

## KAURNA RECLAMATION AND RE-INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Kaurna, the language of the Adelaide Plains, bore the brunt of British Colonisation in 1836. The language was lost within two or three decades. Fortunately, written records compiled by German missionaries have enabled a remarkable revival of the Kaurna language over the last 25-30 years. Kaurna now has a visible and audible presence in Adelaide. Re-establishment of intergenerational transmission is within reach and there is strong demand for teachers of Kaurna within schools. Kaurna is at the forefront of language revival efforts in Australia, showing what is possible with minimal records and resources to re-introduce a sleeping language once considered long extinct.

**Keywords:** Kaurna, language reclamation, language re-introduction, language revitalisation, language revival, Australian Aboriginal languages, language and identity

### Resumo

Kaurna, a língua das Planícies de Adelaide, foi atingido pelo impacto violento da colonização britânica em 1836. A língua foi sendo perdida ao longo de duas ou três décadas. Felizmente, registros escritos por missionários alemães têm permitido uma notável revitalização da língua Kaurna nos últimos 25-30 anos. Kaurna tem, hoje, uma presença audível e visível em Adelaide. O reestabelecimento da transmissão entre gerações está sendo alcançada e há uma forte demanda por professores de Kaurna nas escolas. Na Austrália, Kaurna está na frente dos esforços de revitalização, mostrando o que é possível fazer, a partir de um mínimo de registros e de recursos, para reintroduzir uma língua adormecida que foi considerada extinta há muito tempo.

**Palavras-chave:** Kaurna, reclamação linguística, reintrodução linguística, revitalização linguística, renascimento linguístico, Línguas Aborígenes Australianas, língua e identidade.

<sup>1</sup> This article is dedicated to Dr Alitya Wallara Rigney who passed away on 13<sup>th</sup> May 2017. Ngarrpadla (Auntie) Alice was a much respected Kaurna Elder, who was intimately involved in Kaurna language revival from the very beginning and every step of the way. She strongly believed that "language is power", seeing Kaurna as a tool of empowerment for the younger generation, whom she encouraged and nurtured in the language. She was also very generous in sharing and teaching her language to achieve reconciliation. We are forever indebted to Ngarrpadla Alitya for her passion, enthusiasm and warrior spirit in breathing life back into the Kaurna language.

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## 1. Background

Australia has arguably the worst record of loss of Indigenous languages world-wide. Of the original 250 to 300 languages, comprising 600-800 dialects, only 13 languages are still reasonably healthy, that is, are still being acquired by children through normal transgenerational language transmission (Marmion et al, 2014: xii). This is five fewer languages than reported in the first national survey (McConvell et al, 2005: 3), a significant decline over a period of just nine years.

Kaurna, the language of the Adelaide Plains, is just one of many Australian languages located at one end of the spectrum, having been lost at an early stage in Australia's colonial past. But fortunately, it was one of a handful of languages documented reasonably well in the early to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Sadly, a number of Australian languages have been lost almost without trace, whilst for many, only wordlists remain. Kaurna is one of the few Australian languages lost early in the colonial period for which a reasonable grammar remains. Despite the absence of sound recordings, this written documentation has formed the basis for a sustained language revival movement over more than 25 years. Kaurna language reclamation is at the forefront of numerous efforts across the length and breadth of Australia where Aboriginal peoples are attempting to reclaim or re-invigorate their languages (see Amery & Gale, 2008).

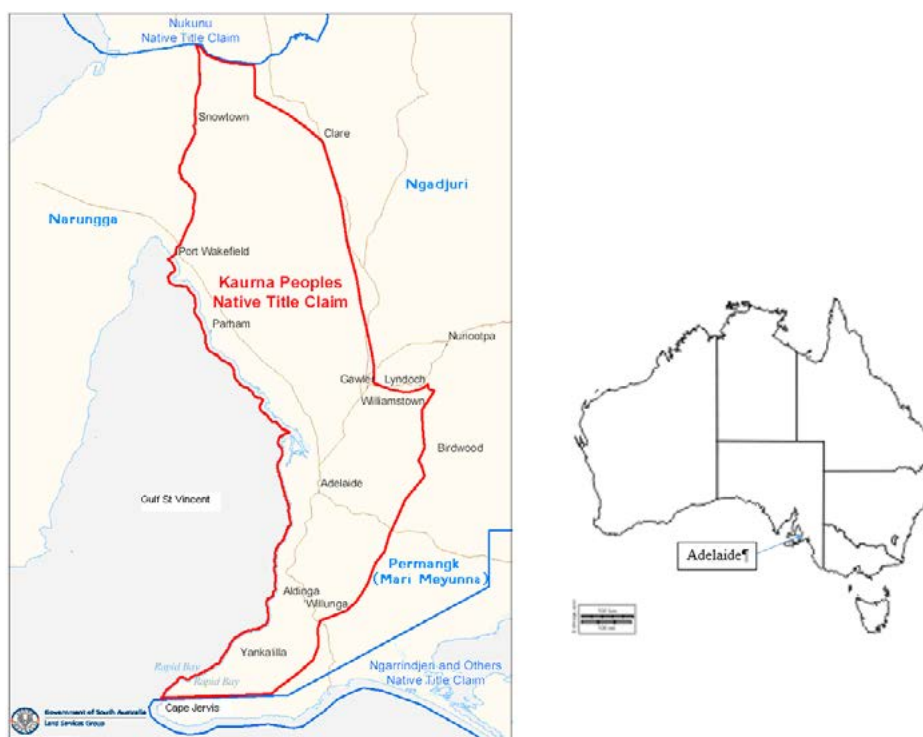


Plate 1. Map of Kaurna Lands

By world standards, Australian Aboriginal languages are small. No Australian language spoken today (leaving aside two creoles that have arisen and distinctive varieties of Aboriginal English) has more than 5,000 or 6,000 speakers. The largest languages today probably have more speakers now than they ever had. Many languages were always very small, perhaps having no more than 100 speakers. Aboriginal Australia was highly multilingual. In northeast Arnhemland, for instance, one must marry into the

