ASPECTS OF THE SOCIO-POLITICAL HISTORY OF NGUKURR (ROPER RIVER) AND ITS EFFECT ON LANGUAGE CHANGE

John Sandefur

INTRODUCTION¹

In this paper we will consider some of the social, political and historical factors which have been relevant to the decline of traditional languages and the rise of a modern² language in one particular Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory. The modern language, which developed out of the pidgin English lingua franca of the pastoral frontier (Dutton 1983, Harris 1984, Sandefur 1984), is Kriol; the community is Ngukurr.

Ngukurr grew out of an Anglican mission, officially known as Roper River Mission, that was established in 1908 by the Church Missionary Society [colloquially and hereafter referred to as CMS]. The settlement is situated on Aboriginal-owned land just inside the southeastern border of Arnhem Land. Ngukurr functions essentially as a private town, with access by non-Aboriginal people being restricted.

The Aboriginal population of the settlement has characteristically been variable, changing with the seasonal movements of people. In the past up to 50 per cent of the peak, wet season, population would move to cattle stations in the region during the dry season. Today the peak population is approximately five hundred, with movement being primarily directed towards a dozen outstations which have developed within a hundred kilometres of Ngukurr since 1977. Up to 60 per cent of the peak population may be away from Ngukurr during the dry season. Half of the population of Ngukurr is under sixteen years of age. Some twenty basically transient non-Aboriginal people also live in the settlement.

Ngukurr is a fairly isolated community. It is located some three hundred kilometres by road from its supply centre, Katherine, and is just over two hundred kilometres from the nearest town. The highway to the community can be cut during the wet season for up to six months.

The language most commonly used by Aborigines at Ngukurr today is Kriol. It was in the Ngukurr area that creolisation of the pidgin English mentioned earlier first took place, resulting in a deeper 'time-base' for Kriol at Ngukurr than at most other Aboriginal communities. The language in the Ngukurr area consequently shows signs of being more developed, and its

John Sandefur has been studying Kriol in the Northern Territory and other areas in which it is used since 1973. He is currently working on a translation of the Bible into Kriol with a team of Kriol speakers. He is a member of the Summer Institute of Linguistics.

¹ I am indebted to John Harris and Susanne Hargrave for their helpful comments in the preparation of this paper.

² I use 'modern' here in the sense of 'non-traditional' after the Aboriginal Languages Association [ALA]: "Aboriginal Languages shall mean Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island languages, traditional or modern (including Pidgins, Creoles and Aboriginal varieties of English)" (quoted from the ALA Newsletter, No. 1, April, 1981, page 1).

North Australia and the Roper River District.

speakers in general have a greater understanding of the nature and significance of the language. The second most common language spoken at Ngukurr is English. The only traditional Aboriginal language that is actively used by a significant segment of the community is Ritharrngu. Speakers of up to two dozen traditional languages, however, can be found at Ngukurr and many first-language Kriol speakers may have second-language command of one or more of these.

GENERAL SOCIO-POLITICAL BACKGROUND

Socio-political change at Ngukurr cannot be fully understood without reference to changing attitudes and changing policies in the wider Australian community. We will, therefore, briefly consider the broader background before examining the specific situation at Ngukurr.

The history of European-Aboriginal relations in Australia can be described (after Thiele 1982) as falling into three broad stages: neglect, direct control and indirect control. The stage of neglect was the long period of the conquest of the Aboriginal peoples and the gaining of control of their lands by Europeans. Much of this conquest was accomplished through gross brutality; some of it through the establishment of missions and government settlements. The conquest of Aboriginal peoples led in many cases to the demoralisation of those who survived the violence. Governments generally responded in the late 1800s and early 1900s to the problem of what to do with the demoralised remnants of Aboriginal civilisation by instituting 'protection' policies to 'smooth the dying pillow' of a race that was 'doomed to pass away', an approach that neglected to address itself seriously to the problems that dispossession of lands and maltreatment had produced.

The stage of neglect began to end in the late 1920s when Elkin and others became convinced that the protectionist policies should be replaced with policies based on the realisation that Aborigines may not die out. Largely in response to pressure from an informed public opinion, government policy was changed in 1936 with citizenship being the goal of an assimilation process. The new policy implied the development and welfare of Aborigines as citizens in contrast to the idea of the previous policy of protecting a dying race.

Under the new policy the people were materially 'cared' for, but their traditions, including languages, were neglected and even directly or indirectly suppressed. The implementation of this new policy, however, was interrupted by World War Two. After the war, details of the new welfare system through which the assimilation policy was to be implemented were finalized, with welfare procedures coming into operation in the early 1950s.

The implementation of the welfare system under the assimilation policy brought in the second stage of European-Aboriginal relations, that of direct control. During the 1950s the Commonwealth Government began to take an active interest in the running of remote Aboriginal settlements in the Northern Territory, with settlements being developed into 'spring-board' institutions for the purpose of preparing Aborigines for assimilation. Most government-sponsored activities were directed towards this end, with the traditional Aboriginal economy being further broken down under the pressure from institutionalisation, enforced English schooling, cultural domination and manipulation, and economic dependency.

