



THE LANGUAGE PARTY

A documentary film. Duration: 60 min.

by Natalia Laska and Fiona Strain (ASE).

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SYNOPSIS

A white linguist needs Miriwoong speakers to join his 'Language Party' in Kununurra, East Kimberley, but there seems to be only a handful of those who know words in this critically endangered language. With the help of a Yolŋu mentor, the quest for storytellers turns into a wild goose chase through town camps and ancestral lands. The key to language revitalisation is yet to be discovered.



SHORT SYNOPSIS

While searching for Miriwoong language speakers to put on a public storytelling show in Kununurra, the linguist and his team must follow rather than guide Indigenous people.

WHAT THE FILM IS ABOUT

The documentary film 'The Language Party' shines a spotlight on Indigenous languages, challenging the notion that endangered languages are only for academic documentation. By creatively integrating one of the oldest world languages into the contemporary landscape of Kununurra, the film inspires a new generation of Miriwoong speakers and fosters respect among the mainstream Australian audience.

MESSAGE OF THE FILM

This documentary film aims to address the invisibility of language owners and captures moments of empowerment of the language users. The Miriwoong language community is seen as interested in preserving its oral culture as well as in the extra-linguistic outcomes of having a good time and staying strong.

THE FILM

The film takes us to Kununurra, a small town that serves as both a gateway to the epic tourist destinations of the Eastern Kimberley and the home of the Miriwoong people and their language, which is classified as critically endangered. As linguists, the experts declared, this one of the world's oldest languages, has lost its fluent users.

However, some in Kununurra still use the language and believe it is essential to their identity and safety, as it is in the Miriwoong language that explains the laws of nature and nurture. Those rules will be explained in the film by the most senior Miriwoong elders, Joolama Newry, Ben Ward and Agnes Armstrong, whose portraits are on the mural that everyone can see when entering Kununurra. Steven Bird, the white linguist, had the idea to make The Language Party in Kununurra, but it did not immediately impress them. To be a storyteller, one needs to speak good language, or to overcome the shame of language loss, or the fear of speaking incorrectly.



The camera follows the relationship building between Miriwoong elders and their families and Steven, who claims that his Language Party will become ‘a source of pride and strength’ for the Miriwoong people. All they have to do is join the Party and share stories (in the language) with (mainly) a white audience, who will pay for a ticket for this ‘heart-opening experience.’

Recruitment for The Language Party begins at the Language Centre, Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring (MDWg *Mirima, place for talking*), a small building shaded by boabs, on the outskirts of Kununurra, run by Knut Olawsky, his team of linguists, and the Miriwoong ‘language workers’. Like most language ‘rescue missions’ in Australia, MDWg is funded by the Australian Government and must adhere to mainstream (white) methodologies, bureaucratic deadlines, and policies, which are often tied to the electoral cycle. As a result, short-term, fixed-cost, tangible outcomes, such as language documentation, recordings or dictionaries are priorities. Yet Miriwoong people see their country as a source of language and would rather do ‘field trips’ than sit in a classroom.

In MDWg, Steven meets ‘language workers’ Glennis, Sylvia and Che who, among others, navigate both classrooms of the Centre or schools, and Miriwoong’s open dictionary under the sky, where students can see, touch, and connect to where language sits.



Steven invites his friend, student and mentor, Ian Gumbula, a Yolŋu Elder, to come to Kununurra and share with Miriwoong people his philosophical know-how of passing on knowledge such as language and leadership. Ian's method is based on recognising three components of cross-generational dialogue: Märr (willingness), Dayaju (feeling), and Bälpara (supporting).

The holy grail of 'keeping language strong' depends on a simple yet the most challenging task: passing language on to children, preferably at home, to create new speakers.

The film does not directly draw a connection between the current language loss and the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in both incarceration and incidents of domestic violence in Kununurra. However, between the lines of many statements by Miriwoong elders, we hear the cry for change when young family members appear in family photos wearing prison uniforms.

