

Pitjantjatjara language change: some observations and recommendations

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Abstract: Pitjantjatjara is often regarded as a robust language with more than 3000 speakers, including children, across a range of communities. Nevertheless, the language has been affected by colonialism and many community members are concerned about language change. In this paper, Anangu educators from Pukatja/ Ernabella work together with a non-Indigenous linguist to survey changes we have noticed in the language and to make recommendations for the future. We report changes in pronunciation, grammar and the ways the language is used. In some cases, these changes result directly from contact between languages or other changes in the cultural setting of people speaking Pitjantjatjara today. We see these as winds of change that are sweeping across the language and call for the construction of a windbreak to protect Pitjantjatjara language and culture to keep it strong for future generations.

Pitjantjatjara is one of the more secure traditional Indigenous languages in Australia. It is spoken by 3125 people (ABS 2016) and is the dominant language for many communities in northern South Australia and southern Northern Territory. Children living in these communities grow up learning Pitjantjatjara as their first language and only learn English later through school education. Nevertheless, the Pitjantjatjara language is undergoing rapid change. In this paper, we describe the changes we have observed and make recommendations for what could be done to help strengthen the language for the future.

The observations described here relate to Pitjantjatjara as spoken in Pukatja (Ernabella). Pukatja is a community of approximately 500 people within the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands located in the north-west corner of South Australia (Figure 1). Our observations come from Anangu (Indigenous) educators' experiences living and

working in the community and from recordings of multi-generational groups made by a Piraṅpa (non-Indigenous) linguist between 2016 and 2018. Our main comparison is between the speech of those born in the 1960s and earlier and those born in the 1980s and later.

Rebecca Defina became interested in the topic of language change during her study of how children acquire Pitjantjatjara. She noticed a difference between the speech of the parents and grandparents of the children she was studying, so she set out to describe these differences in order to gain a better understanding of the linguistic environment of the children and what they were developing towards as a linguistic target. As part of this process, she spoke with several community members to ask about changes they had noticed within the language. It was then that she discovered that Makinti Minutjukur and Katrina and Umatji Tjitayi had been thinking about the issue of language change in some detail for a long time

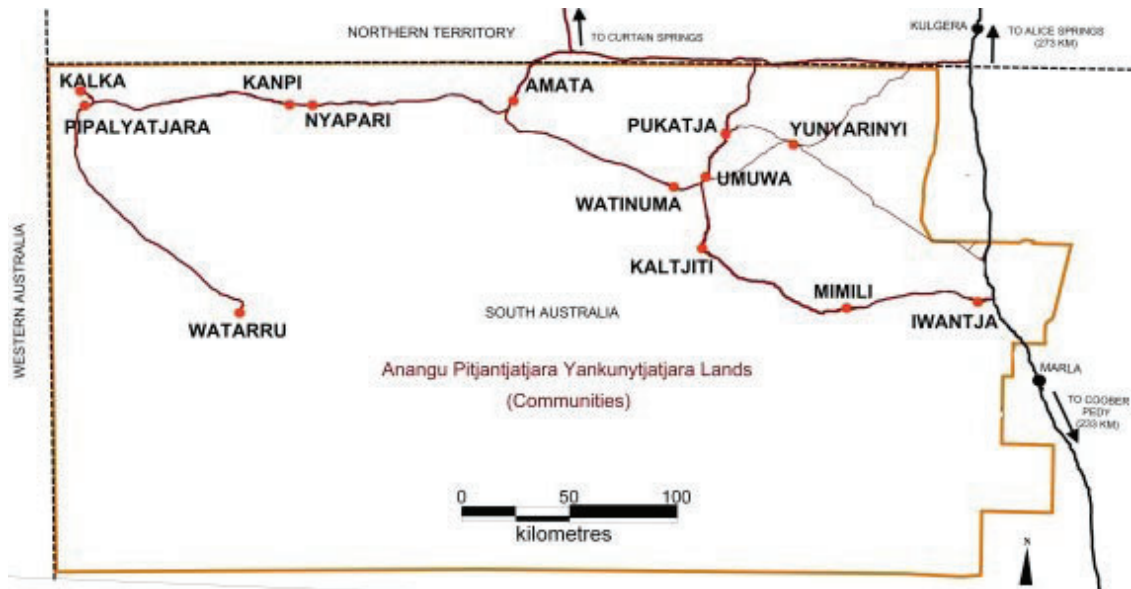


Figure 1: Map of the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands (APY n.d., used with permission)

and we decided to collaborate. First, we met together to discuss the various changes we had noticed and sketch out the majority of this paper. Then we met again to discuss the issues in more detail and Minutjukur, Tjitayi and Tjitayi painted the paintings shown in Boxes 1–3. These paintings and their accompanying text were created by the individual authors but constructed within ongoing joint discussion between all four authors. Defina drafted the body of the paper from these joint discussions and, finally, we met together again to edit and approve the final paper.

