

## Chapter 3

### Cultural and sociolinguistic context

The sign language observed in places of data collection is locally referred to as *goŋu djäma* (lit. *goŋ* – ‘hand’; *djäma* – ‘work’) or by the English word *actions*. At the present moment, it is unclear whether the sign language encountered in three data collection locations (see section 4.1 for more information) is used throughout the Yolngu territory. Earlier publications indicate the use of the same sign language by different peoples in North East Arnhem Land (Warner, 1978, p. 389; Williams, 1981, pp. 44–45; Elwell, 1982, p. 89; Kendon, 1988, pp. 52–53<sup>26</sup>; Ngandama & Williamson, 1989). Furthermore, my research takes as its point of departure the study by Cooke and Adone (1994), who label a sign language they analyze, based on the data collected in Galiwin’ku, as *Yolngu Sign Language* (YSL). On these grounds, I am inclined to suppose the sign language data collected for this study should be referred to as *Yolngu Sign Language*.<sup>27</sup>

The chapter is organized as follows. Section 3.1 examines the previous work on the sign language in North East Arnhem Land. Further, some background on the Yolngu communities is provided. Some significant historic and geographical facts are discussed in 3.2 and some outstanding cultural and sociolinguistic features in 3.3. Section 3.4 explores which spoken languages surround YSL and how they linguistically relate to each other. In 3.5 I discuss how YSL is being used in the Yolngu communities today.

#### 3.1. Previous studies

The use of sign language in North East Arnhem Land (henceforth: NE Arnhem Land) has only received scant attention. Almost all that is known on this topic, until today, derived from the following five publications.

The earliest mention of sign language in NE Arnhem Land was published in 1937. Warner refers to it as *Murngin Sign Language* and states the following: “All the tribes in northeastern Arnhem Land have a very elaborate sign language, which is used between peoples who do not understand each other’s spoken languages, between the deaf and dumb, and by young men who are observing taboos of silence after certain initiations” (Warner, 1978, p. 389). *Murngin* is alongside with *Wulamba*, *Miwuyt* or *Malag* one of the terms, which have been used in the earlier literature to refer to the Indigenous

people in NE Arnhem Land Region of Australia. Today the term *Yolngu* as the collective term for the languages and dialects of this area (e.g. *Yolngu Matha*) and its people seem to have replaced the above mentioned terms<sup>28</sup>. In his short article, Warner presents descriptions for 67 signs out of which 54 seem to be identical with the data collected for this study. Some of the signs (e.g. for 'dugong' or 'jaribu'), which Warner accounts for, were not elicited. Other signs such as sign for 'honey' or 'tobacco' seem to have changed and are not found in the same appearance in the corpus of the study undertaken here.

In his book on Aboriginal kinship Williams (1981) explains that the kinship terms can be expressed in NE Arnhem Land via signs. Illustrations denoting ten various kinship relations are documented in the form of photographs (ibid. p. 45–46, 63, 78). All of the signs presented by Williams are consistent with the data collected for this study. Additionally, another YSL kin sign was collected.

Elwell (1982) reports about "an extensive system of sign language" in the Maningrida area, which is located on the coast at the western edge of the NE Arnhem Land (cf. Figure 5). Elwell offers no description of this sign language, but merely underlines its inter-lingual communication function by referring to it as "a traditional but silent *lingua franca*". Elwell assumes that sign language in this linguistically highly diversified area is used between people who do not share the same spoken language. Elwell points out that in Maningrida 11 spoken languages are used by five distantly related families, while a single sign language is common to all of them:

"Everyone understands it and uses it at various times, for example: between relatives who are not permitted to speak aloud because of a taboo placed on their oral communication; when communication is required over a distance, especially when silence is essential, as in hunting situations, as a way of introducing oneself to a stranger and finding out about that person; to communicate with deaf people (who are thus not socially isolated, as tends to be the case among European Australians); and, finally, when no common language exists between people" (ibid. p. 89–90).

The only pictorial dictionary of Yolngu Sign Language found contains 45 photographs demonstrated mostly by Aboriginal children with a brief explanation of sign production at the end of the booklet (Ngandama & Williamson, 1989). The authors divide the signs into five semantic domains: family relationship signs, signs for food and animals, signs for not eatables, traditional signs and non-traditional signs. All of the presented signs occur in the data collected for this study.

Cooke and Adone (1994) are the first linguists to formally examine Yolngu Sign Language. Based on the analysis of a series of videotaped dialogues involving one deaf and one hearing Yolngu from Galiwin'ku, the authors argue that Yolngu Sign Language (YSL) should be considered a developed sign language and can be employed as a mode of discourse on its own. To illustrate this argument, they discuss major aspects of grammar such as word order, WH-questions and negation in YSL. Their observations are interpreted as supporting the view that YSL morphology and syntax display little relationship with spoken Yolngu languages and demonstrate some similarities with primary sign languages such as ASL or BSL. The findings of Cooke and Adone's (1994) investigation are taken as point of departure for the present study. Their findings will be considered in the chapters to follow.

Following Cooke and Adone's research in 1994, no further publically available studies of NE Arnhem sign language are known. The present study represents the first linguistic account of the use of space in YSL and hopes to contribute to a small, but growing body of literature on Yolngu Sign Language (see Adone, Bauer, Cumberbatch, & Maypilama, 2012).

