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ABORIGINAL LANGUAGE USE IN THE
NORTHERN TERRITORY: 5 REPORTS

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FOREWORD

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Because of the preliminary nature of most of the material, these volumes are circulated on a limited basis. It is hoped that their contents will prove of interest primarily to those concerned with Aboriginal and Islander studies, and that comment on their contents will be forthcoming from readers.

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CONTENTS

FOREWORD	iii
INTRODUCTION	ix
YANYUWA--A DYING LANGUAGE by Jean F. Kirton	1
0. Introduction	1
1. Historical Background	1
2. The Situation in 1963	3
3. Factors which have Contributed to Change, 1963-86	4
3.1 The Disbanding of the Main Camp	5
3.2 Changes in the Cattle Industry	6
3.3 The Education System	6
3.4 Changes in Linguistic Expectations	7
3.5 Changes in Aboriginal Mobility Patterns	8
3.6 Changes in the Economy and Values of the Yanyuwa	8
3.7 Changes in the Sources of Power and Status	10
3.8 Changes in the Social Structure of Borroloola	11
3.9 The Influence of Alcohol	12
3.10 Media Pressure	14
4. Ineffectual Counter-Influences	14
5. The Move from Yanyuwa towards Kriol	16
6. Conclusion	17
Notes	17
References	18
KRIOL IN THE BARKLY TABLELAND by Philip L. Graber	19
0. Introduction	19
1. The Survey Team	20
2. Overcoming Obstacles	20
3. Communities	21
4. Sociolinguistic Observations	24
5. Linguistic Observations	25
6. Survey Conclusions	27
Appendix	27
References	31

SOCIOLINGUISTIC SURVEY REPORT: DALY RIVER REGION LANGUAGES	33
by S. James Ellis	
0. Introduction	33
1. Items of Historical and Sociological Relevance	34
2. Centres of Population	35
2.1 Daly River	35
2.2 Peppiminarti	37
2.3 Woolianna	37
2.4 Wudikapalirr	38
2.5 Other Areas within the Daly River Region	38
2.6 Areas outside of the Daly River Region	39
3. Sociological Conditions of each Daly River Area Language	40
3.0 Methodology	40
3.1 English	41
3.2 The Daly River Creole	43
3.3 Ngankikurungkurr	44
3.4 Ngankiwumiri (Nangumiri)	47
3.5 Marrithiyel (Marithiel)	48
3.6 Malakmalak (Mullukmulluk)	49
3.7 Magnella	49
3.8 Tyeraity, Yunggor, Kamor	49
3.9 Murintjabin, Mareammu, Maridan, Maringar, Maramanandji	50
3.10 Maranunggu, Ami, Manda	50
3.11 Ponga Ponga, Wadyigin, Batyamal	50
3.12 Wagaman	51
4. Language Attitudes	51
Appendix 1 Map of Daly River Region	53
Appendix 2 Language Use Categories	54
Appendix 3 Ethnographic Questionnaire	54
Appendix 4 Interview Schedule	61
References	66
 SOCIOLINGUISTIC SURVEY REPORT: WAGAIT REGION LANGUAGES	 67
by S. James Ellis	
0. Introduction	67
1. Methodology	68
2. Centres of Population	69
2.1 Belyuen (Delissaville)	69
2.2 Wagait Reserve	69
2.3 Darwin Camps	70
3. Sociological Conditions of the Wagait Region Languages	71
3.1 Vernacular Languages	71
3.2 The Belyuen Creole	73
4. Language Attitudes	73
References	74

TIWI: A LANGUAGE STRUGGLING TO SURVIVE

by Jenny Lee

0.	Introduction	75
1.	Historical Background	76
2.	Tiwi Life Today	78
3.	The Present Language Situation	80
4.	The Nature of the Change in the Language	80
	4.1 Traditional Tiwi (TT)	80
	4.2 New Tiwi (NT)	81
	4.3 Modern Tiwi (MT)	84
5.	The Sociolinguistic Situation	85
6.	Reasons for the Change in the Language and Language Use	87
7.	Factors Influencing the Survival or Revival of Tiwi	91
8.	Tiwi or not Tiwi, that is the Question	93
	Notes	93
	Abbreviations	95
	References	95

