Claiming vitality: How identification with territory and language influences language vitality

CHRISTINA RINGEL

Endangered languages and the land: Mapping landscapes of multilingualism

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Claiming vitality: 
How identification with territory and language influences language vitality

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Abstract

Speakers of Aboriginal languages identify not only with their languages but also the country they belong to. Since colonization, both connections have been weakened by actions of individual settlers and the Australian Government. As a result, language vitality has drastically declined. Linguists can play a variety of roles in countering this trend: In combination with revitalisation projects, documentary linguists can help strengthen speaker’s ties to their languages. The preparation of linguistic evidence for Native Title Claims can foster speaker’s connection to country both in itself and when it facilitates the success of the claim. However, the effectiveness of revitalization efforts crucially depends on the financial and political support of the government. This paper addresses that inheritance of land/territory is organized among the Miriwoong (non-Pama-Nyungan, Jarragan) along kinship lines and cultural beliefs and practices. In addition, the role of linguistic evidence put forward in land claims, such as the study of archaic elements in place names and ethnonyms, will be examined. Finally, it will be asserted that the Australian government has a particular responsibility to play a supportive role with respect to the vitality of Aboriginal Australian’s languages.

Keywords: language vitality, identity, Aboriginal Australians, land rights, place names

Introduction

Aboriginal Australians are renowned for the importance they attach to the connection between their ancestral country and the language(s) that belong to it. Speakers of Aboriginal languages identify both with their country and the languages they own.1 ‘Caring for country’ is a primary objective for every member of the society. Not only in the face of environmental changes induced by the destruction of Australian landscape through mining, dumping and nuclear tests initiated by (multi)national companies and the government but also in response to the theft of traditional lands by individuals and the state for financial benefit and the expansion of the sphere of influence of white settler culture, this cultural given of Aboriginal connectedness to and responsibility for country has been reinforced in recent generations. Thus, many Aboriginal Australians strive to have their country legally recognized in Native Title Claims.

The role of language and land in land claims is complex. From one Aboriginal perspective, claimants strive for land rights since restrictions to their access to land is a key factor in endangering language vitality. From a legal perspective, proving a continuation of language – interpreted as a continuation of cultural practices – is deemed necessary to warrant land rights because the claiming party has to prove that their connections to the country being claimed has existed for a period longer than the time span between first settlement by non-Indigenous people and today. It works in the favour of the claimants that due to the tight connection between language, land and people in Aboriginal society, in many cases it is possible to show that a language and thereby its speakers have been connected to the claimed area for a very long time.

In this paper the perspective of the Miriwoong people with respect to land rights is summarized. The Miriwoong language is a non-Pama-Nyungan language of the Jarragan language family. Miriwoong is classified as ‘severely’ to ‘critically endangered’ (Brenzinger et al. 2003) as it is spoken fluently by no more than 20 individuals who are all older than 60 (Olawsky 2010a/b). The traditional Miriwoong country lies in the Kununurra area in the north of Western Australia and also stretches for about 100 kilometres beyond the Northern Territory border (Olawsky 2010a). The Miriwoong people2 were granted partial traditional ownership rights to their traditional land by the High Court in 2002 after a Native Title court case.

The analysis underlying this paper has first been presented in a joined publication prepared by a Miriwoong Elder and a linguist who has spent 10 months in the community (Ringel & Newry 2018). It relies on contributions by both male and female Elders and middle-aged Miriwoong people who have shared their views on the role of language and land in land claims. However, the effectiveness of revitalization efforts crucially depends on the financial and political support of the government.

1 Ringel & Newry (2018) discuss the notion of language ownership in more detail: A number of scholars working in the Australian context (e.g. Rumsey 1993:199) stress the distinction between language usership/fluency in a language and ownership (see Sutton & Palmer, 1980:300). In Walsh’s (2002:233) words, Indigenous Australians own language by birthright; ownership is non-voluntary, permanent and rule-governed. In contrast to Western conceptions it is non-controllable (Aikhenvald 2013:51). Here the interested reader can also find details on why languages are seen as belonging to specific places on country: In the Dreamtime languages were planted by spiritual beings at locations where they lived or at certain sites along their paths as they travelled through country (Ringel & Newry 2018 and references therein).

