

# THE REVIVAL MOVEMENT OF THE WARRONGO LANGUAGE OF NORTHEAST AUSTRALIA<sup>[1]</sup>

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**Abstract:** From 1971 to 1974, the first author recorded the Warrongo language (northeast Australia) from its last fluent speakers. Towards the end of the last century, a movement to revive the Warrongo language started. In 2002, Warrongo language lessons, conducted by the first author, commenced. So far the lessons have been conducted five times — four or five days each time. The revival movement is making a slow but steady progress. Its developments are seen, for example, in (i) increased local involvement, (ii) increased teaching staff, (iii) spontaneous use of the language, and (iv) naming in Warrongo. However, this movement is beset with many problems, and lack of funding is one of the most difficult obstacles.

**Keywords:** Warrongo, linguistic heritage, language revival, spontaneous use, naming.

## 1. INTRODUCTION<sup>[1]</sup>

In 1971, when the first author was an M.A. student at Monash University, he started fieldwork in and around Townsville, north Queensland. His main focus was on the Warrongo language (also spelt Warungu, Warrungu, etc.), which used to be spoken in the upper Herbert River area, northwest of Townsville. Other languages he recorded include Biri (Bowen area), Gabilgaba (Townsville-Magnetic Island area), and Buluguyban (Palm Island). One of the outcomes of that fieldwork is his M.A. thesis (Tsunoda 1974).

The present paper incorporates portions of (i) T. Tsunoda (2004, 2005), an essay located at <http://www.sgu.ac.jp/com/ksasaki/kaken/essay/essay-tsn.htm>, and (ii) T. and M. Tsunoda (2006, 2007).

## 2. IMPORTANCE OF DOCUMENTING ENDANGERED LANGUAGES

Already in the early 1970s, the above-mentioned languages of north Queensland were facing extinction. They each had just one or two speakers left. The first author recorded data from the last speakers of these languages.

In the case of languages that seem to have no or little chance of survival, the last speakers often wish, and indeed make every effort, to have their language recorded. This heartfelt desire and commitment were best expressed by the late Mr. Alf Palmer (Warrongo name: Jinbilnggay), the last fluent speaker of Warrongo, who used to say to the first author:- ‘I’m the last one to speak Warrongo. When I die, this language will die.

I'll teach you everything I know, so put it down properly'. Indeed, Alf Palmer made admirable efforts to teach the first author everything he knew.

In retrospect, it was Alf Palmer who taught the first author the importance of documenting endangered languages. His was perhaps one of the earliest responses to the crisis of language endangerment. It was made twenty years before the publication of works such as Hale et al. (1992) and Robins and Uhlenbeck (1991), which are possibly the first works that urged linguists to pay serious attention to language endangerment. Alf Palmer was a man of wisdom and foresight.

The last speakers of these languages of north Queensland passed away, and the languages became extinct. Alf Palmer passed away in 1981, and there was no one left who could speak Warrongo — except the first author.

### **3. LANGUAGE REVIVAL MOVEMENT**

More than a quarter century later, towards the end of the last century, a few groups of people there, including Warrongo people, started a movement to revive their ancestral languages, and they approached the first author, requesting him to assist their activities.

In March 2000, the first author visited Townsville (where many Warrongo people live nowadays), after 26 years since his last visit of 1974 to the area. The visit was followed by another visit in March 2001.

The central figure in the Warrongo language revival movement is Rachel Cummins, who is Alf Palmer's granddaughter.

Many of the people involved in the language revival activities turned out to be grandchildren of the last speakers the first author had interviewed in the early 1970s. They already knew about him, and about his work. Some of them had obtained copies of relevant field tapes from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra (with which he lodged all his field tapes), and they even knew his voice.

The late Stephen Walsh, a member of the Biri group, said to the first author, 'We are grateful that you recorded our languages'. This obliterated all the hardship that the latter had experienced during that fieldwork.

### **4. VALUE OF LINGUISTIC HERITAGE**

In March 2000 and March 2001, the first author had preliminary discussions with a number of people. He described one aspect of the Warrongo language roughly as follows.

Warrongo had a phenomenon that linguists call syntactic ergativity. This phenomenon is unique among the world's languages. It mainly occurs in Australia, in Queensland, and in fact, in north Queensland. It occurs in Warrongo, and also Warrgamay, Girramay, Jirrbal, Mamu, Ngajan, Yidiny, and Djabugay. Because this phenomenon is unique among the world's languages, it is a very important part of

the cultural heritage – not only for the people of this area, but also for the entire humankind.

Needless to say, the knowledge of the existence of a truly unique phenomenon in their ancestral language has enhanced Warrongo people's sense of pride and self-esteem, and also interest in the language. It has proved to be an invaluable cultural heritage to them. (Syntactic ergativity is illustrated in Tsunoda (2004, 2005).)

## 5. WARRONGO LANGUAGE LESSONS

The first round of Warrongo lessons was conducted in March 2002 in Townsville. So far, the lessons have been conducted five times — about four or five days each time: March and August 2002, March 2004, and March and August 2006. What we have dealt with includes the following.