During this period Aborigines became more vocal and politically involved, with many demanding equal rights and having the support of some non-Aboriginal groups. It was thus becoming increasingly difficult for the government to neglect Aborigines. In the Northern Territory a new social welfare ordinance in 1964 ended legal discrimination and resulted in the 'withdrawal of the whole superstructure of quite rigid controls' (Rowley 1972:406). The following year the government shifted the emphasis of its policy from one of active contempt for Aboriginal culture to one of toleration and respect. This shift in emphasis was the beginning of a move away from assimilation, which had been directed at the eradication of all vestiges of Aboriginal culture and traits, towards an integration policy which would allow the maintenance of Aboriginal culture and identity in a pluralistic Australian society. The Referendum of 1967 brought citizenship to Aborigines and they were now 'free' to integrate into the broader Australian society on supposedly equal terms with Europeans.

The third and most recent stage of European-Aboriginal relations, that of indirect control, officially came into being with the announcement in December 1972 of the self-determination policy of the newly elected Australian Labor Party. The ousted Liberal-Country Party had, in fact, been also slowly moving in that direction. In January 1972 the then Prime

Minister had stated that the government recognised the rights of individual Aborigines to effective choice about the degree to which and the pace at which they could come to identify themselves with the wider Australian society, and that the role of the government should increasingly be to enable the Aborigines to achieve their goals by their own efforts. These were important changes in the stated philosophy and objectives of policy and indicated that the Liberal-Country Party was abandoning its policy of integration in favour of allowing Aborigines to lead a life separate from other Australians. When the Liberal and National parties were returned to power in 1975, they continued to support a policy somewhat similar to that of the Australian Labor Party, although the label was changed to 'self-management' to reflect new interests now influential in government. Neither political party has acknowledged separate development for Aborigines as a goal, but it is clearly a consequence of the policies of self-determination and self-management.

These policy changes of the early 1970s have, in essence, only brought policy into line with reality, for the notion of separate development was implied in the establishment of remote Aboriginal settlements (e.g. see Elkin 1944:45). Implicit in these new policies is an acceptance on the part of the government that the integration of Aborigines, especially those in remote areas, into the wider European-dominated social and economic system is not possible or at least is likely to take a very long time. One of the effects of the new government approach is that the geographic isolation of remote Aborigines can be maintained. The government is reducing the likelihood of large-scale migration to towns and cities by raising physical living standards on settlements, promoting an ideology of self-determination and separate development, and influencing Aborigines to accept that separate development will bring benefits. Thus it is that the settlements that were originally established to promote assimilation are tending to have the opposite longterm effect.

PRE-EUROPEAN CONTACT: pre-1845

It is not known when nor whence the Aborigines first arrived to take up residence in the Northern Territory. Conservative scholarly opinion accepts at least 30,000 to 40,000 years for the occupation of Australia and much earlier dates than this are being suggested. Throughout those years there appear to have been several waves of migration and movement of languages. The evidence suggests that the linguistic mosaic pattern which existed when Europeans first entered Australia would have spanned only a small fraction of the total time that the first Australians had spent in the land, and it is not known when nor how that pattern developed (Powell 1982:13-15).

Today there are nine major traditional languages represented at Ngukurr (Mara, Wandarang, Alawa, Manggarai, Ngandi, Ngalakan, Nunggubuyu, Rembarrnga and Ritharrngu). Only one of these languages, as was pointed out earlier, is still spoken by a significant number of residents at Ngukurr. One of the major reasons why Ritharrngu is still actively spoken at Ngukurr is that the Ritharrngu people are the latecomers to Ngukurr, having first arrived in the 1940s in contrast to the other groups who have been represented at Ngukurr virtually from the year of its establishment.

Before the arrival of Europeans, contact with outsiders was virtually unknown by most of the Aborigines of the Ngukurr area. For two hundred years prior to the arrival of the first Europeans, however, Macassans from the southern Celebes had regularly visited the coast of

Arnhem Land in search of Australian trepang. Some of the ancestors of the Nunggubuyu, Wandarang and Mara people are likely to have had contact with the Macassans, while relatively few of the ancestors of the other Ngukurr Aborigines would have had direct contact with them, for the trepang industry was limited to the coastal areas and most of the Ngukurr Aborigines come from inland areas.

The period of Macassan contact appears to have had very little influence on the traditional life of the Aborigines in southern Arnhem Land even though a Macassan camping ground was located near the mouth of the Roper River. This phase of the history of the Ngukurr area had no direct effect on Kriol, although in one respect it did help set the stage for its arrival. Contact with the Macassans resulted in the development of a pidgin variety of the Macassans' language which functioned as a lingua franca between Aborigines of different linguistic groups (Urry and Walsh 1981). This 'Macassan' language was used not only among coastal Aboriginal communities, but also between them and some of the inland groups with whom they had contact. As a result, Macassan influences may have affected Aborigines who had never seen or met a real Macassar. Thus the mechanism of an Aboriginal lingua franca based on the language of an ethnically different people with whom the Aborigines were in contact was firmly established by the time Europeans arrived.