2 The Gajirrabeng (Gajerrong) people who traditionally lived to the north of Miriwoong country and speak a sister language were equally involved in the land claim.
about the culture of possession during two fieldtrips dedicated to documenting linguistic structures marking possession in Miriwoong. The paper addresses how inheritance of land/territory is organized along kinship lines and cultural beliefs and practices. For example, a person’s gooning (totem) plays a major role in the determination of the country that this person belongs to.

Further, it will be shown how linguistic evidence has been used successfully in Native Title Claims alongside evidence from anthropology, history, archaeology and geography and oral evidence given by the claimants. Following a discussion about the analysis of word lists, phonological and morphological properties of place names and ethnonyms, i.e., names for ethnic groups, will exemplify kinds of linguistic evidence put forward in land claims. It can be attested that linguistic research done in preparation of these claims has led to increased funding of the linguistic study of Indigenous languages as well as the refinement of analyses and techniques.

Finally, the paper will assert that in addition to the involvement in land claims the Australian state has a particular responsibility to play a supportive role with respect to the vitality of Aboriginal Australian’s languages. Governments are notorious for actively discouraging all but national or global languages, but even where financial and institutional support for minority languages exists – such as in Australia – funding is often much too limited to make a real difference in reversing language shift.

As a result, the situation in Australia has been described as the most critical case of endangerment world-wide (Nettle & Romaine 2000:4): The majority of the 250 to 300 languages that were spoken in Australia before colonization are no longer in use (Tsunoda 2006:20). Only 13 languages can be considered strong (Marmion et al. 2014).

As it has been shown that stronger rights lead to an increase in language vitality (Crystal 2000), the Australian government is not only well-advised to increase the funding for language documentation and revitalisation but also to promote the linguistic rights of the First Nations people by ratifying relevant international conventions.

Miriwoong land rights

For Miriwoong people there is an “unbreakable link between language, land and cultural identity” (Newry & Palmer 2003:103). In order to legitimately identify as Miriwoong all three elements need to align.3 Thus, Miriwoong people draw a distinction between mere language usership and language ownership: “you may learn the language but that does not make you a Miriwoong person” (Newry & Palmer 2003:104, Joolama p.c.). Their relationship to country can be described as a sense of belonging to country rather than ownership in a legal Western sense;4 “We can say Ngayangeng dawang [My country] but that does not mean we own the country.” “We are part of the country.” “We respect the country.” “What we get from the country [e.g. bush food and game] is ours but we don’t own it.” It is a “belonging of country” (Joolama p.c.). This belonging entails immediate rights and obligations to the country for every individual such as the obligation to look after certain sites and the right to tell the stories connected to those sites:

Dawawang (traditional owners) of areas or estates of country have rights and responsibilities for those estates. These include the right to tell and paint the stories that belong to those areas: ownership of an area […] in turn leads to a sense of ownership of the language that is part of the stories. (Newry & Palmer 2003:104)

In order to further explore the connection between the Miriwoong language and territory, this section will survey the factors that determine language and land ownership among the Miriwoong people. The findings emerged from conversations with various members of the community. First, the place where a Miriwoong person and was conceived or born and grew up are argued to be relevant to the question of which country they consider their country. Secondly, kinship relations are said to determine both which language an individual identifies with and the inheritance of country. Finally, cultural beliefs and practices such as the concept of gooning influence these matters.

Birthplace and childhood dwelling place

To begin with, one’s birthplace and childhood dwelling place is a criterion for the subject matter of land and language ownership. In her personal account the Elder PG (p.c.), for example, refers to the cattle station she grew up on, which was founded on Miriwoong country. Note that Blythe & Wightman (2003:72) point out that nowadays more births take place in town hospitals rather than on country. Originally, without stations and hospitals the factor of the birthplace might have come into play

‘Caring for country’ rely on the knowledge about flora and fauna which is encoded in language and involve speaking to the country and the ancestors.

