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## The Role of Country and Self-Determination in Revitalisation

**Abstract:** The UNESCO Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032) is a good opportunity for shining a light on language endangerment in Australia. In this paper, I argue that many causes of endangerment can be traced back to a relocation of speakers of Indigenous languages from their traditional land. A case in point is the endangered language Miriwoong. The analysis of a case study with the Miriwoong people will demonstrate that both their traditional educational practices and several current revitalisation projects rely on access to traditional Country. Miriwoong is no longer transmitted in natural contexts, i.e. it is not spoken and learned in the family home. Thus, in order to achieve the goal of countering endangerment, the community needs the support that Australian governments can provide via the mainstream education system. For such projects to be effective, self-determination needs to be part of any policies concerning formal education. This ensures that traditional beliefs and practices, such as teaching 'on Country', can be properly incorporated.

### Language endangerment and the relocation of speakers

UNESCO declared 2019 the International Year of Indigenous languages "in order to raise awareness" of the fact that "languages around the world continue to disappear at an alarming rate".<sup>1</sup> The numbers are dire: 50% of the world's 6 500-7 000 languages (including sign languages) will no longer be used in the near future.<sup>2</sup> 2022 marks the beginning of the UNESCO Decade of Indigenous Languages,<sup>3</sup> for which concerted efforts all over the world to preserve indigenous languages are envisaged.

Many causes of language endangerment can be traced back to a relocation of the speakers from their traditional lands. Speakers can 'voluntarily' decide to abandon their lands when this becomes *necessary* for sheer survival – for example owing to the effects of climate change and natural disasters – or for economic survival following upheavals such as urbanisation and globalisation. Time and again, however, in violation of Indigenous people and minority speakers' land rights, the relocation of speakers has been enforced by colonialists and dominant cultures.<sup>4</sup>

A case in point is the Indigenous population of Australia. Due to their treatment at the hands of settler colonialists and federal and local governments, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people lost – if not their lives – their access to their traditional lands and waters. Land-grabbing in the course of the

1 Matthias Brenzinger et al.: Language Vitality and Endangerment.

2 Peter Austin, Julia Sallabank: Introduction, p. 1.

3 UNESCO: Indigenous Languages Decade.

4 This was expressed, for instance, by Tiffany S. Lee, Teresa L. McCarty: Bilingual-Multilingual Education and Indigenous Peoples, p. 410: "Throughout the world, physical genocide, ethnicide, linguicide, and *detrterritorialization* have been the combined goals of colonial regimes" (emphasis added).

appropriation of land, enforced relocation to government reserves, and removal of children from their families (resulting in the ‘Stolen Generations’)<sup>5</sup> are some of the causes that have led to Aboriginal Australians’ separation from their Country.<sup>6</sup>

Impeding access to traditional land leads to a restriction of opportunities for Aboriginal people to practice their traditional culture. Ceremonies that necessarily take place at particular locations are made impossible when access to those locations is denied by non-Indigenous people who acquired the land. As a consequence, speakers of traditional languages have shifted to languages of wider communication as traditional contexts for the use and transmission of their first languages to their children fade.

The realm of education is another context for the transmission of Aboriginal languages and cultures that has been disrupted. Traditional education<sup>7</sup> was replaced by mainstream education both forcibly for reasons of assimilation and by way of rendering traditional ways impossible or infeasible.<sup>8</sup> Again, relocation from traditional lands is one of the driving forces: important aspects of traditional education were taught on the traditional Country of those in charge of the education of younger generations since it involved, for example, teaching the names and uses of local flora and fauna and the spiritual knowledge about specific places. It is difficult to uphold this practice when teachers and/or pupils relocate, voluntarily or forcibly, to a different part of the country. The lack of opportunities for traditional education is aggravated by two factors; a) the short time children can spend with their families due to i) compulsory mainstream schooling and ii) the unavailability of secondary and tertiary education in many remote areas that leads to a relocation of pupils to larger centres; and b) the influence of globalisation. New media, for example, are primarily available in dominant languages such as English.

As a result of these disruptions, language endangerment has become critical in Australia.<sup>9</sup> Intervention is urgent as the majority of the 250 to 300 languages that were spoken before colonisation – depending on where the line is drawn between language and dialect, this number can grow to 450<sup>10</sup> – are no longer in use<sup>11</sup> and

5 From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century well into the 1970s, children of Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait Islander descent have been taken away from their families by Australian federal and state government agencies and church missions to be brought up in missions or white families for various reasons such as assimilation, or protection from alleged neglect and child abuse, or to provide them with better living conditions and a supposedly better future.

