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Talking Language to Whitefellas

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At the heart of the historiography of endangered indigenous language documentation lies a disconcerting irony: the language surveys that have formed the basis for quantified estimates of the world's spoken languages and the rates at which they are disappearing are largely records of statements and actions of linguists and the institutions supporting them. Speakers of endangered languages are not well represented, either in published accounts of language documentation or in archived correspondence, in which government actors and would-be ethnographers negotiated terms of access to indigenous populations. We can, however, examine field data—texts that enable us to form impressions of what informants made of the whitefellas who showed up without notice to spend an afternoon, a week, or a year asking such questions as, “You got another language here?” and demanding the words for ‘hair,’ ‘water,’ and ‘forehead’.¹

In particular, recordings and transcripts of direct elicitation represent a major resource. In Australia, prior to the start of the land claims movement, the sole register in which indigenous actors spoke for posterity, as far as Australian settler society was concerned, was that of the Dreaming: cosmogonic stories of totemic Ancestors who inhabit a time out of time.² Contrast reports of native oratory from the Americas, which long served various social purposes for settlers, or the situation in New Zealand, where Maori-authored grammars of Maori sprang up not long after colonization.³

In the conversations conducted by the Summer Institute of Linguistics transcribed in the 1970 “Surveys of Languages and Dialects of the North-East Kimberleys,” Indigenous Australians speak in the present, as cattle station stockhands, as participants in the budding Indigenous revival at Kununurra, as persons who grew up at this mission, worked on that station, had a relation on that reserve, and whose availability to answer linguists' questions was constrained by the exigencies of wage labor—the need to return to work once the smoke break was over. The transcripts also show Indigenous Australians acting not simply as passive sources but as guides, taking their linguist interlocutors in hand: correcting linguists' confusion of toponyms, ethnonyms, and glossonyms, setting them straight on what words are deictic shifters and what words are names, telling them what they could truthfully write down about a given language situation, commanding them, in exasperation, “You look now,” while they tried to explain the circulation of language and social identity through time and space.

Not all transcripts of elicitation offer the chance to hear the speakers as human beings responding to particular circumstances rather than as linguistic type-specimens. The survey of the East Kimberley is exceptional because its objectives were explicitly comparative and, given the time allotted for it, ambitious: to determine how many languages fieldworkers were dealing with and where the speakers of these distinct languages originated; to compile basic vocabulary lists in order to use cognate densities to gauge degrees of relatedness, or at least of mutual intelligibility. The missions and the cattle economy shifted Indigenous people from all over the Kimberley and adjoining parts of the Northern Territory from place to place, to live and work together.⁴ The only way to identify “which language” one was compiling a test list for was to ask the speaker. Speakers’ biographies and speakers’ metalinguistic expertise were the keys to reconstructing a time before the boundaries of intelligibility and descent had been blurred and erased by evangelism and wage labor.⁵ Asking the speakers was also the only way to determine where in the immense expanse (over 400,000 square kilometers) of the Kimberley one might find another potential informant who spoke *the* language named by a particular glossonym.

The principal object of the interviews conducted by David Glasgow and his colleagues on October 12–24, 1970 was to collect lists of basic vocabulary words.⁶ The transcripts of tapes recorded at cattle stations, missions, and Aboriginal resettlement townships or reserves across the East Kimberley reveal fieldworkers anxious to find enough reliable informants to scrape together word lists for the speech forms listed in Capell’s 1963 *Survey*, and to connect informants’ languages with places of origin. Test-list data were supplemented through discussions with informants about languages and tribes of their area, which were also recorded (SIL 1971, 1–2).⁷

Our question is this: How faithful are these transcripts to other texts that have become canonical sources of meaning about the events in question? In this case, the canonical sources of meaning are published linguistic atlases and the popularizing accounts of language endangerment that invoke them as authoritative references, in particular the Summer Institute of Linguistics’s own *Ethnologue* and its many reverberations in grantmaking, reportage, documentary, and popular linguistics and anthropology.⁸ Informants and linguists brought with them markedly different ontologies of language, land inhabitation, and social identity, and the production of facts about the disposition of languages and people in space entailed the negotiation of a shared set of facts about how language works. My point is not simply to point to a category of actors whose work gets written out of the final textual products of language documentation but to draw out the aleatory and negotiated qualities of the facts around which those products are composed. Dialect geography is a gamble and a

compromise, and, like most things involving translation, it is subject to indeterminacy.

