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NORTHERN TERRITORY: 5 REPORTS

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# FOREWORD

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# 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.

## YANYUWA -- A DYING LANGUAGE

Jean F. Kirton

### 0. INTRODUCTION

Yanyuwa<sup>1</sup> is a dying language. If any factors should contribute to its reviving, the writer will rejoice indeed, as at this time the factors contributing to its loss seem too strong to be overcome. Yanyuwa, along with other minority languages in multilingual situations around the world, is dying.

The term 'dying' refers to that '**point of no return...** which we can recognise in language shift, where the association of the younger generation with the new language is so strong, and the opportunity and motivation for acquisition of the old language so weak, that the shift is irretrievable' (McConvell 1986:18).

The purpose of this paper is to consider the changes which have led to the present situation, and especially to look at the changes which have taken place since 1963--the year in which the writer commenced her work with the Yanyuwa people at Borroloola.

### 1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In 1985 Borroloola celebrated its centenary as a gazetted Australian town, and so Yanyuwa speakers have had an ongoing contact with English for a little over 100 years. There were earlier contacts with the Macassans, but those periodic contacts had little effect on the language beyond adding a few items of vocabulary. It was the impact of the coming of the white man, the necessity to communicate with him, and the consequent progressive disruption of the Yanyuwa social situation which has been leading steadily towards the death of the language. The

pressures towards learning English and the pressures against learning Yanyuwa have been steadily mounting, and the writer seeks to document those factors which have brought about these pressures in the Yanyuwa people's situation.

Traditionally the Yanyuwa community was a multilingual community. The Yanyuwa people were technically those whose fathers were Yanyuwa. The probability is that their mothers were not. They were likely to have been Garawa or Mara (or from other neighbouring groups then existent). The children first learnt the language of their mothers and the women around them. The boys had maximum exposure to their fathers' language--the language essential for ceremonial life--when they were initiated. The girls learnt their husbands' language at marriage if they married non-Yanyuwa. In traditional times, contact with these other Aboriginal languages led to the developing of multilingual skills.

Towards the end of last century, the town of Borroloola was founded and developed. It became a supply centre for the white settlers on cattle stations in the area. Supply boats travelled up the McArthur River several times a year. The Centenary Souvenir Brochure records:

By the turn of the century it was one of the larger and more colourful frontier towns in the north, with a population of around 1,000.<sup>2</sup> Hundreds of people passed through each week on their way to the goldfields in the north, and the police were kept busy with trigger-happy fortune hunters and cattle duffers (that is, cattle thieves).

And so the Yanyuwa have had something over a century of association with the white man and with the English language.

Early this century, about ten of the more adventurous young Yanyuwa men from the Yanyuwa families on the Sir Edward Pellew Islands worked on a cargo boat and at diving for trepang in the coastal area of North Australia and beyond. Other Yanyuwa worked on cattle stations or at jobs associated with the Borroloola town community while the town thrived. From these various contacts the Yanyuwa added Pidgin English, and later the developing creole language<sup>3</sup> (now named Kriol), to their language knowledge.

Two factors in particular hindered their learning Standard English. The people did not have the opportunity to put their language-learning abilities to the test. Traditionally they had learnt by sitting in a communal situation and listening to conversations and to story-telling sessions around them. It is unlikely that there were comparable gatherings of English speakers, and if there had been, it is unlikely that Aborigines would have been free to join such groups night after

night. In addition, the nature of the English phonology, grammar and semantics made the gap between the two languages a formidable one to bridge.

As in other parts of the Northern Territory, a number of Aboriginal people in the area were killed by whites over a period of time.<sup>4</sup> One elderly Yanyuwa man, whose own father and uncle were among the casualties, in the mid 1960s spoke of three factors contributing to the termination of the white man's killing of his people: (i) the Aboriginal women slept with the white man and this contributed to the reconciliation of the races; (ii) the Aborigines worked at learning English, and the increased ability to communicate contributed to improved relations; (iii) in addition, the government instructed the white men to cease killing Aborigines and to put them to work instead. In the people's own view of their history, the learning of the white man's language was closely related to survival.