The Kimberley region consistently records the highest imprisonment rates in Western Australia. Ben Ward, a Miriwoong senior leader, states that language enables youth to replace gang identity with traditional knowledge and a sense of belonging. Ben believes that language connects with people who exist now and those who have existed in the past, who still hold the power to heal the minds of speakers, especially young ones, who are often torn between the Indigenous traditions and modern life.



The film's characters, in their own words and through spontaneous acts of truth-telling, present their own version of events that led to language loss. Events such as the construction of the Ord River Diversion Dam, which began in late 1960 and was officially opened three years later by Prime Minister Robert Menzies. The dam scheme benefited water-thirsty crops such as cotton, rice, and sugarcane. The business model induced by white people brought annihilation of the vast ancestral land of Miriwoong and Gajerrong people. The dam, once introduced, has submerged ceremonial, burial and rock art sites, representing the gathering places of language exchange and practice.

In the film, Ben Ward and Joolama also describe the devastating impact of public or missionary schools, which have successfully promoted the elevated status of Standard Australian English. We hear about systemic shaming, psychological and physical punishments, as well as other 'soft methods' like language testing and educational curricula, which were all de facto forms of promoting monolingualism and stopping networking with and inside of Indigenous communities.

THE FILM'S CENTRAL QUESTION

Every year, hundreds of projects are implemented by the Australian government in Indigenous communities that fail due to little or no concern for Indigenous ways of thinking and doing. The central question of the film explores the knowns and unknowns of possible engagement with the Indigenous community. When the film's protagonist, the linguist Steven Bird, declares his willingness to 'unlearn' his old ways of thinking and to give up on control, a world of new possibilities unfolds.

The film explores possible change in thinking about power, decision-making, and the measurement of success or failure in the space of Indigenous language revitalisation. The breathing parts of an unscripted, vastly observational documentary give an insightful case study. Knut Olawsky, the head of the

Kununurra Language Centre, once commented that many Miriwoong people had grown accustomed to film crews coming to ask about ‘dying language’ and offering them five minutes to speak to the camera. Miriwoong elders developed a routine of simply asking the camera person, ‘What do you want me to say?’ In this documentary, the filmmaker is following, not leading, and listening with no time pressure. As a result, the audience can witness how fragile, unpredictable, yet fascinating is the process of relationship-building in a space shaped by language and cultural differences.

THE MAIN THEMES

Those Miriwoong people who agreed to join The Language Party demonstrated their ADAPTABILITY in navigating complex and ever-changing communication methods with white Australians. The film crew recognises that the Language Party is a hybrid, de facto integrating Indigenous oral culture into a theatre-like setting with an audience made of Westerners - strangers, not family or kin.

The film focuses on RESILIENCE in the context of language loss and subsequent trauma, which didn’t affect the Miriwoong shared sense of a distinctive identity. The film also advocates an understanding of the country and its natural settings, where, for Miriwoong people, the language provides access to places of special cultural significance. Accordingly, to Miriwoong people, the country can recognise the language of its traditional custodians. Those members of the film audience who are not so spiritually inclined can just enjoy the ride across the Kimberley landscape and connect with Miriwoong people through a shared appreciation for the natural beauty.



MIRIWOONG LANGUAGE

The Miriwoong language is classified as nearly extinct, indicating that the only remaining active speakers are members of the grandparent generation and older. It is stated by academics that all traditional Indigenous languages in Australia are at risk of ‘language shift’ that results in people abandoning their original vernacular language in favour of English.

In recent years, language revitalisation has shifted from a framework defined by words and grammatical rules extracted from native speakers to a more holistic approach of ‘the empowerment of language users, or potential language users, rather than the language per se’.

Miriwoong still puzzles linguists as they try to unpack its grammatical rules and syntax. Knut Olawsky learned to speak Miriwoong and claims it is vastly more complex than English.