In the conversation snippet reproduced below, David Glasgow interrogates the speaker about both the identity or mutual intelligibility of the speech forms named by distinct glossonyms and the geographical location of those speech forms. Of necessity, the speaker's personal history comes into play (throughout the transcript, however, indigenous speakers are labeled 'A,' or sometimes 'A₁,' 'A₂,' even when the section headings include their names):

A: I think the Forrest River tribe talk them Gunin language—that's similar to Wunambal language.

D: There's another one I heard about—Gambera. Do you know if that Gambera language at Kalumburu?

A: I never heard of it.

D: Any Wunambal?

A: Worora and Ngarinyin—you've heard of Ngarinyin language? Gibb River and Kurundji—a lot of them.

D: Kurundji too eh? Is that Ngarinyin?

A: Yeh.

D: What do you think most people speak at Kalumburu ... What language most of them speak?

A: Wunambal language.

D: Only a few Worora eh?

A: Yeh, few Worora and Ngarinyin—few Ngarinyin—but mostly the Worora language comes from Mowanjum [Mission]—down Derby—well those people up there talk that language.

D: Well I was there at Mowanjum six months ago or might be four months ago and I met a fellow called Hildebrand—you know Hildebrand? He came from Kalumburu Mission.

A: He's my father—Ildefonse you mean—Ildefonsis from Kalumburu—mostly some people call him Hildebrand.

D: What's his wife's name?

A: Delores.

D: Yeh, I think that's right—well they were there at Mowanjum and they said he talked Gambera and his wife she said she talked Gunin. Does that make sense to you?—that sound right?

A: Well all depends on—we got different sort of tribes—like—the Worora and the Wunambal tribe—

D: That Gambera same as Wunambal do you think eh?

A: Yeh, I think so—but it's a bit harder—you know—Gambera.

- D: So it's a bit harder and Gunin do you think that's the same as Gambera or is it different?
A: I think it's a bit different.
D: Do you think that Gunin bit same as this Forrest River language?
A: Yeh, I think so—Well Forrest River and Kalumburu they talk the same language—The people at Forrest River came from Kalumburu Mission.
D: Same language eh? But might be words a little bit different do you think?
A: Yeh. Some words a little bit different.
D: Like they can talk to each other.
A: Yeh they can talk to one another.
D: Do you know any of that language? Wunambal eh?
A: I don't know how to talk Wunambal, but I can understand it you know.
D: Yeh, now another one I heard—that's Gwini—another name—do you know that name? Don't eh? Long time ago. It's probably called ... I just wondered if you'd heard that name?—Gwini— Yeh, well I think that's about all I want to ask you so thanks very much for your trouble.
(SIL 1971, 3–5)

Here the speaker struggles to respond in the register in which the ethnographer has posed the questions. This is a register of linguistically differentiated tribes, each with its own fixed point of geographic origin. Other informants, such as Daniel Evans at Wyndham Reserve, confidently adopt the idiom of whitefella linguistics:

- D: Can you tell me about Wumbulgaři—all the people here Wumbulgaři—or they when they say some Yeidji and some Wumbulgaři?
A [Daniel Evans]: Yeh they mixed people you know—some Wuladjangaři, some Wumbulgaři some what you call it now?
D: Wunumbal?⁹
A: Yeh they talk different too.
D: That's different eh, Wunumbal?
A: Two nations mixed—two tribes mixed.
D: Wumbulgaři and Wunambal different?
A: All the same, all the same—they understand one another.
D: They understand one another a little bit eh?
A: Yeh—no question, but not real well.
D: Yeh—but different word here and there—some word different eh?
A: Yeh that's right.

D: What about Gambera? There some people here
Gambera? Gambera from Kalumburu Mission way—you
know that—they talk Gambera language?
A: Gambula language, Gambula—
D: Gambera—
A: All different tribe names—all different tribe ... like that.
D: Yeh.
A: All the different names.
(SIL 1971, 10)

Evans matches his locally situated knowledge to the linguist's epistemological frame of reference. This represents Capell's distillation of two generations of ethnography, by degrees amateur and professional, happenstance and deliberate. Capell's *Survey* was shaped not just by the heterogeneity of its source material but by the political context in which it was commissioned: the founding of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS, later AIATSIS or Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies), which was, *in extenso*, the institution of a Commonwealth Government-backed mandate to complete a census of historically attested (since colonization), linguistically-delimited indigenous tribes before they disintegrated. Ironically, many of the October 1970 meetings between native speakers and linguists took place on cattle stations, which were widely understood as major sources of the pressures contributing to tribal disintegration.