opposite moiety, which means necessarily marrying a speaker of a different language. To marry someone speaking the same language is tantamount to incest. So, children in northeast Arnhemland would grow up most likely with four grandparents speaking four different languages. Acquiring knowledge of a range of languages continues throughout life and gives prestige. Similar multilingual ideologies probably also existed in southern Australia, but this is difficult to reconstruct.

## 2. Introduction

Historical records indicate that there were approximately 700 Kurna people at the time of colonisation, though numbers may well have been considerably higher prior to smallpox epidemics in the mid-1820s and possibly also in 1879 following the introduction of smallpox with the convict colony in Sydney, New South Wales. Smallpox spread down the river systems via the trading networks reaching the Kurna well ahead of colonisation. Teichelmann & Schürmann (1840: 34) write in their vocabulary under *nguya* ‘smallpox’:

“They universally assert that it came from the east, or the Murray tribes, so that [it] is not at all improbable that the disease was at first brought about the natives by European settlers on the eastern coast. They have not suffered from it for some years; but about a decennium ago it was, according to their statement, universal; when it diminished their numbers considerably, and on many left the marks of its ravages, to be seen at this day”

Following contact with sealers and whalers in the early nineteenth century and with colonisation in 1836, additional diseases were introduced including influenza, typhoid and venereal diseases. Unusually, men outnumbered women three to one and there were relatively few children (Teichelmann & Moorhouse, 1841: 34). The population plummeted.

The colonists encouraged people from the River Murray districts to come to Adelaide so they could see black and white live together in harmony. The remnant Kurna population withdrew to localities outside Adelaide to avoid violence with their traditional foes who preyed upon their women. By the early 1860s, within less than three decades, Kurna probably ceased to be spoken on an everyday basis and the Kurna population was reduced to a very small number.

Fortunately, Kurna was reasonably well-documented in the early-mid 19<sup>th</sup> century by German missionaries, C.W. Schürmann and C. G. Teichelmann, who compiled a vocabulary of 3,000 to 3,500 words and wrote a 24-page sketch grammar (Teichelmann & Schürmann, 1840), henceforth referred to as T&S. Unfortunately, there are no sound recordings of the language as it was spoken in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Various other observers recorded wordlists ranging from just 14 body parts (Earl, 1838 in Lhotsky, 1839) to 651 items including terms for a number of plants and insects etc that the German missionaries (T&S; Teichelmann, 1857 (henceforth TMs)) had overlooked (Wyatt, 1879). There are at least 20 primary sources, but the German missionaries were the only ones to write a grammar and they recorded hundreds of phrase and sentence examples, some of them chosen to illustrate complex

grammatical structures. A number of other observers recorded some simple sentence examples, but all other 19<sup>th</sup> century sources (Wyatt, 1879, Williams, 1840; Koeler, 1843, Robinson, nd, ca 1837) record only Pidgin Kurna sentences. Only Black (1920) records a small number of simple sentences of up to four words in length of the true Kurna language, which confirm aspects of T&S's (1840) grammar, but reveal nothing new.

Kurna is a fairly typical Pama-Nyungan language. It has an inventory of 20 basic consonant phonemes, with 6 places of articulation, three laterals and three rhotics, but a complete absence of fricatives. There are just three short vowels (i, a, u), three long vowels (ii, aa, uu), which only occur in the first syllable and then not often, plus three diphthongs (ai, au, ui). Kurna roots are typically two syllables, often three syllables and rarely monosyllables. There are only a few syllable types, most often CV or CVC, rarely CVCC and possibly also #V, #CRV and #CRVC. Like other Pama-Nyungan languages, Kurna has no articles or counterparts of the verb 'to be'. It employs case suffixes, as opposed to prepositions. Word order is free, with all possible orders found within the historical corpus, though SOV predominates. Kurna is strictly suffixing and short form pronouns function as clitics. Enough of the basic grammar has been recorded to allow us to express a wide range of ideas, but there are still many gaps and areas of uncertainty.

### **3. Kurna language reclamation**

#### **3.1 Early Beginnings**

Efforts to reclaim the Kurna language began in 1989-90, in an era in Australian linguistics when the prevailing ethos espoused by RMW Dixon (1989) maintained that attempting to revive a 'dead' language was "an impossible dream" and purely a political exercise. Furthermore, Dixon argued that government funds should not be directed to language revival, but rather, reserved for the documentation and maintenance of language that still had fluent native speakers.

