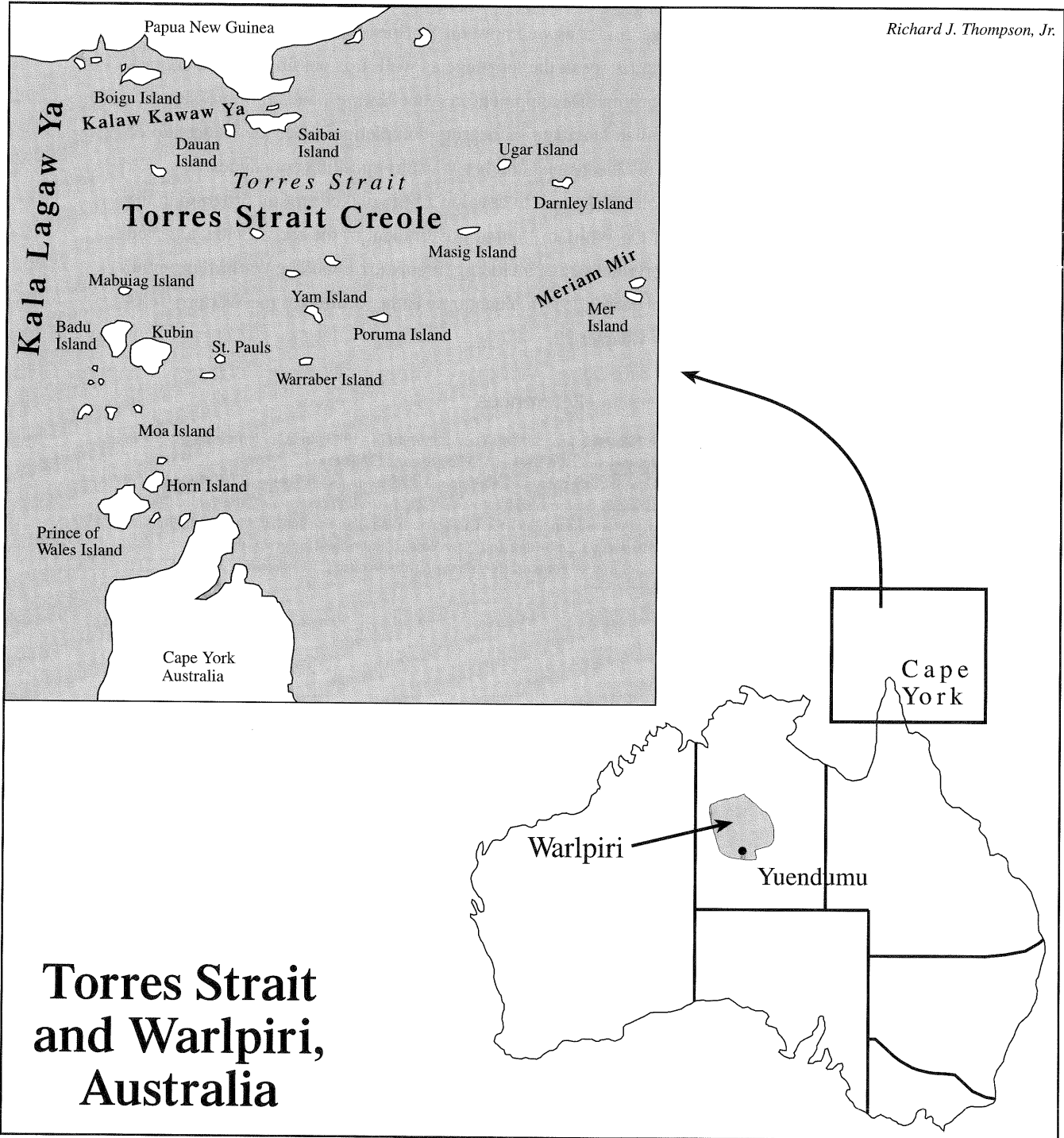


Richard J. Thompson, Jr.



