

# Writing Gooniyandi, 1990 update

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## Abstract

(The following paper outlines the change made from a linguistics-based practical orthography to one based on community input.)

Gooniyandi is an Australian language spoken by some one hundred adults living in communities between Fitzroy Crossing and Hall's Creek, including Yiyili and Bayulu, in the Kimberley region in the north of Western Australia. Most full speakers are over the age of thirty. Younger people often understand but do not speak the language. Today there is a shift in the region from speaking traditional languages to Kriol and English. Kriol is spoken as a first language by young Gooniyandi people. For more information on Gooniyandi people and their language see McGregor 1988, 1990.

David Street and Topsy Chestnut have been the main Gooniyandi-speaking decision makers in the forming of a Gooniyandi orthography. Linguists who have played a part in its development are William McGregor, who did the initial phonological analysis, Joyce Hudson and Therese Carr.

McGregor has worked on the language since 1980, during which time he has not only written numerous academic papers about the language but has also written Gooniyandi reading materials for school programs.

Joyce Hudson began her involvement with Gooniyandi in 1983 at Yiyili Community School where she was employed as a linguist to help develop the language program there. At that time (1991). *Notes on Literacy*, 17(3).

she was working in a SIL project at Fitzroy Crossing, in a neighboring language, Walmajarri. (See [An orthography chosen by those who speak Gooniyandi](#).)

Therese Carr, linguist with the Kimberley Language Resource Centre (KLRC), began working at Fitzroy Crossing in 1990. The KLRC is an independent centre, managed by an Aboriginal committee and is committed to assisting communities in the maintenance of their languages in the Kimberleys. One way they do this is by assisting with orthography development, particularly for school language programs. With her involvement with the Gooniyandi people at Bayulu and the language program at Gogo School, Carr also became involved in orthography decisions.

## 1. Introduction

In 1983, two Gooniyandi aboriginal people met with a linguist to choose a spelling system that could be used in a community school's language (revival) and literacy program. Seven years later, the two met again to review their orthography and make some changes. This paper discusses the history of Gooniyandi orthography development, particularly giving attention to the factors that led the users of the orthography to modify it at that 1990 meeting.

The first orthography for Gooniyandi was developed by William McGregor, and was almost identical with that referred to as the South Kimberley orthography ([Hudson and McGregor 1986](#)). The only difference was the addition of *nh* and *th* and the deletion of *ii* and *uu*. McGregor used this orthography in written materials for the Yiyili Community School and for Gooniyandi examples in his technical writings on the language.

The second orthography came into being in 1983, when Joyce Hudson encouraged two Gooniyandi speakers to select an orthography for use in the school, that would be easier for people literate in English to use without any special training. The account of how the orthography was chosen and the implications of some of the choices of symbols is given in the paper by [Hudson](#), NOL49:11.

The orthography was tried out in the language program at Yiyili school, during 1983 and again during 1987–1988. No major problems or issues resulted from the trial. In 1988, KLRC published a primer written by McGregor, using the orthography. The use of this primer did not generate responses or comments on the orthography by users of it.

The third orthography came out of the 1990 meeting involving Street, Chestnut, Hudson, and Carr. It reflected modifications that were already being made by a few writers of Gooniyandi.

## 2. Orthographies for Gooniyandi

In the following table, the three orthographies have been written side by side to highlight the differences that have developed. Each group of three symbols, reading from left to right, represents the first, second, and third orthographies respectively.

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## Consonants

	bi-labials	lamino-dentals	apico-alveolar	apico-post-alveolar	lamino-palatal	dorso-velar
stops	p b b	th th th	t d d	rt d d	j j j	k g g
nasals	m m m	nh nh nh	n n n	rn n n	ny ny ny	ng ng ng
laterals		- lh -	l l l	rl l l	ly ly ly	
tap/flap			rr d rr			
glide	w w w			r r r	y y y	

## Vowels

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	short		long	
	front	back	front	back
high	i i i	u oo oo		
low		a a a		aa ar aa

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## Orthographies for Gooniyandi

Over the years, following the 1983 orthography choice, though it was never formally stated or acknowledged, it became known that spelling differences had developed among the few Gooniyandi writers. Another meeting between Topsy Chestnut and David Street was held in June 1990 to review the 1983 orthography. Some changes were made and the 1990 orthography resulted from this meeting (see table).

The 1990 community orthography uses distinct symbols for the alveolar stop *d* and the tap *rr*. This seems to reflect a desire to distinguish these two sounds in the orthography. However, the apico-post-alveolar (retroflex) stop, nasal and lateral are no longer distinguished from the alveolar series (see table). Hudson (1984) has already observed that younger Gooniyandi people do not always perceive this distinction, and it may be in the process of being lost in their speech. *lh* was dropped because it was not used by writers.