In 1989, an Australian Commonwealth Government-funded project began to look at the potential for language revival in Adelaide. Awareness-raising workshops were held with the main focus on Ngarrindjeri and Narungga originating from the nearest missions and reserves to the east and west of Adelaide. But Kurna was also included. This project culminated in a songwriting workshop in March 1990 and the production of a songbook, *Ngarrindjeri, Narrunga and Kurna Songs* (Ngarrindjeri, Narrunga and Kurna Languages Project (1990)). Out of the 33 songs published, seven were either written in Kurna or included Kurna language alongside of Ngarrindjeri, Narungga or English. In writing these songs we had to look through the 2,000-word wordlist and 24-page sketch grammar in T&S. This was a painstakingly slow task, as there was no English-Kurna listing nor could we search the wordlist electronically in those days.

#### **3.2 The Trail of Discovery**

In 1991 Jane Simpson gave us an electronic version of the TMs wordlist in backslash codes. This greatly expanded the available vocabulary. This vocabulary was gradually added to with words from other sources such as Wyatt (1879) and Williams (1840). From 1995 – 1998 I undertook a detailed and systematic study of Kurna sources as part of a PhD project (Amery, 1998) whereupon several additional minor sources of vocabulary were identified, as well as a number of letters written by Kurna children in the Kurna language. All in all there are over 20 primary sources for the Kurna language, but the German missionary sources (T&S; TMs and Teichelmann, 1858) are the main sources. With the exception of Black (1920), they are also the best quality transcriptions and the only grammar. Unfortunately, Black (1920) is very limited with just 66 words, eight phrases and 20 short sentences recorded from Ivaritji, the so-called ‘last speaker’ of the Adelaide language (Kurna).

### 3.2.1 Recovering the Sounds of Kurna.

In the absence of speakers and any sound recordings, how do we know how to pronounce Kurna words? We can begin by reading the brief descriptions that were sometimes written by observers (T&S, 1840: 1-3; Black, 1920: 76-81). Most importantly we can use records of neighbouring closely related languages. In the Kurna case, ‘remembers’ of the Nukunu language, to the immediate north of Kurna, were documented by linguist, Luise Hercus in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Whilst we know far less about the Nukunu language than we do about Kurna, there are 197 out of 428 words listed by Hercus (1992) which are cognate with Kurna. In most cases, the pronunciation of these Nukunu cognates is most likely to be exactly the same as Kurna, though the form of the present tense suffix in the citation form of Nukunu verbs, *-tya* is different to Kurna *-ndi* (*-nthi*). In just two cases the Nukunu rhotic *r* has been lenited to *y* as in *kara* vs *kaya* ‘spear’. Despite this sporadic lenition, there is no reason to believe that the sound system of Nukunu is any different to that of Kurna. Other related languages, including Adnyamathanha, Barngarla, Narungga, Ngadjuri and Wirangu also serve as a point of comparison.

It is evident that Kurna and Nukunu (N) distinguished between three rhotic phonemes: a trill (*rr*), tap (*rd*) and glide (*r*). In T&S rhotics were sometimes written *r* and at other times *rr*. The single *r*-spelling is usually a tap (*rd*), but the *rr* of equally likely to be a rolled (*rr*) as a glide (*r*). On several occasions T&S spelt pairs of words with contrasting rhotics in exactly the same way (eg *wirri* ‘club’ (= N. *wirri*) vs *wirri* ‘scapula’ (= N. *wiri*); *karko* ‘red ochre’ (= N. *karrku*) vs *karko* (= Adnyamathanha *arlku*)).

The German missionaries failed to systematically distinguish between interdental, alveolar and retroflex consonants representing them as *t*, *d*, *n* and *l*. In a handful of instances they wrote an interdental *th* and on numerous occasions wrote retroflex consonants *rt*, *rd*, *rl*, though these same consonants were often written *t*, *d*, *n* and *l*.

### 3.2.2 The Lexicon

Three thousand or so Kurna words were recorded in historical sources. Of course, the Kurna

lexicon would have been much, much larger than that. Some areas of the lexicon, such as body parts, are well-documented, but others are poorly documented. Even concrete domains which were a core part of Kurna life, such as fish terms, were poorly documented, let alone more abstract domains. And of course, the world has changed radically since the early to mid-nineteenth century when Kurna was documented as a vibrant language.

### 3.2.2.1 Filling the Gaps

Some lexical gaps have been addressed as the need arises, often in the context of developing a language resource such as the learner's guide (Amery & Simpson, 2013). For instance, no word for 'worm' of any sort was ever recorded, nor is there a word in historical Kurna sources for iconic species such as koala, echidna or platypus. *Wumi* 'worm' has been borrowed from English, the original Dharuk (Sydney language) form *kuula* 'koala' has been adopted, *naalha* 'echidna' has been borrowed from neighbouring Nukunu whereas *kauwilta* 'platypus' has been encoded as a reduced compound (*kauwi* 'water' + *pirлта* 'possum'). Koalas have since been re-introduced and echidnas are still relatively common on the Adelaide Plains. Numerous freshwater fish species were adopted as descriptive compounds by Kurna Elder Lewis O'Brien and I working together with the Native Freshwater Fish Society, who contributed their knowledge of the fish species. What's more, of the vocabulary that was recorded, many terms are very imprecise to the point of being unusable except as names, unless we arbitrarily assign meaning. There are four terms recorded for unknown species of ducks, but a dozen species known to be indigenous to the Adelaide Plains. There is a term for 'mushroom' plus another four terms for unknown species of fungi. Without assigning more specific meaning to these terms, they are all but useless in Revived Kurna.

