

# weekend

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## Lost for words

The lonely fight to save our dying languages

By John van Tiggelen



**Plus:**

**Bret Easton Ellis**

Mad, bad and dangerous to know

**Stitches in time**

Martha Stewart's poncho and the politics of knitting

If a language dies in the desert and no one notices, does it leave a silence? With indigenous tongues dying out at an unprecedented rate, **John van Tiggelen** travels to Hope Vale, Cape York, where the language that yielded the word “kangaroo” is down to the wire.

# The sound of **ONE** man chatting

ROGER HART LIKED TO CALL PEOPLE *anggatha*. *Anggatha* means friend in his native Barrow Point language. Or meant. When Hart died last July, at the age of 89, or maybe 87, the language expired with him, for he was the last of its native speakers.

Hart lived in Hope Vale, the former Lutheran Aboriginal mission half an hour's drive north of Cooktown, Cape York. For the best part of 70 years he thought of it as a temporary arrangement. Home for Hart was Barrow Point, the spectacularly wild coast country that lies 150 kilometres to the north. He'd been torn from there when he was about seven. The product of a likely sex-for-tobacco deal between his mother and a squatter, his tribe one week walked him to the mission to leave him tied up at the front gate. It could have been worse: one of his brothers had apparently been left to drown because he was half white.

The mission, in keeping with government thinking of the time, was the best and safest place for him. Safe from his tribe and safe from the miners, squatters, native police and pearlers who virtually laid siege to the semi-nomadic Barrow Point mob, helping themselves to anyone who looked halfway useful and scattering those who didn't.

The mission, however, was a different country. Hart couldn't understand a soul. There were no *anggatha* here – in the local tongue of Guugu Yimithirr, the word for friend was *thawuuthn*. At Barrow Point he'd been called *Urrwunthinn*, or Stephen, or

sometimes Jackie. Now the mission kids dubbed him *Arrwala*, the only word the missionary knew of his language. It meant, “Come here!” Then he was Lex, until the missionary's wife decided there were too many boys called Lex, and he became Roger.

Time and again little Hart ran away, but each time the *bama* (Aboriginal people) on the outside would hand him back. Though Hart's outsider status steadily diminished as he became fluent in both Guugu Yimithirr and English, his younger brother, Jimmy, recalls Roger trying to run away well into his teens.

Even as an adult, Hart never did quite take to mission life. He liked to go bush, to spear fish or hunt pigs, harpoon dugong and catch turtles. He married in his 20s, lost three young children to infectious diseases, had eight more, then quit the mission – and his family – after he felt the missionary cheated him out of a share farm. He spent the late 1960s cutting cane down south with a childhood friend before returning to Hope Vale to look after his ailing wife. He was an “old fella” now, on the wrong side of 50, his people's life expectancy.

The 1970s saw the church lose its grip. The missionaries' pursuit of self-sufficiency quickly ceded to the drip-feed of government welfare. Grog, ganja and the corrosive politics of colour, of half-caste versus full-blood, of traditional owners versus mission transplants, took up the slack under the guise of self-determination. The old men would gather in front of the shop, whirring away in Guugu Yimithirr to lament the latest weekly cycle of sly-grogging,

“When I speak language, it makes me feel home”: (right) Roger Hart in front of his van at Hope Vale, 1995.





domestic violence and suicide. More and more, they found themselves attending funerals for their children and grandchildren.

Hart kept himself a little aloof. There was something about him, a deeper sadness, though people kind of knew: it's a lonely business being the last of your people. At one stage, he moved out of home into a van in his backyard, out of reach of his hard-living family. More and more he sought refuge in the mist of childhood memories from Barrow Point. The more he ached to return to Barrow Point, the more the language came back to him. He sought out the last remaining speakers. He'd spend nights trying to recall certain words and phrases. Creation stories about the adventures of *Wurrey*, or Old Man Fog, came back to him scene by scene. He accosted the linguist documenting Hope Vale's dominant Guugu Yimithirr, and together they started writing a book, *Old Man Fog and the Last Aborigines of Barrow Point*, the early drafts of which Hart kept in a box under his bed in the van.

"Uncle Roger was always trying to teach me his language," recalls Sonya Gibson, who used to clean Hart's place in exchange for school pocket money and now runs Hope Vale's cultural centre. "It was a tongue-twisting language, very nice and soft, like a song. It really was beautiful to hear it spoken."

