

# Yolŋu Sign Language: An Undocumented Language of Arnhem Land

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## Abstract

Recently there has been an increase in studies documenting the world's languages. Most of these studies concentrate on spoken languages but there is a growing effort to document sign languages. In this short paper we describe one of the many undocumented sign languages of Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia. This Indigenous sign language is known locally as Yolŋu Sign Language (YSL). Although this language is used in daily interaction, many of its users are not aware that it is a language per se. With this brief description of YSL we hope to make our readers aware of the existence of this language. Another aim of this paper is to generate some general discussion on the status of Indigenous sign languages in Arnhem Land, which we believe have become endangered. Although YSL is an endangered language there are still measures that can be taken to prevent this language disappearing.

## Introduction

In the last decade we have seen an increasing effort to document endangered languages in many areas of the world. Most of the languages that have been documented are spoken languages. Little is known of signed languages. In this short paper we describe briefly an undocumented sign language in Arnhem Land. This Indigenous sign language is known locally as Yolŋu Sign Language (YSL). Although this language is used in daily interaction, many of its users are not aware that it is a language per se. Our main aim in this paper is to describe some interesting aspects of this sign language. In doing this we hope to make our readers aware of the existence of this language and to generate some general discussion on the status of Indigenous sign languages in Arnhem Land. We believe these are in a similar situation to many spoken languages,

in that they have become endangered. The term 'endangered' is a complex one because there are various degrees of endangerment. In the case of YSL it is not too late to save the language, but only if some immediate measures are taken to protect this language.

This paper is organized as follows. In section two we introduce the distinction between spoken and sign languages. In section three we give an overview of studies previously conducted on the Indigenous sign languages of Australia. In section four we describe the study conducted by Cooke and Adone (1994) and the current research project on YSL. We discuss briefly the sociolinguistic contexts in which YSL is used and we compare some characteristics of YSL to those of other sign languages. In section five we concentrate on the future of YSL. Section six consists of a brief conclusion.

### Spoken and Sign Languages

In the field of Linguistics scholars generally distinguish between two types of language. Spoken languages are languages in the auditory-oral modality while sign languages are languages in the visual-gestural modality. This means that for spoken languages people use mainly their ears and voice to communicate, whereas for sign languages people use mainly their eyes and hands. This is probably the reason why people use terms such as ‘hand talk’ and ‘talking with hands’ to refer to sign languages. For instance, Davis (2010) refers to the sign language of the American Indian nations as ‘Hand Talk’. Yolŋu people on Galiwin’ku (Elcho Island) refer to the sign language they use as ‘action’ or *‘djäma goŋdbu’*, ‘work with hand’.

Today in the field of Linguistics we have accumulated considerable knowledge of spoken languages. We know that there are language families, that some languages are closer to each other than others. We also know that there are regional differences among languages. We know that there has been intense contact among languages in many parts of the world. Europe is a typical example of this, where we see the influence of French on British English and vice versa.

An example of a language family in the Northern part of Australia is seen in the group of Yolŋu languages. Some examples of spoken languages within this group are Djambarrpuyŋu, Gupapuyŋu, Gumatj, and Djapu, among others (Morphy, 1983; Schebeck, 2001; Zorc, 1986). The Yolŋu languages belong to the Pama-Nuyŋan family of languages.

Although there has been a concerted effort to document sign languages, many are still unknown. We know that sign languages are languages used by deaf people. When a deaf person acquires a sign language from birth, this language becomes their mother tongue or first language. Sign languages can be also acquired and used by hearing people to communicate. This is seen in many communities around the world. In Indonesia we have ‘Kata

Kolok’ (Marsaja, 2008) and in Thailand ‘Ban Khor’ (Nonaka, 2004) that are shared by hearing and deaf people. In Australia we see a similar situation across Arnhem Land. In all these contexts we refer to the communities using both spoken and sign languages as bimodal bilingual or ‘shared signing communities’ (de Vos, 2012) because the population uses a spoken and a signed language.