### 3.2.2.2 Lexical Expansion

Fortunately, in excess of 100 neologisms are contained within the Kurna legacy materials. They illustrate a range of processes that Kurna people used in the 1830s and 1840s to encode new concepts, such as *nurliti* 'key' (lit. twisting thing) and *tipukardla* 'matches' (lit. spark fire). These processes were documented and analysed in Amery (1993). They include semantic extension, compounding, backformation, onomatopoeia, derivation through the application of several different suffixes, reduplication and a combination of reduplication and suffixation. These processes have been used to expand the Kurna lexicon. The very first neologisms to be developed in revived Kurna were *karrikarriti* 'airplane' and *padnipadniti* 'motor vehicle' by analogy with *tikathikati* 'chair' and *pakipakiti* 'knife' being derived through reduplication of the verb root plus addition of the nominalising suffix *-ti*. Since then, many terms for household items, cooking implements, introduced foods, fishing gear, sports terminology, occupations and so on have been adopted. We even developed some metalinguistic terminology with terms such as *mudliwarra* 'noun' (lit. thing word), *wapiwarra* (lit. do word) 'verb', *yitpiwarra* 'meaning' (lit. seed/spirit [of the] word) and *wapiwarrarla karrpa* 'complex sentence' (lit. verb-DUAL sentence) (Amery & Simpson, 2013).



### 3.2.2.3 Lexical Semantics

Unsurprisingly, Kurna words extend their meanings in different directions to English. Kurna semantic structure mirrors that found in other Aboriginal languages. For instance, the meaning extensions of *tirntu* ‘sun’ to ‘day, time, clock’ and *kardla* ‘fire’ to ‘firewood’ are found in languages of central and northern Australia. Using this knowledge, we can with some confidence draw on the extended meanings of better documented languages to find counterparts for English words that may not appear in the definitions given in the historical corpus. For instance, we extended the meaning of *tura* ‘shade, shadow’ to ‘image, picture’ since we know that similar words are extended this way in other languages. Sometimes, the definitions given in the historical corpus are difficult to interpret. For instance, T&S (1840: 21) have *marrawakka* ‘double hand’ and *marrawakkandi* ‘to hold the double hand’. But what does ‘to hold the double hand’ actually mean? When I ask my students or audiences to demonstrate, they come up with all sorts of explanations from holding the hands together in prayer, or holding the hand with the fingers doubled over, or clasping the hands together, or shaking hands and so on. Further exploration of TMs (1857) reveals *marra wakka* ‘both hands formed into a basin’. Cupping the hands in this way would have been the way in which Kurna people habitually drank water from a stream. But without the later TMs (1857) source, we would never know.

### 3.2.3 Recovering Kurna Grammar

As a general principle, the Kurna recovery grammar should be in keeping with the historical record. However, just a few decisions have been made intentionally in the full knowledge that the resultant forms and structures are different. For instance, in traditional Kurna grammar, non-singular nouns did not take ergative case (marking the subject of a transitive verb). Because word order is free, this means it is impossible to see which NP serves as the subject and which serves as the object. Prior to European contact, Kurna, like most languages in the world, was unwritten, thus communication in the Kurna language was strictly face-to-face. Non-singular subjects have a much lower functional load than singular subjects, and any potential confusion was probably disambiguated in context. However, in written communication, this ambiguity often remains. To avoid this potential ambiguity we have applied the ergative case suffix to non-singular transitive subjects and have developed ergative forms for non-singular pronouns and demonstratives.

It is clear from example sentences that there were several different verb classes in Kurna, but because every verb is listed in the T&S vocabulary with an invariant *-ndi* (= *-nthi*) present tense suffix, there is no way of recovering these verb classes. Furthermore, because T&S did not adequately distinguish between interdental, alveolar and retroflex consonants, the nominalisation, prohibitive suffix and indefinite past tense are often all written *-tti*, whilst sometimes the prohibitive is written *-rti*. It could well be that each of these suffixes (especially the prohibitive and indefinite past tense) have several allomorphs. However, in revived Kurna we have adopted a simple contrast *-ti* ‘NOML’, *-rti* ‘PROHIB’ vs *-thi* INDEF.PST. The original system could well have been more complex.

### 3.2.4 Kurna Idiom

Like all languages, Kurna would have had a rich repertoire of idioms. Just a few appear in the

historical corpus. For example:

*parnu tia wortangga tarkaringa*

Sing according to his mouth (tooth); ie imitate the singer (T&S: 58)

This idiom can be analysed in revised spelling as follows:

*Parnu tiya warta-ngka taaka-rri-(i)nga*

his tooth behind-LOC sing-RECIP-PL.IMP

(ie sing behind his tooth)

We know that body parts play a central role in the semantics of Aboriginal languages and Kurna is no exception. The liver (*tangka*) is the seat of emotions, the lungs (*wingku*) are the seat of anger and a number of emotion terms are based on these and other body parts.

### 3.2.5 Discourse

Little can be said about discourse structure in 19<sup>th</sup> century Kurna for want of records. As English is now the first language of all Kurna people, in reviving Kurna, the text or discourse is often formulated in English first, then translated into Kurna. The alternative would be to gain inspiration from discourse structures of Aboriginal languages elsewhere, but because the closest neighbours are not well-documented, these would necessarily be somewhat distant.

