Language revitalisation at Ngukurr:
One tack worked partway: Should we change tack?
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Map of traditionally spoken languages of the Ngukurr area

The Ngukurr linguist’s duty statement included:
   to facilitate language teaching in the schools at Ngukurr, Minyerri (Hodgson Downs) and Urapunga
The linguist was based at Ngukurr, and used to make weekly trips to Urapunga (25 mins drive) and fortnightly trips to Hodgson downs to be there for the weekly Alawa teaching day.

Ngukurr: total population approx. 1500; school approx 280 pupils K-12.
Hodgson Downs: total population prob. around 500.
Urapunga much smaller.

At Ngukurr:
In 2008 semester 1, 30 minute weekly classes assigned for traditional languages.
Five teams for 5 languages: Marra (4), Ngandi (1), Nunggubuyu (1), Rembarrnga (1-2), Ritharrngu/Wägilak (4). Ritharrngu/Wägilak spoken further north, Rembarrnga spoken but threatened further north, Nunggubuyu old people at Numbulwar, Ngandi fading out, Marra some old speakers, not all on the teaching team, one of Marra team a trained teacher (retired head teacher).
School language teaching for some years has been words in a chosen domain, and some songs:

*e.g. in Marra: Nga-jurra na-balba-yurr, na-balba-yurr, na-balba-yurr
Nga-jurra na-balba-yurr, Jurr-nga-ju na-warlanyan-i
I-went masc-river-to catch-I-did masc-fish-for

Minyerri School: a trained local teacher in charge, not an Alawa speaker, 1-2 Alawa speakers, two non-speaking Alawa helpers. 30 minute lessons, but better organised than at Ngukurr because co-ordinated by a trained teacher.

Urapunga: Program not working in 2008. In August-September I did some Kriol work (an alfabet buk) and two mixed language songs (Kriol and Ngalakgan)

Ngukurr second semester introduced Language and Culture Days, but only two held before I left. Concentration on kinship terms showed the interrelationships and began to show ritual obligations.

**Ngababarra Alawirryunu**

![Diagram of Ngababarra Alawirryunu](image)

Differences between oral and literate societies

Ong (2002) notes:

In recent years certain basic differences have been discovered between the ways of managing knowledge and verbalization in primary oral cultures (cultures with no knowledge at all of writing) and in cultures deeply affected by the use of writing. The implications of the new discoveries have been startling. Many of the features we have taken for granted in thought and expression in literature, philosophy and science, and even in oral discourse among literates, are not directly native to human existence as such but have come into being because of the resources which the technology of writing makes available to human consciousness. (Ong:2002:1)

Bain has suggested that the move from fisher-hunter-gatherer to agricultural living is behind this change. The result, as she notes, is that

‘when Aborigines and whites encounter one another, a cultural interface is present and we can expect refraction of ideas and loss of communication. The loss can be described and understood in terms of the proposed contrasts.
It is important to note that the explanatory tools are constituted by difference, that is, they exist by virtue of difference and so also does the cultural interface at which refraction occurs. The point at issue, therefore, is not that Aborigines or whites use any particular degree of abstraction, but that when they consider event in which both take part, they can, and often do, use different degrees. Likewise, in the one event Aborigines and whites sometimes conceive process differently. This difference results in alternative expectations of that event and mutual misunderstanding. (Bain 2002:147)

Eades’s research on Aboriginal English (1982) showed that traditional ways of interacting carry over into Aboriginal people’s use of English, even when such people are generations removed from their forebears who used a traditional language.

References
Bain, Margaret S. 2005. ‘White men are liars’: Another Look at Aboriginal-Western Interactions. Alice Springs: SIL Darwin Inc.