With the increasing European presence in the Northern Territory from the mid-1800s onwards, a knowledge of English became more important than a knowledge of the Macassan language. As a result, the Macassan language began to rapidly decline, being replaced by pidgin English.

EARLY EUROPEAN CONTACT: 1845-1908

The 'invasion' of the Ngukurr area by Europeans began in 1845 when the exploration party of Ludwig Leichhardt passed through the area. Two other exploration expeditions, that of Augustus Charles Gregory in 1856 and John McDouall Stuart in 1862, passed through the upper reaches of the Roper River. The next recorded contact was in 1867 when Frances Cadell made an examination of 'the country around the Roper' in a paddle-steamer.

Intensive contact began with the construction of the Overland Telegraph Line between Adelaide and Darwin in the early 1870s. A supply depot was set up at Roper Bar and a sizeable township, which reached a peak non-Aboriginal population at one stage of about three hundred, was established. By 1873 most of the Overland Telegraph Line construction workers had returned south, but the Ngukurr area never recovered from their presence. The region had been opened up, and for the next three decades the government attempted to establish a permanent non-Aboriginal presence in the area. When the Overland Telegraph Line party left Roper Bar, a small community of settlers continued to live there and a store was soon built to service the 'overlanders' from Queensland, who were mostly drovers, prospectors and outlaws, as well as several cattle stations that were established in the district. Throughout the 1870s and into the 1880s the Roper River valley served as the stock route for the tens of thousands of Queensland cattle which were being driven to the developing north. The pattern of relations that developed during this time was one of Aborigines harassing the drovers and killing the cattle with the pastoralists responding with punitive expeditions.

By 1890 the situation was beginning to stabilise. Many Aborigines had been killed during the previous two decades and others had retreated into areas in Arnhem Land where the pastoralists had not penetrated. Some of the Aborigines, however, had been 'pacified' and

remained in the area. They had come to recognise the superiority of European weapons and began to accommodate to the non-Aboriginal presence, with the few permanent settlers in the district beginning to 'employ' them.

This relatively peaceful state of coexistence, however, was shattered by the large cattle syndicate, the Eastern and African Cold Storage Company. This company leased the entire eastern half of Arnhem Land comprising some 50,000 square kilometres, and purchased several cattle stations in the area, thus taking in virtually all of the country belonging to the seven major tribes of Ngukurr. In 1903 the company engaged in what has been described as 'probably one of the few authenticated instances in which Aborigines were systematically hunted' (Bauer 1964:157) and without doubt 'the most systematic extermination of Aborigines ever carried out on the Roper' (Merlan 1978:87). For a time the company employed two gangs of ten to fourteen Aborigines headed by a European or a part-European to hunt and shoot 'wild blacks' on sight. The company went into liquidation in 1908, the year the CMS established its mission station on the Roper River.

It was in this environment that the process of creolisation, which resulted in the development of Kriol, first appears to have taken place. The development and spread of Kriol appears to have been encouraged by the disruption of Aboriginal residence patterns and the reduction of the Aboriginal population consequent on non-Aboriginal occupation and development of the region. Some of the language groups became too small to be viable, while the speakers of others became dispersed over a wide area. As a result, the communities which developed around the cattle stations consisted of speakers of several different languages, with Kriol developing as the lingua franca for daily interaction in this multilingual situation. Within a decade of the turn of the century, Kriol was the main language used by school children at Roper River Mission for talking among themselves.

OLD MISSION: 1908 – WORLD WAR TWO

A new period in the history of the Ngukurr area began with the establishment of the Roper River Mission in August 1908. The mission station was located about six kilometres down river from the present community of Ngukurr. It was destroyed by floods during the wet season of 1939/40 and a new mission station built on the site of the present community. The original mission station and the events associated with it are known as 'Old Mission' by the residents of Ngukurr, so this phase of the history of Ngukurr will be referred to as 'Old Mission'.

Old Mission was established in the midst of the stage of neglect when the colonising Australians were supposedly trying to 'smooth the dying pillow' of the dispossessed original Australians. The prime motives for establishing Old Mission were humanitarian and evangelical. From the beginning the mission was to have industrial and agricultural as well as educational and spiritual concerns. Almost immediately a school and dispensary were started, followed a short time later by agricultural and stock work.

When the missionaries arrived on the Roper in 1908, Kriol, as a pidgin, was well established in the area. The leader of the first Aborigines to come and take up residence at Old Mission, for example, was able to speak it. Just over a year after its establishment, there were at times over two hundred Aborigines at the mission, with an average of seventy being there regularly. Although the Aboriginal population fluctuated as Aborigines moved to and from Old Mission unpredictably, the average population remained fairly constant throughout its thirty year history, slowly rising from seventy to a hundred by the early 1940s. A significant

feature of the demography of Old Mission is that in spite of the marked fluctuation in population, there was a small number of Aborigines who lived more or less permanently at Old Mission almost from the time it was established. The oldest positively identified mother tongue speakers of Kriol are the first generation of the children who grew up at the mission station.

