

New app created to support preservation of endangered language

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(Phys.org)—One of the world's most endangered languages is to be brought into the digital age through the first phone app designed specifically for the documentation of an Australian Indigenous language.

The Ma! Iwaidja (pronounced 'ee-WHY-jah') [smartphone](#) app has been developed as part of the Minjilang [Endangered Languages](#) Publication Project. The project team, based on Croker Island in remote Northwestern Arnhem Land, worked with Mr Bruce Birch, a [linguist](#) from the School of Culture, History and Language in the ANU College of Asia and the Pacific to develop the app.

The app includes a 1,500-entry English-Iwaidja dictionary with audio, a 450-entry phrase book, a 'WordMaker' allowing users to conjugate verbs

and construct short phrases, and an information section about Iwaidja and other endangered languages of Arnhem Land.

Mr Birch said that use of the app as a reference tool was far from the whole story.

"The app also gives users the ability to record new dictionary or phrase book entries using the on-board recording capability of their phones, so people can customise their app by including, for example, new phrases which are particularly useful to them.

"And with the completion of the next phase of development (which is currently underway) the app will become the world's most user-friendly language documentation tool. With little or no training, users will be able to upload recordings of new dictionary entries and phrases to be moderated and checked for accuracy before being made available for download to all users of the app.

"With the upload, users will be able to include 'metadata' relevant to the recording, such as who the speaker was, or a photo of what they were talking about. That additional functionality means that the app becomes a living, constantly-developing repository and capture device for a language that is otherwise [losing ground](#) fast.

"Additionally, we are initiating more structured use of the app, with [school students](#) on Croker and in Darwin working with Indigenous staff on the task of collecting [phrases](#) or words around a particular theme and then recording and uploading them to be moderated by members of the Minjilang-based Iwaidja Language Team," he said.

The app was developed in collaboration with programmers Pollen Interactive and graphic designers David Lancashire Design, both based in Melbourne. Funding for the project was provided by the Australian

Government's Indigenous Languages Support program.

Mr Birch said that the app has already attracted considerable interest from groups involved in the documentation of endangered languages in Australia, Africa and the Americas. The Croker-based team is now broadening their focus to other endangered languages of Western Arnhem Land, which Birch says is one of the most linguistically diverse areas of the planet.

"We are already gathering content for a Mawng version of the app, and will follow that with a Kunwinjku version. We've also had expressions of interest from speakers and documenters of other languages around Australia and overseas," he said.

The app is available from iTunes for iPhone/iPad/iPod Touch ([app/ma-iwaidja/id557824618?mt=8](https://itunes.apple.com/au/6578d8e1a1...dja/id557824618?mt=8)) with an Android version to follow in a few weeks' time.

Provided by Australian National University

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