By incorporating the linguist's expertise, the film opens a window for its audience to visit a diverse community of linguists. The film protagonist, Steven Bird, the linguist, is shown as he wants to shift his modus operandi from strict data collection and preservation to the Indigenous way of ‘keeping language strong’. The other linguist, Knut Olawsky, is focusing on writing Miriwoong’s Descriptive Grammar. The film also features Frances Kofod, a linguist, who

moved to Kununurra in the 60s and has remained there, becoming the only fluent non-indigenous Miriwoong speaker and highly critical of linguists' declaring that the Miriwoong language is dead.

Away from the linguists busy with their 'archaeological work', the Miriwoong man, Joolama, is considering creating new words to describe modernity. For example, the word for an airport, which Joolama assures: "It's going to be a long, and related to one of our birds, that can fly fast and land suddenly..."

THE PROTAGONISTS

Steven Bird, a former president of the Association for Computational Linguistics, used to focus on "data-driven" and purely technological exploration of speech or language systems. He has conducted fieldwork on endangered languages across various regions, including Australia (Top End), West Africa, South America, Central Asia, and Melanesia. Today, as a research professor at Charles Darwin University, Steven collaborates with Indigenous leaders and directs the Top End Language Lab. Steven advocates moving away from exploitative, data-extractive methods and instead empowering speech communities through participatory design. He wants to unlearn his old working methods.

Ian Gumbula, a Yolŋu elder who grew up on Elcho Island, is a qualified teacher who has worked in education in Batchelor and Ngukurr. Ian speaks 16 dialects of Arnhem Land. He claims that 'different languages support each other. Ian's strength lies in facilitating communication between the 'gardiya' (a white man in Miriwoong) and the Miriwoong community. He knows when and how to connect with locals, and what it means to do things 'Indigenous way', including entering their spiritual dimensions.



The film features members of the Miriwoong community:

David/Joolama Newry, the Senior Language and Culture Consultant and director of MDWg and the Kimberley Interpreting Service, where he initiated a study on translating for the local health and justice sectors. Reluctant at the beginning, Joolama gradually took the role of The Language Party's de facto producer. He requested the firepits to provide storytellers with a source of light that has always assisted Indigenous yarn sharing. His reserved approach to language appropriation stems from his 'old way' of teaching language, which requires "only listening at the beginning, not talking."

Ben Ward – the senior Miriwoong leader, once a car mechanic, then a stockman at Carlton Station, and a practising nurse at Ord Valley Health Service, later in his life became a painter and designer of the Nexus Airlines logo. In 1998, Ben launched and secured the native title claim, 'Ben Ward v State of Western Australia', upon his request, supported by traditional evidence in the Miriwoong language and law. In the film, Ben is always on fire when he talks about Miriwoong history and language trauma. His often bitter comments about European settlers on Miriwoong country are sweetened by his energising

humour. ‘Miriwoong is a spoken language, not written. Writing is for people with dementia, those who can’t remember...’



Darrgayi/Rozanne Newry – mother of four. She was the first in the community to graduate as a Miriwoong language teacher. She wants to make Miriwoong children talk; “You just go slow with them and teach by showing – our words that are in the bush, or with fish names.” Darrgayi fears the growing gap between the town's language and the community's, as the town imposes the Western reality of sending elders to old folks’ homes and halting the transfer of language.

Glennis Galbat-Newry, has a certificate from the Bachelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education and a Diploma of Arts in Language Study. Glennis authored two children’s books on Miriwoong animals. Her songs have lots of repetitions to attract children – “Everyone, everyone. Men, women, children – we all speak Mirawoongan”. Glennis brings to the film a timeless

connection with Miriwoong ancestors, as she talks to ‘old people’ - spirits, or points at certain types of trees, that belong to shared generational medicinal knowledge. Miriwoong songs and rhymes come naturally to Glennis, but she sometimes fears if she remembers the appropriate cultural codes.

Agnes Armstrong – ‘a senior language consultant’. Her Miriwoong is stronger than her English. Agnes stays close to the Waringarri Arts Centre, where she paints and conducts a Welcome to Country ceremony whenever buses of tourists arrive.



