

Indigenous Perspectives on the Vitality of Murrinh-Patha

Barbara Kelly, Rachel Nordlinger and Gillian Wigglesworth

University of Melbourne

{b.kelly/racheln/gillianw}@unimelb.edu.au

Abstract. This paper reports on recent research into community attitudes around the vitality of Murrinh-Patha; a polysynthetic, non-Pama-Nyungan language spoken by approximately 2000 speakers living in and around Wadeye (Port Keats) in the Daly River region of the Northern Territory of Australia. The report is part of an ongoing research program that aims to identify the role of the community in the strong maintenance of this language in Wadeye, when so many other Indigenous communities are in the process of rapid language loss or change. This research has a two-fold motivation of investigating both why the language is robust and, if it is to remain robust, what is the situation with language-learning children? In a national language environment in which Indigenous languages are on the decline the robustness and seeming vitality of Murrinh-Patha is striking and raises questions about why this language continues to remain so strong. In the current study we investigate issues of linguistic vitality by examining the language attitudes of Murrinh-Patha speakers. Through the use of semi-formal interviews and observation we establish the primary domains (home, school, work, media etc.) in which Murrinh-Patha, English, and other languages are used by members of the community. Additionally, we report on perceptions regarding the ongoing vitality of Murrinh-Patha and the interaction with English.

Keywords: language vitality, Murrinh-Patha, Indigenous, bilingual, language shift

Selected Papers from the 2009 Conference of the Australian Linguistic Society,
edited by Yvonne Treis & Rik De Busser. <http://www.als.asn.au>. 2010.

1. Introduction

The National Indigenous Languages Survey 2005 reports that the majority of Australia's Indigenous languages are now no longer spoken fully or fluently, and another 50 can be expected to reach this stage of endangerment over coming decades. However, not all Indigenous languages are following this pattern of decline.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics census figures show 1430 speakers for Murrinh-Patha in 1996, 1157 in 2001, and 1832 in 2006. These figures show clearly that speaker numbers are at least stable and even perhaps on the rise (see also Blythe 2009:29 for similar observations), with 2006 Australian Bureau of Statistics census figures indicating that 60% of current speakers are aged under 24 years, and 40% aged under 14 years.¹ In a national language environment in which Indigenous languages are on the decline the robustness and seeming vitality of Murrinh-Patha, especially among the younger population, is striking and raises questions about why this language continues to remain so strong.

There are today fewer than 20 traditional Indigenous languages spoken across all sections of a community and acquired by children as a first language. Increasingly, in many communities, including remote communities, Indigenous people are speaking some form of creole, usually known as Kriol in Australia, or a new mixed language (see for example Meakins 2007; 2008). Children born into these communities, while often having some access to the local Indigenous language, are growing up speaking either Kriol or one of the new mixed languages as their first language.

There are an increasingly small number of communities where children are learning the traditional language as their first language. Simpson & Wigglesworth (2008a) point out that for the most part Indigenous languages survive best in remote areas where the traditional social structures have also survived. However, remoteness itself does not necessarily mean that the Indigenous language will survive and there are many remote communities where the children are learning Kriol as a first language. In this paper we report on recent research into community attitudes around the vi-

¹ Accessed online at <http://www.abs.gov.au/> (accessed 30 October 2009).

tality of Murrinh-Patha, the language of Wadeye (Port Keats), a community of 2000+ people in the Daly River region of the Northern Territory of Australia, where the children are learning Murrinh-Patha as a first language and the language appears to be strong. The report is part of an ongoing research program that aims to investigate in detail the language children in Wadeye are acquiring and its developmental path. We are also interested in exploring the role of the community in the strong maintenance of the language, when so many other Indigenous communities are in the process of rapid language loss or linguistic change.

Many studies have discussed linguistic vitality in Australian Aboriginal communities from the perspective of language shift (e.g. Simpson & Wigglesworth 2008b), language endangerment (e.g. Naessan 2008; Schmidt 1985; Walsh 2005), language planning and education (e.g. Henderson 1994; Wilkins 2008; Hill 2008). In the current study we investigate issues of linguistic vitality by examining the language attitudes of Murrinh-Patha speakers. In particular we are interested in establishing community attitudes towards the vitality of Murrinh-Patha and the present socio-linguistic situation in the community. The data we report on here is based on recent interviews and observation conducted in Wadeye over two field trips in 2009. In particular we are concerned with the community's perceptions of the strength and vitality of Murrinh-Patha and the extent to which the language the children are learning is the same as that of the adult community. We are also interested in the community's view of when and how the children learn English and whether this is seen as a threat to the on-going vitality of Murrinh-Patha.