3 An anonymous reviewer commented that an unbreakable link between the three implies that language shift leads to a shift in cultural identity. This view is clearly formulated by members of the community, e.g. by Elder David Newry on the Mirima Dawang Woorlaberring Facebook page: “If I lose our language, we lose our identity as Miriwoong people” (2018-10-15, bit.ly/2JF9wgc). Note that loss of language and loss of cultural practices exacerbate each other as most customs require language: Traditional ceremonies are accompanied by dance and song (and thus language); acts of

4 By using the description ‘Western’ as a simplified abbrevia
tion it is not intended to exclude similar systems. Keen (2013), for example, describes that in ‘traditional’ China there was exclusive possession of tracts of land on the level of the family. The authorities took note of these possessions and legal actions such as selling were governed by written laws.
more transparently. It would presumably be central if one was born near a gooning (see below) or sacred site.

In the context of Native Title Claims a further aspect is mentioned. In addition to the place where a baby is born, the conception of that baby can be vital: French (2004:90, see footnote 4) quotes the Full Court which states that proving biological descent is not limited to proving patrilineal descent; spiritual conception or birth within the claimed area is also accepted.

Apart from the detachment from traditional country during delivery due to the availability of medical assistance in towns, there are further issues with the criterion of the birth-place that originated in colonization. Not only have pastoral stations and missions attracted Indigenous people in search of protection, medical assistance or labour from all corners of a territory onto one spot, in some cases people from different countries were forced onto government reserves that did not lie on their traditional country. For example, Aboriginal people from various areas were brought to Mulla Bulla for training or punishment (Blythe & Wightman 2003:71). The location of this government station was on the traditional country of many speakers of Halls Creek Kija (2003:75). Being born on such a reserve far from one’s parents’ country would make it difficult to reconcile one’s birth-place with one’s language and country.

It is even more difficult for members of the so-called Stolen Generations – Aboriginal children taken away from their families 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. If they do not even know or remember their Aboriginal family members because they were taken away very early and records of the removal were destroyed, it must be difficult to determine one’s language and country and therefore where one belongs.

**Kinship relations**

The second factor determining language and land ownership involves kinship relations. Language identity is inherited through filiation, i.e. links through one or both parents (Rumsey 1993:200). That identification with a language among the Miriwoong is indeed connected to kinship relations was confirmed by conversations about identity and the discussion of family trees with the Language Worker DwN among others. DwN explained to me that he identifies with Miriwoong and Ngarinyman and shared with me the languages of his parents and grandparents. He will serve as an example to show that both descent lines (mother’s and father’s) are relevant for Miriwoong people. Looking at his parents, the identification with Miriwoong stems from his mother since his father does not include Miriwoong among his languages. Ngarinyman was listed for both parents so that in this regard there is no conclusive evidence. In the grandparent generation his FaFa was a white man and can therefore not be taken into consideration. His Miriwoong identity could stem from his MoFa or MoMo, his Ngarinyman one from MoFa or FaMo.3

Joolama (p.c.) explained to me – and this was consistent with other Miriwoong people – that language and land ownership is inherited in terms of kinship in a very specific order. Miriwoong people look first to their father’s father or gagayi. Next in line is their mother’s father or jawoojing; then their father’s mother or ngajang and finally their mother’s mother or gagayi. This order is represented in Figure 1 below, where the inner-most ring symbolizes the relation who primarily bequeaths ownership rights. The bold-face highlights that there appears to be a male-first policy.

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3 These relationships are also relevant for Native Title Claims. French (2004:90) quotes the Full Court of the Federal Court in Western Australia v Ward which states that biological descent from land owners as a requirement for the existence of Native Title is not limited to patrilineal descent. “[A] whole range of relationships may lead to membership of the community, including ‘father’s country’, ‘father’s mother’s country’, ‘mother’s country’, ‘mother’s mother’s country’, ‘regent’s country’.”
were born (2003:72). According to Blythe & Wightman, the former was claimed by early ethnographers like Phyllis Kaberry (1939:184), who describes a patrilineal ‘horde’ as being tied to a named, well-defined area or *nawarram taam* (1939:30f), literally ‘big or important country’. Being a member of a horde that lies in Kija country presumably justifies one’s association with the Kija language (Blythe & Wightman 2003:2).

It is interesting at this point to look at other cultural practices that are connected to kinship in a similar way: For example, one’s father’s father gives names to boys, and one’s father’s sister gives names to girls and teaches them about country.