## 4. Re-introduction of the Kurna language

The re-introduction of the Kurna language began in schools and in the public sphere. It seems that it is much easier to begin to speak a language in public than it is in the home where English is well-entrenched. However, when a language is lost, it is the private domain where language hangs on longest, sometimes going underground in the face of repressive policies and negative attitudes.

### 4.1 Kurna Naming Activity

Re-introduction of the Kurna language began in 1980 with the naming of an alternative school in Adelaide by Kurna/Ngarrindjeri Elder Auntie Leila Rankine. The name Warriappendi (meaning ‘to seek or find’) was taken directly from T&S (1840: 54). Since 1980 many have drawn on the historical record of the Kurna language, and especially from T&S, as a source of personal names for themselves and their children, for names of their pets, names of buildings, rooms, organisations, programs, events, publications, parks, walking trails, streets, previously un-named geographical features, even businesses, devices, boats, a bus, a tram, a frost chamber for testing frost resistance



in wheat, an allele and so on. Many requests for Kurna names are made to the Kurna language organisations, Kurna Warra Pintyanthi (KWP) and Kurna Warra Karrpanthi (KWK). There have been well over 1,000 instances of Kurna naming since 1980.

In 1996 I developed a Kurna placenaming proposal in conjunction with Kurna people in response to a request from a Kurna woman Ms Dot Davy (Goldsmith) then working as Community Development Officer at Adelaide City Council. Whilst it took some years to adopt in entirety, all of the parks and squares in the city of Adelaide now bear Kurna names, some of them dual names alongside their English names. The state of South Australia passed dual-naming legislation in 1991. The first Kurna dual name to be adopted under this legislation was Karrawirra Pari (lit. the redgum forest river) for the River Torrens which flows through the centre of the city of Adelaide. Dual naming only applies to original names of geographical features. Thus it is not possible to officially acknowledge names like Pathawilya ‘swamp gum foliage’ for the seaside suburb of Glenelg or Yartapuulti ‘land (of) sleep (or) death’ for Port Adelaide or any location that has a postcode under dual naming legislation.

## **4.2 Kurna in the Public Domain**

Kurna names are not the only ways in which the Kurna language is used in public. The Kurna language may be heard in speeches of welcome and acknowledgement of Kurna country and cultural performance and is seen in public artworks, publications and of course on the internet.

### **4.2.1 Speeches of Welcome to and Acknowledgement of Kurna Country**

Speeches of Welcome to Kurna Country are now accepted protocol at major public events such as the Adelaide Festival of the Arts, the Fringe Festival and Womadelaide (an annual world music festival), as well as numerous conferences and local Indigenous events. The first speech of welcome in the Kurna language was given in 1991 (Amery, 2016: 211). Since then they have increased exponentially. Now there are many hundreds of speeches of welcome or acknowledgement of Kurna country given in the Kurna language every year. This practice has spread across Australia and is now commonplace in the local languages in all of Australia’s capital cities. Australia’s Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull gave an acknowledgement in the Ngunnawal language of Canberra, Australia’s national capital prior to delivering the 2016 Closing the Gap statement.<sup>3</sup> Here in Adelaide, the Vice Chancellors of both The University of South Australia (UniSA) and the University of Adelaide have used words of acknowledgement in the Kurna language.

### **4.2.2 Dance Performance**

The revival of the makanthi ‘thigh shaking’ dance performance in the early 1990s is now performed by three Kurna dance troupes, all bearing Kurna names (Paitya ‘deadly’, Taikurtinna ‘family’ and Kuma Kaaru ‘one blood’), and is accompanied by introductions in the Kurna language. They have also incorporated singing into their performances and significantly increased the Kurna language

<sup>3</sup> *The Australian* (10 Feb. 2016). <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-12-15/learning-wiradjuri-overcome-agoraphobia-language-revolution/8118758>

input over the last few years.

### 4.2.3 Public Artwork

The first public artwork both to bear a Kaurna name and incorporate Kaurna text was the Yerrakartarta installation at the entrance to the Hyatt Hotel on North Terrace in the heart of Adelaide. This artwork as created in 1995 by Daryl Milika Pfitzner, a Kukatha man together with Ngarrindjeri/Kaurna artist Muriel van Der Byll with input from Kaurna Elder Kauwanu Lewis Yerloburka O'Brien. The artists took a sentence from T&S: 67: *Natta atto nanga; yakko atto bukki nakki* 'Now I know (or understand) it; formerly I did not know'. To this they added the words *Kaurna yerta* 'Kaurna land' to the front of the expression resulting in 'Kaurna land, now I know it, before I didn't.' Surprisingly, no English translation is provided in or to accompany the plaque. Various Kaurna words, such as Warriparri 'Milky Way', Wirnta 'spear', Tarnda 'red kangaroo', Kari 'emu' etc. Now, there are many works of public art across the Adelaide metropolitan area, but especially in the centre of Adelaide, which incorporate words, phrases and titles in the Kaurna language.

### 4.2.5 Kaurna in Cyberspace

In 1995 there was just one hit for 'Kaurna' with a Google search. That was for the Kaurna holdings in the ASEDA electronic archive at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). Now there are 194,000 hits and searches on other Kaurna words, such as *pangkarra* 'territory inherited from the father' also yield sizable numbers (15,900 hits on 14 March 2017) largely through its use in the wine and food industries.

