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# “Brainwash from English”? Barunga Kriol Speakers’ Views on Their Own Language

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**Abstract.** This article deals with the sociolinguistics of Kriol, an English-lexifier creole widely used among Aboriginal people in the north of the Northern Territory in Australia. Some views and ideologies about their own language expressed by four first-language Barunga Kriol speakers in a series of speech interactions are presented, and possible interpretations are suggested, based on understanding of speakers’ local and personal backgrounds as well as socio-linguistic and historical clues. While the youngest speaker was somewhat critical of Kriol, older and middle-aged speakers expressed affection and pride for it, even though their depiction of Kriol as “in between” English and traditional Aboriginal languages was in line with the youngest speaker’s views. One must be cautious about drawing general conclusions from such a small number of cases, but two possible factors triggering the discrepant evaluations may be the older speakers’ greater awareness of the history of Kriol and of its recognition as a respectable language and their mastery of ancestral Aboriginal languages.

**1. Introduction.** This article seeks to present a particular situation and some conversations I had with consultants during a field session in southwestern Arnhem Land in October 2007. Although I suggest an interpretation of this situation and of what the consultants said, I do not aim to articulate definite or general conclusions. It must be remembered that the views people express at a particular time, in the context of a particular conversation, should not be considered immutable: in another context, the same person may say something else. In addition, any stretch of spontaneous speech may attract various interpretations. Hence, the perspective sketched in this article does not seek to exclude other interpretations. The following pages should be read as suggestive, rather than conclusive.

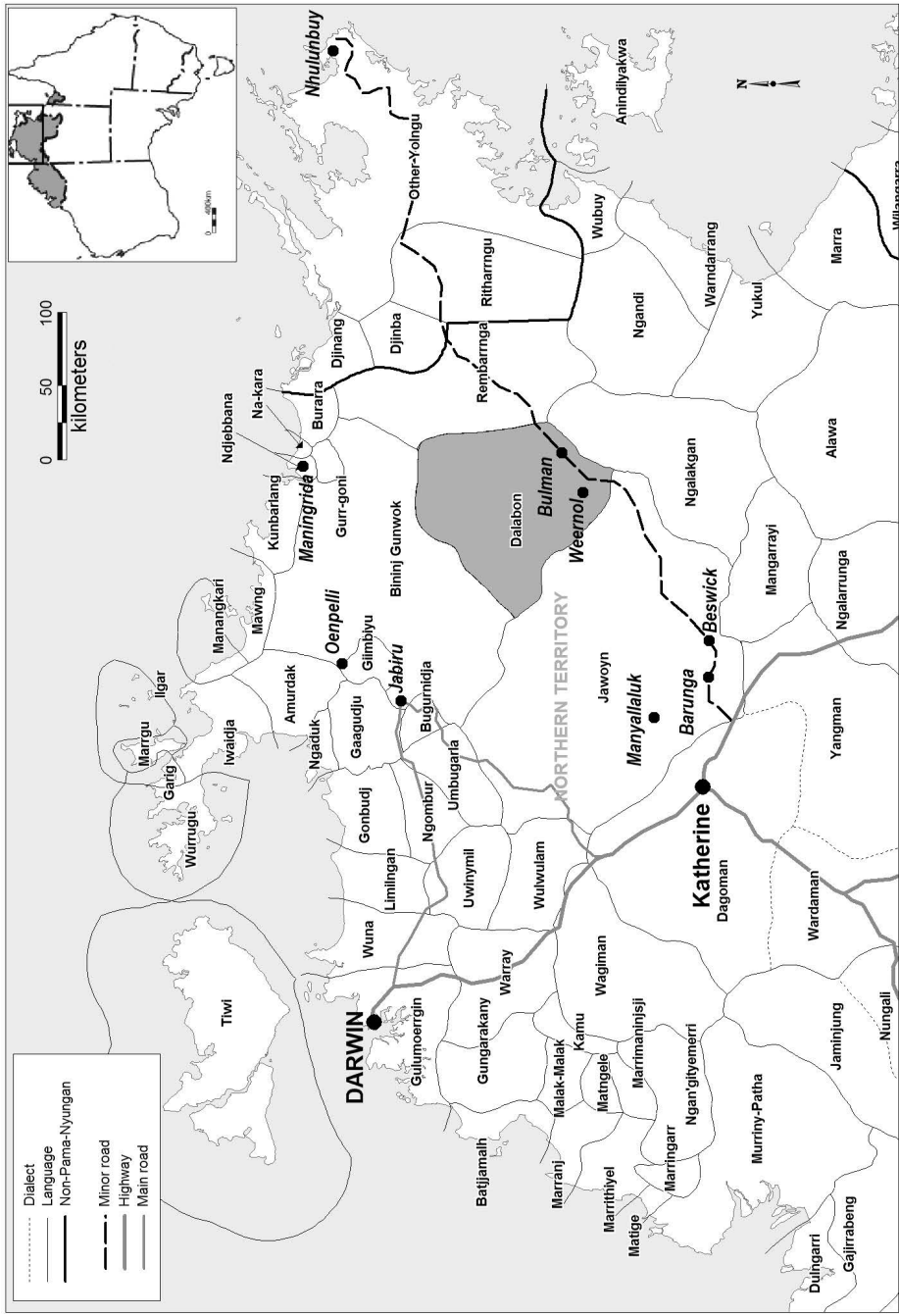
The conversations presented in this article deal with the status of Barunga Kriol, a variety of Kriol, the widely spoken creole of Northern Australia. Speakers discuss the position of Kriol as compared with traditional Aboriginal languages, and its role in communication and language acquisition. Of course, I had to select examples from among a number of interactions I had observed; my interpretation of these conversations is greatly informed by other conversations on the same topic, by direct observation of language practices, or by the existing literature on Kriol. As seen below, the particular set of conversations I have chosen to document here points to a generational pattern of ideologies, and a pattern of ideological change. Again, it must be remembered that the selection of

conversations presented here is an artifact of my own understanding of the speech interactions I witnessed. They could have been organized in a very different manner, triggering different interpretations. However, I find the following interpretation enlightening, considering what I know of the language ecologies and language ideologies of the communities involved, of their linguistic practices, and of their sociolinguistic and historical background.

