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Words of Life

Author:
Nicholas Evans

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Summary:
In Australia's Northern Territory, and elsewhere, Indigenous vocabularies do more than identify species. They also communicate a range of important ecological information. As linguist Nicholas Evans writes here, they can direct us to what is unique and key in a species.

Author bio:
Nicholas Evans is Laureate Fellow and Distinguished Professor of Linguistics at the Australian National University. He directs the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language (CoEDL) and has carried out wide-ranging fieldwork on the indigenous languages of Australia and Papua New Guinea. The author of Dying Words: Endangered Languages and What They Have to Tell Us, he has also published book-length grammars and dictionaries of several Aboriginal languages (including Kayardild, Bininj Gun-wok, Dalabon). He has also worked as a linguist, interpreter and anthropologist in two Native Title claims, as a promotor and interpreter of Aboriginal art, and as a translator of Aboriginal oral literature.

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WORDS OF LIFE

In July 2006 I travelled to a remote beach camp called Wilyi, in the Northern Territory of Australia. In my company were three Iwaidja elders – Khaki Marrala, David ('Cookie') Minyumak and Archie Brown, as well as other members of our language documentation team – linguists Murray Garde and Bruce Birch, material culture specialist Kim Akerman, and photographer Sabine Hoeng.

Khaki, Cookie and Archie were old friends and longstanding participants in our project to document the Iwaidja language and other languages of the region. Khaki's systematic and careful personality made him ideal for working through complex verb paradigms; Archie and Cookie were accomplished composers of the song style known as *jurtbirrk* – poignant, emotional, understated songs, rich with words we'd never heard before. Cookie, a magnificent singer with a smoky voice who somehow managed to wield his clapsticks with great dexterity despite having lost his fingers to leprosy, had earned his nickname working as a camp cook many years before.

Khaki had long begged me to take him back to Wilyi, a place that was very special for him. Though he was living some distance away, at the community of Minjilang on Croker Island, and in his early manhood had worked on boats in the Cobourg Peninsula region, Wilyi had powerful associations for him. It was a place where he had once entertained the ambition of becoming a 'clever man' with supernatural powers (something like what's called a shaman elsewhere), under the tutelage of the fabled Namadbara, who also went by the English name 'Paddy Compass', and who was equally famous for his exuberantly ribald bark paintings. In the end, Khaki had not followed that path – his methodical character made him temperamentally unsuited for the liminal world-crossings of shamanistic life.

As soon as we got to Wilyi, he asked us to set up a shade on the beach, close to the sea and well down from the sand-dunes and the trees behind them. And then – for his eyes were poor – he asked us to walk up to the dunes, have a look around, and report back. When we got back he asked what trees were there – was there still a large white gum tree? Yes, there was. And was there anything up in the tree? Yes, a large sea-eagle. He gave me one of those long wordless looks so characteristic of my Aboriginal teachers – almost expressionless, but deeply imbued with the confidence that you will understand. And I realised that it hadn't just been his poor eyesight that had made him hesitate – that eagle was Namadbara's spirit and he wanted to be careful.

Sea eagle nest.

One reason we had come to Wilyi was to get vocabulary for animals found on the mainland. This is where Iwaidja people lived many years ago, before they were moved to Croker, a small island with an impoverished faunal stock. We wanted to document the Iwaidja language in all its richness, in the place where it had developed, before Government and mission decrees forced Iwaidja people off the land. Getting back to Wilyi, where the animals and the memories of them would be fresh, seemed like a good plan. Trouble was, the animals just weren't there. Not a sign of them, and the men admitted it had been a long time since they'd seen any of them, though if you go further inland to the rock country, the larger wallabies and kangaroos are still thriving.

As a backup, we'd brought a small library of guides to the marsupials of northern Australia – lavishly illustrated, with maps of their ranges. But Khaki's and Cookie's old eyes weren't up to it, and Archie's weren't much better. Here we were, sweating it out under our flapping plastic tarp-cum-boughshade on hot Wilyi beach, getting nowhere fast. Khaki, Cookie and Archie made a fire and began a siesta under the boughshade.