Torres Strait and Warlpiri, Australia

MAP 22.1 Torres Strait and Warlpiri, Australia

Strict Locality in Local Language Media An Australian Example

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BROADCASTING

We are familiar with the thesis that television can be detrimental to local and endangered languages, where the medium is exclusively or largely in English or Spanish, say, and the local language is given little or no time in the programming. The allure of television implicates more than language, of course, but its power can have serious consequences for the continuation of the linguistic and intellectual heritage of a local community.

To be sure, abstractly speaking, both television and radio are, in and of themselves, neutral in this regard. Their effects, bad or good, depend on many contextual factors. And in principle there are good purposes to which these media can be put in language revitalization and maintenance.

Indigenous peoples in various parts of Australia were remarkably prescient in understanding the implications of the impending media onslaught well before advanced technology was in place to transmit an overwhelming deluge of English-laden image and sound into relatively isolated communities in which local languages still flourished. Recognizing the dangers inherent in this inevitable circumstance, they moved to mitigate it to whatever extent possible, by grabbing the mic and confronting the media on their own terms.

As elsewhere in the world, in Aboriginal Australia it is believed with good reason that television in particular “has imposed greater exposure to non-indigenous languages and, perhaps more importantly, has led to a reduction in more interactive pursuits which involved the traditional languages, such as story-telling, singing and dancing and simple campfire conversation” (McKay 1996, 101).

The rational response to this has been the establishment of local programming in diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities by taking advantage of the full range

of broadcasting resources, including the Broadcasting for Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme (BRACS), various regional broadcasting facilities, and both community and commercial broadcasting organizations. Broadcasting in this environment has two major functions, that of securing local control of at least a part of the programming to ensure appropriate cultural and social content and the involvement of people of significance in the communities, and that of providing an opportunity for the use of local languages in broadcasting.

Ironically, it is the very wealth of traditional languages which has hindered full exploitation of this potential. The experience of the Torres Strait Islander Media Association is indicative. Their broadcasts are in Torres Strait Creole, rather than the indigenous languages, for a number of reasons, including the fact that “the broadcast area covers more than one language,” “the Creole itself has developed as a significant language of Torres Strait Islander identity over recent years” and would “reach and appeal to more people,” and, unsurprisingly, “the level of funding available does not permit the employment of broadcast staff for each language group” (McKay 1996, 102).

By comparison with other parts of Australia, Torres Strait is on the face of it relatively uncomplicated as far as linguistic diversity is concerned. There are two indigenous languages. The Western Island language, called Kala Lagaw Ya (spoken in several regional varieties, including Mabuiag and Kalaw Kawaw Ya, among others), belongs to the large Australian language family known as Pama-Nyungan. The Eastern Island language (Meriam Mir) is of Papuan linguistic affiliation. But what is simple in the abstract is typically complex in reality. The dominant language of the region is the English-based Torres Strait Creole, whose origins are to be found in the Pacific Pidgin English brought to Torres

Strait in the mid-19th century by Pacific Islander and European immigrants involved in the commercial exploitation of marine resources such as *bêche-de-mer*, pearl shell, and trochus. By the end of the 19th century, Pacific Pidgin was no longer a pidgin for many people, being their first language, their *native* language, and thus an established Creole. Its spread to Torres Strait as a whole advanced rapidly in the first half of the twentieth century.

The Torres Strait Islander Media Association did not have a viable option of simply broadcasting in the two indigenous languages for various reasons. Among these are the fact that Torres Strait Creole is now an important element of pan-island consciousness, replacing the tradition of "separateness-in-contact" which once characterized relations between west and east in Torres Strait. Furthermore, Creole is a legitimate indigenous language, born as such on the Torres Strait Islands. An additional factor in the choice of broadcasting language is the circumstance that for many islanders, the indigenous languages are no longer their first languages.

The reasonable desire to serve the widest possible audience has a natural consequence on the linguistic choices of a broadcasting organization. This, combined with economic limitations, can, and usually does, have a marginalizing effect on local languages. Thus, Torres Strait Islander Media Association personnel recognize "not only the power of broadcasting to provide a vehicle for material in indigenous languages and to give status to indigenous languages, but also the power of broadcasting to provide a means for English and Creole to take the 'market share' away from indigenous languages, thus weakening them" (McKay 1996, 81).

