

Adding value to legacy linguistic fieldnotes: an Australian case study

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Abstract

For a number of Aboriginal languages of south-eastern Australia some of the most detailed information currently available comes from fieldnotes collected by the late Stephen A. Wurm in 1955. These notes present a number of challenges to users, especially those without linguistic or philological training, such as complex transcriptions and German shorthand translations. In this paper, I discuss a general data model I have developed for encoding the materials in Wurm's fieldnotes on Guwamu (applied also to Malyangapa and Gamilaraay-Yuwaalaraay), and my use of software tools to add value to them. I show how this has increased their usability for academic research as well as creating files that could become potential resources for community use. I present a discussion of the challenges these legacy materials raise (cf. Austin 2017) in terms of form and content, along with the backgrounds, training, goals, and interests of the collector and the people he worked with (components of meta-documentation, Austin 2013). I outline potential solutions for addressing these challenges. In addition, work on Wurm's fieldnotes presents various ethical, social, and political challenges, due to their histories (part of what Dobrin & Schwartz (2022) call their 'social lives'), and their significance for and relationships to the heritage Indigenous communities who can claim interests of various types in the knowledge of relevant languages, cultures, and people that the legacy materials incorporate.¹

Keywords: linguistic legacy materials, fieldnotes, metadata, meta-documentation, Guwamu, Australian Aboriginal languages, S.A. Wurm

1. Introduction

When Australia was invaded, starting in the 18th century, it is estimated that there were around 400 languages spoken across the continent (Bower 2023b). Today, just 14 of these are being learned at home by children (Meakins 2025), while the remainder are endangered, moribund, or sleeping. In south-eastern Australia, more than 30 language revival projects are underway, especially in Queensland, New South Wales, and Victoria, with increasing efforts to recover linguistic and cultural knowledge (Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, and Communications et al. 2020). Many of these rely on the use of linguistic legacy materials, that is written documents (or

¹ For discussion of the main issues in this paper I am grateful to Lise Dobrin, Edward Garrett, John Giacon, Cheryl Leavy, David Nathan, the late Stephen Wurm, and the audience at the Discussions on Legacy Materials (DiLegMa) Workshop, Bern, Switzerland 24-25 April 2025, where a first draft of parts of this paper was presented. Thanks are also due to David Nash, David Nathan, Jane Simpson, and an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments on an earlier version. I alone am responsible for the content of this paper.

in a few cases tape recordings) that were created in the 19th or 20th centuries by missionaries, amateurs, or trained anthropologists and linguists (Thieberger 2005).²

As Austin (2017: 23) points out: ‘there are practical, technical, contextual, ethical, and political issues that legacy materials raise, and many questions which it may be difficult or even impossible to answer’.³ Furthermore, it is important to investigate the historical and intellectual background within which the legacy materials were created (what Dobrin & Schwartz 2022 call their ‘social lives’, see further Section 7), and to describe them in as much detail as possible (a part of meta-documentation, see Austin 2013). As Austin (2017: 25) comments:

To make sense of legacy materials it is essential to explore the socio-cultural and historical context of the documents and their creation, including the biography of the author(s), especially what prior language knowledge and/or study and/or exposure they had, who their teachers/mentors/correspondents were, how long they worked on the language and at what point in their careers, how the work was funded and with what goals, whether there were previous studies of the language or the community that they could have had access to, and so on.

We investigate the socio-historical context of Wurm’s research in Section 2 below. In addition to this, for Australia there are important contemporary ‘social lives’ that legacy materials have in terms of the roles they play in Indigenous ideologies and politics about language, culture and heritage (see Section 7). This can include significant restrictions on their access and use that can make their inclusion in language revitalisation challenging (see Thieberger et al. 2024).

The following sections explore the legacy materials created by Stephen A. Wurm in 1955, their backgrounds, and some of the ways that value can be added to them in order to enrich the significant linguistic and cultural knowledge that they contain.

2. S. A. Wurm and his linguistic fieldwork

Stephen Adolphe Wurm (1922-08-19 to 2001-10-24) was born in Budapest, Hungary, the son of Hungarian-speaking Anna Novroczyk and German-speaking Adolphe Wurm. Wurm grew up in a multilingual environment, and as Pawley (2002: 2) notes:

Stephen was interested in languages even as a child and, by the time he had grown up, was fluent in about nine languages. He was a genuine rapid language learner, and before he was 40, was fluent in five of the Germanic languages, five of the Romance languages, three Slavic languages, in Arabic, Swahili, Turkish, Uzbek, Mongol, Mandarin, Tok Pisin, and Police Motu, and could get by in perhaps 30 other languages – over 50 in all.

In 1944, Wurm received a PhD in linguistics and social anthropology from the University of Vienna, writing a dissertation on a group of Uzbek dialects (based on materials elicited from prisoners of war). He was interested in languages of Papua New Guinea and applied

² See also the Paper and Talk Workshops on language revitalisation run by AIATSIS and Living Languages (<https://aiatsis.gov.au/research/languages/paper-and-talk>, accessed 2025-10-26)

³ For general discussion of philological methods for Australia see Giacon & Koch (2023).

for the post of Government Linguist in the capital Port Moresby, but due to bureaucratic delays he had moved to London by the time it was offered to him. In 1953, Arthur Capell, Reader in Oceanic Linguistics at University of Sydney (Newton 2007), organised a position for Wurm of Research Fellow in Oceanic Linguistics in the Anthropology Department at Sydney, and in 1954 he and his wife Helen arrived in Australia.



Figure 1. Stephen Wurm (left), Geoffrey O'Grady (BA student and research assistant, centre), Arthur Capell (right), University of Sydney, 1956-09-10 (photo Helen Groeger-Wurm)⁴

As Pawley (2002: 4) points out:

With Capell's encouragement, Stephen plunged into fieldwork on Australian Aboriginal languages. In 1955 and 1956 ... Stephen did fieldwork on many indigenous Australian languages, especially of New South Wales (NSW) and Southern Queensland. Capell gave him 100 pounds⁵ to do a survey of northern NSW and told him to keep going until the money ran out. Most of the languages he worked on had only a few fluent speakers left, who took some finding. In those days, outback Australian road conditions were bad, and one had to deal with often hostile police and suspicious landowners before one had a chance of speaking to the people one wanted to learn from. Stephen had the personal skills to deal with these circumstances. He bought a motorbike, a Matchless 500cc, and added a sidecar. He rode this bike to remote parts of the country in search of

⁴ See <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/entities/anuarchivesitem/6783c727-0522-4832-b5b2-67896f57b77d> (accessed 2025-10-11)

⁵ According to a letter from Wurm to Austin dated 1980-02-21, he received 'a total sum on £60', which would be equivalent to approximately AUD 2,600 in 2026.

speakers, often accompanied by Helen or Capell in the sidecar, covering 27,000 miles.⁶