Yet it puzzled people that Hart should care so much. They'd see him sitting under a tree with his lists of words and say, "Why you bother with all that, old fella?" And he'd say, "When I speak language, it makes me feel home."

**T**HE PASSING OF ROGER HART'S LANGUAGE made no news whatsoever. A language expires on average every two years in Australia, and every fortnight worldwide. Of the 250-odd Aboriginal languages (comprising up to 700 dialects) spoken at the time of colonisation, each as different from the other as English and Dutch, some 55 have already gone, and the rate of extinction has never been higher.

Roger Hart may have died lonely, but as a last keeper of his people's language he was far from alone. Just to the west, in Laura, old Tommy George and George Musgrave are the last speakers of Thaypan. To the north, on Lilyvale Station, three geriatric siblings maintain Rimanggudihma. And down the road in Cooktown lives Helen Rootsey, the sole keeper of not one but two languages: her father's Bathurst Head language and her mother's Marrett River language, both from the Princess Charlotte Bay region. Rootsey's mother died at 35. "I just speak a few words of that language now," says Rootsey, who is 84. "Maybe I could understand it if there was someone left to speak it, I don't know."

According to SIL International, a Christian-based organisation that documents the world's oral languages with an eye to producing Bible translations, 27 Australian languages are down to a single speaker. A further 63 are down to two to six speakers, and another 80 are classified as "almost extinct". Just 20 or so have been deemed sufficiently active to warrant New Testament translations.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN VAN TIGGELEN

Noel Pearson, the Cape York leader who grew up in Hope Vale, says he finds it as hard to get his head around the rate of loss as to comprehend that Aborigines were able to maintain such language diversity in the first place. Cape York Peninsula was one of the country's most diverse regions, with almost 50 complex languages – just one of which, Wik Mungkan from the isolated west coast, is still routinely passed on to children.

“You're talking about relatively small numbers of people insisting on keeping distinct languages from one another for thousands of years,” explains Pearson, who was close to Roger Hart and, alone among the Hope Vale community, picked up a good deal of his language. “These were not people living in discrete groups. They mingled, intermarried, moved around.

“Typically, everyone in camp would be multilingual. They'd speak four to five languages but they'd own a language in relation to their country. They might not live there all the time, or even most of the time, but they were connected to country through language. So the prime function for that maintenance of diversity must have been identity. The survival of language is paramount for our sense of self.”

Language is also a repository for history and knowledge. At Cape Keerweer on Cape York's west coast, the scale of the massacre that accompanied the discovery of Australia by the Dutch in 1606 might have been lost with the sailors who did the killing, were it not for the Wik people who passed it from generation to generation for 400 years. On the other side of the Gulf of Carpentaria, many millennia before Carl Linnaeus came up with his system of biological classification, an Arnhem Land tribe named various macropod species for the way they hopped.

John Haviland, the American linguist who worked with Hart and documented Pearson's native Guugu Yimithirr language, says “language reaches back in time and place in a way that nothing else does in Aboriginal society”. Intact Aboriginal languages also set the boundaries of social relations. Not unlike Javanese, which comprises different lingos for different social classes, an Aboriginal language may take different forms depending on the level of kinship. Within Guugu Yimithirr, for example, a “brother-in-law language” exists with thousands of separate words. “It's a conceptual masterpiece,” says Haviland. “When you're dealing with an intellectual feat like this, you never know what its precise value is until you need it.”

**I**N HIS BOOK *LANGUAGE DEATH*, BRITISH linguist David Crystal likens the momentum of loss to a tsunami of sorts, powered by cultural assimilation through globalisation and the ongoing drift to the cities. It's the third mass extinction of languages, each in the name of human progress. The first struck 8000 years ago in the wake of the Neolithic revolution, when hunters and gatherers began to cluster in agrarian settlements. The second, which came with the colonisation of Oceania and the Americas, spared just one-sixth of the 1200 Brazilian languages that existed 500 years ago.

The current wave looks no kinder. Crystal estimates that of the world's 6000 languages surviving today, half will be lost by the end of



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this century. “The prospect in a few hundred years of just one language per nation, and then just one language for the whole world ... is indeed real,” writes Crystal.