In the Torres Strait case, at least, a language seen by Islanders as part of their heritage figures prominently in broadcasting. In other cases, however, the results of this tension have been more serious. The Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association, a pioneer in indigenous language broadcasting, "no longer broadcasts in languages to the extent it once did," and in the Aboriginal (Imparja) television area, "a high proportion of the programming is simply commercial television—in English," prompting one to ask "whether this situation—whether by design or by default—is not actually promoting a shift to English" (McKay 1996, 103).

The problems are not trivial, therefore, for a broadcast organization that seeks to represent the linguistic and cultural diversity of its audience. One response, of course, is to adhere to the principle of economy—that of reaching the largest audience at minimal cost. Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait broadcasters generally do not accept this philosophy, though economic realities often force them to something amounting to this position in actual fact. Responses by broadcasters in a recent survey mentioned, "in particular, the difficulty of covering all the languages of their broadcast area because funding was not sufficient to employ broadcasters from each language. For many of them, broadcasting even a little in a restricted range of languages was better than only broadcasting in English" (McKay 1996, 102–3).

Thus, spot programming for individual languages is a partial solution to the problem. And the sharing of program material has been a solution to another problem, that is, the Aboriginal language diaspora—the existence of widely dispersed groups representing the same language, a common condition in contemporary Australia. For example, radio programs in Warlpiri and Arrernte produced by the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association in Alice Springs are used by the broadcaster at Wirramanu (Balgo) in northern Western Australia (McKay 1996, 103).

But this system is fragile. In some instances, spot programming is done on a voluntary and occasional basis, as in the case of the Torres Strait broadcaster Jenny Enosa, who "uses her language (Kalaw Kawaw Ya) from time to time on her own initiative for important announcements," a circumstance much appreciated by her audience (McKay 1996, 80). This example illustrates in rather stark relief the very general condition of dependency in which indigenous languages find themselves in the realm of broadcast media. Minor changes in personnel or funding within a broadcasting organization can have rather drastic consequences for indigenous language programming, often in the direction of reducing it or eliminating it altogether.

However, fragile as this may be, it approaches the condition which could well, given contemporary realities, be optimal for Aboriginal and Torres Islander media development and use. This is the condition of "strict locality," in which media (including printed material, as well as radio and television) are designed and created for dissemination to a particular language audience for the purpose of promoting the use of the language involved and—within reason, of course—without regard to the size of the audience or the economics implicated. As examples of this mode of media creation, I briefly discuss the use of video in the Warlpiri community of Yuendumu, Central Australia (Michaels 1994, 98–124) and the use of newsletters and magazines containing material in Australian Aboriginal languages.

WARLPIRI TELEVISION

The story of Warlpiri media at Yuendumu is not a simple or fully positive one. It implicates old and familiar tensions originating in, among other things, the predictable official state interventions which have beset Aboriginal peoples during the past two centuries. The Warlpiri characteristics of stubbornness and commitment to autonomy and survival, characteristics shared by many embattled local language groups, are precisely those that could, in principle, foster an enduring autonomous local media structure.

Warlpiri media . . . is the product of a struggle between official and unofficial discourses that seem always stacked in the state's favor. This might suggest a discouraging future for Yuendumu Television. Given the government's present policy of promoting media centralization and homogenization, we would expect that Yuendumu will

soon be overwhelmed by national media services, including “approved” regional broadcasters who serve the state’s objectives of ethnicization, standardization, even Aboriginalization, at the expense of local language, representation, and autonomy. If this scenario is realized, then Yuendumu’s community station seems likely to join the detritus of other development projects that litter the contemporary Aboriginal landscape. . . . We won’t know that the experience of television for remote Aborigines could have been any different: for example, a networked cooperative of autonomous community stations resisting hegemony and homogenization. Instead, we expect Warlpiri TV to disappear as no more than a footnote to Australian media history, leaving unremarked its contribution to a public media and its capacity to articulate alternative—unofficial—Aboriginalities.

