Wangka Maya, the Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre

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Aboriginal Language Centres occupy an exciting and innovative space in the fringe between academia and the people used by academia as its source of data. Now with funding that has lasted over a decade, language centres have the potential to train local people, to record and store information about local languages, and to promote the use of the languages in schools and other venues. In this paper we discuss the establishment and ongoing function of Wangka Maya, the Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre in Port Hedland, Western Australia (WA).[1]

1. Language Centres

Language centres are very practical examples of what could be termed 'advocacy linguistics' (following 'advocacy anthropology' (Gardner & Lewis 1996:47)). In the same tradition as the Aboriginal Languages Association (ALA)[2], they are a co-operative approach to supporting Australian indigenous languages between (usually) non-indigenous linguists and local communities (see Marmion (1994) on the Yamaji Language Centre). It should be noted that the political pressure exerted by the ALA is one of the most important inputs resulting in federal government funding for Aboriginal language work around the country, including language centres.

The language centre model works well when it has grown from a base of community support. Typical of a centralised public service approach, the funding bodies encouraged (if not demanded) the establishment of language centres around the country. What had been a good idea in the places where it had been developed may not have been such a good idea in the places in which it was imposed. Problems arise when institutions become their own reason for being, even if they were intitially established to perform particular functions which have since become

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[1] Thanks to Margartet Florey, David Nash and Jane Simpson for comments on an earlier draft of this paper. We take this opportunity to acknowledge the support of the following people in the establishment and running of Wangka Maya (some of whom have sadly passed on): Mitchell Biljaba; Joshua Booth; Alexander Brown; Milton Chapman; Tootsie Daniel; Edward Dhu; William Gardiner; Brian and Helen Geytenbeek; Charmaine Green; Edna Hopigar; Trudy Hayes; Maureen Kelly; Manny Lockyer; Jim Marsh; Rosie Munroe; Rose Murray; Allery Sandy; Gary Sherman; Anne Sibosado; Debbie Sibosado; Mervyn Smith; Marnmu Susan Smythe; Roger Solomon; Desmond Taylor; Bruce Thomas; Maureen Yanawana; Gordon Yuline.

[2] The ALA was a pressure group of indigenous and non-indigenous linguists that began in 1981 (Fesl 1993:163). Following the establishment of the Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages (FATSIL), the ALA ceased to function.

redundant or were never carried out in the first place. It is not enough for a language centre to simply be, it must be a locus for language work, ideally of many kinds.

Map 1, Approximate location of indigenous languages of the Pilbara region (Wangka Maya)

Clearly, all organisations are only as good as their staff. In most parts of Australia Aboriginal people have had little training in language work. Without training and with funding given regardless of performance it is not surprising that some centres are much less productive than others. And conversely, hiatuses in funding have proven very difficult for low-budget centres to bridge. Reviews of language centres have been undertaken (Riley-Mundine & Roberts (1990), National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia (nd)), and they have invariably acknowledged the importance of ongoing funding for language centres. In neither case has there been any attempt to show what linguistic outcomes there have been from the operation of the funded activities. This may seem unusual since the funding is for language-oriented projects, but is most likely due to the political difficulties of identifying what the expected outcomes of these projects should be in the first place. Each centre may cover a range of situations, from fluency in a local language through to recovery of information about the language from historical sources. Given this diversity, the reviews understandably look at the physical outputs of the funded projects (books, language-focussed activities, school work and so on) rather than linguistic outcomes.

2. Political engagement

The politics of Western Australian Aboriginal affairs inevitably involve mining. For those from the 'east' who are not used to the prevailing reification of mining as the backbone of Western Australia's economy, it can come as something of a shock to see the extent to which the needs of local people (especially the original owners of the land) are ignored or suppressed for the benefit of employment and that most sacred of icons, development. In towns like Port Hedland there are fringe camps of wrecked vehicles, tin sheets and no facilities, typically with a floating population from out of town. Among the white locals intolerance and lack of understanding are common. As in all colonial societies, there is a division between domains occupied by indigenous and other Australians. These domains had blurred edges at times, and there are some spaces that are becoming more of a shared territory (educational institutions and Aboriginal-run community agencies for example). The contrast between the mining town's resources and the pre-existing welfare-based camps is captured elegantly in the film *Exile and the Kingdom* (Frank Rijevic et al 1992) made with Ngarluma and Yindjibarndi people from Roebourne.