2. Background

Murrinh-Patha is a polysynthetic, non-Pama-Nyungan language. Established as a Catholic mission in 1935, the Wadeye community includes people from a number of language groups (Marringarr, Magati Ke, Marri Tjevin, Marri Ammu) and also various Murrinh-Patha clans, many of which have been there since the early mission days. The community is relatively isolated, and it is cut off by road for 5-6 months of the year. As a result there is very little in the way of incidental traffic or visitors who do not have community links.

In the early days of the Mission, children were forced to speak English in the dormitories, and community members (in their 50s and above) tell stories of the punishments that were meted out for transgressions of this rule. However, despite this, the children continued to speak Murrinh-Patha at home on Sundays, as well as secretly with each other in the mission context by whispering.² The following interview excerpts are reflective of people's descriptions of these times:

- (1) Speaker 1: *In the early mission, they tried to stop the language. In the dormitory.*
- (2) Speaker 2: *If you were caught speaking Murrinh-Patha, they had the cane out.*
- Linguist: *But still you mob kept speaking Murrinh-Patha, eh? You didn't stop.*
- Speaker 2: *No, we didn't stop.*

Outside the dormitories, the Indigenous community continued to speak Murrinh-Patha, and the other language groups switched to Murrinh-Patha also. Murrinh-Patha is now spoken as a first language by (almost) everybody in the community, even those from Marringarr, Marri Tjevin, Marri Ammu and Magati Ke backgrounds. Older speakers (i.e. 45+) have reasonable English as a second language, largely as a result of their mission experience. Younger adults have variable and often limited second language skills, both receptively and productively. The children in the community all speak Murrinh-Patha as their first language and appear to have no receptive or productive skills in English (beyond the odd swear word, *hello*, etc.) before attending school.

² The traditional language may have been further reinforced during the war years by the establishment of a split shift system of residence in the mission to reduce tensions and ease pressure on rations (Blythe 2009). According to this system all groups, apart from the local Yek Dimirnin clan, resided for two weeks at a time at the mission, returning to their clan territories for the intervening two weeks (Furlan 2005, cited in Blythe 2009).

Our Lady of Sacred Heart Wadeye School (OLSH) has a Murrinh-Patha/English bilingual program, which was established by SIL linguist, Chester Street, who lived in the community for many years. He developed the orthography in the 1970s, and the bilingual education program was introduced in 1976 with its initial accreditation in 1985.

3. Data collection

The data were collected through semi-structured informal discussions with community members including community elders, parents, teachers and children in Wadeye in June and September 2009, as well as through observations over this period. In this particular community, it would not have been appropriate to administer a questionnaire, nor to organise formal interviews. The majority of interviews were taped, although the discussion below is supplemented with reference to some more informal discussions and observations which were recorded as notes.

The questions were focussed around the community views of Murrinh-Patha's vitality as a language. A number of questions revolved around the children's school experience, given the existence of a bilingual education program in the school.

The following questions were used as a guide in the discussion:

- You probably know that in lots of places in Australia Aboriginal languages aren't spoken any more. What about Murrinh-Patha? Do you think it's strong and still spoken by lots of people? Do you have any ideas about why? Do you think it's under threat?
- Are kids still learning Murrinh-Patha right through?
- Do you think it's important that children learn Murrinh-Patha? At school? If so, why?
- What domains is Murrinh-Patha used in: school, home, media, business transactions, local council etc?
- Do you think kids' Murrinh-Patha changes when they go to school? If so, how?
- Is it important that children learn English? If so, why?
- Do you think it's important that the school teach in both languages? Why?

- Do kids speak much English before they go to school? What about Murrinh-Patha? How much of each?

