

INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVES ON THE VITALITY OF MURRINH-PATHA

Full presentation

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This paper is a report on a recent survey into community attitudes around the vitality of Murrinh-Patha, as spoken in Wadeye (Port Keats), NT. Murrinh-Patha is a polysynthetic, non-Pama-Nyungan language spoken by around 2000 speakers living in and around Wadeye in the Daly River region of the Northern Territory. The report is part of an ongoing research program that aims to identify the role of the community in the strong maintenance of this language in Wadeye, when so many other indigenous communities are in the process of rapid language loss or linguistic change. This research has a two-fold motivation of investigating both why the language is robust and, if it is to remain robust, what is the situation with language-learning children?

The *National Indigenous Languages Survey 2005* reports that the majority of Australia's Indigenous languages are now no longer spoken fully or fluently. As many as 50 languages can be expected to reach this stage of endangerment over coming decades. However, not all Indigenous languages are following this pattern of decline. The Australian census figures show 1430 speakers for Murrinh-Patha in 1996, 1157 in 2001, and 1832 in 2006. These figures show clearly that speaker numbers are at least stable and even perhaps on the rise, with 2006 ABS census figures indicating that 60% of current speakers are aged under 24 years, and 40% aged under 14 years. In a national language environment in which Indigenous languages are on the decline the robustness and seeming vitality of Murrinh-Patha, especially among the younger population, is striking and raises questions about why this language continues to remain so strong.

Many studies have discussed linguistic vitality in Australian Aboriginal communities from the perspective of language shift (e.g. Simpson & Wigglesworth (2008)), language endangerment (e.g. Schmidt 1985, Walsh 2005), language planning and education (e.g. Henderson 1994, Wilkins 2008). In the current study we investigate issues of linguistic vitality by examining the language attitudes of Murrinh-Patha speakers. Through the use of surveys and language interviews we establish the primary domains (home, school, work, media etc) in which Murrinh-Patha, English, and other languages are used by members of the community. Additionally, we report on perceptions regarding the ongoing vitality of Murrinh-Patha and the interaction with English. Further, we report on findings regarding the social networks of members of the community and link these to the domains of use in order to investigate whether there is a relationship between community attitude, community interaction, and language use.

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