Wurm had been well trained in phonetics and morphological analysis, and as Pawley (2002: 13) notes: ‘his good ear and his analytic abilities allowed him to gather data at a fast rate’. He had not studied Australian Indigenous languages previously, and it is likely that Capell gave him a copy of Capell (1945), which was a manual for eliciting basic morpho-syntactic and lexical materials on these languages (see also Wurm 1967). The fieldnotes for each language he worked on follow a common pattern of requesting Indigenous language translations of English prompt words and sentences that aim to identify basic verb and noun and pronoun inflectional morphology (tense/aspect/mood for verbs, and case for nouns and pronouns). Wurm often did so in a systematic paradigmatic fashion, e.g. by asking for singular-dual-plural forms of first-second-third person pronoun free forms and affixes (the latter if present). There are indications in the notes that he was attempting to analyse the materials as he transcribed them, though occasionally making mistakes in morphological parsing or translation (e.g. Guwamu forms quoted in Wurm 1972 such as *gunil-gu* ‘hit-future’, which should be *guni-lgu*). Note that no texts or connected sentences are found in the fieldnotes as Wurm’s focus was on individual lexical items and single sentences, following Capell’s manual. For each language there is a short tape recording of selected examples drawn from the notes, apparently to exemplify their pronunciation (Wurm’s supply of tapes was restricted and hence he chose only a limited number of sample sentences to record on each language).

For the next 20 years, Wurm’s fieldnotes (and tapes) remained in envelopes in his Sydney office and then at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra, and as Pawley (2002: 4) notes: ‘except for a few brief sketches, Stephen himself did not write up his fieldnotes for publication’. Fortunately, in 1975 Wurm generously made copies of his notes on individual languages available to me and others, and created English translations of his German shorthand annotations, opening the materials up for researchers and community members to access (see Section 5 below).

According to a letter from Wurm to Austin dated 1980-02-21:

The Guwamu materials were collected in the course of a three-months field trip from mid-September to mid-December 1955 of which I spent three and a half weeks with Guwamu informants at Goodooga in north-western New South Wales.

In this letter, Wurm also provides information about how he carried out his interviews and translation sessions:

camping out for three months and living near the Aborigine camps under Aborigine-style conditions, mixing with them most of the day and learning to speak to them as much as I could in their own languages. ... Conditions during the fieldwork were rather trying because it was a drought period and at Goodooga the day temperature was never below 105° [41° Celsius, PKA],

⁶ See images at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-07-09/wandering-wurms-and-their-work-to-preserve-indigenous-cultures/102559806> (accessed 2025-10-11)

though the nights were quite cool. Water was in rather short supply – at Goodooga I could obtain water supplies from the town nearby ... the camp Aborigines went hunting and they shared some of their meat with me for which I shared tobacco and sugar with them in return. ... Most of my fieldwork at Goodooga was done under a bough shade built by the Aborigines and they kept on pouring water from the river on the leaves which evaporated very quickly and kept the air underneath pleasantly cool (relatively speaking, i.e. it dropped to below 100 degrees).

Wurm notes that:

[m]y chief informant was Willy Willis, aged 65, who was the last surviving good speaker of the southern dialect in Guwamu in which subject suffixes are used. Several other several half speakers in the camp at Goodooga but none of them contributed significantly to the materials, except for encouraging Willy Willis and prodding his memory. The best amongst them was Gudjeba who spoke the northern dialect.

In the 1950s in Australia, interactions between outsiders and Indigenous people were highly restricted – many Aboriginal people lived on ‘missions’ or ‘reserves’⁷ with access to the inhabitants controlled by police and white overseers (Reay 1945, 1949).⁸ Aboriginal people were non-citizens and not counted in the national census⁹ (the Federal referendum which changed this occurred 12 years after Wurm’s work), were heavily discriminated against, and their languages and cultures were deprecated. They were often punished for speaking their languages and carrying out traditional practices in public (see Reay & Sitlington (1948) for an account of the situation in one town in northern New South Wales; see also Ticehurst 2013, 2020). Wurm’s interest in studying the languages would no doubt have been seen as unusual, and interested interviewees would have probably been positive about working with him (this was long before notions of informed consent or ethical fieldwork had developed), even though the local climate for use of their languages in public was generally negative (Reay (1949: 90) reports that ‘aborigines who speak their native tongue as fluently as they speak English tend to restrict its use to the privacy of their houses’). It appears that the speakers interviewed by Wurm were fluent in their own languages and probably used them in private on a regular basis.¹⁰

The following sections deal in more detail with the materials on the Guwamu language collected by Wurm at Goodooga, northern New South Wales, in December 1955.

⁷ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aboriginal_reserve (accessed 2025-10-11)

⁸ In 1975 Wurm told David Nash (p.c. 2025-10-11) that he had been advised (probably by Capell) to first report to the local police when he arrived in a town. Apparently, he had some papers (perhaps from the New South Wales Aboriginal Protection Board) giving him permission to go into reserves, but he was also advised not to flourish them on introduction, just mention that he had them in his briefcase. Wurm said he was never asked to produce them at any of the research locations.

⁹ The term ‘mixed race’ was used to refer to ‘communities which self-identified as Aboriginal, but which government authorities viewed as transitional and assimilable’ (Ticehurst 2013). See also Taylor & Jardine 1924, Ticehurst 2020.

¹⁰ Reay (1949: 90) reports that ‘[t]he aboriginal dialects are still spoken in many mixed-blood households in north-western N.S.W.’. Gamilaraay people I interviewed in 1972 recollected that their parents and grandparents regularly spoke the language at home.

3. The Guwamu language

The Guwamu (also spelled Koamu or Kooma) are an Australian Indigenous group whose traditional territory lies in what is now south-west Queensland and north-west New South Wales.¹¹ According to Tindale (1974: 175) they are associated with ‘South of St. George on the Balonne River to Angledool, Hebel, and Brenda; west to Bollon and Nebine Creek; at Dirranbandi’. Figure 2 gives the section of Tindale’s (1974) map ‘Australia SE Sheet’ that includes Guwamu (his ‘Koamu’).¹²