4. Results

4.1. *Language in the community*

All of the children in the Wadeye community grow up with Murrinh-Patha as their first language. As confirmed both by our own observations and by what parents said about their children, the children learn little or no English at home. Instead, the expectation of their parents is that they will learn English once they attend school. The following exchanges are reflective of the opinions expressed by adults when asked about the children's English:

- (3) Linguist: *Do they [kids] know any English?*
Parent 1: *No*
Linguist: *Will they learn English?*
Parent 2: *Yeah at school*
Linguist: *Will it be better than their Murrinh-Patha?*
Parent 1,2: *[Laughter] No!*
- (4) Linguist: *When the kids are just playing together, do they speak English with each other or do they speak Murrinh-Patha?*
Speaker 3: *Murrinh-Patha, just Murrinh-Patha.*
- (5) Speaker 3: *The kids are sticking to Murrinh-Patha.*

When we asked people about the domains in which they used Murrinh-Patha, English and any other languages, we found that the types of factors that sociolinguists (e.g. Fishman 1972; Clyne 2005; papers in Romaine 1991) usually focus on in terms of linguistic and cultural domain theory, including: home, school, media, religion, leisure, friendship etc. cannot be readily applied to this community. This is because Murrinh-Patha is so pervasive that it is spoken between Murrinh-Patha people in all

domains, so that asking about the use of Murrinh-Patha in Wadeye is analogous to asking in which domains Dutch is used in the Netherlands, for example.³ All study participants confirmed that Murrinh-Patha was used by all age groups in all community interactions, and English was only used when required with non-Indigenous people and/or visiting Indigenous friends/family who are not Murrinh-Patha speakers:

- (6) Linguist: *Living in Wadeye, do people need to use English very much?*
 Speaker 2: *Just to communicate with the non-Aboriginal people, and visitors from outside of Wadeye. You know, families from Daly, they come here and they don't know how to speak Murrinh-Patha, so they speak in English.*

Some (often limited) use of English was observed, or reported to be used, in local businesses and government offices when interacting with non-Indigenous staff, in interactions with the police and in the health clinic (one parent commented on the good fortune of her son whose good English enables him to “tell off the policemen”; “tell off the nurse”!), at the school and with visiting linguists.

Thus, language use – and the choice of which language to use in which situations – is determined by the interlocutor. In general from a sociolinguistic perspective, this is not surprising in light of the fact that we know that even at a register and dialect level language use is often determined by the interlocutor (illustrated throughout papers in Eckert & Rickford 2001). However, within an Indigenous Australian context the primary language of the interlocutor does not always determine language choice. For example, Haviland (1979:233) reports an interaction in the Guugu Yimidhirr speaking community of Hope Vale in which people were found to order in English from a Guugu Yimidhirr-speaking shop assistant whenever the Eng-

³ This reflects the situation as it was described to us by community members, and reinforced by our own observations. However, it should be noted that the limitations of this study meant that a detailed investigation of the language use amongst Murrinh-Patha speakers in different work places (e.g. health clinic, council, school, etc.) was not undertaken.

lish-speaking manager was present. Thus the presence of the manager and the English context prevailed even when the English-speaking manager was not part of the dialogue.⁴

4.2. Language in the School

Attendance in school is very low; approximately 200 children regularly attend school in a community with around 700 school age children.⁵ One of the best attended classes in the school (a Year 2 class) has 35 kids on the books, with around 22 attending each day, but they are rarely the same 22.

The bilingual program in the school is a Step transition program. Devlin (2005) provides a detailed description of such programs in which English increases in steps across years. In this school, where the children begin with very little, if any, English, literacy and numeracy are taught in Murrinh-Patha from Prep (first year of school) to year 2, together with some oral English. The transition to English literacy comes in year 3, but all classrooms (even beyond year 2) have a Murrinh-Patha speaking teaching assistant and/or teacher to translate.

Despite the name, the children are not becoming bilingual as a result of the bilingual program. They remain, for the most part, very much second language English speakers, who, like many children in remote Indigenous communities, are taught by teachers who are untrained in methods for teaching ESL (Simpson et al. 2009). Non-Indigenous teachers report that they rely heavily on the Indigenous teaching assistants (and gesture) to communicate with the children in the classroom. They also report that the children speak very little English to them, apart from basic statements such as *toilet*, *drink*, and that they never hear the children speaking English to each other.

⁴ See also Evans (2001) for discussion of multilingual conversations in which speakers may not necessarily speak in a language that their interlocutors speak.

⁵ Based on figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006 census, accessed online at <http://www.abs.gov.au> (accessed 30/10/09).