The afternoon lassitude was broken by the sound of a diesel engine – a rare thing in these parts – and a Toyota appeared, sporting odd modifications to its rear. A stranger stepped out – Mark Ziembicki, a biodiversity ecologist researching a PhD on dwindling ecological niches in Australia. In the back of his truck was a

minor museum of stuffed marsupials: wallabies, quolls, brush-tailed possums, sugar gliders, black-footed tree rats. By taking his travelling taxidermic museum to remote indigenous communities and showing actual specimens to people, asking elders which creatures were still around, which they had never seen, which had disappeared in living memory and when, he hoped to get detailed and reliable data on the receding distribution of many of Australia's unique species. He'd never heard of us, and we'd never heard of him; it was sheer serendipity that our paths crossed that day in such a remote place.

Left to right: Khaki Marrala, Nick Evans, David Minyimak, Mark Ziembicki, Archie Brown.

Mark unpacked the animals and we set them all up under the boughshade, getting the men to talk about each in turn. They would give their Iwaidja names like *marnanbuki* for the brush-tailed phascogale (*Phascogale Tapoatafa*), *murlunybi* [1] for the brush-tailed rabbit rat (*Conilurus penicillatus*) or *nabarraminyminy* for the northern blossom bat (*Macroglossus minimus*). Then they would discuss their behaviour, bringing in new words like *rahardalkbin,* 'it glides like a plane', for *wahay* the sugar-glider (known as scurrel, from squirrel, in local English). Or they would recall the plants these animals sought out: *kartaywal*, the black-footed tree rat, for instance, eats *mamungarn* ('red sap') and *yaji* ('clear gum'), from the acacia tree known as *warlum* in Iwaidja. This in turn would often lead out into other stories: as in many other places, the northern quoll *kabarrakan*, which looks like a spotted marsupial cat, has close associations

with the origins of death. Now the memory of that animal is itself becoming ghostly, a fading image in the men's memories.

The men were animated, laughing to see again animals that had disappeared from their own lives many years before, and which people had slowly stopped talking about, to the point that many of the names would not have returned to mind without the tangible prompt of Mark's specimens. Those objects, packed into the trunk of his Toyota, recreated for a moment the rich regional fauna that had surrounded these men when they were growing up, and which had imperceptibly disappeared from their lives. Even in this remote part of the continent, a place which can only be reached by a six-hour drive, half on dirt roads, from the city of Darwin, the effects of feral cats, cane toads and other introduced animals have been clear: as the range of invasive species expands, the range of native species gets smaller and smaller.

The reach of faunal extinction, out into places that are seemingly still untouched by industry, agriculture or urbanisation, has struck me at a number of places where I have carried out linguistic fieldwork. In remote parts of southern New Guinea, where animals from the cassowary to the wallaby, bandicoot and echidna are still boisterously present in the mixed savannah / rainforest landscape, a number of local fish species have completely disappeared from the rivers and streams in the last decades. I discovered this recently, when, using a book listing and illustrating the fish of the Fly River region, I tried to elicit their names from speakers of the Nen language. Fish like the tilapia (*muzaya* in Nen), striped snakehead (*gastol*) and walking catfish (*lili*) [2.] have crossed the border from Indonesian Papua, where they have been brought in by people from other parts of Indonesia over the last half a century or so. In the process, they have displaced fish traditionally found in the area, such as the *wagsgi*, 'banded magurnda', and *wagsgi tuleli*, 'trout magurnda', which my Nen teachers say disappeared soon after their arrival. Poignantly, I first learned the verbs *awalngs*, 'to disappear', and *walngs*, 'to get rid of something', while seeking the names of these fish.