## 2. THE SITUATION IN 1963

When the writer arrived at Borroloola to commence work in 1963, Yanyuwa was the dominant language. By that time Borroloola was a 'ghost town'. The white population was reduced to about a dozen adults and some children, and their housing ranged from corrugated iron houses to Roger Jose's famed dwelling constructed from two galvanised iron water tanks. These people were associated with the Welfare Department, the Aborigines Inland Mission (A.I.M.), the one general store/post office facility, or were crocodile shooters, casual workers or hermits. The road to Borroloola was one of gravel or dirt at best, of fine 'bull dust' or mud at worst. People needed strong motivation to use it.

The main population of Borroloola in 1963 was the Aboriginal community who then lived in their camp at Malandarri on the eastern side of the McArthur River. (The 'town' was on the western side.) The central camp area belonged to the Yanyuwa group. A small group of Mara lived to the north and a larger group of Garawa to the south. The numbers swelled each wet season when the cattle station workers returned from their seasonal work.

At that time, Yanyuwa was the dominant language because the Yanyuwa people were the dominant people. Three factors gave them this dominance: (i) they were in their own area while the others were 'outsiders'; (ii) the Yanyuwa (according to the report of anthropologists who have worked here through the years) were, and have continued to be, the recognised leaders in the ceremonial life of the area; (iii) the Yanyuwa were the group who related most easily to the white man because their previous cross-cultural contacts with the

Macassans had given them confidence in meeting with newcomers, and there was less loss of life in their encounters. It may be that the very character of the Yanyuwa would also tend towards domination.

The Yanyuwa spoke both Yanyuwa and Kriol among themselves at that time. In addition, the men usually had at least a passive knowledge of Garawa or Mara or both. The women usually spoke their husbands' language as well as their own. Some of the women had lived or worked in association with English speakers at the cattle station homesteads in the area. The women generally tended to have more communication with the local white people, and so their English was more comprehensible to non-Aborigines.

At the Aborigines' request, the A.I.M. missionaries had provided schooling for the children and some classes for adults for about ten years prior to this time. This had given an opportunity for some of the younger members of the community to move further towards Standard English.<sup>5</sup> A Welfare officer had transferred the school to Welfare control at some time prior to August 1963. He had placed the school in charge of an Aboriginal woman whose own education had been limited, and so the 'school' had tended to become a child-minding centre.

This, then, was the situation in 1963. The Yanyuwa people were small in number, about 150, but their language was the main language of the camp community. The people recognized a necessity for the children to know English also, and the parents tended to speak to the children in Kriol when they addressed them directly<sup>6</sup>. In the years that followed, a number of factors contributed to changing the social situation at Borroloola, the main environment of the Yanyuwa language by this time.

### 3. FACTORS WHICH HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO CHANGE, 1963-1986

The writer has had an ongoing contact with the Yanyuwa people and language through the period 1963-1986. There have been times of absence in relation to work or holiday, and three periods of about a year for renewing contacts with family and with the Christian constituency who have provided financial and prayer support. There was a 4-year absence when she returned home because of parental need. In that 4-year period, the accumulated effects of a whole range of factors became more evident. In the year following her return in mid-1984, it was obvious that the language situation must be reassessed, and she reached the conclusion that Yanyuwa was dying.

A number of factors have predictably led to this state of the language. They include the disbanding of the camp which fostered communal life and language, unemployment leading to the advent of 'outside' Aborigines coming into the community, the education system for the young people,

increased mobility of Aboriginal people, the loss of the expectation that wives would learn their Yanyuwa husbands' language, changes in other aspects of the culture and in the very nature of the town of Borroloola, disruption to social life and communication because of increasing alcoholism, and pressures from the powerful media of television and video.

### 3.1 THE DISBANDING OF THE MAIN CAMP

In 1963 the main Aboriginal camp was at Malandarri above the eastern bank of the McArthur River. There was a single large camp and this fostered communal life and the acquisition of traditional language. Although a government officer was appointed to Borroloola to maintain a local authority since its establishment as a 'town' (either a policeman or a Welfare officer), the Aboriginal camp was the people's own domain and under their control. Even though the parents spoke Kriol to their children, the children were constantly exposed to hearing Yanyuwa when it was used in adult communication. At that time the Yanyuwa children were obtaining a passive knowledge of Yanyuwa which many later extended into an active use after they entered the circle of Yanyuwa-speaking adults.

