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Author/s:

Green, J

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Visible Talk: Looking at Australian Indigenous Sign Languages

Jennifer Green

When considering the richness and diversity of Australian Indigenous languages, perhaps the first thing that comes to mind are the many spoken languages. But less known is the fact that sign also holds an important place in the communication ecologies of Australia's First Peoples. Sign and speech together form part of the inheritance of the oldest continuous culture on earth.¹ Sign is mentioned in records that date back to early stages of colonisation, and descriptions of sign appear in the archival records of explorers, missionaries and ethnographers. One of the earliest, dating back to 1846, was made by the Lutheran missionary Clamor Wilhelm Schürmann, who observed that 'a great number of manual signs' were used without speech by the Indigenous peoples of Port Lincoln, in South Australia.² Some even discuss the possibility that the stencilled handshapes found in the ancient rock art of the Carnarvon Gorge in central Queensland are evidence of the use of distinctive handshapes for signing or signalling.³

The reasons for signing vary across the continent. Sign is used instead of speech when talking is either impractical or culturally inappropriate. Sign is employed in certain types of ceremonies in which speaking is disallowed, when giving directions, and for communication between people who are visible to each other yet out of ear-shot. Sign is useful when hunting (either because speaking could scare prey, or, in northern coastal regions, making a noise might attract crocodiles). In situations where speech could be regarded as impolite, sign provides an alternative that marks an attitude of respect and signals the circumspection required of certain topics. In some communities, sign is the main form of communication used by particular kin in the context of bereavement—used instead of speech during periods of 'sorry business'. In certain parts of Australia, widows traditionally observed speech bans during these periods of mourning (for up to a full year). Indigenous sign languages appear to have been most developed in regions such as Central Australia and western Cape York, where such restrictions on speech were in place.

To some extent sign may function as a lingua franca in contexts where multiple languages that are not mutually intelligible are spoken. Senior people, and in particular women, are the acknowledged experts, especially in some communities in Central Australia. That said, younger people sign as well, and new signs are developed to keep pace with sociocultural and environmental changes. For elderly people who are hearing- or speech-impaired, sign can become the most useful communicative resource available to them in later life. Whether Indigenous deaf people use traditional sign, or sign languages such as Auslan, is largely unexplored.



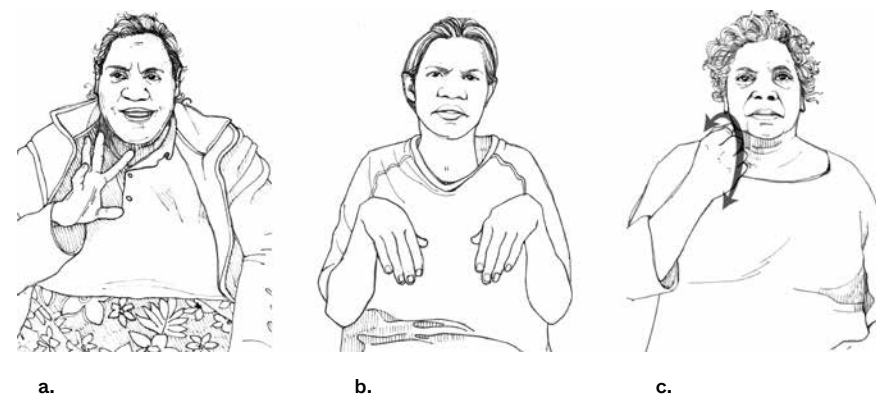
Some examples of 'new' Gurindji signs⁴

The question of how many Indigenous sign languages there are in Australia, and how distinct they are from each other, remains difficult to answer. Australian Indigenous sign languages vary in terms of their complexity and their relationships to the spoken languages of the communities in which they are found. Drawing on archival records and on fieldwork recordings made in the 1970s and 1980s, Adam Kendon provided some indication of the diversity of sign across Australia.⁵ He found that the proportion of signs shared between groups is higher than that of shared spoken words. Geographically close groups have more in common in sign than geographically distant ones, regardless of the relationships between their spoken languages.

The extent of the lexical repertoires of sign also varies, and this is complicated by the reality that some knowledge of sign has been either lost or is under threat. The upper limit of the number of signs is probably around 1500 for the Warlpiri of Central Australia. In other communities the signs may number in the hundreds, and in others there may be only thirty or so signs in common daily use. Another aspect worth noting is that there is a high degree of polysemy in sign, where one sign form has many meanings that are distinguished by separate words in spoken languages. For example, in Warlpiri *kuturu* (fighting stick), *juka* (sugar) and *ngarlkirdi* (witchetty grub) may all be signed the same way.

As is the case with other sign languages of the world, the signs have standards of well-formedness and are distinguished by handshape, place of articulation or location of the sign, movement of the hand or hands, and orientation of the hand. Small differences in any of these parameters can result in signs that are minimally different to each other in form and yet have quite distinct meanings. Several signs may go together to form utterances that include only sign, or sign can be used together with other semiotic resources, including speech, gesture and graphic practices such as sand drawing.