The KWP web pages at the University of Adelaide ([www.adelaide.edu.au/kwp](http://www.adelaide.edu.au/kwp)) were established in 2005 and in 2006 the Kaurna Placenames website was launched ([www.kaurnaplacenames.com](http://www.kaurnaplacenames.com)). Since 2012 the KWP project at the University of Adelaide has been producing YouTube clips to facilitate the learning and use of the Kaurna language. The Pirltawardli puppet show<sup>4</sup> is oriented towards children, whereas the Kaurna Language Learning series<sup>5</sup> is accessible to all, with clips that introduce golfing and football terminology. There are now 30 YouTube clips on the web and many of these clips have been viewed by hundreds and thousands of viewers. Others have established their own websites and all three Kaurna dance troupes have a Facebook presence. Numerous organisations acknowledge the Kaurna land and people through the use of Kaurna language on the web.

## 5. Learning and teaching Kaurna

During the 1990s the school programs were the powerhouse for Kaurna language revival. We began with a songwriter's workshop in early 1990 followed by annual workshops held at Kaurna Plains School (henceforth KPS) and with early childcare workers. Participants were drawn from the education sector. In 1992 KPS adopted the Kaurna language for its school language program,

4 Pirltawardli Puppet Show on Kaurna for Kids web pages: <http://bit.ly/kaurna2>

5 Kaurna Language Learning Series: [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UChOOYOnJuEeydJK0QjN\\_Fpw](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UChOOYOnJuEeydJK0QjN_Fpw)

despite being encouraged to adopt Pitjantjatjara, a strong Aboriginal language from the north of South Australia with many native speakers.

When Kurna was first taught in schools there was a widespread belief within the school sector that it was quite impossible to teach a 'dead' language and we had to work hard to demonstrate that Kurna was a language of substance and that it was possible to develop the resources needed to support a teaching program. In 1994 an accredited senior secondary Kurna language program was introduced at Elizabeth City High School and Elizabeth West Adult Campus in the far north of the Adelaide metropolitan area. Kurna was amongst the first few Indigenous languages, along with Pitjantjatjara and Yolngu Matha from the far north of Australia, taught at senior secondary level in accredited programs under the Australian Indigenous Languages Framework (AILF) (see Mercurio & Amery, 1996). Prior to 1994, some 34 migrant languages were taught in accredited programs in schools, but not one of Australia's many Indigenous languages.

The original Kurna language teachers have all long since retired or passed on and the non-Aboriginal support teachers have been transferred to other schools. In 2006, a young Kurna man, Jack Kanya Buckskin began learning Kurna with me in an adult evening class. After team-teaching the course with me in 2008 I handed the course over to Buckskin in 2009. He was the main teacher of Kurna in schools for a number of years, teaching at KPS, Adelaide High School, Salisbury High School and LeFevre High School spread across the central, western and northern metropolitan area. Buckskin now has a young family of his own and has left the school sector to work in adult education at Tauondi College, Port Adelaide. Young Kurna woman, Taylor Tipu Power-Smith, along with Buckskin, are the only two graduates of the TAFE<sup>6</sup> Certificate IV course 'Teaching an Endangered Aboriginal Language (Kurna)'. Power-Smith has been teaching Kurna at Gilles Street Primary School in the city since 2014 and in 2017 also commenced teaching Kurna at Challa Gardens Primary School in the mid-northern suburbs.

The success of programs in the 1990s has generated huge demand within the school sector for teachers of Kurna. Many schools across metropolitan Adelaide would like to run a Kurna language program. However, few Kurna people have the knowledge, skills and confidence to teach Kurna. There is no longer any professional development within the education department for teachers of Aboriginal languages, though the department provides some funds through partnerships with Aboriginal organisations, such as KWK, to produce their own resources and organise their own professional development activities if they see this as a priority. Training of teachers of Aboriginal languages, and especially Kurna, is an urgent priority to meet the unmet demand. In 2017, Buckskin introduced the TAFE Certificate III course 'Learning an Endangered Aboriginal Language (Kurna)' at Tauondi College and is working with teachers and parents from KPS. We hope to recruit many more to this course over the next few years.

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6 Technical and Further Education (TAFE) is Australia's government run adult education sector.



**Plate 2.** Kaurna TAFE Course Participants, 2014: Kneeling at Front from left: Jack Kanya Buckskin, Trevor Tirritpa Ritchie; Middle Row from left: Dr Mary-Anne Gale, Cherie Warrara Watkins, Frank Wangutya Wanganeen, Dr Lewis Yerloburka O'Brien, Dr Alitya Wallara Rigney; Back Row from left: Taylor Tipu Power-Smith, Dr Rob Amery, Stephen Gadlabarti Goldsmith, Garth Agius, Jenny Wright.

