

Models and methods in linguistic fieldwork: a case study in reflexive meta-documentation

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ABSTRACT

Linguistic fieldwork has seen a progression of frameworks of research since the 1960s, from an ethical model ('fieldwork on'), to advocacy ('fieldwork for'), to collaboration ('fieldwork with'), to empowerment ('fieldwork by') (Cameron et al. 1992, Grinevald 2003, 2007, Grinevald & Bert 2011). Each of these impacts on relationships to the people researchers work with and the methods they use in the field. In addition, meta-documentation (documentation of the research itself) has emerged as an area of concern to fieldworkers and in need of elaboration and practice (Austin 2013). In this paper, I give a personal account of the models and methods I have used over 50 years of engagement with the Diyari (Dieri) Aboriginal community in South Australia (Austin 2014) as a form of reflexive meta-documentation in linguistic field-based research.

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1. Introduction¹

Linguistic fieldwork is a method of engagement with speakers and communities that is employed by linguists and others to explore language structures and use (Bowerman 2008, Meakins et al. 2018). It is useful to distinguish three types of approach to linguistic fieldwork: description, documentation, and revitalisation. We understand description as the study of language as a structural system separated from its actual use by speakers and from the social-political-cultural-economic situation in which it is used. This requires abstraction and the search for general structural principles (phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, sociolinguistics). It demands idealisation, and typically involves 'cleaning up' of recordings of actual use when they are cited as instances of some descriptive phenomenon (Austin and Grenoble 2007, Austin 2010).

Data collection for description may often involve elicitation through surveys, or interviews or experiments with individuals or groups of speakers/signers. Frequently, study of a language or variety that the researcher does not themselves speak or sign is

¹ Earlier versions of the materials incorporated in this paper were presented at the Australian National University, SOAS University of London, and Mahidol University. I am grateful to audiences at these presentations for comments and feedback, and to Lise Dobrin, Julia Sallabank, and David Nathan for discussions of the general theoretical approaches taken. I received very helpful detailed feedback on an earlier draft from Lise Dobrin, David Nash, David Nathan, Jan Scott, and an anonymous reviewer. My thanks also to Greg Wilson for collaboration 2010-2013. My greatest debt is to the Diyari community, especially the Merrick, Murray, Kemp, and Warren families who have taught me about their language and culture, and welcomed me so warmly into their lives since 1974.

undertaken via translation or asking for speaker/signer judgements. Commonly, the records of interview or survey are not of interest in themselves, but are seen as a way to accumulate ‘the data’ for analysis. Description is typically carried out for several reasons:

- to present language structures for others to understand;
- to identify common features and differences across languages (typology);
- to reconstruct language histories and/or contact;
- to investigate how the human mind works (psycho-linguistics, neurophysiology);
- to understand the principles behind how humans interact and express personal, social, and cultural relationships.

The analysis that results from description is often highly structured and written in an abstract metalanguage (which may or may not be formalised). The audience for description is typically other researchers, and it is distributed in articles or books (grammars, dictionaries, maps, graphs, narratives, text collections).

Language documentation, by contrast, is, according to Himmelmann (2006: v):²

concerned with the methods, tools, and theoretical underpinnings for compiling a representative and lasting multipurpose record of a natural language or one of its varieties.

According to Himmelmann (2006: 15), it differs from description by virtue of its focus on collecting and analysing primary data (instances of linguistic performances), accountability (analytical statements are supported by transparent access to the primary data), long-term storage and preservation of primary data (archiving), work in interdisciplinary teams, and cooperation with and direct involvement of the speech/signer community. The outcome of language documentation is frequently seen as an annotated and translated corpus of archived representative materials on a language or a variety (see also Woodbury 2011).

Language revitalisation refers to efforts to improve linguistic vitality by taking action to extend the domains of use of a language and/or to increase the number of speakers/signers (often in the context of reversing language shift), both adults and children (Austin and Sallabank 2018). Speech/signer community members may often be more interested in revitalisation than description or documentation, though increasingly many are also using documentary and descriptive approaches to support their work on language and culture learning and recovery.³ There are several models of revitalisation in use in different situations (language nest, master-apprentice, immersion, language awareness) and communities may associate revitalisation with formal language learning in a school context.

