

Translation app helping to preserve endangered Indigenous Queensland languages

ABC North West Qld By Zara Margolis and Harriet Tatham

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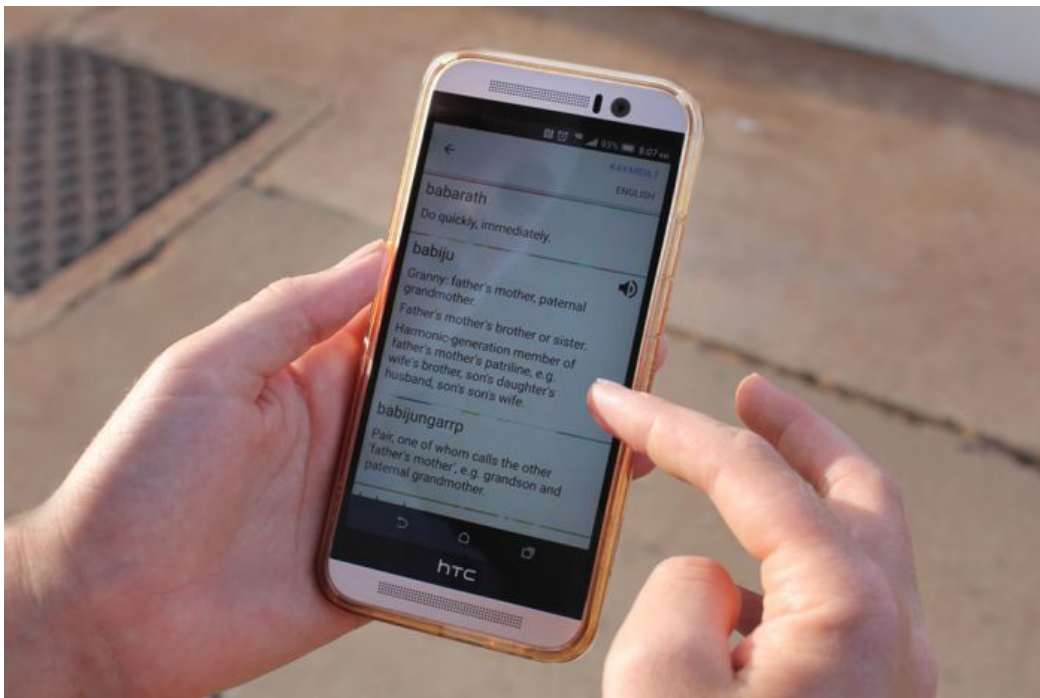


PHOTO: The app is available on Android devices, and currently features more than 3,500 entries and 50 audio clips. (ABC North West Qld: Harriet Tatham)

A unique partnership between a linguist, an app designer, and a remote Aboriginal community is helping to ensure the survival of a rare Indigenous language.

The Kayardild language became threatened when the Kaiadilt people, who traditionally inhabited Bentinck and Sweers Islands in Queensland's Gulf of Carpentaria, were brought by missionaries to live on Mornington Island.

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WARNING: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that the following story may contain images and voices of people who have died.

Professor Nicholas Evans, director of the Australian Research Council's Centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language, has been leading the translation work.

Together with local elders, he has been working to translate old Kayardild sound recordings and transform them into a language app, which can be downloaded on mobile phones.

"This is something that's just starting to be embraced in terms of the new wave of digital literacy for Indigenous languages," Dr Evans said.



PHOTO: Dr Nicholas Evans (left) and his sister Catherine, chatting with May Moodoonuthi on Mornington Island in 1982. (Supplied: Penny Johnson)

Hearing ancestral voices

The original soundtracks were recorded in the 1960s, and feature voices of elders past and present.

Loretta 'Lulu' Durretmuthi who has been working with elders to translate the Kayardild to English, was able to hear sound recordings that featured her great-grandfather.

"It almost brought a tear to my eyes listening to him speaking because the last I remember him was when I was about 10 or 11 years old," she said.