The forms of many signs bear iconic relationships or resemblances to salient features of their referents. Signs for various animals may be based on representations of their tracks or movement, and those for particular plants on actions associated with them. One example is the Anmatyerr sign for *anakety*, a type of bush tomato (*Solanum chippendalei*), which is based on the action of cleaning out the bitter seeds from the fruit with a specially designed tool made of emu thigh bone. Another is the sign for kangaroo, in Anmatyerr and Warlpiri formed by opening and closing the hand in an action reminiscent of its hopping motion; in Gurindji and Kuninjkun by holding both hands up, as if imitating the way a kangaroo holds its front legs; and in Ngaanyatjarra by a hand held in a fist and flexed from the wrist, towards and away from the body several times. In Balgo it is articulated with two extended fingers that are also used to replicate the tracks of the kangaroo on the sand in the practice of sand story narration.⁶



Three different signs for kangaroo:
 a. Anmatyerr, Warlpiri (Central Australia) b. Gurindji (Victoria River district), Kuninjkun (Arnhem Land) c. Ngaanyatjarra (Western Desert). Illustrations by Jennifer Taylor



Kin sign poster in Gun-nartpa and Burarra, languages spoken in Maningrida in Arnhem Land



Kin sign posters in Wurlaki ga Djinang, language spoken in Maningrida in Arnhem Land¹³

Since the 1980s, an increase in community-based projects has led to a wide variety of publications about Indigenous languages, some of which focus on sign. In Central Australia a web-based dictionary titled *Iltyem-iltyem*, named after the Anmatyerr term for ‘using handsigns’, is the first searchable online dictionary for any Australian Indigenous sign language.⁷ *The Mudburra to English Dictionary* includes an extensive section dedicated to sign, with photos of sign actions and QR code links to 170 videos of signs.⁸ A partnership with the Karungkarni Art Centre at Kalkaringi in the Victoria River district led to four sign posters, organised thematically and with embedded QR codes that link to short video clips. Kin sign posters in four languages from Maningrida in Arnhem Land similarly use QR code links to sign films.⁹ Also from Arnhem Land is a lavishly illustrated handbook of Yolŋu Sign Language (YSL) that includes 500 of the most frequently used signs.¹⁰ And sign has found its place in Indigenous media—a collaborative film project in the community of Balgo resulted in a visual dictionary of more than 300 Kukatja signs and a series of short films circulated online. Other sign films, including Gurindji ones, have been broadcast on Indigenous Community Television (ICTV).¹¹

These educational resources are evidence of a growing momentum to keep these signing traditions strong and to pass the knowledge on to the next generations. As Margaret Kemarre Turner OAM has put it, speaking from Mparntwe (Alice Springs) in the heart of Australia, sign language ‘is the sacredness of the hand. It’s part of respect. When people use sign their spirit feels well.’¹²

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1. See <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/australias-first-peoples>. It is estimated that prior to colonisation there were at least 250 to 300 spoken languages; today, only twelve are regarded as ‘strong’ and as being transmitted inter-generationally. Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications, Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, and Australian National University, *National Indigenous Languages Report*, Australian Government, Canberra, 2020, <https://www.arts.gov.au/documents/national-indigenous-languages-report-document> (viewed 18 February 2021).
2. CW Schürmann, *The Aboriginal Tribes of Port Lincoln in South Australia: Their Mode of Life, Manners, Customs, Etc.* George Dehane, Adelaide, 1846, p. 7.
3. GL Walsh, ‘Mutilated Hands or Signal Stencils? A Consideration of Irregular Hand Stencils from Central Queensland’, *Australian Archaeology*, vol. 9, 1979, pp. 33–41, and *Carnarvon and Beyond*, Takarakka Nowan Kas Publications, Kenmore, Qld, 1999.
4. Edited from J Green, C Algy and F Meakins, with Karungkarni Art, *Takataka: Gurindji Sign Language Posters*, Batchelor Institute Press, Darwin, 2017, <http://batchelorpress.com> (viewed 16 February 2021).
5. Adam Kendon, chapter 12, *Sign Languages of Aboriginal Australia: Cultural, Semiotic and Communicative Perspectives*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988.
6. E Jorgensen, A Phonological Analysis of Sign Used in a Western Desert Community, Honours thesis, The University of Melbourne, 2020, p. 6.
7. See <http://iltyemiltyem.com> (viewed 16 February 2021). Margaret Carew and Jennifer Green, ‘Making an Online Dictionary for Central Australian Sign Languages’, *Indigenous Sign Languages*, special issue of *Learning Communities: International Journal of Learning in Social Contexts*, no. 16, 2015, pp. 40–55.
8. R Green, J Green, D Osgarby, A Hamilton, F Meakins and R Pensalfini, *Mudburra to English Dictionary*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2019.

9. J Green M Carew and C Coleman, *Maningrida Kin Sign Posters*, Batchelor Press, Darwin, 2020, <http://batchelorpress.com> (viewed 16 February 2021).
10. B James, MCD Adone and EL Maypilama, *The Illustrated Handbook of Yolŋu Sign Language of North East Arnhem Land*, The Australian Book Connection, Melbourne, 2020.
11. See, for example, <https://vimeo.com/247087860/cee10ccdb8> and <https://ictv.com.au/video/item/6224> (viewed 17 February 2021).
12. Personal communication, Margaret Kemarre Turner to Jennifer Green, Mparntwe (Alice Springs), 16 November 2019.
13. Green, Carew and Coleman, *Maningrida Kin Sign Posters*.