2. Meta-documentation

Austin 2013 (building on Nathan 2010: 196) proposes the term ‘meta-documentation’ to refer to documentation of language documentation, description, and revitalisation research projects. This includes the nature of the materials collected and analysed, as well as project goals, history, stakeholders, biographies, attitudes and politics, methods,

² See also Austin (2010), Austin and Grenoble (2007).

³ Communities are also being trained in applying descriptive techniques to legacy materials, as in workshops of the *National Breath of Life* in the US (<https://mc.miamioh.edu/nbol/>, accessed 2024-05-28) and *Paper and Talk* in Australia (<https://www.livinglanguages.org.au/paper-and-talk>, accessed 2024-05-27).

tools, relationships, agreements, and outcomes of a given project. These aspects of research are rarely explicitly described by linguistics researchers (other than at the outset in a project proposal, e.g. in a grant application, however this typically does not receive ongoing representation as the research is actually carried out). Woodbury (2011: 161) uses a narrower term ‘project design’ to cover ‘the participants, their purposes, and the various stakeholders in the activity or program of activity or project’.

We suggest that meta-documentation is important for:

- developing good ways of presenting and using language research;
- future preservation of the outcomes of current projects, assisting sustainability by ensuring continuity of projects, people, and products;
- helping future researchers learn from successes and failed experiments; and
- documenting intellectual property contributions and career trajectories.

We develop below (Section 5) a case study of meta-documentation of our work with the Diyari (Dieri)⁴ Aboriginal community of South Australia. We hope that in future other researchers will publish similar accounts of their description, documentation, and revitalisation projects (see also Grinevald 2003, 2005, 2007 for her work with the Rama community in Nicaragua).

3. Research frameworks

Cameron et al. (1992), Grinevald (2003, 2007) and Grinevald and Bert (2011) identify four frameworks within which research with speakers/signers has been carried out over the past sixty years:

1. *Ethical research* – research **on** a language or speakers/signers. This is defined by Cameron et al. (1992: 14-15) as:

a wholly proper concern to minimize damage and offset inconvenience to the researched, and to acknowledge their contributions. ... But the underlying model is one of ‘research on’ social subjects. Human subjects deserve special ethical consideration, but they no more set the researcher’s agenda than the bottle of sulphuric acid sets the chemist’s agenda.

2. *Advocacy research* – research **for** speakers/signers. Cameron et al. (1992: 15) say this is:⁵

characterized by a commitment on the part of the researcher not just to do research on subjects but research on and for subjects. Such a commitment formalizes what is actually a rather common development in field situations, where a researcher is asked to use her skills or her authority as an ‘expert’ to defend subjects’ interests, getting involved in their campaigns for healthcare or education, cultural autonomy or political and land rights, and speaking on their behalf.

⁴ I spell the language name as Diyari (see Austin 1981, 2013, 2021 for discussion). Other spellings in the literature are Dieri, Diari, Dieyerie and variants thereof. The community preference for the name of the group is Dieri and hence the political body is named The Dieri Aboriginal Corporation TDAC (<https://dieri.org.au/>, accessed 2024-05-09).

⁵ For Native Title in Australia (see 5.2) advocacy research “is conducted in order to provide evidence to support – or not – rather than speak on behalf of the claimants” (Jan Scott, p.c.).

3. *Collaborative research* – research **with** speakers/signers. Cameron et al. (1992: 22) describe this as:

the use of interactive or dialogic research methods, as opposed to the distancing or objectifying strategies positivists use. Community members participate as agents working together with researchers.

4. *Empowering research* – research **by** speakers/signers. According to Cameron et al. (1992: 24):⁶

In this model: (a) ‘people are not objects and should not be treated as objects.’ (b) ‘Community members have their own agendas and research should try to address them’ (c) ‘If knowledge is worth having, it is worth sharing’.

Note that the last framework may involve research training and full participation of speakers/signers as equals in the research design, process, and outcomes. It has been seen by many as the favoured model for documentation and revitalisation work over the past 15 years or so (see Czaykowska-Higgins 2009, Glenn 2009, Leonard and Haynes 2010, Rice 2010, Sapien 2018, Yamada 2007).

