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Language documentation, description and revitalisation: experiences in South Australia

Peter K. Austin
Emeritus Professor in Field Linguistics
SOAS University of London



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www.peterkaustin.com

Overview

- Theoretical preliminaries
 - Description, documentation, revitalisation
 - Meta-documentation
 - Research frameworks
 - Case study
 - Diyari (Dieri) South Australia
 - Conclusions and Q&A
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Language description

- Study of language as a **system** separated from its actual use by speakers and the social-political-cultural-economic conditions of use
 - Requires abstraction and search for general principles (phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics)
 - Requires idealisation and “cleaning up” recordings of actual use
 - Data collection often involves **elicitation** through surveys or interviews or **experiments**
 - Studying a language the researcher does not speak is often done via **translation** or asking for **speaker judgements**
 - The records of interview or survey are **not** of interest in themselves, but just a way to accumulate “**the data**” for analysis
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Language description

1. **Goals** of description:

- present language structures for others to understand;
- identify common features and differences across languages (typology);
- understand how the human mind works (psychology, neurophysiology);
- understand how humans interact and express personal, social and cultural relationships

2. Analysis is often highly structured and formal and written in an abstract **metalanguage**

3. the **audience** for description is typically other researchers, and distributed in books or articles (grammars, dictionaries, maps, graphs, narratives, text collections)

Language documentation

- “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” (Himmelman 1998)
 - Features:
 - *Focus on primary data*
 - *Accountability*
 - *Long-term storage and preservation of primary data (archiving)*
 - *Interdisciplinary teams*
 - *Cooperation with and direct involvement of the speech community*
 - Outcome is **annotated and translated corpus** of archived representative materials on a language, cf. TLA/Dobes, ELAR
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Language revitalisation

- efforts to increase **language vitality** by taking action to:
 - increase the domains of use of a language and/or
 - increase the number of speakers (often in the context of reversing language shift) both adults and children
 - older than language documentation (serious work began in 1970s and 1980s among Maori, Native American groups and others)
 - speech/language community members are often more interested in revitalisation than documentation
 - Various models of revitalisation but often assumed = formal language learning (school lessons, immersion)
 - many communities are now using documentation to support language and culture learning and recovery
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Meta-documentation (Austin 2013)

- Documentation of documentation: project goals, history, people, biographies, methods, tools, relationships, agreements, outcomes
 - Very rarely made explicit by researchers (cf. grant application)
 - cf. Woodbury (2011: 161) 'project design': 'the participants, their purposes, and the various stakeholders in the activity or program of activity or project'
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Meta-documentation

- Nathan (2010: 196): '[A]nother way to think of metadata is as meta-documentation, the documentation of your data itself, and the conditions (linguistic, social, physical, technical, historical, biographical) under which it was produced. Such meta-documentation should be as rich and appropriate as the documentary materials themselves.'
 - Why?
 - to develop good ways of presenting and using language descriptions, documentations and revitalisation efforts
 - for 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
 - to document IP contributions and career trajectories
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Frameworks for research involving humans



(Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton, and Richardson 1992)

Ethical research – research **on**

“... there is 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.”

(Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton, and Richardson 1992, p. 14-15)

Advocacy research – research **for**

“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.”

(Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton, and Richardson 1992, p. 15)

Collaborative research – research **with**

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.

(Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton, and Richardson 1992, p. 22)

Empowering research – research **by**

“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.’”

