

# ***Missionary Linguistics***

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*Wangka kanyira ngalipirniku*

PRESERVING OUR LANGUAGES FOR ALL OF US

*Artwork by Chela Rianon*



## Missions in the Goldfields

- Arrival of colonists saw the end of self-governance for Indigenous Australians in the Goldfields
- *Aborigines Protection Act 1886, Aborigines Act 1905*, Chief Protectorate controlled First Nations' lives
- The mission was one such intervention
- Removed First Nations' people from their homelands
- Resulted in a denial to access of Heritage and benefits that flow from it
- Heritage = language.
- Method of transmission of Heritage and Ways of Being
- Linguistic and non-linguistic factors caused language change in the Goldfields

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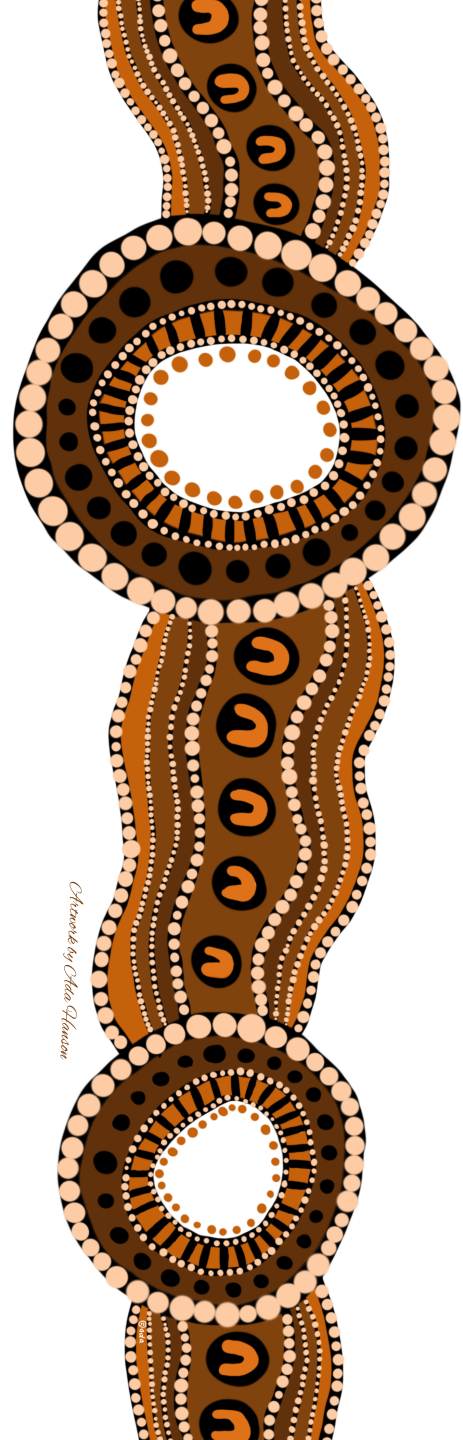
- Discovery of gold prompted a mining boom, resulting in loss of place and order for Indigenous people
- Aboriginal groups living in the Goldfields have suffered social and territorial dislocation since the commencement of mining activity in 1893 (Stanton, 1984)
- This disruption was the beginning of the destruction of centuries-old cultural practices and social norms
- All transmitted via Language within the traditional family unit
- Intergenerational trauma -this loss is ongoing and still felt today
- Aboriginal people were unable to feed themselves
- State already under pressure from Church and townspeople find a solution to Indigenous Australians
- Religious groups concerned for the welfare of First Nations' people
- Townspeople were resentful of Aboriginal people gathering in the towns and regional centres
- Aboriginal people were losing the competition for land with settlers
- Steps taken to keep Indigenous people away from towns, like ration stations



