

Mirniny Language: A snapshot
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1.1 Abstract

Australian languages are among the most critically-endangered in the world (Coffin 2022). At the time of European invasion there were an estimated 250 languages spoken across the continent. Today, linguists believe less than 20 are taught as a first language (National Indigenous Languages Report [NILS] 2020). In the Goldfields region of Western Australia, the status of languages is defined as sleeping, critically endangered, endangered or living (Austin, 1986). Speakers, with linguists, at the Goldfields Aboriginal Language Centre Aboriginal Corporation (GALCAC), are working to document and revitalise these sleeping languages.

The last 30 years has seen a growth in language revitalisation, and the success of language reclamation programs such as those used by the Kaurna in South Australia, demonstrate that a language can be revived, even if it hasn't been actively spoken for many years (Amery, 2016). Where the language is not spoken as a living language, it is common to find wordlists and secondary research materials that can be used in recovery. Such is the case with Mirniny, a sleeping language spoken by First Nations people whose speakers occupied a thin strip of land along the southern coast of the continent. Mirniny is the traditional language of the Mirning people, an Indigenous nation of the same name (Mirning Traditional Lands Aboriginal Corporation [MTLAC] n.d.). Mirning traditional homelands are positioned across Western Australia and the South Australian border, from East of Point Culver, to the head of the Great Australian Bight (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [AIATSIS], n.d.; von Brandenstein in Thieberger, 1993). Curr (1886-1887) believed the Mirning did not venture north of their lands into the Nullarbor, as the desert was harsh and difficult to cross. However, a relationship between these two groups is evidenced by the presence of Wati lexemes in a database established by the Goldfields Aboriginal Language Centre Aboriginal Corporation (GALCAC) (Coffin and Reynolds, 2023). The corpus also demonstrates a relationship between Mirning people and their neighbours to the east and west, the Wirangu and Ngadju nations.

Mirniny, AIATSIS classification A9 (AIATSIS n.d.) is a sleeping or remembered language (Austin, 1986). Many Mirniny people are partial speakers, using words and phrases. GALCAC's corpus consists of secondary material in the form of wordlists collected by laypersons, historians and linguists, and a small number of language recordings and short grammars. This situation is not ideal, but far from unique. Compared to many others whose language has lain dormant for some time, Mirniny is in a better position than most for reclamation and rejuvenation, thanks to the existence of voice recordings and a significant corpus of historical records.

Mirning people directed the collation and analysis of material by GALCAC. This paper presents a breakdown of the work undertaken over the last four years of research and analysis, and will discuss findings from a phonology, word creation processes used to create labels for new objects following contact with Europeans, and a Mirniny phonotactics study. Mirniny will be used to refer to the language, while the nation of people who use the

language shall be labelled Mirning. The word-final /ng/ is preferred by the speakers for self-identification and as such, will be used by GALCAC.

2.0 Introduction

Mirniny has been classified as part of O’Grady’s Mirning subgroup, alongside Kaalamaya and Ngadju (O’Grady, Voegelin and Voegelin, in Thieberger, 1993). This places Mirniny in a separate language classification to the neighbouring Noongar, Wati and Thura Yura families. Generations of dispossession, disease, forced relocation and active suppression of language use by church and state has seen Mirniny, like so many other Australian languages, suffer massive devastation and loss of language (Hobson in 2022). Aligning with modern naming conventions, it is labelled as a sleeping or remembered language (Austin, 1986). A sleeping language is ‘a language no longer actively spoken’ but one that will include some community members who remember words and phrases (Zuckermann, 2020). Despite the fact that a language is not actively spoken, the people will still identify as belonging to that language or cultural group. Considering this, the available Mirniny corpus consists of a small amount of historical wordlists (Curr, 1886-1887; <https://bates.org.au>; Velichova-Rebelos, 2005; Saar, 1934; O’Grady, 1956 and Naessan, 2013) and a small amount of primary data from speakers and audio recordings (O’Grady Hale 01-014055). At this stage, GALCAC has very little primary, or first-hand data. Despite this, the existing data and the Mirniny linguistic corpus provides sufficient material for the phonological, morphological and semantic collation of the language (Amery, 2016). Most importantly, there is a will and desire of the Mirning people to reclaim their language.

3.0 Phonology

The Mirniny phonemic inventory consists of 23 phonemes: 6 vowels, and 17 consonants.

