

Wangkarra: communication and the verbal arts of
Australia's Western Desert

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we situate the verbal arts of the Ngaanyatjarra people of the Western Desert of Australia within the discourse surrounding the UNESCO concept of Intangible Cultural Heritage. We describe the rich heritage of oral traditions that exist in the Ngaanyatjarra region, how they emerged, how they are being sustained and the forces of change that reveal their fragile state today. We give an account of the Western Desert Verbal Arts Project, a documentation project that has, since 2010, collected, recorded and archived a spectrum of practices including oral narratives, sand storytelling, alternate sign language and special speech styles. These practices are embedded in a speech community where the everyday indigenous spoken language is also considered endangered. We consider ways to not only safeguard these rarefied and extremely fragile verbal arts traditions, but also to bring them to the fore as an integral aspect of the living heritage of the Ngaanyatjarra people.

Keywords

Endangered language, language, living heritage, verbal arts, transmission, respect registers, sand stories, avoidance and respect relationships, Indigenous Australia, Western Desert, Ngaanyatjarra people

Introduction

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) comprises practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills recognised by communities as part of their cultural heritage (UNESCO: 2003). This definition of ICH includes language as a vehicle

for oral traditions and cultural expressions (Bialostocka: 2017, pp. 18-19). Transmitted from generation to generation, these practices and expressions are constantly renegotiated and reinvented by people in response to the social and natural

environment in which they live, and to the history of their communities. As has been further argued, *language itself represents people's heritage; it displays all the parameters to be considered ICH – it is transmitted from generation to generation; constantly recreated; speech can be treated as linguistic practice and expressions; language bestows identity upon people in the same way that social practices, rituals or indigenous knowledge do* (Smeets: 2004, cited in Bialostocka: 2017, p. 19).

Writing this paper at the beginning of 2019, which the United Nations has declared the International Year of Indigenous Languages, we reflect on what ICH means in an endangered language context where it is the intangible heritage aspects of communication, cultural expression and social interaction that are rapidly disappearing. As the celebrated linguist, Ken Hale, noted (1992), the loss of local languages and of the cultural systems which they express has meant irretrievable loss of the world's diverse intellectual wealth. In this paper we discuss this issue by focusing on one case study: the verbal arts traditions of the Ngaanyatjarra people of Australia's Western Desert, who reside in a region locally known as the Ngaanyatjarra Lands. We trace our attempts to safeguard the verbal arts of the Western Desert through documentation, recording, archiving and repatriation (Plate 1). Although safeguarding these verbal arts as intangible cultural

heritage could arguably be perceived as an end in itself, key to the vitality of these traditions is their transmission to future generations. We conclude the paper by shifting the focus to the language of youth and consider how the verbal arts can be kept strong through everyday language practices.

Our research addresses the question of what happens in societies that have undergone profound and recent sociocultural transformation, where structures that made sense in the not-so-distant past are challenged by contemporary modes of communication and social interaction. We draw attention to the experiences of a people whose communicative styles and practices have been altered by modernity. Increasingly, as elders pass away, there are fewer and fewer adults who retain the memory of how these fragile oral traditions were practised. With their passing, some of the connection to the poetic forms of the Western Desert will be severed.

Our study also contributes to the debate about what may seem to be competing imperatives: the documentation agenda versus the language revitalisation one, and argues that these practices are, as Grant (2010, p. 54) puts it, *two sides of the same coin*. Seen as an iterative process grounded in long-term relationships and ethical engagements, the tangible objects of language documentation have the potential



Plate 1
The WDVA team documenting sand storytelling in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands.
Photo: Inge Kral, 2012.

to inform and inspire, to find their place in the arts and education, in new media and musical forms, and even, as we will show later, in their original contexts of use. It also raises issues about the processes involved in transforming what are essentially dynamic and ephemeral forms of language—speech, sign, song, drawing—into tangible forms, by the creation of documentary records. Such ‘fossilisations’ of linguistic practices are, by their nature, not able to reflect the many innovative and adaptive dimensions of verbal arts traditions (see Grant: 2010, p. 51). We argue, however, for the value of such documentations as part of a multi-faceted strategy to invest in the heritage value of one the world’s unique, small, endangered languages.

