

Official Opening of Merrepen Art Sale and Launch of the Ngan'gi Dictionary  
SPEECH by His Honour Mr Tom Pauling AO QC,  
Administrator of the Northern Territory, Daly River – 31 May 2009

---

Last year, I enjoyed my first opportunity to visit on the occasion of the Merrepen Arts Festival. I do, however, have great memories of this area. Some rather dramatic such as my first trip at Easter, 1970, when we lost almost half our camping equipment as flood waters raged down the Daly and separated Ma Fairweather's Pub from our camping site..

And again, during a remarkable court case about a farmer in the area who had set fire to his stubble. The wind fanned the flames which actually leapt the river and burnt out another property. During the case we had to cross the Daly in a ten foot tinnie, a scary endeavour with the river in flood and huge trees overtaking us. Some of you will remember when, as the lawyer helping Justice Toohey in the Daly River Land Claim, I met many of the older people including the mothers and fathers of many here today. We too travelled on the river.

Today, on a glorious dry season Sunday, the river is benevolent, the visitors abundant and the community resplendent. I am sure that, just like last year, there will be an enthusiastic response to the art auction and a flurry of activity in the silk workshops.

It gives me great pleasure to note a further significant occasion – the launch of the “Ngan'gi” dictionary. Ngan'gi, or in full Ngan'gikurunggurr Ngen'giwumirri is one of several languages spoken in the Daly River region – mostly in the communities of Nauiyu and Peppimenarti. Up until now there have been linguists' technical grammars and preliminary wordlists. However, this dictionary is the first major published work intended for community use. In fact, it is also the first major dictionary of any language of the Daly River area.

The Ngan'gi Dictionary has two authors: Patricia Marrfurra McTaggart, a local Ngan'gi speaker and community linguist, and Dr Nicholas Reid, an academic linguist based at the University of New England. While they have collected and organised material over many years, there have been many speakers who have contributed the knowledge of words and meanings, so it is really a representation of the collective knowledge of a speech community.

There are many ways in which this publication is important. Languages encapsulate cultures in crucial ways. The Ngan'gi language is a unique human language intimately tied to this land. For Ngan'gi speakers this language represents their link to their ancestors and their identity. The dictionary also has real significance in terms of the perceived status of the language. In a country where Aboriginal languages have never been highly valued by the wider community, the publication of a dictionary has enormous symbolic value, and even those Ngan'gi speakers who don't read will view this publication as outward evidence of the high status of their language.

This dictionary shares some fascinating facts - in English our dominant season names are based on the months of the Gregorian calendar. However, in Ngan'gi the names for seasons of the year are largely based on the annual cycle of growth of speargrass. Some words can have multiple meanings, suggesting very different cultural understandings. The Ngan'gi word *kagu* can refer to 'animals', but also to 'money', and even to 'playing cards', but the connections between these things are not immediately obvious to speakers of English.

In addition to being a window into Ngan'gi culture, the dictionary also captures aspects of the changing world. It demonstrates the way English itself has changed since Ngan'gi speakers were first exposed to it about 120 years ago. I'm intrigued to see that the Ngan'gi loanwords *pawul* 'chicken' and *pulimity*, now unrecognisable to English ears, are borrowings from the old words 'fowl' and 'bloomers', though these are no longer in common usage.

There is also adaptation to new things that Ngan'gi speakers need to discuss. The authors tell me that the very last addition to the Ngan'gi dictionary – just weeks before publication, was the newly coined word *watkuwatku amuyeyi* - 'canetoad' - sadly needed because these creatures have finally made their way into Ngan'gi country!

This publication is the wonderful culmination of more than fifteen years of work and my sincere congratulations go to both Patricia Marfurra McTaggart and Dr Nick Reid.