4. Reflexive meta-documentation

I use the term ‘reflexive meta-documentation’ to refer to research which analyses and interprets researchers’ experiences in their work, and elaborates and contextualises its goals, history, relationships, and outcomes (see Section 2). This requires reflexive and critical consideration of the broad context of historical, socio-cultural, political, and personal issues (within the community and more widely) at the time. It has been practised for the last 25 years within anthropology (including in the form of what Van Maanen (1988) called “confessional tales”), but has not been seen in mainstream linguistics. This is because linguists generally adopt a positivistic empiricist approach that excludes these kinds of contextual and experiential issues from considerations of language structures and uses. Notable exceptions are Dixon (1983), the papers by Grinevald describing her research in Nicaragua on Rama (Grinevald 2003, 2005, 2007, Grinevald and Pivot 2013), and the collection on legacy materials edited by Dobrin and Schwartz (2021).⁷

In the following sections, I describe and analyse my experiences working with the Diyari Aboriginal community, from 1975 to the present day, categorising this work into several phases according to the research framework and methods adopted at each stage. The goal of this writing is to elucidate the intellectual history of my research, make explicit its contextual circumstances and dynamics, as well as meta-document the various kinds of materials collected and produced during this 50 year period. It is to be hoped that other researchers will engage in similar reflection on their research, whether or not they adopt this particular method as a means to represent it.

⁶ Here ‘knowledge sharing’ refers to researchers sharing their knowledge with those they are working with.

⁷ Other autobiographies by linguists who have worked in Australia, such as Oates (2003), Glass (2018) and Swartz (2020), present their work in a narrative, rather than reflexive, way.

5. Phases of research with the Diyari Aboriginal community

The Diyari (or Dieri) are an Australian Indigenous First Nations group whose traditional lands are in the far north of South Australia, east of Kati Thanda-Lake Eyre (in Diyari, *kati thandra*) and centred along the lower reaches of Cooper Creek (*kudnarri* in Diyari). For an overview history of the language since the community was missionised by German Lutherans in 1867 see Austin (2014).

5.1 Phase I – descriptive ‘research on’

The first period of my research extends from 1974 to 1990, with fieldwork in Maree, South Australia, in 1974 (for my BA Linguistics Honours at the Australian National University ANU) and 1975-1977 (PhD at ANU, submitted 1978).⁸ It is important to recall that this was less than seven years after the landmark 27th May 1967 Australian Referendum⁹ that removed references in the Australian Constitution that discriminated against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) people, and enabled the Australian Parliament to make laws for First Australians, as well as counting them as part of the population. It was also just two years after the erection of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy to protest for ATSI land rights,¹⁰ and a year after the election of the Whitlam Labor federal government which instituted reforms to Indigenous rights, such as creation of the Aboriginal Land Fund for the purchase of private property, and the introduction of bilingual education in the Northern Territory (Devlin et al. (eds.) 2017). ATSI people generally held subordinate social positions, being discriminated against in a wide range of ways, and having dependent economic roles, often relying on government funds for support. Many people, including the Diyari, had moved into towns (like Maree, Port Augusta, and Broken Hill) from station properties, following the 1966 Gurindji strike in Wave Hill in the Northern Territory that established equal pay for ATSI workers.

I was introduced to the community of Diyari speakers in Maree by Luise Hercus, a researcher at ANU who was working on the neighbouring Arabana-Wangkangurru and Kuyani languages. Through observing Hercus’ interactions and methods as a kind of apprenticeship,¹¹ I adopted what could be called an ‘ethical research’ approach that relied on elicitation and recording of narrative texts, as well as music performances (for more on Hercus’ work and general approach see Nathan 2016, and other chapters in Austin et al. 2016). This also involved learning to speak Diyari well enough to be able to engage in qualitative dialogic interactions, with sessions recorded on tape and in fieldnotes. At the time there were about 20 multilingual speakers who had learned Diyari as children, and the language was in daily use in some families (especially among Frieda Merrick and her daughters and grandchildren). The outcome of this research was a descriptive grammar (Austin 1981, revised in a practical orthography in 2013), and academic papers about literacy, language classification, and history.¹² Austin et al.

⁸ In 1978 I took up a one-year position at the University of Western Australia and began fieldwork in the Gascoyne region in the mid-north of the state. This research on Ganyara, Mandharda and Gardu languages, which could be classified as primarily ‘descriptive research on’, continued until 1995.

⁹ See <https://www.naa.gov.au/students-and-teachers/student-research-portal/learning-resource-themes/government-and-democracy/constitution-and-referendums/1967-referendum>, accessed 2024-05-29.