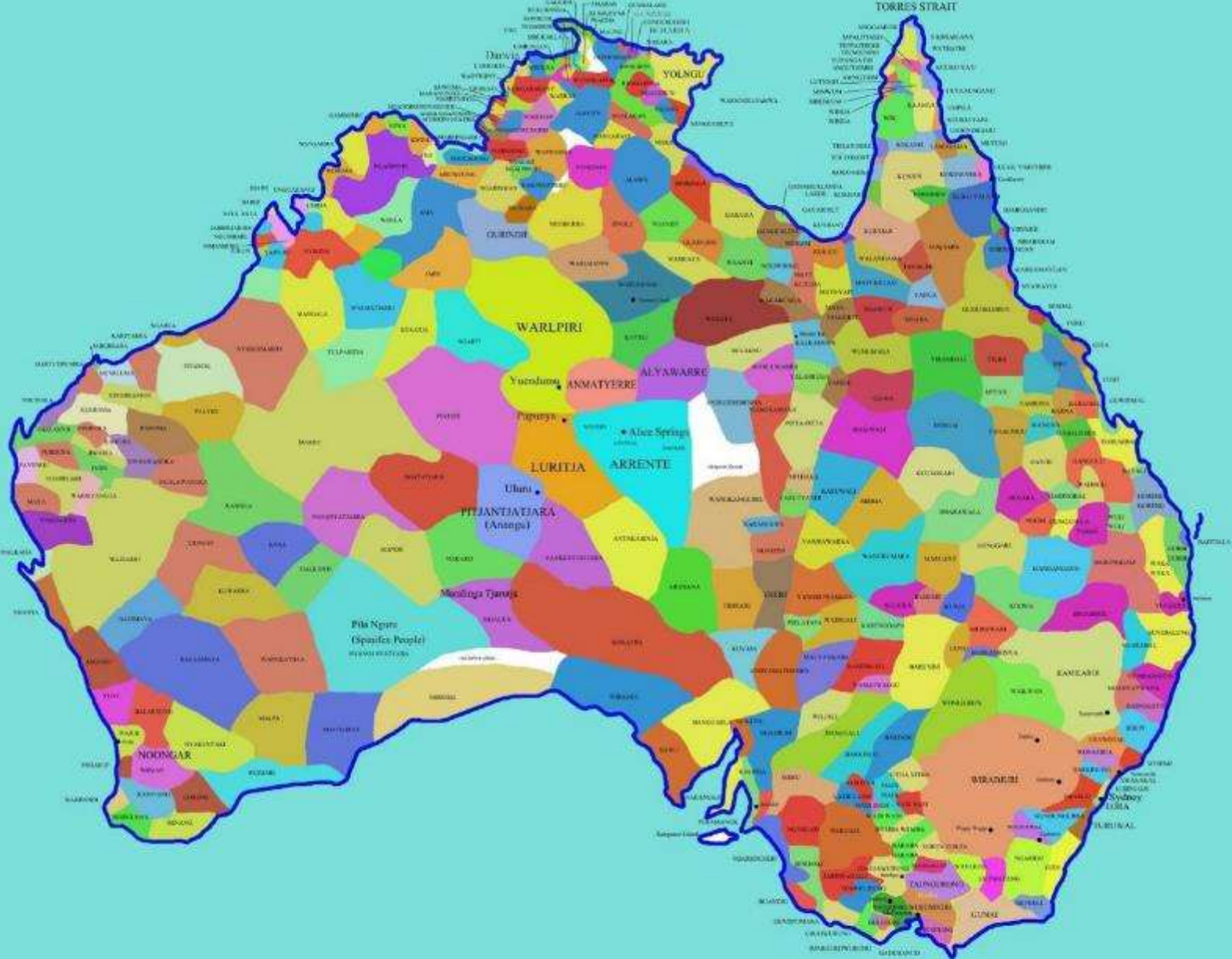
Can involve training and full participation as equals.