"I can understand what they're saying, but I can't really speak it.

"If I'm going, I'll tell you ngada warraj [and] if I tell you to come, I say dalij, and if I wanted you to sit down I tell you to diij."

Ms Durretmuthi said the transfer of the Kaiadilt people to Mornington Island, where the project is currently being run, is the reason behind the language's threatened status.

"Everyone was just, more or less, forced to speak English, I suppose," she said.

"My mum said even when they were put in the dormitories, the missionaries told them they weren't allowed to speak their language and that's how come it sort of got lost.

"Out of the old girls, there's about five of them, and there's only one of them that's actually very fluent on it."



PHOTO: Dr Evans has been working with large groups of Kaiadilt people to build the grammar. (Supplied: Grace Barnes)

Writing a grammar for unique language

Dr Evans became involved with the Kayardild language in the early 1980s when he began his PhD and became aware of the language's vulnerability.

"At that point, there would've been about 40 people that still spoke the language, [and] from that time on, no child was born that would grow up speaking the language," he said.

He began to write the grammar of Kayardild in a final push to preserve a dying art.

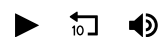
"My job was to write a grammar of the language which basically describes how a language works," Dr Evans said.

"I was very, very lucky because it's a very unusual language that does lots of things that no other language in the world does."

Using the grammar written by Dr Evans, app designer Ben Foley has separated individual words spoken by elders, and integrated these in a form of dictionary.

"What we can now do, also thanks to technology, is to go through these recordings, snip out a recording, and then that gets associated with the word on the app when you display it," Dr Evans said.

He said while a lot had been lost in terms of Indigenous Australian languages, technology could help us savour the knowledge that still existed.



AUDIO: Linguist Professor Nicholas Evans spoke to Zara Margolis about the program. (ABC News)

"We can't turn back the clock, and we can't bring people back to life who've left this earth, but through this process — going back over recordings that have been made — people hear voices and we can break it up," Dr Evans said.

Indigenous languages under threat

The Kayardild language is not the only Australian Indigenous language in peril.

Dr Doug Marmion, a research fellow in linguistics at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) said overall, Indigenous Australian languages were in decline.

"In 2004, AIATSIS conducted a survey, which we called the National Indigenous Language Survey (NILES), and we looked at the state of Indigenous languages across the whole continent," he said.

"We believe that there were at least around 250 languages across Australia.

"In 2004, the evidence was that around 145 still had speakers and of those, only 18 were strong — and by 'strong' we mean they were being passed onto children who were using their languages as a matter of course on a daily basis."

A decade later AIATSIS conducted a second language survey to measure further vulnerability.

"[In 2014] there were about that time around 120 [languages] with speakers, and the 18 strong languages had declined to around 13, so certainly there is ongoing decline," Dr Marmion said.



PHOTO: Dr Evans with his daughter Olwen and May Moodoonuthi on Bentinck Island in 1982. (Supplied: Penny Johnson)

Not all bad news for languages

Dr Marmion said while the 2014 survey findings may sound gloomy, there was a positive note in that a language revival was underway.

"There's a wave of activity across Australia where Aboriginal people are working to revive their languages," Dr Marmion said.

"What that means is that in many cases, [they are] working with linguists to find any old historical materials or work done by linguists in past years and [are] using that to develop classes for adults and children."

While Dr Evans admitted saving the few 'strong' languages was a battle against the clock, he believes Australia should be proud of its efforts to protect native tongues.

"It should be a source of pride to Australia ... the way people are going about documenting [Indigenous cultures]," he said.

"I think we're really leading the world in how we're bringing technology to bear on this, and we shouldn't forget that speech technology is a growth industry, it's just zooming up there."

Topics: aboriginal, aboriginal-language, internet-culture, information-and-communication, languages, university-and-further-education, academic-research, indigenous-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander, gununa-4871

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