

Talking book gives new voice to Indigenous languages

June 19 2015, by Gillian Ievers



Cassandra Algy demonstrates using QR codes to hear audio of the Gurindji text in the Kwarla book.

As many Indigenous languages lose their speakers, a researcher from The University of Queensland has developed a unique audio book to keep the words alive for generations to come.

Kwarla: How to Make a Coolamon is the result of extensive language documentation work conducted in the Gurindji community in the Northern Territory.

Dr Felicity Meakins, from UQ's School of Languages and Cultures, worked with Gurindji elders Bidy Wavehill and Violet Wadrill to create the book.

"The audio is linked to the book's text through QR codes, which can be played through [smart phones](#), allowing the reader to hear the words as they were spoken," Dr Meakins said.

"It means that Gurindji elders will continue to be heard long after they pass away, and younger generations will still have access to their knowledge.

"Most Indigenous languages were traditionally only spoken, not written, which means developing a book like this will bring new life and longevity to the language, history and culture of the Gurindji people."

The Gurindji people are from the Northern Territory's Victoria River District, about 900 kilometres south-west of Darwin.

Dr Meakins' work as a linguist focuses on the documentation of Australian Indigenous languages in the area and the effect of English on them.

"Across Australia, just [40 of the original 250 Indigenous languages](#) once spoken remain," she said.



The KawarLa book team: (L-R) Felicity Meakins (linguist), Penny Smith (photographer), Violet Wadrill, Bidy and Jimmy Wavehill (Gurindji language experts, painters and coolamon makers).

Dr Meakins said she hoped this work could help preserve the Gurindji language and perspective.

"After all, it's our history on the line – and it's through language that we communicate it," she said.

KawarLa: How to Make a Coolamon will be published this month by Batchelor Press.

Provided by University of Queensland

Citation: Talking book gives new voice to Indigenous languages (2015, June 19) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-06-voice-indigenous-languages.html>

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