Che Kelly – one of the youngest language workers MDWg. He just completed the Aboriginal Languages Teacher Training course. Barefoot in the classroom, Che is teaching Miriwoong to kids at the East Kimberley College. Miriwoong, after thousands of years of being spoken only by its users, is now becoming the subject of a dictation-and-marking system.

Sylvia Simon, injured in a serious domestic violence incident, lost one eye, and despite that and her advanced age, she remains one of the most dedicated language workers. She declared that she wants to share her Pelican Story at The

Language Party. Either shyness or other issues prevented her from joining, possibly including the complex rules of ownership of animal totems that Miriwoong people often dispute.

Marcus Hall, a musician and stockman, knows Miriwoong through his mother. He also speaks Murrinh-patha (literally 'language-good'), estimated to be spoken by over 2,000 people. Marcus takes us to his ancestral land to show the ancestral lines of dreaming and the cattle station located there, which is bound to him through the lease and employment.



The film depicts the team of linguists and managers of MDWg - The Language and Culture Centre in Kununurra: Frances Kofod and Knut Olawsky, linguists working with the Miriwoong people in Kununurra, and speaking the language. Frances arrived in Kununurra in 1960 to record local languages. At that time, most of the Miriwoong people who had been living on the surrounding cattle stations had been relocated to the Mirima reserve and had requested the establishment of the Mirima Council to address the loss of their language and culture. The film will use some of Frances' 95 hours of audio recordings and

video files digitised from her Super VHS footage, some featuring the last Miriwoong and Gajirrabeng fluent speakers, such as Daisy Jandoony and Jimmy Paddy Moodi, who passed away just a couple of years ago.

Knut Olawsky, CEO and senior linguist of MDWg since 2005. Knut has published grammars of Indigenous languages from Ghana and Peru. He holds a PhD from the University of Düsseldorf.



THE STYLE OF THE FILM

Shots of the Kimberly region's natural beauty are intercut with images of present-day Kununurra, the largest town in Western Australia, with a population of over 5,000 people (almost 30 per cent of whom are Indigenous). The semi-urban living conditions of the Indigenous community are depicted in the film without embellishment. The film focuses on the environment and lifestyle as described by Miriwoong elders as often welfare-dependent, with youth more connected to YouTube content than their own skin names. The present social hub and cross-section of local languages (Miriwoong, Gija, or from Marrngu and Yappa groups) is located at White Gum Park, featuring a concrete skate

ground in front of the IGA and Tucker Box shops. The local barramundi fish decorates the town's mural, in the same street-style graffiti as the Miriwoong elders, portrayed on the wall next to the petrol station. Those local Indigenous celebrities, Joolama, Ben Ward, and Agnes Armstrong, all became the stars - storytellers at The Language Party.

The filmmaker's point of view is sensed through hand-held camera sequences, and her voice occasionally prompts us. Steven addresses the camera as he shares an emotional reaction to something that has just happened. Sometimes Steven's emotional response, perhaps impassive, is not what the filmmaker expects, and she asks him for an account.



The film conveys its message through a visual acknowledgement of the holistic value of the Miriwoong language, which encompasses both its speakers and their environment. When the film characters claim that “The language was given to people by the land. Land owns the language”, we are directed to follow, see and touch Miriwoong lands and waterways. Guided by the traditional owners of the land and their language, we build our attachment to the place through the emotional power of personal memories and mythologies.



Through the juxtaposition of images and personal narratives, the audience participates in the construction of a widely shared meaning among Miriwoong people, who inseparably link their language and landscape. This observational documentary avoids the aura of detached objectivity, instead showcasing the personal involvement of all the makers in their shared effort to understand language as a source of identity embedded in geographical location. The story is told in chronological order, but when needed, it sidetracks to local history told by the Miriwoong people.