Evans seems unfazed by the profusion of unfamiliar names offered by Glasgow, casually asking the ethnographer to repeat one: "... some Wuladjangari, some Wumbulgari some what you call it now? — Wunumbal? —Yeh they talk different too." Eventually, he reaches the limit of his capacity to testify to or characterize differences among named speech forms in the ethnographer's idiom—in which mutual non-intelligibility is primarily a matter of differences in basic vocabulary. The linguist prompts: "Yeh—but different word here and there—some word different eh?" Evans assents but, offered another unfamiliar name, responds with, "All different tribe names—all different tribes ... like that." That is, he refuses to specify how the languages, tribes, and names in question are different.

This conversation occurred at Wyndham Reserve on October 16, 1970. It was recorded on an early section on the tape numbered Tape 17 in the ethnographers' labeling (later A2183 in the AIATSIS media indexing system). In other instances, a register boundary between informant and ethnographer is more evident. Tape 16 (AIATSIS A2182) features another conversation on October 16, between Glasgow and James, at Fork Creek Reserve. After sounding James out on Gambera and Wunumbal, the

linguist turns to the mysterious 'Gingara,' provoking disagreement between James and an unidentified second informant:

D: And what about Gingara?

A [James]: Gingara you know King River?

A₂: What King River?—that Wula—That's country that one—
King River.

D: And what's that Kalumburu?

A: Same.

D: Is that language or place?

A₂: Language.

A: No, that country they call Kalumburu.

D: Kalumburu.

A: That country belong River.

D: And what they call the language there? The language that
country—What language they talk?

A: Worora.

D: Worora.

A: Yeh.

D: And uh.

A: I don't know.

D: What about—you know Wila Wila.

A: Well some—same right round—Wila Worora and
Gambera.

D: Where there some man that speaks Wila. Where'll find
that man?

A: Wila this here ... (mandjaway)¹⁰

D: (Mandjaway)?

A: Yes, (mandja)

A[₂?]: (Mandja) Where's that?

A: Over here longa Mission they call (mandja)

D: Mowanjum?

A: Mm.

D: Oh yeh—and what about this mob at Kurundji?—What
language they talk there?

A: Wuladja, all the way.

D: Oh yeh.

A: You gettim here, you gettim there, all right through along
Kurundji and Gibb River.

D: And Gibb River too eh?

A: Mount House (yirambu) all around everywhere.

D: Yeh.

A: Broome, Derby, all Wuladja.

K [Kathleen Glasgow]: Big mob eh?

A: Mm.

D: You know this name Wembria?
A: Belong this country or Kurundji?
D: I don't know? I'm asking you. You know that one?
A: Wembria—language or country?
D: I don't know?
A: Wembria—men or what?
D: Men I think, or language?
A: Wembria—might be country, I think.
(SIL 1971, 10)

Confronted by a demand to attach an unfamiliar language name to a hypothetical person or persons situated at some fixed place (“Where there some man that speaks Wila. Where'll find that man?”), James introduces a nomicon of his own, obliging the ethnographer to try to match unfamiliar names to his own knowledge (“(Mandjaway)? ... Mowanjum?”). Asked to situate a place in linguistic topography, James becomes expansive, depicting language as something organized in space not as a tessellation of discrete, abutting tracts but as a reticulation, with a particular speech form extending along a series of possible itineraries (“You gettim here, you gettim there, all right down ... Broome, Derby, all Wuladja.”) Finally, confronted with a bare indicium, a name without a country, as it were, he demurs. When the ethnographer is not even sure of his own ontology (“Wembria—language or country? ... men or what?”), how can the informant be expected to translate local knowledge into that ontology?

Elsewhere, the linguists make no effort to meet local ways of understanding language halfway. Sometimes, the local expert responds easily, as in this exchange on October 14, at Fork Creek Reserve; the informant is probably a man called King Peter.