### 3.2. Historic & demographic background

Indigenous Australians living in NE Arnhem Land were first referred to in the anthropological literature under the name *Murngin* (Warner, 1978 [1937]), later under the term *Wulamba*, which has been attributed to Berndt (1955) (Devlin B. C., 1986). Schebeck is said to have introduced the term *Yolngu*<sup>29</sup> in his original paper in 1968, although this term seems to have had its forerunners in the literature. Chaseling has called the people of Arnhem Land with a similar term of *Yulengor* in his book in 1934 (Wilkinson, 1991, p. 1). Since the sixties, however, the term *Yolngu* has been favored in the literature and has been adopted by linguists, anthropologists and the Indigenous people themselves. Today the term Yolngu customary refers to a sociocultural unit and the language varieties within this unit. This study employs the transcription method used by Wilkinson (1991)<sup>30</sup>, however, a spelling *Yolngu* is preferred throughout for practical reasons (see footnote 28).

The area under consideration is located in the northeastern corner of Australia's Northern Territory. Arnhem Land stretches from east and south-east of Darwin across to the western coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria. The Yolngu region, NE Arnhem Land, starts from east of the Blyth River and covers almost 40, 000 square kilometers of Arnhem Land. Before the contact with Europeans, there is evidence that Yolngu in the coastal regions had

significant, intensive and long-lasting cooperation with the Macassan traders, who came from Indonesia in search of trade in the early sixteenth century. In the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Dutch and the Portuguese had discovered this part of Australia. It was not until 1803 that the first European contact was recorded in this area (Berndt & Berndt, 1954, pp. 15, 72). Yolngu have long been trying to resist the occupation of their lands. In the 1880s, the land was divided into eleven pastoral leases, to what Trudgen (2000, p. 18) refers to as the ‘first pastoral war’. Later in the 1930s, it was declared an Aboriginal reserve. From then on, Yolngu Aboriginal communities began to be forcibly moved into new settlements away from their lands in line with the ‘assimilation policy’. In 1935, the first Methodist Mission Station was established at Yirrkala (see Figure 5) fundamentally changing the traditional lifestyle of Indigenous people.

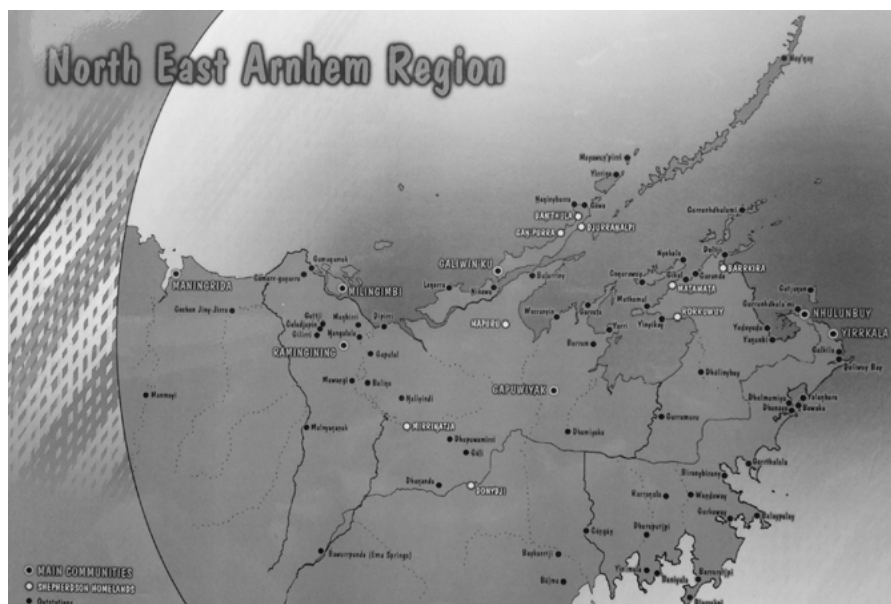


Figure 5. Yolngu communities and homelands in the NE Arnhem Region<sup>31</sup>

Another Aboriginal settlement was established in 1942 on the Elcho Island, known as Galiwin'ku. With the discovery of bauxite on Yolngu lands in the 1950s, a new mining town of Nhulunbuy was established, which is located on lease areas of the Alcan Gove mining company. As late as 1976, after various attempts to gain legal recognition of the ownership of their land, Yolngu people were recognized as the owners according to the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act* passed by the Australian Government

(Devlin, 1986). Today almost half of the Northern Territory is Aboriginal land<sup>32</sup>. Only after disbanding the assimilation policy by the NT government in 1973, groups of Aboriginal people began to move back and establishing communities on their traditional lands and waters. This became known as the start of the *homeland movement*, which has been effectively lasting until today (Calma, 2009, p. 111). Yolngu decided to move back to the so-called homelands<sup>33</sup> away from the hub towns created by non-Indigenous people. Aboriginal families relocate back to their traditional lands to avoid the increased social tensions between different clan groups being put together on the another clan's land. Almost one-third of Indigenous people in the Northern Territory today live on homelands. Research has proven that homelands have a positive effect for an individual Yolngu and the community wellbeing<sup>34</sup> (Altman, Kerins, Fogarty & Webb, 2008; Calma, 2009; Greatorex, personal communication, 2010). Living on homelands allows Yolngu to maintain their spiritual and economic connection to their land and raise their families according to their traditional culture<sup>35</sup>. Recent studies show that homelands have lower levels of social problems and the health of Indigenous people living on homelands is significantly better than of those living in larger communities. According to recent statistics, there are 500 homelands in Northern Territory with approximately 10,000 people associated with them and additional 40,000 people who might wish to permanently vacate their ancestral lands, but cannot do so and are forced to live in larger settlements e.g. during the school terms (Altman, Kerins, Fogarty, & Webb, 2008).