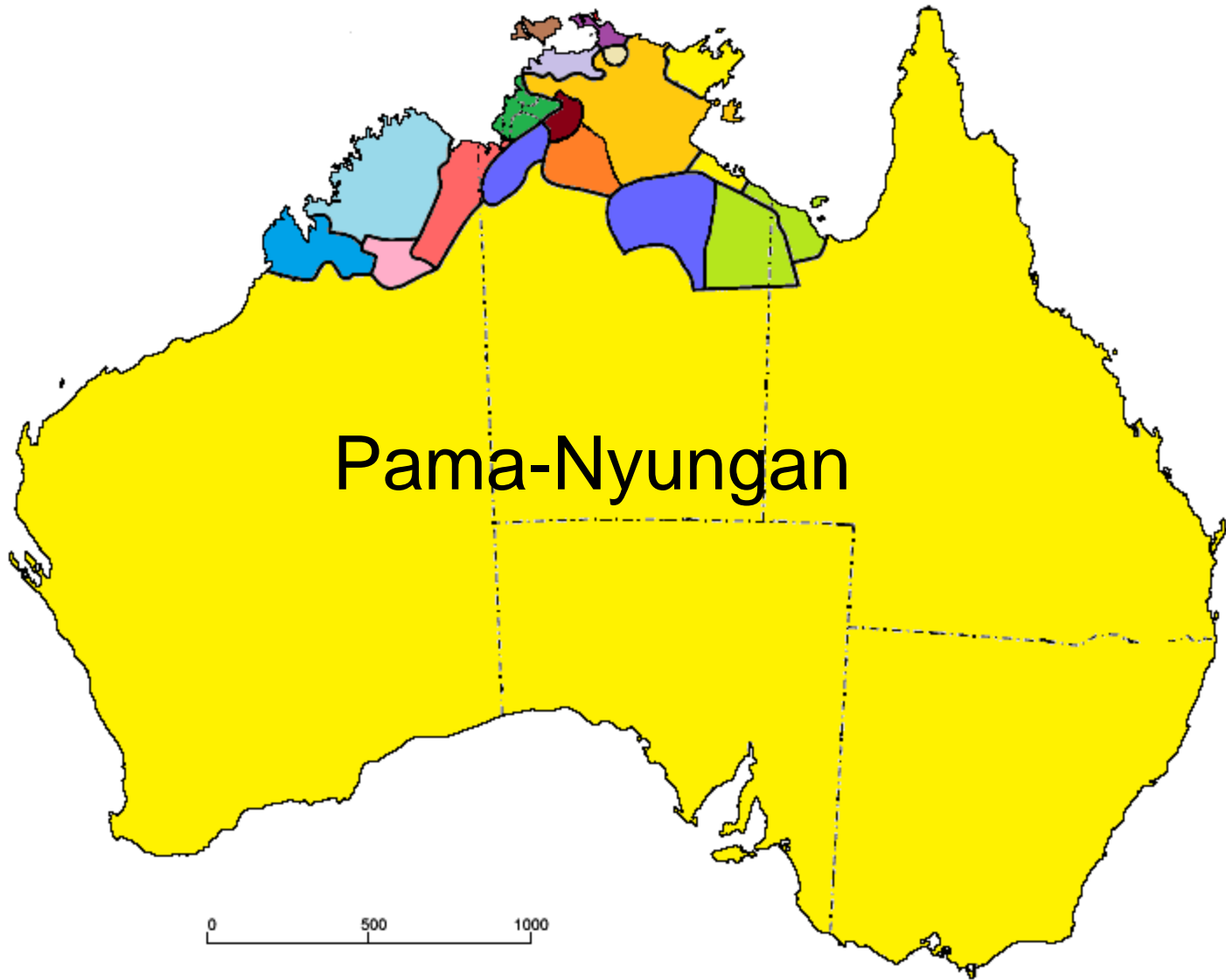
(Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton, and Richardson 1992, p. 24)