Verbal arts documentation in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands

Since 2010 we, the Western Desert Verbal Arts project team¹, have been recording and documenting verbal arts and special speech styles in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands. We began ongoing documentation of the spoken ‘respect register’—*yirrkapiri wangka*—in 2010. In research from 2012–2018, we filmed the *mirlpa* ‘sand storytelling’ practices of old and young women and explored their adaptation of this drawing practice to iPads (Ellis, Green and Kral: in press.). Audiovisual documentation of children’s songs and games was undertaken with older care-givers and their children (Ellis, Green and Kral: 2017). We also recorded sign

language practices (Ellis *et al.*: forthcoming). In tandem with documentation, we have returned collections to the community formally and informally on USB memory sticks and in film festivals (Ellis, Green and Kral: in press.). Additionally, we have deposited the audio-visual recordings and associated metadata in relevant language and community archives, in a quest to safeguard them for future generations of speakers and researchers.²

The Ngaanyatjarra Lands fall within the Western Desert region of central Australia and comprise approximately 3% of mainland Australia, fanning out into Western Australia from the tri-state border with South Australia and the Northern Territory (Figure 1).

Approximately 2000 people now live in the eleven Ngaanyatjarra Lands communities. The population includes descendants of the last nomadic groups of the Western Desert (referred to hereafter as ‘the Ngaanyatjarra’). As a group, the Ngaanyatjarra have never left their country, nor has their country been annexed or occupied by outsiders, and they now form a relatively homogenous group. Remoteness has protected them, residing as they do in the harsh desert of central Australia, a thousand kilometres away from the closest townships of Alice Springs to the east, and Kalgoorlie to the west.

The mutually intelligible Western Desert dialects Ngaanyatjarra, Ngaatjarra and Pitjantjarra are the main languages spoken by those who reside in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands. Of Australia’s remaining Indigenous languages it is estimated that less than twenty are sufficiently robust to be passed on to the next generation (Angelo *et al.*: 2019). Of these, only a few will retain their full expressive richness. The dialects spoken in the Western Desert will be transmitted to the next generation: however their oral traditions, the verbal arts of their culture, are under immediate threat. These traditions of Western Desert people are central to cultural practice and social interaction and embrace special, respectful ways of speaking, as well as sign language and the use of graphic symbols to accompany sand story narratives. These multimodal speech arts are a valued part of their traditions. Nevertheless they are highly endangered, and opportunities for children to acquire the full expressive potentials of these oral and visual traditions are decreasing dramatically.

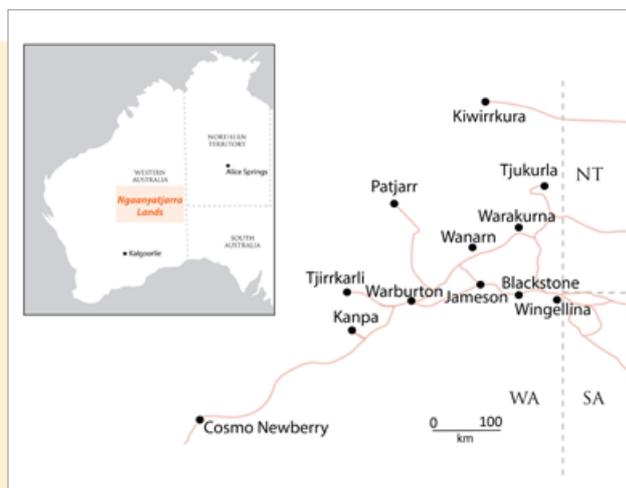


Figure 1
Location of Ngaanyatjarra communities.
Map: Jennifer Green, 2018.

The verbal arts of the Western Desert

Communication and social interaction in Ngaanyatjarra communities embrace a rich spectrum of verbal art forms, speech styles and respect registers. Everyday communication (*wangkarr*) includes storytelling (*tjuma*), sand storytelling (*mirlpa*), dance/song (*turlku*) and sign language (*mara yurriku*). Special speech styles and respect registers are utilised in secular and ceremonial contexts. Figure 2, developed by Ellis, schematises the interconnectedness of these different aspects of Ngaanyatjarra communication.