As linguists and anthropologists we cannot avoid our own role in 'development'. In Western Australia it was the case that site-clearance had to be undertaken before mining work could proceed. This clearance work was done by consultants from varying disciplinary backgrounds, and with varying political affiliations. Some practitioners were known to do the companies' bidding[3], resulting in the need for careful handling of one's own research, and adherence to professional standards appropriate to one's discipline. It also meant that material stored at the language centre needed to be housed securely.

The language centre inevitably became part of the network of support for Aboriginal people, at the level of providing employment for a community activist as the administrator of the centre, and at the broader level of writing documents in support of our constituents, typically in opposition to 'development', (e.g. Thieberger (1989)). Support for indigenous languages cannot be separated from a more general support for the speakers of those languages and the issues that face them in their attempts to control their lives. In 1998 Wangka Maya produced a report for the Heritage Commission of WA in conjunction with Karijini Aboriginal Corporation on the Aboriginal Heritage of Karijini National Park and environs.

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[3] see for example the Four Corners programme "Secret White Men's Business", ABC TV, March 20, 2000

The approach to data at a language centre is potentially quite different to that of university academics. Because there is ongoing local contact between language speakers and the centre, it is possible to provide resources appropriate to the speaker's current needs. For example, a handwritten wordlist found in a Benedictine archive by a linguist whose project was a comparison of all Australian languages would not have found its way back to descendants of speakers of the language of the list were it not for the local language centre. For the purposes of the academic linguist the list was comparative data. For the speakers of the language it was a source of information about their heritage. One speaker of the language has taken the list and incorporated it into his dictionary of the language (assisted by the local SIL linguist), rediscovering words he had forgotten and learning words he had not known before.

3. Establishment of Wangka Maya

In 1985 Thieberger was employed by the Institute of Applied Aboriginal Studies, then a section of Mt Lawley College in Perth to run a project funded by the Commonwealth Schools Commission. The project had been proposed by a committee attempting to establish a bilingual education programme for speakers of Aboriginal languages in Western Australia (WA). As part of their strategy they saw a need for a survey and database of material related to WA Aboriginal languages. Once established, this collection was indexed in the Handbook of WA Aboriginal Languages (Thieberger 1993). This collection of some 200 documents (ranging from articles to theses) related to languages of WA was to have been located at a publicly accessible location, but was lost by Edith Cowan University sometime around 1990. While most of these documents were replaceable (and the rest ranged from unique to rare or difficult to obtain), the effort required to accumulate them was considerable, and their loss illustrates the need for safe long term archiving of linguistic material.

In the course of travelling for the IAAS survey it became clear that it would be necessary to focus on one geographical area if there were to be any ongoing activity after the survey was completed. The Pilbara region was chosen, mainly because of the community support that was apparent for recording and supporting local languages, together with the fact that recording of some of the languages of the area had been undertaken to an extent not reflected in other parts of Western Australia (by Ken Hale, Geoff O'Grady, Carl-Georg von Brandenstein, Peter Austin, Alan Dench, Brian and Helen Geytenbeek, Jim Marsh and others).

On one of the consultation trips at Yandeeyarra, an Aboriginal camp to the south-west of Hedland, Thieberger talked about the language centre with the appropriate community leaders

and was directed to talk to Maori Tom, an old white-bearded man, who it turned out was one of Ken Hale's language teachers. They sat and talked and he tried to teach some Nyangumarta, expecting that the language would be recorded in the way that his earlier visitor had done. This response was not uncommon in other places visited. When the issue of a language centre was raised one was often then given lists of words in a local language. This enthusiasm was also often followed with requests to work on recording a particular language and made clear the need for a local language centre which could answer these requests.