## 6. Re-establishing intergenerational transmission

One of the major success stories of the Kaurna language movement has been the progress made towards the re-establishment of intergenerational transmission. In 2000 we decided that the development of words and expressions for use by parents and caregivers of babies and young children was a priority. We held a series of workshops to that end (Amery & Gale, 2000) where we identified functions (such as comforting or warning) and situations (such as mealtimes and bath times) for language use with young children. We translated or found alternative Kaurna expressions for a range of utterances as suggested in English by the participants. In the process we needed to develop several new words, such a *warnupaltha* 'nappy or diaper' and *tadlipurdi* 'soap' (lit. foaming stone). Little more happened over the next few years until Jack Kanya Buckskin came along (as discussed above). Buckskin, whose story is told poignantly in the documentary *Buckskin*, made a concerted effort to learn Kaurna. In addition to teaching the language and working on Kaurna projects recording sound files for loading onto the web, he began to talk to his dogs in Kaurna, and only in Kaurna. When his daughter was born in March 2011 he talked to her consistently in Kaurna so that she is now at least a semi-native speaker of Kaurna. Some concepts she knows only in Kaurna, others she knows only in English and some that she knows in both languages. When I speak to her in Kaurna (eg *Waa ninkai?* 'Where's your mother?' or *Mapa mapakurungka ngatpanthu!* 'Put the rubbish in the rubbish bin!') she understands perfectly, but responds in English. Her English is dominant, as her mother, who spends most time with the children, speaks only English. It will be very interesting to see the future language development between the three siblings when her brothers (born in May 2014 and December 2016) grow up a little.



**Plate 3.** Jack Kanya Buckskin with daughter Mahleah Kartanya

## 7. Kurna as an auxiliary language

The Kurna language is emerging as an auxiliary language for Kurna people used alongside English. It will never replace English, nor is there any desire that it replace English. But Kurna people have embraced the Kurna language as an embodiment or a pillar of their identity. A small number have actively embraced the language making impressive efforts to learn and use it for a wide range of topics. Some use it emblematically in more restricted ways. Others draw pride from seeing members of their community use it and inevitably some jealousies arise, but that too is a sign of linguistic vitality.

Re-engagement with their Indigenous languages builds self-esteem and, for some, is a source of culturally-affirming employment. This has positive implications for health and well-being. This is portrayed vividly in the *Buckskin* documentary, where engagement with Kurna language and culture was the path to recovery following the suicide of Jack Buckskin's sister. For Buckskin and others, the Kurna language has given people a real sense of purpose. These experiences are repeated elsewhere. Geoff Anderson (2010) from central New South Wales shares his account of personal and social healing through engagement with his Wiradjuri language, which like Kurna is being reclaimed and taught in schools. Anderson reveals further how engaging with the Wiradjuri language helped him overcome agoraphobia, the aftermath of a mental breakdown following severe physical injury.<sup>7</sup>

The cost of treating a severe mental illness or of incarceration is high (\$100,000 to \$300,000 per year in direct costs) apart from the indirect costs to family, friends and of course, the individual. In cold, hard economic rationalist terms, we can see that turning just one person's life around means that investing in language revival is a good investment. We can do a lot with \$100,000 per year.

7 ABC News 3 January 2017 <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-12-15/learning-wiradjuri-overcome-agoraphobia-language-revolution/8118758> (accessed 17 March 2017).



The Kurna people, at least those active within KWP/KWK circles are keen to share their language with wider society in order to break down the barriers between Indigenous and non-Indigenous society and achieve reconciliation. Many understandings emerge from a study of Kurna. Certain understandings about Kurna country, its fauna and flora, climate and weather emerge. For instance, Kurna has a term *pukarra* for the hot northwest wind, well-known by every Adelaidean, that blows around November marking a distinct change in the weather pattern. There is no term in English for this phenomenon. A study of the language also affords insights into early contact history with recorded sentences such as:

*Pulyunna meyu yakko yailtyatti pindi meyu budnitina*

The black men had no idea that the Europeans would come (T&S, 1840: G20)

Kurna also brings insights into aspects of Kurna culture as we have seen. Along with other Aboriginal languages, it has a particularly rich inventory of kinship terms with distinct terms for the four grandparents and their reciprocal grandchildren, terms for a range of deceased kin, such as *kutarri* ‘a late elder sister’, and bereaved relatives, such as *wikanti* ‘father whose children are dead’ or *wilu* ‘a man whose brothers and sisters have died’. A study of Kurna also helps us understand Nunga English, a distinctive form of English spoken by Aboriginal people in southern South Australia. For instance, Nunga English uses the term ‘deadly’ to refer to both dangerous or venomous things, as well as to something which is really good. The Kurna term *paitya* shares this same range of meanings. Through the language, even though it was only partially documented, people begin to recognise a complex and beautiful culture which challenges long-held negative stereotypes about Indigenous languages, cultures and people.

## 7. Language planning considerations

As a researcher of the Kurna language in the early 1990s, I often received requests from members of the public and sometimes from Kurna people themselves for Kurna names, translations and information about the Kurna language. As a non-Indigenous linguist, I often felt uncomfortable about providing this information. I provided the information but advised the requestor to consult with Kurna Elders. I was seldom sure that they did. We needed a process to ensure that Kurna people were involved at every step in the development of their language.

### 7.1 Kurna Warra Pintyanthi (KWP)

In 2002, following a series of workshops on developing Kurna funeral liturgy, Kurna Elders, Dr Alitya Wallara Rigney and Dr Lewis Yerloburka O’Brien and I formed KWP. KWP was a committee of Kurna language Elders, enthusiasts, linguistics, teachers and researchers which met on a monthly basis to deal with requests for Kurna names and translations, to promote the Kurna language, to oversee the development of Kurna language resources and provide guidance to researchers. Its brief was specifically language matters. Requests of other kinds (for example permission to use the Kurna shield) were referred to the other Kurna organisations. KWP met initially at the University of South Australia where I was working at the time, then at the School of Languages, and since 2004, at the

University of Adelaide which hosts KWP's web pages, KWP research projects and auspices KWP's finances. But KWP is not a department of the University.