Ngaanyatjarra people say that in the *tjukurrpa*—the Dreaming or Creation time—Ancestral Beings appeared out of nowhere. They then created waterholes and other features of the environment and these sites became significant places imbued with spirituality and sacredness. In the Creation time, everything was brought into existence by the Beings: *parna*—the land, *kapi*—the water, *yukiri*—the flora, *kuka*—the fauna, *yilkari*—the cosmos, and *yarnangu*—the people. The actions of the Ancestral Beings who created the environment are embodied in the performance of ceremonies that re-enact the Ancestral Beings' original acts. Traces of the actions of the Ancestral Beings remain etched on the landscape and abstracted into designs. These designs, inscribed on sacred boards and painted on the bodies of participants during rituals, serve as mnemonic devices for recalling the *tjukurrpa*. Such actions of the Ancestral

or Dreaming Beings are also rendered in *tjuma* (oral narratives) and *turlku* (songs, dances and stories).

The Ancestral Beings also spoke in certain ways, and the way that Ngaanyatjarra people speak now is influenced by the way that the sacred Ancestral Beings spoke to each other in the Creation time. Their legacy remains in narratives from the *tjukurrpa* and in the special speech styles and registers used by people to this day. As Ngaanyatjarra people say, *you can go back into the tjukurrpa and see this is the place, this is the song, this is the story. Oh we do this now because it was in the tjukurrpa they say, it's our traditional law, it's our culture. This why we do what we do now and this is why we speak like we speak now.* Importantly, this means that much communication is embedded in the realm of the sacred and secret. This sets rigid rules for when *tjaa yuti* (literally 'clear speech') is allowed and when alternative forms of speech must be used. *Tjaa yuti* is the form of language that can be used in the everyday and is understood by everyone. Everyday communication also embraces the verbal arts: *tjuma* (story), *turlku* (dance/song), *tjinytja/mirlpa* (sand drawings), and *mara yurriku* (sign language). Contemporary cultural practices and language practices all derive from these understandings. Language establishes the frame for the proper order of things—the order of life, behaviour and interaction in ritual life and in the everyday (Kral and Ellis: forthcoming).

Let us now turn to the rich spectrum of Western Desert verbal arts.

Tjuma - narrative

There are many kinds of narrative in Ngaanyatjarra society. Without a doubt, the most important narratives are the *tjukurrpa* stories that link directly to songs and to narratives about the creation of the land. Many of the *tjukurrpa* stories are linked to the travels of the Ancestral Beings and the particular sites where events took place. The sequences of songs that are linked to these sites are sometimes referred to as 'songlines'. All the major songlines are the source of many of the Western Desert ceremonies (*turlku* or songs, dances and stories linked to sites along the songlines). However, only individuals who have family connections and *tjukurrpa* links to a certain 'country' (i.e. traditional land ownership) have the authority to tell the story for that country.

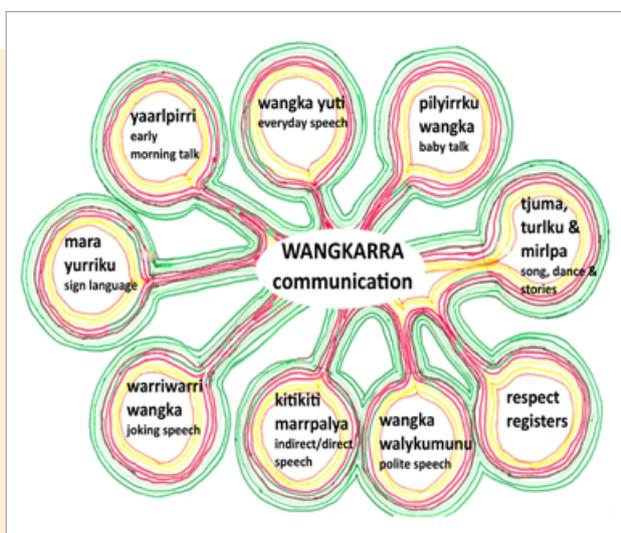


Figure 2
The network of communication practices found in Ngaanyatjarra communities.
Artwork: Elizabeth Ellis, 2016.

Within Western Desert society, any discussion of the *tjukurrpa* narratives must take account of who owns the story or parts of the story along the songline, as well as the gradations along a continuum from secret/sacred to public. The travels of the Ancestral Beings who created the songlines can be quite extensive, sometimes up to thousands of kilometres. One major songline running through the Ngaanyatjarra region is the *Kungkarrangkalpa Tjukurrpa* or Seven Sisters Dreaming (Brooks and Jorgenson: 2015; James: 2015; Neale: 2017). Then there are the stories that are told as children's stories (*tjilkuku tjuma*). Many of these are told as bedtime stories set in the *tjukurrpa* (Creation time) while others have no link to the Creation stories at all. Another type of *tjilkuku tjuma* is *mirlpa* or sand storytelling.