Throughout its existence there were never more than a handful of missionaries in residence at any one time at Old Mission, and most missionaries remained for only a few years. The attitude of the missionaries towards Aboriginal culture and the use of Aboriginal languages, and Kriol in particular, varied. The Anglican missionaries in the Northern Territory are reputed to have adopted a rigid policy from the start, with Aboriginal culture being negatively valued. The Aborigines were encouraged to model their behaviour in all respects fundamentally on that of the European missionaries: 'they could not change their physical appearance, but they could, and should, change all the rest' (Berndt 1961:23). The degree to which this was true, however, depended on the particular missionaries in question. Keith Langford-Smith, for example, one of the more advanced-thinking early missionaries, wrote in 1932 that he believed three things were absolutely essential to the mission: a knowledge of the native language, a knowledge of the Aborigines' laws and customs, and knowledge of their beliefs and myths.

A new mission constitution and policy, which was accepted in 1944 and in effect until 1962, stated that

all missionaries shall, in general, study a suitable native language, and native social customs and laws, for it is an essential part of the policy of the Society that the natives shall not be cut off from their own tribal life Great care must be taken not to adopt a merely negative attitude to things the missionary regards as evil.

This policy was re-emphasised in 1954 when a letter was circularised which stated in part that 'the missionaries (should) be informed that the Federal Council expects them to spend time in language study'. In practice, however, the policy of studying language and culture was not always carried out, in part due to 'busyness and a negative attitude'³.

In the early 1930s when Langford-Smith first arrived, Kriol was used by some of the missionaries. He later commented (personal communication) that 'most of the white men spoke pidgin [Kriol], which we picked up from the natives'. He also noted that 'all instruction was done in English or pidgin [Kriol]', and that 'many of [the Aborigines] were obviously unable to grasp the meaning of the English [church] service' (1935:59,57 respectively).

Some of the missionaries, however, did not look favourably upon Kriol and disciplined those who used it. Others, while also disapproving of Kriol, found that it was necessary to use it if communication was to take place. The official mission policy in 1944 stated that:

the use of pidgin English [Kriol] shall be discouraged, and in any region where it is impracticable to base educational work on the use of any one native dialect, English shall be used, and the native trained as far as possible to speak correct English.

³ Quoted from page 1 of a mimeographed report entitled "Church Missionary Society, Linguists' Conference, Groote Eylandt, 7-10 April, 1970".

It should be pointed out that this policy was in essence simply a reflection of the general milieu at the time. It was generally being advocated that 'protectors and missionaries need to know Aboriginal languages . . . [but] Pidgin-English is quite unsatisfactory . . .' for it is simply 'English perverted and mangled . . . ridiculous gibberish . . . childish babbling . . .' that 'is useless for the conveying of any but the most concrete of directions . . .' (Elkin n.d.:2, Strehlow 1947:xviii, and Elkin 1974[1938]:65 respectively). The language policy of the mission as a whole was much more favourable towards Aboriginal languages than was that of the government, which at that time was one of outright hostility directed towards the complete suppression and eradication not only of pidgin, but even of traditional Aboriginal languages (Wurm 1971:1034).

Traditional Aboriginal languages were still in active use throughout the Old Mission period. In the 1940s there was such a significant number of Nunggubuyu speakers that the minister set about learning the language and translated several books of the Bible into it, which were then published by the British and Foreign Bible Society. There was also an influx during the 1940s of Ritharrngu and Balamumu people from northeast Arnhem Land, although a few years later the Balamumu along with the Nunggubuyu people moved north to the newly established mission at Numbulwar.

WORLD WAR TWO

The history of the Roper River Mission itself can be divided into two parts, one before the 1950s and one after. The break between the two, although not abrupt, is very clear. The original mission station was destroyed in the 1939/40 wet season and rebuilt at a new location. The move to a new location was followed by World War Two, during which mission staff was minimal and normal mission life interrupted. Unlike the interruption of World War One, that of World War Two completely changed CMS activity in Arnhem Land. Life at Roper River Mission never settled back to what it had been.

The interruption of World War Two appears to have had several significant effects on social interaction which in turn had an impact on Kriol. To begin with, the war brought an influx of non-Aboriginal people into the north greater than ever before, with some 100,000 military personnel coming to the Northern Territory during the war. Thousands of servicemen were stationed throughout the region, manning lookout points all along the river. Children of mixed descent were evacuated to New South Wales and the mission operated with a skeleton staff. Hundreds of Aborigines were 'employed' around the service camps, many acting as guides for scouting parties and some serving on boats patrolling the waterways.