Changes in the speech community

The community of Pukatja, then known as Ernabella, was built around a mission established by Dr Charles Duguid in 1937. The Ernabella mission differed noticeably from many other missions in its acceptance and promotion of the local language and culture. In fact, Duguid and the Presbyterian Church created the mission consciously to ‘act as a buffer between the Aborigines and the encroaching white settlers’ (Edwards 2014:45). Christian teachings were offered and encouraged, but staff were also required to learn the Pitjantjatjara language and culture. In envisaging the mission, Duguid said,

‘An intelligent Christian mission, in my mind, is the only way, but those who attempt the task must have a knowledge of anthropology, must learn the language of the natives, and must have in them the spirit of Christ’ (Duguid 1934).

From the earliest days of the mission school, classes were predominantly in Pitjantjatjara. In the 1950s, the children at school in Ernabella were taught by one Piraṅpa and five Anangu teachers (Osborne 2016). The school continued to be bilingual until 1992, when an English-only school policy was instituted in the APY Lands as requested by the Pitjantjatjara-Yankunytjatjara Education Council. This policy has recently been renegotiated. Pitjantjatjara literacy is now taught for one hour each week and discussions continue to increase the use of Pitjantjatjara in school.

Nowadays, Pukatja is a multilingual community. Many service providers, such as doctors, teachers and store cashiers, are monolingual English speakers and Anangu interact with them in English. The increased ease of travel also appears to have increased the rates of marriage with Arrernte, Luritja, Warlpiri and other peoples, and many families are now mixed, with the children learning two or more languages at home.

Box 1: The Pitjantjatjara language context changing over time



Figure 2: Painting by Katrina Tjitayi, acrylic on canvas, March 2018

A long time ago, our language was really strong. We were teaching our children all the time, speaking to them, while hunting, cooking, singing inma, and staying together. The old people speak strong language.

In the mission time, there were white Australians who spoke Pitjantjatjara really well. These people taught in the school and Pitjantjatjara was the main language used there.

Now something has changed. New things have come into our world and it makes it hard for our children. They are losing Pitjantjatjara words and learning English words. Everything is getting mixed up and that is why children are speaking the wrong way.

This painting shows the mix of languages in our community. We have many languages in our community now. Families are speaking different languages. The mother's language is always the strongest, as they are always with the children. We want our children to learn all their languages. All languages are good, but we need to keep them all strong rather than mixing them up, which weakens them. I see language as a journey — generations coming after learn the language mix they hear now and this becomes the new language. So, it is important for people to speak proper language, without mixing, to ensure children learn these languages properly. It would be good for kids to be able to learn and get credit for their languages as part of secondary school.

Box 2: Case studies of families in Pukatja



Figure 3: Painting by Umatji Tjitayi, acrylic on canvas, March 2018

This painting is about families staying in their places talking Pitjantjatjara together. In the top left is my family — me and my husband and our children. In the top right is me and my sisters and our children. My husband speaks a different language and brings a different culture. But our children still speak Pitjantjatjara and they also learn from their father's side. We all speak Pitjantjatjara in our families and the language remains strong. We have it in our spirit.

In the middle of the painting is a school where they speak Pitjantjatjara and the language stays strong and flourishes like a tree from the water at the centre there.

In the bottom of the painting are other communities coming in, families who come to visit sometimes, groups of kids and families who come from other places and talk in different ways. These families and groups do not speak as much Pitjantjatjara and the languages get mixed and are not as strong there. When the language is not being spoken, it is like a tree that starts to wither and the language does not get passed on to future generations. We want to keep our language strong, so that our children's children will still have the language strong in their spirits.

with verbs to indicate the direction of motion, but they do not reduplicate them.

Another morphological change we have noticed relates to the verb classes. Pitjantjatjara has four verb classes that determine the form of tense and other suffixes, much like French and many other languages. Younger speakers have been changing the verb class of some verbs — particularly those borrowed from English. For instance, older speakers will say *tantjiri!* (dance!) in the Ø verb class, where younger speakers will say *tjantjiriwa!* in the wa verb class.

Beyond these structural changes, we also see substantial changes in the lexicon, with many words being lost. Younger speakers no longer know many of the specialised words — for instance, words for types of birds, water, land formations and plants. Also, many of the words that are still being used and learned by new generations are shifting their meaning. Generic terms, such as *tjulpu* (bird), are being used in more contexts where, previously, more specific terms would have been used. Sometimes, more specific terms are becoming broader in their meaning. For instance, *kutjani* (boil) is sometimes used for all types of cooking, including *pauṇi* (roast). *Kutitjunanyi* (concealing something/steal) is sometimes also used to mean ‘hide oneself’ in place of *kumpitjunanyi* (hide). We also see other shifts in meaning, such as the use of *nyitja* instead of *nyangatja* (here). This new form of the demonstrative may be based on *nyiku*, a word used when handing someone something, as in ‘here you go’.

