

Indigenous language project considers what is in a word

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Elizabeth Ellis and Dr Inge Kral in the field documenting the Ngaanyatjarra language. Credit: ANU

One of Australia's oldest Indigenous languages is being immortalised in a speech register with work underway in the Western Desert to document formal ways of speaking before the knowledge is lost forever.

Elizabeth Marrkilyi Ellis from Tjukurla community in the Goldfields,

located 50km from the Northern Territory border, is working at the Australian National University as an ARC Discovery Indigenous Research Fellow to document her [language](#) Ngaanyatjarra.

Ms Ellis is speaking to family and community to record respectful and formal ways of talking in one specific ceremony, together with linguistic anthropologist Dr Inge Kral and linguists Dr Jennifer Green and Professor Jane Simpson.

"I have documented adults and elders speaking the Yirrkapiri Wangka language and explaining the meanings and its uses—when it is spoken, by whom it is spoken and why," Ms Ellis says.

As part of the project a large amount of audio and film footage has been collected and will continue to be translated and synthesised in a written document in both English and Ngaanyatjarra.

It is important to document our language for future generations to ensure our culture and language remain strong, Ms Ellis says.

Ngaanyatjarra is a rich and unique language system that is more than 60,000 years old, she says.

"It has complex and unique systems for knowledge and language teaching and learning and archiving and museum that is different to the white man's knowledge safe keeping systems," Ms Ellis says.

The speech register will chronicle the most appropriate way to speak to different people in Ngaanyatjarra as the way someone may speak to their mother is different to the way they would speak to their grandmother.

The ways of speaking are also influenced by the way people live and think, Ms Ellis says.

"It is very important to focus on language, because it tells you where the person is from, it's the one thing that sets us apart from another," she says.

ANU-based ARC Centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language Professor Jane Simpson says the best analysis draws on the insights of native speaker linguists and second-language-learner linguists working together.

"Based on lifelong experience, a native speaker has intuitions and insight into what words and sentences mean, what their connotations are, and how they are used," she says.

"The second-language-learner has the understanding of an outsider who comes fresh to a language, and who brings the understanding of a language which categorises the world differently."

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