Today Yolngu people live either in former mission settlements of between 500 and 2000 along the northeastern coast of Arnhem Land as Galiwin'ku (see Figure 5) or on homelands such as Mapuru.

The third group of Yolngu lives in distant Darwin, the capital city of the Northern Territory, far away from Yolngu land. Some of them are to be found among "long-grassers", who live in parks, on the beaches or other public places (Christie & Greatorex, 2004).

Although Arnhem Land covers a large area, its population is now considerably small. The number of Aboriginal people is known to have decreased after the colonization of Australia. Today Indigenous people are a small minority, which accounts for approximately 3% of the Australian population. The Northern Territory has the largest Indigenous population in percentage terms and is estimated to be approximately 30% of the Territory population (Nakata, Byrne, Nakata, & Gardiner, 2005), which forms about 70,000<sup>36</sup>. The Yolngu population was estimated at about 5000 people in year 2004 (Christie & Greatorex, 2004).

### 3.3. Cultural background

Because social and cultural factors tend to affect the linguistic situation in NE Arnhem Land to be described in the next section, it appears worthwhile to consider these factors here.

As noted earlier, the culture of Yolngu is very rich and complex. The social life of Yolngu is governed by *gurrutu*, the complex, extended kinship system. Clans and moieties are building the fundament of Yolngu social structure. A clan is an extended family group, which is associated with a particular land and a particular linguistic unit. Thus, every Yolngu belongs to a clan of his or her father. Identity of an individual Yolngu and the clan to which they belong is expressed through their own dialect of Yolngu matha, their song lines, dance, designs and ceremonies that relate to this same tract of land, their own traditional land. There are more than 50 Yolngu patrilineal clans in NE Arnhem Land<sup>37</sup>.

Yolngu clans and the entire Yolngu universe is divided into two different, mutually exclusive, but complementary, interrelated and interdependent groups or moieties, termed *Yirritja* and *Dhuwa*. Each individual is by birth a member of the moiety of his or her father (Christie, 2007). Thus, every named thing of the Yolngu world belongs either to the Dhuwa or the Yirritja moiety: the land, the people, the animals, the stars and the languages. Marriages are always exogamous, which means that a man has to find a wife belonging to the other moiety (Christie, 2007). As a result, husband and wife speak different language varieties. The children subsequently inherit first their father's moiety, clan affiliation and language variety (Christie, 2007). Traditionally, a child's first language will be his father's variety and his second language will be that of his mother's clan. Each Yolngu is, therefore, always bilingual (Heath, 1978, p. 19). This leads to strong linguistic abilities of the children and their solid metalinguistic awareness. Albeit several surveys reveal (Devlin, 1986; Wilkinson, 1991 among others), that today many Yolngu in main settlements such as Galiwin'ku have adopted one dominant dialect for every day use, it still can be claimed that younger speakers have an extensive passive knowledge of their traditional clan languages. The shift towards the use of Djambarrpuyngu for regular interaction seems to be influenced by the extra-linguistic factors such as the establishment of the mission (Devlin, 1986). This suggests that a change from centralized townships to smaller traditional communities within the homeland movement might launch an inverse development towards the clan-language maintenance. It is an established fact that Yolngu as well as other Aboriginal Australians possess an exceptionally strong and intrinsic relationship between their social identity

and the language variety, which in turn is a kind of “passport” (Evans, 2010, p. 8), which gives people the right to stay in a particular tract of land. While English is simply a communication variety which can be spoken anywhere in the world, Aboriginal languages and their names are predominantly associated with a particular geographic region.

### 3.4. Linguistic context

It has already been shown that Yolngu Sign Language is not a signed version of any spoken Yolngu language (Cooke & Adone, 1994). Yet coexisting in the same sociolinguistic and cultural environment, languages tend to have some impact on each other. In addition, Australian Aboriginal sign languages are claimed to have been developed by the hearing members already competent in a spoken language (Kendon, 1988, p. 406). Given these sociolinguistic circumstances, comparison with the surrounding spoken Yolngu languages cannot be ignored. After a high level overview of the Yolngu linguistic bloc within the wider context of Australian languages, I examine individual languages and/or dialects spoken in the NE Arnhem Land in order to be able to identify likely causes of influence on YSL or vice versa.

Historical genetic relations, classification and comparative analysis of Australian languages have caught the attention of many researchers (Dixon & Blake, 1983; Dixon, 2002; Evans, 2003, 2005, 2010; Bower & Koch, 2004; Sutton & Koch, 2008 among others). A particular emphasis has been attached in the research literature to the ‘Pama-Nyungan’ and ‘Non-Pama-Nyungan’ linguistic distinction. After the lexicostatistic classification work by Hale, O’Grady and Wurm in the 1960s (cited in Koch, 2007), this linguistic and geographical division has largely become to be widely accepted by the majority of linguists, anthropologists and other specialists with Dixon (2002) being a notable exception.