6 Joseph Blythe, Glenn Wightman: *The Role of Animals and Plants*; William McGregor: *Languages of the Kimberley*; Michael Walsh: *Language is Like Food*. Throughout the paper, the convention to write the word ‘country’ with a capital c will be followed, to signal that it is not used in its usual sense of a nation state but in the sense of the tracts of land (including sea shores and maritime territories) that a particular group of Indigenous people considers itself responsible for.

7 The term ‘traditional’ (education/Country/language) refers to the state of affairs in the time period before 1788, i.e. before the advent of European colonialists.

8 Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, Robert Phillipson: *Linguistic Human Rights*. Daniel Nettle, Suzanne Romaine: *Vanishing Voices*, p. 4.

10 Stephen Wurm: *Australasia and the Pacific*, p. 436; Claire Bowern: *Language Documentation and Description and What Comes After*.

11 Tasaku Tsunoda: *Language Endangerment*, p. 20.

only 13 languages can be considered strong.<sup>12</sup> A reminder of the dire situation of language shift and loss and the corresponding responsibilities of nation states in the form of a Decade for Indigenous Languages is, thus, still relevant even for economically strong countries such as Australia that have more resources for language revitalisation projects at their disposal than other countries.

### ***Language endangerment and the role of Australian governments***

Australian governments have had detrimental effects on Australian Indigenous languages both passively, through neglect, and actively through punitive measures to suppress languages.<sup>13</sup> The government was guilty of (tolerating) the reduction of the number of speakers through shootings, massacres, introduced diseases such as leprosy and venereal disease, and of indirectly putting languages under pressure by harming the land and the connection between the land, the language and the people through land grab, enforced relocation and pollution.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the treatment of Aboriginal Australians at Christian missions and government reserves (among other things the segregation or removal of children from their families and prohibitions to speak Aboriginal languages) had significant effects on the transmission of culture and language. "This history is seen by many as creating a responsibility for present-day governments to do what they can to repair the damage, where this is desired by Indigenous people".<sup>15</sup>

### ***Language revitalisation through the education system: The Australian government and self-determination***

Australia is not bound by any international agreements, such as covenants, to promote Indigenous languages through the education system.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, this paper offers support for the established claim that Australian governments have the responsibility to fund and facilitate projects in schools that support the revitalisation of Indigenous languages. Over the years, a variety of projects and programmes, including bilingual education programmes in the Northern Territory,<sup>17</sup> have been realised. While it is beyond the scope of the present discussion to give a full account of reasons for success and failure, some observations made in the literature will be summarised below. The main contribution of this paper is that it highlights the importance of properly implemented self-determination for any project that concerns formal education.

12 Doug Marmion et al.: *Community, Identity, Wellbeing*.

13 AIATSIS: *National Indigenous Languages Survey*, p. 22.

14 William McGregor: *Languages of the Kimberley*, p. 12.

15 AIATSIS: *National Indigenous Languages Survey*, p. 22; for a more detailed discussion of Australia's responsibility to play a supportive role with respect to the vitality of Aboriginal Australian's languages see also Christina Ringel: *Claiming Vitality*.

16 See also Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, Robert Phillipson: *Linguistic Human Rights*.

17 For a comprehensive discussion, see, for example, Jane Simpson, Jo Caffery, Patrick McConnell: *Gaps in Australia's Indigenous language policy*.

According to the policy of self-determination, projects may not be solely planned and executed by the government. Depending on how self-determination is understood, Aboriginal communities must initiate them or at least be consulted appropriately. In Australia, this policy was proposed in 1972<sup>18</sup> and arguably ended *de facto* “in 1996 with Howard’s first election and *de jure* with the demise of ATSIC in 2004”.<sup>19</sup> Internationally, self-determination has, for instance, been enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Article 1.1 states that

All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.<sup>20</sup>

The ICCPR was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1966 and became part of Australia’s law in 1986.<sup>21</sup>

In the following, Laura Rademaker and Tim Rowse’s outline of self-determination in Australia will be summarised. They emphasise the “likelihood that ‘self-determination’ has meant different things to different people at different times”.<sup>22</sup> Some authors in their edited collection note that “steps taken in the name of self-determination were sometimes presented as primarily *leading to economic independence and the amelioration of disadvantage*”. Others assert that “the underlying logic of self-determination policy was to *encourage ‘responsibility’, implying control and self-governance*”.<sup>23</sup> The notion of control invoked here, in turn, was interpreted differently by different people: “for some, it was *mere consultation and ‘respect for Aboriginal aspirations’, while for others it required Aboriginal involvement in decision-making*”.<sup>24</sup>