INTRODUCTION

This is the second volume of language surveys produced by the Summer Institute of Linguistics, Australian Aborigines and Islanders Branch. The first, appearing in WORK PAPERS OF SIL-AAB Series B Volume 11, presented three different types of survey: inherent (or mutual) intelligibility between some Western Desert languages, a preliminary general survey in central Northern Territory, and a sociolinguistic survey focusing on language usage and attitudes in a specific Queensland community. The articles in this volume again represent several types of language survey.

Jean Kirton's article is quite unique in some ways. It is a diachronic study of a linguistic community which is in the process of replacing one language, Yanyuwa, with other languages, particularly Kriol and English.

Phil Graber has focused on a specific language, Kriol. He has built on the earlier survey work of Dave Glasgow in an attempt to determine the extent to which Kriol is used in the Barkly Tableland of the Northern Territory. In contrast to a more general type of survey, this was a type of dialect survey aimed at trying to determine the boundaries of Kriol within the Tableland.

The surveys by Jim Ellis of the Daly River and Wagait regions are of a general sociolinguistic nature. The purpose of these surveys was to determine what languages are spoken in the various communities in this area of the Northern Territory, and the relative strength of each of the languages.

Language survey, especially when trying to evaluate language use and attitudes, is by its very nature an inexact science. The number of factors which influence the findings of any given survey are many. A person's conscious or unconscious attitudes toward his own language and other surrounding Aboriginal languages will affect his response. Attitudes toward researchers will also have a profound effect on responses. The researcher's knowledge of the area and the methods used will affect the findings.

The greatest hurdle that must be overcome in language investigation is that of the researcher's paradox. The ideal context in which to evaluate language use is a natural social setting amongst users of the language. However, it is impossible for the researcher to observe language use without actually being there. With the introduction of a researcher into the community, it is no longer a natural social setting unless that researcher is considered as part of the community. The

researcher is faced with the paradox of trying to observe what happens when he is not there!

In Jean Kirton's situation, this hurdle has been overcome to a large extent. Since she has lived and worked with speakers of Yanyuwa in Borroloola since the mid-1960s, she is in fact a part of the Yanyuwa community.

To minimize the impact of being outsiders in Aboriginal communities, the Kriol survey team comprised several Kriol speakers from Ngukurr. It was these men who carried out a great deal of the actual survey work in the Tableland communities.

In spite of the drawbacks and limitations of any survey, the surveys which are included in this volume help to give us a somewhat clearer understanding of the use of Aboriginal languages in the Northern Territory.

Research reported in this volume was partially funded by the Research Fund of the Australian Aborigines and Islanders Branch.

Michael J. Ray
Volume Editor

NOTE: After M. Ray had written this Introduction and departed overseas, an additional paper became available. We are happy to include Jenny Lee's paper on Tiwi language change in this series volume.

SOCIOLINGUISTIC SURVEY REPORT: WAGAIT REGION LANGUAGES

S. James Ellis

0. INTRODUCTION

This report covers the results of a survey done on the languages spoken around Delissaville and in parts of the Wagait Reserve. Actually these languages are part of the Daly River Language Family (Tryon 1974), but sociologically the people are a separate group. For this reason I have made this report separate from my Daly River region survey report (see this volume) and have entitled it accordingly.

In addition to Delissaville (or Belyuen, its Aboriginal name, as it will hereafter be called), Wagait Reserve and points in between the two, I have included in my report the part of Darwin that is integrated with the activities of the former two places. Altogether, these make up the Wagait region.

The word 'Wagait' refers to no language in particular. It simply means 'beach dweller' (Black 1982:22) and it refers to the groups of people that traditionally lived in a region stretching north and south of the mouth of the Daly River, including Peron Island. These people now make up the population of Belyuen. My explanation as to how and why the groups came together would follow the line of reasoning laid out in my Daly River report. They initially came together because of the attraction of European lifestyle. Later depletion of their population and loss of traditional solidarity resulted in continuing unification of diverse groups. Most likely the groups moved initially into the present Wagait reserve area and then into the Darwin area. Upon the establishment of the Belyuen settlement, that became the centre of activities for the various groups.