During 1985 and 1986 there were a number of literacy workshops and consultative discussions with Aboriginal people in the Pilbara (which came to be defined as from Onslow in the west to Lake Dora (*Ngayarta Kujarra*) in the east, and as far south as the Tropic of Capricorn). In this region there are still some twenty indigenous languages spoken.

These discussions guided the kind of resources the language centre would provide. They also identified which Aboriginal people were actively interested in the issues and would subsequently take a role in managing the language centre. It was at this stage that there was a meshing of the agenda of the whitefella linguist proposing what could be seen as an employment creation scheme for himself with the desires of the local Aboriginal people for greater recognition of their cultures.

Pilbara Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs) and the Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (AECGs) supported the idea of a language centre. Their focus was on the resources that could be made available locally, in the form of materials and training. With this sort of support it was less daunting to speak about the proposal in front of a bush meeting.

Bush meetings in the Pilbara were a way of making the bureaucrats get out of their offices to answer to their Aboriginal constitutents en masse. A river bed was the usual setting, and for a weekend the discussion would cover all sorts of issues. After facing a number of bush meetings with a sprinkling of supporters in the audience, Thieberger wrote submissions for funding to the Bicentennial Authority, the Commonwealth Education Department, the State Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority and the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (as they were all then known), none of which bore fruit. Nevertheless, in June 1988 we received our first grant when the National Aboriginal Languages Programme began.

The Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre followed the model established by the Kimberley Language Resource Centre (Hudson & McConvell 1984) and by keeping-houses in other parts of the country. It is a model which blends the dominant culture's paradigm of academic linguistics with the needs of local speakers of Aboriginal languages or their descendants, and straddles the political intricacies of working between these two agendas. Even Eve Fesl, in an otherwise largely negative view of non-indigenous linguists' involvement with Aboriginal languages, notes the 'very important development of community-controlled language centres' (Fesl 1993:165).

We ran a conference in October 1988 to set directions for the language centre, and to decide on its name, Wangka Maya ('language house'). This conference elected the management committee, agreed on a draft constitution and recommended the establishment of a language workers' training course at Pundulmurra College, an Aboriginal secondary school in South Hedland. Janet Sharp, a teacher and a linguist with a long involvement with languages of the region took on the development of the course at Pundulmurra. She has continued to work with the language centre and her recently completed doctoral thesis was a grammar of Nyangumarta.

During the early years, Wangka Maya had the local support of the Western Desert Land Council (later made to change its name to Western Desert Puntukurnuparna Aboriginal Corporation by government pressure, and now known by the acronym WDPAC), which provided the first office space and other facilities for the language centre (including being the incorporated body sponsoring the centre's first funding). This was one of the key reasons for establishing the centre in Hedland rather than one of the other Pilbara towns.

This office, in the light-industrial area of Hedland (and later on a freehold piece of land 20 km west of South Hedland known as Decca), was the town base for the WDPAC constituents, desert people from mainly Manyjilyjarra and Warnman language groups. With this beginning, the language centre also developed a focus on the desert languages, and conducted a number of trips to the Rudall River region, recording stories and running literacy workshops. WDPAC also had staff from a Kariyarra group in Hedland who were to play a role in directing the activity of the centre to record that language with an old man who has since passed away.

In October 1989, after sharing premises with WDPAC and when funding was secured for at least twelve months, the centre moved into its own building in Port Hedland. This fibro cement three-bedroom house stood in the old town centre with views over the sea and across to Finucaine island. It had been an Aboriginal hostel and then had been left empty for a year before we moved

in. It was elevated about a metre above the ground, enough to make for a comfortable shady area underneath it, one that was occupied more or less continually by a rolling population of Aboriginal people. Occasional fights and abandoned children broadened the centre's day to day work to include welfare and policing.

The language centre has since moved to a converted house on the Pundulmurra College Campus and following that in 1999 to office space in the newly constructed Lotteries House, South Hedland where they currently operate.