- (a) Orthography.
- (b) Pronunciation.
- (c) Basic vocabulary, including ancestors' names, e.g. Jinbilnggay (Alf Palmer).
- (d) Simple sentences, such as:
  - (d-i) declarative sentences;
  - (d-ii) general questions and special questions, and;
  - (d-iii) imperative sentences
- (e) Complex sentences: syntactic ergativity.
- (f) Mini-conversations.
- (g) Socio-cultural background, e.g. kin terms, patterns of kin-based behaviour, sections, totems, marriage rules, mythology, and naming.

The people in the class found (g) really interesting, and welcomed the inclusion of cultural aspects in the Warrongo language lessons. They stated that they realised they still retain the traditional patterns of kin-based behaviour, despite the fact that they no longer know the traditional kinship system or kin terms. They also stated that they now know why they behave the way they do. The inclusion of the cultural aspects turned out to be a great success.

In 2003, the first author prepared *A provisional Warrungu dictionary* (Tsunoda 2003), and sent 50 copies to Rachel Cummins, who in turn distributed them to other Warrongo people. Fortunately, the dictionary is in demand, and additional copies have been requested. One Warrongo person indicated that he is proud to have a book on his ancestral language in his home.

## 6. SLOW BUT STEADY PROGRESS

The Warrongo revival movement is making progress — a slow but steady progress. Specific instances of the progress include the following. Most of them took place in 2006 — four years since the Warrongo language lessons started in 2002.

[1] Local involvement. Warrongo people began to participate in the revival movement more actively. Examples follow. (i) Two Warrongo persons prepared picture cards — a



Other boys teased him, using one of the words they had learned in previous lessons:- ‘How about *bojimborrowam* (‘cockroach’) for your name?’ All the boys roared with laughter. But this anecdote, too, shows that they began to use Warrongo spontaneously.

(f) During the lessons of March 2006, there were a few occasions when the first author was unable to recall a Warrongo word. But on each occasion one Warrongo person showed him where in *A provisional Warrungu dictionary* the word was. It was clear that she had studied the dictionary thoroughly and that she had gained a good knowledge of Warrongo vocabulary.

To sum up, the Warrongo revival movement is making a slow but steady progress. This shows that Alf Palmer’s dedicated efforts to have his language documented have proved to be truly worthwhile. What he sowed more than 30 years ago is now beginning to be harvested by his descendants and his people.

## **7. SUGGESTIONS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODOLOGY**

In 2006, the authors noticed two interesting phenomena.

(a) Grammar. Some aspects of the grammar were difficult for children. But adults found them less difficult, and they were explaining these points to children.

(b) Pronunciation. The reverse situation was observed. Adults sometimes had a difficulty in pronouncing those sounds that were absent in English, but children acquire such sounds easily.

In view of this, the second author suggested that the following might be a useful strategy for these language lessons.

Difficult aspects of grammar: teach them to adults first, and get them to explain these points to children.

Difficult aspects of pronunciation: teach them to children first, and then get them to teach the pronunciation to adults.

## **8. PROSPECTS**

There are a number of plans that Warrongo people are entertaining. For example, they hope to have camps in their traditional land, for language and other activities. They also hope to have the Warrongo language taught at James Cook University in Townsville. To have an Aboriginal language taught at a university has an important implication, that is, it will help to enhance the status of Aboriginal languages:- ‘Our language is taught at a university. It is not a primitive language. It is an important language — just like French, German, and Japanese’. Unfortunately, however, this plan is only ‘a dream’ (Rachel Cummins, p.c.) at this stage.

As is almost always the case with language revitalization efforts, the Warrongo movement is beset with numerous problems. The most serious problem is lack of funding. For example, there are people who wish to come to Townsville to attend the Warrongo lessons, but there is no funding for their expenses. As another example, the

first author's applications to the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, the Australia-Japan Foundation, and the University of Tokyo (where he was teaching at that time), to fund the two authors' participation in the Warrongo language revival movement, were all unsuccessful.

The Warrongo language revival movement is an important component of the cultural activities of the entire humankind. It is hoped that the Japanese and the Australian governments recognise its importance and pay due attention to it. To assist such activities is a duty of every responsible government.

There is one encouraging sign. The Warrongo language movement has begun to attract the attention of the media. It has been reported by the following: (i) in Australia: The Australian (a newspaper), (ii) in Japan: Nihon Keizai Shimbun, Yomiuri Shimbun, Asahi Shimbun, Joyo Shimbun, The Japan Times (all newspapers), and Radio Japan. The program by Radio Japan was broadcast worldwide, in as many as seventeen languages. It is hoped that this will make governments and funding agencies aware of the value of language revival activities.

## NOTE

[1] This paper is dedicated to the memory of the late Mr. Alf Palmer, who taught the first author the importance of documenting endangered languages more than 30 years ago. The authors are grateful to Rachel Cummins (Alf Palmer's granddaughter) for supporting the publication of this paper and also for approving the way they cite Alf Palmer and his family in this paper.

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