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aboriginal_Tent_Embassy, accessed 2024-05-29.

¹¹ I had taken a course on ‘Field Methods’ at ANU in 1973, but this involved one-to-one 50 minute weekly interviews over 10 weeks in a classroom with an ‘informant’, asking for Hua (a Papuan language) translations of English sentences on the topic of complex sentence constructions. It did not address general issues of fieldwork outside the classroom, and did not prepare me for interactions with ATSI people.

¹² For a full list see <https://peterkaustin.com/publications/published-books-and-articles/>, accessed 2025-05-15.

(1988) is a biography of Ben Murray, one of my main teachers; it is notable for presenting his life history partly through a collection of narrative excerpts in Diyari and Wangkangurru with English translations. Further Diyari texts and translations were published as co-authored with Ben Murray (Murray and Austin 1981).

5.2 Phase II – applied ‘research for’

Beginning in around 1990, a number of significant socio-political and economic developments took place within Australia, and among the Diyari in particular. The 1992 the Australian High Court Mabo decision overturned the application of *terra nullius*, opening the possibility for ATSI groups to demonstrate a close and continuous relationships to their traditional lands, and thence to argue for title to unalienated Crown land through a land claim process (Native Title Act 1993). In 1997 a group of Diyari lodged such a land claim; a consent determination was handed down on 1st May 2012 (SCD2012/001)¹³ with award of non-exclusive native title to 47,000 square kilometres east and north-east of Lake Eyre (see Austin 2014 Figure 4). A second consent determination was awarded on 26th February 2014, adding to this native title (SCD2014/003),¹⁴ and a third one on 28th September 2017 for the eastern shore of Lake Eyre (SCD2017/001).¹⁵ Meanwhile, in 2001 The Dieri Aboriginal Corporation (TDAC) was formed, with 600 members in New South Wales and South Australia (increasing to 1,500 by 2024); members typically are identified via family links that can be traced back to apical ancestors associated with the 19th century Lutheran mission. TDAC has negotiated various agreements concerning mining rights with a number of corporations, including Beach Energy and Santos Ltd (their role in funding language activities is mentioned below), and has several business activities in Port Augusta and Maree. Together these have resulted in TDAC being in a strong financial position to undertake social and cultural activities within the community, especially among the largest populations located in Maree, Port Augusta, and Broken Hill.

Although I had kept in touch with individual Diyari people through other researchers such as Luise Hercus and Philip Jones following the end of my fieldwork in 1977, it was not until 2010 that I had the opportunity to revisit the Diyari community.¹⁶ This was in collaboration with Greg Wilson, who was working as a teacher-linguist on language issues for the South Australian Department of Education. Beginning in 2008, Wilson undertook numerous field trips to Port Augusta and Whyalla in collaboration with the Dieri Resources Development Group established by TDAC, and identified a range of people with knowledge of the language, most commonly words and simple sentences. All of my teachers had passed away by then, and there were only a handful of people alive who had learnt Diyari as children, such as Rene Warren, born in 1930, and her late sister, Winnie Naylor (the grandchildren of Frieda Merrick, mentioned in 5.1). As Austin (2014, section 5) points out:

¹³ http://www.nntt.gov.au/searchRegApps/NativeTitleClaims/Pages/Determination_details.aspx?NNTT_Fileno=SCD2012/001, accessed 2024-05-29

¹⁴ For details of the determination see

http://www.nntt.gov.au/searchRegApps/NativeTitleRegisters/Pages/NNTR_details.aspx?NNTT_Fileno=SCD2014/003, accessed 2024-05-15.

¹⁵ https://nntt.gov.au/searchRegApps/NativeTitleRegisters/Pages/NNTR_details.aspx?NNTT_Fileno=SCD2017/001, accessed 2024-05-29

¹⁶ In 2001 I left Australia to take up employment in Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK.

Wilson (p.c.) reports that collection of materials for the Dieri Yawarra project required a great deal of time and that many of the people identified by TDAC as speakers struggled to remember words and sentences in Diyari after years of disuse and lack of practice. It appeared then that all that remained were a number of ‘semi-speakers’ or ‘rememberers’ of the language (Grinevald and Bert 2011), but no-one with conversational fluency or ability to record even short narratives.