This development although natural is not widespread. In the case of Europe, most hearing people do not usually sign. This means that most hearing people use spoken languages only and deaf people use sign languages. An exception comes from the case of children who have one or two deaf parents and who grow up with both a spoken and signed language. These children are known as CODAs (Children of Deaf Adults).

In this paper we prefer the term ‘bimodal bilingual’ community to describe Galiwin’ku. Although YSL does not have an official status, it is used in many Yolŋu communities, including Elcho Island, Milingimbi, Yirrkala, and Ramingining. Based on the sociolinguistic data gathered by Adone in 1994 and in 2012 in interviews and questionnaires as well as first-hand information provided by Maypilama, YSL is usually acquired from birth along with other spoken languages, thus making the population typically bilingual bimodal. Linguistically, YSL provides a fascinating case study because of the way it emerged in the community (Maypilama & Adone, 2012b). Although we cannot discuss its origins here, there are reasons to believe that this language or its precursor has been around for a long time. Aboriginal culture has a rich gestural system with gestures forming an integral part of the communicative system used by Aboriginal people. There is also evidence for the use of signs by all the tribes in north eastern Arnhem Land (Warner, 1978). Warner calls one of them ‘Murŋin Sign Language’, and this is probably the precursor of YSL. Furthermore, in hand stencils of the pre-estuarine period (c.50,000 BCE) found in various places in Arnhem Land (Chaloupka, 1993), we find hand shapes such as the three middle fingers

closed and the more common open hand form that are still seen in present-day YSL and other Indigenous signing systems of the region.

In linguistics we distinguish several types of sign languages according to their origin, structures and social functions. Kendon (1988) distinguished between primary and alternate sign languages. YSL fits well into the description of an alternate sign language because it is used by the hearing community as an alternative language or as an adjunct to spoken languages in some contexts. Its use has been observed during mourning periods when a ban on speech was being practised. Maypilama gathered evidence from the elders of the community that this was very much the case before the arrival of the missionaries (Maypilama & Adone 2012b, 2012c, 2012d). Although some of the contexts of usage have changed, there are still many contexts in which silence is culturally requested.

For the sake of clarity we have listed some types of sign languages that have been distinguished in the field. This list should not be considered exhaustive as this area of study is a work in progress.

- Primary sign languages are those sign languages that are acquired by deaf people as their first language and are officially recognized in the country concerned as the national sign language. Examples of these languages are British Sign Language (BSL), American Sign Language (ASL) and Australian Sign Language (AUSLAN).
- Alternate sign languages are those sign languages that are used as adjunct languages by hearing people. In many cases these alternate sign languages are used when speech is not appropriate. Examples of these languages are the Aboriginal sign languages of Australia and those of the Plains Indians of North America.
- Urban sign languages are those sign languages that are used by signers living in cities and urban areas. The term 'urban' overlaps with primary

sign languages as many urban sign languages are acquired as primary sign languages.

- Rural sign languages or village sign languages, used by signers living in rural or village communities: 'Konchri Sain' is an Indigenous sign language of Jamaica (Cumberbatch in Lanesmann, Meir, Cumberbatch & Adone 2012); 'Ban Khor' is an Indigenous sign language of Thailand (Woodward, 2000; Nonaka, 2004).
- Homeland sign languages are those sign languages that are used in Aboriginal homelands. We classify homeland sign languages as a subtype of the so-called rural sign languages. They differ from other types of sign languages in the contexts of use as observed by Maypilama and Adone (2012b, 2012c).
- Emerging sign languages are languages that have recently emerged and are still developing: 'Nicaraguan Sign Language' (Senghas, 1995), Mauritian Sign Language (Gebert & Adone 2006; Adone, 2007) and 'Al Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language' (Meir, Sandler, Padden & Aronoff, 2010) are the most well-known emerging sign languages.