D: What's this mob here now?
A [King Peter?]: This oh callim King River gabarindja—King River gabarindja gura wundjadun different—different mifella callim different country—half way—King River half way this way. —From right up Dunham come this way—this way—different way.
D: What language?
A: Wulaidja and Djerak.
D: So that's three language—Wulaidja, Djerak and Yeidji. You got another language here?
A: No we got none.
D: Just three—all right.
A: You can't put-im-down another language.
(SIL 1971, 2)

Note how gracefully the informant switches registers. Posing an open-ended question—“What’s this mob here now?”—he sketches a picture of a graduated network of affinity organized in space along a series of linked itineraries, with names for social collectivities, stretches of land, and ways of talking changing as one follows a path. His speech assumes a distinctive rhythm characterized by a pattern of alternating stress: “different mifella callim different country—half way—King River half way this way.” Asked bluntly, “What language? ... You got another language here?” he switches, instantly, to the clipped, affectively muted rhythm of the well-behaved atlas: “Wulaidja and Djerak. ... No we got none.” He is confident, authoritative, a veteran scientist sharing the benefit of his accumulated knowledge: “You can’t put-im-down another language.”

Not all informants were so acquiescent. In this conversation, recorded at Kalumburu on October 22, 1970, the penultimate day of the survey, Albert Barangga refuses to butcher his own knowledge system in the interest of ethnographic legibility:

D: Well you understand all these different kinds of Ngarinyin do you Albert? And was this man talk the same kind of Ngarinyin as this man?

A [Albert Barangga]: Yeh, but (nebi) that one (wa’tad).

D: Anybody else talk Ngarinyin in this country or—that well what I mean is your—these fellows Ngarinyin might be a little bit heavy or is it light? [i.e., more or less difficult to understand]

A: You look now—that Ngarinyin goes like this see—there’s Gambera, Wunambal, Gunin—all that much see.

D: Yeh.

A: All come different, different and this Ngarinyin here—but we—we in this way you see—all that Ngarinyin here—inside here see—this is outside people Ngarinyin see—this is border of this Ngarinyin—all around language see—we have Ngarinyin, Wunambal, Gambera—all the same—We hear Gambera—that’s the edge of [the] boundary of all the Worora, Ngarinyin.

D: Yeh.

A: And then down to Gibb River language here see.

D: Yeh.

A: But then this lot the edge up to Ngarinyin.

D: Yeh.

A: All these edges can mostly pull their own language again see.

D: Yeh.

A: This is how this works.

D: Well which way these two men.

- A: The end of this border.
D: From the border of Ngarinyin.
A: Yeh, yeh.
D: From Gibb River Country and
A: That's right yeh,
D: Gibb River Country your country or from this side Gibb River.
A₂ ["Aeroplane"]: Oh past through Kurundji side.
D: Kurundji side.
A: Ellenbray way.
D: Ellenbray, I see.
A: Look here now—there's a Gibb River country and this 'nother boundary here see—well that's Kurundji country and then this is other place Ellenbray country—that's how all the group run see.
D: Yeh.
(SIL 1971, 30–31)

Languages may have boundaries, but these boundaries, far from obstructing long-range dialogue, serve to facilitate communication, functioning in the constitution of a pan-regional discourse in a way impossible to express idiomatically in the ethnographers' register: "All these edges can mostly pull their own language again see."¹² Moreover, a stretch of land associated with a particular set of cosmogonic narratives and a distinct array of resources for sustenance and ritual work may be inhabited or visited by speakers of multiple languages:

- D: Aeroplane now—you two from that same country as this men or ...
A [Albert Barangga]: Yeh:
A₂ [Aeroplane]: All those crowd now.
D: Or you from different country?
A₂: All that lot all one country.
D: All one country—yeh—all right well—I think we get a lotta language from your country—we'll just check here—Now how do you say? ...
[Elicitation commenced.]
(SIL 1971, 31)

In the end, the linguist can only fall back on word-list elicitation.

We also see the linguist unsystematically sounding out informants on attitudes toward language within the community. In a conversation that took place a day after the exchange between Daniel Evans and Glasgow reproduced above, which also included Evans's nephew, personal history comes to the fore. The parenthetical comments in the text represent

redactions in the transcript, places where the person transcribing the tape skipped part over a stretch of the conversation.