Wilson elicited solely via translation from English and recorded around 2,000 items, using a revision of Austin (1981) to elucidate their grammatical structure. This led to the 2011 booklet *Dieri Yawarra: Dieri Language*, which was presented as “a handbook for community and school revitalisation and second language learning”, and an accompanying CD that included cartoons and audio recordings.¹⁷ A pilot language learning programme was initiated at Willsden Primary School in Port Augusta involving speakers and trained Diyari teacher’s aides.

Wilson also began work on a larger language learning textbook entitled *Ngayana Dieri Yawarra Yathayilha: We are all speaking Dieri now* under the auspices of the South Australian Department of Education and with the support of TDAC and Beach Petroleum.¹⁸ Recordings of all the sentence examples in the textbook were made, along with translation of several English children’s songs,¹⁹ and *Folsom Prison Blues* by Johnny Cash, a favourite of Diyari elder Rene Warren.²⁰ In terms of overall design, the structure of the learning materials and textbook was decided by Wilson and follows a grammar-translation model that introduces learning goals via modules focussing on particular grammatical structures, such as:

<i>Nhawurda ngakarni mara.</i>	This is my hand.
<i>Ngayana Dieri wima wangkayilha.</i>	Let’s sing a Dieri song.
<i>Ngakarni para maru marla.</i>	My hair is really black.

I served as an unpaid consultant on the textbook, creating a vocabulary list, and checking the transcription, translation, and grammatical analysis of all components. Unfortunately, the textbook was not completed, and remains in 2013 draft form only.

In 2011, with encouragement and support from Wilson and myself, TDAC successfully applied for a grant from the Indigenous Languages Support (ILS) scheme funded by the Federal Government Department of Regional Australia, Local Government, Arts and Sport. The grant ran from July 2012 to September 2013 and included four community language and culture workshops led by Wilson and myself (February and April 2013 in Adelaide, and March and August 2013 in Port Augusta).²¹

¹⁷ Sadly the CD-ROM no longer functions on current computers and the materials on it are locked in an inaccessible format.

¹⁸ Work on both textbooks was funded through Commonwealth Shared Responsibility Agreement (SRA) grants involving The Dieri Aboriginal Corporation (TDAC), the Department of Water, Heritage and the Arts (DEWHA), Families, Housing, Community Services, Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), the South Australian Department of Education & Children’s Services (DECS), and Beach Petroleum.

¹⁹ Such as *Old McDonald’s Farm* (<https://dieriyawarra.wordpress.com/2013/03/01/diyari-wima/>, accessed 2024-05-15)

²⁰ For the Johnny Cash song see <https://dieriyawarra.wordpress.com/2013/03/19/folsom-prisonanhi/>,

<https://dieriyawarra.wordpress.com/2013/04/23/folsom-prison-mandru/>,

<https://dieriyawarra.wordpress.com/2013/08/04/folsom-prison-parkulu/>, and

<https://dieriyawarra.wordpress.com/2013/08/05/folsom-prison-mandru-mandru/>, all accessed 2024-05-15.

²¹ TDAC provided travel funds in support of the ILS grant in order to enable participants from Broken Hill and Port Augusta to participate.

These workshops brought together 60 Diyari participants on each occasion, ranging in age from five to eighty. The curriculum covered basic vocabulary and grammatical structure (such as pronouns, imperative verb forms) and was essentially teacher-led by Wilson and myself (in the spirit of ‘research for’). Through my conversations in Diyari with Rene Warren it became apparent that she was a fluent, if rusty, speaker, while her son Reg Warren could understand everything that his mother and I said, but was not as productively skilled as his mother. They served as pronunciation models in the ILS workshops.

To support the ILS activities I created the *Ngayana Dieri Yawarra Yathayilha* blog which presented posts reporting on the workshops and illustrating and explaining aspects of vocabulary, grammar, and simple conversations.²² The reasons for choosing the blog format were that it enables timely reports on activities, bite-sized language lessons, links between related posts, and the inclusion of images and media. I continued posting after the ILS project concluded, and by early May 2024 the blog had 116 posts, and has had 48,100 page views since January 2013. It typically attracts 50-100 views per week from an international audience. The blog was publicised on social media, especially *Facebook*. In 2023 a podcast called *Diyari Yawarra* was begun,²³ presenting some of the blog posts in audio form in response to requests from community members to be able to hear spoken Diyari, as well as read it.