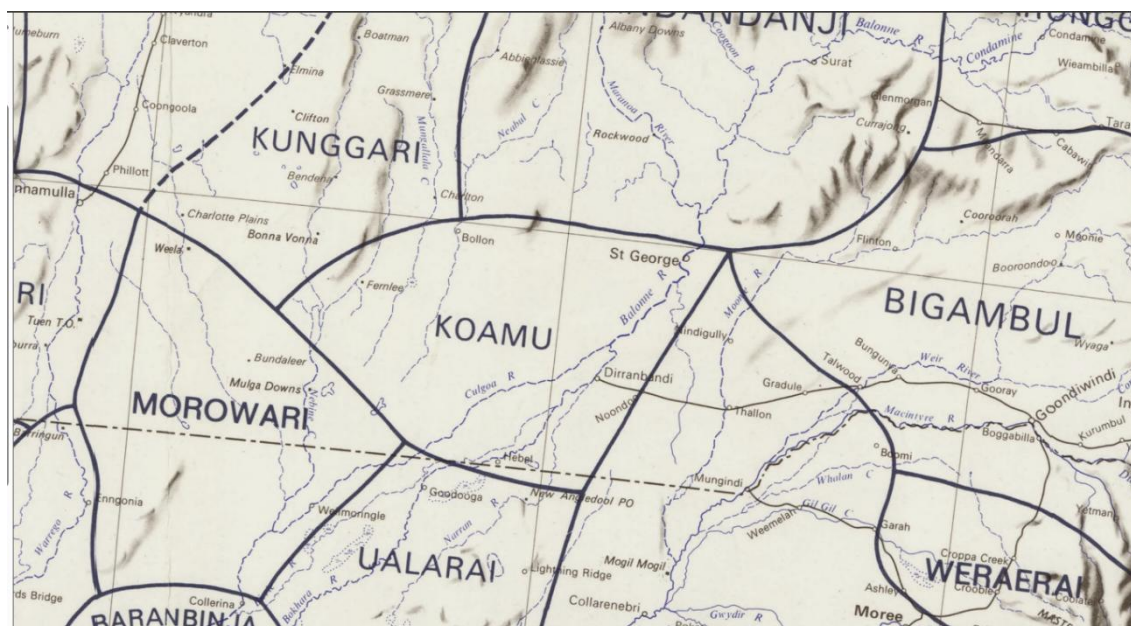


Figure 2. Part of Tindale 1974 South East Australia map

The modern descendants of the Guwamu identify as ‘Kooma’, and according to the Kooma Aboriginal Corporation RNTBC website:¹³

We, the Kooma People, are Traditional Owners in Queensland's South-West region. Our eastern boundary is Balonne and our western boundary is Widgee, with our traditional country spanning 28,720 km² of land and waters where our ancestors have lived and walked for thousands of years. On 25 June 2014, our native title rights and interests were formally recognised by the Federal Court of Australia, leading to the establishment of the Kooma Aboriginal Corporation RNTBC (ICN 8053) to hold our people's native title rights and interests in trust on behalf of our community. The Kooma People were formally recognised as Native Title Holders by the Federal Court of Australia on 25 June 2014. The hearing took place at the Bollon Civic Centre before Justice Darryl Rangiah. Our determination area spans approximately 3,160 km² and includes the Murra Murra and Bendee Downs

¹¹ Austlang code D33 (see <https://aiatsis.gov.au/austlang/language/D33> accessed 2025-05-16), ISO 639-3 code gwu.

¹² See also the AIATSIS map at <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/map-indigenous-australia> (accessed 2025-05-05)

¹³ <https://www.kooma.com.au/> (accessed 2025-05-05).

pastoral stations, over which we have exclusive possession as a result of our native title determination.

The Guwamu language belongs to the Maric group of languages (Wurm 1972, Beale 1975, Breen 1990, Wafer & Lissarrague (2008: 322-324), Barrett 2005) which stretches north, east, and west of Guwamu throughout most of central Queensland (Figure 3). Laughren (2013: 2) and Bower (2023a: lxxxix) further classify it as ‘Southern Maric’. The Maric languages share many words in common, such as *mari* or *mardi* for ‘person, man’ (hence the name of the group) and *gamu* ‘water’. My research on Guwamu has been informed by lexical and structural resources available on some neighbouring Maric languages, such as Breen (1973, 1982, 1990) and Terrill (1998), as well as by Barrett (2005) which is a compilation of vocabulary from published sources, along with his reconstructions of proto-Maric.

Guwamu was spoken in two dialect forms (Sim 1959): *Nharagirri* in the north (*nhara* ‘north’) and *Baragirri* in the south (*bara* ‘south’). As noted above, Willy Willis, who was Wurm’s main consultant (see also Section 4), spoke the southern dialect. From the fragmentary information in Sim’s and Wurm’s notes, it appears that the northern dialect lacked subject pronoun suffixes that were obligatorily attached to verbs in the southern dialect, and had some lexical differences, such as *gumba-* ‘to give’ (southern *waa-*) and *wumba-* ‘to sing’ (southern *bandja-*). In addition, the northern dialect showed loss of word-initial *g*, e.g. southern *gamu* ‘water’, northern *amu*.¹⁴

¹⁴ Breen (1973: 3) notes the same difference between the Warrego variety of the Maric language Bidyara-Gungabula (preserving initial *g*) and the Maranoa variety (loss of initial consonant).

