

Park Notes



Aboriginal Languages

Aboriginal Languages Australia Wide

Contrary to popular belief that there was only one Aboriginal language in Australia, studies have shown that there were about two hundred Aboriginal languages in Australia at the time Europeans arrived. These were distinct languages as different from each other as English and Bengali. These languages have extensive vocabularies and complex grammars. Today about one hundred languages are still spoken to some extent with fifty languages having a significant number of speakers.

Language is the life blood of culture. The cultural identity and unique world view of each people is carried in their language. English versions of Aboriginal concepts such as the Dreamtime can only give a watered-down and somewhat misleading view of the original idea. For this reason Aboriginal communities are keen to see their languages survive in a living and dynamic form.

Languages in Kakadu National Park

The linguistic diversity of Aboriginal Australia is demonstrated locally in microcosm. The map on the back page shows the main languages of the Park.

Languages of the Escarpment

The languages still actively spoken in the Park are Gun-djeihmi (also called Mayali), Kun-winjku and Jawoyn. These languages were all spoken in or adjacent to the Arnhem Land escarpment. People talking Gun-djeihmi and Kun-winjku can understand one another and therefore they are regarded as dialects of the one language. Jawoyn is a separate language.

These languages share very similar structure and grammar. For this reason these languages, together with others in the region, are grouped together into a large language family called the Kunwinjku language family. The details of one of these languages, Gun-djeihmi, are outlined over the page.

Gun-djeihmi ... A Living Language

Gun-djeihmi is the language spoken in the central Park area and is used here to show some of the characteristics of Aboriginal languages.

Sounds and their nearest English equivalents.

Vowels

- a - as in father or the u in but
- e - as in bed or the ai in air
- i - as the ee in feet
- o - like or said quickly
- u - as in push

Diphthongs

- ai - like eye
- au - like house
- ayi - at the end of words, eye-ee
- ei - like they
- eu - like air-oo said very quickly
- eyi - at the end of words, as in payee
- iu - like ee-yoo said quickly, or the eau in beaut
- oi - as in poise
- ou - like low
- ui - like gooey said quickly

Long Consonants

- bb, dd, djdj
- like long English pp, tt, tch



Consonants

- b - bank
- d - dog
- dj - jump
- g - gun
- h - like the Cockney tt in bottle - bo'le, or like oh-oh
- k - cake
- l - lift
- m - mad
- n - nose
- ng - sing
- nj - canyon, or like boyn if at the end of word, eg bonj
- r - rice, carry
- rd - as in harder with an American accent
- rl - as in curl with an American accent
- rn - as in burn with an American accent
- rr - like the tt in butter said very quickly so it is trilled
- w - wait
- y - yell

Ng at the start of words:

Say the word 'singalong', then practice dropping the start of the word, so it becomes 'ingalong' and then 'ngalong'. The 'ng' sound is sometimes said very faintly in Gun-djeihmi so that the word would sound more like 'along' with just a hint of the 'ng' at the start.

Structure

Gun-djeihmi is a polysynthetic language. That is, it can express in a single complex word an idea that takes a whole sentence in English. For example abanmarneyawoihiyukyirurndeng can be broken into the following parts.

a	I
ban	then
marne	for
yawoih	again
yiuk	honey
yi	with
rrurnde	return
ng	non-past tense

In English we would use eight words to express this as "I bring the honey back for them again".

Verbs and Tenses

Gun-djeihmi has five tenses, each shown by a different suffix. Look at the different forms of the verb *ginje*, to cook.

Imperative	yiginj <u>em</u> n	Cook it!
Nonpast	yiginj <u>e</u>	You are cooking it.
Past completive	yiginji <u>ng</u>	You cooked it.
Past durative	yiginj <u>eyi</u>	You were cooking it.
Irreals (unreal)	yiginj <u>emeninj</u>	You didn't cook it.



Do you mean me?

Gun-djeihmi has a complex system for indicating exactly who is being referred to and who isn't. Compare the following:

- anire: "we two (excluding you) go"
- arrire "we (more than two, excluding you) go"
- ganire "we two (including you) go"
- garrire "we (more than two, including you) go"

Nouns

There are four noun classes masculine, feminine, vegetable and neuter. These are indicated by prefixes to words.