**Cultural beliefs and practices**

The third factor deemed central to and instructive for understanding Miriwoong land ownership is the concept of *gooning*. It will serve as an example of relevant cultural beliefs and practices. *Gooning* means ‘tote’ or literally ‘dream’. According to Woerde (2012a/b; p.c.), each Miriwoong person has at least one *gooning* which is passed down to them through either side of their family (Kaberry 1938:284). It is important to one’s identity as it is tied to the philosophy of ‘Caring for Country’. *Gooning* is a concept that exemplifies the above-mentioned unity of language, land and people: It was mentioned in conversations with Miriwoong people that a *gooning* can be both an animal and a place. As Joolama (p.c.) puts it: *gooning* is “a place where I can get anything I like and use it. I feel sorry for the animal and avoid it.” This entails that Miriwoong people respect and care for the animal and the place. He also explains that if one sees the animal unexpectedly or hurt, this is a warning or a sign that something bad happened, for example to one’s family. Woerde also describes that a *gooning* is often an actual physical feature of landscape and that Miriwoong people are allowed to go wherever the animal species represented by that *gooning* dwells.

Joolama made it clear that one should not say “My *gooning*”, but “The *gooning* I am part of”, thereby stressing that Miriwoong people do not (legally) ‘own’ country. However, one can say that borders between pieces of land that one family belongs to and another piece of land that another family belongs to can be attributed to the various *gooning* existing in different places.

**Linguistics for land claims**

Linguists can contribute to Native Title Claims in a variety of ways (Evans 2002). Providing evidence for the existence of a coherent claimant group such as by establishing an overarching language family for the claimant’s languages is but one of the many possibilities of how to be involved in a claim. When asked for an assessment of which languages where spoken in a particular area at the time of early exploration and settlement, they can make use of their expertise in finding and interpreting early sources on potential candidates. This section explores some ways in which these sources can be fruitfully analysed.

**Analysing word lists**

By comparing early word lists stemming from the area in question with modern descriptions of Aboriginal languages and dialects they can provide evidence of which variety was likely spoken at the location where the word list was collected. The linguist can also interpret seeming counter-evidence by explaining the context in which the lists where likely created and by identifying potential flaws in the material. For example, linguists are capable of evaluating the credibility of the material in terms of the experience and amount of exposure of the collector of a list to the language (Evans 2002:62). They might find that a list established by a layman and labelled for a particular language does not (only) include words from the language variety stated but a different one. This could, for instance, be the case when the consultant who provided the words was in fact not a (native) speaker of the local language but a visitor to the area, who (also) provided words from his or her own language or a neighbouring variety which he or she speaks as a second language. Even if the consultant was a member of the language group in question, there may be inter-speaker variation, so that discrepancies between different lists can be explained (2002:80/85).

Further, the content of the lists possibly needs to be made accessible by an experienced linguist. The lists could be written in a peculiar spelling system or include mistakes such as (i) misunderstandings (e.g. a morphologically complex word or phrase not analysed correctly (2002:68)) or an English word pronounced with a basilectal pronunciation interpreted as a word of the Aboriginal language, (ii) omissions (meanings of a term not listed accurately or not exhaustively (ibid.)), or (iii) mis-hearings due to the influence of the recorder’s mother tongue.

In these cases, linguists can apply their training and conclude that when the lists are corrected they do constitute supporting rather than conflicting evidence for a claim, e.g. when what appear to be contradictory lists can be shown to consist of words from the same or a closely related variety. This also applies to closely-related varieties whose sounds systems differ to an extent that renders them superficially quite distinct until an analysis of systematic correspondences reveals their underlying relatedness (2002:68).

**Analysing place names**

In addition to analysing word lists, there are many further linguistic techniques that linguists have applied in order to provide evidence of where which language and dialect where spoken at the time of early exploration and settlement. The study of place names and ethnonyms will serve as an example here.
Studying place names is interesting in the context of Native Title Claims as they exemplify the close connection between language and country in Aboriginal societies. The names are believed to have been given by the ancestors during the Dreamtime (see also Koch 2007:42 and footnote 1).

Place names have been observed to be conservative, i.e. they often retain archaic elements and they are often not subjected to sound changes that apply to other lexemes of a language (McConvell 2004:44-47). Therefore, the place names in a language’s lexicon can be used to prove that the language has been spoken in the vicinity of the named places at least since a morphological or phonological change which did not apply to them happened. Since language change is, generally speaking, a slow process, it is usually pertinent to then argue that the language has been spoken in the claimed area since the time before non-Indigenous settlement. This assessment is a clear argument in favour of an NTC.

