



How technology can save dying indigenous languages

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By Winsome Denyer

A small cultural association in Newcastle might just be the first to develop a computer program aimed directly at Indigenous communities to save and teach traditional languages.

Arwarbukarl Cultural Resource Association (ACRA) has developed a program called Miromaa, which means "saved" in the Awabakal language.

General Manager Daryn McKenny and Program Manager Dianna Newman travelled up to Cardwell over the weekend, to man a stall at the Girringun Cultural Festival.

"We've found ways of being able to use technology to empower our people to revive, maintain, preserve and disseminate our traditional languages," Daryn says.

"Normally that's in the domain of academics like linguists. To be here at this festival where we have an awful lot of our people hanging around, traditional owners, community people, people from language centres all here, it's a great opportunity to expose what we do from little old Newcastle, to other areas of the country."

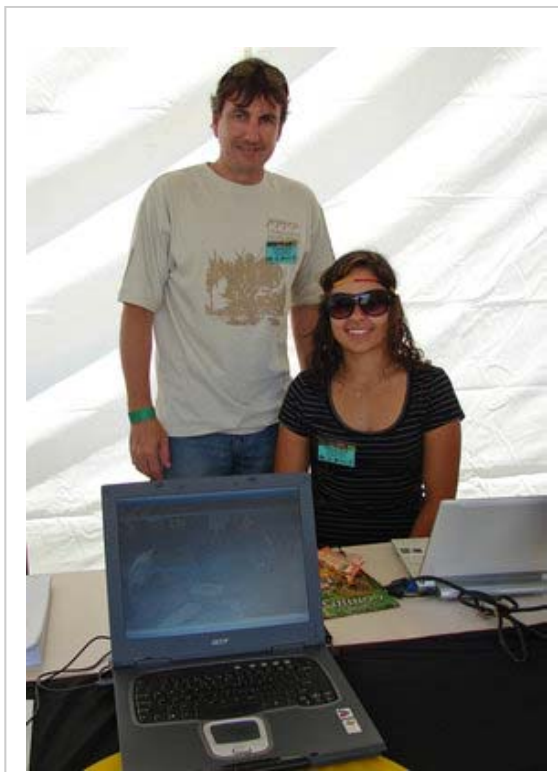
ACRA's motto is, if you are using Miromaa to record your language via textual information, audio recordings, still photographs or video clips, you have gone an long way to saving your language. "That's why we named it Miromaa," Daryn says. "We don't know of any program even internationally which is aimed directly at community people to use technology for language work."

We were told we'd be better off to employ a linguist to do the work. We thought, we don't want that, because we want to be employed to do the work

The idea began when ACRA started to revive and disseminate its own local language. "We couldn't find any programs [to do it]," Daryn says. "We were told we'd be better off to employ a linguist to do the work. We thought, we don't want that, because we want to be employed to do the work. We recognise there's a time and place for linguists to do their stuff, but we want to be hands on doing the work on a daily basis. And there weren't tools available anywhere."

Daryn came up with the concept and work started from there. Over about three years they are now at the point where Miromaa is being used around Queensland, in New South Wales, and Victoria. "There are over 10 communities in Victoria which are using the program, and we're working with the Victorian State Language Centre to get it out to the whole 38 language areas. It's already being used out in Kalgoorlie by the language centre there."

Daryn says as community development programs disappear, it's becomes harder and harder for indigenous people to actually find work, particularly within the community.



Daryn McKenny and Dianna Newman from Arwarbukarl Cultural Resource Association in the language tent | Winsome Denyer

"To be able to look at the core of who we are, our identity, which is made up of our connection with our culture and our language, we need to look what we can do to strengthen that and to be involved with it," Daryn says. "Let's look at using the world's newest culture, technology, to empower us to maintain the world's oldest living culture and oldest living languages."

This comes at an opportune time, when it was highlighted in the media recently that Australia is most at risk of losing its languages.

"We have the most endangered and extinct languages in the world," Daryn says. "We need to have an army of our people right now recording our languages, our people are unfortunately passing away younger and younger every year. That knowledge is the heart of our identity."

Our languages are an oral language, so lets use those senses, our eyes and ears, to learn that

The program can be used not only to store the language, but to teach it as well - through audio, visual and text.

"The program comes blank. It doesn't have a language in it. You get the program and then it is yours for you to put that language in, because the language is owned by that community."

"Our languages are an oral language, so lets use those senses, our eyes and ears, to learn that," Daryn says.

At the moment, the program doesn't translate. But there are always possibilities down the track.

"We've just received federal funding to develop I think Australia's first ever national aboriginal language website called Our Languages. It'll be a place where we hope all Australians can go to and get to understand and have awareness of languages."

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