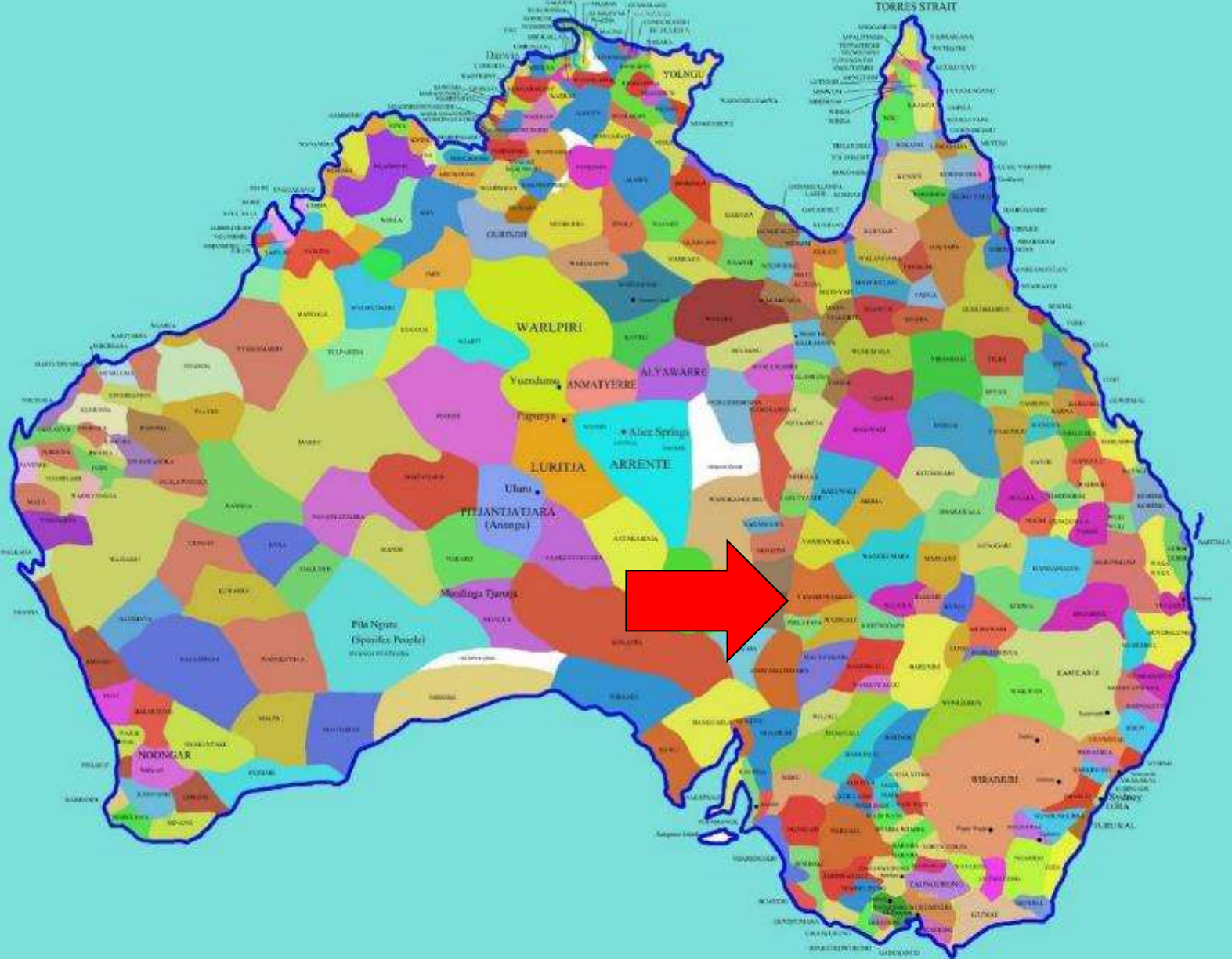
An example of progression from my research