Rademaker and Rowse also quote various views expressed by Indigenous scholars. To name but a few, Megan Davis<sup>25</sup> and Pat Dodson<sup>26</sup> outline self-determination as “freedom, agency, choice, autonomy, dignity” and the right to “negotiate our political status and to pursue economic, social and cultural development”, respectively. Noel Pearson equates self-determination with liberty and responsibility.<sup>27</sup> As Jeff Cortassel explains, “[n]otions of ‘responsibility’ – both individual and collective – are familiar to many Indigenous people who feel a keen sense of responsibility to their *country*, ancestors and kin”.<sup>28</sup> More concretely, Larissa Behrendt distinguishes sovereignty from self-determination

18 Jane Simpson: Self-determination with respect to Language Rights, p. 294.

19 Laura Rademaker, Tim Rowse: The history of self-determination in Australia, p. 4, quoting Jon Altman: Email to the editors, 24 October 2019.

20 UN General Assembly: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, p. 171.

21 Jane Simpson: Self-determination with respect to Language Rights, p. 294.

22 Laura Rademaker, Tim Rowse: The history of self-determination in Australia, p. 3.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 9 (emphasis added).

24 *Ibid.*, p. 10 (emphasis added).

25 Prominent advocate of the Uluru Statement and member of the Referendum Council Megan Davis: *Listening But Not Hearing*, n.p., quoted by Laura Rademaker, Tim Rowse: The history of self-determination in Australia, p. 1.

26 Laura Rademaker, Tim Rowse: The history of self-determination in Australia, pp. 11 f., quoting his 1999 Vincent Lingiari lecture: Patrick Dodson: *Until the Chains Are Broken*, p. 29.

27 Noel Pearson: *A Rightful Place*, p. 43.

28 Laura Rademaker, Tim Rowse: The history of self-determination in Australia, p. 14, quoting Jeff Cortassel: *Re-envisioning Resurgence*, p. 93, emphasis added.

by defining the latter as the practice “when Indigenous people are involved in the setting of priorities within their community, the *development* of policy, the delivery of services, and the *implementation* of programs”.<sup>29</sup> Finally, the call for self-determination found a prominent joint expression in the Uluru Statement from the Heart of May 2017, which articulated “an Indigenous vision for a better relationship between settler and Indigenous Australians: one ‘based on justice and *self-determination*’”.<sup>30</sup>

In the following, factors influencing the success or failure of language maintenance and revitalisation projects and programmes as observed in the literature will be summarised. Joseph LoBianco observes that “40 years of multilingual policy development [in] Australia [...] resulted in multilingual education practice through the teaching, supporting and examining some 100 of Australia’s 300 spoken languages”.<sup>31</sup> However, policies that were implemented were not always successful. As one of the causes he identifies that “Australia’s policy development has been beset by *changing priorities, inadequate and inconsistent implementation, and contested aims and purposes*”.<sup>32</sup> He goes on to note that an explicit national policy would be needed: “[w]hile *absence of explicit language policy* does not preclude innovation in multilingual education, it *renders initiatives less effective, lacking coherence, coordination, and support*”.<sup>33</sup> LoBianco reminds the reader that not only deliberate government policies either contribute to or deter from language maintenance and revitalisation: “[e]rosion of [bilingual education] programs can occur even under supportive policy, via language prejudice entrenching the elevated status of Standard English over traditional languages”. LoBianco characterises this as an “invisible language policy”, which “privilege[s] monolingualism or rank[s] some bilingualisms higher than others”.<sup>34</sup> However, this invisible policy is often aggravated by “the near-universal practice of governments to prioritize investment in languages of wider communication”,<sup>35</sup> in the case of Australia “prestige international languages” and “key Asian trade-servicing languages” in particular.<sup>36</sup>

29 Ibid., pp. 15 f., quoting Larissa Behrendt: *Aboriginal Sovereignty*, pp. 171 f., emphasis added.

30 Referendum Council, *Uluru statement from the heart*, quoted by Laura Rademaker, Tim Rowse: *The history of self-determination in Australia*, p. 1, emphasis added.

31 Joseph Lo Bianco: *Multilingual Education across Oceania*, p. 608, quoting Joseph Lo Bianco, Yvette Slaughter: *Second languages and Australian schooling*.