But something in Warlpiri reckoning confounds their instrumentalization and the grim prophecy this conveys. A similar logic predicted the disappearance of their people and culture generations ago, but proved false. A miraculous autonomy, and almost fierce stubbornness, delivers the Warlpiri from these overwhelming odds and assumes their survival, if not their eventual victory. (Michaels 1994, 101–2)

Warlpiri videotaping was begun in the early 1980s at Yuendumu, by a member of the Japanangka subsection who was responding to the impending arrival of satellite television, asserting that “we can fight fire with fire,” in the tradition of the Warlukurlangu (Fire Dreaming) ritual, which now gives its name to the Yuendumu artists’ association. Authority for videomaking at Yuendumu was soon transferred to a member of the Jupurrurla subsection, appropriately, since these subsections stand in the kirda-kurdungurlu patri-moiety relation which marks all Warlpiri ritual functions and, more abstractly, symbolizes the pervasive Warlpiri dialectic of the “unity of the opposites.” From the very beginning, therefore, to its very core, television at Yuendumu has been a Warlpiri business through and through. And consistent with the Warlpiri character of the business, authority was eventually extended to all eight subsections through an appropriate sequence of training and collegial relationships orchestrated by Francis Jupurrurla Kelly.

If videomaking at Yuendumu is a Warlpiri business, it is a contemporary Warlpiri business, unconcerned with outsider notions of Aboriginal authenticity and the like.

In the case of Jupurrurla’s art, the implicit question of authenticity becomes explicit: Jupurrurla, in Bob Marley T-shirt and Adidas runners, armed with his video portapack, resists identification as a savage updating some archaic technology to produce curiosities of primitive tradition for the jaded modern gaze. Jupurrurla is indisputably a sophisticated cultural broker who employs videotape and electronic technology to express and resolve political, theological, and aesthetic contradictions that arise in uniquely contemporary circumstances. (Michaels 1994, 104–5)

Jupurrurla produced a corpus of hundreds of hours of tape for the Warlpiri Media Association. It is not surprising that one of these would deal with the infamous Coniston Massacre, also called “the Killing Time,” a notorious event in Warlpiri history. The incident took place in 1929 when a punitive raid—following the murder by Aborigines of a white trapper and dingo hunter—resulted in the slaughter, by police, of as many as 100 Warlpiri men, women, and chil-

dren. The actual death toll varies, but it was a staggering loss for the Warlpiri population of the time. Moreover, the raid wiped out a ritual gathering and the associated intellectual wealth—in the form of verse, design, and choreography—stored in the minds of the slain.

Jupurrurla’s video representation of this incident bears no resemblance to what we would expect from Hollywood. It is rather the cinematic representation of an oral account, interested in content unadorned by special technique or fiction. Eric Michaels’s report of its production and structure depicts quite well the Warlpiri mode of video production:

The ritual relations between participants were effectively translated by Jupurrurla into those of video production. Because the storyteller was a Japangardi, from the “one side,” it was entirely appropriate that Jupurrurla, from the “other side,” would be behind the camera. This modeled the in front/behind camera dichotomy after their Warlpiri equivalents. Kirda (“Boss”) is on stage, Kurdungurlu (“helper/manager”) is behind the scenes. This arrangement was followed throughout the first three scenes, while the fourth includes an innovative deviation from this practice.

Each virtually uninterrupted take was shot on the site where the events of the story being told by Japangardi occurred:

1. the site of Brook’s murder;
2. that of his grave;
3. a waterhole where people were encamped for ceremony;
4. a cave in which an old Japanangka hid from police trackers.

In them, Japangardi is first seen from an extreme long shot, his figure appearing to emerge from the landscape. He walks toward the camera, and begins speaking when in medium-shot range. . . . The effect of these scenes conforms to a ceremonial convention in which certain ritual story-dances do not begin on the dancing ground proper, but are “brought in” from the bush at some distance. The effect is to express the contiguity of such stories and to invoke that corpus of all stories, the Dreaming. More specifically, the relations of stories to land and place are acknowledged by these conventions. Any story comes from a particular place, and travels from there to here, forging links that define the tracks over which both people and ceremonies travel. Jupurrurla models his electronic discourse on exactly such principles. (Michaels, 1994, 113)

The final scene is a taped interview in which Jupurrurla asks certain questions of detail and clarification.