In 1969, a Yanyuwa family then resident in Darwin flew back home for that year's Borroloola Races. They brought with them from Darwin a virulent form of influenza which rapidly spread throughout the communal camp, packed as it was with visitors. Within one month there were eight deaths in the Borroloola area. After the first deaths at Malandarri, the camp there was disbanded. The Garawa remained on the eastern side of the river but moved south. The Yanyuwa and Mara crossed the river and several scattered camps were set up. As more deaths occurred, these new camps were abandoned and the people moved again. Finally, more permanent camps were established in the new scattered locations.

A major flooding of many of the new camp areas in 1974 led to further moves. Government housing projects (commenced early in the 1970s) have continued the pattern of the Yanyuwa living in varied locations, although they have tended to group together in their areas. This dispersion of the community, combined with the inter-marriage of the Yanyuwa with those of other language groups, resulted in less use of Yanyuwa in the camps and more frequent resorting to Kriol in many instances.

The youngest people currently speaking Yanyuwa well, with few exceptions, are those who spent their early childhood years at Malandarri (or on cattle stations in family groups, returning to Malandarri each wet season.) In families with older members from

Malandarri and younger members born too late to be part of that community, the younger members of the family have never mastered the language. Other influences coincided with that event (as will be seen below), but the move out from a single large camp dealt a sharp blow to the language. (The 'few exceptions' are the young adults who have confident parents with strong traditional roots, parents who continued to speak Yanyuwa to each other and to others in their new camp areas.)

### 3.2 CHANGES IN THE CATTLE INDUSTRY

Through the years a number of financial considerations have led to an increasing flow of Aborigines from the cattle stations in the surrounding area and into the Borroloola community. When there was the requirement that Aborigines be paid wages equal to those of whites, the process began. At that time the cattle station owners could afford to keep only their best Aboriginal stockmen, and the remainder (along with the various extended family members who had accompanied them) returned to Borroloola. This first return was by those who normally returned every wet season and so they belonged to the community. The only problem at this time was one of unemployment.

Since then, however, two factors have led to the steady increase in the extent to which other Aborigines have come into the community, Aborigines whose lives had formerly centered on the cattle station communities: (i) tight financial times for station owners, brought about by changes in the world beef market and periods of drought, have led to the termination of employment of Aborigines; (ii) the use of helicopters for mustering cattle has made additional Aboriginal stockmen redundant. Each fresh influx of Aboriginal people from the cattle stations brought those whose connection with the Yanyuwa community was increasingly remote. These changes in the cattle industry resulted in an increased number of Aborigines at Borroloola who had no knowledge of Yanyuwa.

### 3.3 THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

In the mid-1960s the first government school was opened at Borroloola. It commenced with a single caravan classroom and one teacher. It has developed until a cluster of permanent buildings have been established and the staff has steadily increased in both white teachers and Aboriginal teaching assistants. Once Kormilda College was established in Darwin, increasing numbers of Borroloola students moved off to post-primary education there, a thousand or so kilometres from home.

Two school-associated factors have contributed to language loss for the Yanyuwa. The first is the pressure of English which, with very rare



exceptions, is the only language heard at the schools. Few teachers have actively discouraged the use of Aboriginal languages but the very system itself has taught the children that English is the priority language and that Aboriginal languages are an 'optional extra'. The second factor has been the removal of the teenagers from their language community for their post-primary education.

The post-primary students relate most readily to their fellow-students and to Darwin activities. Ties with their home community and language are weakened. This period of association with young people from 'foreign' areas has also resulted in some marriages for the Yanyuwa young people outside the community. These marriages have either taken them to a distant community and cut them off from their language totally, or they have brought more non-Yanyuwa people back into the home community. This has contributed to a breakdown of the former system where marriage was into communities where there was reciprocal language knowledge and use.

The education system, however unwittingly, has contributed to language loss. At the time when young people are most receptive to learning, they are absent from the Yanyuwa language environment for significant periods for primary school and even more for post-primary. At the time when they are beginning to think of marriage partners, they are surrounded by 'foreigners' at their Darwin college.

The educators of children are not alone in their promotion of the English language. Cattle station people, mission staff, government staff--virtually everyone has contributed to the pressure from English. Indeed, a few teachers stand out as exceptions and have encouraged the children in their knowledge of their Aboriginal language. But the education system has been singled out because the impact it makes on the community is greater than that of any other.

