literature Production Centres in their home schools to produce vernacular literature materials for bilingual school programs. With CALL becoming a part of Batchelor College, opportunities opened up for such students to undertake a range of studies alongside their language studies, such as teacher training.

Today the college at Batchelor offers a full range of training courses, spread over a number of sites in the NT, and is known as the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education. Courses on Aboriginal languages were once called Certificate I, II, and III in 'Own Language Work'. These courses have recently been rewritten and are now called Cert I and Cert II in Indigenous Language and Knowledge Work, and are the training courses for adults in the NT who wish to work as Language and Knowledge Workers in a range of employment situations. The courses are largely project based, with one of the core units requiring students to 'Use an Indigenous oral language to document Indigenous knowledge'. This unit is particularly designed for languages that are still being transmitted orally on a daily basis, and would hence be difficult to undertake in a language revival situation. Even if students from southern states wanted to study the Batchelor courses, this would not be possible unless the students moved to study in the NT. Study opportunities also exist for students to pursue further Diploma and Degree studies in languages at Batchelor, with a number of students from revival language situations in southern states having already completed their Bachelor of Arts (linguistics) at Batchelor.

## **TAFE LANGUAGE COURSES ACROSS AUSTRALIA**

In Western Australia (WA), there are a number of language centres operating that support language activities in a multitude of Aboriginal languages.<sup>13</sup> TAFE courses complement these activities. At Pundulmurra College in South Hedland there are several language courses on offer, including a Certificate III and IV in Australian Languages and Cultural Heritage. They are offered both internally and externally from Port Hedland, through Pilbara TAFE. Both courses are comprehensive and include a large collection of core units, but the core units indicate there is an underlying assumption that the languages being studied are spoken fluently by at least some community members. Two core units, for example, in the Cert III are:

“Conduct a fieldtrip for data collection with the intention of recording Australian languages” and “Demonstrate proficiency of speaking skills (Australian language ) levels 1 and 2”.<sup>14</sup>

These WA certificates, however, must be adaptable to other language situations, as some adult students in Victoria are currently studying their own languages (which are undergoing revival), by licensing the Pilbara TAFE course to Gippsland TAFE. They have also added a teaching unit to the course (Paul Paton, personal communication, May 2011). The languages currently undergoing revival in Victoria are Gunnai (Kŭrnai) from the Gippsland region (where Doris Paton and Lynette Solomon-Dent are coordinators); Taungurung with Lee Healy as the coordinator; and Wathaurong in Geelong with David Tournier as the coordinator. Further language revival work is in the preparation stage in the south west of the state, under the title: South West Aboriginal Program, with Joel Wright as the coordinator.<sup>15</sup>

In NSW, there are three accredited Aboriginal language courses available for adults: Certificate I, II and III in Aboriginal Languages. These are offered through TAFE at various campuses for specific languages on demand. Cipollone (2010) provides a good summary of the various campuses where these certificate courses have been offered, and says in 2010 there had been approximately 450 students enrolled, with the bulk in Certificate I. Prior to the accreditation of these courses, with the Cert I first offered in the second half of 2007, some of the languages of NSW were offered in workshop mode as part of General and Vocational Educational Training (VET) courses. These workshops indicated the need and demand for TAFE to develop the certificate. Some of the languages offered included Dunghutti, Gamilaraay (Kamilaroi) and Gumbaynggirr (see Cipollone, 2010).

One of the first languages to be offered by NSW TAFE at the Certificate I level was Dhurga at Moruya TAFE on the south coast of NSW. The New England Institute of TAFE has also offered Gamilaraay (Kamilaroi) workshops for a number of years at Tamworth and Moree, even before the Certificate I was accredited. The Dharawal (Biddigal dialect) language has also been offered by the South Western Sydney Institute of TAFE. Perhaps the most often taught languages are Gamilaraay/Yuwaalaraay (from mid northwest of NSW), Gumbaynggirr (from the north coast of NSW) and Wiradjuri (from central NSW), though not always as TAFE certificates. The Wiradjuri language is offered informally at Parkes (see Anderson, 2010), while Gumbayingirr and Gamilaraay/Yuwaalaraay has also been offered at the Muurrbay Aboriginal and Cultural Co-op and the Many Rivers Language Centre as summer schools.<sup>16, 17</sup>

In Queensland it seems there are some enthusiastic attempts to retrieve and revive some of the languages now under serious threat (see Stockley, 2010), and to document others before they are lost in Cape York (see Hill and McConvell, 2010). Although it is possible to attain a

“Statement of Attainment in Indigenous Language” from TAFE Queensland (see Cipollone, 2010, p. 171), there are no Queensland TAFE language courses listed on the National Training Information Service (NTIS) website.<sup>18</sup> Stockley writes of the many language workshops that have been run for different language groups in northern Queensland, such as Warrgamay and Gudjal, but outcomes of these intensive learning experiences don’t seem to include any formal TAFE qualification for students.