Section 2 provides a presentation of the geographical and linguistic context of the southwestern Arnhem Land region in the Northern Territory of Australia. Section 3 presents the initial speech interaction that triggered the interrogations explored in the article, namely a few words said to me by a young man who expressed an unusual claim (or a claim rarely uttered in my presence) about his own language, Kriol.<sup>1</sup> Section 4 describes the reaction of an older woman when the young man's view was reported to her. In this section, I compare the young man's and the old woman's views, and sketch a possible interpretation as to why and how they differ. A few sociohistorical factors are identified in order to try and understand differences between the older person's views on Kriol and other local languages, and the young man's view. Section 5 turns to a conversation I had with two middle-aged speakers about the young man's statements. Their views on Kriol echo the old woman's statements, and help us refine our hypotheses about a generational trend of ideology, and about the sociohistorical factors that can possibly explain this trend. The last section clarifies the suggested generational patterns.

**2. Linguistic context in Weemol, southwestern Arnhem Land.** Weemol is a remote Aboriginal community of southwestern Arnhem Land, in the Northern Territory of Australia. I have been living in and working with this community since 1998. As shown on map 1, Weemol is located 360 kilometers east of the township of Katherine, in the country of the Dalabon-speaking group.

Dalabon is a non-Pama-Nyungan, prefixing language of the Gunwinyguan family, numbering less than ten fully fluent speakers at the time of writing, all older.<sup>2</sup> There are also a few dozen semispeakers, some of them younger, enjoying variable mastery of Dalabon. In addition, there are passive speakers, some of them quite young. Their understanding of Dalabon is often limited. Nowadays, Dalabon speakers live in Weemol, but also in Wugularr/Beswick and Barunga/Bamyili,<sup>3</sup> on the Central Arnhem Road, that is, between Weemol and Katherine. Some speakers also live in Katherine or in northern Arnhem Land communities, at least part of the time. In the same communities live speakers of other Aboriginal languages, such as Mayali, Rembarrnga, and Jawoyn.<sup>4</sup> Although Mayali enjoys a more vital status due to its use as a lingua franca in northwestern Arnhem Land, none of these traditional Aboriginal languages is very widely used in the southwestern Arnhem Land region, where Kriol is now the first language of most people and of all children.



**Map 1.** Linguistic map of the Top End, Northern Territory, Australia (based on the contributions of many researchers, which were collated by Mark Harvey at the University of Newcastle, Australia).

Kriol is a widely used English-lexifier creole that has at least twenty thousand speakers (Munro 2004) across Northern Australia (and up to thirty thousand, according to some estimates; see Lee and Obata 2010). This article relates to interactions with speakers of Barunga Kriol and refers to the context and history of this particular region. In Weemol, as in Wugularr/Beswick and Barunga/Bamyili, the local variety, usually called Barunga Kriol, is widely identified as an Aboriginal language by its speakers, a view acknowledged by the researchers working in the region. However, many mainstream Australians remain naive about Kriol, often failing to recognize it as a language or, at least, as a clearly identifiable and well-differentiated variety<sup>5</sup>—or simply ignoring its existence. Kriol has gained some institutional recognition over the years, with interpreting services and a bilingual education program being made available, for instance. But the institutional status of Kriol is subject to constant renegotiation, typically in the educational domain.<sup>6</sup> It is important to mention that Kriol speakers' ideologies about this new language are not identical across regions and across varieties.

**3. A thought-provoking conversation.** The speech interaction from which this article originated took place near Weemol, during a field session in October 2007. My research project at the time did include Kriol, but its main focus was the documentation of Dalabon. Thus, I spent more time with older consultants who have higher proficiency in the Dalabon language than with younger Kriol speakers. However, one night after dinner, a young man in his early twenties, who was a speaker of Kriol with a good mastery of English,<sup>7</sup> came to me and asked me about my activities on language. He was an attractive, relatively successful young man whom I had known for many years. The brief conversation turned to Kriol, and he stated very firmly that in his view, Kriol was *breinwoj brom Inglj*, literally, 'brainwash from English'. The exact meaning of this Kriol expression is not straightforward. While it is akin to the literal English translation, we cannot assume that it shares exactly the same connotations. It is not a very common expression, and my Kriol data do not contain relevant information about it. We may note that in Dalabon, the idea of a person or a force getting hold of one's mind, taking one's mind away, is easily expressed thanks to several formulae, including a dedicated verb (*men-werremu*, lit., 'mind, idea' + 'rub out'; see Ponsonnet 2009). I responded to the young man's comment by asking whether he would consider learning one of his family's traditional languages. His answer was *tu had* 'too hard'. This conversation was informal, and therefore not recorded.

The young man's statement that Kriol was *breinwoj brom Inglj* was puzzling, because it did not match the views usually expressed in my presence by Kriol speakers across generations. Barunga Kriol speakers usually express their affection for the language they use every day, which they widely consider as their own cultural device (in this region, languages tend to be considered as the

cultural property of their speakers, and this clearly applies to Kriol, as is apparent in section 4). Naturally, the affection for Kriol is neither unanimous nor unambiguous, and it should not be taken at face value. For instance, older people, when recounting the first years of colonization, tend to link Kriol with English, calling it *Munanga langguj* 'white men's language'. They are thus implicitly associating Kriol with colonial invasion. In addition, while Kriol mother-tongue speakers claim pride in their language in the presence of white people, one can easily imagine that they allow for criticism away from the representatives of cultural domination when they do not feel a need to protect their own cultural dignity. Hence, the affection for Kriol among Barunga Kriol speakers may be relative. Nonetheless, this young man's open criticism, directly addressed to me, was puzzling, if only because it was unusual. In order to understand his statement better, we need to turn to the history of Kriol.

Barunga Kriol, spoken in Weemol, Wugularr/Beswick, and Barunga/Bamyili, is one of the varieties of a creole that developed throughout the Top End (coastal areas excepted) up to the Kimberleys. Kriol resulted from the creolization of a pidgin that came to be used in the Northern Territory in the second half of the nineteenth century, following the New South Wales pidgin imported via Queensland by traveling pastoralists (Koch 2000). It has been suggested that Kriol first developed in the Roper River region, where the Roper Kriol variety is now spoken (see Munro [2000] for hypotheses on the spread of Kriol). It is important to mention this theory regardless of its validity, because this account of the origin of Kriol may have reached Barunga Kriol speakers, via early researchers and community linguists (see below). Hence, these narratives may bear upon speakers' ideologies. According to Harris (1986), creolization occurred abruptly after 1908, when a mission was established at Roper River. According to this hypothesis, creolization occurred because children and adolescents from various Aboriginal groups, lacking a common language of communication, were forced to interact together at the Roper River Mission, in the children's dormitories in particular. According to this theory, Kriol was created by children. Munro (2004) partly disagrees with this account. She contends that Harris's view concedes too much to Bickerton's "language bioprogram" hypothesis. Harris (1986) refers to Bickerton (1977), whose views have been strongly rejected by most scholars (Thomason and Kaufman 1988; Siegel 1997, 1999; Chaudenson 2001; Mufwene 2001; DeGraff 2003). According to Bickerton, the features of creoles are determined by universal tendencies in language learning via a situation whereby a group of children is compelled to communicate despite inadequate access to the language that they are supposedly trying to learn. In contrast, Munro (2004) follows Siegel (1997, 1999) and describes a nonabrupt process of creolization, taking place from the early 1900s throughout the first half of the twentieth century, not only at the Roper River Mission, but also in all of the cattle stations of the Roper River region. In the situation she describes, universal trends of language learning play a smaller part, and the influence of