In addition, a number of special compounds were established by the Army along the Stuart Highway and Aborigines encouraged to settle in them. The compounds became meeting grounds for Aborigines from a diversity of languages and localities. The population of the compounds 'covered almost the whole gamut of contact experience, from old Darwin hands and jaded cattle station sophisticates to people associating with Europeans for the first time' (Berndt 1961:20). Although the compounds were established only 'for the duration', when they were disbanded most of the Aborigines did not return permanently to their traditional country. The compounds thus encouraged the use of Kriol and provided a major impetus for widespread creolisation.

Another significant effect of the war was that it gave Aborigines a freedom of movement which had never before existed. Relatively few Aborigines moved outside their traditional country before the war. In many respects, the war forced them to travel through strange

country and helped many overcome their fear of moving outside familiar regions. The compounds encouraged many Aborigines to make the social adjustments to a new set of relations with members of other tribes, whose languages and customs may have seemed entirely strange, as well as with non-Aboriginal people, on their first step in their journey away from their home area. This new freedom of movement enabled many Aborigines to enter into cattle droving. After the war, for example, many Ngukurr Aborigines spent months away from their own country on droving trips, travelling east across the Barkly Tableland deep into Queensland, or south to the railhead at Alice Springs, or west across the Northern Territory to the meatworks at Wyndham. Such droving continued throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s until roads were opened up and modern transport made droving uneconomical. Extensive droving may account for the knowledge of Kriol by some older Aborigines in communities well outside the Kriol language area, for a number of such Aborigines have said that they learnt Kriol when they had been 'up north' droving.

It appears, then, that the influx of people during the war accelerated the use of Kriol, and the establishment of new compounds and collections of Aborigines from a variety of language backgrounds brought about additional creolisation. The freedom of mobility and movement that the war brought stimulated the convergence of numerous varieties of pidgin and Kriol and increased the amount of inter-Aboriginal group communication that was dependent upon Kriol as a lingua franca. The effects of the war were not limited, of course, to the Roper River region but affected virtually the whole of North Australia.

CMS: WORLD WAR TWO – 1968

A number of factors combined to bring about extensive changes in Roper River Mission around the middle of the present century. In addition to the relocation in 1940 due to the destruction of Old Mission by floods and the interruption and the changes brought about by World War Two, there was a complete changeover in staff. By the early 1950s the break with Old Mission was complete. The Aboriginal residents of Ngukurr today generally refer to the pre-war days as Old Mission time, and the 1950s and 1960s up until the mission was turned over to the government as the CMS time. This phase of the history of Ngukurr will thus be referred to as 'CMS'.

The new government assimilation policy and welfare system provided the major impetus for a change in mission policy during the CMS time. In 1947 the various missions in the Northern Territory were urged to help implement the new government plan for the assimilation of Aborigines into the European-Australian way of life. They were encouraged to provide work for the Aborigines, pay wages and open shops so Aborigines could learn to run their own lives and their own communities within the framework of the missions. The government made promises of larger grants for capital buildings and approved personnel to help the missions carry out such programs.

CMS had few hesitations in backing the government's new approach. As a consequence of these initiatives, the non-Aboriginal staff at Ngukurr increased, a building program was instituted and CMS concentrated on educating and training Aborigines. By the mid-1950s a shop had been opened, electricity and water were reticulated to the homes of Aborigines and motion pictures were being regularly shown. In 1951 CMS began paying pocket money to Aboriginal workers and over the next few years Ngukurr began to operate on a cash economy, with Aboriginal workers being paid full wages by the end of the 1950s.

One of the effects the assimilation policy had was to influence more Aborigines to stay

permanently at Ngukurr. By the late 1950s most had become used to settlement life and had come to see many features of it as desirable, even necessary, and the average resident population rose to 250. The Aborigines had become permanent settlement dwellers unable to move easily back to a traditional way of life. This permanency resulted in a strengthening of the European-oriented activities and beliefs of the Aborigines that had been slowly developing at Ngukurr since 1908.

As was pointed out earlier, the official CMS language policy stated that missionaries were supposed to learn the language of the people, unless it was Kriol, in which case its use was to be discouraged. The government policy at the time was an English-only policy: Aborigines had to learn English and English had to be used in school. In spite of the government and official CMS policies, the CMS superintendent allowed the use of Kriol in school, for the only way to communicate with some of the children was with Kriol. The only way of initially communicating with children who were coming into the school for the first time, whether younger children at the pre-school level or older children from the bush at higher levels, was by using Kriol. It was the only language all the children knew, although some of them also knew a traditional language. Because Kriol was not recognised as a separate language, however, most Europeans thought CMS was treating the Aborigines as inferiors and exposing them to ridicule. It was generally thought that all they could speak was a 'bastardised' form of English and that they would therefore always be disadvantaged, which in turn would cause further cultural deprivation.