Mirlpatjunku: sand storytelling and other ground-based activities

Across the Western and Central deserts of Australia, storytelling, especially sand storytelling, integrates graphic designs drawn on the ground with speech, song, sign and gesture (Eickelkamp: 2011; Green: 2014; Munn: 1973; Watson: 2003; Wilkins: 1997). Ngaanyatjarra narrators typically employ conventionalised graphic forms as well as leaves and sticks to represent story characters (Plates 2 and 3). The storyteller uses a *mirlpa* (*mirlpinti/tjinytja*) 'stick', a fresh twig that is shaped and used to make marks on the ground, as well as to erase the surface of the ground once each story sequence has ended. Sand storytelling developed in a particular

cultural and ecological niche where inscribable surfaces were readily available for private soliloquies, polyadic accounts (traditional stories or recounts with many parts and narrators), or for collaborative, co-constructed actions. They constitute a key feature of traditional desert environments, and manipulation and experimentation with the 'ground' and its varied textures—creek sand, fine soft red dirt—with the hands and the use of sticks or wires is encouraged from early childhood onwards. In this way, desert children are socialised into multilingual, multimodal praxes of interaction from an early age.

There is a dynamic interplay between semi-permanent marks made on the sand with the hand, the stick (or now with so-called 'storywires'), and the spoken word. In this primarily female practice, little girls learn to narrate by drawing upon a range of communicative resources deploying multiple modalities in the act of storytelling. Alongside verbal forms, these may include sign, drawing, mimetic sound symbolism, mimetic action represented by the movement of parts of the body and the engagement of 'props' such as leaves and sticks (Green: 2014; Green: 2016). Today young girls are still constantly seen sitting in groups telling stories in the sand using a storywire (Plate 4).

Ground-based games have also developed where inscribable surfaces are readily available. The *mama mama ngunytju ngunytju* game is played in the Ngaanyatjarra region. In this game speech, gesture and graphic designs are negotiated in dyadic and



Plate 2
Graphic elements in a sand story, representing people ('U' shapes), a fire, artefacts, and an enclosing shelter. Drawing by Elizabeth Marrkilyi Ellis. Photo: Jennifer Green, 2018.



Plate 3
Leaves and other small objects are used to represent characters in sand stories. Photo: Jennifer Green, 2012.

polyadic interactions between caregivers and a number of children, as linguistic and embodied practices are reinforced in peer-to-peer play. It is a systematically organised language routine in which players employ oral 'question and answer' routines linked to visual graphic schema drawn on the sand and contextualised in a framework of social and spatial knowledge.

The *mama ngunyju* game is an overt language socialisation activity that reinforces the connectedness of kin to their traditional country within a bounded socio-spatial field. Through engagement with the game, young girls practise and acquire manual and verbal skills and demonstrate their knowledge of social relationships within the known range and expanding habitus of their world. Children take from the game a heightened understanding of kinship relationships and spatial orientation within the desert landscape. Ngaanyatjarra children acquire these core cultural concepts as tacit knowledge required for myriad practices in the course of their lives. In this practice, we see the use of a mutually comprehensible set of symbols or icons associated with the sand storytelling tradition combined with new symbols associated with contemporary living (Ellis, Green and Kral: 2017).

***Mara yurriku* - sign language**

In the Western Desert, Indigenous sign languages are used alongside speech, gesture and other semiotic systems such as sand drawing. Combined with these other semiotic systems, it becomes a powerful resource



Plate 4
Katrina Giles and Joella Butler using a storywire.
Photo: Jennifer Green, 2013.

that holds a particular place in the overall schemata of *wangkarr* (communication) (Ellis *et al.*: forthcoming). These sign languages have been termed *alternate* sign languages, as they are not generally the main method of communication, but rather they may be employed with or without speech, or used instead of speech in particular cultural circumstances (Kendon: 1988). The Ngaanyatjarra phrase *mara yurriku*, meaning 'moving the hands', is used to describe communication by manual signing, and this is an important aspect of the communicative ecology of Ngaanyatjarra communities. Ellis recalls her father being a particularly good signer, who would mix sign with speech while storytelling. Sign was used for communication across distance and to ensure silence while hunting, she notes. *One other reason*, Ellis says, *is when the older people don't want the younger people to hear conversations about secret sacred issues*. Sign might also replace speech during ceremonies, and be used for private and discreet talk between lovers. In the repertoire of lexical signs there are signs drawn from many semantic domains: kinship, flora and fauna, time, topography and the environment, and the traditional and modern artefacts of everyday life.