- (7) Linguist: *Do the kids speak English to each other in the playground?*
 Teacher: *No, it's not cool!!*

The minimal use of English was confirmed by our own informal observations (including time spent in the Year 2 classroom), and by the children themselves. One Indigenous child with a non-Indigenous parent was aware that she had very good English, as evidenced in the following exchange:

- (8) Linguist: *You're good at English*
 Child: *Haha, yeah*
 Linguist: *Who else is good?*
 Child: *Child X, Child Y [both non-Indigenous]*
 Linguist: *Who else?*
 Child: *Haha Teachername*
 Linguist: *Who else?*
 Child: *Nobody – but a little*

There were two non-Indigenous children in the class who did not speak Murrinh-Patha and one of them had several observations to make, as follows:

- (9) Linguist: *Who do you play with?*
 Child: *ChildXboy, ChildYgirl [both non-Indigenous]*
 Linguist: *Whose house do you go to? [Above]*
 Linguist: *Who comes to your house?*
 Child: *[Above + non-Indigenous girl in Yr 1]*
 Linguist: *Do you learn any Murrinh-Patha?*
 Child: *No. When the other kids have Murrinh-Patha, ChildX and I make stuff. We do art.*

One teacher observed that many of the children speak only around ten words of English and they rarely ask questions. The only English we heard involved the use of lexical items without a straightforward Murrinh-Patha equivalent (e.g. colour words when painting, and “manners” like *please, thank you* etc.).

4.3. *Attitudes around the vitality of Murrinh-Patha*

Almost no concern was expressed by any of the people we surveyed about the long-term vitality of Murrinh-Patha. The general consensus was that Murrinh-Patha was strong, and would always remain strong. In part this was because all speakers see it as obvious given that Murrinh-Patha is the language of their heritage, and the country where they are living:

(10) Linguist: *What sort of Murrinh-Patha do the kids have?*

Speaker 1: *The language flows from them like a river.*

(11) Speaker 1: *Language of Murrinh-Patha is the background of who they are... It's a nature kid. Don't forget that. It's a nature kid, and we've got to learn at whole what's the nature belonging that kid. Cause that's the language that make that person strong.*

(12) Speaker 1: *This is the country, related to the language, and who we are. That's the most important aspect of life for Aboriginal kid.*

In addition, as one speaker pointed out, one-time speakers of other languages, such as Marringarr and Magati Ke, now use Murrinh-Patha as their primary language of communication and with the migration of Murrinh-Patha speakers to Darwin and Western Australia, she laughed at the thought that the language is actually “getting more strong”. The community judgment that the language is growing and remains strong is in line with Blythe’s (2009:28) observations and the census figures cited in §1 showing a growing number of speakers.

(13) Linguist: *Do people here worry about Murrinh-Patha? Do they worry that it's going to go away?*

Speaker 1: *I don't think so, no. I don't think that.*

Linguist: *It's going to stay strong?*

Speaker 1: *Yeah, stay strong.*

One person expressed some concern, but he is a language worker of Magati Ke heritage (a language which is severely endangered, having only one old speaker left) so this may have influenced his perspective:

(14) Linguist: *Are people worried about Murrinh-Patha?*

Speaker 2: *Little bit, I'm a bit worried.*

Interestingly, however, his concern was more to do with the fact that the children today are speaking a different sort of Murrinh-Patha, rather than having anything to do with a perceived threat from English. However, while a few older speakers claimed that there were differences in the type of Murrinh-Patha spoken by younger community members, this was not the view shared by all people surveyed – many people, when asked whether the children spoke the same Murrinh-Patha that they did, or whether the children spoke “proper” Murrinh-Patha, said yes definitively.

In response to the question “Do they speak Murrinh-Patha right through?” replies were all affirmations. However, as mentioned above, some speakers noted that there are variants of the language, which were termed “baby Murrinh-Patha” and “light Murrinh-Patha”, “make it shorter”. On the surface this looks like the sorts of changes reported in the language shift of young speakers of other Indigenous languages such as reported in Schmidt’s (1985) study of young people’s Dyrbal, Amery’s (1985) study of Dhuwaya in Northeast Arnhem Land, Lee’s (1987) study of young people’s Tiwi, O’Shannessy’s (2008) study of Warlpiri, and Langlois’ (2006) study of Pitjantjatjara, to name a few. However, it is difficult to determine to what extent the young speakers’ Murrinh-Patha differs from that of older speakers. Even if it were found to differ measurably, this would not necessarily be indicative of language shift. In fact, considering the complexity of this language, and the strong input and daily practiced use across all domains as well as the minimal use of English throughout the community, a marked shift, at this stage, would be surprising.