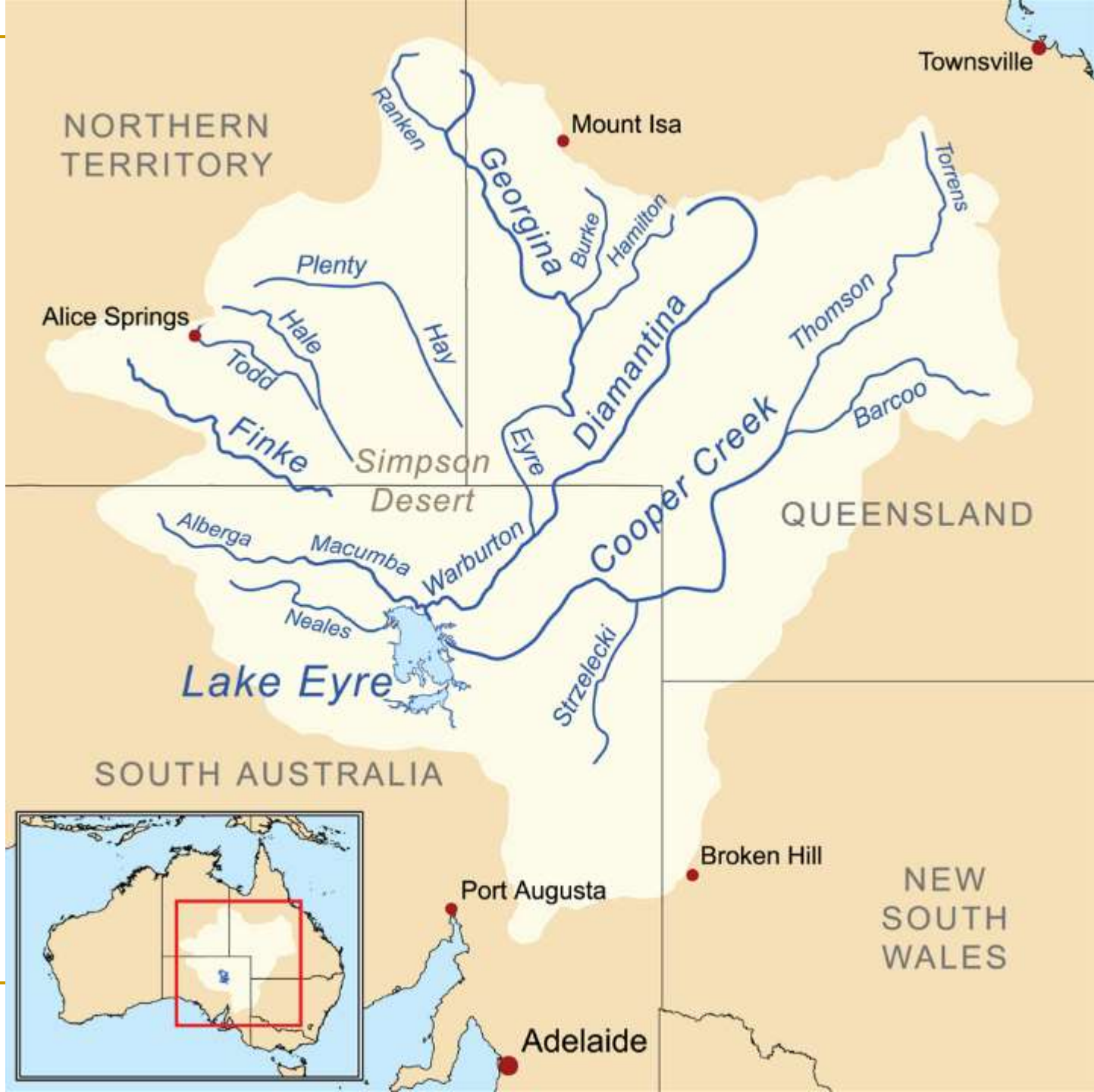
I have worked with the Diyari (Dieri) Aboriginal community in Australia since 1974:

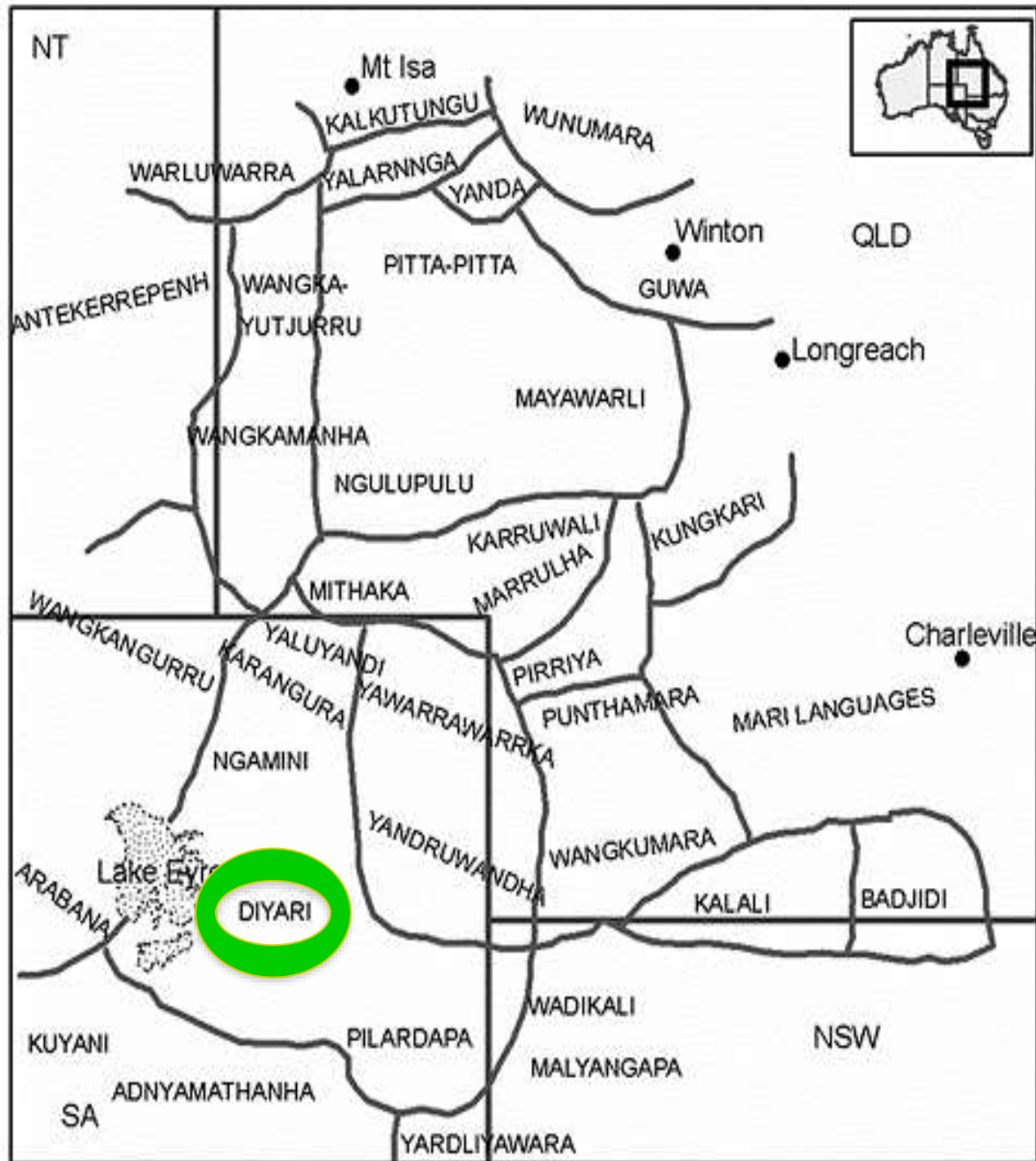
- for my BA and PhD thesis research (research **on**);
 - publications and language learning workshops (research **for**);
 - research on ethnobiology (research **with**);
 - community language and culture workshops (research **by**)
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Diyari (Dieri) Phase I (1974-1978)

- 4th year undergraduate honours, introduced to 'moral research' approach and methods by Luise Hercus: individual-centred respect, qualitative dialogic interaction, joint construction of outcomes, co-authorships
 - PhD aimed at grammar production (Austin 1981)
 - About 12 multilingual speakers who learned Diyari as children, in daily use in some families (for history see Austin 2014)
 - Moved on to WA in 1978, no further SA fieldwork but continued descriptive publications
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Social shifts

- 1992 Mabo decision overturns *terra nullius*
 - 1997 Diyari group lodges land claim
 - 2001 formation of Dieri Aboriginal Corporation – 600 members in NSW & SA
 - May 2012 determination of native title to ancestral lands
 - 47,000 square kilometres (about 20 times ACT)
 - second Consent Determination 26th February 2014 added to this land
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Native title May 2012 (lodged 1997)



Diyari Phase II (2010-2015) – research for and ILS project

- 2013 workshops: February Adelaide, March Port Augusta, April Adelaide, August Port Augusta
 - Materials development with teacher-linguist Greg Wilson – songs, bilingual dictionary, Willsden Primary school language programme
 - Blog dieriyawarra.wordpress.com
 - 120 posts, 48,740 page views (as of 2024-05-08), gets around 120 views per week
 - (Added podcasts in 2023)
 - Community inclusion and engagement process
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March 2013 workshop, 4 generations