32 Ibid., p. 609.

33 Ibid., p. 611.

34 Ibid., p. 609.

35 Ibid., p. 605.

36 Ibid., p. 609. In addition to his treatment of Australia, LoBianco also describes the situation in New Zealand/Aotearoa and the Pacific. In these remarks the following further factors contributing to the failure of policies can be detected: i) primary education can be “hampered by teacher training designs focused on secondary schools” (ibid., p. 610); ii) in “micro-nations [...] small scale and geographic dispersion preclude development of differentiated institutions and efficient administrative structures” (ibid., p. 604). The latter is relevant for the situation in Australia insofar as several hundred languages were spoken there before colonisation, as opposed to one main language e.g. in New Zealand/Aotearoa (i.e. te reo Māori). A one-size-fits-all approach to policies, institutions, administrative structures and funding schemes is unlikely to benefit all indigenous languages in Australia equally, as their present situation can be quite diverse.



Tiffany S. Lee, Teresa L. McCarthy offer some advice on the circumstances under which programmes can be effective: “Indigenous language maintenance and revitalisation work best when tailored to community needs, beliefs, language acquisition resources, and level of commitment”.<sup>37</sup> A concrete example is given by Josph LoBianco: “Melanesian countries have expanded the range of languages included in education, mainly through decentralization to more efficient *village-based provision*”.<sup>38</sup> Both of these observations are in line with the main argument of this paper, namely that teaching on traditional Country – which is one expression of traditional Aboriginal practices (see below) – plays a major role in successful language revitalisation.

Taken together, the two accounts above show that while changing government priorities, contested aims and inconsistent implementation lead to unsuccessful programmes, these issues could be ameliorated if self-determination in its stronger sense – namely involving Aboriginal people interested in the maintenance and revitalisation or revival of Indigenous languages in the development and implementation of policies and programmes so that they are tailored to community needs – were to be incorporated to a much more comprehensive degree.<sup>39</sup>

### ***Aboriginal beliefs and practices with relation to their land***

Before delving into the Miriwoong case study in the following section, a few Aboriginal beliefs and practices that the Miriwoong people share need to be introduced. This section is not intended to be exhaustive and glosses over many of the details. Instead, it highlights a few aspects that are relevant for the discussion of the case study.

Aboriginal Australians from a variety of backgrounds have testified through stories and literature to a strong connection between people, Country, and culture.<sup>40</sup> Such connections have also been described by non-Aboriginal researchers.<sup>41</sup> According to these sources, languages are believed to belong to specific

37 Tiffany S. Lee, Teresa L. McCarthy: *Bilingual-Multilingual Education and Indigenous Peoples*, p. 412.

38 Josph LoBianco: *Multilingual Education across Oceania*, p. 605, emphasis added.

39 A third, and even stronger interpretation of self-determination is possible, namely that the Aboriginal community is the sole decision maker from the conceptualisation of a project to its implementation and evaluation. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in which situations this can lead to successful results. Suffice it to say that there is a danger that this would be misinterpreted to mean that there does not have to be any commitment of Australian governments whatsoever. Offering advice, training, funding etc. where needed and desired, can still be part of projects implemented under this strongest sense of self-determination. As Laura Rademaker and Tim Rowse point out, the failure to do so can be argued to have contributed to the questionable success of self-determination in Australia: “the new rights of the self-determination era were not matched with measures ‘designed to assist people through the crises of occupation, discipline, motivation, conflict management and community trauma that soon erupted and by the 1990s had reached a crescendo, especially in remoter regions’”, Laura Rademaker, Tim Rowse: *The history of self-determination in Australia*, p. 19, quoting Peter Sutton: *The Politics of Suffering*, p. 58.

40 For example, Sally Morgan et al.: *Heartsick for Country*.

41 For example, Ronald Berndt, Catherine Berndt: *Aborigines of the West*; Alan Rumsey: *Language and Territoriality*; Harold Koch, Rachel Nordlinger: *Languages and Linguistics*.

places on Country because in the Dreamtime they were planted by spiritual beings at locations where the beings lived or at certain sites along their paths as they travelled through Country.<sup>42</sup> These Dreamtime beings are connected via kinships relationships to human beings, who become speakers of the language and Carers for Country by observing the cultural practices connected to particular sites which were predetermined by the Dreamtime beings who live in those places or travelled by them.

One of the cultural practices relevant to the present discussion is the teaching of language and culture in Aboriginal society. Traditionally, language and culture were taught at the appropriate places (and times of the year) through corroborees (performances of dance and song) and the telling of stories. The strong connection between the Country and the culture mandated that language and cultural knowledge are taught while being on the Country that the stories belong to. The Miriwoong people and their institutions will serve as a case study on how the teaching of language and culture can be organised by Aboriginal organisations today.