- D: When you were little boy where were you? At a Forrest River Mission? When you were a little boy?
- A [Daniel Evans]: Yeh, born there.
- D: Long time ago eh?
- A: Very early, long time ago.
- D: And did you work in the Mission?
- A: I work on Mission, yeh.
- D: Did you go away any other place to work?
- A: I went to a station one day.
- D: And what did you do there?
- A: On a stock job.
- D: What station that one?
- A: Rosewood Station.
- D: Rosewood, where's that?
- A: Oh be a few run from Kununurra to Rosewood—couple morning's run up long Kununurra town—You been to Kununurra?
- D: Yeh.
- A: Well you start long Kununurra at the breakfast—you get there smoko time—not far run.
- D: Oh yeh. (Discussion about stock work follows, then ...)
- D: Many people now work on the stations—like—
- Wumbulgari people—
- A: The mission closed—
- D: Yeh.
- A: The cattle and the horse up there—a few cattle there—a few horses.
- D: What about on the stations any?
- A: Oh they wander, wander, wander—people still live there. They stop on still. They mob boys with myself—used to bring cattle overland to Wyndham.
- D: Oh yeh.
- A: And every evening the boys bring im and put him into the yard ready—make one of these— take cattle down to the race, down the jetty and the boys come alongside im (and so on) ...
- D: See that old man down there? Who's that old man?
- A: Horace.
- D: What language does he talk?
- A: Wumbulgañi language—same language as with us.
- D: Yeh. What about this little boy? What's your name?
- A: Roland Evans.
- D: Your son?

A: He's my brother's son—chap with artificial leg over there.
D: Oh yeh.
A: Lives in the green houses over there.
D: With the artificial leg eh?
A: Yeh, he's my younger brother.
D: Roland, you speak this Wumbulgari language too eh?
A: He don't understand language.
D: He doesn't understand?
A: He talk English.
D: Don't you understand that language?
A₂ [Roland Evans]: No.
D: That's too bad. The old people talk a language—you don't understand what they're saying eh?
A [Daniel Evans]: No.
D: That's too bad eh? They'd better teach you eh?
A: Start teaching that to him to-day or to-morrow.
D: What do you think if somebody come here and teach all the kids to write the Wumbulgari language—teach em to write it down— You think that good or not?
A: Good idea.
(SIL 1971, 11–12)

Five days later, the survey team had made its way to Kalumburu. Halfway through the first side of Tape 29 we find this conversation between an informant named Philander and Glasgow:

D: When you talk Gambera language many old people here speak that language or just a few Gambera people here?
A [Philander]: Oh a few old people down there camp.
D: Oh yeh—what about young people—they learning that Gambera language or not?
A: I don't know—they don't look like they learning any. That's the thing we worry about. We are worried about these young people, I don't know where they heading.
D: Yeh.
A: They want to try to go in modern ways to civilization—but they never get to that way yet.
(SIL 1971, 29)

Later the same day, Glasgow pursued the matter further with Mary:

D: Mary—the children here—are they still—they're learning English in the school—but can they speak Gunin and these languages?
A [Mary]: Some of them—only very little tho'—some young ones they understand it—the old people talk—they

answer them you see—for the old people they talk in language.

D: They talk it to the old people?

A: Yeh—they can understand their grandmothers and grandfathers—they have to talk in language—not to forget their own language see for them old people.

D: Yeh—What about like these girls working in the sewing or in the kitchen.

A: Yeh they understand too—they say (kabu, kedji) (kabu) means nothing (kedji) yes.

D: Yeh.

A: They say (paranga)—come here.

D: So that when they talking to each other they can ...

A: No, they talk in English—the young ones you know,—only for the old people.

D: Good, yeh. I see—well I'll see if Jackies around.
(SIL 1971, 30)

The next day, October 23, as the survey was ending, Glasgow was back at Wyndham Reserve. On this visit, he interviewed Earnest Unba and Nancy Namitj, older members of the community identified in the transcript as “pensioners,” confronting the fact that older speakers were forgetting languages they once spoke, while young people were no longer learning local languages. As with Daniel Evans so with all the native speakers interviewed in this survey: the informants’ biographies are marked by periods spent at a number of missions and stock stations, living and working with people from across the Kimberley and the adjoining part of the Northern Territory. The languages one speaks best do not necessarily correspond to the languages associated with the countries one calls one’s own by virtue of totemic affiliation.¹³ Nor are they necessarily the languages one learned as a child. Again, parenthetical comments in the transcript are reproduced.