**Plate 4.** KWP Team and Elders: Front: Dr Alitya Wallara Rigney and Dr Lewis Yerloburka O'Brien. Rear: Stephen Gadlabarti Goldsmith, Jack Kanya Buckskin, Rob Amery, Dot Goldsmith, Trevor Tirritpa Ritchie, Taylor Tipu Power-Smith, Gerhard Rüdiger, Chester Schultz.

#### **7.1.1 The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the University of Adelaide and KWP.**

In 2013 following protracted discussions, a memorandum of understanding was signed between KWP and the University of Adelaide. The MoU commits the University, amongst other things, to the ongoing teaching and research of the Kurna language. The MoU at the University of Adelaide came on the back of a MoU signed in 2003 between Kurna Elders Dr Lewis Yerloburka O'Brien, Dr Alitya Wallara Rigney and myself and the University of South Australia (UniSA). The MoU with UniSA related specifically to Kurna course materials which I had developed with Kurna people at the University of Adelaide. When I shifted to UniSA and took the course with me, it was a clear case of them inheriting the course. They had not actually invested any of their own resources in developing the course. In fact, when I developed the course at the University of Adelaide in 1997, I was a PhD student, not an employee of the University, though a technician and the recording studio were used.





**Plate 5.** Signing of the MoU between KWP and the University of Adelaide: Dr Lewis Yerloburka O'Brien, Prof. Warren Bebbington and Dr Alitya Wallara Rigney.

## 7.2 Kaurna Warra Karrpanthi (KWK)

KWP was never incorporated. In an effort to put the Kaurna language movement more centrally in the hands of Kaurna people, a sister organisation, Kaurna Warra Karrpanthi (KWK) 'supporting Kaurna language', was formed and incorporated under the Office of Registration of Indigenous Corporations (ORIC) in 2013. KWP and KWK are essentially the same people working towards the same ends. KWP now focusses on language research and resource production, whereas KWK provides the service arm now hosting the regular monthly meetings that deal with requests for names and translations and provide training.

## 8. The way forward

Whilst remarkable progress has been made over the last 25-30 years, the Kaurna language movement is still highly vulnerable and dependent on a very small number of individuals. Like other early language revival programs in Australia, we are in an era of generational change. The way forward is clearly a focus on recruiting others to the Kaurna language movement and building capacity within the Kaurna community to run and expand their own language programs and resource development. We still have a long way to go in raising language proficiency within the community. Clearly there is significant demand for knowledgeable and skilled Kaurna language teachers and performers. Career paths need to be developed, to ensure recognition of the TAFE training by the school sector and to provide adequate remuneration and working conditions.

## 9. Lessons learnt

Is the Kaurna experience able to be copied and reproduced? In our experience, every language, every community, every situation is different. The legacy materials for Kaurna are very different to the legacy materials associated with all of the neighbouring languages. There is a vast body of texts of variable quality that have been recorded in Ngarrindjeri to the east, whilst Kaurna legacy texts

are almost non-existent, though, there is a comparable grammar (Meyer, 1843) written by T&S's colleague. Very little has been recorded of Narungga, Ngadjuri and Nukunu, the other members of the Miru subgroup which are most closely related to Kurna. No historical grammars were ever written for these languages and little can be extracted from the handful of recorded sentences and complex verb forms that have been recorded. A recovery grammar has been written for Narungga (Eira, 2010), but this grammar relies on Kurna to complete pronoun and other grammatical paradigms.

The extent to which languages can be reclaimed and reconstructed depends on the extent to which closely related languages have been documented. If the language is a linguistic isolate, this severely limits the possibilities.

On the sociolinguistic front, with six state capitals and a national capital city, Kurna is one of just seven Indigenous languages associated with a capital city. Of these languages, Kurna is by far the most comprehensively documented. There are many more opportunities for use of a reclaimed language if it does belong to a capital city than if it is associated with a sparsely populated regional centre. More than 80% of the schools in the state of South Australia are located within Kurna country, though there are some 40-50 languages Indigenous to the state, including Pitjantjatjara which is still relatively strong, being spoken by all generations.

For reclaimed languages like Kurna, I have proposed the Formulaic Method (Amery, 2001; 2016: 237-242) whereby it is introduced alongside English in well-formed chunks of language, or speech formulas, beginning with high frequency one-word utterances and slowly building up in complexity. This method exploits code-switching, allowing them to use what they know, even if they don't yet understand the grammar.

There is a tendency for members of the public, and even for some linguists, to accept the language used by an indigenous person as being correct. As a result, many errors go unchallenged. However, until a cohort of native-speaking children emerge, the measure of what is 'correct' Kurna must be the historical record (see Amery, 2013), which is, of course, open to interpretation.

The reclamation and re-introduction of a language like Kurna, which belongs to a small and disenfranchised community, is shaped dramatically by the personalities, interests and skill sets of the individuals involved. The Kurna language movement has made significant progress, though some areas have actually regressed. Kurna is still highly vulnerable, but despite this, the Kurna language movement has provided a vision for the future. We have developed a range of innovative strategies and are working towards the formation of a sustainable language movement. I believe this will become a reality as my expectations for the language are constantly pushed further forward.

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