Sound change phenomena also offer valuable clues as to whether a place name was originally coined in a particular language or borrowed into that language from another one. This is important because the latter could constitute a counter-argument to a Native Title Claim. Thus, a linguist would look for situations such as the following: A neighbouring language group might have borrowed a place-name from a language which subsequently underwent a sound change so that the recipient but not necessarily the donor language retains the original form of the place name. Alternatively, not the place name itself but a related form was borrowed. For example, in Gurindji we find the place name Warrijkuny, see (1).

(1) Warrij-ku-ny (McConvell 2004:46) crocodile-DAT-NMLZ ‘place belonging to crocodile’

In neighbouring Mudburra the term for crocodile is warrija. The final -a was added in a process called ‘-a-augmentation’. This sound change did not take place in Gurindji. However, Gurindji speakers borrowed the word warrija from Mudburra into their language with the -a already attached, although in their place name the -a is not present. It can be concluded that the name is an old Gurindji form⁶ whereas warrija was borrowed from Mudburra after the sound change took place and is therefore more recent (McConvell 2004:46).

As mentioned above, the place name provides evidence for the connection between the Gurindji language and Gurindji country: The meaning of the term reflects mythological knowledge of the place: The name was given to a place which belongs to (the ancestral) crocodile. In combination with the existence of linguistic material which already lists the name in the 1890s it is easily established that Gurindji has been spoken in the vicinity of this place for a long time and most likely before the advent of colonialists. It is a further advantage of place name studies for Native Title Claims that place names were often taken up and therefore recorded by early settlers (Koch 2007:42).

Coming back to the tendency of place names to be conservative, in the following some details on archaic elements will be given. Archaic elements are morphemes that have become unanalysable and synchronically have no interpretable meaning. Alternatively, the internal make-up and ordering of analysable morphemes differs from current usage. Thus, archaic element arise because of morphological change. In (2) an example of an archaic element in a Gurindji place name is presented.

(2) Karngka jirrpukarlin (McConvell 2004:47) karn-ngka jirrp-kula-rni spear-LOC’ stick.up-LOC-still ‘where the spears are sticking up’

The archaic element -rni has a range of meanings such as ‘still’ and ‘only’. In the past it had been more directly meaningful.

Archaic elements in place names, like sound change phenomena, show that the terms are rather old and that the language they are part of has been spoken at the named location for a long time. Note that it could be argued that archaic elements in a language are not (in all cases) a sign of natural language change within a language but are instead relicts from ancient substrate languages (McConvell 2004:46). Even if this should be the case, these objections do not necessarily represent counter-evidence for a Native Title Claim: As long as the substrate influence has entered the language a very long time ago, it is not relevant to the discussion of the relationship between the claimant’s language and the contested stretch of land since European interest arose. This is especially true if the substrate languages no longer exist and there are no language owners who could lay claim to the land under dispute. When the language groups who spoke those substrate languages have died out, their land was taken over according to customary law (McConvell 2004:38). Such processes are not considered counterindications to granting Native Title.

In addition to archaic elements, place names can be analysed for further morphological evidence that proves that they stem from a particular language. Language-specific morphology for place names, such as locational markers, can help delineate the traditional boundaries of a language group’s country (McConvell 2009:389). Plotting place names on a map and highlighting the relevant morphology can demonstrate where the language was traditionally spoken. Potentially this even reveals that the language was formerly also spoken beyond the currently claimed area. This additional territory could have been taken up by other language groups a long time ago.

⁶ The reason to assume that the place name is Gurindji is the fact that the suffixes are typically Gurindji.

⁷ The LOC suffix in Gurindji marks location as well as a non-finite subordinate clause.
For example, the Jarragan languages – the language family that Miriwoong belongs to – use locative suffixes in most place names. An example for Miriwoong is given in (3).

(3) Ngamoowalem
gamoowale-m
cycad-LOC
(Ivanhoe Range)

McConvell (2009:388) presents a map of the eastern border of present-day Jarragan territory which depicts the distribution of place names that include the Miriwoong locative -m suffix (with its allomorphs -em and -me, Kofod 2015) or the Gajirrabeng locative -mi suffix (with its allomorphs -bi, -be, -me, -moo, -m, -em, ibid.). He argues that Jarragan territory must have traditionally extended further east as place names including the suffix can be found to the east of the border in what is now Jaminjungan territory.