D: Some Wuladja now or you bin forget that.

A [Earnest Unba]: Wuladja

D: Yeh.

A: No, I can talk Wuladja.

D: You can talk Wunambal?

A: Wunambal all right, I talk to you a few words—I

D: What about Yeidji—Wumbulgari?

A: Yeh, yeh I talk that.

D: Wumbulgari.

A: Yeh, Wumbulgari—that way Wumbulgari.

D: Yeh, Where you come from yourself?

A: Here—this my country.

D: Wyndham?

- A: Wyndham.
D: Were you at Forrest River?
A: I was born there. (I don't know if this refers to Wyndham or Forrest River.)
D: You were born there?
A: My mother they lose there, and body there too, for long time.
D: Where—whereabouts.
A: Pump you know where this pumping station. We callim pumping station.
D: Pumping Station.
A: Where water pumped.
D: Yeh and you from this King River tribe eh?
A: Yeh but I can't—talk Wuladja.
D: Yeh.
A: I go way from there now when my little child I bi grow up long Mission Forrest River—
D: Oh yeh was that King River people? King River tribe where they talk Wuladja?
A: Wuladja—yes.
D: Oh yeh
A: Mixed (kaɛga) Yeh mixed—Wuladja, all that I talk Wuladja.
D: (kaɛga)
A: King River people yeh.
D: What's this (kaɛga)?
A: (kaɛ)
D: What's that mean like—same like Wuladja?
(interruption) Your wife?
A: Wife?
D: What language was she when she was living?
A: He belong whatchamicallem language—longa dis way.
D: What was that one—what language?
A₂ [Nancy Namitj]: He can't talk now he forget all dat. Brother got all that language from this way. What they call people from that way—from this way?
A: Miriwung.
D: Miriwung.
A: Like and you know
D: Kununurra
A: Yeh, yeh.
A: (kare'yan)
D: Yeh.
A: He's the sister now.
D: Oh yeh.
A: Long Kununurra—Wadi.

D: Wadi.

A: Mm.

D: That's your—I seen him—I got Wadi—I got on this tape recorder. I get im give me language.

A: Oh yeh.

D: He talk to me and tell me all the words.

A: Yeh.

A₂: But we no more gottim Wuladja language—belong dis way—King River—he talk Wuladja. Me—I belong this country. This my country—my mother born. Him bin loose there. I bin born there too, me.

D: Mm.

A: Well, I forget now. I go way, leave when me little time—me bin go back Mission.

D: Yeh.

A: Aruwadi side (aruwadi = south) Supposed to getim Wuladja, before. He forget all that now. No language belong this country.

D: Where I find some men from King River Side.

A: Eh?

D: Where they now Fork Creek or?

A: Finish.

D: All finished eh?

A: All finish.

D: King River people.

A: All die yep.

(SIL 1971, 31–3)

A few minutes later in the conversation, the linguist returns to Yeidji, which Earnest might have said he spoke (—"What about Yeidji—Wumbulgari?"—"Yeh, yeh I talk that.").

D: Yeh—well you can tell me some Yeidji talk now eh?

A: Eh.

D: Yeidji—you understand that or is it Wunambal?

A: Wunambal—yeh I talk a little that Wunambal.

D: I want to get somebody to tell me some Yeidji.

A: Roberts.

D: Robert Roberts.

A: Yeh.

D: Maybe I'd better go see him eh?

A: Yeh.

A₂: He's the proper Wuladja Number I. He belong that country.

D: Oh yeh.

A: (kular) (= west)

(SIL 1971, 34)

Of the language or languages from the country to the west, Nancy Namitj assures the linguist, “You get it properly once you get Robert here” (35).