3.1 Vowels

Mirniny uses six vowels; three short vowels, /a/ /i/ and /u/, and three corresponding long vowels: /aa/, /ii/ and /uu/.

- /a/ as in English *cut*
- /aa/ as in English *father*
- /i/ as in English *pin*
- /ii/ as in English *been*
- /u/ as in English *put*
- /uu/ as in English *boot*

Table 1: Mirniny vowels

	Front	Middle	Back
Close	i i:	u u:	
Open			a a:

Short vowels appear more commonly than long vowels, and may take word-initial, word-medial or word-final position.

- (1) alinytjirra, *north* (<https://bates.org.au>)
- (2) ikarnu, *dog* (Velichova-Rebelos, 2005; O'Grady, G.N. & Curr, E.M.1886)
- (3) kari, *arm* (O'Grady, G.N. & Curr, E.M.1886; Velichova-Rebelos, 2005)
- (4) umiya, *nothing, for no reason* (von Brandenstein, 88 GTS)

Long vowels account for 0.84% in the GALCAC Mirniny database. When they do occur, it is always in the first syllable of a word, or in a single-syllable lexeme (Coffin & Reynolds, 2023).

For example:

- (5) tjaalany, *mouth* (O'Grady Hale 01-014055; Velichova-Rebelos, 2005)
- (6) miil, *eye* (Graham, 2022; <https://bates.org.au>)
- (7) puuna, *blow* (Naessan, 2013; Velichova-Rebelos, 2005)

It is very rare to find a long vowel in any position, other than the first syllable. Long vowels, when they occur, are always in the first syllable (Susan Hanson, personal communication, 28 June, 2022). This is because stress patterns in Australian languages dictate that stress always falls on the first syllable (Sharp, 2004). These stress patterns rules are predictable, which allows us to disregard the occurrence of a long vowel in the second syllable, if presented in historical documentation (Coffin, 2022).

In this respect, Mirniny vowels are typical of vowels in most Australian languages (Dixon, 2011).

3.2 Consonants

Table 2: Mirniny Consonants

		Non-peripheral				Peripheral	
		Apical		Lamino		Velar	Bilabial
		Alveolar	Retroflex	Dental	Palatal		
Stops		t	rt	tj		k	p
Nasals		n	rn		ny	ng	m
Laterals		l	rl		ly		
Rhotics		rr	r				
Semi-vowels	Glides			y			
	Approximants						w

Mirniny has 17 consonants: /k/, /l/, /ly/, /m/, /n/, /ng/, /ny/, /p/, /r/, /rl/, /rn/, /rr/, /rt/, /t/, /tj/, /w/ and /y/.

Analysis of consonant phonemes, from recordings retrieved from AIATSIS has produced the following pronunciation guide

Table 3: Mirniny Consonant Pronunciation

Mirniny Consonant	Standard Australian English
/k/	g et
/l/	l ight
/ly/	l million
/m/	m ouse
/n/	n est
/ng/	n ing
/ny/	n onion
/p/	p in
/r/	r car
/rl/	r girl
/rn/	r barn
/rr/	tap bairn trill here (like the Scottish pronunciation)
/rt/	r cart
/t/	t ap
/tj/	t june
/w/	w on
/y/	y ellow

This language has two rhotic or /r/ like sounds; a retroflex rhotic /r/ such as found in American English (AmE) /r/ and an alveolar rhotic /rr/ which is found in Scottish English. The initial retroflex rhotic consonant /rl/, /rt/ and /rn/ is pronounced as rhotic, but not written this way, because speakers know to do this automatically. To write the consonants in this manner would only confuse readers and learners (Coffin, 2022).

The phonemes represented by /y/ and /w/ are semi-vowels. These are pronounced the same as in English. However, in some circumstances the /y/ operates as a glide. Although they are labelled semi-vowels, they are treated the in the same way as consonants (Coffin, 2022).

Mirniny does not have requirements towards vowel-initial or vowel-final lexemes. Words may start and end with vowels or consonants, however vowel-final words are more common than c-final. The language does have rules around which consonants may appear in word-initial and word-final positions, as well as where certain consonants may appear in consonant clusters (CCs). More information on this is discussed in Section 5.0.

Vowel-initial words make up 2.45% of morphemes in the corpus, and consonant-final, 15.47%. This is in contrast to Wati languages like Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjarra and Yankunytjatjarra, which are vowel-final (Glass & Hackett, 2003; Goddard & Defina, 2020).