The selection of *aa* to represent the long low vowel solves the problem of ambiguity in the second orthography, when *ar* represented both the long low vowel found, for example in the verb root *bar* [baa] ‘to call out’, and the sequence short low vowel immediately followed by a retroflex glide, for example *bar* [bar] ‘to climb up’.

## 3. Community writing 1983–1990

Chestnut and Street have always been the most confident Gooniyandi writers. However, neither has had much cause to write more than individual words and a few sentences, as the only domain for written Gooniyandi was in the school revival program.

(1991). *Notes on Literacy*, 17(3).

Since 1985, Street has been employed as an Aboriginal Education Worker at Go-Go School, the primary school that services his community, Bayulu. He teaches Gooniyandi language and culture to the children there. The program is primarily an oral one, and literacy work tends to be restricted to labeling objects and body parts and the writing of simple songs and illustrated stories. For this work, Street had evolved a variation of the 1983 orthography. His writing was influenced by two things. One was his English-based intuitions, which caused him to see *p* and *b*, *k*, and *g* as interchangeable and the retroflex consonants as not needing to be marked. The other was his knowledge and experience of the South Kimberley Orthography, which, for example, uses *rr* for the tap and *aa* for the long low vowel.

Up until 1990, Chestnut only occasionally wrote Gooniyandi. She was sometimes called upon to write words for teachers and community workers as she contributed to in-services and orientation days for nonaboriginal government workers in the Fitzroy Crossing nonaboriginal area. Early in 1990, while participating in a translation workshop, she demonstrated an ability to use the 1983 orthography consistently, as she translated a children's story from English to Gooniyandi.

Early in 1990, both Street and Chestnut were more deeply involved in writing as they checked and added words to a Gooniyandi wordbook. Both writers have now begun to write longer texts.

Increased interest in the Gooniyandi orthography can be attributed to several recent events:

1. Late in 1989, a Gooniyandi speaker and artist strongly suggested that spelling issues needed to be sorted out before any more printing or publication of Gooniyandi materials took place. Chestnut and the KLRC took up this suggestion and it was decided that, before too long, a big meeting should be called so they could discuss spelling and other language issues.
2. This year, a new opportunity for Aborigines interested in learning to write their languages arose when a course designed to train aboriginal language workers became available in the region
3. The KLRC is currently preparing Gooniyandi storybooks and a wordbook for publication. Judging by the current level of interest in the wordbook, it seems certain to be used as a standard reference for teachers and others desiring to write Gooniyandi words. The book will be inexpensive and attractively produced.

## 4. The 1990 meeting

The idea of a big meeting of Gooniyandi people was passed on to me, when I took the position of KLRC linguist in Fitzroy Crossing early this year, but for a number of reasons it did not eventuate. However, I soon found myself in need of guidance as to how to write Gooniyandi. My own involvement in various projects where the language was being written made me acutely aware of the need for standardization, at least between the two main Gooniyandi writers.

I consulted with Joyce Hudson and she agreed to attend a meeting with Street and Chestnut. Both were paying lip service to the 1983 orthography, yet each was writing in his own way. It was thought that Hudson's attendance might help to release the two from the 1983 statement.

The 1990 meeting was attended by Chestnut, Street, Hudson, and myself. It was informal, with no predetermined structure. We began with discussion of the work we were doing and the different ways Gooniyandi is being written. We looked at samples of Street's work and that of his students, Chestnut's translation, and some stories transcribed by McGregor (1982). Hudson suggested that we each attempt to write words containing problem areas.

This we did and decisions were made in the following way. Where Chestnut and Street spelled words the same way, we agreed to use that spelling convention. Where they came up with different spelling, for example, the use of *d* versus *rr*, representing the tap, they reached a consensus in each case. Usually, it was after trying out a few more words with the same phoneme.

At the conclusion of the meeting, although a satisfactory consensus had been reached, it was decided that another meeting with more Gooniyandi people still needed to take place, so that they could be made aware of the changes, have a chance to voice their opinions, and endorse the 1990 orthography. In the light of this intention and in view of the potential for more changes as writers learn more about writing Gooniyandi, the 1990 orthography should be regarded as provisional.

Accordingly, no materials have yet been published in this latest orthography. There are, however, encouraging signs that it is acceptable to at least one group of speakers. A draft version of the Gooniyandi wordbook in the 1990 orthography has been well received by another two speakers who are English literates. One commented, "It's easy to read the words. Yes, it's written right."

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