## **LANGUAGES IN THE TAFE SECTOR IN SA**

As already mentioned, South Australian schools have been teaching Aboriginal languages since early colonial times, but over the years these intermittent programs have not always flourished. In its annual statistical report DECS Aboriginal Language Project Officers boasted that in 2009, “6% of South Australian state schools offer Aboriginal languages programs”. They confirmed that 9 Aboriginal languages were taught, ranging from Awareness programs (Wirangu), Reclamation programs (Kurna and Narungga), a Renewal program (Ngarrindjeri), Revitalisation programs (Antikirinya, Arabana and Adnyamathanha), plus L1 programs and L2 programs (in the Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara languages). These programs were taught at ‘54 sites (52 school, 2 preschool)... to a reported total of 4,064 learners’ (see Wilson & Tunstill, 2009, p. 2). These high levels of participation in SA schools sound impressive, but for those working at the coal face, it is commonly felt that sustaining these programs can be a real battle. Indeed, the annual figures fluctuate. One of the biggest battles is finding teachers to teach the classes. To help alleviate this problem, informal training programs have been running at various schools for years to help supply confident and capable language teachers. I myself was involved in running ten language workshops in Murray Bridge (with the assistance of Elders) for any adults involved in teaching Ngarrindjeri at four different school sites in 2003 alone. Around the same time, informal training was also being offered for Narungga, Kurna, Adnyamathanha, and the Arabana languages. But again it was through workshops with no formal accreditation.

Gradually, Aboriginal adult students’ interest in learning and teaching their language grew, and they started asking for more formal recognition of their training workshops. In 2007 the University of Adelaide was successful in gaining a grant to offer more formal training to 16 keen Ngarrindjeri adults through Murray Bridge TAFE (see Gale & Mickan, 2007). But we struggled to find TAFE units in which to enrol the students. We found a 100 hour unit called “Aboriginal Language” which was an elective unit within the SA Certificate I in Introductory Vocational Education (IVEC). The course went well, resulting in a formal ceremony in August 2007, which was reported in the local *Standard* newspaper, with 16 students graduating with an “IVEC I (Ngarrindjeri Language)”.

As community interest in learning more of their language grew, the Ngarrindjeri in particular started to demand more in the way of formal training. This demand wasn't just to meet the teaching needs in schools, but to meet a genuine interest by community Elders and younger adults to learn more of their language for their own personal and professional needs. Further TAFE classes at Murray Bridge had become the hub of the revival movement, largely led by women. One of the most successful learning activities was the translation of favourite English hymns into Ngarrindjeri. Before long a Ngarrindjeri language choir was formed, and was receiving constant requests to perform songs in the Ngarrindjeri language at different community events. Ngarrindjeri Elders and students continued to enjoy coming to further intensive workshops or regular language days (organised by the Health department), but started asking for more recognition of their learning successes. "Participation Awards" were not enough. Similarly, the Narungga had also exhausted all their options after completing the IVEC I, with DECS funding, and were looking for more recognition. Adnyamathanha has also been taught in evening classes at Tauondi College (an independent Aboriginal TAFE training institution in Port Adelaide), but again with no credit for participants.

The only other option in SA, at the present time, for formal language training for adult students is to enrol in Year 11 and Year 12 weekly evening classes offered through the School of Languages. But the only Aboriginal languages presently on offer are Kaurna and Pitjantjatjara. In 2008 I made enquiries all over the country trying to find awards to offer our adult classes, but nothing seemed to fit our needs. Batchelor couldn't enrol any students who didn't enrol in the NT. The courses in NSW were not readily available to interstate students, and the Pundulmurra College course in WA wasn't geared specifically for the revival situation. We also wanted a course that incorporated both learning the language as well as a teacher-training component. There was no single TAFE course that offered both. So we decided to apply for a commonwealth grant, under the auspices of TAFE SA, again through the Maintenance of Indigenous Languages and Records (MILR) program, to write our own course.