It was not the European teachers who mostly used Kriol with the children, but rather the Aboriginal 'monitors', as teaching assistants were then called. In 1951 the one teacher in the school was assisted by up to eight monitors, depending on the number of students. The student population in the early 1950s fluctuated from a low of about thirty during the dry season to a hundred during the wet season, and up to 150 if a group of Nunggubuyu people were in residence. The monitors were Aborigines who had been through school and could supervise a class once the teacher had outlined a particular exercise. All of the monitors used English in formal lessons but would use Kriol at other times. If the children did not understand the English, however, they would give an explanation in Kriol. They would often do this, not only when they were supervising the lesson, but also when the teacher was taking the lesson. When the Nunggubuyu people were in residence at Ngukurr, a monitor would do the same for them, but use Nunggubuyu instead of Kriol.

Kriol was also generally used by different staff in the daily church services. Those who took the time to prepare their lessons in Kriol received a good hearing, whereas everyone else generally did not. Even so, there was a general feeling among Europeans that to use Kriol was 'demeaning' to the Aborigines. Partly because of this, and partly because of the translation which had been done in the early 1940s, CMS initially tried to concentrate on the use of Nunggubuyu. As was noted earlier, however, most of the Nunggubuyu people shifted to the mission at Numbulwar when it was started in 1952. The minister subsequently shifted his focus to Ritharrngu, reasoning that the Ritharrngu group could only comprehend Ritharrngu while the others could understand English.

In the late 1960s a new minister arrived from Sydney. It was openly recognised by then that virtually all of the Aborigines spoke Kriol among themselves, so the new minister, the Rev. D.C. Woodbridge, set about making himself proficient in the language (Cole 1968 : 26). According to Sharpe (1982:44), the people specifically requested Woodbridge to learn Kriol and to preach in it instead of English. Percy Leske, however, who was at Ngukurr

LANGUAGE CHANGE AT NGUKURR (ROPER RIVER)

throughout most of the 1950s and 1960s, claims (personal communication) that the people had placed no extra demand on this particular minister: 'It was generally always implied by the people that they would appreciate things being done in Kriol. It would be much better. It would be more helpful.'

The 1960s brought a number of changes which affected the structure and administration of Ngukurr. Due in part to increasing difficulty in financing the operational activities of the settlement, CMS began planning to hand over control of the settlement to the government. CMS wanted to concentrate its resources on pastoral, evangelistic and educational work, with the government having the responsibilities of civil administration and political and industrial assimilation.

GOVERNMENT AND COUNCIL CONTROL: post-1968

Almost a decade before CMS pulled out of Ngukurr, an attempt to help the Aborigines take control of their own affairs was begun. This attempt was primarily through the establishment of a 'station' council that functioned as a consultative and administrative body for the running and development of the internal affairs of the settlement. It had sixteen members, consisting of the settlement superintendent as the chairman, seven people who were in charge of major sections of the workforce, and an equal number of Aborigines elected by the Aboriginal population of the settlement. Initially the council was composed of eight Europeans and eight Aborigines, but as Aborigines moved into positions of workforce oversight their number increased against the Europeans. This resulted in an automatic phasing of control to Aborigines.

This council, however, never successfully achieved full autonomy and authority as envisaged by CMS. Its failure to do so, in many respects, was due to historical circumstances. The council possibly could have become self-governing in a few years if CMS had not had to pull out due to lack of finances. When the handover took place, it was reported that Peter Nixon, the then Minister for the Interior, recognised the freedom the Ngukurr people had developed under CMS direction and said that the Ngukurr people should govern themselves. Unfortunately, however, the government ordinance on settlement regulations made no provision for self-government. The government officers who took control of Ngukurr had to abide by the existing government regulations which did not allow the council to continue developing in the direction it had been heading.

The Welfare Branch of the Northern Territory Administration therefore assumed control of the settlement in October 1968 and the Aboriginal residents found themselves dealing with an ill-prepared, and at times reluctant, remote government bureaucracy whose Ngukurr representatives tended to only stay for short periods of time.

About the time of the settlement handover, government policy had begun to swing away from enforced assimilation. When the handover took place, the Aborigines were expecting the government to act positively and decisively in filling the role CMS had vacated. The government, however, was no longer prepared to take the responsibilities that such action demanded. Government policy was increasingly favouring the handing over of responsibility for settlement affairs to Aborigines, but, at the same time, details for the implementation of such policy had yet to be formulated. As a result, government action on Ngukurr was characterised by vacillation and procrastination.

When the Australian Labor Party came to power in 1972, it adopted a policy of self-determination for Aborigines. This resulted in two major changes at Ngukurr. Over the next

few years there was a gradual withdrawal of non-Aboriginal staff, both physically and from positions of control. At the same time, a town council, which was essentially a continuation of the CMS station council, began to accumulate both power and authority over the modern institutional affairs of the community. The council took responsibility for many of the positions vacated by Europeans and employed Aborigines to fill them. Europeans who remained worked either directly for the council, filled advisory positions, or worked in the government office at Ngukurr until it was closed.

The town council gradually increased its control over settlement affairs and resources and by the second half of the 1970s had become the official ruling body of the settlement. The council by that time was all Aboriginal in composition, with the president functioning as both chairman of the council and superintendent of the settlement. Although all members, including the president, are elected by the Aboriginal residents of the community, the constitution requires that each of the seven major tribal groups have a representative on the council.