A favourite activity at the 2013 workshops was singing, and on the participants’ initiative Wilson and I created a Diyari translation of a country music song written and performed by then TDAC Chairperson and award-winning performer Chris Dodd.²⁴ Diyari lands are arid with an average of just 270mm (10.5 inches) of rain annually,²⁵ and the song celebrates a special phenomenon which is very occasional heavy rainfall in the Channel Country of Queensland (around 800km north-east of Killalpaninna) and the subsequent flooding of Cooper Creek that runs through Diyari traditional lands. This brings with it abundant water, fish, and bird and animal life, while promoting subsequent luxuriant plant growth:

<i>ngapa-ngapa pirna ngariyi</i>	Lots of water is coming down
<i>ngarrimatha wakarayi</i>	A flood is coming
<i>thalara pirna kurdayi</i>	Lots of rain is falling
<i>ngayanarni mithanhi</i>	In our country
<i>daku pirna thana</i>	There are big sandhills
<i>matya ngayana pankiyilha</i>	So we are happy now
<i>ngapa pirna ngakayi</i>	Lots of water is flowing
<i>parru pirna pakarna</i>	And big fish (are coming) too

As well as celebrating links to country and a significant recurring historical event, the vocabulary and grammatical structure of songs such as this can serve as a resource for language learning.

One challenge I faced at the time with continuing and expanding this work was that I was fully-employed at a university on the other side of the world, and that the outcomes of the work, including externally-refereed publications on topics like meta-

²² See <https://dieriyawarra.wordpress.com/>, accessed 2024-05-15.

²³ See <https://open.spotify.com/show/6PnZ6Ykxkf8c0PvL5uS8c>, accessed 2024-05-15.

²⁴ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5hFVjQFJQzM>, accessed 2024-05-15.

²⁵ <https://www.worldweatheronline.com/v2/weather-averages.aspx?q=dlk>, accessed 2024-06-06

documentation and intellectual history, were deprecated by my Head of Department and considered as “not Linguistics”, especially in the context of the periodic UK Research Assessment Exercise. I retired from academia in December 2018, which left me free to be more mobile and to carry out research and write in ways that were outside ‘academic norms’ (including blog posts, podcasts, and interactions on social media).

5.3 Phase III – ‘research with’

The third phase begins in 2022 with TDAC funding and organising a research trip to the Lutheran mission site at Killalpaninna near Cooper Creek, focussing on documentation of ethno-botanical knowledge and practice, as well as traditional cooking methods. The research team comprised four generations of Diyari (including members of the Warren family), myself as linguist, an anthropologist, an archaeologist, a plant specialist, a community development specialist, and a videographer. The Diyari group included two teenagers (great-grandchildren of Rene Warren) as an experiment in taking members of the younger generation to traditional country and encouraging them to learn about their heritage language and culture. For this project, the goals and methods were set in collaboration with the Diyari participants, and centred around video-recorded interviews, including several by Michelle Warren with her grandmother Rene Warren in the form of experientially-embedded conversations about mutually-shared occasions of identifying and using plants. One of these is *yawa* a small tuber, often called ‘wild onion, bush onion’ (*Cyperus bulbosus*) that was a subsistence staple on Diyari country until groups moved into the towns of Maree and Port Augusta in the 1960s.²⁶ This project was thus collaborative and engaged the Diyari members as active co-participants. One activity was particularly co-operative. Taryn Debney told the group that her archaeological research in Diyari country had identified numerous sites with instances of clay balls (*tyaputyapu*) being used in ground ovens as heat retainers. The ethnographic and historical record, including oral histories, had shown no evidence of their use since the mid-19th century. The two teenage participants experimented with the clay soil at Killalpaninna and were able to recreate clay ball heat retainers and to cook damper bread using them.²⁷ I updated the Diyari blog and podcasts to present these activities and provided vocabulary and example sentences drawn from them, thus potentially supporting language learning by users.

