

# Language Documentation and Description

ISSN 2756-1224

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This article appears in: *Language Documentation and Description*,  
vol 17. Editor: Peter K. Austin

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Cite this article: de Dear, Caroline, Francesco Possemato & Joe Blythe.  
2020. Gija (East Kimberley, Western Australia) – Language Snapshot.  
In Peter K. Austin (ed.) *Language Documentation and Description* 17,  
134-141. London: EL Publishing.

Link to this article: <http://www.elpublishing.org/PID/189>

This electronic version first published: July 2020



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# Gija (East Kimberley, Western Australia) – Language Snapshot

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<b>Language Name:</b>	Gija (Gidja, Kija, Kitja, Kidja, Loonga)
<b>Language Family:</b>	Jarragan
<b>Dialects and varieties:</b>	Warmun variety, Halls Creek variety
<b>ISO 639-3 Code:</b>	gia
<b>Glottolog Code:</b>	kitj1240
<b>Speakers:</b>	approximately 12
<b>Location:</b>	East Kimberley, northern Western Australia
<b>Vitality rating:</b>	EGIDS 8a

## Summary

Gija is an endangered Australian Aboriginal language spoken in the east Kimberley region of northern Western Australia. It is no longer acquired as a first language, nor spoken fluently by younger generations of Gija people, who instead largely speak Kimberley Kriol (an English-based lingua franca) with some Gija vocabulary. Due to widespread concern about the vitality of their language, many members of the community are actively engaged in language revitalisation efforts. Although academic publications are scarce, the linguists who have worked with the Gija community since the 1980s have produced language-learning materials and records of ethnobiological knowledge, oral history, and stories told through painting. Numerous community-oriented language publications aimed at maintenance of the language and culture have also been produced. A video corpus of face-to-face Gija conversations is currently being developed to support community-led initiatives for language documentation and revitalisation.



Figure 1. Map of Gija country<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Overview

Gija is a non-Pama-Nyungan language from the Jarragan language family, which also includes Miriwoong and Gajirabeng (Kofod 1996; McConvell 2003). It is a head-marking language with three number/gender noun classes (masculine singular, feminine singular, and neuter/non-singular) that show considerable agreement patterns across most word classes. Gija also features complex predicates, which are typical of many northern Australian Aboriginal languages (Schultze-Berndt 2000: 118). These consist of an uninflected coverb and an inflected verb, which function as a single predicate (Bower 2006: 17).

Traditionally, the area associated with Gija covers a region to the north of Warmun (Turkey Creek), west to Landsdowne and Tableland stations, and just south of Yarliiyil (Halls Creek), including the majority of Purnululu National Park (Bungle Bungles, see Figure 1). Gija people live in the

<sup>1</sup> This map illustrates the region traditionally associated with the Gija language. It should not be used in native title determination.

communities of Warmun (*Warrmarn*, in the Gija orthography), Wurreranginy (Frog Hollow), Roogoon (Crocodile Hole), Jooworlinji (Bow River), Yarangga (Chinaman's Garden), as well as in the east Kimberley towns of Halls Creek and Kununurra. Prior to the arrival of pastoralists in the 1880s, Gija people probably spoke several distinct dialects. Today, however, two dialects are commonly recognised: the Halls Creek variety, and the Warmun variety (Kofod 2016: 3).

Gija country includes high cliffs and ranges, rocky outcrops, open woodlands, grassy understoreys, shrublands, clay plains, black soil plains, as well as some major rivers (Kofod 2003; Purdie et al. 2018). This rugged landscape is renowned from the landscape paintings for which Gija people are famous (Warmun Art 2020). The topological diversity and the dry monsoonal climate of the east Kimberley provide a wealth of bush medicines and bush foods. Gija people regularly hunt for kangaroos, emus, goannas, the Australian bustard (or 'bush turkey'), barramundi and other fish, mussels, wild honey, as well as collecting boab nuts, yams, berries, and fruits.

Gija social structure is based on an Aranda classificatory kinship system (Radcliffe-Brown 1930-1931). Each Gija person is born into one of eight subsections, the names of which are used throughout the east and south Kimberley region with only minor dialect differences (Kaberry 1937b, 1939). These subsections are linked to social relationships, behaviour, and preferred marriages.