The current generation is the fifth growing up at Ngukurr. Its lifestyle is now structured in large part by the modern social institutions that were established, structured and, until recently, administered by Europeans. Originally, the Aboriginal population formed a community within the settlement, which was known colloquially as 'the village'. The settlement administration had little direct interference with the organisation of the village and vice versa. The village was relatively free to organise its internal activities as long as they did not conflict with Australian laws, government ameliorative efforts, or the economic organisation of the settlement.

The rapid changes which have taken place during the last decade in the sociopolitical and administrative structure of Ngukurr, however, have resulted in a lessening of the distinction between village and settlement. Physically this is indicated by the movement of part of the Aboriginal community out of the village into housing in the previously non-Aboriginal-only section of the settlement. Politically many residents of the village who previously had little influence upon the running of the settlement are now actively involved in setting and carrying out community policy.

These changes have also had a significant effect on the use of language. During the period of government control, the council functions were strongly under the domain of English. At the same time Kriol had very low prestige, being openly despised by some government officers. The government school is reputed as recently as 1972 to have abandoned a policy of punishing children who were caught speaking Kriol in school.

The changes in government policies and practices and the Aboriginalisation of most of the major social institutions at Ngukurr during the 1970s have resulted, not in more English being brought into the village, but in more Kriol being brought into the administrative domains of the settlement. The language which used to be confined primarily to the village [i.e. Kriol] has now been taken into virtually all levels of settlement administration, and issues which were previously considered to be mainly of non-Aboriginal interest and thus discussed in English, are now interpreted to be of Aboriginal interest and discussed in Kriol. This does not mean, however, that Kriol has totally taken the place of English throughout Ngukurr. Some of the modern social institutions, such as the clinic, are still under direct control of a local non-Aboriginal administrator. Even though the administrator may respect the fact that English is not an effective medium of communication with a large percentage of the Aboriginal population at Ngukurr and may encourage the use of Kriol by the Aboriginal

staff, the mere presence of a non-Kriol-speaking European in an administrative position demands the use of English. Even those institutions which have been handed over to local Aboriginal control are not independent of non-Aboriginal interlocutors and the resultant pressure to use English.

GOVERNMENT POLICY AND ITS EFFECT ON LANGUAGE USE

The changes in government policy over the years have significantly affected the use of language. The pressure under the assimilation policies was for Aborigines to become, in essence, black-skinned Europeans. This meant that Aboriginal language skills were undesirable, English skills were a pre-requisite, and multi-lingualism was in no way to be encouraged. Increasing involvement on the part of the government in settlements and the enforced schooling of children for the purposes of assimilation, which was often accompanied by dormitory or hostel living conditions, rapidly boosted the rate of traditional language decline and inadvertently encouraged creolisation. Kriol was closer to English than traditional languages, and in that respect Kriol represented a move towards the goal of Anglicisation. At the same time, however, Kriol was almost universally considered to be a pathological development of English which needed to be eradicated. Many Kriol speakers themselves viewed Kriol in this way and saw it as a hindrance to achieving acceptance in the broader European-Australian society.

The pressures which favour movement in the direction of English are essentially the same pressures which have long favoured movement away from traditional languages. Anglo-Australians have a long tradition of an English monolingual mentality which they have consistently tried to impose on Aboriginal-Australians. The imposition of this monolingual tradition became institutionalised in the assimilation policies of the post-war period. The resultant Europeanisation has meant a decline in language facility for most Aborigines rather than an extension or development of it. The multilingualism characteristic of older Aborigines is noticeably lacking in younger Aborigines, for the pressure to assimilate encouraged the development of an English-only linguistic competence. Generally speaking, this pressure, when institutionally applied to speakers of traditional languages in much of North Australia, resulted in the acquisition of Kriol by those speakers. The pressure was also applied, however, to speakers of this 'bad English' (i.e. Kriol) in an effort to move them closer to 'proper English'.

Many Kriol speakers have responded to that pressure by 'moving up' to speaking so-called 'proper' English, but with relatively few exceptions they have continued to speak Kriol. The European educational establishment at Ngukurr has been teaching English and in English for some seventy years, or in Aboriginal generational terms, for four generations. Many of the Ngukurr people who have been through that educational system can speak and read English, but all of them also continue to speak Kriol in their home environment. The assimilation policies of the 1950s and 1960s failed to 'eradicate' Kriol.

Aboriginal-European relations in Australia have always been characterised by separation and European domination. At Ngukurr there was a dichotomy between the village and the settlement, between traditional and modern activities. The village was an Aboriginal domain, while the settlement was a non-Aboriginal domain. The same basic division and domination applied to Kriol and English, both of which have been present at Ngukurr since its establishment in 1908, Kriol in the Aboriginal domain, and English in the non-Aboriginal domain. Use of the two languages followed much the same general pattern as the social interaction of

Aborigines and Europeans. When Aborigines moved out of the village and into the settlement, they moved from an Aboriginal domain into a non-Aboriginal domain. This move required them to switch from Kriol to English, at least as regards speaker intent for those who lacked English competence.