Wangka Maya is run by a Management Committee made up of a small number of dedicated people who have been struggling to keep languages in the Pilbara strong. They respond to project requests from the community. Submission writing is a direct result of this type of orientation and many of the projects which are requested by community people are completed in one form or other depending on availability of funding. The committee is constantly reviewing its operational plan according to community demands for language work.

When funding for staff initially became available in 1988, Lorraine Injie, a trained teacher and speaker of languages of the region got the job. She undertook training with the linguist and was instrumental in developing support for the language centre in the West Pilbara. After a few years working there she went on to work at and then run the language workers' training course at Pundulmurra College, an Aboriginal secondary school in South Hedland. This course had been established following a recommendation of the inaugural Pilbara Aboriginal languages conference. Again, Pundulmurra was fortunate to have Janet Sharp, a linguist with a long involvement with languages of the region, available to develop the curriculum and deliver this course.

Much of the training of language workers depends on Wangka Maya's established collection of language data organised on file as well as on computer. This is a resource which can be used creatively within the normal training regime of language workers to develop language research skills, to discuss matters of orthographic preferences, to assist in the development of literacy in language worker's languages, and to assist in their own development of language skills.

4. 1990-2000 at Wangka Maya
From time to time contract linguists have been employed at Wangka Maya to work on some of the southern languages including Thalanyji and Yinhawangka. Much of the work was conducted

from Onslow and so this became an annexe for the centre. There has also been work conducted near Newman in the Putijarra language (a largely unrecorded language). This work was carried out by a Putijarra man, Joshua Booth and the late Jim Marsh (an SIL linguist who worked at Jigalong). Joshua Booth is still carrying out the work even though the funding for that project has run out.

Funding for the core functions of the language centre came via the Federal government's Aboriginal language funding programme (known as NALP or ATSILIP). Other grants were sought focussing on particular languages, or recording oral histories.

Wangka Maya was also lucky to have employed Marnmu (Sue Smythe) on a full time basis. A supporter of the language centre when she worked for the Commonwealth Education Department, Marnmu (Sue Smythe) began working for Wangka Maya in 1991. She is a speaker of Yindjibarndi and other languages of the region and has also contributed greatly to cross-cultural workshops that Wangka Maya conducts whenever organisations request them. Marnmu was responsible for work and research associated with Women's Cultural Heritage (called the Women's Project) and she has collected stories and experiences of many Pilbara women. Projects like these are very important and contribute much to overall cultural knowledge for Aboriginal people. It also helps Aboriginal women understand the medicines that are distributed through modern medical agencies.The meetings which are conducted as part of the women's project have evolved to become a forum for Aboriginal women to learn and understand more about the different types of medicines that are used or could be used, both traditional and modern.

Other types of forums facilitated by Wangka Maya are cross-cultural Workshops. These are designed to give people working with or for Aboriginal organisations the opportunity to access information about cultural and language differences. Cross-cultural workshops are usually a response to requests from organisations such as the hospital, employment agencies and educational agencies. They range from workshops which are conducted in a two hour time slot to those conducted over two days. Wangka Maya has designed a cross-cultural package which it delivers to the various target groups with emphasis on areas of cross-cultural relationships which affect them directly in their own area of work. Elders from the community volunteer to form a panel and are willing to respond to questions from the participants in the workshop. Many of the panel add to the sessions by spontaneously singing traditional songs and clapping boomerangs. In order to cover costs such as payment for the Aboriginal members of the panel , materials and catering, Wangka Maya charges a registration fee which includes an informative file of

information for participants to refer to at a later date. There is usually a large component of the workshop dealing with the languages of the Pilbara.

The language centre has also been running its own bush meetings. Groups from all over the Pilbara are invited to participate in a language and cultural festival which allows people to hear information on current issues such as native title, medical services, museums, ATSIC, land councils and schools. As part of their function in the community, the Wangka Maya staff try to keep up with national developments in key issues like Copyright Law, Native Title Law and other complexities which impact on the ability of the staff to participate in community life and to record and distribute information about language and culture. Guest speakers include doctors from Aboriginal Medical Centres, lawyers from Land Councils and the Aboriginal Legal Service and workers involved in communication services, museums, ATSIC and other Aboriginal organisations.