Perhaps the largest shift in the language is within the areas of verbal arts and ways of talking. This shift within the verbal arts has been discussed for neighbouring language Ngaatjatjarra and is the focus of Elizabeth Ellis and Inge Kral’s current Western Desert speech styles and verbal arts research project (see ANU 2019). Many older Pitjantjatjara speakers talk about how their language is simplifying and losing its richness. They comment on the loss of alternate vocabulary and linguistic embellishments, but particularly on the loss of oratory styles and the rich traditions of narrative. For instance, the early morning talk style *aalpiri* was employed to resolve disputes and announce plans for the day

before people moved from their beds in the camp but it, along with evening storytelling styles, is now rarely heard. These changes are likely due to cultural shifts among the Anangu. For instance, with family groups living either within the same house or spread out over several houses across the community, the called-out *aalpiri* is no longer a necessary or effective method for communicating among the group.

Some of the changes we observe in Pitjantjatjara are identifiably due to contact with English. For instance, many words have been borrowed from English, even where there are good Pitjantjatjara equivalents. Young Pitjantjatjara speakers are often heard saying *look here*, *finish* and *family*. English terms have also taken over part of the Pitjantjatjara kin term system. Younger speakers are now consistently using *mummy* in place of *ngunytju* (mother) and *paapa* in place of *mama* (father). The influence of English extends beyond the lexicon. It can also be seen in several phrases that appear to be direct translations or calques from English. These direct translations sometimes generate new meanings for the Pitjantjatjara words involved. For instance, the English phrase, ‘Can I have a bite?’, is often translated as *patjarani uwa*. However, the Pitjantjatjara verb *patja* (bite) would not normally be used in relation to eating. It is reserved for biting, as in a dog biting and injuring someone’s leg. When older speakers hear this phrase, they often jump with shock. The influence of English can also be seen in word order changes. For instance, where the negative marker *wiya* would normally follow the noun in *papa wiya* (no dogs), it is now common to see signs around communities and even sometimes to hear people say *wiya papa*.

Although it is clear many changes are due to the influence of English, some are not transparently due to language contact. Many changes are likely due to changes in lifestyle. For instance, the loss of *aalpiri* and words for specific types of animals and plants relates to shifts in sleeping and food-acquiring practices. Other changes are likely regular processes of language change, as one would find in any language over time. However, it is possible the massive changes in lifestyle and intensive language contact over the past century have accelerated these changes.

Box 3: Our language was, is and will remain strong against the winds of change

Figure 4: Painting by Makinti Minutjukur, acrylic on canvas, March 2018

Our language is always strong. In the past, present and for the future, our language is always strong. As the language moves from the present to the future we want to keep it strong by teaching our Anangu children proper language. The wind is changing from every direction — east, west, north and south. We don't want our language to become weak or to change. We want our language to stay the same and remain strong.

Other languages are coming in and changing our language, but we want our language to be strong. We need to build a windbreak to buffer our language against these changes. Our language keeps our culture, lands and stories from the past for our generation and the generations of the future. The world is changing. We want to keep our language strong from past, in the present and for the future.

Recommendations for a strong future

But how do we make a windbreak for a language? First, it is helpful to look again at the family case study from Box 2, as well as community members' reactions to it. The families at the top of the painting are the artist's own nuclear family (herself, her husband and children) and her slightly wider family (her sisters, herself and all their children). These families are described as still speaking Pitjantjatjara and keeping the language strong, even though the children also know the languages of their fathers. This contrasts with other families, who are described as using more of a mixed language. However, Umatji's family is not immune to the changes we see in the general language community and has been recorded using English words such as *mummy*, *family*, *look here* and *stop*, as well as saying *nyiiitja* instead of *nyangatja* (here). The differences seem to lie in the extent of English loan word use and the maintained knowledge of a fairly broad range of words and verbal styles. In this way, the family seems to have been somewhat buffered against some of the linguistic changes taking place. Umatji Tjitayi credits this buffering to the fact that she stays with her family and speaks Pitjantjatjara with them consistently. She also credits her sisters, who are all strong Pitjantjatjara speakers and work together to care for the children, speaking Pitjantjatjara with them and correcting them as they see fit. For instance, the following excerpt from a recording of Umatji's granddaughter J shows Umatji's sister K correcting J's use of *nyiiitja* (a new word being used instead of *nyangatja* 'this') and J taking up that correction in her next utterance, though she reverts to *nyiiitja* soon after.