### ***Miriwoong case study***

Miriwoong is spoken in the Kununurra area in the north-east of Western Australia and across the border with the Northern Territory. The degree of endangerment of the Miriwoong language becomes obvious when looking at the factors that are typically adduced when assessing the vitality of a language, in particular the total number of speakers, their age and their percentage within the community, intergenerational transmission to children, and the use of second languages:<sup>43</sup> a handful of speakers from the generation of 60 and older have a good command of Miriwoong<sup>44</sup> and up to a hundred speakers from the middle-aged generation are bilingual in Miriwoong to various degrees. These speaker numbers account for a small percentage of the population of around 1000 people who identify as Miriwoong.<sup>45</sup> Most Miriwoong people, including those in child-bearing age, have learned Kimberley Kriol as their first language (L1) and mainly converse

42 See Christina Ringel, David Newry: *The Miriwoong Perspective on Land Rights*, and references therein.

43 In response to global language endangerment, linguists have studied the factors which favour or disfavour language vitality. UNESCO's Ad Hoc Expert group on Endangered Languages (Matthias Brenzinger et al.: *Language Vitality and Endangerment*), the NILS report (AIATSIS: *National Indigenous Languages Survey*), the linguist Tsunoda (Tasaku Tsunoda: *Language Endangerment and Language Revitalization*) and the Ethnologue (M.P. Lewis: *Ethnologue. Languages of the World*), taken together, list the following factors: a) transmission to children, b) language attitudes, c) state of documentation and availability of educational materials, d) total number of (fluent/mother-tongue/first language) speakers, e) percentage of speakers within the community, f) age of speakers, g) functions of the language in the community/society, h) response to new domains and media, i) economic opportunity or the lack thereof, j) governmental & institutional language attitudes & policies including the official recognition of languages within the nation or region, k) the use of second languages. Factors a), b), and c) are argued to be most important.

44 MDWg: *Miriwoong Woortlang Yawoorroonga-woorr*, p. 142.

45 David Newry in a personal conversation with the author in August 2015.

in Kriol or Aboriginal English, so that transmission of Miriwoong no longer takes place in natural contexts, i.e. Miriwoong is not spoken and learned in the family home. Since the domains in which Miriwoong is used are limited and Miriwoong words for most modern concepts do not exist, the factors ‘functions of the language’ and ‘response to new domains and media’ currently indicate endangerment, as well: According to informal interviews inspired by Rottet’s sociolinguistic questionnaire<sup>46</sup> conducted in the course of linguistic research for my PhD project<sup>47</sup> (see below), the domains in which Miriwoong is spoken include the following: i) during personal exchanges between Miriwoong-speaking individuals, regardless of whether (non-Miriwoong) non-speakers are present and whether the situation is informal/private (e.g. asking each other for money or tobacco or discussing fishing gear) or somewhat formal/public (e.g. while shopping, while practising art and telling the respective stories at Waringarri Aboriginal Arts centre, in the presence of police), ii) when following cultural protocol, such as asking the ancestors for fish while fishing but iii) not necessarily during official gatherings of Miriwoong and Gajirrabeng people, e.g. Miriwoong Gajer-rong Corporation meetings.

The level of endangerment of the Miriwoong language described above has many different causes, a comprehensive discussion of which is beyond the scope of this paper. Hence, here, I will focus on the aspect highlighted in the introduction, namely the relocation of speakers from their traditional Country. In the case of the Miriwoong people, in addition to removal by early colonisers and displacement to missions and government reserves, relocation was caused by the Ord Irrigation Scheme, which led to the establishment of the township of Kununurra and the flooding of a large area on their traditional Country.<sup>48</sup> The Ord River was dammed in two places. In 1967, the Diversion Dam was constructed.<sup>49</sup> In 1969, a larger dam was built 40 kilometres south of Kununurra and created Lake Argyle.<sup>50</sup> The two dams were built in places that are sacred to Miriwoong people,<sup>51</sup> and Lake Argyle now covers important sacred sites.<sup>52</sup> These changes to the landscape affect the Miriwoong people who have a deep connection to the land and feel the responsibility to maintain it.

Kununurra was built in 1963<sup>53</sup> and attracted Indigenous as well as non-Indigenous people with employment opportunities, facilities for medical care, stores and the like. The dams were put in place to supply water for farming on Miriwoong Country and to the town of Kununurra. At the time there was no

46 Kevin J. Rottet: Language shift in the coastal marshes of Louisiana.

47 Speakers were asked, for example, what language is spoken at home as opposed to downtown at the shop, when joking or when talking about serious business, when telling off kids or when arguing.

48 Both for a more detailed discussion of the (causes of) endangerment of the Miriwoong language and further details about the role of colonisers, missions and reserves, the interested reader is referred to Christina Ringel: *Possession in Miriwoong*.

