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Jaru (Australia) – Language Snapshot

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Language Name:	Jaru (also Djaru, Tjaru, Jaroo)
Dialects and varieties:	Nyininy, Wawarl
Genetic Classification:	Pama-Nyungan, Ngumpin-Yapa
ISO 639-3 Code:	ddj
Glottolog Code:	jaru1254
Number of speakers:	approx. 217[1]
Location:	East Kimberley region in northern Western Australia
Vitality rating:	EGIDs 7 (shifting)

Summary

Jaru is an endangered Australian Aboriginal language spoken in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia. Intergenerational transmission of Jaru is in the process of being disrupted and children are usually socialised in the English-based creole language Kriol, which also serves as a lingua franca of the wider area. Previous work on Jaru includes a reference grammar by Tsunoda (1981), and community-oriented publications by the Kimberley Language Resource Centre. Current research aims to document and explore interactional practices of Jaru speakers in ordinary conversation.

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[1] The figure of 217 is the number of people in Australia who reported Jaru as their main language other than English spoken at home in the most recent census (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016). The formulation of the census question does not take into account language proficiency and only allows a single language as a response. Accordingly, the number of people who identify as Jaru is probably higher, while the number of fully fluent speakers is likely to be much lower.

Figure 1. Traditional Jaru-speaking area[2]
For larger map see page 149.

1. Overview

Jaru is a Pama-Nyungan language of the Ngumpin-Yapa subgroup spoken in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia (see Figure 1). The language can be divided into a nearly dormant western dialect known as *Wawarl*, and an eastern dialect referred to as *Nyininy*. Wawarl was previously spoken around the Old Town of Halls Creek and on the pastoral stations of Lamboo and Ruby Plains, while Nyininy was spoken around Gordon Downs, Sturt Creek, Flora Valley, Nicholson and Turner River stations (Tsunoda 1981: 3). Today, most Jaru people live in the town of Halls Creek, in the neighbouring Aboriginal community of Yaruman (Ringer Soak), and in surrounding settlements that lie outside of the traditional boundaries of Jaru lands, especially Kururrungku (Billiluna), Wirrimanu (Balgo), Malarn (Mulan), Lajamanu, and Kununurra.

[2] This map is intended as a general guide to illustrate the area where Jaru is traditionally spoken. It may not be completely accurate and is not suitable as an indication of traditional land ownership.

The lands of the Jaru people have a hot semi-arid climate and lie between the tropical area to the north and the desert to the south. The vegetation predominantly consists of sparse open shrublands and low open woodlands with waterholes, soaks and some permanent creeks and rivers in the northern parts (Deegan et al. 2010). The country provides a range of plant-based foods, including fruits, seeds, yams and gum; various kinds of game, such as kangaroos, bustards, emus and goannas; as well as other animal source foods, such as fish, witchetty grubs, and wild honey.

In terms of social structure, Jaru people have a classificatory kinship system of the Aranda type (Radcliffe-Brown 1930-1931), and a system of eight subsections (Kaberry 1937a) that traditionally determine preferred spouses as well as social rights and obligations. The subsections (or 'skin names') are frequently used as person-reference items and as terms of address.

Although Jaru has been placed within the western group of Ngumpin languages on the basis of the comparative method (McConvell 2009, cf. Bowern & Atkinson 2012), the phylogeny of Ngumpin is somewhat clouded by extensive lexical borrowing. Thus, Senge (2015) and Tsunoda (1981: 6) state that Jaru is closely related to its eastern Ngumpin neighbour Wanyjirra, with which it has a remarkably high degree of mutual intelligibility. Jaru forms part of a Ngumpin dialect continuum that extends both east and west of the Jaru-speaking area (McConvell 2009: 791), comprising a chain of mutually intelligible varieties, many of which use the word *jaru* to mean 'language'.

Most Jaru people live in settings that are multilingual. Their linguistic repertoires generally include Jaru, the English-lexified creole language Kriol, and a variety of Australian English. As the intergenerational transmission of Jaru is in the process of being disrupted, the active use of Jaru has significantly decreased in recent decades. Nevertheless, some younger people can still use the language, to a certain degree. Most Jaru children acquire the Kimberley variety of Kriol as their first language, with frequent lexical borrowings from Jaru. Many older people also have command of one or more traditional languages from neighbouring groups.

Speakers of Jaru have been in continuous contact with English speakers since the invasion of the south-east Kimberley in the mid-19th century (Smith 2000). The persistent contact situation between English and the traditional languages has led to the emergence of several varieties of Kriol. According to Munro (2000), the geographical spread of Kriol across northern Australia is associated with the westerly expansion of the pastoral industry from Queensland during the 1880s, this being a continuation of a northward expansion that saw the New South Wales pidgin spread into Queensland. Kriol still serves as a lingua franca across a vast area of northern Australia, reaching from the Kimberley region across the Top End and south to Tennant Creek.