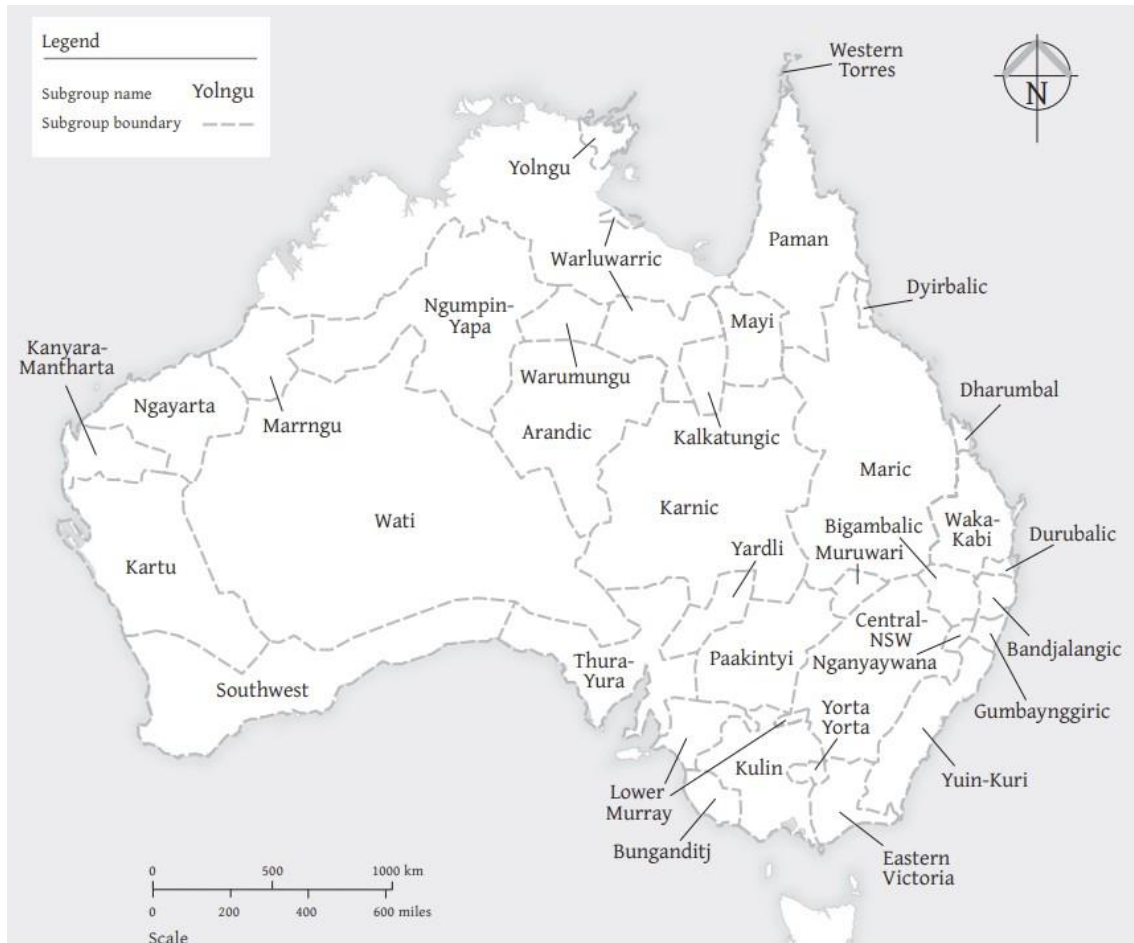


Figure 3. Maric and other Pama-Nyungan subgroups (Bower 2023a: lviii)

In addition to Wurm’s fieldnotes, there is a short vocabulary recorded by Tindale (1938); he was an anthropologist who did survey work across central and eastern Australia and collected mostly basic words and kinship terminology (Jones 2021). Ian McHutchison Sim (1931-2021) worked as a trainee surveyor in Bangate (in the Goodooga area) in the early 1950s, subdividing large rural properties. During absences of his supervisor in Sydney, Sim visited the houses of Aboriginal people in Goodooga, despite being warned not to by the local policeman, and wrote down materials in Yuwaalaraay, Muruwari and Guwamu languages. Sim was accepted by the Indigenous community and was assigned to the Emu Clan (*Gambuu Dhinawan Dhii* in Yuwaalaraay), and given the name *Gumbadhina*, meaning ‘hard foot’.¹⁵ Sim (1959) contains a large Guwamu vocabulary and a small number of sentences translated from English by Willy Willis (see Section 4) in 1955. His records on Guwamu and the other languages are those of an amateur, untrained in linguistics or anthropology, and hence less phonetically reliable than Wurm or Tindale, but his notes are more extensive since he spent longer living in the area. He appears to have communicated with Wurm about his work, also carried out in 1955.

¹⁵ Information from John Giacon, see <https://yuwaalaraay.com/2021/09/29/maayu-yanaaya-gumba-dhina/> (accessed 2025-05-05).

Gavan Breen undertook salvage linguistic fieldwork in various places in western Queensland from 1967 to 1971 (see Breen 1990), and collected some unpublished Guwamu materials. These are archived at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and PARADISEC.¹⁶ I have not yet accessed his recordings or notes. Oates (1988) includes some Guwamu vocabulary she collected during her research on the neighbouring Muruwari language; this is reproduced in Wafer and Lissarrague (2008: 759-764).

4. Wurm's Guwamu materials

Wurm interviewed Willy Willis for his Guwamu research. According to Sim (1959: 6), Willis was 'born at Willamurra Station,¹⁷ Qld, 1890, resident 50 years in the Goodooga district'. In an interview in 2019, Sim noted that:¹⁸

Willy Willis of a calibre to Harry Kelly etc. Yes. Willy's knowledge was different, he hadn't been through the law as Harry had. Legal considerations interfered with his education. Mother took boy and left her own country. He spent the rest of his life learning what he could of traditional aboriginal life, spoke his language quite fluently.

Willis' interest in traditional life and language would have been ideal for the kind of survey work that Wurm was carrying out. He was married to Ginny Rose, who served as a Yuwaalaraay consultant for Wurm.

Wurm's 60 double-sided pages of fieldnotes on Guwamu contain phonetic representations of elicited words and about 1,000 phrases and sentences,¹⁹ with German translations written in shorthand. A few selected utterances were tape-recorded as samples, along with some short songs.²⁰ Figure 4 is a sample page from Wurm's Malyangapa notes, which are in the same format as the Guwamu ones.

¹⁶ <https://dx.doi.org/10.4225/72/56E977E7BCA8E> (accessed 2025-10-04)

¹⁷ Willamurra (or Willa Murra, Willamurra) homestead is located at 146° 58' 34" E, 30° 32' 31" S (-30.54202, 146.97631) according to <https://www.mindat.org/feature-2143616.html> (accessed 2025-05-05)

¹⁸ See <https://hunterlivinghistories.com/2020/07/03/sim-2019/> (accessed 2025-05-05)

¹⁹ See Giaccon & Koch (2023: 69) on interpreting Wurm's transcriptions of Yuwaalaraay.

²⁰ See AIATSIS sound recordings WURM_S03-002895A and WURM_S02-002895B.

M. Qu...
 Nov. 1957
 Hammah Quayle
 4-Pak...
 'Maljano ba
 (Air Bag)
 n84...
 21 M, ?
 Waj...
 2/17/1957
 k...
 in...
 'lalu water
 'jali man
 'gombaga roman
 'jalibada little boy
 'mayara " girl
 'gunju dog
 'milpa dingo
 'hannu gunju
 'wala " 12
 'innu " e 2
 'halu " s 2 (12)
 'ganjababa
 'bandanji " o " 6 (neptun)
 'puma in
 'hamma
 'gopu 16 1/2
 'yurpa ari
 'paryulu
 'balugadi
 'ibu
 'yabu
 'papaninda head
 'bundju hair
 'milba eye
 'windi
 'daja
 'diia
 'ganjunja
 'bulgu
 'juri
 'bula 'jurimada
 'bula 'gunju

Figure 4. Page from Wurm's Malyangapa fieldnotes

In addition to this material, Wurm reports in a letter to Austin dated 1980-03-18 that 'I have a fairly extensive number of additional vocabulary items which I jotted down in my

miscellaneous notes – in fact, there would be several hundred additional Guwamu items to the ones you already have [in Austin 1980], mainly dealing with objects in nature, etc.’

As noted above, the fieldnotes remained in an envelope in Wurm’s office at the Australian National University (ANU) until 1975, when I began my work on them.