The process of writing the new course took two years, and by November 2010 we were proud to see the newly accredited and nationally recognised courses appear on the NTIS website. They are: Certificate III in Learning an Endangered Aboriginal Language, and a Certificate IV in Teaching an Endangered Aboriginal Language. The Certificate III appeared on the scope of TAFE SA by term 4 in 2011, and will be taught to various language groups on demand. In the meantime we are trialling the course on the west coast of SA with a group of Wirangu students in Ceduna, and in Murray Bridge with Ngarrindjeri students. Classes are running well, and enthusiasm is high. At Murray Bridge we often feel as if we are running a well being course, rather than a language class, as people continually tell me that working on their language "makes me feel happy". Some students are already considering pursuing

further linguistic training, while one of the original 16 students is now undertaking formal teacher training in Sydney.

We specifically wrote the new Certificate III and IV courses in a manner which makes them adaptable for stronger languages, as well as for those languages being revived. With TAFE offering a competency based approach to its training, any Pitjantjatjara students who undertake the course in the future, who are already fluent speakers of their language, can apply for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for the units that focus on communicative competence in the target language. Such students would concentrate their study time on improving their literacy skills in their language, plus learning about the metalanguage they need to talk about their language when teaching it to second language learners who require explicit explanations of grammatical structures.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, students such as the young Kurna man Jack Buckskin, who has now been teaching the Kurna language independently for several years, would get RPL for much of the Cert III and Cert IV. Buckskin has been teaching adults at the School of Languages for three years, and the children at Kurna Plains School for a similar period.<sup>20</sup>

## REFLECTIONS

There is no doubt that running intensive language workshops or regular language classes in Aboriginal languages can have many positive outcomes for Aboriginal adults. Such classes not only offer educational and vocational outcomes, but also rewarding personal and social benefits. This has been the case in SA, and reportedly in Queensland as well. According to Stockley (2010, p. 92): “Learning your Aboriginal language can make you feel really good about yourself... Understanding and learning language can make you think differently about your identity and self concept, your place in your family and community. It makes you feel proud.”

Stockley uses the insightful metaphor of “rekindling a fire” as being analogous to the process of reviving an Aboriginal language. He tells us that “it is always easier to rekindle a fire by blowing on still-smouldering coals, rather than letting the fire go out and starting anew” (Stockley, 2010, p. 99). This metaphor seems particularly appropriate for the Ngarrindjeri situation in SA, as well as certain Queensland languages. In contrast, the neighbouring Kurna people in SA have had to start anew with the reclamation of their language from historical records and a missionary sketch grammar. There were hardly any Kurna words remembered by the Elders when they embarked on their revival process in 1990. They say their language had been “sleeping” since the last speaker Ivarityi died in 1929. Although they have had successes, it has been a long slow haul to awaken the Kurna language, with the number of Kurna people engaging with the language being relatively small. At times,

Amery quips that it feels like “we are trying to light the fire with wet wood” when their progress comes in fits and starts, or when they occasionally struggle to interpret inadequate language records (R. Amery, personal communication, 2010).

Ngarrindjeri, however, is a language that never went to sleep. When that first group of Ngarrindjeri adults travelled to Batchelor in the mid 1980s to relearn their language, with the assistance of Steve Johnson, they recorded hundreds of words for their contemporary wordlist. Since then, we have audio-recorded 480 words with numerous Elders within the last decade, and have rekindled the Ngarrindjeri language into glowing embers. The aim has always been to involve respected and knowledgeable Elders in the revival process. It is no coincidence that the TAFE classes have become the impetus for ongoing revival activities. Some of the key Elders in the current TAFE classes, such as Eileen McHughes and Phyllis Williams, were in the original Batchelor group, and other Elders such as Julia Yandell bring a wealth of knowledge to our workshops. Yet these same Elders are also open to learning more from the many missionary and ethnographic records that we are fortunate to have for Ngarrindjeri, particularly the old grammars. It is because of these records that the possibility exists for Ngarrindjeri embers to one day maybe burst into flames.<sup>21</sup> On several occasions during our sharing time in language classes, we have got the very real sense that something special is happening with the language among our class participants. To aid this process we have compiled a set of class rules which are aimed at instilling discipline into the long and hard learning process, and vowing to always support each other if feelings of insecurity or inadequacy arise.

I believe that the modest yet gratifying successes we have had in recent years with the Ngarrindjeri language is also due to the collaborative production of essential language resources, including: a dictionary, learners guide (outlining the traditional grammar), a pronunciation guide (with recordings of Elders), and a language curriculum for schools. But these resources are of no use if learners don't know how to read them. It is the TAFE classes that have given community members an opportunity to learn how to use these resources to further develop their language skills, and ignite their language flame. But we have discovered that it is essential to involve key Elders in all our TAFE classes. The linguist must always be outnumbered by Elders. Otherwise the program lacks credibility in the eyes of the community, especially in the eyes of those who aren't participating.