Special speech styles

The concept of respect is core in Ngaanyatjarra society, and is evident in the many respect relationships and in a rich array of speech styles and respect registers. *Anitji* is a respect register used openly by male and female kin in ceremonial (and secular) contexts. People use this register because in the *tjukurrpa* the Ancestral Beings spoke *anitji* during the man-making ceremony. *Anitji* is also known as *tjaa nyantulypa*, *tjaa paku* or *wawanypa* in various Western Desert dialects. It is an auxiliary language comprising separate lexical items, but identical grammatical forms to everyday speech, except for certain pronouns, demonstratives and interrogatives. Primarily, it is used by those who are the *yirrkapiri* (the grandfather, grandmother, aunt, uncle, mother and father) of a boy going through the man-making ceremony. Without a doubt, this respect register is severely endangered, even though the ritual practices associated with the passage into manhood remain strong to this day. These days, when families can no longer use this special respect register—they whisper or use hand signs when communicating with one another.

Other respect relationships are the so-called 'avoidance' relationships. Among the many avoidance relationships in Western Desert society, the strongest are the relationships between a woman and her son-in-law, and a man and his son-in-law. These two strict avoidance relationships also come into being during the manhood ceremony. In these respect relationships there must be no eye contact and no physical contact, and a respectful distance must be maintained. People can only speak with each other and give things to each other via a third party. They can refer to each other by indirect means but must not say each other's names. In contexts requiring respectful or distant social interaction between certain relations, the use of indirect speech styles—*tjitirra* or *kiti-kiti watjalku*—is also required (Kral and Ellis: forthcoming).

Another speech style originating from the *tjukurrpa* is *yaarlpirri*. *Yaarlpirri* or 'early morning talk' is a form of public oratory or rhetoric that is a more formal version of ordinary everyday discourse, used extensively in the past to discuss issues, air grievances, disseminate information or organise the day's hunting and gathering (Goddard: 1992). *Yaarlpirri* is a speech routine employing indirect mediational strategies to maintain social harmony and resolve conflict.

To this day it is understood that to be a competent speaker in this speech community entails having proficiency in cultural as well as linguistic practices in different domains of use. This requires understanding the social conventions of language use encompassing verbal and non-verbal communication modes, as well as mastery of the verbal arts and the special speech styles used in everyday and ceremonial contexts.

The impact of change

Western Desert people practised these speech arts for thousands of years before their encounter with Anglo-Australian settler society altered the everyday social, cultural and linguistic practices of desert people. The remoteness of Ngaanyatjarra people meant that they were protected from the early ravaging effects of colonisation on Indigenous people in the settled parts of south-east and coastal Australia. The United Aborigines Mission established itself at Warburton Ranges in the early 1930s, and provided relatively benign protection until the 1970s. Until the 1950s most Ngaanyatjarra

people were still roaming the large desert expanse between Warburton Ranges Mission and Ernabella Mission in South Australia some 600 kilometres to the east. The presence of the mission at Warburton Ranges in many ways prolonged the maintenance of the nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle, in part due to its remoteness. The last of the nomadic peoples from around the Gibson Desert and Rawlinson Ranges were brought into the mission during the 1960s.

The 1960s and 1970s saw numerous Ngaanyatjarra people travelling out into towns in the Eastern Goldfields, near Kalgoorlie: adults for employment on pastoral stations and adolescents for secondary schooling. After the mission was relinquished to the government in 1973, families moved back to their traditional country and set up small outstations that became the permanent communities we see today. By the 1980s, families began to move from residing in semi-permanent bough shelter constructions to living in houses in settled communities. Today, extended family groups tend to live together in Western-style houses. Most families have motor vehicles and are highly mobile, driving hundreds of kilometres to visit family, attend funerals, sporting events, participate in ceremonial activities or seek out services such as banks, hospitals and shopping malls in urban centres like Alice Springs and Kalgoorlie. In recent years there has also been a rapid uptake of digital technologies. The internet is widely used, there is mobile phone connectivity and most teenagers and adults have mobile phones.