5. Adding value to the Guwamu materials

My research on Guwamu began in 1975 as I was starting my PhD studies in Linguistics at the School of General Studies at the Australian National University (ANU). During my previous undergraduate studies, in 1972 and 1973 I did fieldwork on the Gamilaraay-Yuwaalaraay language spoken in northern New South Wales (Austin 1989, 1992, 1993, 2006, 2008, 2026, Austin & Nathan 1998, Giacon 2014), which neighbours Guwamu to the south and east (see Figure 2). Wurm (1963) reported on fieldwork on Gamilaraay and Yuwaalaraay varieties in the 1950s, so I approached Wurm, who was then professor in the Institute of Advanced Studies Linguistics Department at ANU, to ask whether he had any notes or tape recordings from that time. Wurm kindly allowed me to photocopy his Gamilaraay-Yuwaalaraay materials and then went through them to provide English translations for the glosses written in German shorthand (these were recorded on tape, which I then transcribed along with making a hand-written copy of the fieldnotes).²¹ He suggested that we do the same thing with some of his other Australian materials from the 1950s, so we worked on his notes from Malyangapa, Nhirrpi Yandruwandha, and Guwamu. Wurm subsequently made his notes on other individual Australian languages available to students and scholars at ANU for research and publication (see Wurm & Hercus 1976, McDonald & Wurm 1979, Evans 1985). I deposited copies of the 138 pages of retranscribed and translated Guwamu notes with AIATSIS (Wurm 1976), but did not do any further work on them for some years (see Figure 5 for a sample page).²²

In 1980, while a post-doctoral researcher at Massachusetts Institute of Technology I compiled an unpublished vocabulary of Guwamu based on Wurm’s fieldnotes that included headwords, part of speech, English translations, cognates in Bidyara-Gungabula from Breen 1973, and an English-Guwamu finder list (Austin 1980). Drawing on his miscellaneous notes mentioned in Section 4, Wurm added several hundred additional items, resulting in Austin & Wurm 1981. In 1985, after moving to La Trobe University in mid-1981, I supervised an MPrelim dissertation by Kelly Skinner on the phonology and morphology of Guwamu, based on my transcription of Wurm’s fieldnotes (see Skinner 1985). We had planned to publish an account of all this work, however in October 2001 Wurm passed away, and all the materials we created remain unpublished.

Beginning in about 1995, I began using interlinear text glossing software to analyse language materials I was collecting on the Sasak language, spoken on Lombok Island, Indonesia, firstly with the now defunct SIL IT program (Simons & Versaw 1987), and then with Field Linguist’s Toolbox (earlier called Shoebox).²³ I also began working with Wurm’s Malyangapa and Guwamu fieldnotes using Toolbox, and at a Workshop on Australian Aboriginal Languages organised by Rachel Nordlinger, University of Melbourne, in March 2002, I gave a presentation on the data model I had developed for

²¹ Copies of the translation tapes were deposited at AIATSIS by Wurm in 1976.

²² See <https://peterkaustin.com/projects/guwamu-project/> (accessed 2025-05-05)

²³ See <https://software.sil.org/toolbox/> (accessed 2026-02-19)

digitising Wurm's Malyangapa materials as a case study (Austin 2002), and subsequently extended the analysis to Guwamu. I created a set of categorised data files derived from Wurm's fieldnotes plus my analysis that are linked by various kinds of relationships. Figure 6 presents a schema of the project data.

As mentioned above, this schema has been implemented using SIL Field Linguist's Toolbox software, which involves the creation of a set of structured text files and the use of inbuilt algorithmic processes to support data entry. Specification of the entities and relationships in the project is based on my study of the fieldnotes and other available sources.

In 2005, the late Jeanie Bell, a Jagera and Dulingbara Indigenous linguist, was employed by the Kooma community to work on Wurm's materials using my transcription of the originals. I shared with her the Field Linguist's Toolbox files I had created by that time, and she added further sentences and created a morphological analysis with morpheme-by-morpheme glossing for all the sentences. In 2010 she completed the work and gave me a copy of her Sentences file, but not the Lexicon which would have been linked to it.²⁴ To the best of my knowledge, Bell did not publish anything deriving from her work.²⁵

²⁴ It is possible that Buchanan (2012) was derived from Bell's Lexicon file, however the publication does not mention her name.

²⁵ My analysis was informed by Skinner (1985) and differs in crucial ways from Bell's, but it is important to include a representation of her research.

21B/ gullajanda nuga call him
 gullalgija nuga jēba ugu
 I shall call him from over there here
 ugu mandjalgija nuga
 Here I shall fetch him
 ugu mandalgija
 Here I will walk
 wogandanjgija madin i-lanna nagalgije nuga
 I will run after that man, I will see him
 judi ilu gundu wadijenda, gadja
 You take away this nest, it stinks
 badu u:ndu gam:u ŋungejanda gadju
 Fetch water from the creek for me
 badu - u:ndu from the creek.
 badu u:ndu gam:u ŋuggalgije inu
 I will fetch water from the creek for you.

Figure 5. Guwamu fieldnotes page 21B retranscribed and English glosses added by Peter K. Austin.

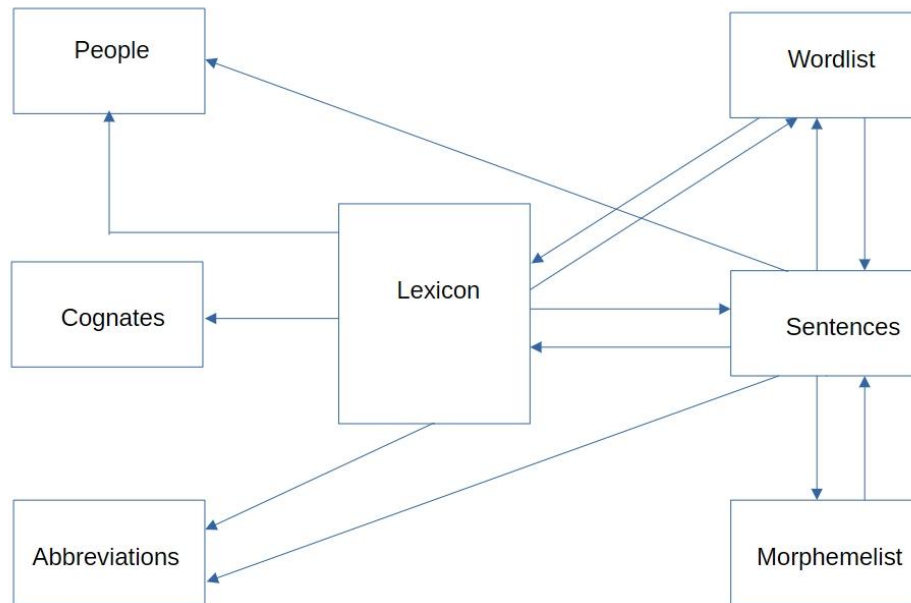


Figure 6. Guwamu project schema

The following is a specification of the digital records for the Field Linguist’s Toolbox data set in the form of structured plain text files and the fields which make them up:

1. **Sentences** – the sentences in Wurm’s notes where each record has:
 - a unique identifier;
 - Wurm’s phonetic transcription;
 - Wurm’s English translations, or my translation if I believe there is an error in the glossing in the fieldnotes (with the original translation indicated in the ‘notes’ field below);
 - my retranscription into a practical orthography that follows usual Australianist conventions;
 - metadata on sources (speaker, recorder, digital record creator, fieldnotes page location);²⁶
 - reproduction of the analysis shared by Jeanie Bell in 2010;
 - morphemic analysis: morpheme-by-morpheme glosses, and morpheme-level part of speech and subcategory annotations. Glossing and annotation is assisted by Toolbox’s software pattern match and data writing functions (partially automated interlinear glossing);
 - notes of various types, including where Wurm’s transcription or translation appears to be an error
 - date of last edit of each record.