Rather, it may be the case that the language features older speakers identify as different from their own are actually those that are still being acquired. It is not uncommon across languages for some relatively frequent features (such as English prepositions, irregular past tense markers) not to be fully mastered until the end of primary school (Singleton & Ryan 2004). The complexity of Murrinh-Patha makes this a real possibility in terms of explaining potential differences. However, without an in-depth acquisition study of the language, such as Hill’s (2008) research undertaken on Yolngu Matha spoken in the Galiwin’ku school, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which the language may vary across the different generations

of speakers and whether this is to be attributed to developmental processes or language shift.

On a visit to Our Lady of Sacred Heart School in Wadeye in June 2009, we spoke with a staff member who was teaching in the school in the 1980s and had just returned to the school in 2009. As a fluent Murrinh-Patha speaker herself, we asked if she had noticed any differences in the Murrinh-Patha that children are speaking today compared with 1980s. She told us she had noticed no differences with the exception of perhaps one or two English words being used (e.g. *one* instead of *numi*), but only in the classroom, and to white teachers.⁶

All people surveyed agreed that it was important that the children learn English, and all saw school as the appropriate place to acquire this: a very common response to the question “will Child X learn English?” was “yeah, we’ve got a bilingual program”. Interestingly, the bilingual program was almost always referred to as being for the purposes of children learning English, rather than having anything to do with the maintenance of Murrinh-Patha.⁷ This is not to say that the presence of Murrinh-Patha in the school program wasn’t considered important, but just that its presence was treated as a given, since Murrinh-Patha is the language of the community.

Despite the infrequent use of English across domains, there is still an expectation (and a faith) that the children will learn English at school and somehow maintain this in the almost entirely Murrinh-Patha-speaking community. The following example is representative:

(15) Linguist: *Does Child X speak English?*

Parent: *Yeah – only a little bit*

⁶ The issue of code-switching and language mixing is beyond the scope of this paper, however we observed no code-switching apart from the odd lexical item.

⁷ Fortunately, since OLSH is part of the Catholic system, the bilingual program is not in immediate danger as is the case elsewhere due to policy changes; see Simpson et. al. (2009) and Lasagabaster & Wigglesworth (2009) for more detail about this issue.

- Linguist: *Do you speak English at home?*
 Parent: *No – not at home*
 Linguist: *He learns it at school?*
 Parent: *Yeah*

An AIATSIS symposium in June 2009, focussing on bilingual education in the Northern Territory, involved a lot of discussion around the role of bilingual programs in fostering children’s overall development. Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma noted in his opening address that “language is the medium through which culture is transmitted”. Interestingly, when we were visiting the Wadeye school, a visiting Catholic Education senior official was overheard to spontaneously observe that the children in Wadeye “are much more confident compared to other communities I’ve been in”.

To summarise, in Wadeye, Murrinh-Patha is the language of the community and children are expected to learn English at school. There are few concerns expressed in the community about the strength of Murrinh-Patha and its future. These findings are in themselves relatively unstriking – they’re speaking Murrinh-Patha because they’re Murrinh-Patha kids, and they’ll learn some English at school. However, this is in a country where language loss, shift and decline is occurring at an unprecedented rate, but the Wadeye people, for the most part, show a complete lack of anxiety about the potential fate of their language.

In the remainder of the paper we consider two issues: firstly why Murrinh-Patha has remained as robust as it has given the fate of so many other Indigenous languages which have suffered rapid language shift to mixed languages or toward Kriol; and secondly we consider potential issues of language endangerment for Murrinh-Patha.

5. Why has it remained so robust?

There seems to be nothing inherently different about the community at Wadeye to explain the robustness of Murrinh-Patha, but there are some aspects of the community organisation which may have contributed to this outcome. Firstly, the community has had a long-term literacy program and a bilingual program in the school (although many other schools in other places where the Indigenous language has not

remained as strong also have these). Secondly, there has been a shift of other language groups to Murrinh-Patha, making it the lingua franca of the area. This increases its domains of use, and people's perceptions of its strength and vitality, as well as its functional importance. The relative isolation of the community, in the sense that there is very little incidental traffic or visitors, also helps to limit the need for people to interact in languages other than Murrinh-Patha (such as Kriol or English).