Teacher model of interaction



Writing songs

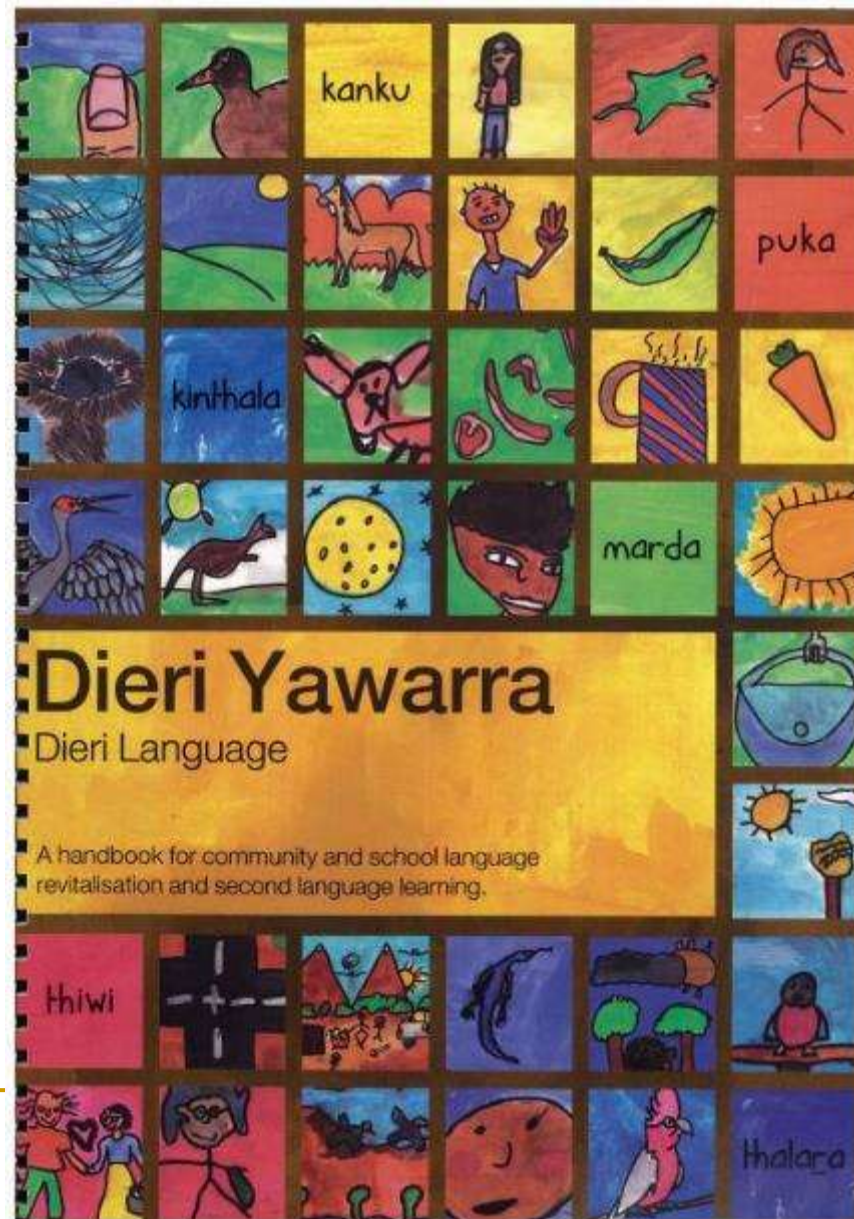


*ngapa-ngapa pirna ngariyi
ngarrimatha wakarayi
thalara pirna kurdayi
ngayanarni mithanhi
daku pirna thana
matya ngayana pankiyilha
ngapa pirna ngakayi
parru pirna pakarna*



Lots of water is coming down
A flood is coming
Lots of rain is falling
In our country
There are big sandhills
So we are happy now
Lots of water is flowing
And big fish (are coming) too

Printed outcome (with CD)



Phase III Research with – ethno-ecology fieldwork in Diyari country (2022-12-07)

- DAC organized and funded trip to Killalpaninna
 - Multi-party team: 4 generations of Dieri, linguist, anthropologist, archaeologist, plant specialist, community development specialist, videographer
 - Goals and methods set by DAC participants – documenting plants and uses (culturally embedded), interviews as experientially-embedded conversations, youth engagement (research by?)
 - E.g. collecting *yawa* and making *tyaputyapu*
 - [Video1](#)
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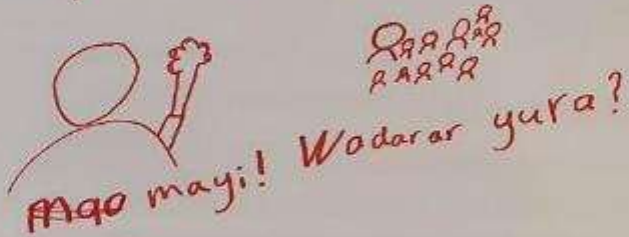
Phase IV Research by – workshop in Broken Hill NSW (2023-11-10/13)