²⁶ The intellectual contribution of speakers, recorders, and creators (who typed up the digital version of the fieldnotes) is thus represented for every record in the Sentences file.

2. **Lexicon** – a list of the free and bound morphemes in Wurm’s notes, giving:
 - its lemma;
 - a unique lexicon identifying number;
 - variant (allomorph) forms;
 - morpheme gloss;
 - definition in English;
 - semantic field;
 - scientific name (of flora and fauna, where identified);
 - scientific name source (typically a link to Wikipedia);
 - link to a picture of a plant or animal species;
 - semantic relations (synonym, antonym, see ...);
 - ethnographic and grammatical or other notes;
 - identifiers of the speaker and the recorder who contributed the item;²⁷
 - link to cognates in other Maric languages;
 - list of derived forms found in the Sentences that are built on the lemma;
 - identifiers of selected examples in the Sentences file;
 - Guwamu example sentence form, and free translation into English. I use Toolbox’s lookup and write functions (typically otherwise employed for interlinearisation) to copy the example forms and translations from the Sentences file;
 - a list of identifiers of all the word forms of the lemma found in the Sentences (these identifiers link to the Wordlist file that is created using Toolbox’s wordlist function)
 - date of last edit.

Figure 7 shows a screen shot of a sample entry in the Lexicon (left window) and Sentences (right window) files as presented to the user by the Toolbox software.

3. **Abbreviations** – a list of all the (mostly grammatical) abbreviations included in the project with their definitions;
4. **People** – a list of all the people involved in the project, giving their roles and other properties, such as biography and relations to other people;
5. **Cognates** – for selected items in the lexicon these are uniquely identified sets of related forms in neighbouring languages such as Margany, Gunya, Bidjara, Biri (all Maric languages), and Muruwari (which is not Maric), plus proto-Maric reconstructions from Barrett (2005).

²⁷ The intellectual contribution of speakers and recorders is thus identified for every lemma (headword and affix) in the Lexicon.

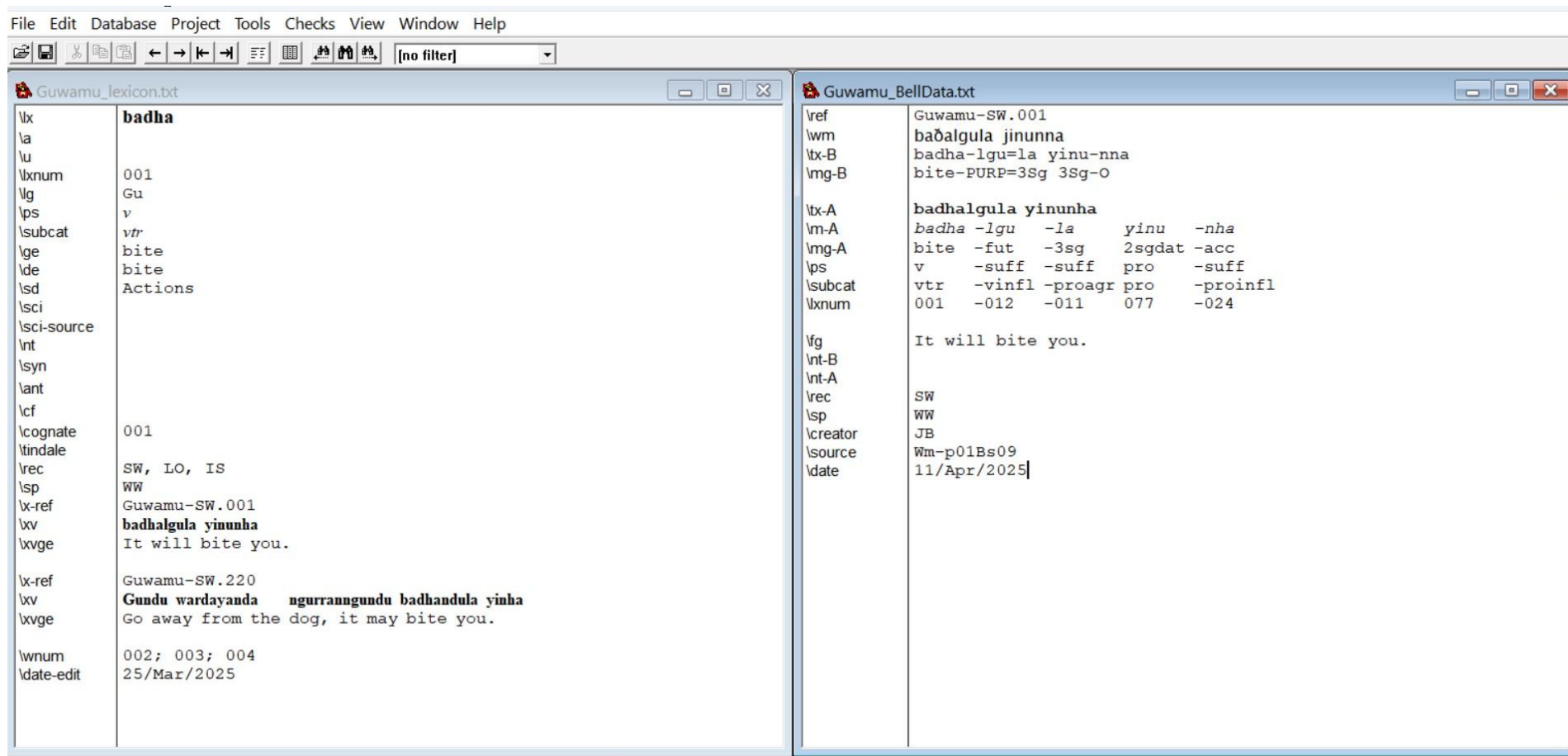


Figure 7. Lexical entry for *badha*- ‘to bite’ and an example of its use.

Using the software's inbuilt Wordlist function I created two additional files:

6. **Wordlist** – a list of the word forms in the Sentences file and the identifiers of each of the sentences that contain them; and
7. **Morphemelist** – a list of the lemmas in the Sentences file and the identifiers of each of the sentences in which they appear.