A further contributing factor to the strength and vitality of Murrinh-Patha may be the fact that the community have complete faith that the school (by virtue of the bilingual program) will teach their children English. The result of this may be that this faith leaves them free to speak Murrinh-Patha at home (cf. reports from other communities, where parents tried teaching English to their children at home in order to help them get ahead at school).⁸ Added to this is the fact that there is very low school attendance in the community, which is the only context in which the children have real contact with English. As a result, we can surmise that the majority of children use and hear Murrinh-Patha most of the time.

6. Is Murrinh-Patha endangered?

Given the current healthy state of Murrinh-Patha, as discussed above, an obvious question to ask is whether it should be considered to be endangered. It is clear that from the community perspective this is certainly not the case. As discussed in §4, no-one we spoke to expressed any strong concerns about the ongoing vitality of Murrinh-Patha, nor suggested that there was any language shift currently underway among the community. The following exchange is representative:

⁸ Jane Simpson (pers. comm.) points out, however, that this expectation of parents combined with the fact that the children do not actually acquire much English at school (as we note in §4) is potentially detrimental since it may weaken the community's belief in the bilingual program and strengthen the case for an English-only school program.

- (16) Linguist: *Do you think Murrinh-Patha is changing?*
 Speaker 1: *No, I don't hear that.*

From the perspective of linguists, Murrinh-Patha also appears not to be endangered. According to UNESCO (2003):

A language is endangered when it is on the path towards extinction [...] when its speakers cease to use it, use it in an increasingly reduced number of communicative domains, and cease to pass it on from one generation to the next. That is, there are no new speakers, either adults or children (2003:3).

As we have shown above, none of these factors are currently applicable to Murrinh-Patha in Wadeye.

By all measures most relevant to Australian Indigenous languages (e.g. McConvell 1986, Schmidt 1990, Dixon 1991, Wurm 1996, Krauss 1996, McConvell & Thieberger 2001) Murrinh-Patha does not rate as even slightly endangered. Wurm (1996:1), for example, suggests a definition of “endangerment” whereby any language which is not learnt by 30% of the children of the community should be considered endangered. Murrinh-Patha, with close to 100% of Wadeye children learning it as their first language, does not even come close to endangerment by this measure. This is supported by McConvell & Thieberger’s (2001) language endangerment indicator (Table 1), according to which Murrinh-Patha is clearly categorized as strong:

| Age | Strong | Endangered (early stage) | Seriously endangered | Near-extinct | Extinct |
|-------|--------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|-------------|
| 15-19 | Speak | Don't speak | Don't speak | Don't speak | Don't speak |
| 20-39 | Speak | Speak | Don't speak | Don't speak | Don't speak |
| 40-59 | Speak | Speak | Speak | Don't speak | Don't speak |
| 60+ | Speak | Speak | Speak | Speak | Don't speak |

**Table 1. Recommended language endangerment indicator
 (McConvell & Thieberger 2001:54)**

So, by these Australian measures, Murrinh-Patha is not at all endangered. In fact, in McConvell & Thieberger (2001:59) Murrinh-Patha is given the endangerment index of 2.0 (where > 1 is strong), indicating that approximately twice as many people in the 0-19 age group speak the language than in the 20-39 age group! (We believe this reflects population increase, not speaker decrease in the higher age groups.)

From an international perspective, UNESCO (2003) provides a much more complex set of measurements for gauging language endangerment, using a scale from 0 (Extinct) to 5 (Safe) across nine different factors. Even according to these measures, Murrinh-Patha ranks as 5 (Safe) for most of the identified factors. There are however, a few measures according to which Murrinh-Patha may be classified as less than Safe, such as Factor 7: Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes And Policies.⁹ For other measures there are some complexities in knowing how to apply them to the Murrinh-Patha situation. On a global scale, Murrinh-Patha has relatively small speaker numbers (approximately 2000), which would appear to give it a lower ranking on Factor 2: Absolute Speaker Numbers. However, when we consider that all Australian languages, even before European contact, would have had relatively low numbers of speakers, and that it is highly likely that the current number of Murrinh-Patha speakers is substantially greater than pre-contact, the relevance of this measure is reduced.

Similar complexities arise when evaluating Murrinh-Patha with respect to Factor 3: Proportion of speakers within the total population. The population group is defined as “the ethnic, religious, regional, or national group with which the speaker community identifies” (UNESCO 2003:9). If the reference population group is taken to be Wadeye and its surrounds, then Murrinh-Patha is ranked substantially higher than if the reference population group is considered to be the broader Australian community.