#### 3.4 CHANGES IN LINGUISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Traditionally, when an Aboriginal girl married, she was expected to learn the language of her husband. Now there is no such requirement. Kriol or Aboriginal English provides a common language for husband and wife. (Some young people have come from other Kriol-speaking communities. Others come from areas where Aboriginal English<sup>7</sup> is spoken.) A lingua franca has removed the necessity for wives to learn Yanyuwa, if they come from outside the community.

In recent years, every young Yanyuwa married man has espoused a wife who has no knowledge of Yanyuwa. The children hear no Yanyuwa from their

mothers and will probably hear little from their fathers. This would seem to spell the death of the language.

In earlier years, this potential problem was becoming apparent but at that time there were a significant number of Yanyuwa grandparents who were maintaining a Yanyuwa language environment. The number of Yanyuwa-speaking grandparents is steadily diminishing.

### 3.5 CHANGES IN ABORIGINAL MOBILITY PATTERNS

Through the years the transport system of the Yanyuwa people has changed radically. In 1963 the people travelled in their area on foot or by canoe. As the years progressed, some cheap second-hand vehicles began to make their appearance as well as some aluminium dinghies. In more recent years the cars have improved in quality and quantity to the extent that everyone now has access to a relative's if they do not have one of their own, and many of the vehicles are obtained new. Similar changes have occurred in neighbouring communities.

People from the Yanyuwa community are mobile for a number of reasons. Some find employment in other areas. More go out for training of many kinds. Those employed by the school or the Health Centre have periodic opportunities for in-service training at larger centres. The Yanyuwa go out to the larger centres to share in political, cultural and Christian activities. Expense money for conferences or holiday travel enables some of the government employees to travel throughout Australia and sometimes overseas. Family members in other parts of the Northern Territory and in other states of Australia draw their Borroloola relatives for visits. The Yanyuwa spend more time out of their language area than previously.

One factor has drawn mobilised Aborigines from surrounding areas into Borroloola. Most of these communities do not have ready access to unlimited quantities of alcohol. At Borroloola there is a hotel facility within easy walking distance of the various Aboriginal residential areas with liquor on sale seven days a week. This is an attraction to many Aborigines to visit Borroloola, and some remain to add to the numbers who do not understand Yanyuwa.

### 3.6 CHANGES IN THE ECONOMY AND VALUES OF THE YANYUWA

In 1963 the Yanyuwa people resident at Malandarri were still oriented towards a traditional pattern of living. The days were given to hunting and food-gathering and the evenings were given to corroboree dancing, story-telling, or talking around the camp-fires. At that time the

Welfare officer distributed rations each week, but in accordance with traditional eating patterns, the food was steadily eaten until it was finished. Food given out on Friday was finished on Monday. Hunting and gathering expeditions resumed on Tuesday. (If individual families endeavoured to make their supplies last through the week, they were soon discouraged by the demands of other relatives who had no such goals.)

At that time, the adults and children were satisfied by either 'whitefella tucker' or by bush foods. But this was to change. Over the next few years legislation brought Aborigines out of wardship and a ration system into citizenship and a financial economy. As more money became available, the necessity to hunt for food ceased, and hunting and food-gathering became holiday activities. When the government school was first set up, a midday meal was provided for the children. For these various reasons, 'whitefella tucker' became the normal food of the younger members of the community.

Early in 1976 there was a breakdown in the transport system which kept the Borroloola store supplied. Bread, flour, cereals, sugar and various other basic foods ran out, and these things remained unobtainable for a week or so. When the writer shared a few kilos of flour with a few of the nearby families, she was quite unprepared for the gratitude expressed by the Yanyuwa pastor--gratitude quite out of proportion to the small gift of food. But he explained why the gift was of such value to him. He and his wife were well satisfied with the foods they could readily obtain from the bush but their children were not. They had become accustomed to food from the store and were pleading for bread or for damper (a flat scone-like cake made from flour). The children's hunger was not satisfied by unfamiliar bush foods, and that gift of flour had met a need of the pastor's children.

This increasing dependence on store foods is indicative of other dependencies on western commodities: petrol for vehicles, medical treatment at the Health Centre, and so on. These factors have largely negated the hoped-for benefits that the outstation movement may have brought, in providing a new nurturing ground for the Yanyuwa language.

