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## “We talk in saltwater words”: Dimensionalisation of dialectal variation in multilingual Arnhem Land

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## ABSTRACT

In Arnhem Land, northern Australia, speakers of the Burarra language live and communicate within a highly multilingual and multilectal language ecology. This paper explores how regional ideologies of socio-cultural distinctiveness and unity are projected into the linguistic space at the level of the language (within Maningrida’s language ecology), as well as at the level of the lect (in terms of dialects and sociolects within the Burarra language). Drawing from current ethnography, naturalistic interactional and elicited language data, and other existing materials, the paper considers how speakers reproduce and evaluate language-internal variation within a linguistically diverse region. These processes are contextualised within the dynamics of long-term ‘egalitarian’ multilingualism which continue to shape contemporary practices and contemporary means of social meaning-making.

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### 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In Arnhem Land, northern Australia, speakers of the Burarra language live and communicate within a highly multilingual and multilectal language ecology. Language practices in the region index a variety of social categories, including patrilineal land-holding units and moiety groupings, and local language ideologies essentialise the connections between individual linguistic varieties and particular tracts of territory. Language affiliations are in large part inherited through kinship networks. In the following quote, Isobel, a young Martay Burarra woman, describes how she connects to languages in her repertoire through her close kin:

*Jin-ngaypa mununa Martay Burarra jin-gata. Wurra, an-ngaypa jaminya, jin-nigipa mother, jin-gata An-barra. Rrapa ngaypa, like, Martay Burarra ngu-weya ngu-workiya. Rrapa minypa Djinang ng-galiyarra ngu-workiya, ngardawa an-ngaypa jaminya gu-nika wengga. Rrapa an-ngaypa ninya rrapa bapapa, jungurda apula yerrcha gun-ngayburra wengga Yan-nhangu, like gurda gun-gapa east, east side. Well gurdiya minypa, only like gun-ngardapa gun-guyinda marn.gi gun-gata Yan-nhangu aburr-weya, but ng-guna waya ngaypa like marn.gi ngu-nirra [...] Sometimes mix up nyiburr-weya nyiburr-workiya, mix nyiburr-negarra nyiburr-workiya minypa An-barra. Gapala yerrcha aburr-weya aburr-workiya arrburra ‘ngika gurda wengga, gun-guna wengga! Gun-guna gun-burrall, gun-derta gun-ginyipa.’*

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations: 1: first person exclusive; 12: first person inclusive; A: augmented number (alternative to ‘plural’, used in categories where ‘unit augmented’ and ‘augmented’ oppositions exist); FUT: future; I, II, III, IV: noun class (male, female, edible, land); PL: plural (alternative to ‘augmented’ where there is no opposition between ‘unit augmented’ and ‘augmented’); SC: singular; TF: temporal focus.

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My grandmother, she's Martay Burarra. But, my grandfather, his mother, she's An-barra, and I speak Martay Burarra. And, like, I hear and understand Djinang, because that's my grandfather's language. And my father and auntie, all my grandfathers, our language is Yan-nhangu, that one over there, east side. Well that one, like, I know only a few words here and there from that Yan-nhangu that they speak, but now I understand that one. [...] We sometimes speak in a mixed-up way, we're always mixing it (Martay dialect) with An-barra (way of speaking Burarra). The old people are always saying to us, 'not that language, this language! This one's the real one (for you). Your one's a strong one.'

Isobel is multilingual, speaking a number of local Indigenous languages as well as English, but she is also multilectal within her main language, Burarra, having mastery of both the Martay and the An-barra dialects. In drawing upon her linguistic repertoire, Isobel must constantly navigate the ideological constraints that surround the appropriate use of languages and lects in her community.

Isobel lives in Maningrida – Arnhem Land's largest community, and one that represents a concentration of the linguistic diversity of the wider region. Many Indigenous languages are spoken here, alongside increasing use of English and various contact varieties. Interaction is characterised by high levels of individual multilingualism and diverse multilingual strategies (e.g. receptive multilingualism, a broad range of code-mixing practices) – practices which form a symbiotic relationship with the region's linguistic diversity. In spite of this diversity, a lingua franca has never emerged at Maningrida,<sup>2</sup> although the impact of changes in mobility and residence patterns (among other demographic, cultural and linguistic shifts) are observable in both the functioning of language-internal variation, and in the deployment of multilingual repertoires.