⁹ Anecdotal reports suggest that Thamarrurr council meetings are held in Murrinh-Patha, but that all official records, minutes, actions, etc. are recorded in English. We were not able to confirm this in the present study.

While current linguistic measures of language endangerment suggest very little risk for Murrinh-Patha, the longer term question is whether it can withstand the enormous pressure of English. More specifically, the reality may be that the Murrinh-Patha language is just a generation or two behind other Indigenous languages which have already succumbed to massive language shift. To return to the role of community attitudes, does the very fact that speakers themselves don't see the language as endangered increase its risk of endangerment? If there is little awareness or concern about the encroachment of English, does this in itself make the language more vulnerable because nobody is "looking out" for this potential danger? Or alternatively, is this lack of anxiety about English (part of) what has enabled Murrinh-Patha to remain so strong?

We know from what we see, and have seen, in other parts of Australia, that it is right now that we need to put in place the tools to avoid Murrinh-Patha heading toward language endangerment. Once the process of language loss begins, it is extremely difficult to reverse, so it is crucial to do everything we can to stop it happening in the first place.¹⁰ However, this raises ethical dilemmas. If people themselves perceive no threat to their language, then what can we, as linguists, do to help? But more importantly, is it paternalistic of us to try to convince them of what we see as a potential danger? We need to be certain that we are not imposing on the community something they neither want, nor see the need for.

7. Conclusion

Wadeye, and the strength of Murrinh-Patha, presents a relatively rare case of Indigenous language maintenance in a community which is lucky enough to be able to maintain bilingual education in its school system. The community members are confident in their views that Murrinh-Patha is a strong language – indeed they view

¹⁰ Furthermore, given the disproportionate number of young speakers of Murrinh-Patha in the population, a shift in this section of the community is likely to have a rapid and devastating effect on the vitality of the language more generally. (We thank Jane Simpson, pers. comm., for this observation.)

their language as one which is increasing in strength, if anything. The children enter the school system with virtually no English, and it is there that their parents expect that they will acquire English. While we have yet to investigate the children's outcomes in English, anecdotal evidence would suggest that it is very limited.

This presents us with a dilemma. If the children speak Murrinh-Patha fluently as children, young adults and adults they will pass the language on to their children and it will remain strong. If they do begin to acquire English to greater levels of proficiency, they are likely to leave the community, and their Indigenous language, behind. And as we have seen elsewhere, it takes only a couple of generations for a language to stop being passed on through the generations. We would argue that what we need is a really vibrant bilingual program that promotes both Murrinh-Patha and English, together with an understanding by the community of the importance of raising their children in Murrinh-Patha, even where they themselves are bilingual. Murrinh-Patha is a small language in a large country and it will probably not take much for it to enter the endangerment indices. We need to do everything we can to ensure that this does not happen. The question is: how do we approach this problem? But more importantly, do we have the right to do so?

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all members of the Wadeye community who participated in this research and were so willing to answer our endless questions. We are also extremely grateful to the OLSH Wadeye School and the teachers who allowed us to enter their classrooms and who shared their observations and experiences with us. This paper has benefited from discussions with many colleagues, including those in the audience at the ALS conference in Melbourne 2009, and especially Joe Blythe, Stephen Hill, Jane Simpson, Nick Reid, and Michael Walsh, and we thank them all for their contributions. This research was funded by a research grant from the Arts Faculty at the University of Melbourne.

Bibliography

Amery, Rob. 1985. *A new diglossia: Contemporary speech varieties at Yirrkala, N.E. Arnhem land.* Canberra: Australian National University MA Thesis.