5.4 Phase IV – ‘research by’

The final phase covers 2023-2024 and includes activities wholly organised and carried out by members of the Diyari community, with my role being a supporting consultant. In 2023 the sub-community in Broken Hill (NSW) expressed interest in holding a family-oriented weekend (12-13th November) of *Yarning About Language* focussed on language and culture activities, in collaboration with knowledge-holders in Port Augusta.²⁸ I was in Adelaide as part of my research (‘on’ and ‘for’) funded by the Leverhulme Trust on missionary J. G. Reuther’s massive Diyari-German dictionary (see Austin 2023), and was invited by the families to participate. Approaches by the

²⁶ For more details and photographs see <https://dieriyawarra.wordpress.com/2022/12/20/word-of-the-day-yawa/>, accessed 2024-05-15.

²⁷ For further details and photographs see <https://dieriyawarra.wordpress.com/2022/12/21/tyaputyapu/>, accessed 2024-05-15.

²⁸ For further details and pictures see <https://dieriyawarra.wordpress.com/2023/11/15/yarning-about-language-dieri-families-workshop/>, accessed 2024-05-12.

interested Diyari participants to TDAC for funding were refused as part of wider political issues and disagreements within the community,²⁹ so the participating family members and I paid for all the costs of travel, accommodation, food, and room hire. The two days were attended by 60 participants, including Diyari local knowledge holders, artists, musicians, and interested persons aged from 5 to 93 years. Taryn Debney also attended and gave a short presentation on archaeology and the research trip discussed in 5.3 above, including presenting a compilation video.

The workshop curriculum was decided and facilitated by Michelle Warren, on the topics of greetings, body parts, children's songs, and an interactive game which she and I invented called lingo-bingo.³⁰ Michelle had received some basic linguistic training a few years before via the Research Network for Linguistic Diversity (now Living Languages),³¹ and had attended a workshop in Alice Springs several years prior on the topic of language revitalisation through the master-apprentice model.³² Michelle had adapted this approach to the Diyari situation with her grandmother Rene Warren as a Diyari master (and to a lesser extent myself) and the participants as apprentices. All learning was interactive and engaged every participant, building on existing knowledge, and exploring new contexts. So, for example, in discussing the term *thina* 'foot', some of the children knew the expression *thina puta parlu* 'without any shoes' as it was regularly used by their father before they left the house (*thina* 'foot', *puta* 'shoe, loan from English boot', and *parlu* 'naked'). Thus, existing knowledge by community members was incorporated into the sessions. Michelle emphasised self-expression without concern for literacy and 'correct spelling' in order to encourage spoken language use. Lingo-bingo was particularly popular. This is a card matching game where participants joined teams that each created 20 playing cards with pictures on one side and their Diyari names on the other (e.g. *nganthi* 'meat', *ngapa* 'water'). Teams selected 10 of their cards to play with and placed them picture-side-up in front of them. Michelle then randomly called out Diyari names, and teams with a match turned them over to show the Diyari word; the winner was the team that turned over all their cards and called "lingo-bingo". The goal of the game is to create an enjoyable context for vocabulary listening and recognition skills, as well as passive literacy learning.

As a follow up to the workshop, Michelle Warren had two sets of lingo-bingo cards and instructions professionally drawn (by her daughter, a talented artist) and printed, with one set to be available in Port Augusta and one in Broken Hill. Also, during November and December 2023 I wrote a series of posts on *Facebook* with a picture of a local event or cartoon and a description of it in Diyari as a way to demonstrate that the language can be used to talk about anything that people experience in their daily lives. An example is a picture of a snake catcher in Broken Hill with the caption *karnali wanku pardakayi yakuthanhi wirripalha* 'The (Aboriginal) man is picking up a snake to put in a bag' (the vocabulary and grammatical analysis is given in a comment under the Facebook post). These posts attracted positive responses from Diyari Facebook users,

²⁹ Indeed, I received a letter on 6th November 2023 from the TDAC Chairperson stating that the Board had made a "recent decision to work with SA Museum & Mobile Language Team to get Dieri Language out to the whole of the Dieri Community ... Due to the TDAC Boards decision to not proceed with this, on behalf of the TDAC Board of Directors I ask that the Dieri Language Workshop in Broken Hill, does not proceed".

³⁰ Compare an earlier version developed in the ILS workshops that relied on literacy, rather than emphasising oral listening and speaking (<https://dieriyawarra.wordpress.com/2013/09/03/ngayana-pirkirna-warayi-lingo-bingo/>, accessed 2024-05-28).

³¹ See <https://www.livinglanguages.org.au/training>, accessed 2024-05-29.

