

# An orthography chosen by those who speak Gooniyandi

by Joyce Hudson

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After 15 years of working at Fitzroy Crossing with Walmajarri people, and recently with Kriol people also, I was thoroughly convinced of the value of the linguistic-based orthographies currently in use for writing Aboriginal languages. These orthographies have proved to be practical for those adults whose initial literacy is in a traditional language.

However, over recent years several incidents caused me to reconsider. The first, was a report I heard of comments made by an Aboriginal linguist at the Aboriginal Languages Association meeting in 1982. I understand she said that Aboriginal languages should be immediately readable by Aborigine bilinguals [in English], without a special literacy course. Although the Walmajarri representatives at the meeting defended the Walmajarri orthography in private, the report of this criticism raised the question in my mind as to whether we linguists are indeed the best judges of orthographies.

In the last three years, I have had contact with Aborigines in the Fitzroy Crossing area who have been through the school system and who wanted help to write their own or their parents' languages. Some sounds caused difficulty for all and by guiding them to use the Walmajarri orthography as a basis, I found they were confused and soon stopped trying. The phonemes in question are the alveolar central consonant written as *rr* and the high back vowel written as *u*. Of course, other phonemes with no equivalent in English are also a problem.

(1986). *Notes on Literacy*, 49.

The argument is often raised by linguists that people can learn to use these symbols with a little help, and that is certainly true. I know many who have learned the system and are happy with it. But, I support the view that if Aborigines have mastered English literacy, then they should be able to pick up material written in their own language and have reasonable success at reading it.

Early in 1983, when I was asked to help develop a Gooniyandi language revival programme at Yiyili Aboriginal Community School, I decided that I could not impose the usual linguistically-approved orthography on these people. I wanted to give them a chance to choose something else. An orthography was already prepared for the Gooniyandi language, based on the Walmajarri orthography. I have no fault to find with it and the materials left at the school were most helpful.

By encouraging a different orthography, I realized that I would be opening myself to the criticism of fellow linguists. Several things gave me courage to go ahead in spite of this:

1. We are dealing with an Aboriginal language, so the decisions for writing it should be made by Aborigines from that language group. It is not always easy to find people who know a traditional language and are also educated well enough in English to be able to understand the issues of orthography choice. This was one of the difficulties in 1968, when we selected the orthography for Walmajarri.
2. Gooniyandi is the language of a small number of people, probably not more than 150. Of these, most do not use it for everyday conversation anymore. At Yiyili, I have observed that Kriol is the language of the community, and even those who are able to speak Gooniyandi use Kriol to communicate with the majority. This being the case, we cannot expect to see a large literature develop in Gooniyandi; in fact, all written materials will most likely emanate from the school programme at Yiyili. Therefore, a large volume of literature was not at stake, if the chosen orthography did not prove suitable.
3. Those who speak Gooniyandi, but have not had the opportunity of literacy, are generally older and are not likely to learn to read in Gooniyandi now. So, the future readers of this language will all approach it via English literacy. For them to have to be taught by an outsider, in order to read their community language, could only put them at an unnecessary disadvantage.
4. Yiyili Aboriginal Community School, as an independent school, is able to make decisions about their language programme without reference to outside organizations, as would be the case in a government school programme. Also, there is no other Gooniyandi language programme in progress which needed to be considered.

These factors meant that we, on the Yiyili staff, were in an ideal position to test an alternative orthography. At a community meeting with representatives of all Gooniyandi speaking groups, it was decided to appoint two people as a committee to help work out details about spelling. Both people chosen for the committee are fluent in English, Walmajarri, and Kriol, as well as Gooniyandi, and they are literate in English and Walmajarri. Both received primary school education in the Fitzroy Crossing area and later spent time in Perth. In the past, one of these people has worked with other linguists who have gathered Gooniyandi data for analysis. Neither is from the Yiyili Community, where the language programme is in progress, and neither is currently living in this community. At the same meeting, two

women from Yiyili were chosen to be the final authorities on questions relating to dialect, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar.

The orthography committee was encouraged to choose the symbol they preferred for each phoneme, and sometimes the choices were surprising. Most of 1983 was taken up with making these decisions and testing them. The following chart is the orthography which the committee chose and which now is in use:

### Consonants

	Bilabial	Dental	Alveolar	Retroflex	Alveopalatal	Velar
Stops	b	th	d	<u>d</u>	j	g
Nasals	m	nh	n	<u>n</u>	ny	ng
Laterals	-	lh	l	<u>l</u>	ly	-
Centrals	-	-	d	r	-	-
Semivowels	w	-	y	-	-	-

### Vowels

Short	i, a, oo
Long	ii, ar, oo

## Glides

\*iyi, ayi, \*oo, awoo

\*Materials in use in the school, in 1983, did not require use of these glides so they were not tested.

There are potential problems of underdifferentiation in three areas:

- d is used for both alveolar stop and the central consonant
- oo is used for both short and long high back vowels, as well as the glide
- The ng (velar nasal) and ng (alveolar nasal plus velar stop) are differentiated by placing a period between them [ n.g ] for the latter

From observing the children's speech and attempts to use Gooniyandi, it seems very likely that, in the future, the distinction between the retroflex and alveolar series will be lost. The choice of symbol for writing the retroflex series is not likely to have any effect on this as, already, the contrast is not perceived clearly by young people in oral work. In Kriol, which is the children's first language, retroflexion appears to be more allophonic than contrastive. However, use of one symbol for two phonemes [ d and oo ] could contribute to the loss of these distinctions in future Gooniyandi, if the literature becomes the main means of preserving the language.