YSL is an example of a homeland sign language. One main characteristic of homeland sign language is its use in all domains of communication, public as well as private. During data collection in 2012, we found differences at the lexical level between the signing of YSL employed in Galiwin'ku and the variety used in the surrounding outstations or homelands. One example is in the use of signs for colours. Many rural signers used index finger pointing, a strategy used by signers all over the world to refer to something they do not have a sign for. When they did not know the sign for the designated colour, they pointed and touched an object in their surroundings with the same colour. Signers from the outstations used signs for RED, WHITE and YELLOW. This finding together with others lead us to conclude with caution that there are structural as well as sociolinguistic

differences between the rural and homeland signing, an area that will be investigated by the authors in the near future.

### Are There Studies on Aboriginal Sign Languages of Australia?

Although Aboriginal languages of Australia are well known in Linguistics, the focus has so far been on spoken languages. These have been studied quite extensively, while studies on the sign languages of Aboriginal Australia are sparse.

Kendon (1988) offered the first comprehensive study on Aboriginal sign languages used by seven Aboriginal groups of the North Central Desert, focusing on three sign languages of the region, Warlpiri, Warumungu, and Warlmanpa. Although there has been no systematic study of the sign languages of the Northern Territory, Kendon

noted that sign use is widespread there.

A first attempt to describe the structures of YSL was undertaken by Cooke and Adone (1994). At that time Cooke and Adone were interested in establishing whether signing at Galiwin'ku was mere gestures or a language. Based on the data collected at that time from a deaf person and hearing people the authors concluded that the signing system at Galiwin'ku displayed all the structures of a natural, fully-fledged language. This means that when YSL was used as a sole means of communication it met the full burden of communication. In those contexts where signing was used, there was no miscommunication or communication breakdown. As is the case with both signed and spoken languages, there was a high degree of variability depending on the sociolinguistic variables of *who* signs *what* to *whom*, *when* and *where*. Recently, more studies have