substrate local Aboriginal languages plays a bigger part, via the mechanism of transfer described by Siegel. Other linguists, such as Koch (2000), demonstrate the role played by the New South Wales and Queensland pidgins, and by linguistic interactions between various groups across Northern Australia (Simpson 2000), thus minimizing the prominent role of Roper River speakers in the emergence of Kriol.

Creolization is a complex and much debated issue, bearing on difficult historical and sociolinguistic matters that I do not try to disentangle here (see Siegel [2007] for an insightful account of a range of theories of creolization and the associated ideological tenets). But it may be mentioned that Harris's hypothesis, the view that Kriol was initially created by children, echoes speakers' views in an intriguing manner. This hypothesis was adopted by the linguists Joy and John Sandefur (see, e.g., Sandefur 1979, 1986). John Sandefur and other linguists worked on Kriol in general, and in Barunga in particular, where in the 1970s and 1980s they interacted with Kriol speakers in a way that would have impacted on speakers' ideology about their own language.<sup>8</sup> At the time, linguists helped to create an orthography, supported recognition of Kriol as a language, encouraged the creation of a literary corpus, etc. Sandefur (1986) notes that Kriol speakers at the time held Kriol to be the language of children, while other Aboriginal languages were considered appropriate for adults. This may relate to the fact that in several regions Kriol was first adopted by generations of children who then continued speaking it as adults (Hudson [1983] signals this phenomenon in the Fitzroy Valley region, McConvell [1985] among Gurindji people). As I show in section 5, some speakers today maintain this association between children and Kriol. One may thus wonder how the specialists' view that Kriol was initially created (rather than adopted) by children, and the speakers' view that Kriol is a language for children (probably connected to the fact that it was first adopted by children), relate to each other. What kind of role do speakers attribute to children in creolization, in the creation of Kriol? Did speakers' ideology influence Harris? This raises many questions, among them the question of the reciprocal impacts and interactions between researchers' representations of a language and speakers' ideologies and attitudes about this language. This impact has occasionally been pointed out—for instance, by Hudson (1983), with reference to John and Joy Sandefur and the ideologies of Kriol in the Fitzroy Valley region, as well as by Meakins (2008a, in press) and Charola (2002) in the Gurindji region. Among Gurindji communities, the presence and activities of linguists are said to have encouraged Kriol speakers to identify Kriol components of their speech as distinct from English and the traditional languages, as well as to distinguish Gurindji Kriol as the local mixed language.<sup>9</sup> It would be interesting to document these interactions thoroughly.

Regardless of the role linguists were to play later on, in the Northern Territory the emerging creole did not enjoy immediate support and recognition. Sandefur (1986) recounts that in the first half of the twentieth century, the local



creole was deprecated: it was pejoratively described as broken English, both by whites and by Kriol speakers. It was therefore banned from schools and authorities explicitly tried to eradicate it. But Sandefur notes that the effect was the opposite—precisely because it was stigmatized and concealed, in the Barunga region the new creole became a symbol of local Aboriginal identity, and thus grew stronger. Sandefur states that Barunga Kriol speakers' views on their own language improved from the 1960s, and that Barunga Kriol was fully recognized as an Aboriginal language in the early 1970s—several decades after its adoption in the Barunga region, which coincides with World War II (Harris 1986; Sandefur 1986). The recognition of Kriol in this region coincided with the advent of the Australian federal self-determination policy in 1972. The self-determination policy, replacing previous assimilation and integration policies, claimed recognition of Aboriginal cultures, and encouraged Australian indigenous populations to make their own decisions about their present and future. The recognition of people's actual language, Kriol, as a respectable language was a logical consequence of this new official stance. This policy has not always been systematically implemented, and Kriol speakers are still missing out on some types of practical recognition of their own language. But theory and symbols can be effective in themselves in terms of ideology. Barunga Kriol speakers are now proud of their mother tongue, or at least, many of them very often say so. In addition, probably because of past discrimination against Kriol, in the Barunga region it has become somewhat politically incorrect, in some conversational contexts (with indigenous and non-indigenous interlocutors), to criticize Kriol. This is why this young man's—his bare affirmation addressed to me that Kriol was "brainwash" from English—was puzzling.

From what has just been said, we may note that this derogatory statement echoes past self-criticism. However, the young man's statement did not imply that Kriol was not a proper language. His criticism—which actually sounded like a complaint, a protest, endowed with a political dimension—was that Kriol was influenced by English, shaped by English. His concern seemed to be about formal and probably cultural influence from English. It sounded like a political claim about the integrity of his own cultural identity rather than a simple denial of the legitimacy of his own language. The radical dimension of this claim was also thought-provoking. Although such political stances are common among younger members of these communities, they are not usually openly expressed to non-indigenous people, or at least not in my presence. Furthermore, the second part of the conversation resembled an expression of helplessness, rather than a political protest. The young man's renunciation of the languages of his parents, grandparents, and ancestors, under the assumption that learning them would be too hard, was moving. This made what initially sounded like a protest somewhat dissonant, and even more puzzling.

I was curious to shed some light upon this short conversation, and upon the view that Kriol was 'brainwash from English', and to learn more about what

adults would have to say about it. I thus took advantage of the working sessions that followed to discuss what the young man had said with consultants. Sections 4 and 5 present two of these responses, by representatives of two different generations above the young man's generation.

