

RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Amurdak – An Endangered Language

Dr Robert Mailhammer is studying Amurdak, an endangered language of Northern Arnhem Land. This project has been funded by the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London through its Grant Endangered Languages Academic Programme.

'Amurdak is a language traditionally spoken in Northern Arnhem Land in the Australian Northern Territory', says Dr Mailhammer. 'There are only a few elderly speakers left, living in the Minjilang community on Croker Island, even though this is not traditional Amurdak country. There is a rich wealth of knowledge contained in Amurdak stories including the history of people, places and knowledge of regional flora and fauna in their traditional country. Documentation is vital to record what is almost lost but it is also important for us to understand how Amurdak differs from other languages in the same language group of Northern Australia – the Iwaidjan languages. This research will help us understand the reasons for these differences and how they might have developed.'

This research will investigate the many ways Amurdak is understood as part of a larger comprehensive Australian Indigenous languages documentation project. Data on language use, linguistic interpretation and culture and ethnography will be collected. This will be done by documenting and recording narratives, conversation and songs in Amurdak, body language and expression. Amurdak-affiliated people who do not speak Amurdak, but who still have relevant cultural links and knowledge will also be interviewed. Transcriptions, translations and linguistic data will be examined to determine their linguistic properties.



Language isn't just a way of saying something, it expresses and creates meaning and culture. The number of speakers of the Northern Arnhem land language of Amurdak is now very small. While this research will produce new linguistic knowledge about Australian Indigenous languages, the most important benefit from documenting and understanding this unusual language will be the contribution to the Amurdak community in helping them not only to keep their language alive but the traditions, knowledge and culture embedded within and created by their language.

Project Title: Documentation of Amurdak, an endangered language from Northern Arnhem Land (Australia)

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