- Issues with DAC funding of trip to Broken Hill (NSW) sub-community so families and I paid expenses
 - Multi-party team: 4 generations of Diyari, local knowledge holders, artists, musicians, archaeologist, and me. Facilitation by Michelle Warren (60 participants over 2 days)
 - Goals and methods set by participants – greetings, body parts, lingo bingo; all learning was interactive and engaged all participants, building on existing knowledge and exploring new contexts
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Michelle Warren on greetings



Class practice

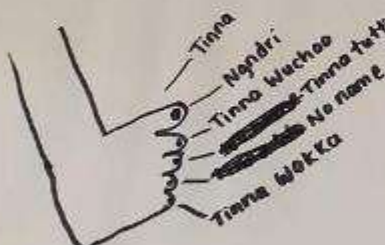
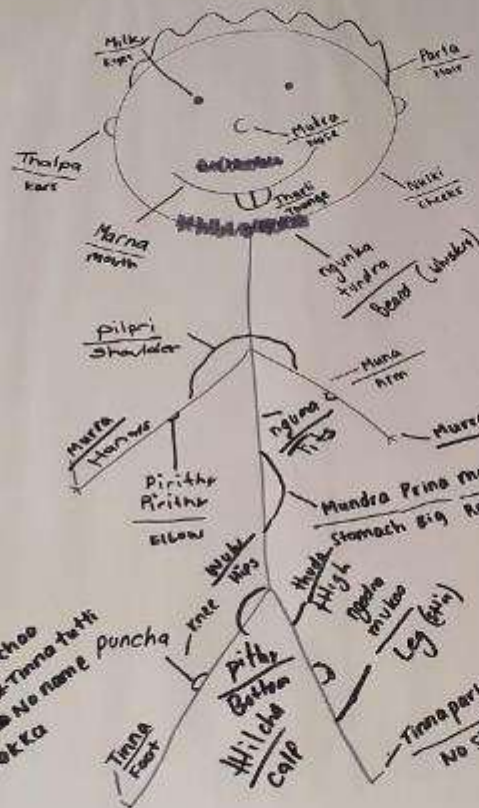


RARRR
RARRR



Body part terms (non-standard spelling)

DIERI
Body
Parts





Lingo bingo



Follow up

- Creation of professionally printed Lingo Bing packs (cards, instructions)
 - Facebook posts – local events or humorous illustrations with short descriptions in Diyari posted every day or two in November-December 2023
 - Diyari Language Blog – regular daily traffic
 - No books – focus on listening and speaking
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karnali wanku pardakayi yakuthanhi wirripalha



kinthalawara karlkatharriyi thayilha



Research by – workshop in Port Augusta (2024-04-16)

- Pilot translation of children's stories from English to Diyari (→ literacy, self-esteem, identity, language learning)
 - Rene, Michelle, Reg Warren – created text and audio recordings
 - Collaboration with Primary School teacher and me
 - Currently exploring funding to scale up project for other children with Diyari heritage in collaboration with primary school
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Port Augusta (2024-04-16)



Port Augusta (2024-04-16)



Port Augusta (2024-04-16)



What have I learnt over the past 50 years?

- Moving from ‘research on’ to ‘research for’ to ‘research with’ and ‘research by’ can be extremely rewarding and generate insights into language structure and use, both within the community and in the wider academic world
 - Revitalisation generally relies on a solid documentary and descriptive basis – the size of the corpus does not have to be a determining factor but can impact on possible outcomes
 - Revitalisation work involves substantial challenges, including personal, academic, social, and political
 - It is easy to fall into simplistic “solutions” that do not work, either linguistically or socio-politically (see Wilkins 1992, Amery 2009)
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What did I learn?

- Be ready to listen and try to understand what people mean by what they say
 - Leave your own politics at the door
 - Look for solutions and sustainable outcomes through open and equitable discussions in a realistic context
 - Develop concrete outcomes but be careful not to promise too much and raise expectations that cannot be fulfilled and that will lead to disappointment
 - Sometimes you just need to shut up and be patient – timing and personalities can be the most important variables
 - Be even more patient 😊
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Thank you!

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