Parents have worked hard to obtain traditional land and outstation facilities there. They have been motivated by a deep concern to remove their sons and daughters from access to alcohol and to encourage them back to a more traditional life-style. The adults' hope for at least some of the outstations had been to set up more traditionally oriented schools, with Yanyuwa language used and cultural skills taught to their children. But in many instances the sons and daughters have changed values and do not share the motivation of their parents. Their concern is to keep returning to Borroloola and to their peers and the facilities there.

A few of the outstations have been more strongly established than the others. Of these, the writer is aware of only one where there has been a positive contribution to the maintenance of the Yanyuwa language. For the remainder of the Yanyuwa, the earlier move into a western economy has been accompanied by a move towards western values and life-style and language.

Even at this one outstation, Wandangulla, the children's knowledge of Yanyuwa is restricted to certain vocabulary areas. Of the senior grandparents there, the grandfather uses primarily Garawa and the grandmother Yanyuwa. John Bradley reports that in his repeated visits there (in association with his Sacred Sites Authority work), he has observed that the children use a basic Kriol into which they have incorporated Yanyuwa nouns (for such categories as bush foods and body-parts), and Garawa verb forms (which are considerably simpler than Yanyuwa's prefixed forms).

This situation at Wandangulla illustrates two further factors. One is a measure of confusion in the children's identifying with one specific linguistic group. The other is the very nature of Yanyuwa itself. It is one of the prefixing, noun-classifying Australian languages, which makes it one of the more daunting to learn. In addition, it is the only one of these which has separate dialects for male and for female speakers, which compounds the difficulty.<sup>8</sup>

### 3.7 CHANGES IN THE SOURCES OF POWER AND STATUS

A study on the politics of Borroloola and four other Aboriginal settlements has been written up by Rolf Gerritsen (1981). He describes how the five communities are controlled by small dominant groups who appropriate a disproportionate share of the benefits from the public sector. He writes of these 'dominant men' who obtain their power from three sources, of which only the first is a traditional source: (i) 'ceremonial attainment' which is associated with affiliation to a group which 'owns' or 'controls' a particular ceremony; (ii) 'land power' which is 'a modern power' associated with recognised ownership of reclaimed traditional land, and (iii) '**munanga** ("whiteman") power' which is associated with a knowledge of English and of the European bureaucratic systems.

Gerritsen writes that the power of the 'dominant men' is gained from varying mixtures of power from the above three sources, but that '**munanga** power is vital'. The changes in the cultural economy have resulted in finances gaining a significant cultural value. It is the 'dominant men' who understand how to obtain finances for themselves and

for others and this indeed places considerable power within their control.

The writer has observed this same phenomeon. The fact that this power has a close association with 'control of European language' gives another strong motivation for mastery of English. This contributes an additional pressure to push Yanyuwa into the background.

### 3.8 CHANGES IN THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF BORROLOOLA

Through the years since 1963, the white population of Borroloola has steadily increased. At first the increase mainly related to government staff who provided services for the Aboriginal people. The school staff grew with the enlarging community. Police replaced the Welfare officer when it was rightly predicted that the availability of alcohol to the entire population would necessitate their presence. A Social Services staff was required. A Health Centre was established and a resident staff appointed. At that stage the Aboriginal people were still largely the focal point of the community but this then changed.

In 1968 the main access road to Borroloola from the Stuart Highway (going south from Darwin through the centre of Australia) was sealed. About the same time the road south to the Barkly Highway (crossing the country from the east to meet the Stuart Highway) was also sealed. Borroloola quite rapidly became one of the major stops on an outback tourist route. It also became a more attractive resort for fishermen. The 1985 Centenary Souvenir Brochure states: 'Borroloola currently claims around 8,000 visitors a year'.

The white people in the community have increased in number and the focus of major interest has turned away from the Aboriginal people (as a group with need for cross-cultural assistance). The writer's impression is that they are now seen more as consumers--or perhaps as a hindrance to the development of the area. Certainly there has been a marked change in racial attitudes in the community as a whole.

These changes have led to the Aboriginal people being exposed to even greater social pressures from the dominant national culture. Although the Europeans are a minority group numerically, their better education, greater financial resources (or understanding of finances and ability to handle them, at least), and their facility in their own language and cultural system have given them a strong social advantage. The Aboriginal people have become increasingly aware of cultural pressure being exerted on them.

