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A small speech community with many small languages: The role of receptive multilingualism in supporting linguistic diversity at Warruwi Community (Australia)

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ABSTRACT

At Warruwi Community (pop. 400), nine very different Indigenous languages are still widely used, which is unusual in the contemporary Australian Indigenous context. Using the receptive multilingual mode, speakers frequently address one another in different languages. This mode offers speakers of small languages such as Mawng (ca. 400 speakers) an alternative to accommodating to larger languages such as Yolngu-matha (ca. 2000 speakers). Although not unique to Warruwi, receptive multilingual practices are part of a set of “mutually constituting ideologies and practices” (Nakassis, 2016) that co-construct a speech community where many small languages flourish.

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1. Introduction

Warruwi Community in northern Australia is unusual because many Indigenous languages are still being learned by children. Elsewhere in Australia linguistic diversity has declined sharply. Yet, at Warruwi at least nine languages are spoken amongst 400 people (Singer and Harris, 2016). How are so many languages still being maintained in this community? Experience in other contexts suggests that multilingual language practices and ideologies are likely to play an important role in supporting this intensive linguistic diversity (Kroskrity, 1993; Sicoli, 2011). Warruwi is one of the last places in Australia where so many Indigenous languages co-exist which makes it a good place to look at the practices and ideologies that support such an abundance of small languages. Given the paucity of work on language survival, it is worth asking what enables so many languages to be passed on across the generations in a context where there is dramatic social change, the loss of many local languages and the introduction of a lingua franca (English).

Michael Silverstein has long theorised about “local language communities that have survived at the peripheries of imperial and currently globalizing projects” (Silverstein, 2015). He points out that scholars need to investigate “the nature of such plurilingual social formations – speech communities with complex communicative economies”. Warruwi is clearly a ‘complex communicative economy’ in the way it integrates a multiplicity of languages and social groupings. In this article, we will look at how the practice of receptive multilingualism at Warruwi is integral to multilingualism at Warruwi. Receptive multilingual practices involve people speaking to one another in different languages. These practices are contextualised in this article within language ideologies and broader discourses about social and cultural diversity that circulate at Warruwi. Receptive multilingualism emerges as a way for people to maintain quite different repertoires and patterns of language use even in the one family.

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Warruwi is a place where many small languages are still spoken. There are no Indigenous Australian languages with more than a few thousand speakers so all would be categorised as ‘small’ from an international perspective. The north coast of Arnhem Land is home to many languages with only a few hundred speakers, and the high levels of linguistic diversity in this area result from the fact that these small languages differ dramatically from one another in vocabulary and grammar. So a small language is defined here as one with 500 or fewer speakers and the term ‘small’ is not intended to imply ‘minority language’ or a lack of importance (cf. Pietikäinen et al., 2016). As Carr and Lempert (2016) argue, ‘scale matters’. The fact that these languages are so small demands a more fine-grained study of the role they play in interactions, in families and in people’s lives.

Receptive multilingualism is a practice that is particularly prevalent at Warruwi and seems to help make Warruwi a place where many small languages can flourish. The way people orient to receptive multilingual practices as ‘ordinary’ and not worthy of comment makes receptive multilingualism a candidate for being one of the ‘shared norms’ that defines the speech community. To introduce the practice, two examples are shown below. Extract (1) is from a recording of a naturalistic conversation between Nancy Ngalmindjalmag¹ and Richard Dhangalalang. Nancy uses Mawng (*italics*) and Richard uses his Dhuwal variety of Yolngu-matha (underlined).²

(1)

145 Nancy *Anpanamin nuyu Jonah kunpannyaka jurrk.*
Tell Jonah to drop you off (in his car).

146 Richard Jonah nali dhu wanany.
We’ll tell Jonah.

147 Nancy *Kurrunpanyutpa.*
He’ll drop you lot off.
(RS1-160 NN1 and RD1 conversation 00:06:14.650– 00:06:19.161)²

Nancy was born at Warruwi and has spent all her life there, although she travels frequently around Arnhem Land, to visit family and participate in Uniting Church activities which also regularly take her to the regional capital Darwin and interstate. Her husband Richard moved to Warruwi from eastern Arnhem Land in 1980 when they were married. Having spent time with Nancy and Richard outside of a research context, I noticed that they spoke to each other in this way most of the time, with Nancy addressing Richard in Mawng and Richard replying in Yolngu-matha. Even though Nancy can speak Yolngu-matha fluently, she only occasionally addresses Richard in Yolngu-matha. Extract (2) is from an interview in which Nancy speaks Mawng to Janet Marbinda, who replies in Bininj Kunwok (underlined).

(2)

055 Janet Saturdayni bu ngarridurndi.
Saturday is when we came back.

057 Nancy *La kurrunpayatayangtung pata palanta?*
The White people looked after you?

058 Janet Yoh ngandinahnan. Nani nawu birridjalburrinj
Yes they were looking after us the ones who wore...

059 Nancy *Aku* (overlapping)
Okay

060 Janet orange t-shirt birridjalburrinj namekke kabirringeyoy NTES namekke
wore orange t-shirts. They are called NTES, those people.

062 Nancy *Aku, nungmalal.*
I see, that’s good.
(RS1-358 NN1 JM2 cyclone 00:02:58.296–00:02:58.296)

As these examples show, when people talk to one another at Warruwi, they may each speak a different language. This receptive multilingual mode of interaction is the antithesis of two better known phenomena; accommodation and code-switching. Receptive multilingual practices go against the supposed universal tendency for speakers to accommodate, for multilingual speakers to find those shared parts of their linguistic repertoire as needed (Giles and Powesland, 1975; Giles and Ogay, 2007). In both the recordings cited above, Nancy could have matched her language to that of her interlocutor, as she is a

¹ All names of participants are real names (as requested by them). Italics is used for the Mawng language throughout and underlining is used for Kunwinjku and Yolngu-matha (only one of these languages are used in each extract).

² These recordings are archived in the PARADISEC digital archive.

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