FILM so far:

Beginning in March 2025, Steven Bird and Ian Gumbula initiate seeking storytellers at MDW-g - the Language Centre. They also undertake visits to the homes of Miriwoong people and climb into land cruisers, load up with supplies, and head out into the country. From that point, the film builds emotional engagement around the question: What is The Language Party? Is it going to happen? Who will participate in it?

Over the course of subsequent visits to Kununurra, we move from one location to another, almost like intercutting between the chaser and the chased – we see how Steven attempts to explain what TLP is about, and how his initial project goes through the process of acknowledgement, with a dose of ambivalence from Miriwoong people.

What becomes clear is the Miriwoong people's expectation of being listened to before anything else. Steven and Ian acknowledge that the local 'first things first' takes them to the country, where people use their language, triggered by visual phenomena like water, rocks, or bush tucker, as well as natural sounds, connecting them with 'the Dreaming', indicating the beginnings and pathways to the future. The focus shifts from making The Language Party to building friendships and trust. What follows are trips to local supermarkets. Sharing food brings the act of listening to Miriwoong people yarn about their dramatic history and culture.



Along the way, we witness Steven's realisation that he needs to give up the habit of controlling his project. Until the very last minute, despite distributing fliers of the event, he wouldn't know who, if anyone, would appear at his Language Party.

In August, after the necessary preparations (the right type of slow-burning wood with little smoke, local music, dancers, and food) the Language Party is finally hosted by the Waringarri Aboriginal Art Centre. To Steven's surprise, this Language Party unfolds unlike any other, and accordingly to Miriwoong

storyteller's wishes, especially when the lights are turned off in the middle of the event. The audience is left in darkness with only 'tongues' of fire and language to listen. Only three of the Miriwoong speakers came forward to deliver their stories, but with unexpected content. Instead of light stories about animals and Miriwoong fables, their focus went straight to the jugular, expressing their anger about language loss due to European invasion. Miriwoong speakers revealed what was important to them in their own way. Ben Ward said after his storytelling – 'I am so happy to speak to white people in Miriwoong about what happened to the Miriwoong language – it makes me feel stable'. Steven accepted the Miriwoong narrative at The Language Party with respect and reverence. At the same time, he declared that he wants to make the Language party again, as he considers it an eye-opening learning process for everyone involved. The plan for 2026 covers additional visits to Kununurra. The aim is to hold a second Language Party, this time focused on youth participation. There is a possibility of organising the event at Ben Ward's community in Cockatoo Springs, a 45-minute drive out of Kununurra. The community has already been involved in "on-country" projects, and Ben expressed his personal agenda of promoting language among young people, especially those who are too often involved in dealing with local police.





DIRECTOR STATEMENT

Coming from Poland to Australia, I always perceive the Indigenous perspective as close to my skin. This is an Indigenous story that resonates with my own ancestors' tale of the loss of land and the safety of culture. I know that one thing that cannot be taken away from people is their distinctive identity, wrapped up in language. Standing with my camera in the middle of Miriwoong country, I was experiencing the generosity of its people, trusting that they would talk to me and open up to share personal stories for no other gain than to be listened to. My responsibility now is to make the film 'The Language Party' to amplify the Miriwoong people's testimonies about the language loss but also their resilience, often indicated by the resistance to the government-run language revitalisation programs. I am going to use all the forces of cinema, such as images of Miriwoong's iconic country, but not manicured, to portray the drama of those who live in Kununurra now, as de facto refugees in their own country. All of that to capture the attention of the Australian audience and help them experience an important relationship-building process, enabling 'The Language Party' we should all do daily in our multicultural, linguistically diverse society.

STEVEN BIRD'S STATEMENT

In Australia, we find the most intimate possible relation between land and human language. The purpose of the film is to celebrate people who are keeping their indigenous languages strong. We want audiences to experience three things. First is to experience that language in Kununurra is inseparable from song and story, and the songs and stories, in turn, are inseparable from the shapes and features of the land.” Second is to experience the *safety of listening*: when we deeply listen to this country – its people, voices, wisdom – our common life is enriched, and we begin to heal our colonial past. Third is to experience what cultural survival looks like today in a remote Australian community. As these three experiences knit together, audiences come to realise that they have experienced Aboriginal Voice, and that far from being a threat, it is a gift for all.