The increased European presence has been accompanied by the growth of an increased number of associations, meetings relating to town management (and now a newly-elected town council), hearings relating to new liquor licence applications, parent-teacher meetings, and so on. For the Yanyuwa and other local Aboriginal people to have meaningful involvement, there is increasingly a need for better ability to comprehend and communicate in English. It has been assumed by Europeans and Aborigines through the years that English is the appropriate language for such activities, and that assumption is still there. (The Aborigines are aware that any weakness in the area of English skills places them at a disadvantage.)

Places, such as Njawuma, that were regularly frequented by the Yanyuwa for camping out on hunting trips have been taken over by local European clubs or by tourists. The Yanyuwa no longer feel comfortable to visit these places and now avoid them. Some of the islands, which provided a place of refuge for the people in past years, are now open to the tourists. The Yanyuwa had no way of knowing that among the visitors would be those who would disregard the bounds set, and worse, would desecrate areas sacred to them, even the burial places of their kinsmen.

Linguistically, socially, and emotionally, they have come under pressures. To an increasing extent, they have lost control in areas where, a few decades ago, they were the authority. Sometimes they can still exert their former dominance but they cannot rely on doing so. In ceremonial areas they are decision-makers still. But when there is a move into areas of 'politics', 'democratic processes' or 'group representation', then they are now one of many voices, even within the Aboriginal community.

As consciousness of the Aboriginal-European dichotomy has been strengthening, it seems that there has been an accompanying weakening of the distinctions which have marked the separate identity of Yanyuwa, Garawa, Mara and other Aboriginal groups. This social situation has put the Yanyuwa language under stress in two ways. There is pressure towards English from the white community presence, and the need for the Aborigines to identify as a unit is bringing pressure towards the use of Kriol (or Aboriginal English for non-speakers of Kriol) as a lingua franca.

### 3.9 THE INFLUENCE OF ALCOHOL

The one feature of citizenship that the Borroloola Aboriginal community clearly understood (when legislation incorporated them with the rest of Australia's citizens in 1964) was that they were free to purchase and to drink alcohol. Some of the men had met with it already. The ten who

helped man the cargo boat in the northern waters had been given a rum ration along with the whites on the crew (the issue was given immediately prior to their settling to sleep). Others had been slipped some beer or spirits by one or two of the whites, or by kinsmen whose white paternity allowed them to obtain it legally. And so there were already those who had a taste for alcohol.

The local Welfare officer had planned that there would be some education on the use of alcohol before he notified the Aborigines of their new freedom, but the news arrived from other sources ahead of the planned 'education'. The day that the Aborigines began drinking alcohol, the corroboree dancing in the camp, at the close of each day, ceased. The rhythmic droning of the didgeridoo, the skill of the dance, the identifying of the onlookers with their performing kinsmen, the recounting of the highlights of the dancing the next day--all of this ceased with the arrival of alcohol. From that time to this, dancing has become an event for the rare occasions when a performance is required for visitors or for ceremonial purposes.

At first it was only a proportion of the male Yanyuwa who drank regularly, and at that time the community was horrified to see drunken women among some of the newcomers from more distant cattle station areas. The Yanyuwa were aghast to see drunken mothers neglecting their children.

On the writer's return to Borroloola in 1984, she was aghast to see Yanyuwa women drinking and neglecting their children, and that this was accepted as a normal thing by most of the community. It was also the norm for the teenagers returning from Kormilda College to join the drinking groups. Increasingly it has become the pattern for a large number receiving their fortnightly cheques to buy one supply of food and then to join their 'mates' in steadily drinking their way through as many cartons of beer as their money will buy. (Some do not even make that initial purchase of food.)

Some mothers with a number of children had earlier withstood the pressures to drink, but the stress from their husbands' drinking habit was too great for them to cope with, and they found a way of escape only in turning to alcohol themselves.

This disruption, first to the normal evening activities in the camp social life at Malandarri and later to the normal family social life, has been a further blow to the sharing of Yanyuwa with the children and the young people. The language of the drinking groups is no traditional language. It is usually some form of English or Kriol, and it not infrequently includes a high proportion of English swearing and obscenities. These English-related languages and this vocabulary is the

norm for children who accompany their parents to the hotel and to the drinking groups. Alcohol brought immediate devastation to the cultural life of the Yanyuwa and it has subsequently contributed to language loss also.