There are no guns, no mounted police dashing around, no fiction as we usually think of it. The only “actor” is the narrator, Japangardi, and he is not an actual figure in the story, except by virtue of being in the same semi-moiety (Japanangka-Japangardi) as the primary Warlpiri protagonist. The video is not for the uninitiated. As Michaels notes:

Reviewing the tape, one is struck by the recurrent camera movement, the subtle shifts in focus and attention during the otherwise even, long pans across the landscape. The superficial conclusion is that we are seeing the effects of “naive” camera work; the preference for landscape is a preference for things that don’t move, and are easily photographed: the shifts in focus and direction seem evidence of a simple lack of mechanical skills. Jupurrurla denies this. When asked, he provided a rationale suggesting a meaning in everything his camera does. The pans do not follow the movement of the eye, but movement of unseen characters—both of the Dreamtime and historical—which converge of this landscape: “This is where the

police trackers came over the hill," "that is the direction the ancestors came in from. . . ." Shifts in focus and interruptions in panning pick out important places and things in the landscape, like a tree where spirits live or a flower with symbolic value. The camera adopts technical codes to serve a predetermined system of significance in this radically *Yapa* (Aboriginal) sense of *mise-en-scène*. (Michaels 1994, 114)

Warlpiri people know as much about the "pictures" (movies, the cinema) as almost anyone in the world. And they enjoy them. But there is nothing of the movies in Jupurrurla's Coniston Story, or in any other of his videos. The structure of his videos adheres to a strictly Warlpiri form.

A satellite earth station receiver was installed in August of 1987, introducing live ABC programming to Yuendumu. Jupurrurla began mixing local programming with the incoming signal. Warlpiri News and documentaries were broadcast at 6:30 PM. Tensions developed when Warlpiri News replaced a favorite program of one of the non-Warlpiri residents of Yuendumu and when Jupurrurla decided that "the service would shut off at 10:30 PM, so that kids could go to bed and be sure of getting off to school in the morning. No *Rock Arena*. No late movies," guaranteeing that there would be much heated negotiating in the ensuing months (Michaels 1994, 123–24).

Meanwhile, Warlpiri people continued to be involved in their parallel industry of making Warlpiri television, ensuring a continued tradition of strict locality in the use of the media technology of which they had become competent masters.

NEWSLETTERS AND MAGAZINES

Although it is relatively unsung, the printed word is, in potential at least, the most faithful and stable representative of the principle of strict locality in the promotion of indigenous languages in communication. There are, to be sure, issues that arise around writing, and the question of whether or not a particular language should be written is a real one for many communities, leading in some cases to the decision not to use writing. Such decisions are typically well argued and based on fundamental principles of belief and historical experience. On the other hand, many local communities eagerly embrace writing and use it for a wide range of purposes—letters, news bulletins, announcements, signs, instruction sheets and manuals, magazines, books, and others.

The printed word is cheap and in most cases can pay for itself. And it can be tailored to honor the local language, or languages, in a fully appropriate manner.

Like many Australian Aboriginal communities that developed bilingual education programs in the mid-1970s and later, Yuendumu's Bilingual Resources Development Unit produces a magazine at the Yuendumu Community Education Center. The magazine is called *Junga Yimi* (The True Word). It conforms to the strict locality norm in being inexpensively produced and in publishing primarily contribu-

tions which come from members of the Yuendumu community (both Warlpiri and non-Warlpiri). It normally appears three times each year, and each issue (ranging in length from 15 to 40 pages) is photocopied and simply stapled together. In recent issues, color has appeared on the cover page, but not inside, which is entirely black-and-white, as earlier issues were in their entirety.

It must be said that *Junga Yimi* usually has more English in it than Warlpiri. But it always has pieces in Warlpiri covering topics of all kinds—community problems, sports, education, Yuendumu news, important events like a trip to Niger by a group of Warlpiri people, trips to the bush, celebrations and social ceremonies, training programs, and training needs, including the need for training in broadcasting. Some issues are devoted to a particular theme, such as, for example, *Junga Yimi* 1998, no. 3, the Warlpiri and English Literacy Edition, featuring interviews at Yuendumu conducted by Christine Nungarrayi Spencer, a graduate of the Yuendumu bilingual education program and later a student in the Advanced Vernacular and English Literacy Course at the Institute for Aboriginal Development in Alice Springs.