Not everyone subscribes to Crystal's prognosis. “We don't accept that languages can die,” says Paul Paton, who runs the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages. Paton claims there are 36 indigenous languages in Victoria, about 10 of which are used “to some extent”. A few are even taught in schools and colleges. “Of course, it will never be the same again. There's too much loss. But people use words, maybe one, two every day, to keep their language alive.” Tenuous as this definition may seem – it's hard to conceive of Latin as a living language for our use of *et cetera* and *ad nauseam* – it has some grounding in modern linguistics, which teaches that no language is extinct if it has been documented, because it may be revived. At worst, languages lie dormant.

Old-school linguists don't buy it. Keeping in mind that around the world a language becomes “dormant” every fortnight, the idea of awakening even one, of giving it a shape and a life and a role, seems hardly less fantastical a project than attempting to clone a thylacine from denatured scraps of DNA.

The “dead” language that is invariably cited as a textbook example of successful revival is Hebrew. Yet Hebrew may not even qualify as the textbook exception. Though it faded as a vernacular some 2000 years before re-emerging at the urging of early Zionists in the late 19th century, Hebrew never ceased to be used by Talmudic scholars.

One noted old-school linguist, who in far north Queensland in the 1960s studied five

**Death sentence:** (above) Roger Hart's grave site in Hope Vale, where his language is buried with him.

languages, four of which are now extinct, makes no secret of his disdain for the idea of dormancy. “It's utter rubbish,” says the linguist, who prefers to remain nameless. While it may be possible to exhume some fragments, as the Victorians appear to be doing, he says not a single case exists of the successful resurrection of a language that has completely lost its speech community – not even in Canada and the United States, whose governments far outpoint Australia's in their support for indigenous languages.

**L**ANGUAGE LOSS CUTS TO THE HEART OF Aboriginal identity, which renders it a very touchy subject, especially in the more colonised southern parts of the country where the links between language, traditions and identity have become far from inextricable. Take the census period from 1991 to 1996 (the period native title became legally recognised). Although the section of the population identifying as Aboriginal rose by 34 per cent, to 303,000, the number professing to speak an Aboriginal language stayed constant, at 43,000.

Or take Geoff Clark, the former chair of ATSIC from the Gunditjmarra community of south-western Victoria. On the one hand he says “language is like your sovereign soul”. On the other he is quick to bristle at any suggestion that the loss of his language might be a reflection on his Aboriginality. Colonisation, oppression, prejudice, genocide – all can galvanise identity even as language is stifled. “It's like if you don't play the didge you're not a blackfella,” he says. “We have to dispel this myth of things becoming limited and less [traditional].”

Clark believes language is dynamic, that it can adapt to damage and loss, and that as such Gunditjmarra has evolved into a brand of English that his mob more or less shares with other Aboriginal communities. “There is still a unique system of relating in Australia which is indigenous, a kind of koori or Aboriginal English that we all understand.” Like the street vernacular of African-Americans, Aboriginal English is a dialect of English (as opposed to the Kimberley and Torres Strait kriols, which are languages in their own right), incorporating some Aboriginal words and idioms and spoken with an Aboriginal accent. Its catchcry is “too deadly” (excellent). Most state governments now recognise it as a valid lingua franca. Some schools even teach it.

Lester Coyne, who manages the Melbourne-based Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages (FATSIL), regards Aboriginal English as a bridging language. “It can be a stepping stone for kids to learning their own language,” argues Coyne. “Even if it isn't, it is better than no [Aboriginal] language at all.”

The elevation of Aboriginal English from the street into schools has its roots in towns, where the politics of identity are the politics of loss. Two centuries of colonisation have sapped so much of language, of traditions, of native title and indeed of colour, that one's Aboriginality is asserted as an absolute. (Unlike, say, in Cape York, where terms such as half-caste and full-blood still have day-to-day meaning.) Just as Aborigines increasingly identify themselves as koorie or noongars or murriss – terms that denote a loose, regional,



non-white brotherhood but possess little or no meaningful connection to land or language – they are adopting Aboriginal English as their blackfella language. To urbanised, politicised and bureaucratised blacks such as Clark and Coyne – men whose first language is English – this evolution is a mark of unity and strength.