49 William B. McGregor: *Languages of the Kimberley*, p. 6.

50 Greg McIntyre, Kim Doohan: *Labels, language and Native Title groups*, p. 188.

51 Frances M. Kofod: *Introduction to Miriwoong grammar*, p. 1.

52 William B. McGregor: *Languages of the Kimberley*, p. 6.

53 Will Christensen: *Working as an anthropologist*, p. 177.



consultation or compensation scheme,<sup>54</sup> but following a Native Title Claim the Miriwoong are nowadays recognised as Traditional Owners.<sup>55</sup>

The Miriwoong people are not alone in their fate. A similar case has been described, for example, by Tiffany S. Lee and Teresa L. McCarty with respect to the Pueblo Cochiti, which is situated in New Mexico and was partly flooded following the construction of a dam in 1969, “displacing homes and farmlands” and consequently disrupting the people’s “spiritual, economic, linguistic, social, and cultural ties to farming”.<sup>56</sup> The authors explicitly make a connection between this event and the second main topic of this paper, formal education: The disruption of family-based farming, in combination with a remote housing project and the building of a public school that “emphasized assimilation and mainstream values through an English-based curriculum and pedagogy”,<sup>57</sup> led to children being able to spend less time with elders. Hence, there was less opportunity for exposure to traditional language and education, resulting in language shift away from Cochiti, one of seven Keres dialects.<sup>58</sup>

The current level of vitality of the Miriwoong language as set forth above may seem dire. However, revitalisation projects for the language and cultural practices are underway. The language is mainly used during activities implemented through the Aboriginal organisations Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre (henceforth MDWg) and Waringarri Aboriginal Arts (henceforth Waringarri Arts). Activities include language teaching for young children, youth and adults, the creation of radio programs, language planning sessions during which Miriwoong words for modern concepts such as introduced foods, household items, technical innovations, etc. are created, and practising traditional art, song, dance, and ceremonies. The language is, thus, critically endangered, but revitalisation efforts are in place which are aimed at increasing the number of speakers and the domains in which it is used.

Language revitalisation depends on access to traditional Country in many respects. While MDWg employees mostly deliver language classes for toddlers and school children at the MDWg office and at participating schools and day care centres, the courses also include activities at various locations around town, such as Ivanhoe Crossing, Swim Beach, and Mirima National Park. During these sessions, the students learn, for example, to recognise and name trees and bush food. In addition, MDWg organises cultural activities for children and their families ‘on Country’, i.e. remotely, apart from the town of Kununurra and near-by communities, at culturally significant locations that hold stories about creation, the spiritual world, and memories about cultural practices such as the making of artefacts or songs and dances. Here, they are taught the preparation of bush food and the names and uses of bush medicines or learn the making of artefacts such as a wire spear. Moreover, language classes for Aboriginal rangers on the

54 Frances M. Kofod: Introduction to Miriwoong grammar, p. 1.

55 For details on the claim see John Henderson, David Nash: Language in Native Title, chapter 8, and Sandy Toussaint: Crossing Boundaries, chapter 15-17.

56 Tiffany S. Lee, Teresa L. McCarty: Bilingual-Multilingual Education and Indigenous Peoples, p. 414.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

vocabulary of local flora and fauna enable them to engage with both Country and language during their working hours.

In the following, results of a total of 18 weeks of fieldwork on Miriwoong Country in 2014 (3 months) and 2015 (6 weeks) are reported.<sup>59</sup> Fieldwork was carried out in an office environment at MDWg and during field trips to culturally significant locations on Country. The two research stays were mainly dedicated to the gathering of linguistic data for the description of parts of the grammar. In addition, participant observation and informal interviews were conducted in order to assess the factors that influence language vitality, including language attitudes, and revitalisation strategies.

Participant observation during an internship at MDWg in 2013 (6 months) had indicated that the students participating in Miriwoong language classes enjoyed and profited from the ‘on Country’ sessions described above.<sup>60</sup> During fieldwork with the Miriwoong people, I could verify that the research sessions that took place while on a field trip to Country were both more pleasant for the participants and more effective in many respects: Elders felt much more confident on their traditional Country than in an office environment since being on Country allowed speakers to reconnect with their language and activated their communicative skills and vocabulary access. Being on Country triggered personal stories in traditional owners of nearby sites as well as stories connected to the place, such as the words for – and stories about – resources found at the place. MDWg employees express this manifestation of the profound relationship between the Miriwoong people, their language, and the land on the MDWg webpage in their own words: their reasoning for organizing field trips is that