The local character of *Junga Yimi* is reflected in part by the fact that it is not read with complete comprehension by outsiders, even outsiders who speak Warlpiri. There is a good reason for this.

Linguistically, each volume of *Junga Yimi* is in effect a time capsule recording aspects of the evolution of modern Warlpiri usage in the contexts of Western education, law, and medicine, and so on. In 1974, at the beginning of Warlpiri bilingual education at Yuendumu, a certain amount of "language engineering" was required. There was in the early years much inconsistency in writing Warlpiri, for example. Comparing the inconsistent conventions of those years with the practices of Nungarrayi Spencer, one sees that some standardization has developed, in the use of hyphens and spaces to alleviate the forbidding appearance of the long words characteristic of Warlpiri, and in the punctuation employed to integrate unassimilated English borrowings into a written Warlpiri text. But these features have to do with the appearance of written Warlpiri and with readability, not with comprehension. Problems of comprehension, which go unnoticed by Yuendumu residents, derive from lexical and grammatical adjustments which have been made over the years. In many cases, even here, there is no problem of comprehension for the "returning Warlpiri." Thus, little difficulty is caused by Nungarrayi's relatively standardized use now of the verb *yir-rarni* 'put' for 'write' and the full assimilation of English 'read' as the root element *riiti* in *riiti-mani* 'read'. The realm of quantification is another story, however.

In 1974, the major linguistic expression of quantificational notions in Warlpiri itself was largely by means of the nominal cardinality determiners *jinta* (singular, one), *jir-rama* (dual, two), *marnkurrpa* or *wirrkardu* (paucal or lesser plural, three, several), and *panu* (major plural, many). This

is not a “counting system,” but it enables one to express an exact enumeration, through the universal principle of addition. In “formal” schooling, however, there is need for a counting system, an inventory of expressions including zero and a nonfinite set of cardinality expressions, each of which corresponds to an amount greater by just one (1) than one (and only one) other expression in the set. Efforts were made immediately to address this problem. The linguist engaged to help in starting the bilingual education program was told about a terminology for the playing cards used among Warlpiri stockmen. In consultation with Warlpiri teachers, it was decided that these terms, from ace through 10, could form the basis of a Warlpiri counting system. So, for example, the five was called *rdaka* ‘hand’, unsurprisingly; the seven was called *wirlki* ‘hooked boomerang’; and the eight was called *milpa* ‘eye(s)’. These were reasonable names of the shapes of the numbers, but there were two problems, the uninteresting one that they were unstable (in the Warlpiri tradition fostering multiple synonymy), and the interesting problem of actually developing a system of numerals. The first, more trivial problem will account for some failures in comprehension at any temporal remove—thus, a returning Warlpiri who learned *narntirunki* ‘curled’ for ‘nine’ in 1974 will in all probability not understand Nungarrayi’s use of *kartaku* ‘billycan’ for the same concept in 1998. But this is commonplace in Warlpiri, where lexical items are regularly withdrawn from use to honor the taboo on the use of the personal name of a deceased, or any word resembling the name or incorporated in it—this, as well as in-law-respect vocabulary, accounts for the proliferation of synonyms (e.g., *yankirri*, *karlaya*, *wanyaparnta*, *pirilyingarnu*, etc., for ‘emu’). It is expected that a returning community member will have to learn vocabulary replacements that have taken place in his or her absence, even where the absence is only a year or two.

The second issue, however, implicates a grammatical system. The new numerical terminology was derived from names, the names of playing cards. Inherent in this nomenclature was the possibility of a number system, but it was not a number system in origin, and it had to be “transformed” into a new grammatical category, one functioning both as determiners in noun phrases and as conventional names for numbers. It was necessary, of course, to be able to say things like ‘two houses’, ‘eight horses’, and so on. The indigenous determiners (singular, dual, and paucal, described above) can enter into this relation, of course, but the new terms for higher cardinalities really could not. They were names, not determiners. Warlpiri speakers quickly invented a way to do this, creating an ending *-pala* (ultimately from English *fel-low*, or its Pidgin counterpart *-fella*), permitting the formation of expressions like *milpa-pala kirntangi-ki* ‘for eight months’ (‘eye’ + *-pala* month-Dative). This has now taken on a life of its own in Warlpiri, a fact exemplified in one of Nungarrayi’s interviews when she asks: *Nyiya-pala kirntangikinpa yinyangkaju warrki-jarrija?* (How many months