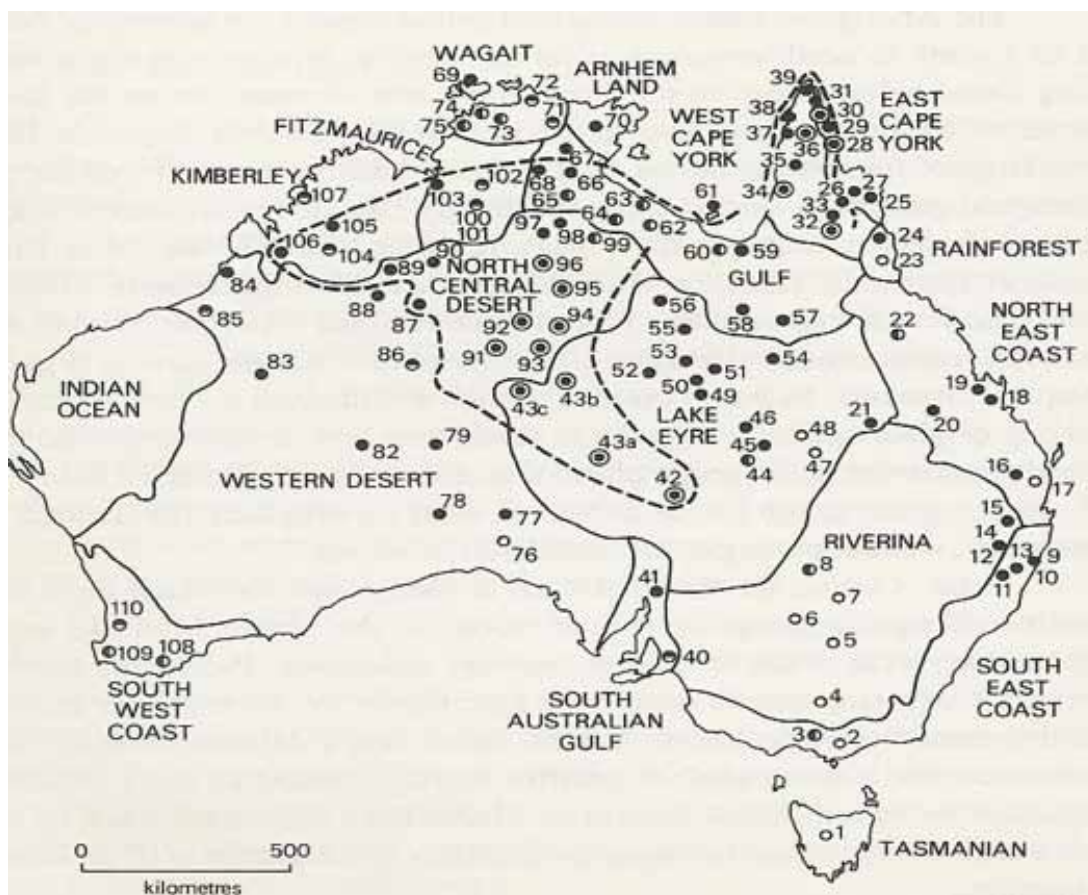


Fig. 1: Map of Australia showing various Indigenous sign languages (taken from Kendon 1988).

been conducted on YSL (Adone, 2001; Adone & Maypilama, 2012a, 2012b). In the current EuroBABEL project on 'Endangered Village Sign Languages', funded by the European Science Foundation (ESF), the EUROCORES Program and the German National Science Foundation (DFG), both a dictionary and a grammar for YSL are underway.

### **What Do We Know about Yolŋu Sign Language?**

As already mentioned in the previous section, studies on the Indigenous sign languages of Australia are rare. Warner (1937) was the first to document the use of a sign language in north east Arnhem Land. In his description of 67 signs and meanings he states 'all the tribes in northeast Arnhemland have a very elaborate sign language which is used between peoples who do not understand each other's spoken languages, between the deaf and dumb, and by young men who are observing taboos of silences after certain initiations' (Warner, 1937, p. 515).

In 1992 and 1993 Adone visited Galiwin'ku and became interested in signing that she observed hearing people using. Cooke and Adone started collecting data to determine whether the signing system they found on Galiwin'ku deserved to be called language or was just gestures used arbitrarily and unsystematically by hearing people. The data was collected from one deaf person and three hearing people who were using signs in communication with the deaf person. Two results became clear from the linguistic and sociolinguistic analysis of the data. First, that there was a wide range of signs that could be used in several domains, implying the existence of a fully-fledged grammar. Second, that there were specific contexts in which the signing system was used as an alternate system when speech was culturally not appropriate.

A closer look at Cooke and Adone's work (1994) and the subsequent work of Adone (2001) and Adone and Maypilama (2012a, 2012b, 2012c)

reveals that YSL shows more similarities with other sign languages around the world than was first assumed. It may bear some similarities with the spoken languages in its environment, but it is most importantly a language in the visual modality. When compared to other rural sign languages YSL exhibits typical sign language characteristics. Similar to other sign languages we find that signers use space in front of them, next to them and even behind them to express meaning and grammatical markings. Different hand shapes are thus combined with different types of movement to express different meanings. The combination of the hand shape (closed fist with index extended) and the movement of the index finger repeatedly flexed and extended in an upward position from left to right with the palm oriented away from the signer refers to SNAKE (a non-Aboriginal person). The same hand shape combined with the index finger placed horizontally in space expresses SNAKE. YSL's use of space is larger and wider than is seen in established urban sign languages such as AUSLAN (Johnston & Schembri, 2007), but it is similar to that seen in the rural sign language Kata Kolok (Marsaja, 2008). In YSL we find the discrete combinations of hand shapes, movement and location in every sign expresses meaning. In this respect it behaves like other sign languages.