During such meetings which usually last for two days and are held 'out bush', (in an area like the Yule River which is a significant Kariyarra place) the elders engage in traditional activities such as story telling and songs. These bush meetings are excellent promotional tools for Aboriginal languages and it gives many different groups a good excuse to get together to communicate with each other about language and language maintenance as well as learn more about the current political issues which affect their lives. A lot of learning goes on in this forum.

Wangka Maya has aimed over the years to support all Aboriginal people in the Pilbara area and particularly those traditional people from the outlying communities. It has, through its language work and promotion of language, attempted to lift the profile of indigenous languages and to enhance the self esteem of indigenous people.

Wangka Maya includes in their overall aims and objectives to:
a.   provide forums for language policy formulations (assisting local people to
         formulate their own language -related goals);
b.   produce literature about language and culture;
c.   provide training and opportunities for language work by language speakers;
d.   provide guidelines for language teaching;
e.   inform communities and wider society about the nature of languages;
f.   coordinate and promote research into languages;
g.   allow access to interpreter and translator services;

h.   promote the collection of traditional stories and oral histories;

i.   maintain and expand resources pertaining to languages and culture;

j.   plan and negotiate the expenditure of funds for language purposes.

Table 1 Linguists/ language workers / contract linguists

1988-1990	Nick Thieberger, Lorraine Injie
1990-91	Margaret Florey, Lorraine Injie
1991-1992	Dianna McCallum, Brigitte Agnew, Marnmu
1992	Brigitte Agnew, Marnmu
1994	Penny Lee, Leah Stacpoole, Kirsten Elliott, Eva Schultze, Marnmu
1994-1995	James Oladejo, Marnmu
1996	Alison Kohn
1996-1997	Morgan Morris
1997-1999	Ian Alexander, Marnmu, Diana Robinson, Larissa Brown, Joshua Booth, Bruce Thomas
1999-2000	Janet Sharp, Marnmu, James Wally, Eugenia Gray, Colletta Cooke

5. Working in a language centre requires much more than a knowledge of linguistics.

In the initial stages, the linguistic role at Wangka Maya was marginal compared to the networking and administrative role. The linguistic apparatus learned at university concentrates on analysis, with the documentary role of the linguist subsumed under the need to have data. This has changed more recently with the interest in the fate of so-called endangered languages (see (Himmelmann 1998)). Nevertheless, it is still the case that many of the skills required in running a language centre are not taught at university. Thieberger had a background in community and activist organisations that included book-keeping, newspaper layout and writing submissions, as well as political lobbying[4] all of which were to be used in the establishment of Wangka Maya. Lobbying (by a number of people) was to prove an important factor in getting the funding for the centre, and later in securing funding for a language workers' course at Pundulmurra College. Contacts in the ALP government also helped, but not as much as we would have liked. When Pundulmurra College looked like it was getting lukewarm on the language workers' course a fax to the Minister of Education (in 1989) brought a swift response

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[4] The language centre in Port Hedland was also the base for the Port Hedland anti-nuclear group (PHANG), focussed on the uranium prospect in Manyjilyjarra and Warnman country (called Kintyre by the miners) in the Karlamilyi or Rudall River region of the Great Sandy Desert.

from the Principal of the college, including assurances that there had never been any hesitation on his part and so on. The importance of lobbying for government funding cannot be overestimated.

The politics of the region meant that the alignment with WDPAC excluded Wangka Maya from working with the Strelley mob, also known as the Nomads Charitable and Educational Foundation, or the Pindan mob. Advised by the late Don Mcleod (a man Ken Hale met and was impressed by in 1960[5]) this group are famous for their independence and the pastoral strike they have maintained since 1946. Gwen and John Bucknall and Janet Sharp, who taught at the Strelley schools and have a long association with the organisation, were nevertheless very supportive of the language centre being established. The Strelley schools were (and are) community run and bilingual, with good support from linguists and teachers. They would have been a logical ally for the language centre. This was not to be owing to the split that had developed at that time between Strelley and what they called the 'Panaka' mob, a group of mainly Manyjilyjarra speakers based around Punmu on Lake Dora, and the Jigalong community to the south.