Finally, this section on place names will end with a few hints on how apparent counter-arguments could be addressed: If there are records of designations for places in the claimed territory which at first sight seem to contradict the claim because the place names do not seem to stem from the language that is claimed to belong to this country, it might be necessary to explain that (i) some place names are from one of the language’s dialects rather than a separate language, (ii) some designations constitute on-the-spot descriptions by individual speakers rather than proper names, and/or that (iii) some names are alternative names/descriptions for a place coined by other language groups, who visit the area for example for ritual purposes (see McConvell (2004:37) on ethnonyms).

Analysing ethnonyms

Following the discussion on place names, below the role of ethnonyms and glossonyms in Native Title Claims will be addressed. Ethnonyms are names for ethnic groups, glossonyms are names for languages. The two sometimes coincide. In English one would say, for instance, that the Miriwoong people speak Miriwoong. Note, however, that many Aboriginal people have names in their respective varieties for (i) what linguistically-speaking are dialects, but from the point of view of Aboriginal people – for whom other criteria are most relevant (for more on language ownership see also the discussion in Ringel & Newry 2018) – are languages, or (ii) for subgroups such as clans and their varieties (Evans 2003:30).8

Of interest for this paper are the semantic and morphological properties of ethnonyms and glossonyms. First, in some areas the respective variety-specific rendering of a particular meaning forms (part of) those terms. For example, the respective translation of ‘no’ was apparently used to differentiate the Marrgu language, Yaako – derived from the Marrgu word yaga ‘no, not’ – from the Port Essington dialect, Yarlo – derived from the Garig/Ilgar word yihiarlulu – yarlulu’no’ (Evans 2002:62; see also Bowern 2009:334). This kind of evidence indicates that the varieties are related and/or have been in contact for a long time. Second, the meaning of ethnonyms, i.e. ethnonyms that are used by a language or dialect group for another group, can help to determine the relative location of one language group with respect to another one: A group that uses the exonym ‘the southerners’ (McConvell 2004:37) for another group probably had its traditional territory toward the north of that group’s territory. McConvell warns, though, that over time ethnonyms can be adopted for self-reference so that linguistic evidence from ‘linguistic stratigraphy’9 needs to be considered to determine the time-depth of the name (ibid.).

Jarragan languages and languages to the east of Jarragan country will illustrate how a morphological analysis of ethnonyms/glossonyms sheds light on the relationship between varieties and their traditional relative locations. McConvell (2009:369) plots these on a map (Figure 2) and highlights their morphology:

– The suffix -bung – -wung is found on the Jarragan glossonyms except Gija. Interestingly, it also appears in the non-Jarragan language Jaminjung (?< Jaminji-wung). McConvell (2009:388f) assumes that Jaminjung speakers have adopted the exonym containing Jarragan -wung as their endonym, i.e. the name for their own variety. The two glossonyms Nyiwanawu and Jiyilawung follow this pattern, too, as -wung can be analysed as -wu + -ng, i.e. the suffix that (to a certain extent optionally) marks non-feminine nouns or rather nominative (Kofod 2009). There are no records about the now extinct languages these glossonyms used to refer to.10 They could have belonged to the Jarragan language family or, like Jaminjung, adopted the exonym for self-reference. If the first option were true, traditional Jarragan territory formerly extended further east. Thus, suffixes which are typical for a language family can help identify potential members of that family. If there are indications of where those languages were spoken, there is evidence of the

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8 There are some indications that different dialects of Miriwoong might have existed (Kofod 2014 p.c.), but no glossonyms which could be associated with them have been recorded.

9 “Linguistic stratigraphy is a way of determining chronological strata of words and other items in a language by reference to whether or not the words in question have undergone certain changes (usually sound changes)” (McConvell 2002:259).

10 McConvell quotes Rose (1990) in saying that the Nyiwanawu group existed “in the nineteenth century along the West Baines River, in part of Amanbidji (Kildurk) station and neighbouring western Victoria River Downs”, but “probably […] succumbed to a combination of settler violence and intertribal warfare” (2009:388). As sources for Jiyilawung he names Mathews (1901) who reports information from a speaker of this language obtained by N. H. Stretch (here called Geelowng) and Tindale (1974).
extent of the traditional country the language family belongs to.