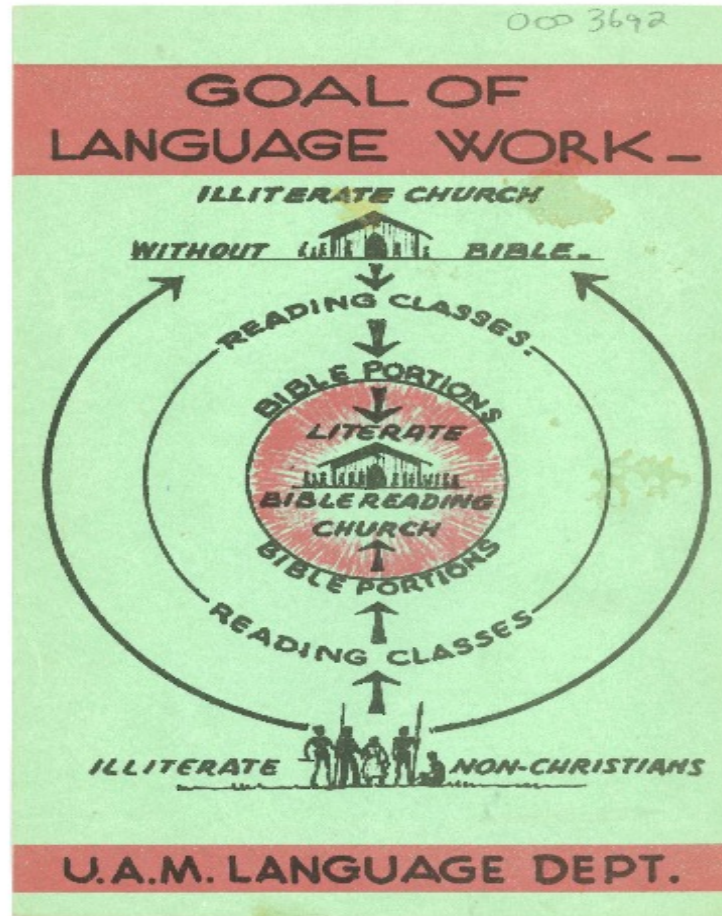


## Missions and the State

- Church lobbying for First Nations' welfare enabled the State to legislate for separation of families
- Pressure from church groups, particularly in north west of the state
- Concern for the welfare of Indigenous children
- Church's offer to take over care of First Nations' children accepted by the State
- *Aborigines Act 1905* and Chief Protectorate allowed State to remove children and separate families
- For churches and religious institutions, missions provided a tool for evangelization
- Church, State and the *Act*, continued to impact the lives and decision making abilities of First Nations' people
- Because the missions were faith-based, conversion to Christianity and an education in European ways of life also occurred in the mission space



Designed by Chela Alvarado





# Missions in the Goldfields

- Missionaries aimed to make disciples through conversion, using language as a tool (Epps & Ladley, 2009)
- Bibles, hymnals in language is the first step in this process (Crowley, 2001)
- The United Aborigines Mission (UAM) founded on a belief of the superiority of Western culture – this informed the running of the mission (Find & Connect, n.d.)
- In addition to children that were relocated, many Indigenous people chose to move to the mission, to escape a life of hardship in the towns,
- Others moved to the mission before they were sent there, or to another further away
- Many Indigenous Australians were grateful for the food, blankets and housing, even if they did not agree with religious aspects of mission life



# Missionary Linguistics: Process

- Studying a language in order to facilitate conversion – Missionary Linguistics
- Similar to Colonial Linguistics,
- One is about spiritual and cultural domination
- The other political domination (Errington, 2008)
- In the Goldfields, Godliness was next to education, European ways of being and speaking Standard Australian English (Stanton, 2005)
- Missionaries travelled to far flung places to spread the word of God
- Missions were in the control of churches, with little to no government involvement (AIATSIS n.d.)
- Bi-racial children were sent to the mission, backed by government legislation
- Under the Act, church and State worked together to institute policies that removed children from their parents and culture
- This broke the family unit and interrupted the process of intergenerational transmission of knowledge, Heritage and language
- By controlling language, residents were converted to Christianity, educated in European ways of being and



# Missionary Linguistics: Process

- Missions needed to convert residents and comply with government policy
- They did both by learning the language(s) of Indigenous people relocated to missions
- With knowledge of languages, bibles, religious materials and materials of instruction were created
- Once command of language was strong enough, missionaries began teaching residents Standard Australian English, that is replacing Heritage and Heritage languages with the code of the colonisers (Errington, 2008)
- Linguistic and religious conversion meant education in European religion,
- Effectively, missions had three functions: community development, evangelism and linguistic research or conversion (Epps & Ladley, 2009)
- Living on the mission, children were separated from their parents. This was a deliberate action on the part of the missions
- Interruption of transmission meant children and babies were cut off from the family unit and traditional, ordered ways of learning culture, language, spirituality and (Indigenous) identity
- Old ways were replaced, removal of language was one way the missions and governments were able to overwhelm indigenous culture (Hale, in Epps & Ladley, 2009)
- Targets of assimilation aimed and reached
- Once severed, the family unit is hard to regenerate



## Missionary Linguistics: Effects on language

- Australian languages among the most critically-endangered in the world
- Goldfields languages include living, endangered and sleeping or remembered (Coffin, 2022; Austin, 1986)
- Contact between Indigenous and non-indigenous groups in the mission sphere prevented the transmission of knowledge and changed language in two ways: insertion of Christianity into language and culture; and the creation of Indigenous creoles, or Mission Languages
- Some missions discouraged, and some missions prevented use of traditional codes, in favour of SAE
- In these places the loss of language was hastened (Stanton, 2005)
- Others allowed language use and the mingling of different speakers in the mission saw the creation of Indigenous creoles