On the other hand, north-of-Capricorn types such as Pearson, who still speak their language and retain strong native ties to country, are not so sure. Pearson, a leading player in the Mabon and Wik native title cases of the 1990s, is the first to recognise that there is political strength in unity. But his concern is that unity is being added with uniformity, in that the drift towards some form of cultural pan-Aboriginality, as evidenced by the increasingly widespread acceptance of Aboriginal English, represents an indigenous dumbing down.

“Aboriginal English and kriols are the crown-of-thorns starfish of Aboriginal languages,” says Pearson. “Rather than people being fluently bilingual, you end up with people who are poor in their own language and poor in English with a language that can’t serve them in the white man’s world and whose most pernicious effect continues to be on the traditional language.

“Maybe for those communities that have lost their traditional language, Aboriginal English becomes their identity language, so they have a policy interest in its validity. They comfort themselves that its evolution is an adaptation when in fact it’s a decline, it’s a pauperisation. The big mistake made by many linguists and educators is that its validity does not depend on whether Aboriginal English is technically a language. That is not the question. People can bark at each other in complicated ways. You could eventually say that this is a language.

“But whether you want to replace Guugu Yimithirr with a form of barking is the question for the Hope Vale community.”

**G**UUGU YIMITHIRR HAS A SPECIAL PLACE in white Australia’s heritage. In 1770, the crew of the Endeavour spent seven weeks in modern-day Cooktown for repairs after striking a reef. Relations with the locals were relatively friendly, and Captain James Cook, botanist Joseph Banks and artist Sydney Parkinson each returned home with substantial word lists. In his journal, Cook described the locals’ speech as “soft and tunable”. Not only did Guugu Yimithirr thus become the first Australian language to be documented, it also yielded the word for the weird-looking animal

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“Aboriginal English and kriols are the crown-of-thorns starfish of Aboriginal languages”: (top) Guugu Yimithirr country near Cooktown; (above) Noel Pearson, centre, Roger Hart, right, and Hope Vale resident Peter Costello in 1993.

the crew had been shooting and eating during their stay: “kangaroo” (*gungurru*).

Now, 235 years later, Guugu Yimithirr is a language on the edge. Some 50 to 100 fluent speakers remain, most of whom are elderly and live in Hope Vale. “It could be snuffed out in a generation,” says Haviland, the linguist. “You take someone like Noely [Pearson]. He’s a fluent native speaker but he’s not fully competent in it because he was educated in English. Would his kid [Pearson became a father in May] learn Guugu Yimithirr or not? It’s an open question for me.”

One of Hope Vale’s elders, Irene Hammett, taught Guugu at the local school until the mid-1990s. She has a single copy left of her textbook, which resembles any language text, with sections on grammar, word games and vocabulary. The kids loved the lessons, she says. Yet the books are no longer used. “I hear they’re teaching the kids Aboriginal English in school at Cooktown now,” she says in disgust. “We shouldn’t be encouraging it. If you want to talk it, talk, but there’s no place for it on blackboards.”

Like Hammett, local artist Roy McIvor, 71, fears Hope Vale English, the local variant of Aboriginal English, has already eclipsed Guugu Yimithirr within his extended family. “To see my language dying is a great sorrow. Guugu is a part of our mob, our history. Some of the young fellas still express a bit of identity through traditional hunting but without language we *bama* are just floating around.” He adds: “Without language we lose that *bama* sense of humour, too. In English, the joke might only

go halfway, but you tell it in language and you hear the old people laughing their heads off.”

McIvor credits Lutheran missionaries with preserving the language. He was taught by Georg Heinrich Schwarz, the stalwart German who ran the local mission from 1887 to the early 1950s. McIvor remembers Schwarz as “a fair man. At times he went overboard, sending people away to Palm Island if they caused trouble. But by keeping our language strong, he kept us strong.” Though Schwarz quashed traditions and tribal ritual, he made it a priority to learn Guugu and took on the name of *Muni*, the Guugu word for black (*schwarz* in German) because his charges couldn’t pronounce his European name. Guugu Yimithirr’s guttural and glottal sounds soon became a feature of church sermons and it was Schwarz who saw to it that this oral language became a written one.