The result of assimilation at Ngukurr, following on the heels of forty years of missionising, was a community of Aborigines who were European-oriented in many of their activities and beliefs, but who had just as obviously maintained many of their traditions. By the early 1970s they had developed a consciousness of community, a feeling of 'Ngukurrness', and in response to European domination, a non-traditional sense of Aboriginality. Kriol, a language which was neither traditional nor European, functioned as an identity marker, being used to indicate the non-traditional group consciousness and the Aboriginal versus non-Aboriginal dichotomy.

Language is a critical element of group identity even in speakers of low prestige language varieties. By the end of the 1960s, in spite of strenuous efforts on the part of the government, as well as linguists, anthropologists and the general public, the Kriol speakers at Ngukurr were still persistently holding on to their Kriol. With the implementation in the 1970s of new government policies which emphasised Aboriginal identity, the strength of Kriol appears to have been made even more secure.

Under the new policies where an Aboriginal is allowed to stress his Aboriginality if he so desires, it is almost imperative for him to have control of a means of linguistic Aboriginal identification. For many Aborigines, primarily those who speak Kriol as their mother tongue, Kriol is beginning to serve that function. Kriol is no longer being seen as a hindrance to becoming a fully acceptable Australian. Instead, it is being seen as a necessity for linguistically displaying and maintaining one's Aboriginality. As a result, not only are publicly expressed negative attitudes towards Kriol by Kriol speakers decreasing, but a number of Aborigines are now actively seeking to raise the status and prestige of Kriol as a legitimate Aboriginal language.

Present government policies are reducing the likelihood of large-scale migration of Aborigines to towns and cities. This in turn is reducing the pressure for Europeanisation and Anglicisation on Aborigines as a whole, although in a sense, by taking over modern administrative and operational responsibilities, a more sophisticated form of Europeanisation is being thrust by circumstances on the ruling elite in Aboriginal communities. For the vast majority of Aborigines, however, the Aboriginalisation policies are strengthening the social dichotomy between Aboriginal and European. One of the main effects of 'Aboriginalisation' on Kriol speakers is the strengthening of the sociolinguistic dichotomy between Kriol and English. For an increasing number of Kriol speakers, their language is no longer bastardised English, nor is it simply creolised English. For many it has become a language in its own right, a language related to English, but a language which is at the same time distinct from English.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bauer, F.H. *Historical geography of white settlement in part of Northern Australia, Part 2, The Katherine-Darwin region*. Division of Land Research and Regional Surveys. Divisional report no. 64/1. CSIRO, Canberra, 1964.
- Berndt, C.H. 'The quest for identity: the case of the Australian Aborigines', *Oceania*, 32(1), 1961:16-33.
- Cole, Keith. *A short history of the C.M.S. Roper River Mission, 1908-1968*. Melbourne, 1968.
- Dutton, Tom. 'The origin and spread of Aboriginal pidgin English in Queensland: a preliminary account', *Aboriginal History*, 7(1), 1983:90-122.
- Elkin, A.P. 'Understanding the Australian Aborigine', no date [c.1940-1950], MS.
- . *Citizenship for Aborigines*. Sydney, 1944.
- . *The Australian Aborigines*. Sydney, 1974 [1938].
- Harris, John W. 'Language contact, pidgins and the emergence of Kriol in the Northern Territory: historical and theoretical perspectives'. Ph.D. thesis, University of Queensland, 1984.
- Langford-Smith, Keith. *Sky Pilot in Arnhem Land*. Sydney, 1935.
- Merlan, Francesca. '“Making people quiet” in the pastoral north: remeniscences of Elsey Station', *Aboriginal History*, 2(1), 1978:71-106.
- Powell, Alan. *Far country: a short history of the Northern Territory*. Melbourne, 1982.
- Rowley, C.D. *Outcasts in white Australia*. Ringwood, 1972.
- Sandefur, John Richard. 'A language coming of age: Kriol of North Australia'. M.A. thesis, University of Western Australia, 1984.
- Sharpe, Margaret C. 'Aboriginal education policies prior to 1973 with special reference to language', in Bell, Jeanie ed. *Language planning for Australian Aboriginal languages*. Alice Springs, 1982:36-46.
- Strehlow, T.C.H. *Aranda traditions*. Melbourne, 1947.
- Thiele, Steven. *Yugul, an Arnhem Land cattle station*. Darwin, 1982.
- Urry, James and Michael Walsh. 'The lost “Macassar language” of North Australia', *Aboriginal History*, 5(2), 1981:91-108.
- Wurm, S.A. 'Language policy, language engineering and literacy: New Guinea and Australia', in Sebeok, Thomas A. ed. *Current trends in linguistics 8: linguistics in Oceania*. The Hague, 1971:1025-1038.