As illustrated in Figure 6, a large part of Australian languages has been classified as belonging to the “Pama-Nyungan”<sup>39</sup> family group. What most scholars refer to as the “Non-Pama-Nyungan” family is represented by 28 language families found in the north-western and north-central part of the continent. Without tackling the controversial issue of ‘Pama-Nyungan’ and ‘Non-Pama-Nyungan’ linguistic division, it suffices here to state the language varieties in the NE Arnhem Region have been classified by most Australianists as a subgroup of ‘Pama-Nyungan’<sup>40</sup>. The evidence for Yolngu languages as a part of the ‘Pama-Nyungan’ group comes from inter alia personal pronouns (the occurrence of *ɲali* as the 1dual inclusive



Figure 6. Distribution of Pama-Nyungan and Non-Pama-Nyungan language families<sup>38</sup>

pronoun) or case morphology (Heath, 1978, p. 12; Alpher, 2004, p. 122; Bowern & Koch, 2004; Sutton & Koch, 2008, p. 490, among others). As seen in Figure 6, the enclave of Yolngu linguistic bloc is exceptional since it is isolated geographically from other 'Pama-Nyungan' languages by the group of 'Non-Pama-Nyungan' languages to the west. The outer fringes of the Yolngu languages are thought to be influenced linguistically to some extent by the neighboring 'Non-Pama-Nyungan' languages (Heath, 1978; Morphy, 1983; van der Wal, 1992). The Yolngu languages are typologically quite distinct from the surrounding languages. They are entirely suffixing, whereas the 'Non-Pama-Nyungan' languages make usually use of pronominal prefixes referring to core arguments of the clause (Dixon, 2002).

The Yolngu linguistic bloc has attracted the attention of many linguists. In particular, much research has been addressed to the issue of dialectology and relationships between the languages in the NE Arnhem Land (Morphy, 1977; Heath, 1978; Schebeck, 2001, among others). Yolngu recognize their languages as being distinct from those of adjacent groups and refer to them collectively as *Yolngu Matha*<sup>41</sup>. These languages are according to Evans (2005, p. 256) as closely related to each other as Romance languages, which is as compared to other parts of Australia quite remote genetically (Heath, 1978, p. 1). The internal genetic classification of the Yolngu group, however, seems to be quite a challenging task which has been complicated by the use of disputable concepts such as 'language', 'dialect', 'dialectal group' or 'subgroup' (Morphy, 1983, p. 3). Van der Wal (1992) reported on



the disagreement and confusion of linguists with regard to classification of the relations between Yolngu languages. Today, almost twenty years later, no widely accepted precise genetic and lexico-statistical relationships between languages in the Yolngu area has been agreed on. The purely linguistic criterion of mutual intelligibility for distinguishing between languages and dialects seems to be an insufficient descriptor of the linguistic varieties in the Yolngu area. As described in section 3.2, most Yolngu are multilingual, knowing many Yolngu varieties and understanding (if not speaking) several distantly related ones. Using native terms such as *matha*, as claimed by Schebeck (2001, p. 61), is likewise unsuitable, since the word is used to denote 'dialect', 'language', as well as, 'dialect group', 'language group' without distinguishing between them.

Academic literature citing classifications of Yolngu languages is strikingly inconsistent. The number of linguistic varieties in the classifications offered in the literature ranges from 5 to 11. For example, Morphy (1983, p. 3) speaks of 5 *languages*. Walker (1984) and van der Wal (1992) identify 6 *speech groups* in the Yolngu bloc (cited in van der Wal, 1992, p.14/17). Heath (1978) first distinguishes between a northern and a southern *group* and records 7 Yolngu *languages* (Ritharngu, Dhayꞑyi, Dhuwal, Dhuwala, Dhaangu, Dyaangu, Nhaangu) (Heath, 1978, pp. 2–3). In his later work, he differentiates 10 *languages* in "dialect-chain fashion" (cited in van der Wal, 1992, p. 12). Wilkinson (1991, p. 32) uses the term *varieties* to refer to these different forms of speech in this area. Dixon (2002, p. xxxvi) divides the Yolngu genetic group into three subgroups: the southern, northern and western subgroup, accounting that way for 8 *languages*<sup>42</sup> with each containing at least two *dialects*. Schebeck (2001) classifies the Yolngu bloc on the basis of the empirical research and sociolinguistic factors into 11 *dialect groups* (see Figure 7) by avoiding the term *language*. Every dialect group according to Schebeck contains more than two dialects. This study follows the terminology proposed by Schebeck (2001) to avoid confusion due to the intricacies of dialectal variation in NE Arnhem Land.

Despite the discrepancies mentioned above, the general patterns of the relationship between languages and dialects in NE Arnhem Land are clear. A general consensus has been, for example, reached that the dialect groups (cf. Figure 7) are named according to the form of the proximal demonstrative 'this' and 'here'. As the proximal demonstrative in Djambarrupuyŋu is *dhuwal*, it belongs to the Dhuwal dialect group. Similarly, Gupapuyŋu is grouped under Dhuwala dialect groups for its demonstrative *dhuwala*.