**4. The response of an older, master speaker of Dalabon.** Maggie Tukumba (MT), who is probably in her sixties, is the young man's classificatory grandmother. That is, she stands two generations above him in the classificatory system, and is indeed a direct ancestor. Dalabon is her mother tongue, but Kriol is now her everyday language, the one she uses the most readily and easily. She learned Kriol at a later age, as a child or young teenager. She is extremely proficient in Dalabon, acting as the main consultant for several linguists working on this language, and she is a coauthor of the first Dalabon dictionary (Evans, Merlan, and Tukumba 2004). She also knows Mayali, which she distinguishes strictly from Dalabon (in terms of lexicon, for instance). She has not attended school for any significant period of time in her life. Her English is limited and often approximate.

I had several conversations with her about the young man's statements, that is, about the idea that Kriol was 'brainwash from English'. Not all of the conversations were recorded, but she once made a point to repeat her disagreement in a formal manner, at a time when I was actually recording.

(1) [MT, speaking Kriol]

*Is not breinwoj darran [Kriol], mai san bin dum det bikos wait men sam olpipul don endesten maj so, imin labda dum det Kriol langguj so wait men kin endesten en blakwan kin endesten tu.*

'[Kriol] is not brainwashing, my son established it because some white people in the olden days didn't understand us well, hence he had to create Kriol language so that white people can understand and black people can understand as well.'

In the same recording, MT expanded on this story involving her son and, through a few working sessions, repeated several times how her son had set up Kriol. Considering her age and the date of birth of her son, now deceased, MT was referring to a period of time around the 1970s. It thus seems that she was assimilating the creation of Kriol on the one hand, and the adoption of Kriol at Barunga on the other, with the recognition of Kriol as validated by its inclusion in the school curriculum. MT's son was a school teacher. He would have taken part in the bilingual English-Kriol program at Barunga School from 1975 (Sandefur 1984), as recommended by linguists working on Kriol to the Northern Territory Department of Education (see Sharpe 1974). On these grounds, MT presented her son as responsible for the advent of Kriol.

MT's understanding of the relationship between Kriol and English is, I believe, a piece of Aboriginal diplomacy. In the view she expressed on that

occasion, Kriol was implemented, in the (post)colonial context, as a tool for adaptation and pacification, so that white people and black people could communicate better. This interpretation sounds to me like an interesting way of neutralizing the idea of cultural domination. The use of Kriol may thus be construed as an act of resistance, to the extent that it is presented as a means to “manage” domination, so to say. It was clear from MT’s words, and from her tone in these recordings, that it was to the credit of Aboriginal populations that they acted to facilitate communication.

(2) [MT, speaking Dalabon]

*[Wurdurd-ngan], wadjbala bulnu kah-didjimabminj olot.*

‘[My son] used to teach all these white people.’

In one of the conversations, MT acknowledged with no hesitation that Kriol was inspired by English, but she understood this influence as an improvement, and as reciprocal.

(3) [MT, speaking Kriol]

*Laik imin gadjimap ola waitmen aidiya. [. . .] Aidiyas brom, brom blakbala du waitmen. [. . .] Imin brabli breiniwan [mai san].*

‘Like he grasped all white men’s views. [. . .] Views from, from black people to white people. [. . .] He was really smart [my son].’

The view MT articulated as a response to the young man’s “attack” on Kriol had, in fact, much in common with the young man’s suggestion. In both cases the emergence of Kriol was described as determined by the presence of English, if only to the extent that Kriol was a response to the presence of invaders. MT clearly acknowledged that Kriol had to imitate English—which constituted the core of the young man’s criticism. But MT depicted this move as a demonstration of intelligence. Overall, MT saw the emergence and use of Kriol as a good thing, while the young man seemed to deplore it. What differed was thus the emotional attitude rather than the content of the descriptions.

MT, however, endures her own pains about languages. She is very attached to her own language, Dalabon, and she is also acutely aware that it is not being passed on to the younger generations. She blames the use of English at school for that and, depending on her mood, she may also sometimes blame the children themselves for not learning fast enough. But I have never heard her blame Kriol for taking over from other languages, although I have heard other speakers blaming Kriol as a killer language. She certainly remembers the multilingual framework of her early years, when languages coexisted without constituting any threat to each other. With this situation in mind, she has no reason to believe that Kriol would hamper the use of other Aboriginal languages. As mentioned above, MT is an excellent Dalabon speaker and is now widely

recognized as the authority in that domain through her role as a language consultant and her participation in major projects such as the Dalabon dictionary (Evans, Merlan, and Tukumba 2004). MT takes a lot of pride in this status and in her long experience working with linguists, which she often emphasizes. For instance, she usually insists on pointing out my mistakes and misunderstandings in Dalabon, with the idea that she is the one who knows and should be asked.

MT's pride in what she describes as her son's role in the emergence of Kriol echoes her pride in and emphasis on her own involvement with Dalabon. We identify here a pattern discussed in section 3, which we find expressed very clearly by other consultants in section 5—Kriol has long been associated with younger generations.

We may also note that MT's narrative about the status of Kriol was rooted in the history of its recognition beginning in the 1970s, rather than in the years of its adoption in Barunga, which Harris and Sandefur associate with World War II. In the decades immediately following the war, Kriol was used, but apparently stigmatized and discouraged by local white authorities. Another consultant reported that her school teachers at Barunga in the 1950s (and maybe early 1960s) demanded that English be spoken at school to the exclusion of Aboriginal languages, including Kriol, which were to be spoken at home. But MT chose not to mention this period, focusing on the time of recognition. As mentioned in section 3, the implementation of the bilingual program at the Barunga school and the recognition of Kriol coincided with the advent of the self-determination policy. This era, from the mid-1970s through to the 1980s, is fondly remembered by some inhabitants of the region as a time of return to homelands and cultural revival in general. These memories are particularly vivid for the inhabitants of Weemol and of surrounding outstations,<sup>10</sup> since Weemol (then itself an outstation) came into existence as a result of this shift back to homelands. Another elder I know often recounts his own interventions in the school at the time, when he was teaching culture to the children.

We may now identify a few aspects of MT's feelings about Kriol which shed some light upon the discrepancy between her positive claims and the young man's complaint.

- MT's positive feelings are connected to her fond memories of the time when Kriol gained recognition, which was also a time of territorial and cultural recovery.
- MT understands this recognition as resulting from her own family's agency, as can be seen from her emphasis on the role played by her son.
- Underlying MT's descriptions is an implicit lineage of language involvement and custodianship, whereby consecutive generations implement custody of different languages according to an accepted generational pattern.