The incremental shift from Jaru to Kriol is still underway and both languages are in daily use. Code-switching and code-mixing between Jaru, Kriol, English, and other traditional languages are the norm. Jaru and Kriol

are mostly reserved for casual social interactions between family and friends, whereas English is usually used in formal education, with government institutions, and in most interactions with non-Aboriginal people.

Some characteristic linguistic features of Jaru are its dual pronominal system (bound and free forms), split-ergative alignment, and complex predicate structure. The pronominal system is composed of free pronouns and pronominal clitics. Both paradigms distinguish three persons (first, second, third) and three numbers (singular, dual, plural). In addition, the language makes an inclusive-exclusive distinction within its non-singular first-person pronouns. In terms of its encoding of arguments, Jaru is a split-ergative language. Nouns and free pronouns show an ergative-absolutive alignment, while bound pronouns use a nominative-accusative pattern (Tsunoda 1981: 143). Nouns are marked for case, and declension patterns depend on phonological environment. The case system allows for relatively free word order. With regard to verbal morphology, Jaru uses complex predicates consisting of an inflecting verb and a non-inflecting coverb. The inflecting verb of these compounds is semantically bleached and primarily conveys information about tense, mood and aspect, while the coverb carries most of the lexical-semantic load.

Traditionally, Jaru speakers made use of an avoidance register when speaking to their mother-in-law and certain other affinal relatives. Due to the language shift affecting special registers from an early stage, this restricted speech style has been out of active use for some time. Tsunoda (1981: 15) also reports the presence of a Jaru sign language as an alternative communication system. The vitality of this system of signs and its degree of elaboration is unclear and requires further investigation.

2. Existing literature

The earliest written records of Jaru reach back to Matthews (1901) and consist of thirteen English phrases and their Nyininy equivalents, Nyininy being a Jaru dialect. The largely unrecognisable phrases were taken down by a long-term local resident by the name of N. H. Stretch and published in Mathews (1901: 219) under the language label *Nining.* More Jaru words and some grammatical paradigms appeared in several linguistic surveys and anthropological studies over the following decades. The most noteworthy include Capell & Elkin (1937), Kaberry (1937a,b), and Capell (1956), despite some imprecisions and analytical misconceptions. Some Jaru songs and other cultural practices were documented by C. Berndt (1965) and R. Berndt (1965). Tsunoda (1981) authored the first comprehensive Jaru reference grammar. This ground-breaking work is aimed at a scholarly audience and has been the foundation for all publications on the language since.

In the 1990s, the Kimberley Language Resource Centre (KLRC) in Halls Creek compiled a yet unpublished draft Jaru-English dictionary (Wrigley 1992), a publication about the language, orthography, culture and recent history of the Jaru people (Minga et al. 1993), as well as a storybook with narratives from the Moola Bulla station in Jaru, English, Kriol and Gija (Binay et al. 1996). Further community-oriented works include the *Jaru Learning Kit* with an easily accessible grammar (Cataldi et al. 1998), and a wordbook with Jaru vocabulary arranged by topic (Hudson & Richards 2003). More recently, the Jaru people have collaborated with a number of Australian institutions to release a reference book on Aboriginal flora and fauna knowledge to preserve and promote the traditional names of over 400 animals and plants from Jaru country (Deegan et al. 2010). The KLRC also holds a large collection of audio recordings, most of which have been digitised but not transcribed.

One significant gap in the documentation of Jaru hitherto is the lack of recordings and analysis of ordinary conversation, as is also true for the documentation of many other Australian Aboriginal languages. Considering that conversation is the most fundamental form in which language is used, the inclusion of such interaction in documentary work is indispensable.

3. Current research

As part of the research project *Conversational Interaction in Aboriginal and Remote Australia* (CIARA), we have been compiling a corpus of video-recorded casual conversation in Jaru. The project will provide new insights into human social interaction and contribute to the urgent documentation of Jaru and its range of linguistic and interactional resources. The recorded and transcribed materials will be deposited with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), and will be accessible as a resource for language maintenance and revitalisation efforts.

4. Links

Useful resources with further information can be found in the reference list and on the following web pages (accessed 2020-06-01):

AUSTLANG: https://collection.aiatsis.gov.au/austlang/language/k12

CIARA: www.ciaraproject.com/jaru

Endangered Languages Project: www.endangeredlanguages.com/lang/4069

Ethnologue: www.ethnologue.com/language/ddj

Glottolog: https://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/jaru1254

OLAC: www.language-archives.org/language/ddj

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Figure 1. Traditional Jaru-speaking area