In this paper, I consider how speakers like Isobel reproduce and evaluate language-internal variation within the highly multilingual language ecology of north-central Arnhem Land. These processes are contextualised within the dynamics of long-term 'pre-existing' multilingualism which continue to shape contemporary practices and contemporary means of social meaning-making through lived and performed sociolinguistic boundaries and affiliations. I address how regional ideologies of socio-cultural distinctiveness and unity are projected into the linguistic space at the level of the language (within Maningrida's language ecology), as well as at the level of the lect (in terms of dialects and sociolects within the Burarra language). This work is based on naturalistic interactional and elicited language data from a number of sources, especially language materials collected since the 1960s in Maningrida and surrounds by missionaries and linguists (in particular Kathy and David Glasgow, Rebecca Green and Margaret Carew), as well as my own more recent data collected over several visits in the last three years.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Arnhem Land, Maningrida and Burarra

Arnhem Land is a remote Indigenous-owned territory on the northern coast of Australia's Northern Territory. Its rich natural environment has for millennia supported a network of diverse cultural groups and, concurrently, a complex multilingual and multilectal language ecology. This language ecology or multilingual 'regional system' (e.g. Epps, 2008; Epps, *forthcoming*) is scaffolded by a range of both long-standing and contemporary practices which contribute to maintaining, and even creating, linguistic diversity. These range from cultural tendencies such as the occurrence of linguistically exogamous marriage, to local language practices such as receptive multilingualism<sup>4</sup> and a variety of language mixing strategies (e.g. Elwell, 1977; Evans, 2010; O'Keefe, 2016; Vaughan, *forthcoming*). Maningrida is a largely Indigenous community on the region's central northern coast, and is its most populous at over 2500 inhabitants. Maningrida is a regional hub for a number of outstation communities (small settlements located on traditional homelands) and many community members regularly move between outstations, Maningrida, and Darwin, the state capital 500 km to the west. Founded in the late 1950s as a welfare settlement on the traditional lands of the Ndjébbana-speaking Kunibidji people, Maningrida has since drawn people representing groups from right across the Arnhem region, and today reflects this diversity as one of the most multilingual communities in the world. Thirteen languages from four Australian language families are currently spoken here (Fig. 1) as well as English and Kriol (an English-lexified creole spoken across northern Australia), with alternate sign systems also in frequent use (Carew and Green, 2017). As we will see, however, counting the number of local language varieties is not a matter of objective 'fact', but rather is a compromise between language boundaries delineated in descriptive linguistic work in the region and the most commonly attested language categories perceived and deployed in interactions in the community. Any 'definitive' list is likely to obscure complexities underpinning language naming strategies and the range of possible ways of delineating local linguistic varieties (Garde et al., 2015).

The languages listed in Fig. 1 represent important categories for social identification. All are spoken to some degree in the Maningrida space, most on a daily basis, but the vitality and distribution of the languages vary considerably. Among the larger

<sup>2</sup> This is typical of communicative strategies assumed to exist in pre-contact Australia more generally, i.e. that intense multilingualism, rather than reliance on lingua francas, was the norm (Brandl and Walsh, 1982; Dixon, 2002). Post-contact, lingua francas are more commonly attested, alongside widespread language shift.

<sup>3</sup> This includes a small corpus of Burarra and several other Maningrida languages, sociolinguistic and linguistic biography interviews, targeted tasks and elicitations (e.g. mapping tasks, discussions about variation and shibboleths arising from naturalistic recordings) and more general ethnographic work in the community.

<sup>4</sup> Receptive multilingualism refers to bilingual conversations where each interlocutor uses a different code (e.g. Singer and Harris, 2016; ten Thije and Zeevaert, 2007).

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