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Another language faces sunset in dead centre

Simon Kearney, Finke | September 20, 2007

BROWNIE Doolan is a wiry former tracker who is at least 90 years old and the final guardian of an almost dead language, Lower Arrernte.



Brownie Doolan, the final guardian of an almost dead language, at his home in Finke. Picture: Richard Cisar-Wright

His leathery hands say as much as his lively face and easy laugh, but they have not been enough to save the language he spoke as a child - his life as a stockman, police tracker and railway worker took him away so his children were raised speaking another language, Luritja, their mother's tongue.

Mr Doolan is the only person left who can speak the language of his mother's and grandmother's people, who moved between Oodnadatta and Finke, 430km south-east of Alice Springs, 100 years ago.

Astonishingly, his position as the lone speaker of a native tongue is not unique in central and northern Australia, which has just been declared the most linguistically endangered area in the world.

A group of American linguists working in conjunction with National Geographic have listed the expanse of traditional Aboriginal Australia, where dozens of languages are spoken by just one or two people, as the world's most endangered language zone.

David Harrison of Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, the project's co-director, said there were 6992 recognised distinct languages worldwide.

On average, one language vanishes every two weeks, often as its last elderly speakers perish, he said.

The linguists who visited Australia over the past few months, said Aboriginal Australia had 153 languages considered endangered. A region of central South America covering Ecuador, Peru, Colombia, Brazil and Bolivia was second on the list of "hot spots," with indigenous languages being overrun by Spanish, Portuguese or other indigenous languages.

Renowned central Australian linguist Gavan Breen said all the remaining Aboriginal languages in the Northern Territory were endangered, with only about 50 languages out of the 250 used at the time of white settlement still in use. "Most of them have died out altogether," he said.

Since 1967, Mr Breen has concentrated on saving languages for posterity.

Through recording and talking to Mr Doolan over the years, Mr Breen has been able to build a dictionary of Lower Arrernte.

"In a language like that, you would be lucky to get 100 words, I've got about 1000 in that one," he said. "It's quite a bit different to the other Arrernte."

Various forms of Arrernte are spoken by several thousand people across central Australia, largely in the south-west corner.

Mr Breen said he knew of only one other recording of Lower Arrernte in the 1960s.

"He's about the best you could get," Mr Breen said of Mr Doolan. "I'm sure there's other people who know some words and he's not a full speaker of the language, but he could hold a full conversation in it."

Mr Doolan smiles wryly when you mention Lower Arrernte to him. "Lower Arrernte, that's my language. When I was a kid, it was my own language," he said.

His mother, father and grandmother spoke the language, which originated south of Finke near a station called Mt Dare, where Mr Doolan was born and raised and began working as a stockman in 1925.

Despite his spritely and good-humoured nature, Mr Doolan does not know how old he is, just the years he did things.

He was a stockman in 1925 and a police tracker by 1940, after which he did contract work and toiled for the Ghan Railway that used to pass through Finke, also known as Aputula.

His relative, Spider Doolan, 77, remembers as a child that "Brownie" Doolan was already a grown man, which he thinks makes him more than 90 years old. He now lives out his retirement in Finke, named after the oldest river in the world, which runs by the town.

Finke is the nearest populated place to the geographical centre of Australia, making it the farthest you can get from the sea anywhere in the country.

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