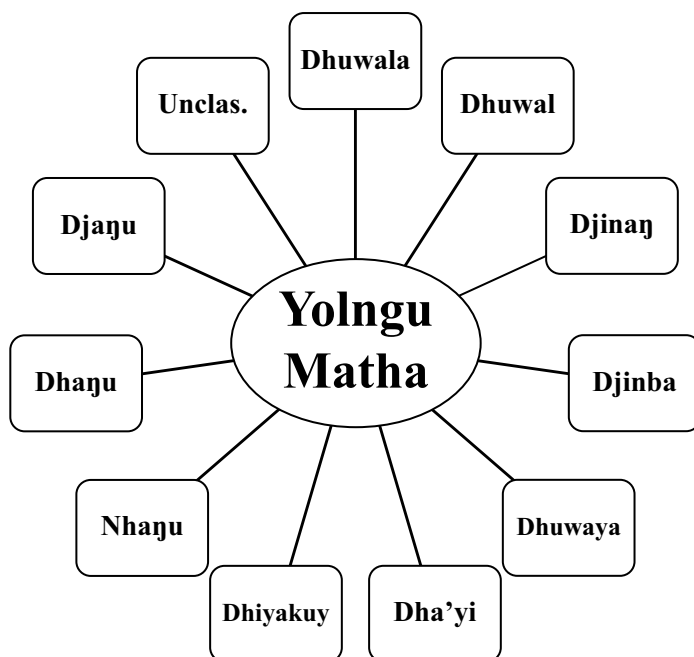


Figure 7. Schebeck's classification of dialect groups in North East Arhem Land<sup>43</sup>

The informants of this study used Dhuwal and Dhuwala dialects. While Schebeck (2001) separates these two dialect groups as seen in Figure 7 above, Morphy (1977) has shown that Dhuwal and Dhuwala dialect groups are more closely related to each other than any other Yolngu dialects. His insightful account reveals that Dhuwal-Dhuwala distinctions result from the vowel deletion rule, which can be exemplified in the following Gupapuyṇu (Dhuwala) clause and its Djambarrpuyṇu (Dhuwal) counterpart<sup>44</sup>:

					[Djambarrpuyṇu]	[Gupapuyṇu]
1)	Gup.	<i>dhuwala</i> +	<i>nydja</i>	<i>yätjkurru</i>		<i>mirithirri</i>
	Djam.	<i>dhuwan</i> =	<i>dja</i>	<i>yätjkurr</i>		<i>mirithirr</i>
		“this/here”+	PROM	bad		INTENS
		‘This is really bad.				
	Gup.	<i>bili</i> +	<i>na</i>	<i>ḡarra</i>	<i>dhipuḡuru</i> +	<i>nydja</i>
	Djam.	<i>bili</i> +	<i>n</i>	<i>ḡarra</i>	<i>dhipuḡur</i> +	<i>nydja</i>
		COMPL+	SEQ	1SG	“this/here”.ABL+	PROM
		I’m finished here’.				

(Wilkinson, 1991, p. 30)

From this example, it is apparent that a vowel deletion process has affected selected grammatical morphemes. Arguing the deletion rule is “consciously maintained marker of social differentiation”, Morphy (1977) has shown that the Dhuwal-Dhuwala distinction is not dialectal, but *sociolectal*. It is indeed the case, that all Dhuwal dialects (Djambarrupynu, Djapu, etc.) are associated with the Dhuwa moiety and all Dhuwala dialects (Gupapuyngu, Gumatj, etc.) with the Yirritja moiety (see section 3.3 for the discussion of the two moieties). Morphy’s line of argumentation is also confirmed by a continuous geographical space, which these dialect groups occupy in the NE Arnhem Region as shown in Figure 8. As can be seen in Figure 8, Dhuwal and Dhuwala speakers are found literally side by side, and are, therefore, rather divided into eastern and western Dhuwal/Dhuwala dialect group (Morphy, 1977, p. 51; Wilkinson, 1991, p. 13).



Figure 8. Map of the approximate territories of Yolngu dialect groups<sup>45</sup>

The spoken dialect used more often in the fieldwork setting of this study was Djambarrpuyŋu in all fieldwork sites. In accord with the hierarchy of descriptive terms proposed in the literature, it is possible to talk about the Pama-Nyungan language family, the Yolŋu group, the southern Yolŋu sub-group, Dhuwal-Dhuwala dialect group, eastern Dhuwal sociolect and the Djambarrpuyŋu dialect (cf. Devlin, 1986; Wilkinson, 1991).

Djambarrpuyŋu is a highly agglutinating suffixing language with particularly rich nominal and verbal morphology. Today, Djambarrpuyŋu dialect is associated with the Galiwin'ku settlement and it is the "official language" used in school<sup>46</sup>. Djambarrpuyŋu has evolved as a lingua franca in Galiwin'ku and other settlements and communities in NE Arnhem Land, which has been mentioned by Devlin (1986) who found the shift towards the use of the single dominant dialect contradicting the traditional clan affiliations. The development of Dhuwal dialects as a modern lingua franca in Galiwin'ku could be connected with the establishment of the mission about 70 years ago when different clans with different dialects were brought together to live in close proximity. A similar situation was described for Yirrkala, where a major shift in language towards a koine or Dhuwaya has been identified by Amery (1993).

Today, a considerable body of data on Djambarrpuyŋu has been collected. The most useful studies focused on the grammatical aspects of Djambarrpuyŋu were contributed by Tchekhoff & Zorc (1983), Devlin (1986) and Wilkinson (1991).

### 3.5. The use of YSL in Yolŋu communities

*"What are you doing here?"* - one of the community workers from Sydney asked me in Galiwin'ku,

*"I am investigating the local sign language"* – I said,

*"Oh, yeah, I have seen them waving with their hands"*.

This section gives some insights into how the Yolŋu Sign Language is used today in the communities of NE Arnhem Land. The findings reported here are primarily based on the observational data gathered during the fieldtrips and conversations with the participants of this study (cf. section 4.3 for information about participants of this study).