[t]he knowledge of the Miriwoong Elders lives in their memories and in the country they relate to. Since it is hard to revive these memories sitting in an office building, we frequently go ‘out bush’ on field trips to immerse ourselves in the views, sounds and smells of our country. It’s much easier to remember how things were done in the old days when you are in the right environment.<sup>61</sup>

A similar argument can be made for the maintenance and revitalisation of cultural practices: it depends on access to traditional Country. Nowadays, w[el]come...]. Welcome to (Miriwoong) Country ceremonies and corroborees that enact traditional ways of teaching about the creation of artefacts or the procurement of bush food, for example, are performed for tourists and the local community at Waringarri Arts or for particular occasions such as the inauguration of a new government building or the opening of a cultural festival. In these cases, the exact location as well as the timing is determined by the occasion. Traditionally,

59 The study was conducted according to the ethical guide-lines published in AIATSIS: Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies (GERAIS). In October 2020, AIATSIS published the Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research. This document supersedes and replaces GERAIS (ibid.). Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

60 Another language teaching project organised by MDWg, namely an immersion-based programme for the very young called Language Nest (Lenore A. Grenoble, Lindsay J. Whaley: Saving Languages) has been systematically evaluated and has been found to have positive outcomes such as improved school attendance (Stephanie Woerde in a personal conversation with the author in August 2015).

61 MDWg: Miriwoong Country Field Trips.

several types of ceremonies and corroborees were strongly connected to particular estates.<sup>62</sup> This connection is still observable when Miriwoong people travel to culturally significant sites. When I participated in field trips to locations that I had not visited before, a Welcome to Country to that particular location was performed by a Traditional Owner as a natural and necessary part of the trip. On one occasion during a female-only trip, the women spontaneously gathered for a corroboree that belongs to a near-by rock formation, which has cultural significance. The maintenance of these kinds of cultural practices relies on access to Country.

As stated above, traditionally, language and culture were taught at the appropriate places and times of the year. Knut Olawsky gives the following example: about 10 years ago a Joonba – “one of the original traditional dances ‘owned’ by the Miriwoong” – was performed at Nyawa-Nyawam (Policehole) in the Keep River National Park in the Northern Territory during ‘Warnga-mageny’, the cold season (which runs from April to August).<sup>63</sup> While Kununrra, the location of the MDWg – the base from which the event was organised – lies in Western Australia, the performance required travelling to the Northern Territory. Olawsky describes this as a “revitalisation attempt”, during which younger people were taught how to perform the corroboree:

[w]e organised a big camp with young and old as the proper performance of a Joonba requires preparation time [...] [for instance] the preparation of props such as paperbark hats. Together we also made sure that the singers had the various ‘verses’ of the song/story ready [and some] explaining was done for the dancers, some of whom were younger people [...]. Children were part of the camp and were learning through observation (i.e. informal rather than structured transfer).<sup>64</sup>

Above, the extra-curricular activities undertaken by MDWg and Waringarri Arts were described. Both organisations are partly funded by the Australian government. So far, funding schemes have been competitive and usually short-termed. In addition, the two organisations rely on donations and income from the services they provide and the resources and art they sell. Thus, government involvement in and direct support for the before-mentioned activities is limited. When it comes to the role of the Miriwoong language and culture in formal education, one would expect the state to take larger responsibility.<sup>65</sup> However, although the Miriwoong language has become part of the local school curriculum as a Language Other Than English (LOTE) in 2018, the LOTE classes are not sponsored by the government but are conceptualised and realised by MDWg personnel through MDWg’s general funds and a small contribution by the school. In order to keep the myriad of activities and services that MDWg and Waringarri Arts have been offering in recent years running while at the same time planning

62 The term ‘estate’ is here used in the sense of Bentley James: *The Language of ‘Spiritual Power’*, where he uses it to refer to a region of different dreaming sites associated with a clan.

63 For the timespan of the cold season, see MDWg: *Miriwoong Seasonal Calendar*.

64 All quotes in this paragraph stem from a personal conversation with the author on 2 September 2022.

65 Nationally, the Australian Curriculum includes a strand for Indigenous languages: Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority: *Framework for Aboriginal Languages and Torres Strait Islander Languages*.

and carrying out LOTE classes in successively higher class levels, an increase in funding and more funding security would be necessary.

Self-determination would still be crucial. This ensures that – if so desired by the Miriwoong people – Miriwoong language classes would incorporate the teaching of cultural knowledge and could involve traditional values and modes of learning such as teaching ‘on Country’.