Later in the day, Glasgow manages to catch up with Roberts (Tape 31, AIATSIS A2190):

- D: They tell me you understand all about the people—
different tribes and everything round here, like some
people from Kurundji side, that’s Wuladjangari isn’t it?
A [Robert Roberts]: What’s that?
D: Wuladjangari.
A: Yeh.
D: That from Kurundji way?
A: Yeh.
D: What about from King River?
A: These all the same.
D: Wuladjangari. And what about Forrest River?
A: No, they Wunambal.
D: Wunambal—
A: Yeh.
D: When you say Wunambal is that the same as Yeidji?—
Yeidji, that same thing as Wunambal?
A: What’s that?
D: Yeidji.
A: Yeidji—that’s Wunambal.
D: What about Andidja?
A: Same language isn’t it? Wunambal.
D: And Andidja, and Gingara people—do you know what that
is—
A: No answer.
D: Or is that the same King River people?
A: King River, yeh.
D: Yeh—when long time ago they—this Wuladja people they
go to—Forrest River or— which?
A: Wuladja people.
D: Which?
A: Wuladja yeh.
D: Same as Forrest River eh? Yeh—what about King River
people?
A: King River people they walk up and down you know.
D: They went in then came back?
A: When they have big meeting they go to—some go
Kurundji or some place.
D: Yeh, I see—yeh—yeh. And what tribe do you belong to?

A: (kular)
D: (kular) and what Country's that?
A: Way down Gibb River.
D: Gibb River.
A: Yeh.
D: Oh yeh and what language talk?
A: Wuladjangari.
D: Wuladjangari—same language?
A: Yeh.
D: Same language as Kurundji?
A: Yeh.
A₂: Old man and old woman out there.
D: Well that's all, I just wanted to ask you a little bit about the tribes here see—if you got time could tell me some Wuladjangari—but when you got time—You working now eh?—Going back to work?
A: I working now.
D: What time do you knock off tonight?
A: Oh about 5.
D: Can I come back and see you then?
A: Yeh.
D: Cause I gotta go back to Darwin to-morrow.
(SIL 1971, 37–8)

Roberts seems to be an ideal informant. His answers are unequivocal. He sticks to the linguist's categories: language, tribe, country. His is the speech of a busy man, who needs to return to work. Like the linguist, who must be back in Darwin tomorrow, Robert Roberts is on a schedule.

As we read these transcripts in series, a narrative arc emerges for the survey in which the linguists' quest enacts a trope of contemporary archive-centered endangered language documentation: the tracking down and authentication of an elusive Last Speaker.¹⁴ Just as he comes to face to face with "the proper Wuladja Number 1," the man who reels off basic vocabulary in the western speech forms as they presumably were spoken in the original state of affairs, it is time to go back to Darwin—and to get back to work. Eight years later, in the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies's *Revised Linguistic Fieldwork Manual for Australia*, Sutton and Walsh caution that, in "[d]istinctively Aboriginal communities, where traditional life is often not very far in the past, brief 'surveys' which cannot result in the establishment of meaningful relations are to be discouraged"; they explain that, "In the past there has not been a great deal of feedback to Aboriginal people" and that "One often hears the remark that someone came and recorded a language and was never seen or heard of again."¹⁴ While linguists "may be tempted to think of the linguist–'informant' relationship as a professional one which can be begun and then

terminated,” for native speakers, the question of who has command of lexical and pragmatic repertoires associated with specific countries is ineluctably tied to questions of which mobs are “finished” and which live on as a single couple, “Old man and old woman out there”; whose brother “got all that language from this way,” who depends on the grandkids “to talk in language—not to forget their own language,” who among the young people “want to try to go in modern ways to civilization”; who has lost a leg to accident or disease, or who has found work on a station or a mission. The gap in the expectations ethnographer and speaker bring to the word-list elicitation encounter arises not from the ethnographer’s failing to realize how his introduction into the life of the community depends on his incorporation into a system of kinship marked by ascribed descent from one or another of a cadre of superhuman Ancestors, but from the more mundane issues of debility, mortality, and survival connected to the question of who can speak in a particular named code on demand.

Notes:

¹ David I. Glasgow, F. M. Hocking, and W. L. Steiner, “Linguistic Survey of N.E. Kimberleys Survey [sic], October 1970. Transcription of Conversations on Languages and Tribes [tape nos. 2175, 2178, 2179, 2180, 21825, 2187-90],” corporate author Summer Institute of Linguistics. Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, PMS 1766 (1971). Hereafter “SIL 1971” in parenthetical citations.

² This is not to say that these narratives—referred to, collectively, as the Dreaming or Dreamtime, terms introduced into broad currency by the anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner—never encode present-day concerns. See Françoise Dussart, *The Politics of Ritual Knowledge in an Aboriginal Settlement: Kinship, Gender, and the Currency of Knowledge* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2004). Basil Sansom argues that Indigenous Australian discourse is characterized by a culturally and linguistically specific tendency to “suppress time” that limits the capacity of local narrative traditions to support the kind of historiographic documentation demanded by native title courts (“The Brief Reach of History and the Limitation of Recall in Traditional Aboriginal Societies and Cultures,” *Oceania* 76, no. 2 [2006]: 150–172).