– The suffix -man appears in Wagiman, Wardaman, Yangman, Ngarinman and “perhaps” Warlmanpa (McConvell 2002). It is argued that the respective roots are mostly characteristic interjections (ibid.).

– The language names Karangpurra, Kawarrangu and Gurindji display a version of the Yangmanic (Wardaman) word korrong ‘south’, either as a bare stem or with the suffix -ji. Note that the three varieties are all currently spoken south of Wardaman country. The directional semantics lead McConvell to the hypothesis that Gurindji country might have traditionally bordered on Wardaman country until Bilinarra and Ngarinyinman, which are closely related to Gurindji, split off from Gurindji (or rather the language ancestral to Gurindji).

![](image)

**Figure 2: Glossonyms at the eastern Jarragan border** (adapted from McConvell 2009:371)

In general, more caution is in order when using ethnonyms and glossonyms as compared to place names to prove a connection between the claimant group and the land, as the ties of human groups to language-land pairs can be more fluid than the ties of language-land pairs (McConvell 2004:38). McConvell observes that “social groups such as clans in Arnhem Land may change their boundaries over two hundred years or less […] due to

succession arrangements” (2004:42). The possibility of these shifts needs to be acknowledged but they do not constitute a problem for Native Title claims as long they occur in accordance with traditional law.11

**Benefits of Native Title Claims**

This paper does not intend to imply that Native Title proceedings and the linguistic work done within their context are beneficial for the claimant group in all respects. There can be problematic consequences of Native Title for Aboriginal Australians such as an accentuation of disputes between different groups who pursue overlapping claims. These can reduce support for and involvement in common language activities that could otherwise have had potential for the revitalisation of all languages involved. Moreover, a negative outcome could be difficult to handle for the claimants. A judicial finding that cultural continuity cannot be established can hardly be expected to be a positive experience for the people involved. However, the positive aspects and benefits outlined below will suffice to show that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

To begin with, in preparation and during the course of the Native Title proceedings concrete research results are produced. These constitute tangible records for the claimants and their families of their language and culture (Henderson 2002:16).12 The linguistic inquiry into the language and language family of the claimant group is often specifically ordered and financed in the context of the claim and is thus valuable especially for languages for which not much linguistic work has been documented and for which otherwise no research would have been done in the near future. In addition to the immediate outcomes, the linguistic work potentially raises awareness both in the linguistic community but also with potential funders so that future documentation and revitalisation projects become more likely. In addition, awareness of language issues is also increased in the wider language community. This can motivate community members to support and be involved in language research and maintenance activities (Henderson 2002:16).

On a wider scale, the prominence of linguistic issues in Native Title Cases could contribute to linguistic rights in general (Henderson 2002:9-14). In addition to demonstrating the need to provide qualified interpretation to witnesses for Aboriginal English as well as Kriol and

community can benefit from them. If the linguist’s financial or temporal resources do not allow him or her to adapt the material into a format that is suitable for non-linguists and he or she does not make the material available to others who could do so, the impact of the research will be minimal. The distribution of results could be further constrained by the witnesses’ wishes not to have their testimony published or by a prohibition in the linguist’s contract, which regulates his or her involvement in the Native Title Claim. Finally, results could be withheld in order not to endanger ongoing proceedings (Henderson 2002:16).

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11 The most transparent case is that of the boundaries of one group being extended when the previous custodians of an adjacent area die. In the case of the Miritwoong NTC, claims have been successfully made to areas that once belonged to now extinct groups but have subsequently come to be considered Miritwoong/Gajirrabeng (Christensen 2004, 179). Shifts are, in fact, expected under the model of language divergence “most commonly used in historical linguistics” (McConvell 2004:42).

12 It has been noted that it depends on how the research results are edited whether the claimant group and the wider
Aboriginal languages in court, the attention created by court cases offers the opportunity to demand the provision of interpretation more generally in public spaces such as government offices and medical facilities, to campaign for the funding of Aboriginal language teaching programs and to formulate interests such as the exclusive right to use one’s language for commercial purposes, or maybe even the right to use it exclusively in any way.