McIvor grabs a hymn book from the shelf behind him. It dates from 1946 and contains hundreds of songs in Guugu Yimithirr. He picks up his guitar, lets the pages fall open at a three-verse song titled *Wuderbe Duderbe* and, to a rusty strum, starts singing – it’s *Silent Night*.

“It was a time when people were genuinely bilingual,” he says after laying down his instrument. “Language teaches us kinship, keeps us together.” He rattles off a string of throaty kinship terms, including four words for “aunty”. “When we lose these kinship terms, our whole caring and sharing system breaks down. We call it *mugay* – a system of kinship relations, for discipline, respect and support. When people know their place, there’s respect. In our language, for instance, we have a word for hunter: *wallan*. This is a good hunter, a lucky hunter who shares his catch. But we have another word: *mathurr*. A *mathurr* is a hopeless hunter, a disgrace, what you don’t want to be. In today’s society, there are a lot more *mathurr*.”

**D**OWN THE ROAD FROM HOPE VALE, IN Marton, lives Alberta Hornsby. She shares her home with her husband, a couple of gammy-legged dogs and often as not a brood of grandchildren. Hornsby, 49, came to see the value of her language the hard way. Her parents left the mission when she was six. Family life quickly deteriorated on the outside and she was sent to boarding school in Albury. “I tried to forget my language because it was seen as babble, something missionaries used to convert people.”

Pregnant at 16, she returned to Hope Vale – now no longer a mission – to have seven more children to three more fathers. “I was the original party girl,” she says. “Grog, drugs, you name it.” Out of the blue she was asked to take over the local language program for FATSIL. She accepted; someone had to. “I just kept partying. I had no knowledge of language. No idea. Then I started going to a few meetings and I saw this push for [language] maintenance and thought, ‘Why is this so important?’”

Over time she consulted the likes of Roger Hart. She began reading John Haviland’s work on Guugu Yimithirr. She’d drop in on her aunty, Irene Hammett, who’d address her in Guugu. “Finally I thought, ‘Okay, I see. Language teaches you about you.’ Then I realised: language is power. That’s why the

whitefellas tried to take it away in so many places. That's why they don't support it properly. Just imagine if Hope Vale community council held all their meetings in language. Where would you *wangarr* [whitefellas] be then?"

Hornsby is now a year from completing a degree in linguistics and, although she's still not fluent in Guugu, she's teaching her grandchildren and is keen to launch language classes at the cultural centre – local politics and funding permitting. "We've moved on from the recording stage; it's now about getting it valued in the community."

The University of Queensland's Professor Bruce Rigsby, who has been studying Cape York languages for more than 30 years, has high hopes for the training of community linguists and language teachers such as Hornsby. Too often in the past the only tangible benefit to result from a (white) linguist's immersion in a community is his or her PhD. When it comes to language transmission as opposed to recording, concedes Rigsby, "we [linguists] do not have good answers. As linguists we can help document languages and compile dictionaries and do some teaching, but really [language survival] takes co-operation between linguists and the community."

It also takes government support. In North America, government efforts to prop up indigenous languages include bilingual school curricula, language classes for outsiders, radio and TV broadcasting, street signs, newsletters, theatre performances and translations of the classics.

By and large, this sort of support is not available for Australian languages. Some endeavours, such as the Northern Territory's bilingual programs for schools, have actually been wound back. State education departments have enough trouble raising Aboriginal standards of English, let alone of indigenous languages. Meanwhile, most of the money allocated through the Federal Government's endangered languages program is spent on linguists and documentation.

To be fair, the task is not made easier by the sheer number of languages involved, and the prevailing politically correct notion within Aboriginal bureaucracy that languages don't die, and therefore "dormant" languages are as deserving of resurrection as living languages are of survival.

"The business of transmission is a massive undertaking," says Pearson, who in the past has translated native title court determinations into Guugu Yimithirr for his community. "I suggest that those communities where language is still very much vibrant, such as in Arnhem Land and central Australia, look at Guugu Yimithirr and see their future. They need to snap out of their complacency. Guugu Yimithirr was at their current stage 30 or 40 years ago. Recording is and has taken place. But in terms of transmission from learned generations to new generations, we blackfellas really need to pull our fingers out."