Frontier violence came to the east Kimberley in the 1880s with the Halls Creek gold-rush and the establishment of a cattle industry. Northern Australian Pidgin English arrived in the region with Aboriginal drovers, who brought cattle from Queensland to Western Australia. Gija people, alongside speakers of other Kimberley languages like Jaru (see Dahmen et al. this volume), Walmajarri, Worla, Ngarinyin, Gooniyandi, and Bunuba, were engaged as stockmen and domestic workers on the various cattle stations located on Gija country, including Moola Bulla, Springvale, Alice Downs, Bedford Downs, and Balooa (Violet Valley). The Kriol language entered the Kimberley region with the expansion of pastoralism in the 20th century (Munro 2000), gradually replacing the earlier pidgin that arrived in the east Kimberley when pastoralists and indentured Aboriginal stockmen brought cattle west from Queensland, in the 1880s. The establishment of a mission and dormitory for children at Moola Bulla in 1939, where children were punished for speaking their languages, saw a downturn in the use of traditional languages and an expansion in the use of Kriol (Binayi et al. 1996; Munro 2000). The current linguistic landscape is shaped by code-

mixing between Gija, Kriol, Australian English, and other Australian Aboriginal languages (e.g. Jaru) in everyday conversations.

Today there is only a handful of fluent speakers,<sup>2</sup> mostly aged in their 80s and 90s, whereas younger generations of Gija people mostly speak Kimberley Kriol with some Gija vocabulary, including interjections, kinship terminology, and terms related to flora and fauna. This situation has raised concerns about the future of the Gija language and country (Purdie et al. 2018: 17-19), thus prompting community-led programmes that address the learning of language and traditional knowledge.

## **2. Research on the language**

The earliest records of Gija were compiled in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries (Ray 1897; Kaberry 1937a,b, 1939), while in the 1970s, brief descriptions were provided of its phonology (Taylor & Taylor 1971), and verbal morphosyntax (Taylor & Hudson 1976). In the 1980s, a language maintenance programme at Ngalangangpum School in Warmun was established by Patrick McConvell, which later engaged linguist Frances Kofod, who has worked with the Gija community ever since. Over the following decades, various community-oriented resources have emerged, including a phrasebook (Blythe 2001), a learner's sketch grammar (Kofod 1996), a draft dictionary (Kofod 2016), ethnobiological resources (Scarlett 1985; Barney et al. 2013; Purdie et al. 2018), and oral histories (Binayi et al. 1996). Most fluent Gija speakers are prolific artists. As such, exhibition catalogues and 'painting documentation' have emerged as a major publication outlet for Gija stories (eg., Jandany & Kofod 2015; Crane et al. 2016), as the artists who speak Gija prefer to talk about their paintings in the language of the country. The few academic publications on Gija specifically are within semantics (Kofod & Crane In press), and historical linguistics (McConvell 1997: 2003). Kofod's enduring collaboration with Gija elders and the wider Gija community has resulted in a new Gija dictionary (scheduled to appear in 2020).

A substantial corpus of documentary material has been collected and lodged at the SOAS Endangered Languages Archive (Kofod 2013), which supports current and future research efforts. A conversational corpus has been established and is being developed through the Conversational

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of publication, we estimate the number of fluent first-language speakers to be twelve. A 2016 census figure of 169 represents those people reporting Gija as the main language other than English that they speak at home (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016). This is based on self-reports and may not reflect language proficiency.

Interaction in Aboriginal and Remote Australia (CIARA) project at Macquarie University.<sup>3</sup> Video-recordings for the conversational corpus were made during field trips to Warmun in 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2019. Expansion of these corpora is geared towards revitalising the language and developing a corpus-based foundation for its documentation.

Recent research has positioned Gija in a number of comparative studies with other Australian Aboriginal languages (i.e. Jaru, Murrinhpatha, and Garrwa), as well as Australian English spoken in the Kimberley region and rural Victoria (Blythe et al. 2018, 2020; de Dear et al. 2019; Stirling et al. 2019). De Dear's current doctoral research project draws on the Gija conversational corpus and builds on her Masters thesis, which investigated place reference and pointing gestures in Gija conversation using an innovative 'geospatial' approach to conversation analysis (de Dear 2019). De Dear's project explores participants' verbal-bodily conduct in everyday conversational interaction and adopts a multimodal approach to language description. Further investigation of the use of sign and gestures in Gija conversation is proposed for future fieldwork.

### **3. Links**

CIARA: [www.ciaraproject.com](http://www.ciaraproject.com)

Jarraggirrem: [www.jarraggirrem.org](http://www.jarraggirrem.org)

AUSTRALANG: [collection.aiatsis.gov.au/austlang/language/k20](http://collection.aiatsis.gov.au/austlang/language/k20)

SOAS Endangered Languages Archive: [elar.soas.ac.uk/Collection/MPI118834](http://elar.soas.ac.uk/Collection/MPI118834)

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<sup>3</sup> CIARA Field trips to Warmun were funded by Macquarie University (MQNS 9201601314), the Australian Research Council (DP180100515), and the AIATSIS Dictionaries Project.

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