have you worked there?). The formation *nyiya-pala* ‘how many’ (‘what’ + *-pala*) is entirely new in Warlpiri grammar, a perfection or filling out, so to speak, of the new quantifier system. The older system had a question word sometimes translated as ‘how many’, but it was not really a cardinality expression, being rather a discourse-dependent interrogative of the type represented by English ‘which’. This is one of several developments in Warlpiri grammar chronicled to some extent by *Junga Yimi* since the initial years of Yuendumu bilingual education.

Like Warlpiri television, *Junga Yimi* is a part of the program to secure for Warlpiri people a “cultural future and a cultural past,” to paraphrase the purpose articulated by the Yuendumu videomaker Francis Jupurrurla Kelly.

This holds quite generally for community news magazines. Some of these, like *Mikurrunya*, the newsletter of the Strelley Community School in western Australia’s Pilbara region, now exercise students’ English literacy skills as much as or more than their writing skills in the local languages, but all retain an indigenous-language component. In its July 1999 issue, in addition to a Nyangumarta crossword puzzle and some children’s stories, *Mikurrunya* includes a Nyangumarta eulogy to the late radical organizer Donald W. McLeod, an early and renowned champion of the language and labor rights of the Aboriginal peoples of Western Australia. It is evident from this piece, and from the children’s writing as well, that the literary form of Nyangumarta has, so to speak, settled down to a level of consistency and stylistic sophistication quite advanced over that which first emerged in 1960 in McCleod’s camp near Roebourne, when the linguist Geoffrey N. O’Grady and the Nyangumarta linguist Monte Hale began to deal with the task of creating a written form of Nyangumarta.

Jupurrurla’s purpose would be achieved in grand measure by the development of a written literature in Aboriginal languages, a possibility recognized in the 1988 Pitjantjatjara short story contest promoted by the Anangu Schools Resource Centre at Ernabella, South Australia, through the center’s bilingual quarterly magazine *Kurparu* (Goddard 1994). The contest was open to all ages, and the 33 entries received represented five Pitjantjatjara-speaking communities. The panel of four judges was composed of acknowledged expert speakers of Pitjantjatjara, and their criteria were grammar and spelling, seriousness of intent, accuracy of content, and composition. The five prizewinning stories dealt with parental teaching of linguistic elements to babies, a widow, a devil woman, a spearing at Atarangu, and the technique of hunting euros in groups. The winning essays were published in the magazine *Kurparu*. One of the judges added a written Pitjantjatjara commentary on the entries as a whole, suggesting ways in which the unsuccessful writers could improve their writing style, by not changing the subject halfway through an account, by striving for clarity, or by periodically rereading what one has written for intelligibility and coher-

ence. The first-place winner, an essay by Nyurpaya Kaikalu of Amata, compares parental language teaching practices (employing a kind of baby talk) with the phonics method for teaching literacy. It is a respectable piece of Pitjantjatjara literature, well worthy of the name and of an honored position in the Pitjantjatjara chapter of Francis Jupurrurla's global vision of a cultural future for Aboriginal peoples.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

While mass media can overwhelm a local language, effectively pushing it aside, the media notion in and of itself is neutral and potentially positive in relation to indigenous languages, particularly in conjunction with the principle of strict locality. Video and photocopying are now quite cheap, though nothing comes without a price. Stable production of quality materials requires trained personnel, equipment, space, and supplies—all resources for which there may be strong competition within an economically stressed commu-

nity. And independent factors may intervene to block or divert the trajectory of a local language program of media development, as, for example, the subsequent shift away from bilingual education to an "all English" teaching program in the Pitjantjatjara schools of the area where the essay contest just described was conducted. In the final analysis, setbacks like this, a permanent feature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life, have never really kept people from doing things they are determined to do.

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