AUDIENCE

This documentary is intended for non-Indigenous Australians employed specifically in "Indigenous-related work"; the exact number of those is not readily published in national summaries, though it is a significant sector. Spanning sectors like education, health, public administration, and community service. The film aims to reach decision-makers representing Western understandings of “country” and “language” and who routinely evaluate social programs by counting things.

Additionally, the film will aim to reach politically progressive theatregoers, interested in cultural diversity, while retaining unexamined paternalistic attitudes to First Nations people. Other audiences include indigenous people who would enjoy witnessing new respect from the dominant culture for local people's knowledge of the country.



ETHICAL ISSUES THAT FILM AIMS TO ADDRESS

The central issue for this documentary is the extent of mediation with the Indigenous protagonists during the making of both *The Language Party* and the documentary. The filmmaker is informed by Screen Australia Pathways and Protocols. All relevant points are addressed, including the recognition that Miriwoong people have their own unique considerations such as its internal cultural protocols and sensitivities, which are coming to light and being addressed.

Private lives of individuals (p22) – we are aware of entering private space, so people allowing us to do so will be presented with drafts of edited film assemblies to have a chance to see themselves on a screen.

Attention to interpretation vs presentation of real-life” (p23). The film’s strength lies in its presentation of diverse opinions expressed by the Miriwoong people. The film aims to capture their individual narratives describing historical facts, especially in relation to colonial perspectives. Each participant of the film has the right to authorise their own statements or revise them (with plenty of time), as we are not constrained by strict deadlines.

“The dances are wrong” (p24). The film works closely with the most senior leaders of the Kununurra Indigenous community, who are responsible for presenting their own culture, music and dance. All the archival footage that we are using is sourced from The Language Centre and approved for public display.

“Contact relevant organisation” (p29) We are guided and supported by both Kununurra-based the Language Centre, Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring (MDWg, *a place for talking*) and Waringarri Aboriginal Arts, the first wholly indigenous owned art centre established in Western Australia.

“It is not appropriate to assume that an Indigenous actor or crew member be responsible for the cultural integrity of the project” (p32) Yes, we are already discussing several issues, like the ownership of the story that was considered to be used at TLP, as potentially involving the subject of the animal totem that can be claimed by other members of the community, or the person, who was not in the right state of mind to invite the camera to the culturally significant place at black rock waterfall. We are still collecting footage to be able to offer alternative choices and take the pressure off for those who can risk compromising on their cultural integrity.

“There should be Indigenous consultation and involvement in the post-production stages” (p. 38). Yes, for many reasons, like correcting mistakes or misrepresentations.

“Communities should be given the opportunity to view the film at the rough-cut stage” (p. 38). As we go, with the filming and editing of short sequences, we are sharing content with those who wish to take a look and comment. We gave several presentations of short sequences at individuals’ homes, at the Language Centre, or spontaneously in the car park to larger groups who expressed interest in taking a look.

‘shoot first, ask later’ practice – we ask before shooting, with the exception of public events.



THE LANGUAGE PARTY

At any Language Party gathering, storytellers speak in their mother tongue before interpreting into the common language. Language Parties have been held in Australia, Asia, North America, Europe, and Africa. Language Parties are a format for storytelling events in which people gather to share stories in their original languages, followed by interpretation into a common language.

The Makers:

Steven Bird – Professor, Top End Language Lab, Charles Darwin University.

Ian Gumbula – Yolngu mentor and PhD candidate.

Natalia Laska – director, writer, camera, sound, drone.

Fiona Strain – co-writer, editor.

Miriwoong people – Ben Ward, Joolama – David Newry, Glennis Galbat

Newry, Darrgay – Rozanne Newry, Che Kelly, Sylvia Simon and Agnes Armstrong and many others.

Music: Martin Tucker and Audio Network