Over the last two years, we have been using the metaphor of *lakun thunggari* or “weaving the language” to describe the process of reviving the Ngarrindjeri language. The Ngarrindjeri women, who have been the drivers of the present revival activities, are also keen and skilled weavers. The *yalkari* or strands of reeds represent the words while the longer coiled reeds,

which bind the reeds together, to form intricate patterns in baskets or woven mats, represent the grammar of the language.<sup>22</sup> Our challenge now is to get more men involved in coming to classes and actively participating in the revival process. After all, the men did also weave in traditional times. Without the men endorsing the orthography and spelling system used in all the new resource materials, and without them also using elements of the traditional grammar in their occasional welcome to country speeches, the language won't flourish.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has reviewed the Aboriginal language programs that are offered throughout the country in universities, and more recently in the TAFE sector. Because of my involvement with revival programs in SA, this region has provided a focus for the paper. There are lessons that can be learnt from such experiences, particularly the importance of involving key Elders; the need for quality resources including a dictionary, learners' guide and pronunciation guide; and the value of having a supportive classroom environment where students learn how to use these resources effectively. This is particularly the case when languages are being taught in the TAFE sector, which tends to serve languages that are being revived by Indigenous language owners. By contrast, university language courses tend to be offered in stronger languages, and invariably to non-Indigenous students, and have different needs, but still require the support of Elders.

For many languages throughout the country, it is the Elders who have kept the language embers warm over the years, and it is essential that these same Elders be involved in moving the language forward and rekindling the fire. If I can be audacious enough to mix my metaphors here, I would say that by involving key Elders in any language program, whether it be in schools, universities or the TAFE sector, the language fire will not only be rekindled, but will take on a healthy life of its own. This will allow the creative weavers of contemporary language to sit at a warm hearth as they weave new and intricate patterns with every precious word or thread (*yalkari*) that they remember from those early days when they themselves used to sit around the warm hearth of the home, and learn from their Elders.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 The Larakia language was taught in a Jesuit school in the NT near Palmerston; the Kaurna language was taught by the Dresden Mission Society trained Lutheran missionaries Teichelmann, Schürmann and Klose; and Awarbakal was taught by Threlkeld just south of Newcastle in a school first operating under the London Mission Society. Unfortunately, all these mission efforts were short-lived.
- 2 There is much research (e.g. Cummins & Swain, 1986; Tryon, c.1975) which argues that minority children have improved literacy skills and better educational outcomes if they begin their education in their own language, before transferring to English.
- 3 Goal 3: "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages should be maintained and developed where they are still transmitted. Other languages should be assisted in an appropriate way, for example through recording. These activities should only occur where the speakers so desire and in consultation with their community, for the benefit of the descendants of their speakers and for the nation's heritage.
- 4 The 2009 policy has four other elements, including: bringing national attention to Indigenous languages; encouraging the use of critically endangered languages to maintain and extend their everyday use as much as possible; making sure that in areas where Indigenous languages are being spoken fully and passed on, government recognises these languages when it interacts with Indigenous communities; and helping restore the use of rarely spoken or unspoken Indigenous languages to the extent that the current language environment allows. See: [http://www.jennymacklin.fahcsia.gov.au/mediareleases/2009/Pages/preserve\\_indigenous\\_languages\\_10aug09.aspx](http://www.jennymacklin.fahcsia.gov.au/mediareleases/2009/Pages/preserve_indigenous_languages_10aug09.aspx)