These two files are useful in the analysis of derived forms and when searching for examples in the Sentences which illustrate particular morphemes in the Lexicon.

Figure 8 is a screen shot of an array of windows on the files in Field Linguist's Toolbox, here illustrating the lexeme *badha*- 'to bite' (top left, not all fields are shown), a sentence example that contains it (bottom left), cognates in other Maric languages (bottom middle), all its word forms in the corpus (such as the highlighted *badhalgula* 'it will bite' in the top centre window), metadata definition of the abbreviation 'vtr' used in the Lexicon and Sentences files (top right), and biographical information (bottom right) about the speaker 'WW' interviewed by Wurm (and whose contribution appears as speaker data in each record in both Lexicon and Sentences). Toolbox provides a mechanism of interactive hypertext linking (using search and pattern match, rather than anchors and pointers) which it calls 'Jump Paths'. These allow users to move from data in one field within a file to a linked file that contains a matching data item. So, for example, right-clicking on the r(eference) field in the Wordlist window (highlighted in the top centre in Figure 7) displays in the Sentences window the particular example in which that word form appears (bottom left in Figure 7). This is especially useful for checking consistency across the various data files.

In future work, I plan to incorporate all the materials from other sources (Tindale, Sim, Breen, and Oates), distinguishing them clearly from Wurm's data, and to add to the cognate sets from Maric and other neighbouring languages.

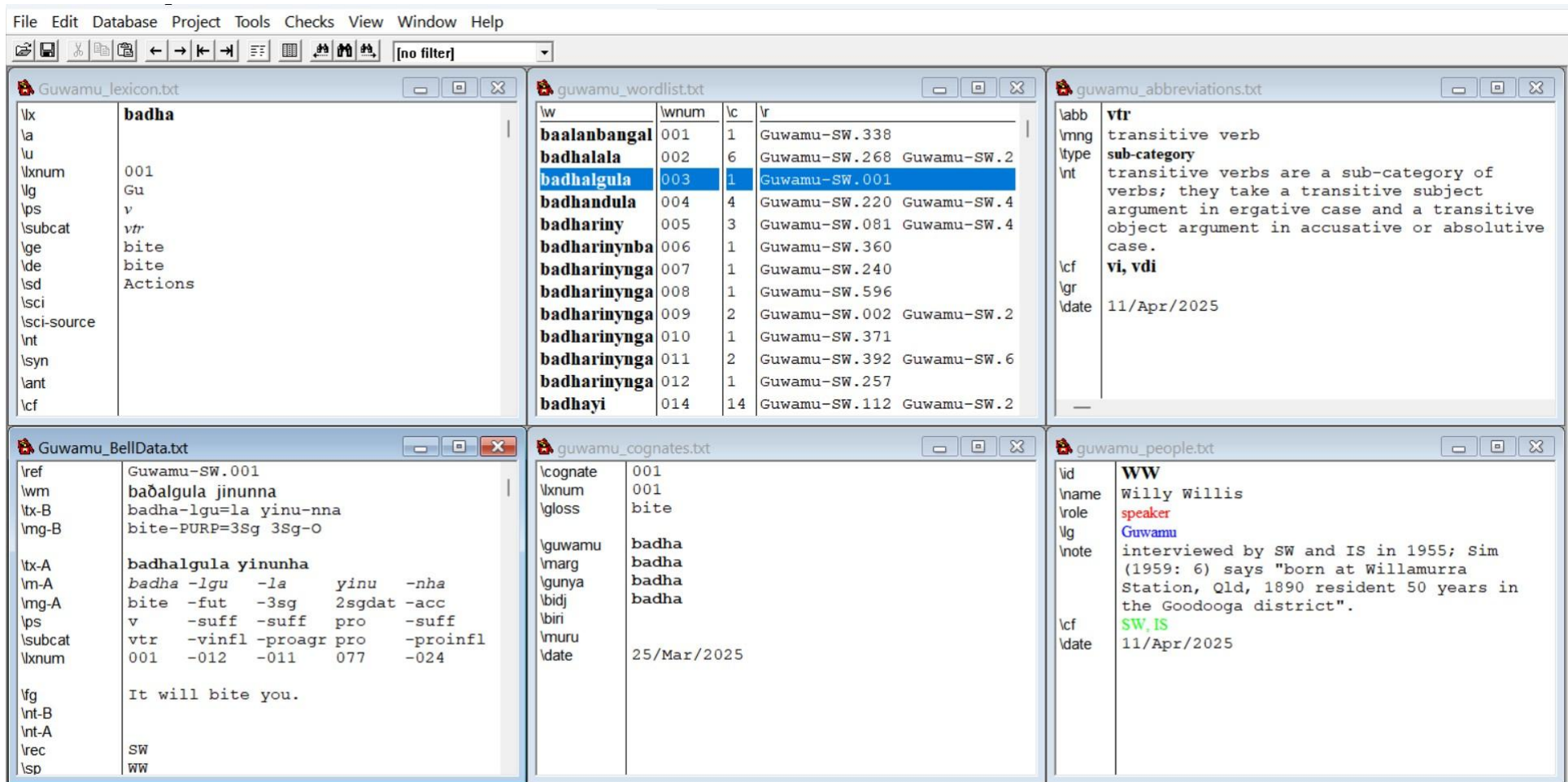


Figure 8. Sample Guwamu project files in Linguist's Toolbox

6. Outcomes

There are three main outputs from the Guwamu project to date. The first is a draft Guwamu-English reference dictionary which presents the 600 morphemes identified so far, together with the material about them in the Lexicon file. This output is generated by an export process from Field Linguist's Toolbox (Multi-lingual Dictionary Formatter – MDF) which adds display (and printing) formatting, and places pictures on the page. A sample page is shown in Figure 9. Note that MDF can also generate listings sorted by English gloss and by semantic fields.

The second outcome is a draft reference grammar of Guwamu, building on the initial preliminary analysis of Skinner (1985), and presenting examples of the analysis in the Sentences file. In future work, comparisons with the grammars by Breen and others of related Maric languages will be included.

The third outcome is a children's story book entitled *Yanga Mother* by Kooma author and poet Cheryl Leavy, with illustrations by Christopher Bassi, a Torres Strait Islander artist. The book is in Guwamu (Kooma) and English. I provided advice on word choice and grammar (based on Wurm's materials), to guide Leavy in her efforts to produce a book that might also be a useful language resource. She notes that 'working with a linguist like Peter ensured the grammar was correct. He provided invaluable feedback and support that has been transformative in my own learning journey' (Leavy, p.c. 2025-02-26, reproduced with permission at <https://peterkaustin.com/projects/guwamu-project/>). I also created an Appendix wordlist of all the Guwamu items in the book and their English translations. For more information about the book, and associated Teachers' Notes, see the University of Queensland Press website.²⁸

7. Social lives of legacy materials and real world politics

The Guwamu project demonstrates the importance of making sense of and coming to grips with the 'social life' of legacy materials. As Dobrin & Schwartz (2022) explain:

they are the products of past human meaning-making activity, they are invested with the goals, knowledge, points of view, and circumstances of those who were involved in their creation.