- MT enjoys a great pride in her own mastery of her mother tongue, Dalabon, a traditional Aboriginal language, and in her knowledge of several other traditional Aboriginal languages.

In light of these factors, it becomes easier to understand why the young man's view was diametrically opposed to MT's views. He did not live through the time when Kriol gained recognition in the Barunga region and may not have been told much about the history of his community in the 1970s;<sup>11</sup> he does not speak a traditional Aboriginal language, which he described as out of his reach; he therefore cannot rely on a lineage of transmission. In fact, none of the factors listed above apply to him.

**5. The response of middle-aged Kriol speakers.** The second response presented here was provided by a married couple, Philip Ashley (PA) and June Jolly-Ashley (JJA). The age difference between them is significant: PA is probably nearly as old as MT. However, PA's background, the age of JJA (born in the early 1960s), and the age of the couple's children are such that they are better classified within the generation below MT, that is, more or less within the generation of the young man's parents. They grew up learning Kriol as a mother tongue. PA's ancestral language is not Dalabon but the neighboring Rembarrnga, which he speaks. He also knows Dalabon and can act as an informant for this language. His wife is younger, speaks Kriol, and knows Dalabon, but she is not fluent. Her father was a prominent Dalabon man and she has inherited some cultural knowledge and some pride in her cultural descent. Both PA and JJA can speak some English. PA and JJA were young adults in the 1970s, and they recall these years with some nostalgia. JJA often recounts how, once Aboriginal populations obtained land rights in the 1970s, she left the Barunga region with her family, led by her father. She likes to describe how they lived as a small family group, including her young children, in a remote homeland awaiting the construction of outstation infrastructure<sup>12</sup> with a tractor and a two-way radio as their only means of communication with the rest of the world.

During the oral presentation on which this article is based, I played the audio file of the full conversation given in transcript 1. It was appropriate in order to give voice to the actual speakers of the languages at stake, and because the conversation was a lively one, where intonations played a significant part, especially near the end. I have therefore annotated the transcript so that it conveys some of the associated information. The conversation refers to a previous one that was not recorded, also with PA and JJA. It may be noted that PA and JJA express themselves in English in some sections. This is probably not due to my presence, but rather to the fact that I had started the recorder, opening up the possibility of a wider audience. In transcript 1, each line in Kriol is followed by its translation; other indications are placed between square brackets; slashes indicate false starts. PA and JJA are not necessarily answering each other and their respective speeches often overlap, which cannot be rendered here.

**Transcript 1. Conversation about the Status of Kriol**

[PA and JJA, speaking to the author (MP) in Kriol and sometimes in English]

[Recording starts as PA is already speaking.]

[Slow pace.]

PA *Rembarrnga, ai len mai kids Rembarrnga, en dei spik wel, en ai kin go, ai kin go dan en lenim mai matha/ ai dun/ Dalabon. Yuno, ai kin len dem, kids, mai kids deil len brabli wei en . . .*

‘Rembarrnga, I teach my children Rembarrnga, and they speak well, and I can continue, I can continue and teach them my mother’s/ I don’t/ Dalabon. You know, I can teach them, my children, they will actually learn and . . .’

MP *But right now, they don’t speak very much Dalabon Rembarrnga, just little bit? D’you reckon?*

PA *Yeah, dei don, dei don len madj.*

‘Yeah, they don’t, they don’t learn a great deal.’

MP *Oh yeah.*

PA *Samtaim dei len lil bit yeah, so, ai len dem Mayali, dei, yeah, dei/ dei/ dei endenstanding Mayali wan ai tok, en*

‘To some extent they learn a little bit, yeah, so I will teach them Mayali, they, yeah, they/ they/ they understand Mayali when I speak, and’

MP *Yeah.*

PA *En ai lis/*

‘And I list’/

MP *En ai/ ai bin lisiin det yangboi am, lastaim, imin dalim/ det boi, imin sei det um, yuno wi bin/ ai bin dalim yu yestadei, det Kriol im breinwoj brom Inglif? Wad yu reken June, yu bin ansrim mi gudwei, wan yu bin, yuno, fo det Kriol, wad yu reken?*

‘And I/ I heard that young man um, last time, he was saying/ that young man, he said that um, you know we were/ I was telling you yesterday, that Kriol is brainwashing from English? What do you think, June, you gave a very good answer, when you were, you know, about Kriol, what do you think?’

JJA *Det Kriol dei streitnimap kid det speak English too as well.*

‘Kriol, it gives directions to children who speak English as well.’

MP *Yeah.*

JJA *Yeah.*

MP *Yeah, so yu reken det Kriol im gudwan langos im album det kid, dem kin spik Inglif?*

‘Yeah, so you think that Kriol is a good thing because it helps the kids, so they can speak English?’

[That was the idea emphasized in the previous, unrecorded conversation.]

- JJA *Yeah! In Kriol, and they can understand that Kriol and speak English.*
- MP *Yeah.*
- JJA *Det brom stat brom det Kriol en dem kin spik det Ingliz, yeah.*  
 ‘That’s from the beginning, start with Kriol and they will speak English, yeah.’
- MP *En wad yu reken fo det Dalabon? Yu reken dem garra lenim o nading matbi?*  
 ‘And what do you think regarding Dalabon? Do you think they will learn it, or maybe not?’
- JJA *Yeah, Dalabon im/ im isi.*  
 ‘Yeah, Dalabon is/ it’s easy.’
- MP *Im isi . . .*  
 ‘It’s easy . . .’
- PA *Yeah . . .*
- JJA *You can get it from Kriol and Dalabon.*
- MP *Yeah, yeah.*
- PA *Yeah, seim wei.*  
 ‘Yeah, in the same way.’
- MP *Mm.*
- JJA *Im seim . . .*  
 ‘It’s similar . . .’
- PA *En Rembarrnga, yeah, dei endesten wad ai . . .*  
 ‘In Rembarrnga, yeah, they understand what I . . .’
- JJA *Gu abda det atha tu langguj det im Rembarrnga en Mayali.*  
 ‘It compares to these two other languages, that is Rembarrnga and Mayali.’
- MP *Yeah.*
- PA *Ai meik dem tok/ samdam dei tok, samdam dei lisin, yuno. When I talk to them Rembarrnga.*  
 ‘I make them speak/ on some occasions they speak, on some occasions they understand, you know. When I talk to them Rembarrnga.’
- JJA *Rembarrnga en Mayali, det spik en/ spik laik Dalabon wei? Yeah . . .*  
 ‘Rembarrnga and Mayali, they speak and/ speak in the same fashion as Dalabon? Yeah . . .’
- MP *Yeah . . .*