- 5 In the school sector Aboriginal language programs have waxed and waned, since 1991, particularly in the north and centre of the country, where Aboriginal languages are still being acquired by children as their first languages. The health of language programs has been very dependent on their respective state governments' official and/or unofficial support, with bilingual programs often becoming the scapegoat for other issues affecting poor performance by Aboriginal students in schools, compared to their southern counterparts. Note this issue is complex and beyond the scope of this paper (See Devlin, this issue; Simpson, 2008; Simpson, Caffery & McConvell, 2009, for a discussion on this topic of concern for precariously endangered Aboriginal languages of northern Australia). However, in the southern states the inclusion of Aboriginal languages in schools has actually increased, due to the injection of funds and government support at both state and federal levels. In South Australia, their 1995 state Language Policy espouses: "It is the ultimate goal of the Education Department that all students have the opportunity at some time during their formal education to learn at least one language other than English" (LOTE)... and "Wherever possible the Education Department will give children the opportunity to study their mother tongue as part of their formal schooling." (Education Department of South Australia, 1995). With an infusion of Aboriginal Language Program Initiative (ALPI) funding, ultimately from the commonwealth, and the appointment of two Aboriginal Language Project Officers in the curriculum branch, school programs in Aboriginal languages soon became a reality in SA. Offering Aboriginal students the opportunity to study their own heritage language, even if it was only in the early stages of revival, rather than studying a language spoken by millions in some distant land, could be viewed as an act of reconciliation, and righting a vexing wrong of the past.
- 6 Linguistics is offered in the following universities, with at least one course on Australian languages: ANU, University of Queensland, University of Sydney, Macquarie University, University of Melbourne, La Trobe University, University of Adelaide, University of New England and University of WA. See an overview of the universities in Australia which offer courses on Aboriginal languages in Amery (2007); and an overview of research on South Australian languages in Amery, Simpson & Gale (2008).
- 7 In January 2012 the UniSA is trialling the reintroduction of Pitjantjatjara as a unit for credit for a few students as part of the summer school
- 8 Solomon-Dent is a trained teacher with a Languages Other Than English (LOTE) degree, and has since worked and taught in a number of language revival programs operating in Victoria, including preschools, primary and high schools. She also trains adults across Gippsland, particularly within the Yirruk-Tinnor Gunnai/Kurnai Language Program (see VACL website). More of what is happening in the TAFE sector in Victoria will be discussed later.
- 9 The policy is that the first four hours of each school day is to be in English only.
- 10 See the Charles Darwin University website for more course information at <http://stapps.cdu.edu.au/>.
- 11 Thank you to R. Amery for the details of the Kurna program (see also Amery, 2007).

- 12 SAL was once administered through the Darwin Institute of Technology (which later became the NT University) before it transferred to Batchelor College. Batchelor College was initially just a teacher training institution, and has expanded to offer training in many vocations today, hence the new name.
- 13 These centres include: the Kimberley Language Resource Centre in Halls Creek, the Mirima Dawang Woortlab-Gerring Language and Culture Centre in Kununurra, Yamaji Language Centre in Geraldton, and the Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre in Port Hedland.
- 14 See Pilbara TAFE website: [www.psc.pilbara.tafe.wa.edu.au](http://www.psc.pilbara.tafe.wa.edu.au)
- 15 See the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages (VACL) website for further details at: [www.vaclang.org.au/language-program](http://www.vaclang.org.au/language-program).
- 16 The Muurrbay Aboriginal Language and Cultural Co-operative has become a Registered Training Organisation and has developed its own VETAB accredited certificates, which it offers rather than TAFE courses. See [http://www.muurrbay.org.au/about\\_us.html](http://www.muurrbay.org.au/about_us.html).
- 17 The University of Sydney also offers the short course Speaking Gamilaraay I. This course is not TAFE accredited, but offers students the opportunity to improve their skills in speaking and constructing simple utterances, and sits alongside the Master of Indigenous Languages Education offered through the Koori Centre at the university, which trains teachers as specialist language teachers.
- 18 In Mid 2011 the NTIS website was replaced with the new website: [www.training.gov.au](http://www.training.gov.au).
- 19 The School of Languages has been offering Pitjantjatjara as a Year 11 & 12 subject in Adelaide for many years in the evenings, once a week. Although there are many fluent Pitjantjatjara people living in Adelaide now, it is very difficult to convince them to teach a class on a regular basis (even though they are happy to be assistants). These new courses will give speakers more confidence in lesson preparation, and also confidence to answer all those tricky grammar questions that adult students inevitably ask. It will also help those speakers who need literacy practice if they missed out on a bilingual education.
- 20 Buckskin took over teaching the Kaurna language from linguist Rob Amery late in 2007, when Amery had to go interstate unexpectedly. There is nothing like teaching a language class by yourself to improve your own language skills and knowledge, as you always have to be at least one step ahead of your class. Buckskin was awarded Young Australian of the Year for SA for 2011.
- 21 It is a happy coincidence that the story of 'fire' plays an important role in the Dreaming narratives of the Ngarrindjeri people (and the Kaurna). The whale was the keeper of fire, but according to legend the fire was stolen from whale by other ancestral animals, for all to share (see Berndt & Berndt, 1990; Meyer, 1846). There are also narratives (such as the Waiyungari story) telling of fire laying dormant in firesticks, awaiting the opportunity to be rekindled (see Berndt & Berndt, 1990). The stem of the Yakka tree (*Xanthorrhoea* species), known as *ngalayi*, was used to make fire by the Ngarrindjeri in traditional times. The Yakka was their firestick.
- 22 See the award winning presentation by Gale, McHughes, Williams and Koolmatrie (2009) at the AIATSIS conference, which can be viewed online at the website: [http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/research/conf2009/papers/L\\_RE1.html#gale](http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/research/conf2009/papers/L_RE1.html#gale).