Three short field trips were made to compile data about the Wagait region languages. I made a visit to the One-mile Dam camp on 1 February 1984 which enabled me to visit Belyuen on 17 June 1984. This visit paved the way for a more extended one on 22-23 June 1984. In addition to these trips, my previous survey at Daly River had given me some background information about the Wagait region.

The purpose of the survey was to provide sufficient sociolinguistic information to enable S.I.L. to determine if there was a need for an S.I.L. translation programme in any of the Wagait region languages.

The specific aims of the survey were to: a) describe the places where Wagait region languages are spoken (see Section 2) b) describe the state of the Wagait region languages, particularly in terms of language use (see Section 3) and c) describe language attitudes of the language speakers and those associated with those speakers (see Section 4).

1. METHODOLOGY

The methods of obtaining information concerning the sociolinguistic conditions of the languages in the Wagait region were solely interviewing, observation, and document research. I used no questionnaire forms or recorded discourses to acquire data, although I had these materials available in case they were to be of use. I did however make use of tape-recording sessions and pre-recorded discourses to gain rapport with the Wagait people.

Interviewing was always on an informal basis. Information came from Allen Nama of One-mile Dam camp, the school teacher at Belyuen, the Aboriginal Health Clinic supervisor at Belyuen, a member of the Department of Community Development in Darwin, a member of the Department of Education in Darwin, and numerous Wagait Aboriginals whom

I spent time with during the course of my field trips. All of these people were eager to talk about the languages and to help wherever possible, for which I was very thankful.

2. CENTRES OF POPULATION

2.1 BELYUEN (Delissaville)

The people who traditionally dwelt around Belyuen (Larakia and Kiok?) are now virtually extinct. The Wagait people have made the area their home since before the war. The bush around the settlement has been the place for their traditional livelihood since the oldest men were small boys.

Today, the settlement covers about a square kilometre of land. There is a full range of modern facilities. Over twenty block homes cover the settlement area along with some school buildings, an all-purpose meeting hall, a store, a health clinic, recreational facilities, a construction and maintenance area, a modern power station, and an airport a short distance away. The buildings are equipped with electricity, plumbing and telephone service. Many families own a colour television. About fifteen minutes away by car is the Mandora resort which is visible across the bay from Darwin. Just north of the resort is a beach area which is called West Point. These two places, the resort and the beach, are favourite spots during leisure time.

There are as many as 200 Aborigines of all ages living on the settlement. The main languages represented are Wadyigin, Ami and Manda.

As far as I could tell, the affairs of the settlement are controlled by the Aboriginal council. Community projects and needs are funded by the Department of Community Development and most likely other government funding agencies as well. There are only about a half dozen Europeans living and working at the settlement. There is no mission presence on the settlement but Mr. Merv Pattemore of the Aborigines Inland Mission and others come to the settlement every week for meetings.

2.2 WAGAIT RESERVE

There are about five Aboriginal groups living on the reserve. Each of them is small in number; the total number of people living on the reserve is no more than a hundred. Apparently the east side traditionally belonged to one group and the west side belonged to another group. At present the east side is made up of a group of Waray, Kurragai(?) and Kiok(?) people who have a land claim on file. The west

side is made up of traditional Daly River people, many of whom were given land rights when the reserve was originally set up.

Of these small groups the one at Bolgo, the Bigfoot family, is the strongest in terms of usage of a vernacular. The Bigfoot family consists of an older man, his two sons, and their wives and children. Ami is the language they use among themselves.

At the mouth of the Finnis River is a group of about twenty Maranunggu people, most of them in their thirties or forties. There are some younger people but their language is an English-based creole.