- PA *En ai spik Dalabon, en ai spik Mayali, en ai spik Rembarrnga.*  
 ‘And I speak Dalabon, and I speak Mayali, and I speak Rembarrnga.’
- MP *Yeah . . .*
- PA *Dets ol ai bin len,*  
 ‘That’s all I learned,’
- MP *Yeah that’s, not bad, yeah . . .*
- PA *Mai fatha bin . . .*  
 ‘My father was . . .’
- [More or less interrupting PA.]
- JJA *Bad bes in Kriol, Maïa, it’s got to get from/ kids from the Kriol and then in, in English.*  
 ‘But first in Kriol, Maïa, it’s got to get from kids from the Kriol and then in, in English.’
- PA *Ai dink Kriol is/ deds for the kids yuno?*  
 ‘I think Kriol is/ it’s for the kids you know?’
- JJA *In English, yeah . . .*
- PA *Dei kin len Kriol en . . . afta det dei go back to their . . .*  
 ‘They can learn Kriol and . . . after that they return to their . . .’
- JJA *Dei grogrou na dei kin len det wanim na . . .*  
 ‘Once they grow up, they will learn, these, whatyoucallit . . .’
- PA *They go back to their lingo na . . .*  
 ‘They return to their traditional language then . . .’
- JJA *Yeah . . .*
- MP *Yeah. Bad yuno, matbi wan dem kids dem biga, nobodi kin spik Dalabon? [Lower.]  
 Ol binij, matbi? Wad yu reken?*  
 ‘Yeah. But you know, maybe when the children are bigger, no one will be able to speak Dalabon?’ [Lower.] ‘They might have passed away? What do you think?’
- JJA *Dei grogrou inaf. Go skul bes,*  
 ‘When they’re big enough. Go to school first,’
- MP *Yeah . . .*
- JJA *en dei kambek.*  
 ‘and they come back.’



MP *Yeah. Mah/*

JJA *Long alidei, en dei toktok den, wan im long alidei den,*  
‘Long holidays, and then they keep speaking, during long holidays,’

MP *Yeah.*

JJA *dei tok dan deya na. Det Dalabon, Rembarrnga en Mayali.*  
‘they speak when they’re here. In Dalabon, Rembarrnga and Mayali.’

PA *Bad, nadinafeldes.*  
‘But there are not enough elders.’

JJA *Im seim spitj.*  
‘It’s the same way of talking.’

PA *Bad nadinafeldes na.*  
‘But there are not enough elders left.’

MP *Yeah . . .*

PA *Yuno du len dem kids.*  
‘You know to teach the kids.’

MP *Yeah, that’s the problem.*

PA *If wi lus dem . . . Yuno if Jimmy gowei o Maggie gowei . . .*  
‘If we lose them . . . You know if Jimmy passes away, or Maggie passes away . . .’

MP *Yeah . . .*

PA *Eeer . . . If myself, o if June, there’ll be nothing left you know, they can’t even learn more . . . Dalabon or . . .*

[Suddenly lively and cheerful.]

JJA *Im toktok olawei det lil boi bla Angela!*  
‘He really speaks now, Angela’s young son [my grandson]!’

MP *Oh yeah, ai bin lisiin, yeah.*  
‘Oh yeah, I’ve heard that, yeah.’

[The tone is playful here, it may even sound as a joke.]

JJA *In Kriol!*

MP *Ai bin lisiin yestadei.*  
‘I heard yesterday.’

JJA *Im tu na . . .*

‘He’s two now . . .’

[Same slow and quiet tone as he used earlier when enumerating the languages he speaks.]

PA *Im endesten. Ai tok la im Rembarrnga, im endesten . . .*

‘He understands. I talk to him in Rembarrnga, he understands . . .’

MP *Yeah.*

[Still with a cheerful, joking tone.]

JJA *Det/ det Pino tu . . .*

‘And/ and Pino too [my granddaughter] . . .’

JJA’s basic idea in this conversation, as expressed more clearly the day before, was that children should learn Kriol first, as this would ease their learning English and other Aboriginal languages. On this occasion, both JJA and PA seemed to view Kriol as a bridge between English and other Aboriginal languages. This is on a par with MT’s view, which saw Kriol as bridging communication between Aboriginal and white people. But in PA and JJA’s picture, Kriol was not a communication tool between members of different cultures, but a step on the language learning ladder.<sup>13</sup> This conversation is complex: the following paragraphs draw attention to a few points that relate to the interpretations made in sections 3 and 4 about the young man’s statement and about MT’s pride in Kriol.

A first point to be emphasized is that although PA and JJA did not make a clear reference to any historical period, a closer look at the way they grounded their views on Kriol shows that they also drew from historical patterns and from a tradition of rhetoric about Kriol. The idea that Kriol is the language of children was central in the conversation, and PA explicitly articulated it. This is a traditional view: it was already expressed by Kriol speakers at the time when Sandefur wrote about Kriol in the late 1970s and 1980s (Sandefur 1986; see also Hudson 1983; McConvell 1985). Thus, PA and JJA would have heard it from other people many times. Another subtly conveyed historical point is the reference to children speaking English at school and speaking traditional Aboriginal languages back home. I understand this point as an association between two common views. On the one hand, the idea that nowadays children going to high school in towns may learn their own culture when they come back for holidays is widespread. Interestingly, Hudson (1983) mentions a similar alternation pattern in the Fitzroy Valley region in the 1950s. On the other hand, as mentioned in section 4, some adult Kriol speakers report a local pattern whereby, until the 1950s and maybe later, Aboriginal languages (Kriol and others) were not to be spoken at school, but were explicitly “sent back home.” My interpretation is that JJA was drawing from both patterns when she stated that it was sufficient for

children to speak Aboriginal languages when coming back home for long holidays. PA and JJA's views on Kriol were thus inspired both by their own understanding of contemporary matters and by historical patterns which make implicit reference to previous decades. In this conversation they did not, however, refer explicitly to the time when Kriol acquired recognition.

A second point of importance is PA's emphasis on multilingualism. All through the conversation PA insisted, as he often does, on speaking several Aboriginal languages and teaching them to his kids. It is obvious that PA is proud of his knowledge of several languages. JJA, who does not know as many languages, is proud of her husband's knowledge and often relies on it when acting as a consultant, for instance.