Such changes have, of course, impacted on communication and social interaction. For example, *yaarlpirri*, the early morning speech style, is no longer heard or used, partly as a consequence of the shift away from living in open camps to dwelling in houses. Similarly, contemporary community life has brought those in avoidance relationships into closer proximity. Older people comment on how young people do not show respect. In other words, they are interacting directly with their in-laws (sitting near each other, talking with them and eating together) rather than using indirect modes (Kral and Ellis: forthcoming).

These changes notwithstanding, the multimodal speech arts (encompassing narrative competence, oratorical skills and other symbolic, visual and gestural modes of representation and communication) remain a

valued, if endangered, part of the traditions of Western Desert people. In the past, command of broad-ranging traditional cultural practices and knowledge systems came through familiarity with the world experienced through embodied knowledge and habitual practices. Although the Ngaanyatjarra have experienced profound change, it is nonetheless evident that the actions of the Ancestral Beings are still present in the landscape, and their trace memories shape the performance and rhythms of everyday life in the present.

Young people in the Western Desert are living in this rapidly shifting language ecology. For them, the newly-introduced institutional pressures of schooling and employment have further impacted their capacity to engage in cultural practices that previously enabled the acquisition of context-specific language forms and specialist knowledge. This has meant that younger people are not acquiring the songs, dances and special

speech styles associated with ceremonial activity as they would have in the past. In addition, social media has intensified the influence of English language and Western cultural practices. Despite these altered sociocultural circumstances, the traditional structures of social organisation remain intact (Brooks: 2011). Moreover, the verbal arts are still practised and young people are transforming them to suit the contemporary context (Kral and Ellis: 2019).

Living language

Memories of past practices continue to live on in everyday life: in ceremonies; in the practice of traditional arts; in media and in digital archives. Moreover, the intangible aspects of the *tjukurrpa* are evident in a tangible form in myriad new expressive forms, first and foremost in the genesis of new acrylic artworks seen across the desert communities (Acker and Carty: 2012; Myers: 2002). In these works icons and symbols display an array of meanings as illustrated in [Plates 5 and 6](#) where Elizabeth Ellis (Author 3) and her mother, Esther Giles, paint their traditional country. Sometimes the meanings and messages in paintings are readily decoded and at other times the deeper meaning is visible only to those with a higher level of cultural knowledge.

In the contemporary songs of young Ngaanyatjarra musicians we also see a performative process of creation and renewal, and an indication of the enduring importance of the verbal arts in the lifeworlds of young



Plate 5
Purrungu by Elizabeth Marrkilyi Ellis, 2016.
This painting is of the country around Purrungu which was created by the Kutungu Woman in the *Tjukurrpa*.
Image courtesy of Tjarlirli Arts.

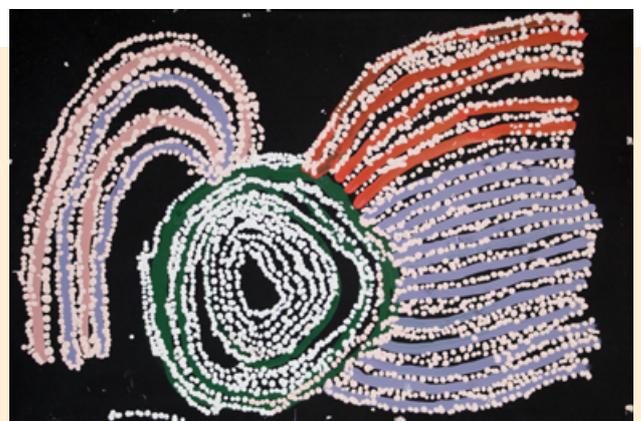


Plate 6
Tjarlirli by Esther Giles, 2016.
This painting is of the waterholes and sandhills of Esther Giles' traditional country around Tjarlirli.
Image courtesy of Tjarlirli Arts.

people. Here, direct and indirect references to the *tjukurrpa* abound, translating intangible concepts into tangible objects in the form of CDs and music videos. Young musicians are using digital technologies to lay down new narrative forms (Plate 7). In a manner reminiscent of the way in which *turlku* or ceremonial song is embedded in place, and people are the vessels for the songs that emanate from the landscape, the music produced by the young musicians is also embedded in place. Their songs evoke movement, and a yearning for 'country'. In one song 'Ngurra Karilywaraku',³ Trenton Giles, a young musician from Warburton (Plate 8), sings about Karilywara (Patjarr), the traditional country of his grandmother:

Yangupala kutjarralurni ngayunya watjarnu,
 Two young fellas came and said to me,
Yarrala marlaku ngurrakutu
 Let's go back home
Ngurra nyarratja ngarala
 To the place over there
Ngurra Karilywaraku
 Our home Patjarr

By shifting the focus to the language of youth we attempt to dispel any notion that we are tied to a form of linguistic essentialism focused only on fixed 'authentic' social and cultural practices and bounded cultural identities. Rather, we seek to recognise the hybridity of new language practices, whether oral, written or mediated by technology. In the language documentation literature, most research has focused on older generations. Consequently we know little about the manner in which Indigenous young people are taking up the oral traditions of their culture, or about how the communication systems, speech styles, verbal arts, performance genres and inter-related knowledge systems are being acquired or transmitted. Further research is needed in this domain.

Safeguarding language for the future

Internationally, the discourse of Indigenous language endangerment and shift has changed to a focus on language vitality, sustainability and resilience (Grenoble: 2015). As Grenoble and Olsen note (2014, p.7), drawing on Joshua Fishman (1991), a vital language is one used by *all* generations in *all* domains. The ratification of the UNESCO *Convention for the*



Plate 7
 Delrick Holland, Wilurarra Creative Studio, 2010.
 Image courtesy of Wilurarra Creative.



Plate 8
 Trenton Giles, Wilurarra Creative Studio, 2015.
 Image courtesy of Wilurarra Creative.

Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage came into force in April 2006, providing a policy framework for safeguarding language as living heritage.⁴ Bialostocka (2017, p.19) wrote *living heritage is primarily contained in the linguistic interactions of the people to whom it belongs*, here highlighting a tension between the need to safeguard intangible cultural heritage through collecting, recording and archiving, and the requirement to see the endangered languages maintained as *living* heritage, ensuring their transmission to future generations (see Grant: 2010).

Importantly, these perspectives situate language as living heritage; where language is alive, it is dynamic, and it is the means by which human beings communicate and interact with each other in a vast array of social contexts. But also language *is not a neutral medium for communication but rather a set of socially embedded practices...* [and] *social interactions live linguistically charged lives*. (Ahearn: 2017 [2012], p.3). Nowhere is this more apparent than in oral performance in context and the *anchoring of verbal art in the social and cultural worlds of its users, and the complex multidimensional web of interrelationships that link performed texts to culturally defined systems of meaning and interpretation and to the socially organised systems of social relations* (Bauman: 2004, p. 32).

Conclusion

To say that the Ngaanyatjarra language is endangered is indeed true. However, our focus in this paper has been on the nuanced speech arts of Ngaanyatjarra oral traditions that embrace speech styles, ceremonial forms, song, dance, narrative, respect registers, sign language and storytelling modes coupled with the associated cultural practices. This verbal arts tradition is most fragile. Safeguarding the verbal arts is an altogether more complex agenda than safeguarding the everyday language of an endangered language speech community. Highlighted here is the importance of storytelling, especially the traditional narratives from the *tjukurrpa*, in the lives of children. This also signals the importance of ceremony in the cultural life of Western Desert people, and its significance in the enculturation of the young and the maintenance of endangered verbal art forms. Ceremony and ritual constitute a rich environment for the acquisition of respect registers and traditional modes of social interaction. Revitalising

and maintaining oral and cultural traditions to ensure that language forms are passed on to successive generations entails a local commitment to maintaining the narrative traditions and performing ceremonies, to ensure that music and dance traditions are also not lost (see Grant: 2014; Treloyn *et al.*: 2013). It also entails a shift in attitudes by policymakers and speakers themselves, as scholars have argued that attitudes to language are of key importance in assessing the chances of an endangered language surviving (Austin and Sallabank: 2013).

Through our project of recording, documenting and archiving the verbal arts of the Western Desert, aspects of this intangible heritage will be safeguarded for the future. However keeping these traditions alive as living language is an altogether more difficult quest. There are, nonetheless, glimmers of hope as we see the verbal arts traditions gain new life and revived prestige as an outcome of our documentation project.