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What does all this mean for the future? And what is the relationship between loss in the landscape and loss in human culture? A few years ago, in remote Central Arnhem Land, I accompanied several dozen indigenous youths on a Bininj Man-bolh, a hike along traditional Aboriginal routes through the bush. Its purpose was to give the younger generation a chance to learn on country from their knowledgeable elders, who were ferried to our nightly camps by truck or helicopter so they could tell stories round the fire, or quiz the younger people on what they had seen and teach them about it. But during the whole multi-day hike,

despite the trap-lines laid every morning by the biologists who accompanied us, we didn't see any of the small marsupials, such as the hopping mouse or the tree rat, that we had expected to find. These are not spectacular disappearances: shy creatures, these animals are only seen, rarely and nocturnally, by the attentive and knowledgeable. Unlike the vanishing of the world's charismatic megafauna, their disappearance won't make it onto the evening news. Nonetheless, little by little the ecological effects of their removal will begin to be felt. The hopping mouse, for example, helps disperse the seeds of many plant species. As this creature begins to disappear, the range of these plants will likewise recede.

But the vocabularies of indigenous languages don't just simply form fine-grained systems of identification which often come close to, and sometimes go beyond, the precision of western scientific species names. They also carry a range of ecological information. Many languages of northern Australia have dozens of what are known as 'sign metonymies' reflecting 'calendar species', which signal the fact that one natural phenomenon is a guide in space or time to the presence of another. In Kune, *manyawok* denotes both the katydid or long-horned grasshopper, and the 'cheeky yam', *Diascorea bulbifera*: the shared name indicates that when the grasshopper starts to call out, it is the right time to harvest the 'cheeky yams'. As another example, in Gun-djeihmi *alyurr* denotes both the Leichhardt's grasshopper (*Petaside ephipigera*), and the two herb species which it eats (*Pityrodia jamesii* and *Cleome viscosa*), whose location is thus the best way to locate these grasshoppers. *Alyurr* also denotes the lightning spirit, which starts to manifest itself in the first monsoonal storms at the same time as the herbs are ready for these grasshoppers to eat. When the first monsoons come, Leichhardt's grasshopper is said to don its sumptuous orange and blue outfit and go looking for the lightning. Local cave paintings depict lightning spirits with axes on their heads – the grasshopper's antennae. A central place in the symbolic thought of another Arnhem Land group, the Yolngu, is held by *likan*, literally 'elbow' but also 'joint, connection'. '*Likan* names' are used, in contexts of art and ceremony, to indicate more allusive readings to the culturally knowledgeable, harnessing the knowledge of ecological links to the interpretation of deep ceremonial meaning.

A Leichhardt's grasshopper clinging to a Pityrodia Jamesii plant. Photograph by Peter Cooke.

Indigenous languages, whose vocabularies have gradually been built over millennia of close observation of the natural world, often direct us to what is key to the unique identity of each species. Consider macropods – kangaroos and wallabies – in northern Australia. The traditional bias in Western taxonomy, going back to Linnaeus and beyond, has been on physical morphology – the careful observation of bones, flower-cases, and other anatomical structures. Recapitulating these biases in the recording of species names, work by biologists and anthropologists interested in Western Arnhem Land flora and fauna had assembled fairly comprehensive species lists by the mid 1980s. When using these lists to ask what these animals are called in Bininj Kunwok and other languages of the region, one will find distinct local terms for all macropod species living in the area, usually tripled up into terms for adult males, adult females, and young. For the antilopine wallaroo (*Macropus antilopinus*), for example, there are the terms *karndakidj* (adult male), *karndayh* (adult female), and *djamunbuk* (juvenile), as well as *kalaba* for an exceptionally large adult male. And for the agile wallaby (*Macropus agilis*) the adult male is *warradjangkal* or *kornobolo*, the adult female is *merlbbe*, and the juvenile is *nakornborrh* (there is also a baby term, *nanjid*). The existence of such triple sets is familiar from English sets like *stallion / mare / foal* and *stag / doe / fawn*.