4.0 Word Creation

Contact with Europeans meant First Nations' people were introduced to a wide range of things, concepts and ideas that needed to be labelled. In 2022 GALCAC began a study on

word creation processes used by Goldfields Aboriginal Languages, Cundelee Wangka, Pitjantjatjarra and Mirniny, to ascertain how these language groups generated lexemes where gaps had appeared following contact with Europeans. Cundelee Wangka, a mission-developed contemporary Wati dialect, and Pitjantjatjarra are living languages; they are taught to children as a mother tongue and are considered to be strong languages in the region. By contrast, Mirniny is a sleeping code (Austin, 1986). As shown below, the size of the word creation databases available for each language reflected their status; Cundelee Wangka and Pitjantjatjarra provided much larger corpuses for analysis than Mirniny.

Table 4: Statistics by Word Class

	Nouns	Descriptors	Verbs	Phrase	Total
Mirniny	51	1	1	0	53
Pitjantjatjarra	120	17	11	1	149
Cundelee Wangka	165	11	26	0	202
Total	336	29	38	1	404

Research showed the language groups used three main processes, lexical borrowing, semantic extension and coinage including derivation, compounding and onomatopoeia. Certain classes of words are more likely to undergo change as a result of contact than others (Breen, 2011). For each dataset, nouns appeared at a higher rate of incidence than any other word class (see table six). Nouns are an open word class, and the data presented in table six demonstrates that this group is more likely to contain borrowed, extended and coined words than verbs, which belong to a closed class.

Table 5: Statistics by Creation Method

	Lexical Borrowing	Semantic Extension	Coinage	Total
Nouns	217	72	48	337
Descriptors	15	11	3	29
Verbs	8	17	13	38
Total	240	100	64	404

Table 6: Mirniny Word Creation Statistics

	Nouns	Descriptors	Verbs	Total
Lexical borrowings	11	0	1	12
Semantic extensions	14	1	0	15
Coinage	26	0	0	26
Total	50	2	1	53

This research project was designed to give linguists insight into effective and authentic re-population processes that can be applied to language revitalisation projects for other Goldfields Aboriginal Languages wishing to rebuild their own codes. Information gathered as a result of this study will be used to inform a GALCAC policy of language rejuvenation.

The complete paper, *Word Creation Processes in Goldfields Aboriginal Languages* is available to read on the GALCAC website; www.wangka.com.au

5.0 Mirniny Phonotactics

Mirniny phonotactics, completed in 2022, identified phonotactic rules in Mirniny using material from the GALCAC database; historical wordlists, secondary research materials and the few available audio recordings.

The research drew on Naessan’s 2013 Sketch Analysis of Geoff O’Grady’s Mirniny Material. Where the phonology or morphology of lexical items held by GALCAC did not agree with Naessan’s sketch analysis, triangulation was used to reconcile differences. The information was used in the creation of a rules-based approach examining said contradictions. As established in 1.0, the GALCAC database consists mainly of historical wordlists. One of the issues with using historical materials is orthographic differences between sources (Amery, 2016). This paper identified the alternate orthographies and provided a contemporary orthography, created from a rules-based approach. This will be applied in GALCAC’s framework for Mirniny revitalisation.

**Table 7: Syllable Distribution
(Naessan, 2013)**

Place of Articulation	Segment	Word Initial	Word Medial	Word Final
Bilabial	/p/	+	+	-
	/m/	+	+	-
	/w/	+	+	-
Alveolar	/t/	-	+	-
	/n/	+	+	+
	/rr/	-	+	+
	/l/	-	+	+
Retroflex	/rt/	-	+	-
	/rn/	-	+	+
	/r/	-	+	-
	/rl/	-	+	+
Palatal	/tj/	+	+	-
	/ny/	+	+	+
	/y/	+	+	-
	/ly	-	+	+
Velar	/k/	+	+	-
	/ng/	+	+	-

**Table 8: Consonant Cluster Distribution
(Naessan, 2013)**

Manner of Articulation	Consonant	C1	C2
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Stops	/p/	-	+
	/t/	-	+
	/rt/	-	+
	/tj/	-	+
	/k/	-	+
Nasals	/m/	+	+
	/n/	+	-
	/rn/	+	-
	/ny/	+	-
	/ng/	+	+
Rhotics	/rr/	+	-
	/r/	-	-
Approximates	/w/	-	-
	/y/	-	-
Laterals	/l/	+	-
	/ly/	+	-
	/rl/	+	-

Combining Naessan’s consonant distribution rules, with vowel-placement rules (as discussed in 3.0), GALCAC linguists were able to establish orthographies for lexemes that had hitherto proved difficult.