The film recordings we made between 2013 and 2018 with ten young women who transferred the traditional sand storytelling practice to iPads have injected new life into this traditional narrative form. The films burst with colour, energy and originality, and we see traditional iconography merging with contemporary symbols as the young storytellers recount stories of trips out bush collecting traditional foods with humorous memories of flat tyres and seeing scary animals. Other stories reveal the contemporary pastimes of young people-playing football, softball and going to the disco (see Plate 9).

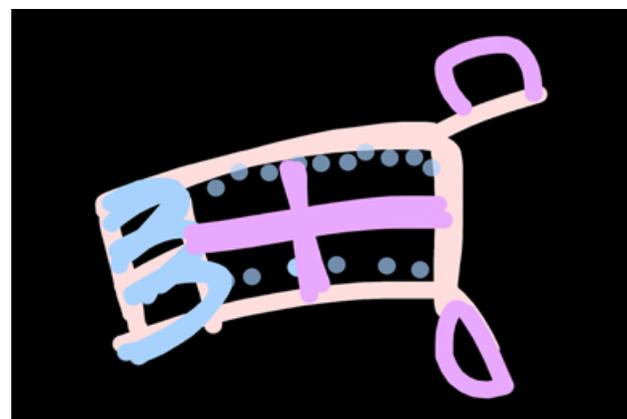


Plate 9
Joella Butler, 2013. 'Tjalaku – Going for honey ants in the Toyota'.
Image courtesy of the Western Desert Verbal Arts Project.

The films have been shown in community film festivals, on Indigenous Community Television, and transferred into book form with QR codes that allow readers to see the films online.

The research on the spoken respect register has also been returned to the Ngaanyatjarra community. At the end of 2018 we went back to the community with a list of some 300 words and their equivalent meanings in everyday Ngaanyatjarra (and Pitjantjatjara), representing the most extensive list of examples from this special respect register (see also Goddard: 1992). Around thirty older people had been interviewed, providing more than six hours of recordings, including example sentences and descriptions of the context of use. These interviewees are representative of the last people to have learned this auxiliary language, and of the very few able to still speak it in the *yirrkapiri* camp during the manhood-making ceremony. The interviews were transcribed and translated in ELAN and entered into the FLEX dictionary-making programme. We left this precious document with an older woman who was eager to spearhead a revitalisation of this special speech style. Some weeks later we heard that the list had been taken into the *yirrkapiri* camp and it had piqued the interest of some of the young people, catalysing a burst of enthusiasm for learning this verbal art form among the young. Such examples of the use of research materials provide a window into the many ways that this intangible heritage can be kept alive, reminding us that safeguarding must have multiple dimensions. Firstly, items must be stored in sustainable archives for future generations, but these traditions must also be maintained as living practices among the younger generation as the future of these unique oral traditions and cultural practices resides 'in their hands' (Hinton: 2014, xi).

In conclusion, we need to consider the connection between language endangerment and language socialisation and the role of the family and community in the acquisition and transmission of cultural processes and practices, including language, over successive generations, and the dynamic hybridity of new language practices as people and their practices change over successive generations. By paying attention to these multi-faceted, multi-dimensional aspects that pertain to the multi-modal speech arts, we may have some chance of safeguarding the Western Desert Verbal Arts for the future.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 A team of people have worked on the Western Desert Verbal Arts Project. The primary fieldwork researchers are Elizabeth Marrkiliyi Ellis, Jennifer Green and Inge Kral. We have been assisted by Jane Simpson, Alexandra Grant, Natalie O'Toole and Linda Rive with the speech register transcription, translation and analysis; and Lauren Reed with sign language annotation.
- 2 Digital recordings from the Western Desert Verbal Arts Project have so far been archived at The Endangered Language Archive ELAR at SOAS, University of London <https://elar.soas.ac.uk/>, and at the Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures PARADISEC <http://www.paradisec.org.au/>, as well as at the *Tjumalampatju* - Our Stories archive at Ngaanyatjarra Council <https://tj.keepingculture.com/welcome>.
- 3 'Ngurra Karilywaraku', writer Trenton Giles. Song 17 on *Turlku 4*, CD produced by Ngaanyatjarra Media, 2010.
- 4 Australia has not ratified the *Convention*, although one state, Victoria, has recently introduced legislation to protect Aboriginal intangible cultural heritage, including language (*Aboriginal Heritage Amendment Act*, 2016).

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