Some linguistic rights (or more generally cultural rights which include linguistic rights) have been granted specifically in Native Title judgements. For example, in the Ward case Lee J found that the Miriwoong-Gajerrong Native Title included the “right to maintain, protect, and prevent misuse of cultural knowledge” (1998 FCA 1478, quoted by Henderson 2002:9). The Maduwoongga and the Koora claimed the right to “speak language about and sing songs concerning the land” (2002:10). This judgement reflects an understanding of the connection between language, culture, and country. It is an important step that Aboriginal Australians’ linguistic rights are being gradually recognized. One could go further and use the attention to demand that the Australian government ratifies and enforces international agreements that include linguistic rights such as the Convention No. 169 Concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries (ILO 1989).

To summarize, despite some potential negative consequences of Native Title hearings, the positive outcomes prevail. Linguistics cannot be the sole determiner of a successful claim but linguists can play an important role in arguing for a continuous connection to country.

**Australia’s responsibility**

From the 1880s government officials as well as pastoralists took massive violent action against Australia’s original inhabitants, the Traditional Owners of the lands on this continent. The number of Aboriginal Australians has been reduced significantly not only through shootings, massacres and the effects of land grab and enforced relocation but also by introduced diseases such as leprosy and venereal disease (McGregor 2004:12). Rintoul and McGregor detail the reasons that motivated the newcomers. Being outnumbered and feeling unsafe (Rintoul 1998) prompted the wish to keep Aboriginal people away from their dwellings and areas of interest such as water resources (McGregor 2004:10). Moreover, the pastoralists wanted to prevent the Aboriginal population from spearing their cattle for food. As for land grabbing, the Miriwoong people, for example, were affected by land grab in the form of the Ord Irrigation Scheme which took shape from the late 1950ies (Christensen 2004:176) and led to the establishment of the township of Kununurra and the flooding of a large area on their traditional country. The reduction of the numbers of Aboriginal Australians was followed by efforts to assimilate them. Especially their treatment at Christian missions and government reserves and the removal of children (the ‘Stolen Generations’) had significant effects on the transmission of culture and language. In the face of these atrocities, the current Australian government has a particular responsibility to enhance the prospects of a bright future for Aboriginal Australians.

The Australian government is obliged to play a supportive role with respect to the vitality of Aboriginal Australian’s languages for several reasons:

1. Urgent necessity: Australia has been described as the most critical case of language endangerment world-wide (Nettle & Romaine 2000:4). Unless steps are taken quickly and decisively, most Aboriginal languages will no longer be spoken in the near future without a hope to being revived.

2. Historical reasons: The government should strive to make up for the many ways in which Aboriginal people have been wronged. Native Title offers the chance to give back some of the land that has been taken and to guarantee the right to practice culture.

3. Effectiveness: Stronger rights have been found to lead to an increase in language vitality (Crystal 2000). Efforts of the government to foster linguistic rights are therefore likely to bear fruit.

4. Closing the gap: To this day the fate of Aboriginal people in Australia is worse compared to non-Indigenous Australians in all spheres of life, including poverty, homelessness, unemployment, life expectancy, suicide rates, percentage of the population in custody etc. As learning one’s ancestral language has been shown to increase health and well-being (Zuckermann et al. 2014) and to have other positive effects such as leading to increased school attendance and better outcomes in education, funding language programs in and outside of schools will contribute to the government’s commitment to ‘close the gap’.

Thus, it is Australia’s responsibility

- to continue funding research for Native Title Claims
- to support language revitalization e.g. by funding language programs at schools and language centres
- to ratify Conventions on linguistic rights for minority languages (for details see AIATSIS 2005)

**Conclusion**

This paper argues that stronger identification with territory and language can positively influence language vitality. Identification with land has been shown to be

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13 For more details on misunderstandings that arose when witnesses spoke Aboriginal English during Native Title proceedings see Evans (2002).
strengthened by the emphasis on the claimant’s connection to country in the course of and as a result of Native Title Claims. Identification with language is invigorated through Native Title Claims and institutional support for revitalization. Taken together, these circumstances are favourable for an increase in language vitality.

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Abbreviations

DAT = dative
LOC = location
NMLZ = nominalizer

References