³² See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Master-Apprentice_Language_Learning_Program, accessed 2024-05-15.

especially Diyari people in Broken Hill, but did not lead to further public language use, primarily because of worries about literacy and “getting the spelling wrong”. In a written context it is difficult to address these concerns in a meaningful way.

The final activity to be reported in this phase is a pilot translation project carried out in Port Augusta on 16th April 2024. This was organised by Michelle Warren, who invited me to join her and Diyari language experts her grandmother Rene Warren and father Reg Warren. The goal was to collaborate with a local primary school teacher (with permission from the parents) to translate some young Diyari children’s writing from English to Diyari as a means to assist them with their literacy skills, self-esteem, sense of identity, and, potentially, Diyari language learning. The stories were based on photographs of the children doing various everyday activities for which they wrote a description, for example, “this is me on the sports oval”. After discussions among the team, we decided on an appropriate Diyari expression (in this case *nhaniya nganhi kanthanhi tharkayi* ‘this is me standing on the grass’) and Michelle then recorded Rene, Reg and herself saying it. This translation process, led by the Diyari speakers, revealed interesting issues about demonstratives in Diyari which I had not been consciously aware of previously. Thus, Diyari has a feminine versus non-feminine contrast in proximal and distal demonstratives that is important when translating “This is me” as correct usage depends on the gender of the speaker (in this case the children are female so *nhaniya* is the correct translation for ‘this’ rather than *nhawuya* ‘this (non-feminine)’).³³ Future work on children’s writing is planned which will include creation of printed and multimedia outputs, and applying for funding to scale up the project to include more Diyari children at the school.

6. Conclusions

I have been engaged in language and culture work with the Diyari community of South Australia for some 50 years and this has progressed from description to documentation to applied revitalisation, and from ‘research on’ to ‘research for’ to ‘research with’ and ‘research by’. These developments have been rewarding personally and professionally, and have resulted in various outcomes (including academic and non-academic products), and insights into language structure and use, both within the community and in the wider academic world. The recent language support work (Phases III and IV) has relied on the solid documentary and descriptive base established in the earlier phases, including the fact that I had learnt to speak Diyari with some degree of fluency. This revitalisation work has involved substantial personal, academic, social, and political challenges (including intra-community disagreements) that have involved me taking a range of roles over time from outside academic researcher determining models and methods, to specialist consultant on community-led projects.

As Amery (2009) and Wilkins (1992) argue, it is easy for researchers to fall into simplistic “solutions” that do not work, either linguistically or socio-politically – the workshops and learning materials discussed in Phase II seem to me to fall under this description. It is important to be ready to listen and try to understand what people mean

³³ For further discussion see <https://dieriyawarra.wordpress.com/2024/04/20/how-to-say-this-and-that-in-diyari/>. Subsequent blog posts discuss the forms and meaning of plural demonstratives (<https://dieriyawarra.wordpress.com/2024/04/21/how-to-say-these-and-those-in-diyari/>), inflectional forms (<https://dieriyawarra.wordpress.com/2024/04/21/advanced-more-about-this-and-that-and-these-and-those-in-diyari/>), and use with non-singular pronouns (<https://dieriyawarra.wordpress.com/2024/04/24/how-to-say-this-is-us-in-diyari/>), all accessed 2024-05-15.

by what they say, and this relies on close, open and long-term personal relationships, as well as effective participant observation (Dobrin and Schwartz 2016). It is essential to set one's own political assumptions aside and to seek possible solutions and sustainable outcomes through open and equitable discussions in a realistic context, while recognising that conflict and disputation is an inevitable part. It is important to develop concrete outcomes, while being careful not to overpromise and thereby raise expectations that cannot be fulfilled and whose non-achievement will lead to disappointment. Sometimes the best outcomes are the processes of shared learning and oral language use, while apparently desirable printed works like dictionaries and textbooks are little more than talismans. In addition, academic requirements such as publication of journal articles and books can be in conflict with other forms of writing, such as social media posts and blogs, even though the latter garner more users and can communicate more effectively with community members.

Sometimes, it is essential for outsiders to simply say and do nothing, and be patient. Timing, personalities, and the willingness to be flexible and change roles and relationships are all important variables in the success of research of any type. Finally, in presenting this case study, I hope I have made a strong case for reflexive meta-documentation of research projects to assist with understanding and interpreting their goals, trajectories, outcomes, and longer-term impacts.

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