# Missionary Linguistics: Processes

- Insertion of Christianity, evidenced by semantic change in the language domain of ceremony and dreaming.
- Creation and adoption of new creoles, or mission languages
- Missionary Linguistics : Two step process: learn the language of the colonised group, then replace it (Errington, 2008)
- Step 1: learn the language of the colonised group, whereby the heritage language domain of ceremony, or the Tjukurrpa is replaced with Christianity by semantic extension, further achieved through immersion in Christianity and Christian ways of living. (Epps & Ladley, 2009).
- Once the dominant, or colonising group have sufficient control of the language, instruction is begun in the language of the dominant group.



## Step One

- Missionaries learn the language of the minority group, in order to begin both religious instruction and education in European ways of life (Errington, 2008)
- Christianity is inserted into the mission through translated bibles
- Existing (Heritage language) words are appropriated and semantically extended to mean concepts of the new religion (Hanson & Coffin, 2022)
- These are taken from the domains of Indigenous spirituality
- Over time, original meanings are replaced, or diluted to include those of the new religion and its culture (Epps & Ladley, 2009)
- It is not uncommon to see First Nations' people who grew up on missions incorporating Tjukurrpa with the Christian religion they were exposed to on the mission (Stanton, 2005)





## Semantic Extension: Examples

- Tjukurrpa, becomes known as Gospel (Hadfield, 2020).
- Mama Kuurrnga becomes Father God (Glass & Hackett, 2003).
- Inma, traditionally meaning song or ceremony becomes church service (Hadfield, 2020).
- Marlki- to clean, becomes 'cleanse' (Hadfield, 2020).
- Yaka-yaka command or law becomes 'commandments' (Hadfield, 2020).
- Miirl-miirlpa, taboo becomes 'consecrated' (Hadfield, 2020).
- Nintipayi, someone who is learned becomes 'disciple' (Hadfield, 2020).
- Katanya, God (Coffin, 2023).



# Missionary Linguistics: Effects

- By semantically-extending definitions of traditional spirituality towards a Christian framework, disorder of culture was achieved through language (Epps & Ladley, 2009).
- The effect of semantically-extending the traditional meaning of this lexeme removed the cultural importance of the original definition, and the culture associated with it (Errington, 2008).
- Today, these words, and their new meanings have become firmly cemented into the lexicons of First Nations people who had experience of missions and Christianity and the original complex cultural meaning has been simplified and lost.



## Step Two

- In addition to providing food, shelter and education in a European way of life, missions were places where speakers of language were shamed and encouraged, often forcibly, to use SAE in place of traditional languages.
- In this way, missions were places where language was first controlled, then removed (Brutt-Griffler, 2006)
- In some missions, Heritage language use persisted. In these places, new codes, creoles, or mission languages emerged
- A mission language is a lingua franca comprised of the different heritage languages located on the mission
- Over time these new codes became embedded in the group
- Resulted in new Goldfields codes Cundeelee Wangka and Wangkatja
- Derived from Western Desert languages Pitjantjatjarra and Ngaanyatjarra
- Both languages are still actively spoken in the Goldfields today and within them the history and culture of these groups is encoded
- Were it not for the missions, these codes would likely not exist today



## Missionary Linguistics: Effects

- In some cases, the efforts of missionaries provided the first and only description of a language (Crowley, 2001).
- Because the missionaries had varying degrees of linguistic knowledge and training, some of these descriptions were correct, and sometimes they were very wrong.
- There are in fact several examples of where languages, misunderstood by missionary linguists, were sanitised or simplified towards an English grammar (Crowley, 2001).
- Examples of this simplification of heritage languages towards English can be found in the Goldfields. In these codes, the traditional, cultural meanings and the unique syntactic and grammatical complexities of heritage languages have been lost, or whitewashed from the language.
- For example, simplification of Indigenous concepts that were the result of extending lexemes like tjukurrpa and miirl-miirlpa towards Christian definitions.





## Conclusion

- Government policy of removal and placement of First Nations' people in missions created the missionary linguistics environment
- Process of gaining control over language, then replacing language (Brutt-Griffler, 2006)
- Interruption in the transmission of knowledges passed down through the family unit, including language and culture
- Intergenerational trauma, still ongoing
- Government-sanctioned interruption to Heritage transmission
- The appearance of missions changed language and culture in two ways
- Prevented children learning Heritage languages and Indigenous identity
- Insertion of Christian terms and ideology into language and culture
- Creation of creoles, or mission languages
- Cundeelee Wangka and Ngaanyatjarra dictionaries, thanks to the work of missionaries



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