- Blythe, Joseph.** 2009. *Doing referring in Murriny Patha conversation*. Sydney: University of Sydney PhD thesis.
- Clyne, Michael.** 2005. *Australia's language potential*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press.
- Devlin, Brian.** 2005. *Two-way learning in the NT: Some research-based recommendations*. Report prepared for NT DEET.
- Dixon, R. M. W.** 1991. *Words of our country: Stories, place names, and vocabulary in Yidiny, the Aboriginal language of the Cairns-Yarrabah region*. St. Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press.
- Eckert, Penelope & John Rickford (eds.).** 2001. *Style and sociolinguistic variation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Evans, Nicholas.** 2001. The last speaker is dead – long live the last speaker! In Paul Newman & Martha Ratliff (eds.), *Linguistic fieldwork*, 250-281. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fishman, Joshua A.** 1972. *Language and nationalism*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Furlan, Alberto.** 2005. *Songs of continuity and change: The reproduction of Aboriginal culture through traditional and popular music*. Sydney: University of Sydney PhD thesis.
- Haviland, John B.** 1979. How to talk to your brother-in-law in Guugu Yimidhirr. In Timothy Shopen (ed.), *Languages and their speakers*, 160-239. Cambridge, MA: Winthrop.
- Henderson, John.** 1994. Aboriginal languages in education: A summary of the issues. In Debbie Hartmann & John Henderson (eds.), *Aboriginal languages in education*, 1-20. Alice Springs, NT: Institute for Aboriginal Development.
- Hill, Stephen.** 2008. *Yolngu Matha and English learning at Galiwin'ku, an Indigenous community in North-east Arnhem Land*. Armidale, NSW: University of New England PhD thesis.
- Krauss, Michael.** 1996. Status of Native American language endangerment. In Gina Cantoni (ed.), *Stabilizing Indigenous languages*, 16-21. Flagstaff, AZ: Northern Arizona University Press.
- Langlois, Annie.** 2006. Wordplay in teenage Pitjantjatjara. *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 26(2). 181-192.

- Lasagabaster, David & Gillian Wigglesworth. 2009. Multilingualism, bilingual education, Indigenous languages and English in Australia. Unpublished manuscript.
- Lee, Jennifer R. 1987. *Tiwi today. A study of language change in a contact situation*. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics.
- McConvell, Patrick. 1986. Aboriginal language programs and language maintenance in the Kimberleys. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics* Series S, 2. 108-121.
- McConvell, Patrick & Nicholas Thieberger. 2001. *State of Indigenous languages in Australia – 2001* (Australia State of the Environment Second Technical Paper Series (Natural and Cultural Heritage)). Canberra: Department of the Environment and Heritage.
- Meakins, Felicity. 2007. *Case marking in contact. The development and function of case morphology in Gurindji Kriol, an Australian mixed language*. Melbourne: University of Melbourne PhD thesis.
- Meakins, Felicity. 2008. Land, language and identity: The socio-political origins of Gurindji Kriol. In Miriam Meyerhoff & Naomi Nagy (eds.), *Social lives in language*, 69-94. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Naessan, Petter. 2008. Some tentative remarks on the sociolinguistic vitality of Yankunytjatjara in Coober Pedy, South Australia. *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 28(2). 103-138.
- O'Shannessy, Carmel. 2008. Children's production of their heritage language and a new mixed language. In Simpson, Jane & Gillian Wigglesworth (eds.) (2008b), 261-282.
- Romaine, Suzanne (ed.). 1991. *Language in Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schmidt, Annette. 1985. *Young people's Dyirbal. An example of language death from Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schmidt, Annette. 1990. *The loss of Australia's Aboriginal language heritage*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Simpson, Jane, Jo Caffrey & Patrick McConvell. 2009. *Gaps in Australia's Indigenous language policy. Dismantling bilingual education in the Northern Territory* (AIATSIS Research discussion paper). Canberra: AIATSIS.
- Simpson, Jane & Gillian Wigglesworth. 2008a. Introduction. In Simpson, Jane & Gillian Wigglesworth (eds.) (2008b), 1-12.

- Simpson, Jane & Gillian Wigglesworth (eds.). 2008b.** *Children's language and multilingualism: Indigenous language use at home and school.* London: Continuum.
- Singleton, David & Lisa Ryan. 2004.** *Language acquisition: The age factor* (Second Edition). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- UNESCO. 2003.** *Language vitality and endangerment.* Document submitted to the International Expert Meeting on UNESCO Programme Safeguarding of Endangered Languages Paris, 10–12 March 2003. Available online at www.unesco.org/culture/ich/doc/src/00120-EN.pdf (accessed 30 October 2009).
- Walsh, Michael. 2005.** Will Indigenous languages survive? *Annual Review of Anthropology* 34. 293-315.
- Wilkins, David. 2008.** W(h)ither language culture and education in remote Indigenous communities of the Northern Territory? *Australian Review of Public Affairs* October 2008. Available online at <http://www.australianreview.net/digest/2008/10/wilkins.html> (accessed 10 January 2010).
- Wurm, Stephen A. 1996.** *Atlas of the world's languages in danger of disappearing* (First edition). Paris: UNESCO Publishing.