## **Discussion**

Although intergenerational transmission of Traditional languages is disrupted in many parts of Australia and Indigenous language education, therefore, plays a crucial role in preventing language loss, Australia is not yet fully committed to reform the education system. Indigenous language education is not impeded where it is organised by individuals and Indigenous organisations such as MDWg and Waringarri Arts. However, individual languages are not yet taught as part of the regular formal education system. Though Indigenous language education is anchored in the national curriculum,<sup>66</sup> Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language-medium classes are not offered nation-wide. Language-specific curricula and programs are yet to be developed by the states and territories. In addition, funding for Indigenous language classes and Indigenous language-medium education is often competitive and short-termed and too limited to reverse Australia’s language endangerment. According to the figures in the Closing the Gap report 2019, the focus of investment is on health issues.<sup>67</sup>

Another problem encountered and lamented by those responsible for securing funding for language centres is that continuity in funding is often tied to the achievement of ‘key objectives’ pre-defined in the call for proposals, which do not match the realities on the ground.<sup>68</sup> This issue would resolve itself if self-determination (understood in its stronger sense, see above) were implemented: Aboriginal institutions would be empowered to define their own key objectives so that they align with community priorities as well as community needs and existing resources. In the Closing the Gap report, Indigenous Australians’ relationship to their Country is recognised. The Australian Government pledges its role in students’ opportunities “to attend and thrive at school, regardless of location”.<sup>69</sup> However, given the history of disputes between the federal government and the Western Australian government concerning funding for remote communities, it is unlikely that large sums will be invested into education facilities in remote communities in Western Australia, so that secondary and tertiary education could be offered remotely. The latter would alleviate the problems associated with sending students away for secondary education: when children do not stay on their traditional Country “[o]lder people fear that [...] the links maintained between people and country for many thousands of years will

66 Ibid.

67 Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet: Closing the Gap Report 2019, pp. 2, 136, 147.

68 Knut Olawsky in a personal conversation with the author in 2019.

69 Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet: Closing the Gap Report 2019, p. 64.

be broken” because the Elders will not have the opportunity to pass on their knowledge and traditions.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, if remote secondary and tertiary education was available, traditional ways of teaching such as teaching ‘on Country’ could be incorporated.

### **Conclusions**

For Aboriginal Australians from a variety of backgrounds, the connection between language, land and people has great significance. A disruption of that connection can have serious consequences. A case in point is the endangered language Miriwoong. The relocation of speakers from their traditional Country, caused, among other things, by the submersion of sacred sites in the course of the Ord Irrigation Scheme, is identified in this paper as one of the major causes of language endangerment.

The relationship between the Miriwoong people, their Country and their language is reflected in their revitalisation activities: language classes and cultural activities take place at culturally relevant locations; rangers are taught Miriwoong in order to allow them to engage with both Country and language during their working hours.

The Australian government has supported the Miriwoong language through funding for Aboriginal organisations. Without the continued support through federal and Western Australian governments, the vitality of the Miriwoong language is at risk. In the face of the dire situation of endangered languages such as Miriwoong, the Australian government has several options to support communities in their revitalisation efforts. The transmission of Indigenous languages can be strengthened, among other things, through long-term funding for language centres and Indigenous language programs at schools.

Self-determination in its stronger sense – namely involving Aboriginal people in the development and implementation of policies and programmes so that they are tailored to community needs – must be part of any policies concerning formal education so that traditional beliefs and practices with relation to the land, such as teaching ‘on Country’, can be properly incorporated.

As several revitalisation projects have been found to depend on access to traditional Country, another way to sponsor the maintenance and revitalisation of linguistic and cultural knowledge is to make sure that Aboriginal people are not denied access to further sites and regain access to those sites from which they have been excluded, may it be by private owners, or big companies.<sup>71</sup>

70 Jane Simpson, Jo Caffery, Patrick McConvell: Gaps in Australia’s Indigenous Language Policy, p. 9.

71 A discussion of the destruction of culturally significant sites in the interest of ‘development’ is also relevant in this respect but is beyond the scope of this paper.



## **Acknowledgments**

I hereby acknowledge all Traditional Elders, past, present, and emerging. I am indebted to the Miriwoong people who discussed issues of language and land ownership with me, in particular Joolama. I am immensely grateful to Frances Kofod for allowing me to draw on her early research, recordings, and transcriptions of Miriwoong language with many now deceased Miriwoong Elders.

This paper is based in part on a presentation at the GAST conference 2018. I would like to thank the audience, as well as two anonymous reviewers, for insightful comments.

## **Abbreviations**

AIATSIS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Studies
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
GERAIS	Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
LOTE	Language Other Than English
MDWg	Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre
NILS	National Indigenous Languages Survey
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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