Finally, the very last lines of the transcript tell us about JJA's attachment to Kriol, as she vividly and humorously expresses her pleasure at seeing her grandchildren learn Kriol. The way they depicted Kriol in this conversation was not negative, since PA and JJA did not imply that Kriol may impede learning other Aboriginal languages or should be abandoned in favor of other languages as one progresses through life. Quite the contrary: Kriol was presented as a key to access all other languages. Furthermore, JJA expressed her attachment to Kriol in a very interesting manner. Her sudden exclamations about her grandchildren starting to speak came immediately after PA's observation (encouraged by myself) that, contrary to what JJA was announcing, Kriol-speaking children may not be able to learn Dalabon later on because there may be no speaker alive at the appropriate time. JJA's cheerful note thus punctuated a gloomy sequence. And her adding, after a pause, that the little boy in question obviously speaks in Kriol came as nearly ironic, especially as PA kept insisting that the children were, in fact, learning traditional Aboriginal languages. This humorous contrast, if not consciously arranged by JJA, was in any case fairly representative of her personality. I interpret it as a subtle diplomatic way of stating that Kriol is her own language, the language that her children and grandchildren learn spontaneously, and the language she is happy to see them acquiring in the course of their expected development. She is thus claiming her attachment to and contentment with Kriol.

Each of these three points echos MT's view: PA and JJA were drawing from historical patterns to articulate their views as MT did; they were relying on their (even indirect, for JJA) mastery of a range of languages as MT did; they expressed no criticism about Kriol and JJA actually claimed her attachment to it as her mother tongue and the mother tongue of her descendants.

However, there is another component in this conversation: the view PA and JJA expressed were not as unified and clearly articulated as MT's views. Of course, one should not expect a spontaneous conversation to be well organized and to present structured arguments. JJA and PA are lively characters who care more about having a friendly and enjoyable conversation and less about conceptual coherence—less than I do for instance. Besides, my referring to a previous

conversation made the exchange even less organized. Nonetheless, at some points, PA and JJA's views sounded a bit entangled in a way that was not to be found in MT's discourse about the same issue.

For instance, JJA assimilated various local Aboriginal languages as *seim spitj* 'same way of speaking', in contrast to MT's sharper distinctions, supported by her knowledge of several local languages. JJA's statement that Kriol-speaking children learn Dalabon may represent an idealized view rather than a description of reality. In Weemol and in the region, I do not know of teenagers or young adults who learn Aboriginal languages other than Kriol significantly. JJA's statements (just like PA's) could be an example of delayed recognition of language loss, a phenomenon described by Schmidt (1990) as widespread in Australian Aboriginal communities. However, we should not assume that she intended her statements to be strictly descriptive. She may have been stating the way things should have been.

PA's mixed description of his children's mastery of Dalabon seemed to reflect his own internal conflict and anguish on the matter. PA does not necessarily believe that he teaches ancestral languages to his children, nor that children speak any of these languages as extensively as he mentioned. In the conversation, he would have been referring to the fact that when he does speak to them in Rembarrnga or Dalabon, in the course of daily interactions, they often understand and react appropriately (for instance, bringing something, shutting a door). These interactions are indeed part of the process of their learning some Dalabon and Rembarrnga. However, the children's understanding of Dalabon is limited, as can be observed in some situations (they cannot always respond correctly, they do not answer back in Dalabon).

PA responded to his own anguish about the status of his languages by occasionally overstating his children's mastery of traditional languages when he mentioned that "they (his children) speak well." This statement was not necessarily intended to convince a would-be audience that the children could speak a traditional Aboriginal language. Comparable statements may be uttered in other contexts, as, for instance, when PA is alone with me and his wife, without a recorder, and trying to convince me or his wife would make little sense. PA described things as he would like them to be, and used this statement as a rhetorical device in order to emphasize his own connection to his ancestral tradition. But the fact that this identity claim relied on an exaggeration of the children's mastery of Dalabon may raise difficulties. Additionally, in this conversation, PA's internal conflicts also surfaced when he expressed different views consecutively. He first explained that his children can speak traditional languages; a bit later, he declared that "they don't learn very well"; and he finally took over my own concern about the decreasing number of Dalabon speakers, so that when his children get older, no one will be there to teach them.<sup>14</sup> This latter statement, partly triggered by a desire to accommodate my own views, may equally be interpreted as a means to claim his identity as an elder, by showing

his concern for ancestral languages. PA's grounds for claiming such an identity thus sound ambiguous. He relies alternatively on his capacity to teach traditional languages to his children in an effective way, and on his concern that this learning process cannot be achieved. The ambivalence of these claims may reflect his own interrogations and anxieties about his language. As a result, his views on the status of his languages, on the local language ecology, and on the foundations of his own identity do not sound as firm as MT's pessimistic but very clear statements on the same issues. As we have seen, such an informal conversation is not a dissertation: statements may be used rhetorically, and there is no need for consistency between them. One can claim one's identity on a range of different grounds without necessarily running into contradictions. Besides, the diversity of PA's views resulted partly from his effort to reconcile his statements with my own concerns. Nonetheless, the diversity of PA and JJA's views, tones, and attitudes contrast with MT's strong, well-articulated account, embedded in a clear perspective on local languages and their status.

**6. Conclusions.** As emphasized in the introduction, this article does not aim to draw firm conclusions. But the interpretations articulated in previous sections suggest some explanations about why the young man's view on Kriol is symmetrical to the other protagonists' views, as summarized in table 1.

**Table 1. Features across Generations**

MT (GEN N-2)	PA AND JJA (GEN N-1)	YOUNG MAN (GEN N)
Kriol as a bridge for communication	Kriol as a bridge in language learning	Kriol "brainwash" from English
Attachment to Kriol as cultural device	Attachment to Kriol as mother tongue	Some criticism
Claim of historical agency	Reference to historical agency ?/∅ (wasn't born at the time)	
Full mastery of Dalabon and of linguistic diversity	Some mastery of Dalabon and of linguistic diversity	∅ (ancestral language out of reach)
Clarity and confidence about the status of Dalabon	Signs of internal conflict and anguish about languages and the status of Dalabon	Self-depreciation ?Growing awareness?