Masculine	<u>na</u>	Feminine	<u>al</u>
<u>na</u> - rangem	- boy	<u>al</u> - ngururrkmanj	- olive python
<u>na</u> - marngorl	- barramundi	<u>al</u> - gordou	- brolga
<u>na</u> - gohbanj	- old man	<u>al</u> - gohbanj	- old woman
Vegetable	<u>an</u>	Neuter	<u>gun</u>
<u>an</u> - mim	- seed	<u>gun</u> - ngei	- name
<u>an</u> - djeuk	- rain cloud	<u>gun</u> - boi	- cooking stone
<u>an</u> - yiuk	- honey	<u>gun</u> - bid	- hand

Languages in Kakadu National Park (Cont.)

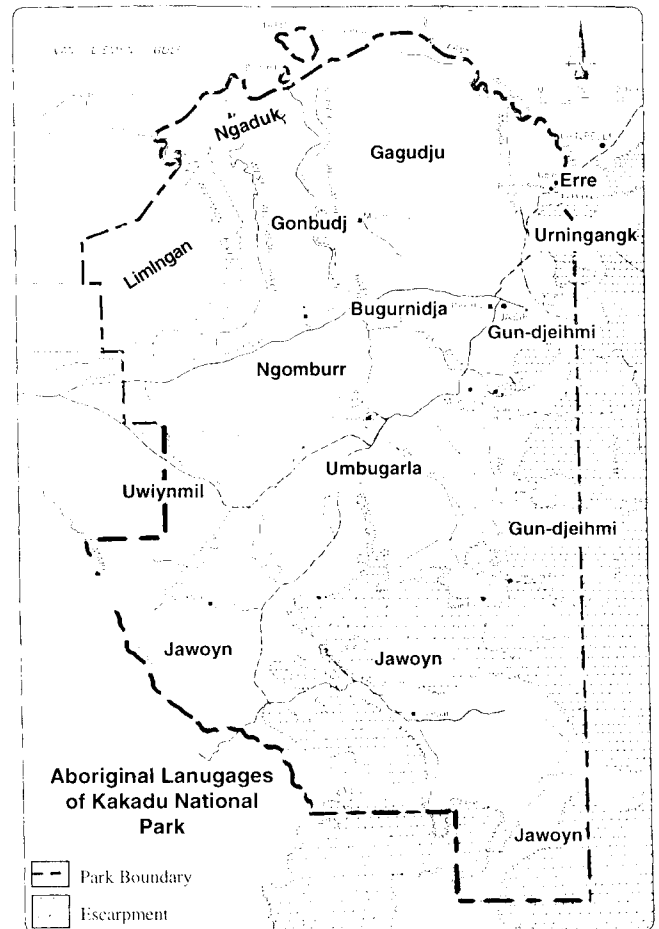
Languages of the lowlands

Much less is known about the languages of the lowlands. These languages are either extinct, with little or nothing known about them, or are remembered by only a few elderly people. The disappearance of these languages is a result of the population collapse that followed the foundation of Darwin in 1869. It is estimated that by 1930 the Aboriginal population of this area was reduced to 5% of its original size due to the introduction of exotic diseases and to violence. The people of the sandstone plateau area, being relatively more distant from Darwin, survived the effects of contact better.

Gagudju, one of the floodplain languages that is still remembered, is a particularly complex language, which, at the turn of the century was the major language spoken in the northern Park area. This language gives its name to the Park. The slightly different spelling comes from Baldwin Spencer, the pioneering anthropologist who first recorded the language in 1912 before a standardised spelling system was adopted.

Multilingual Society

The large number of languages in a relatively small area is some indication of the great diversity and complexity of Aboriginal society. As a consequence, most Aboriginal people were at least bilingual and many spoke three or four languages. Today this is still the case. English is often a person's second or third language.



Place Names

Place names vary in meaning.

Some relate to the presence of a spirit from the creation era, **Namarrgon Djahdjah** is the name of the place where the lightning man, Namarrgon was and is active.

Other names relate to an event in the creation era which caused the earth to take its present form. **Badbong Bawardedjobjeng** which means 'the short-eared rock wallaby cut the rock,' is the name of a rock in the Nourlangie area which has a large crack.

Other names such as **Anbanbang** or **Mardugal** are simply area names with no other meaning.