Having long railed against the "learned helplessness" induced by successive generations of indigenous welfare dependence, Pearson says modern educators might like to study the old missionaries' methods of teaching language and literacy, including the use of Bible translations. With the Hebrew



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**"I tried to forget my language because it was seen as babble": Albert Hornsby (top) is now a year from completing a degree in linguistics; (above), Rod "Rocky" Gibson, Roger Hart's grandson, with his wife Lianne and one of their children.**

model in mind, he believes that traditionalist scholars are needed to keep the language alive.

"We need fundamentalists. We need to educate our own scholars, our own intellectuals," he says. "Don't forget, language maintenance was an exercise that Roger Hart started in the 1920s. He was an intellectual in the true sense."

"By taking a lifelong delight in reconstructing his own language and history, he staged a rescue and recovery operation on behalf of all the people responsible for the sad history of Barrow Point."

**A** LOT OF LANGUAGE AND KNOWLEDGE already lies buried in the Hope Vale cemetery. As Haviland writes in *Old Man Fog*: "The dismantling of Aboriginal life throughout the north was cruelly effective and irrevocable. What survives is radically transformed. What were once moral tales for initiated adults have become fairytales for children's books. What were once the special words for respect or intimacy have now become arcane counters in a calculus of claims for legitimacy and land. What were once elaborate social institutions for sharing resources, honouring the law and educating human beings have been reduced to boundaries, titles, racial distinctions and a decidedly European notion of ownership."

In a corner of the cemetery, three bow-backed dogs skulk among the graves. Most graves are simple plots of beach sand each bearing an anonymous white cross and a jar or two of faded plastic flowers. Propped

against one of the crosses is a framed, sun-bleached photo and a name: *Urrwunthinn* Roger Hart.

A few blocks away, Roger's brother Jimmy lies bedridden in his home. He's so thin he's no more than a rumple under the blanket. Every few minutes he relights and puffs on a fat, stumpy roll-your-own which he barely has the strength to raise to his lips. "I'm buggered for good," he says, almost by way of greeting, or goodbye. Jimmy Hart was fully "missionised" and never spoke Barrow Point but he, too, will take a lot of language with him. None of his children speak Guugu Yimithirr as well as he, and his grandchildren even less so.

He jokes that he's been given up for dead before. The year before, a photo of him was published with his brother's obituary in the *Cooktown Local News*, which caused much consternation among the illiterate of Hope Vale. "Old Roger, I miss him," he says. "He was a very clever man. The way he got back his language. He was always talking about his country, about how beautiful it was and how he wanted to go back and live there. He went back a few times, with John Haviland. He told me they ate oysters and fresh fish every day. He was so excited; it was like he was young again."

Roger Hart's story should have ended at Barrow Point. "Uncle Roger wanted to go back and live and die and be buried there and I promised him that, but it didn't happen," says his grandson, Roderick "Rocky" Gibson. Seven years ago, after a drawn-out native title process, a beach shack was erected for Hart at Barrow Point and a four-wheel-drive was provided to his family to transport him. But the family fought over the use of the car and within months it had been rolled and written off.

"He never did make it back to Barrow Point after that," says Gibson, who lives in Hart's old place with his wife Lianne and their five young children. One of them bears Hart's father's Barrow Point name. Gibson spent three months learning Barrow Point in preparation for a land claim, only to quit after he fell out with other claimants. "The kids speak the odd word of Barrow Point, 'come here', 'get lost', that sort of thing," says Gibson. "That language is gone."

Roger Hart's last days took him south, as it turned out, not north. He was admitted to Cooktown hospital, then flown on to Cairns Base. Says Jimmy Hart: "You know when they send you to Cairns: finish, you come back dead." There was talk of burying him at Barrow Point but the family didn't have the money, the community council didn't have the means and ultimately neither quite had the will. In any event, Hope Vale put on a big send-off for Roger – the community is very practised at funerals – and the Lutheran church was as packed as it had been in its heyday.

John Haviland was there. At the service, he told the story about Hart being tied up by his father and left at the mission. Haviland told it partly in Barrow Point, as Hart had told it to him. Hart's family strained to understand; only Noel Pearson got the full picture. Says Haviland, "I had a distinct sense of burying the language with him. Then again, we were never going to capture a living language. Even as I was documenting it, we were already writing his epitaph, as it were. And Roger would have been as aware of that as I was." ■