We have attempted to meta-document these aspects of both the fieldnotes and the digital files in the sections above, covering the collectors, language consultant, analysts, and analysis and social history of both the fieldnotes and the digital files which were created from them.

²⁸ See <https://www.uqp.com.au/books/yanga-mother> (accessed 2025-05-05)

banggard *n.* back. *Category:* Body part.
Ety: Gunya, Margany.

banggu *n.* hard dirt, stone.
Category: Nature. **Dhambal**
banggunggu gudjayanda gardarru
gundu Hit the snake with a stone before it
gets away. **Marda waayanda**
ngadjunha banggu banyarri
yilunha dhabalguli Give me a hand, we
two will roll this big stone.

banggun *n.* head. *Category:* Body part.
Ety: Gunya.

banyarri *n.* big. *Category:* Qualities.
Ant: **gayugaanba**. *Ety:* Gunya.

banydja *vt.* to sing. *Category:* Language.
Note: southern Guwamu dialect
Syn: **wumba**. *See:* **mudhun**. *Ety:*
Gunya, Margany. **Muginydu mudhun**
banydjalgula The woman will sing.

banydjurd *n.* belly, stomach.
Category: Body part. *Ety:* Bidjara,
Gunya, Margany.

bara *vt.* to hit with hand.
Category: Actions.

bardal *adv.* tomorrow. *Category:* Time.

bardi *adv.* maybe. *Category:* Particle.
Ety: Margany.

bardu *n.* river. *Category:* Nature. *Ety:*
Gunya, Margany.

-bari *nder.* having nominal derivational
affix allomorph. *Category:* Grammar.
Note: used after consonant-final stems
Syn: **-wari**.

barra *vt.* to scratch. *Category:* Actions.
Syn: **baa**. **Barrayanda nganha**
banggarda Scratch me on the back!
barra-la *vi.* to scratch oneself. **Bawurra**
barralanbangala The red kangaroo is
scratching itself.

barran.girri *n.* vulgar, coarse.
Category: Qualities.

barrangirri *quant.* one.
Category: Quantities. *See:* **bulardi**;
gagurbarri.

barrarru *adv.* quietly. *Category:* Qualities.
Ant: **mirra**.

barrbirda *n.* echidna. *Category:* Animals.
Tachyglossus aculeatus.



barrbu *vt.* to spear. *Category:* Actions.

barri *vi.* to cry, weep. *Category:* Language.
Ety: Bidjara.

barriny *n.* bunt. *Category:* Qualities.

barrugirri *n.* name of Southern dialect,
spoken by Willy Willis.
Category: Language.

bawul *n.* chicken, fowl. *Category:* Birds.
Note: loan from English

bawurra *n.* male red kangaroo.
Category: Animals. *Osphranter rufus*.
Note: used as a generic term for kangaroos
See: **gula**; **gumbarr**; **dhugandu**.



bayuli *vi.* to crawl. *Category:* Motion.

Ngunan dhambal bayulinydjangala
A snake is crawling along there.

-bi *suff.* plural? *Category:* Grammar.

bidhal *n.* bark of tree. *Category:* Trees.
Ety: Bidjara.

bidhu *n.* other, other one.
Category: Quantities. **gandu gaba**
yibanydjangala yilunggu bidhunggu
bundhalala nhunga gardarru gamu
ganydjagirri The child really drowned.
That other one (child) picked it up, before
the water would have choked him.

bigany *n.* fingernail. *Category:* Body part.
Ety: Muruwari.

bii *adv.* can. *Category:* Particle.

Figure 9. Sample page of Guwamu-English dictionary

Legacy and archival materials also have a contemporary social life embedded within the socio-politics of heritage communities and modern stake-holders (Woods 2006, 2023; Bell 2010). One aspect of this is that for Indigenous Australia the rights associated with what is recognised as data about Indigenous people have been labelled ‘Data sovereignty’ (Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute 2024). As Kukutai & Taylor (2016) put it, this is:

the right of Indigenous peoples to exercise ownership over Indigenous Data. Ownership of data can be expressed through the creation, collection, access, analysis, interpretation, management, dissemination and reuse of Indigenous Data.

The origins of this concept concern the collection of demographic data for economic, housing, and other purposes, and it was extended to include all kinds of legacy and archival materials. In essence, it expresses direct control by Indigenous communities of access and use of such materials, including their publication and dissemination (see Janke 2021, Kukutai & Taylor 2016). Smith (2016: 116) argues that it is ‘imperative to decolonise the governance arrangements and the colonial data archives that have been externally created for and about indigenous peoples’. The Global Indigenous Data Alliance (GIDA)²⁹ is currently developing CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance: ‘CARE’ is an acronym for Collective benefit, Authority to control, Responsibility, and Ethics. These principles complement the existing ‘FAIR’ principles concerning the infrastructure intended to support the reuse of scholarly data: Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable (Wilkinson et al. 2016). For Linguistics, one version of FAIR is the ‘Austin Principles’ of Berez-Kroeker et al. 2018.

A consequence of data sovereignty and CARE is that complex and subtle political discussions and negotiations are needed, including identification of ‘insiders’ versus ‘outsiders’ and determination of their roles, responsibilities, and relative positions. For the Guwamu (Kooma) community, preliminary discussions about the application of CARE principles in our work on the analysis of the Wurm materials have commenced and are ongoing. To date they have included some degree of internal community disagreement,³⁰ as well as potential interest from Kooma students in creating learners’ dictionaries and pedagogical resources for language revitalisation. Hopefully, face-to-face meetings with members of the Kooma Aboriginal Corporation in Queensland can be arranged, and future interactions and collaborations can move these forward.

8. Conclusions

Legacy linguistic documents, such as Stephen Wurm’s 1955 Guwamu fieldnotes, can potentially be very valuable resources for both academic research and community concerns for language and cultural revitalisation. We have shown that by using an explicit data model and computer software we can add significant value to digitised versions of such legacy materials, and that we must carefully meta-document their circumstances of creation as well as what is added to the ‘original’ by whom. This case study presents some of the possibilities for lexical, semantic, ethnographic, and grammatical research, as well as developing potential resources for future language awareness and teaching. In the

²⁹ <https://www.gida-global.org/> (accessed 2025-05-05)

³⁰ as evidenced by a series of posts in 2025 on a private Facebook post where my work on this Guwamu project was debated.

process, we need to understand the complex social lives of these materials, both at the time of their creation and in the contemporary world. We must incorporate these political and social (and ethical) dimensions in dealing with legacy materials, especially those relating to Indigenous languages and cultures.

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