### 3.10 MEDIA PRESSURE

In the 1960s there was little evidence of radios in the Aboriginal camp. During the 1970s portable radios and cassette players began appearing in increasing numbers. It was during the writer's 1980-1984 absence that a television receiver was erected at Borroloola and television and video became established as a regular feature of life through the Aboriginal camps and homes.

In 1985 an anthropologist, Wayne Dye, visited Darwin to give seminars on various topics. In one of these seminars he spoke on the effect of the impact of television and video on minority languages around the world. Although his basic work has been done in Papua New Guinea, he has visited diverse minority language areas on the continents of Africa, Asia and America in his role as an international consultant with the Summer Institute of Linguistics.

He reported that around the world, the advent of television and video has accelerated the process of language loss among the smaller minority groups. Through these media the national languages have gained in status and the indigenous languages have consequently suffered. Borroloola and several other Australian centres are providing evidence of this same phenomenon in this country. Yanyuwa is a victim.

### 4. INEFFECTUAL COUNTER-INFLUENCES

There have been a few counter-influences which have promoted or encouraged the retaining of the language, but they have been too weak or too late to be effective. There has been a positive interest shown in the language by a few linguistic workers, anthropologists and members of the government staff. But this positive affirmation of the language could not outweigh the negative pressures so strong against it.

One local headmaster was at first under the impression that the Aboriginal children did not speak any traditional language. After the writer's return from a year away, he commented on hearing children using their Aboriginal languages in the school playground for the first time. The presence of a linguistic field worker in the community affirmed the children sufficiently that they were no longer ashamed of using their



language, but it was insufficient to provide motivation for the Yanyuwa children to move into their language in any depth.

In the 1970s legislation was passed which opened the way for Aborigines to make claims for traditional land. It required traditional owners to validate such claims with cultural evidence of ownership such as song cycles, traditional ceremonies and mythology associated with the areas. This, together with the coming of several anthropologists into the area during that decade, led to a resurgence of cultural activity.

Ceremonies, which had been becoming shorter and simpler and performed less frequently, were restored to their fuller performance and were again held regularly. Other ceremonies which had ceased were recommenced. There was a new push to ensure that all the boys were initiated, and then to ensure that the initiated groups were trained in their semimoiety ceremonies. Traditional ceremonies are strongly linked to traditional language and so this situation may have been expected to promote knowledge and use of Yanyuwa. However, Kriol was already in use as a lingua franca for inter-community ceremonies and this allowed for communication without resort to Yanyuwa necessarily. And now that land has been regained and there are changes in the political climate relating to this issue, it seems unlikely that the cultural momentum of the 1970s will be retained.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Yanyuwa was still being spoken by the parents and grandparents in the camp. This use was sufficient pressure on young people with a passive knowledge of Yanyuwa to actively use their language. By the 1980s the ranks of the older Yanyuwa speakers are thinning. Their place is being taken by those who have entered the community from outside or by those who are growing up without a speaking knowledge of Yanyuwa.

A group of Yanyuwa grandmothers have begun to react against the lessened use of Yanyuwa in their community. This group includes several leaders in the women's ceremonies, and two of them are involved on education staff. This group has begun to use Yanyuwa again in speaking to the children and has worked to promote some language maintenance in cultural sessions at the school. They have strongly encouraged the use of traditional languages by the women in the outstation communities (extended family groups who have returned to traditional land areas). If any influence could contribute to the recovery of Yanyuwa, this would be the most likely one to accomplish it.

But there seems little hope of any work in the Borroloola school being effective in the recovery of Yanyuwa. The children are from Yanyuwa, Garawa, Mara and Kudanji groups, and from families who have no traditional Aboriginal language. In attempts to promote traditional

language use thus far, Yanyuwa or Garawa have been used with groups which included numbers of children who understood neither language. This has tended to alienate these children. For any measure of success in such an endeavour, it would be necessary to have a separate teacher to work with each language group. There are not the teachers for this, nor has there been enough community interest to provide members to train to accomplish the task.

The children at the outstations are too few and their local non-Yanyuwa-speaking contemporaries are too many to give much hope of long-term changes coming from that source either.

##### 5. THE MOVE FROM YANYUWA TOWARDS KRIOL

In 1963 when the writer first arrived in the community, the Aboriginal creole was in extensive use as one of the alternatives to Yanyuwa, especially in communication with the non-Yanyuwa.