- 3 J: *ngayu-ku* *nyiiitja*
 1sg-POSS this
 'This one's mine'
- K: *nyiiitja wiya,* *nyangatja*
 this no, this
 'Not nyiiitja, it's nyangatja.'
- J: *ngayuku* *nyangatja*
 1sg-POSS this
 'This one's mine'

When other community members have seen this painting, they have often said something like, 'but of course her family has strong Pitjantjatjara'. The reasons they give for this are illuminating. They credit the fact that Umatji's family largely stays in community, rather than spending significant time in predominantly English-speaking cities. They also note that Umatji comes from a family of strong educators. Her mother was one of the teachers in the school during the mission days and several of her daughters, including Umatji, have followed her into teaching careers.

The key features in this case thus appear to be time spent listening to and engaging with the language, in both family groups and the wider community, as well as the metalinguistic awareness of conversational partners who watch out for and correct what they identify as divergences from proper Pitjantjatjara. These strengths could be shared with others through community information sessions to discuss the importance of time spent communicating in language, the different ways the language appears to be changing, how these changes can be seen in children's speech, and modelling ways people can act to reinforce desired language forms.

As discussed above, the school in Pukatja used to teach in Pitjantjatjara. However, in the 1990s there was a shift to an English-only policy. Recently, schools throughout the APY Lands have reintroduced a Pitjantjatjara literacy program for one hour a week. Many community members feel this is not enough. Indeed, increasing time focused on Pitjantjatjara in school could be a valuable tool to help build a windbreak for the language, especially if this time was spent working with educators who had good metalinguistic awareness and a focus on encouraging more complex, less frequent aspects of the language, such as specific vocabulary items and embellished oratory styles. The many old resources with rich language created during the bilingual education days could be utilised here.

Programs such as this become possible when the teaching of Pitjantjatjara is placed in the hands of Anangu (Pitjantjatjara people). However, Anangu educators have been pushed further away from teaching roles due to increases in the levels of qualifications needed and the closure of the Anangu teacher education program (AnTEP)

run by the University of South Australia. Also, since bilingual education finished in the 1990s, Pitjantjatjara-speaking adults are increasingly not literate in Pitjantjatjara. All these factors have limited the number of skilled educators able to manage Pitjantjatjara language programs. Thus education within the APY Lands has shifted more and more to a Pīranpa-led domain. Recently, there have been increasing calls for an official Anangu Language Committee within the APY Lands to manage language issues. This committee could manage not only school language programs but also oversee training programs and make decisions about language issues.

The winds of change have swept, and continue to sweep, across the APY Lands. Since first contact between Europeans and Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara-speaking peoples 150 years ago, there have been massive shifts in almost all aspects of everyday life. These shifts in lifestyle have coincided with shifts in the linguistic landscape with increasing contact with English, as well as other Australian Indigenous languages. In this paper, we have described some of the shifts these winds of change are bringing to the language. All languages shift and change with time and adapt to the current needs of their speakers. But there is a great desire among many APY community members to protect the valuable knowledge and spirit held within the language spoken by the older generations (e.g. Lester et al. 2013). If we are to do this, we need to act now while these older speakers are still with us and build a windbreak to protect our language. This language windbreak can be built by increasing metalinguistic awareness and exposure to the strong old language. Increasing the strength and understanding of Pitjantjatjara would not only improve Anangu children's first language, but also open the door to stronger English and make their spirits strong and proud. Therefore we add this paper to the growing call for increased Anangu direction of the education of Anangu children (e.g. Burton and Osborne 2014; Guenther et al. 2015, 2016; Lester et al. 2013).

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Makinti Minutjukur comes from Ernabella. She has worked across a diverse range of positions within the community, including as an interpreter. Since 2010 she has worked with the Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Education Committee, first as Director and now as Anangu Interagency Coordinator. She is a frequent presenter on radio and television regarding Anangu children's education and language in the APY Lands.

Katrina Tjitayi was born in, and went to school in, Ernabella. Her mother was one of the first Anangu teachers at Ernabella Anangu School in the 1940s. Katrina studied at UniSA through the AnTEP program, obtaining a Bachelor of Education. She has worked in Anangu education for more than 20 years and currently works for the Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Education Committee as Wellbeing Coordinator. In 2018 she was awarded the Aunty Josie Agius award by the Department of Education, SA.

Umatji Tjitayi grew up in, and went to school in, Ernabella, where her mother was one of the first Anangu teachers. She has worked as a teacher all her adult life, first in Fregon and currently in Ernabella.

Dr Rebecca Defina received her PhD from the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen, the Netherlands, in 2016. Since then she has worked with the Centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language and the Research Unit for Indigenous Language at The University of Melbourne, studying how children are learning to speak Pitjantjatjara in Pukatja/Ernabella.

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