Even though the Manda and Wadyigin people have legal rights to the land within the reserve, they are all living at Belyuen. It appears that the primary livelihood for these small groups is related to the cattle industry. There is a cattle station at Finnis River employing several Aborigines from various groups. Most likely these include the Maranunggu.

Some time ago the Department of Education surveyed the reserve to see if any schools could be set up. But it was discovered that the children were too few in number and too separated in distance to justify the establishment of a local school.

2.3 DARWIN CAMPS

The camp that is most closely united with the affairs of Belyuen is One-mile Dam (or Railway Dam); the people from both places are closely related to one another and they visit back and forth frequently. One-mile Dam is located close to the Darwin city centre. The permanent residents have claimed ownership to one or more acres of land through the efforts of the Aboriginal Development Foundation. The ADF has also provided about five small block dwellings with one more nearing completion. It appears that water and sewage are supplied by an ablutions block. The common consensus is that there are fourteen to fifteen permanent residents. As many as three or four times that number would use the camp from time to time as a place from which to execute their in-town business (be that for medical needs, family visits, shopping or drinking). These visits from outsiders are often a means of income for the camp (Sansom 1980:7). There are no children residing at the camp to my knowledge. One of the leaders in the camp, Allen Nama, was particularly helpful with all aspects of my survey work. He claims the main vernacular of the camp to be his own language which is Amu (which may be MareAmmu as per my Daly River report). Wadyigin would be the second major vernacular. But the primary language of the camp for normal daily affairs would be an English-based creole.

There are several Wadygin people at Bagot Reserve, some of whom had just left to go stay at Belyuen on the day I visited Bagot. I got the impression at the time that those people had been visiting relations at Bagot who were not normally a part of the Wagait region affairs. But there is, I believe, one Wadygin household permanently residing at Bagot.

The only other two Darwin camps that have normal association with the people at Belyuen are the Berrimah settlement and the Catholic Missions headquarters (both described in my Daly River report). The leader of the Berrimah settlement claims that all of the Wagait region languages are spoken in his camp along with about a dozen other vernacular languages. But such use of the Wagait languages would be the exception rather than the norm. The Catholic Missions headquarters, like the One-mile camp, is used as a place to facilitate relationships and transact business--not only for the Wagait region people, but for the Daly River region and Bathhurst Island people as well. The location is meant for transient accommodation.

There are other Wagait region people who have mixed into the white society either by marriage or assimilation. There may also be a few Wagait region families that live outside of the region proper such as a Maranunggu family which is living at Batchelor.

3. SOCIOLOGICAL CONDITIONS OF THE WAGAIT REGION LANGUAGES

3.1 Vernacular Languages

The situation regarding each of the vernaculars is much the same. There are perhaps a dozen Wadygin speakers who use the language as a normal means of communication. For the Ami and Manda speakers that number would probably be a little higher. For the Maranunggu speakers it would probably be less. And if Amu (the One-mile leader's language) is a separate language from the above, then the number of speakers of this language would be very small. Only the old people use the language for a full range of communication tasks. Many of the middle-age people may have a proficiency in their various vernaculars, but I never heard them use it. They used English or the creole typical of the Belyuen area or something in between. The young adults that I spoke to both at Belyuen and at One-mile readily admitted that they couldn't speak 'language' but they said they could 'hear' it. They said the same thing of the children. The school teacher at Belyuen who has been there for seven years told me that the children do not use the vernaculars at home but that they understand much of the content of what is spoken to them by the older people. The health clinic supervisor told me that there were at least two families at Belyuen in which the younger parents were

consciously using a vernacular with their children in hopes that the children would use it themselves. And as mentioned previously, there are at least two families on the Wagait Reserve that are using a vernacular for all their day-to-day needs. There may be two or three families elsewhere that are using a vernacular in their daily family life as well. But these families are not only separated by distance and dialect, they are overshadowed by the tide of Wagait region families who are using the vernaculars in only a very restricted sense. As one of the young adults said, 'We're trying to learn the language but it's too hard'. The fact that I was taken only to old Charlie or old Tommy or some other old person for any language data led me to believe that it was only the old people who really felt comfortable with the vernaculars.