During a period in Darwin in 1971, the writer was surprised to discover that Kriol was already the mother tongue of children from the Borroloola community. She had earlier observed that parents used Kriol almost exclusively with their children during her visits to the camp. In Darwin she shared a unit with a Yanyuwa mother and her two sons, aged about four and ten years. During that 7-week period the Yanyuwa family group was never once heard to speak Yanyuwa among themselves. Only Kriol was used. The mother always spoke Yanyuwa to the writer. The 10-year-old responded to white social attitudes to Kriol and also talked to her in Yanyuwa (but not to his mother or brother). The 4-year-old was blissfully unaware that anyone disapproved of Kriol and he chatted quite happily to the writer in it. Kriol was the mother tongue of the two boys. (The mother and older boy spoke their best English in any contact with other Europeans.)

Parents early became aware that their children must know English to function well in the society around them. The English they spoke was the creole English of their people and so it was Kriol that they taught their children. Kriol was certainly the mother tongue of the children in 1963, and at that time Kriol was the primary language of children in their early teens. This shows that Kriol has been the mother tongue of Yanyuwa children from at least 1950.

As the proportion of 'outsiders' in the Borroloola Aboriginal community has increased, Kriol has strengthened as the lingua franca of the area. It is the one Aboriginal language which remains to those who have lost their traditional language. Kriol reflects the traditional sound system and grammar; but, more than that, its semantic system facilitates

expression of the Aboriginal world view. Although the writer sorrows to see such extensive evidence that Yanyuwa is dying, she is thankful that at least Kriol is alive and well and that this language remains for the Yanyuwa to give expression to their thoughts and feelings.

## 6. CONCLUSION

No one of the factors considered above has caused the death of the Yanyuwa language. The language is dying because of the total effect of an ever-increasing number of factors putting pressure on a language which has always been vulnerable because of the small number of its speakers. Changes to culture and to language were slower at first and were therefore less perceptible. Later the changes which were in progress became increasingly visible. During the years 1980-1984, the changes accelerated more rapidly still as Borroloola changed from being a small outback rural centre to being a small tourist town, as television and video made their debut, and as the influx of whites and 'foreign' Aborigines increased to make Yanyuwa speakers a minority group in their own area. The reality of the situation has become inescapable. Yanyuwa is dying.

## NOTES

1. Yanyuwa (also known by its Garawa name 'Yanyula', its Mara name 'Wadirri', and variants of these three names), is a language spoken by about 90 adults, in an area around Borroloola (about 50 kms from the coast in the north-east corner of Australia's Northern Territory). The writer has been working with the Yanyuwa under the auspices of the Summer Institute of Linguistics since 1963, primarily at Borroloola, but with 8 months spent with the Yanyuwa at Doomadgee in 1967-68. She is indebted to Dehne McLaughlin (in earlier years) and John Bradley for any knowledge of affairs concerning ceremonies in the area.

2. Richard Baker (University of Adelaide), who has been doing historical research of the area, pointed out to the writer that the 'population of around 1,000' in fact applied to the late 1880s, and that the final decade of the nineteenth century saw the commencement of the major decline in population. He also pointed out the effects of Macassan experience (see section 2 paragraph 3).

3. It is the writer's impression that in her earlier years with the Yanyuwa, they were not consciously aware of English and Kriol being separate languages but saw them, rather, as being different registers of

English. She suspects that children commencing school are not conscious that the Kriol they speak is not English.

4. The writer is not aware of the numbers destroyed from the language groups in the area. The impression gathered is that the Binbinga suffered the greatest losses, and that there were more losses among the inland Garawa people than the Yanyuwa. Richard Baker points out that the Yanyuwa's island and coastal territory was not attractive to settlers and that there was consequently less conflict for them (private communication).

5. The missionary at that time, Mr. M. Pattemore, reports that he was expressly asked by the people to teach the children English.

6. John Bradley (Sacred Sites Authority), a Yanyuwa researcher, reports how recently a Yanyuwa grandmother broke down and wept in his presence. The reason she gave for her distress was her new consciousness that she herself had contributed to the loss of Yanyuwa by not teaching it to her family, but had rather worked at teaching them 'English'.

7. For the distinction between Kriol and Aboriginal English, see Sandefur 1986:25-30.

8. This phenomenon will be discussed in separate papers in preparation by Bradley and by Kirton.

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