The use of Australian Aboriginal sign languages has primarily been associated in the literature with the widespread practice of speech taboos usually imposed on hearing women as reported by Kendon (1988) for NCDSLs. However, the use of elaborate sign language by Yolŋu in NE Arnhem Land

is apparently caused by other communicative reasons. The literature has attributed various communicative functions to this language such as the use as lingua franca, the use for communication at a distance, when hunting in order not to scare off prey and communication with the deaf (Warner, 1937; Elwell, 1982; Cooke & Adone, 1994). Cooke and Adone report, for example, that YSL was also used “where proximity to highly sacred objects demands quietness as a form of respect” (1994, p. 3). Presently, there is no evidence of Yolngu practicing extensive speech taboos, in which spoken language is prohibited for prolonged periods of time and sign language is being used instead (Greatorex, personal communication). The more complex Aboriginal NCDSLs among the women at places like Yuendumu and Willowra appear to be associated with speech taboos in these communities. Signing is favored in Central Australia throughout prolonged periods of speech bans during and after male initiation or death and burial rituals (Kendon, 1988, p. 442). The fact, that signing persists without the periods of enforced silence in NE Arnhem Land, shows that some other factors might be at work in the case of YSL.

The observational data collected during fieldwork for this study suggests that Yolngu Sign Language is used today mainly for the two following purposes:

- 1) communication between/with the deaf and/or hard of hearing Yolngu,
- 2) interaction (usually between hearing Yolngu) at a distance within the settlement or outside of it (e.g. hunting, fishing etc. )

### *3.5.1. Communication with deaf Yolngu*

It is difficult to quantify the number of hearing impaired YSL users in NE Arnhem Land, as there is no demographical data available regarding the number of deaf or hard of hearing people in Yolngu region. However, recent research shows that the Indigenous population in Australia has a high propensity towards hearing loss (Coates, Morris, Leach, & Couzos, 2002; Morris, et al., 2005; Howard & Hampton, 2006; Howard, 2004; 2007; de Plevitz, 2010; Stoakes, Butcher, Fletcher, & Tabain, 2011, among others). The studies estimate that Indigenous people experience 50 times as much hearing loss as other Australians and attribute this fact to the uncorrected damage to the middle ear caused by repeated severe episodes of infections (otitis media) during childhood. The predisposition to and persistency of otitis media

among Aboriginal children have been generally found in developed Western countries with Indigenous minorities such as Inuit in Canada, Maori in New Zealand, American Indians in the United States and Aboriginal people in Australia (Bowd, 2005). Overcrowded housing in artificially constructed communities, poor nutrition and hygiene, limited access to medical treatment have been named as factors which contribute to the likelihood of children experiencing middle ear disease (De Plevitz, 2010). Indigenous Australians are reported to have the highest recorded levels of prevalence of otitis media in the world (Morris, et al., 2005). Having examined nearly seven hundred children aged 6–30 months from 29 remote Aboriginal communities in Northern and Central Australia, Morris et al. (2005) conclude that almost all children (91%) had some form of middle ear disease. Studies show that infections associated with otitis media are unfortunately persistent. Later in life as many as 70% of the adult Australian Aboriginal population in remote communities is reported to suffer from some degree of hearing loss (i.e. greater than 25dB) (Couzos, Metcalf, & Murray, 2001; Stoakes, Butcher, Fletcher, & Tabain, 2011). As no official numbers exist, the prevalence of deafness for the settlement Galiwin'ku in NE Arnhem Land where data for this study has been collected may be estimated to be 0.32%, a percentage that is three times<sup>47</sup> higher than has been estimated for non-Aboriginal Australia (Schein & Delk, 1974 in Johnston & Schembri, 2007). Support for the above mentioned estimation comes from the conversation with Yolngu informants, who reported to the author during the fieldwork in 2010 that there were 7 deaf Yolngu at that time in Galiwin'ku. Recent studies (Morris, et al., 2005) and fieldwork observations indicate, however, that there is a greater number of Yolngu in the settlement and the neighboring homeland centers who have less severe and sometimes fluctuating levels of hearing loss. Most deaf YSL signers are told to have acquired deafness postlingually as a result of the otitis media. It thus becomes unlikely that the primary cause of deafness in Galiwin'ku settlement is hereditary. Yet the case of Yolngu Sign Language is not an exception. There are other „communities with a high incidence of non-hereditary deafness” in which the use of sign language was observed (Nyst, Sylla, & Magassouba, 2012).

In their recent study, Butcher, Fletcher, Stoakes, & Tabain (2012) cautiously speculate as to whether the existence of alternate sign languages in Aboriginal Australia could be attributed to the hearing impairment caused by otitis media. The development of another alternate sign language, the Keresan Pueblo Sign Language (see 2.4), has been, for example, ascribed to this medical condition (Kelley & McGregor, 2003). This “untestable hypothesis” as called by Butcher, Fletcher, Stoakes, & Tabain (2012) would, if

confirmed, change our understanding of the origin of Yolngu Sign Language. If middle ear infections have been the norm for many generations in these Aboriginal communities before Europeans first made contact, this could offer a plausible explanation for the development of Yolngu Sign Language as a result of hearing impairments occurring in the communities, similar to the origin scenario proposed for village sign languages around the globe (Zeshan, 2008). From present-day accounts it is difficult to tell whether deafness or hearing impairment could have been a factor in the original emergence of sign languages in Australian Aboriginal communities. Without any evidence for or against this hypothesis, the origin of YSL remains unclear<sup>48</sup>.

