

## **ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES OF THE KIMBERLEY**

At the meeting of 7 July, our President, Kevin Kenneally, introduced Barbara Jones, a linguist who has been involved with the Kimberley Language Resource Centre. The centre endeavours to publicise that there were many different languages in the Kimberley and aims to keep as many of them alive as possible.

Australian, or indigenous, languages all have some common features. They have affixes on words which allow words to be put in any order and yet say the same thing. Although it is difficult to define what is a language and what is a dialect, there were approximately 250 different languages in Australia. They can be divided geographically by a line from the Kimberley across to the Northern Territory. The languages south of this line are of the Pama-Nyungan family of languages and are very similar in structure. The Kimberley languages north of the dividing line are very different and are classed by grammatical differences. Meanings are placed on the beginning of words, rather than at the end, and the languages have very different sound systems. Some of them have complicated systems of noun classes. Examples of noun classes are the masculine and feminine division in languages like French. There are a lot of different languages in the Kimberley, in contrast to the languages south of the dividing line, and there has been a lot of discussion about this diversity. It may be that people living south of the dividing line spread much further because of the geographical and climatic conditions, and it may have also been a later migration of people.

It is difficult to make a map of language areas in the Kimberley and to mark distinct lines where languages occurred. It is estimated that there were 30 different languages in the Kimberley, and four main language families and areas have been determined. The Worroran family of languages occurred in the area from Derby to Wyndham and some of the languages are still found in Derby and Kalumburu. The languages have several noun classes, for example there are classes for rocks, green things and people, and complex verb systems. The Jarrakan family of languages, which have masculine and feminine systems and very complex verb structures, occurred in the area from Wyndham to the Northern Territory border and down towards Halls Creek. There are two languages in the Bunuban family which occurred around Fitzroy Crossing. Another family of languages is the Nyulnyulan family, which occurred in the area from Broome to Derby. As well as differing in their grammatical structures, the meanings in the languages are very different because of the different cultures across the Kimberley. It is often very difficult to find an English meaning for words because of the different cultural context.

There has been a marked change in the continuing use of the different languages in the Kimberley over the last 15 years, for example the traditional language was used as the main form of communication in the school at Ringer Soak in 1986, but on a recent visit Barbara found that the students appeared to be speaking Kriol. When schools are visited, there are now very few places found where the children are growing up speaking their own language. Most children are growing up speaking the lingua franca, Kriol, although in some areas children can understand the language

their parents are speaking but cannot converse in that language. There are still adults in their late 20s who can speak, or at least understand, their own language however.

The development of Kriol began when people moved into missions and, with so many diverse languages, a common language had to be found for communication. Kriol has a very strong grammatical system of its own, with some of the grammar and meanings of traditional languages and many words from English, and is growing as a strong language in its own right. Kriol in the Kimberley and Northern Territory is different to the creole languages in other parts of Australia, and when full Kriol is spoken it is not understood by non-aboriginal people.

There are a number of reasons for the decline of languages:

- English became stronger as the non-Aboriginal population increased.
- Children lived away from parents for schooling.
- Some parents thought their children would be better off learning English, and so Kriol was used in the home.
- Some schools did not allow the traditional languages to be spoken.
- The children of the Kimberley, like teenagers anywhere, want to follow the popular culture as portrayed on TV.

The Kimberley Language Centre was set up following a survey in 1984-5 because people said that they wanted to preserve their languages and teach them to their children. Some languages are stronger than others, particularly in the desert areas, such as around Balgo. Those at biggest threat are in centres where there is a big non-aboriginal population. The task of the Language Centre is to promote languages through school language programs, publications, word books, oral histories and language maps. Introducing languages into schools is ideal but very complex, because the adults who are still proficient in the language are not used to teaching in front of a class, and the languages are not structured for the school teaching environment. In Western Australia, it is not compulsory to teach in the traditional language, whereas in the Northern Territory there has been a policy on bilingual education, although the Territory government now wants to phase it out.

The ideal oral histories are written in the traditional language and Kriol, then translated into English. The Language Centre tries to involve the local communities in writing their own language and to produce story books, word books, and in particular using local illustrations. However the writing of languages that have not had a traditional written form is very difficult, and the only way to learn the language is to hear it spoken. The dilemma is that if a written version for a language is not developed, then the language may be lost.

*Bev Phillips*