The Aboriginal health clinic supervisor, who is from Belyuen, has been trained in the South and has had a lot of exposure to the Top End as a result of his work with government health care. He takes his practice seriously and he has a serious desire to restore traditional lifestyle as well. He performs the circumcision ceremonies in the cleanliness of the clinic. He often takes the young people out camping and fishing on weekends to the familiar bush haunts. And he hopes to see the vernacular language restored. I asked which of the vernaculars would be the most probable to restore. He said that even though the greatest number of vernacular speakers spoke either Manda or Ami (mutually intelligible to each other), the best language would be Wadygin. According to him, the people that still had some interest in traditional things, like the singing men, were Wadygin. On one of the evenings I sat and listened to some young and middle-age men singing with a didjeridu and a beer-can-tapping percussion section. The music was excellent but when I asked them to tell me the meanings of the songs, there was a bit of uncertainty on their part. The school teacher told me he would often run into the same problem when he would ask the children to tell him the meaning of various traditional songs. We figured that perhaps the younger people had been able to memorise the form of many ceremonial sayings and songs but had never grasped the specific meanings. This phenomenon, however, is not unique to the Belyuen people. In many Aboriginal groups the present day singers may have no understanding of the literal meanings of the songs they sing, while at the same time they may speak their traditional language quite well.

Even though there are many older people in the Wagait region who are capable of communicating in one of the four or five vernacular languages, the language of the people is no longer a traditional vernacular. It is some form of English-based creole.

3.2 The Belyuen Creole

After one of my vernacular recording sessions at Belyuen I asked for somebody to give me some creole or pidgin talk. I was immediately referred to a girl who was visiting from Roper River. I tried to get some of the young adults around me to just go ahead and speak their language, but they were unwilling. They would only refer me to a Kriol speaker. They either identified the sound /kriol/ with a language that was different from their speech or they in fact believed that their daily speech didn't have official language status. The Kriol speaker that I did talk to told me that the Belyuen people could understand his Kriol speech easily. He felt that the Belyuen creole and Kriol weren't that different. He obviously knew exactly what I meant by Kriol; he knew John Sandefur and his work and he was able to read a Kriol book that I had given him quite fluently.

I doubt if there are very many in the Wagait region who can't communicate in the Belyuen creole. Even the oldest men who were in my company always spoke to others using either their form of creole or English. The only time I heard a vernacular spoken regularly was between Allen Nama and his wife.

The school teacher feels that the children have an English creole which uses a mixture of words from the various vernaculars. He is not sure that their language is even understood clearly by the older adults. There has been some analysis of the children's speech by recording it. But that was with the purpose of seeing whether they met a level of ability in English necessary to use a particular curriculum programme (i.e. using signalling units). The test revealed that the children qualified in their English ability to profit from the programme. That was no surprise to me since I generally felt that most people I encountered were quite capable in expressing themselves in English, at least Aboriginal-style English.

4. LANGUAGE ATTITUDES

In accordance with what I found at Daly River, everyone in the Wagait region, including whites with whom the Aborigines associated, would like to see the traditional languages in regular daily use. But once again the path of least resistance continues to weaken traditional languages. The school teacher pointed out his belief that if we want to see the vernaculars restored, we can not define our responsibility as waiting until the Aborigines take their own initiative before we act. It won't happen. We must do something to challenge them or even cause them to act. But there is a point at which language loss is irreversible.

I brought up the subject of developing their creole as a written language and as a means of maintaining Aboriginal solidarity. The school teacher was open to that idea. I suggested that he try to get some candid recordings of the children's speech. It could be analysed to see how closely it lined up with Kriol and to determine the potential for using the existing Kriol materials.

The Wagait people as a whole seem to accept their creole. One night a couple of the young men tried to give me some clear examples of their creole 'the way they talk'. They seemed quite proud of it. Although it would be desirable to help the Wagait people retain or revive some vernacular usage, it is clear that their language of daily use is a creole. This creole should be analysed in order to determine if the Wagait region people can profit from any creole materials that are now or will be available.

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