Although the estimated percentage of deaf people (0.32%) in Galiwin'ku is lower than the ratio of deaf people found in deaf villages (cf. Table 1, section 2.3), it is significantly higher than the expected rate of 0.1 percent of congenital deafness in the general population. It must be kept in mind, however, that signing is by no means restricted to deaf Yolngu but is widespread among the hearing Yolngu community members in daily interaction, even when deaf people are not present. This fact makes it difficult to determine an accurate number of YSL signers. Similar to the descriptions of deaf villages in Thailand, Bali or Ghana (cf. section 2.3), deaf Yolngu seem to participate in the community's social and economic life the same way as hearing Yolngu do (Nonaka, 2007; Nyst, 2007; Marsaja, 2008). Deaf Yolngu who participated in the study seemed to be very capable members of their community. E.R. (female ~30), who became deaf due to the middle ear infection, went to school in Galiwin'ku and is now working at the Elcho Island art gallery. W.G. (female ~40) was born deaf, went to school and is now working at the Shire Council. It is clear that YSL serves as a main means of communication for her. YSL is also a main means of communication for R.G. (male, 10 years old), who was also born deaf in a Yolngu settlement. He goes to school with hearing children, since there is no education for the deaf. At the time of my fieldwork, it was reported that this deaf boy was being visited by one Balanda woman from Sydney, who apparently teaches him AUSLAN signs. Since both deaf and hearing people share Yolngu Sign Language, I refer to it as shared sign language (cf. Nyst, 2012, see section 2.5 for the discussion). There is no Deaf<sup>49</sup> community per se, rather, the deaf people are part of Yolngu communities. All three deaf Yolngu participants do not meet and converse with each other more often than they do with other members of the community. No deaf-only activities have been observed in Yolngu communities similar to deaf gatherings described by Marsaja (2008) or Johnson (1991). There is no *Deaf* culture, i.e. there is no deaf-identified culture. Yolngu seem to have a positive attitude toward deafness, which does not result in disablement.

### 3.5.2. *Interaction over distance*

The second observed occurrence of sign language use in Yolngu communities is the interaction between community members at a distance. Signing is used when speech appears to be impractical or undesirable, for instance, when people are separated by some distance or when music or noises are loud and speaking causes too much effort. Observation of daily interaction in two Yolngu communities reveals that nearly all members are able to transmit messages using YSL by standing “where a person can just see you” (Trudgen, 2000). During the elicitation sessions for this study, the informants were asked to sign while sitting close to each other in front of the camera. All of the hearing informants found this situation very unnatural, since they saw no need to use sign language within such a short distance from the addressee. However, instances of code-switching between a spoken dialect and Yolngu Sign Language at a short distance were also observed. This fact that signs are used in daily interaction could be attributed to the Yolngu communication culture, which differs strongly from the dominant European Australian practice. As a number of authors have reported, Yolngu interaction can be characterized by the pervasiveness of silence. Yolngu people mainly use indirect communication modes, are not involved in direct debate, do not offer any criticism, do not make requests and avoid a direct eye contact in the process of conversation (Trudgen, 2000, pp. 78–80). In contrast to European Australian speaking etiquette, it cannot be expected that an answer will be given if a question was asked (Harris, 1977, p. 442, cited in Kendon, 1988, p. 452). On the contrary, frequent questioning may intimidate an Indigenous person and make him or her feel uncomfortable. Given the described character of Yolngu interaction, it becomes clear that a silent mode of communication in the visual-gestural modality as an alternative to speech may be preferred by Yolngu in some daily situations (see also Kendon, 1988, p. 459).

### 3.5.3. *Further aspects of YSL origin and use*

In Central Australia, it is usually women, who use a very complex sign language. Men only occasionally use signs, as, for example, in the male initiation ceremonies or in hunting (cf. Kendon, 1988 p. 87; Green, Woods, & Foley, 2011, p. 68). In NE Arnhem Land, women, men and children seem to be conversing in YSL with a similar fluency. In some cases, the use of sign language supplementary to speech seems to be redundant since sign and speech are used simultaneously in the discourse. However, in some cases, the



meaning of many utterances such as in (2) accompanied by signs cannot be understood without knowledge of the YSL.

- |     |                                     |              |              |       |
|-----|-------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|-------|
| (2) | <i>balanya</i>                      | <i>rraku</i> | <i>wahna</i> | [YSL] |
|     | <i>such as</i>                      | <i>my</i>    | <i>where</i> |       |
|     | YAPA                                | DARRA        | QS           |       |
|     | sister                              | 1SG          | where        |       |
|     | 'Where is my sister?' <sup>50</sup> |              |              |       |

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In (2) every YSL sign is complemented by the spoken components, the so-called 'mouthings' (Boyes-Braem & Sutton-Spence, 2001) of Djambarrpuyngu words. The YSL sign YAPA is accompanied in this case by the mouthing *balanya* meaning "something like/such as". Thus, the meaning *sister* is exclusively conveyed through the manual modality and the oral modality seems to attract the attention of the interlocutor to a particular sign. Examples such as (2) are very frequent in the YSL data corpus and are referred to here as 'emphasis mouthings' (see 5.3.2 for the discussion of mouthings in YSL). Such examples may well illustrate that the knowledge of YSL signs is very widespread in the Yolngu communities and YSL represents an intergal part of Yolngu communicative practices.