³ E.g., Marisol de la Cadena, *Indigenous Mestizos: The Politics of Race and Culture in Cuzco, Peru, 1919–1991* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Ken Hale, “Deep–Surface Canonical Disparities in Relation to Analysis and Change: An Australian Example,” *Current Trends in Linguistics 11: Diachronic, Areal, and Typological Linguistics*, ed. Thomas Sebeok (The Hague: Mouton, 1973), 401–458.

⁴ For background, see Francesca Merlan, “Indigenous Movements in Australia,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 34 (2007): 473–494.

⁵ At a distance of more than forty years, most if not all of the persons quoted in the section that follows must be dead. The practice of avoiding mention of the dead, or of reproducing the speech and likeness of the dead, has wide currency in Indigenous Australia. In the past, out of respect for this practice, anthropologists have avoided direct reference to the dead in the absence of express consent from surviving relations. Deger discusses changes in these conventions. See Jennifer Deger, *Shimmering Screens: Making Media in an Aboriginal Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). Here I feel my greater responsibility is to show how individuals whose lives had been dramatically constrained by white settlement and who were now pressed into service as specimens, witnesses, and experts in the whitefellas’ project of dialect geography managed to insert into the archival record a testament to their own struggles.

⁶ Glasgow was then director of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, Australian Aborigines Branch, based in Darwin; see National Archives of Australia F1 1968/3256 “Summer

Institute of Linguistics — Research Work in the Northern Territory” and State Records Office of Western Australia 1969/0271 “Australian Aborigines Branch of the Summer Institute of Linguistics - General Correspondence.”

⁷ Arthur Capell, *Linguistic Survey of Australia* (Sydney: University of Sydney, 1963). Many of the word-list forms are incomplete. This reflects the fieldworkers’ inability to elicit particular words in particular speech forms, not failure to transcribe the lists from the recordings.

⁸ On the Summer Institute of Linguistics, see Lise M. Dobrin, ed., “SIL International and the Disciplinary Culture of Linguistics,” *Language* 85, no. 3 (2009): 618–658.

⁹ Variant spellings (e.g., Wunumbal, Wunambal) are reproduced here as they appear in the transcript, with no attempt at regularization.

¹⁰ In the transcript, parentheses indicate speech in indigenous languages.

¹¹ The transcript suggests that Albert Barangga is drawing a map in the dirt as he speaks, but there is no parenthetical indication to this effect.

¹² See Nicholas Evans, “Warramurrungunji Undone: Australian Languages in the 51st Millennium,” *Language Diversity Endangered*, ed. Matthias Brenzinger (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2007), 342–373.

¹³ See Nicholas Evans, “The Last Speaker is Dead—Long Live the Last Speaker!” *Linguistic Fieldwork*, ed. Paul Newman and Martha Ratliff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 250–281.

¹⁴ Peter Sutton and Michael Walsh, *Revised Linguistic Fieldwork Manual for Australia* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1979), 1–2.

CONFERENCE REPORTS

Disciplinary Measures? Histories of Egyptology in Multi-Disciplinary Context, June 10-12, 2010, London.

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Sponsored by the University College London Institute of Archaeology Heritage Studies Research Group; the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, Centre for Cultural, Literary and Postcolonial Studies; and the Egypt Exploration Society, the conference brought together Egyptologists and persons who have written on the history of their field (however defined), a burgeoning population in recent years. A number of the most prominent figures in the latter category, such as Stephanie Moser (University of Southampton), Donald Reid (Georgia State University), and Jason Thompson (Dakhleh Oasis Project)—all of whom were, happily, present—are not Egyptologists. Not least because, as Stephanie Moser commented during the conference, historians of Egyptology are now “moving beyond” a phase of writing about great men and great discoveries, it was hoped that productive multi-disciplinary discussions would take place. The basic objective was to promote reflection on what, exactly, “Egyptology” is, its form and purpose. In specific, where does that (in some opinions colonial) discipline stand in today’s post-colonial world, and what are the historical reasons for its position?