Another feature of YSL is its use of non-manual features such as facial expressions, mouth gestures and eye gaze, that play an important role in the internal structure of signs (Sutton-Spence & Woll, 1999; Valli, Lucas, & Mulrooney, 2005). Two further non-manual features found in YSL are lip pointing and eye pointing. These seem to be closely related to their role in Aboriginal culture and interaction. Interestingly, lip pointing is also common in Kata Kolok and Konchri Sain, while eye pointing does not seem to be. Recent work by Maypilama and Adone (2012a, 2012b, 2012c) has also highlighted much variability in the language, a natural development in the life cycle of an oral and limitedly conventionalized language (Adone, 2012). An example is seen in the use of the sign

LIQUID which is commonly used to refer to GAPU 'water'. Signers use the index finger to touch the puffed cheek or the Blax or the B curved touching the puffed cheek repeatedly. The level of variability is linked to the issues of speed, fluency, and precision of signs produced by hearing people and deaf people (Maypilama & Adone, 2012a).

### **The Future of YSL**

Similar to many other Aboriginal languages, YSL should be regarded as an endangered language. UNESCO reports the following figures on the world's languages: approximately 97% of the world's population speak about 4% of the world's languages; of the 6,700 existing languages approximately 50% of them are likely to disappear soon ([www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/endangered-languages/language-vitality](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/endangered-languages/language-vitality)). In the field of endangered languages several studies have documented the fragile status of Indigenous languages. When looking at language vitality and endangerment, languages can be classified as being safe, vulnerable, endangered, severely endangered, critically endangered or extinct. The general consensus is that a language is generally classified as endangered when it is being replaced by another language in the private and public domains, and/or is not being transmitted to children, and/or the size of the speaker community is reduced, and/or when the special registers, ritual languages or speech levels are reduced, thus showing loss of Indigenous knowledge. UNESCO has listed nine major factors crucial to the evaluation of language endangerment (see website above). Of these nine factors we find the following relevant to YSL: 1) intergenerational transmission of language; 2) absolute number of speakers; 3) shifts in domains of language use; 4) response to new domains and media; and 5) availability of material for language education and literacy.

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss these factors, shifts in domains of language use have been observed in YSL (Maypilama & Adone, 2012). For example, the use of time-

lines has changed. Early observation of YSL in the nineties by Adone showed that Yolju signers represented time both from an unanchored and anchored perspective (Adone, 2001). This means that in the unanchored perspective the transverse axis (left = earlier, right = later) was used. This is still attested in the data of hearing middle aged and older signers. In the anchored perspective, the front-back axis (front = past, back = future) was used, which is different from many western cultures. In 2012 we found the reverse front-back axis (front = future, back = past), which is very much a western perspective, replacing the former front-back axis (front = past, back = future). Although we have not yet conducted a systematic analysis, it is possible that the western perspective has been transferred from English. Further, many young people seem to use the western front-back axis only.

Moreover, many children learn YSL but do not use it when they leave the community to go to secondary school in urban areas. We also found that most signers are not aware that YSL is a language. This lack of awareness was reflected in their lack of positive or negative attitudes towards the language. In many cases signers were skeptical that YSL should be regarded as a language with Indigenous knowledge.

### **Conclusion**

To recapitulate, we have looked at YSL, an Indigenous sign language which is taken for granted by many of its users and is not recognised as a language of its own. Many people still think it is dependent on one of the spoken languages in its surroundings, but there is linguistic evidence that it is not. It is normally acquired from birth along with spoken languages. This makes the community typically bimodal bilingual. Based on the work done so far, we believe this Indigenous sign language is best classified as a homeland sign language, a subtype of rural sign languages. Although YSL has kept many of its structures, some of them are gradually fading away.

If signers of YSL want to keep their language strong in the future there are some measures that need to be taken. One of them is to raise the awareness of YSL users. Maypilama has started talking about YSL to young and older people on Galiwin'ku. Various joint papers and presentations by Maypilama and Adone have been produced and circulated. In 2013 a dissemination workshop is planned to raise awareness among the public as well as the scientific circle on the existence of this language. Further steps will have to be taken with the relevant authorities to address the endangerment of YSL and its survival in future. If we move now, there is a good chance we will save this language. Although YSL is not critically endangered, measures have to be taken now to preserve its existence. We have started working on it, will you join us?

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