Another instance of sign language use is mentioned by Lowell and Devlin (1999) who draw attention to miscommunication between Aboriginal students and their non-Aboriginal teachers in the bilingual Aboriginal school in Galiwin'ku and report the following: "In the classrooms observed in this study, many children consistently exhibited behaviors that [...] suggested that they were not listening. These children were constantly moving, lying down, fidgeting, *using Yolngu Sign Language to tease other children...*" (p. 152, emphasis added).

Taking together the above observations, Yolngu Sign Language is used today as

- 1) the alternate means of communication by hearing people and
- 2) as the main means of communication by deaf people.

Hence, YSL can be considered a shared sign language (see 2.5 for discussion) that has developed for the variety of reasons. In the case of YSL and the sign languages of Central Australia, the use of sign language among hearing people is recognised as a common practice and is part of the Aboriginal communication economy (see also Kendon, 1988). In the case of other sign

languages, this is usually not the case. Although a relatively large number of nonnative hearing signers (such as educators, interpreters and others) in any Western country contribute to the spreading of the sign language, and a great number of hearing people in deaf villages are fluent in the local Indigenous sign language (see Marsaja, 2008, Lanesman & Meir, 2010), to date only a few situations were described, in which hearing people use a sign language for interaction with other hearing people for various reasons, when deaf people are not around (see Nonaka, 2007 for some exceptional uses of Ban Khor between the hearing signers).

The origin of Yolngu Sign Language cannot be accurately dated. As mentioned in previous chapter, the first descriptions of sign language used by different Aboriginal groups in the northern Australia were done in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Howit, 1890). In many different parts of the continent, signing was noticed in use by the first Europeans that encountered Aborigines (Kendon, 1988). Thus, the sign language may be at least as old as the first Yolngu settlements in the NE Arnhem Land. It is conceivable that the sign language existed before the contact with Europeans. The indications are that Australian Aboriginal sign languages generally are a very old practice. This seems to be the implication of what has been gathered about their presence in Aboriginal cultures from the earliest observations of them, from considerations regarding the nature of the signing itself as well as from considerations put forward, for example by Kendon (1988), regarding the relationship between ecology sociality and propensity to use sign in Australia (see chapter 14 of his book) as well as the use of signing in other societies such as the San and the pygmies of the Congo.

Historically, Yolngu and other Aboriginal people in Arnhem Region were hunter-gatherers and led a nomadic way of life. It is possible that gestures used for silent communication while hunting have gradually evolved into a sign language among Yolngu, and later developed into a lingua franca to make communication possible between Yolngu speaking different dialects. Notwithstanding the genetic relation between most spoken Yolngu languages, many of them are quite distinct from each other in many respects, e.g. in terms of morphological structure; and thus, mutual intelligibility in the Yolngu region in the past times cannot be taken for granted (Heath, 1978, p. 5; Kabisch-Lindenlaub, forthcoming; 2011, personal communication). Thus, Yolngu Sign Language might have developed as means of communication between different clans speaking different dialects. And if that is so, this would in part account for why YSL does not have the close link with any spoken Yolngu language, which is the case, for example, among the Warlpiri (Kendon, 1988).

Moreover, an additional factor might have contributed to the development of a signed lingua franca among Yolngu. In contrast to the language of industrialized societies such as English, language in Australian Aboriginal society is considered as property (Amery, 1995; Lowe, 2001). A particular dialect is, therefore, seen as the intellectual property of a particular clan. People can be called as a 'language X' person without being able to speak language X (Turpin & Green, 2010). It has been made particularly evident by Morphy (1977) that dialectal differences are consciously maintained by Yolngu as a marker of social differentiation (p. 51). Languages are thus owned and not simply spoken in Aboriginal Australia (Rigsby & Sutton 1980, cited in Kendon 1988, p. 385). It has been noted that no such ownership ideology is assigned to sign languages in Aboriginal Australia (Kendon, 1988, p. 385). Thus, it seems plausible that Yolngu developed a language which is not possessed by any group to deal with multilingualism in NE Arnhem Land (see Brandl & Walsch, 1982). The development of such mutually intelligible sign language appears to be advantageous for communication between different Yolngu groups since it does not conflict with any traditional spoken Yolngu dialect as an entirely different medium.

The use of sign language for intertribal communication has received statistical support in earlier literature (Divale & Zipin, 1977). Davis (2010) has put forward a similar proposition concerning the use of PISL, which, he concludes, was used extensively as a lingua franca for communication among North American Indian nations before spoken English replaced it (p. 172).

Today, Yolngu Sign Language similar to many Australian Aboriginal languages is faced with serious endangerment (Meir, Lanesman, Adone, & Cumberbatch, 2012) (see also section 3.1 for the discussion of the influence of Auslan or Signed English on the Indigenous sign languages used in far north Queensland). There are currently no precise estimates concerning the vitality of this language. Fewer Yolngu seem to learn and transmit the traditional way of signing. Consequently, Yolngu Sign Language as a part of the undocumented oral Indigenous knowledge might be threatened by the Australian culture and Auslan, the sign language of Australian Deaf community, even in such traditional parts of Aboriginal Australia as Arnhem Land. Meir, Lanesman, Adone, & Cumberbatch (2012) suggest that YSL is already affected by intergenerational loss since many younger people do not appear to be gaining a productive knowledge of this sign language. Therefore, there is an urgent need to describe the language, which is the aim of the following chapters.