The teachers at Punmu at the time (mid 1980s), Ray and Diana Vallance, were keenly aware of the need for linguistic input into the school, and also supported the language centre being established in Hedland. Through the school and the Land Council we conducted several trips and assisted in the collection, transcription and translation of stories that were to become the book *Yintakaja-lampajuya* (These are our waterholes) (Davenport 1988). These trips were also part of the broader consultative process leading to the establishment of Wangka Maya.

6. Ongoing functions of the language centre

The language centre stores what is otherwise geographically and temporally dispersed material. Researchers come and go and leave copies of their work for community needs. Often this material is lost or is not available to all members of the community or to other communities in

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[5]" In Roebourne, Ken worked with Mr Bob Churnside on the Ngarluma language. We were to stay there three weeks as the guests of an independent group of Aboriginal people who were engaged in mining activities. They had two requests to make of us: that we provide them with an alphabet for the Nyangumarta language; and that we bring two of their number -- Mr Monty Hale and Punch -- to literacy in the time available. Ken's insights on alphabet-creation and literacy development were of immense value, and today, nearly forty years later, there is a thriving literacy program at Strelley, out of Port Hedland, in Nyangumarta and English. As well, the periodical *Mikurrunya* is brought out in both languages in partial fulfillment of the principle, due to Ken, of 'flood the place with literature!'" (Geoff O'Grady's memoir posted at:
http://web.mit.edu/linguistics/www/ken/posted/posted.html#ogrady)

the region. Research conducted by Geoff O'Grady and Ken Hale in the 1950s and 1960s in the Pilbara region had no local home. Copies were stored safely at the AIAS/AIATSIS in Canberra, and occasionally were sent back to the Pilbara as requested. Copies of their material were housed at the language centre as part of the resource collection established there. Ken Hale's computer-based Ngarluma dictionary was edited and printed (Wangka Maya-Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre 1990a), his notes were made available to descendants of those he recorded. His work provided the basis for the first of the 'Aboriginal Languages of the Pilbara' series produced by the language centre.

One of the more successful applications of the existing resources on Pilbara languages is the development of small topic picture books which can be turned into a teaching and learning package with the addition of sound charts, topic charts, sentence books and finally topical dictionaries. Many skills can then be taught as a result of these projects including data management, desktop publishing and general literacy skills.

The language centre produces a Newsletter twice a year. This is currently called 'Jakul kanganyakata' a Nyangumarta expression meaning 'a messenger'. The newsletter is multilingual and hopes to promote language and discussion in the community. It often acts as a report to communities about the activities of the centre and it includes many photos which people love to see.

Wangka Maya produced a series of booklets 'Aboriginal Languages of the Pilbara' (Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre. 1989-91) for the following languages: Manyjilyjarra, Ngarla, Nyangumarta, Yindjibarndi, Nyamal, Kariyarra, Banjima, Ngarluma, Yinhawangka (see Map 1). Each contains brief information about the language, a map showing its rough location, a short wordlist, a short story, and a guide to further reading. These were photocopied and produced with a card cover for sale to tourists. The map in these booklets was reproduced on a tea-towel, following the success of the Kimberley Language Resource Centre's tea-towel language map, and it too was sold to tourists. These products aimed to popularise information about local languages, as did a guide to languages of the region (Sharp and Thieberger 1992).

The Centre aims to let non-Aboriginal people know which languages are and were spoken in the region and have some understanding of the types of languages they are. In addition to supporting language work, this kind of advocacy was a core aspect of the language centre's activities.

Language centres clearly have a vital role in supporting Australian indigenous languages, both in setting research agendas and conducting practical language maintenance activities, and in raising the profile of the languages. They provide employment and training in a number of areas for speakers of indigenous languages as well as employment for newly-graduated linguists, often in areas that are not normally part of a university degree.

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