What these lists did not pick up, however, was the existence of an elaborate set of verbal terms for the distinctive gait of most macropod types, which extends in

some cases to distinctive verbs for the male and female gaits (the Bininj Kun-wok root *ngudj* 'gait' is an important part of many words, such as *benengudjkadjuy* 'they two followed him (a kangaroo)', literally 'they followed his gait'). A subset of these terms is given in the last line of each species set below:

Black wallaroo (*Macropus bernardus*)

barrk male black wallaroo

djugerre female black wallaroo

murlbardme hop (of black wallaroo)

Antilopine wallaroo (*Macropus antilopinus*)

garndagidj male antilopine wallaroo

mawudme hop (of male antilopine wallaroo)

garndalbburru female antilopine wallaroo

djalwahme hop (of female antilopine wallaroo)

Agile wallaby (*Macropus agilis*)

gornobbolo male agile wallaby

merlbbe female agile wallaby

lurlhlurlme hop (of agile wallaby)

Distinguishing these animals from each other using static physical features can be difficult, especially at a distance. To a hunter – or anyone else trying to spot a wallaby or wallaroo in the bush – the distinctive gait of each type is probably the

most salient clue to which type of animal is present. ‘How shall we know the dancer from the dance?’ W. B. Yeats asks in his poem *Among School Children*. The question doesn’t simply suggest an alternative way of conceptualising what is important in identifying species and sex differences, but also implies in this context an enriched aesthetics of the dynamic landscape, characterised by the gaits and trajectories of the animals that move through it. And as children grow up speaking Bininj Kunwok, their language trains their attention on these different gaits.

Examples like these, and many others, show us that the knowledge of the natural world that is transmitted through indigenous languages goes far beyond the identification of species. It extends out to their gait, other aspects of their behaviour, their ecological connections, and the uses to which they can be put.

The nets of words such languages cast out to the schools of life thus bring in much that escapes those whose traditions have not taught them to attend so finely. Conversely, as species disappear, our memories of them weaken and with this weakening words fade from use to the point of being lost altogether. We should bear in mind that for the vast majority of the world’s languages neither writing systems nor dictionaries yet exist. In these circumstances the only place where living knowledge of native ecology survives is in the minds of these languages’ speakers, and in the conversations that keep their memories alive.

Sometimes, though, unusual circumstances keep words alive long after their referent has been lost. The thylacine (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*) disappeared from the Australian mainland several millennia ago, possibly out-competed when the dingo arrived, though it survived on the island of Tasmania till the twentieth century (hence its common name, the Tasmanian Tiger). The last known wild specimen was shot by a farmer in 1930; for most Australians its memory is kept alive most vividly by the labels on a Tasmanian beer brand, Cascade.

Depiction of a djankerrk or thylacine in a rock painting at Kundjorlomdjorlom, Upper Liverpool River, Arnhem Land. Photo by Murray Garde.

But through those millennia of the thylacine's absence from the mainland, indigenous groups from Western Arnhem Land, such as those who speak Bininj Kunwok, have kept alive both a name for it (*djankerrk*) and a detailed memory of its appearance and behaviour, thanks to the combination of story-telling traditions and extraordinary rock paintings at places like Korlonjdjorr (Deaf Adder Gorge) and Kundjorlomdjorlom on the upper reaches of the Liverpool River in Arnhem Land. This knowledge, transmitted down through the generations, has given *djankerrk* a ghostly afterlife.

A recent children's book in the Kunwinjku dialect of Bininj Kunwok tells of two thylacines hunting and bringing down a kangaroo by biting at its tail. [3] At the end of the story both the thylacines and the kangaroo fall off a cliff into a creek and are transformed into fish. The fact that the thylacine is transformed into an archer-fish (*njarlkan*) references the visual link that archer fish, like thylacines, have stripes on their tails. This connection with stripes of colour has been recorded by others as well. The great authority on Arnhem Land rock art, George Chaloupka, notes that *djankerrk* were associated with waterfalls and with the rainbow serpent, *ngalyod*. The story concludes: *Bolkkime wanjh kabirridi kore kunred kabolkngeyyo Djorlok. Mahni kunwok ngandimarneyolyolmeng kobohkobanj namekke djankerrk birridi kubolkwern manekkeken ngarrbenmarneyolyolme wurdwurd ngadberre.* 'They are all still there now at that place called Djorlok. This story was taught by old people because *djankerrk* used to be everywhere in this land. That's why we are telling this story to our children.'