In the series of interactions I have chosen to present here, Kriol was understood as standing in between English and other Aboriginal languages (as summarized in the first line of table 1). MT, PA, and JJA expressed affection for, and even pride in, Kriol, making it clear that it was part of their Aboriginal identity. The connection between Kriol and Aboriginal identity is of interest in itself. The connection observed in the present case among Barunga Kriol speakers may be compared to the respective status of Kriol, traditional Aboriginal languages, and the mixed language Gurindji Kriol in the Gurindji region, on the southern edge

of the Kriol-speaking area. Meakins (2008a) shows that in this region, speakers of Gurindji Kriol associate some aspects of their Gurindji identity with the persistence of their ancestral language—as opposed to the exclusive use of Kriol—via their use of a mixed language, described as “an act of resistance against the massive cultural incursion which accompanied colonization” (see also McConvell 2008; Meakins 2008b; O’Shannessy 2008). The resistance, here, is to some extent against Kriol, which Gurindji people associate with modernity. Meakins’s compelling argument leaves us with the task of describing how Kriol-only speakers may perceive their use of Kriol as a positive statement of identity, or even as an act of resistance. MT’s account of the creation of Kriol, presented in section 4, sheds some light upon this question, but further research in that direction would be welcome.

My hypothesis is that the criticism uttered by this young man that particular evening (see table 1, line 2) was connected to his not having inherited the knowledge that grounds older generations’ enthusiasm about Kriol. Of course, expressions of enthusiasm are relative to the context. I have been dealing with a particular case and situation, and I am by no means implying that affection or distaste for Kriol are uniform within generations (indeed, we have seen that they are not uniform across regions). Nonetheless, we observe that in this case the enthusiasm about Kriol seemed to be rooted in an ideological inheritance dating back from the time when Kriol acquired respectability, a period of (partial) cultural victories against colonial domination (see table 1, line 3). The young man, who was born in the late 1980s, would have been too young to appreciate even the end of this era. It would be interesting to document how much he, and other representatives of his generation, have heard about it. Importantly, the confidence that Kriol can be conceived of as a bridge between English and traditional Aboriginal languages without being influenced by English in a negative way seems to be associated with the mastery of, or acquaintance with, the diversity of Aboriginal languages (see table 1, line 4). The young man presented this ancestral multilingual background as inaccessible to him, assuming that he would be unable to learn another Aboriginal language. Last but not least, the older MT was able to express her views about language diversity and the status of Dalabon more clearly and more firmly than the younger PA and JJA (see table 1, line 5). Some of PA’s suggestions, in particular, seemed to reflect internal conflicts about the survival of his language, in contrast with MT’s pessimistic but well articulated, unified account. The variations in PA and JJA’s statements probably does not help their children in keeping up with their own values—ultimately, table 1 suggests how transgenerational interactions may lead to the young man’s criticism.

Finally, I would like to draw attention to a few consequences of these interpretations for the activity of linguistic documentation. If I had to risk a more general hypothesis, I would speculate that the some of the families I know may be in a transitional stage. Language loss is not yet foreseen by all (it is

“delayed,” as described by Schmidt 1990). Thus, the usual current linguistic behaviors in the Dalabon community do not demonstrate a very clear practical will to revitalize Dalabon, since the loss of the language is not yet clearly anticipated. But the young man’s complaint could indicate that this loss will be resented within a few years, when the memory of the diplomatic origins of Kriol is more remote, and when traditional languages are no longer remembered in depth by any speaker. The young man’s complaint, addressed to me as a cry for help, did lead me to believe that an upcoming generation might feel a need to revitalize its ancestral language. In this situation, linguists have an important part to play because in the eventuality that a desire to revitalize Dalabon does arise, the process will necessarily rely on linguistic documentation. In addition, as we have seen at several points, the presence of linguists in the community, their activities, their interactions with community members (and typically the ones described in this article) cannot be devoid of influence on local ideologies and attitudes about linguistic practices. This cannot, I believe, be avoided, and there may be no good reason to try and prevent it. It seems crucial to me, however, as a researcher, to remain aware of my own influence on the ideologies of the speakers I work with, to listen to their views, and to try to understand them in an informed way.

### Notes

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1. Because speakers do not use the label “Barunga Kriol,” but refer to their language simply as Kriol, I sometimes use this unspecified term to refer to Barunga Kriol. But as mentioned in section 2, this article deals only with views expressed by speakers of Barunga Kriol.

2. For general descriptions of Dalabon, see, for instance, Evans, Merlan, and Tukumba (2004) and Cutfield (forthcoming).

3. Wugularr and Barunga are the Aboriginal names of these communities, whereas Beswick and Bamyili are their English names.

4. Jawoyn is sometimes qualified as “dormant,” but a few isolated speakers have been reported.

5. Whether creoles should be considered autonomous languages or varieties of their lexifiers is debated among linguists (see, e.g., Mufwene 2001). This article does not elaborate a theoretical view on this point. In the context of the discussion at hand, and considering the attitude of speakers, Kriol may be regarded as a language. Practically speaking, it is not mutually intelligible with English and its norms are defined autonomously by its speakers (this appears in language-learning interactions with children, for instance).

6. At the time of writing, the advocates of bilingual education are engaged in a political fight for the preservation of significant use of Aboriginal languages (including Kriol) in the schools of the Northern Territory of Australia.

7. It should be mentioned that he also had family ties in an English-speaking Aboriginal community. But for cultural reasons, I cannot expand on the young man's identity. These family connections support the interpretations articulated in the discussion in this article. Throughout the article, I voluntarily limit the information given about this young man, for cultural reasons.

8. Hudson (1983) notes the influence of John and Joy Sandefur upon local ideologies about Kriol in the Fitzroy Valley region.

9. This impact has also been acknowledged in the Timber Creek region, where speakers of Jaminjung, Ngaliwurru, and Ngarrinyman are reported to identify Kriol as a language more readily since they have been working with linguists (Candide Simard p.c. 2009).

10. Outstations are communities, often tiny and remote, inhabited by extended family groups.

11. It will be interesting to document how much the members of his generation have heard about this historical period.

12. Aboriginal families had to prove they actually lived on their homelands in order to obtain funding for an outstation.

13. In her discussion of the attitudes about Kriol in the Fitzroy region, Hudson (1983) describes a situation in which individuals indeed move on from speaking Kriol exclusively as young children toward better mastery of English. Her account suggests that Kriol may thus have been somewhat stigmatized, at the time, as a childish language. While this pattern may be part of JJA's ideological baggage, she suggests a more positive and central role for Kriol, which she presents as a necessary and valuable first step in the language learning process.

14. This is also in line with Schmidt (1990), who mentions that speakers are likely to identify language loss when the last fluent speakers pass away.

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