(8) kurrku, *owl*

Historical records for kurrku include: koorrgoo (<https://bates.org.au>), goorgoo (Curr, 1886), kurrkoo (Saar, 1934) and kurgu (<https://bates.org.au>). Naessan’s consonant distribution and consonant clusters (CC) data, combined with understanding of vowels, particularly long vowels, GALCAC linguists were able to arrive at a correct orthography for kurrku.

(9) kurntu, *breast*

Historical records include a variation on the above orthography using the long /o/ in word final position, which has been shown to be incorrect.

Examples (8) and (9) result in an orthographical rule that can be written as:

Word-final /oo/, can be written as /u/.

These are just two examples of the way GALCAC’s phonotactic research has benefitted Mirniny language, and ultimately Mirning people.

The GALCAC phonotactics paper provides insights as to which consonants are permitted to take word-final position (Naessan, 2013). For instance, there are restrictions upon bilabials, velars and some stops from appearing in word-final position. This makes the language different to Noongar, where word-final stops and velars are permissible (Noongar Boodjar Language Cultural Aboriginal Corporation, [NBLCAC] 2023).

The full research paper, *Mirniny Phonotactics*, is available to read on the GALCAC website.

6.0 Strategic Research Plans

The Mirniny lexical database was populated from historical wordlists. Which are, as the name suggests lists of words, often without any kind of accompanying explanation or documentation. So far, the work conducted by GALCAC for the Mirning has consisted of phonological study, word creation research, and phonotactic analysis using lexical comparison and triangulation. This resulted in the creation of a rules-based approach to orthographical analysis that will ensure similar-looking words are the same word, just spelt differently, or if they are in fact, different words.

For Mirniny, the next logical step after the phonotactic analysis will be to analyse syntax. Unfortunately, there are gaps in the syntactic information in the GALCAC database. There are just over 1000 sentences currently held in the corpus, 80 per cent of which are made up of three lexemes or less, while 20% have a total of four or more (Coffin & Reynolds, 2023). Because complex sentences are what provide information about syntax and verbal morphology, GALCAC linguists are limited in their ability to learn about Mirniny syntax. Initial analysis suggests that verbs, when they occur in a sentence, will take sentence-final position. Like most other Australian languages, Mirniny is an agglutinative language with free word order, that favours subject, object, verb (SOV) patterns (Dixon, 2011). The corpus contains 162 verbs, but there is limited data available with which to determine verb classes. The limited number of complex sentences has also restricted analysis for tense, mood and aspect (TAM). However, by working with Mirniny speakers, and comparing GALCAC research currently being conducted on syntax, verbs and TAM in other Goldfields Aboriginal Languages linguists will be able to fill these gaps in knowledge.

7.0 Conclusion

Languages ensure longevity through their ability to create and accept new items into their lexicon. As established above, sleeping Goldfields Aboriginal language, Mirniny, has a substantial corpus from which linguists have been able to study the linguistic processes employed by speakers to populate their code. This data places the code in a good position for revitalisation (Amery, 2006)

Research and analysis has been carried out in the linguistic areas of phonology, word creation and phonotactics. GALCAC linguists are now looking to answer questions around syntax. Working with speakers and language rememberers, and combining understood processes of neighbouring living languages with what is held in the database will enable linguists to scientifically fill remaining gaps.

Following generations of loss, there has been a surge in language reclamation amongst speakers of sleeping or remembered Australian languages. For linguists working in this field, studying the information held, and comparing regenerations processes of known, living languages, results in informed methods with which to create new lexical items that hold true to the target language's original form. In this way, linguists are able to 'fill the gaps' using homogenous resources. A revitalised language can never be exactly as it was, but by working with speakers and rememberers, and by using the language's own resources to meet 21st century needs, researchers can give First Nations' people the best-possible chance of recreating a code that is faithful to the original, and one that is more likely to be embraced and used by those wishing to reclaim it (Zuckerman & Walsh, 2011).

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