At this chasmic moment in history, the swingeing loss of languages is proceeding even faster than the loss of species (40% of languages and 18% of mammal species are slated to disappear by the end of the century). Complex causal tissues bind these two phenomena – both are driven by the demographic explosion, and by the relentless hunger of industrialised or industrialising cultures. But beyond this, habitat loss may destroy the economic basis for indigenous peoples to maintain their livelihoods and cultural distinctness. And the loss of traditional ecological knowledge transmitted through indigenous languages may hasten the abandonment of traditional practices that conserve the richly nuanced ecologies on which many traditional peoples have long relied, such as the Bininj Kunwok tradition of *karung kawohdalknjihme* 'patchwork burning' which keeps down fire loads through small localised burns that allow animals to relocate to haven niches outside the fire front. [4]

This Remembrance issue invites us to contemplate what we now have, and what those who follow us risk neither experiencing nor remembering. Thousands of minority languages around the world are under threat – typically spoken by first peoples whose life, culture and spiritual well-being hinges on a deep understanding of their local environment. Each carries far-reaching, millennially-accumulated knowledge which is itself often the remembrance of much of the world's fragile web of life. By supporting the speakers of these languages in their quest to keep their traditions alive – by giving them cultural respect, visibility, the right to be used in education, and the memorability that comes with recording and archiving them in all their intricate detail – we do more than sustain the tapestry of human memory. We sharpen our sense of what is out there in the natural world, and how we can keep it alive.

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Words of Life was originally published by THE CLEARING, an online journal that offers writers and artists a dedicated space in which to explore and celebrate the landscapes we live in. THE CLEARING is published by Little Toller Books and supported by the Centre for Environmental Humanities at the University of Bristol. This collaboration commissioned a series of works to mark the *Remembrance Day for Lost Species*, of which *Words of Life* is one. The project rationale, and a link to the original article and the full collection of works is provided below:

Original: https://www.littletoller.co.uk/the-clearing/poetry/words-of-life-by-nicholas-evans/

'Poetry can repair no loss,' John Berger writes, 'but it defies the space which separates.' This year, The Clearing *has commissioned seven writers to mark the Remembrance Day of Lost Species. These pieces are not eulogies. Although they respond to the grief and disorientation of our times, they are also songs of hope and memory, commitment and renewal. They mark the immensity of current and past losses, but defiantly —by bridging the 'space which separates.'*

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Notes

1. The *-ny* in Iwaidja spelling is pronounced like Spanish *ñ* or like the *-gne* in French words like Bretagne or Boulogne.
2. All three of these names are taken from languages on the Indonesian side of the border: *muzaya* from Indonesian *mujair*, and *lili* from Indonesian *lele* 'freshwater catfish'. *Gastol* has a more complex etymology: in several languages of the Merauke district, such as Marori and Yelmek, the same fish is called *gastor*, apparently a reduction from *gabus toraja* (where *gabus* is a local name for a type of catfish, and Toraja is the part of Sulawesi from which the man who introduced these is said to have originated). (Thanks to Wayan Arka, Tina Gregor and Bruno Olsson for this information).
3. Nabarlambarl, Sarah Pobalarr, Nabarlambarl, Elizabeth Dulbin & Dangbunala, Berribob. 2018. *Djankerrk. Thylacine Story.* Warddeken Land Management.
4. Garde, Murray et al., 2009. 'The language of fire: seasonality, resources and landscape burning on the Arnhem Land plateau. In Jeremy Russell-Smith et al. (eds) *Culture, Ecology and Economy of Fire Management in North Australian Savannas* (CSIRA Publishing), pp. 85-164