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Planting linguistic legacy materials: some cross-disciplinary possibilities

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Thanks are due to John Giacon and David Nathan for helpful comments and feedback on Yuwaalaraay language materials.

Overview

- Issues for discussion
 - Case study: plant collection and journalistic writings from Carrawillinghi Station, south-western Queensland, by J. C. Dalton, 1865-1871
 - Outcomes of collaborative research
 - Discussion and conclusions
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Issues for discussion

- Linguists typically look for legacy linguistic materials in unprocessed/raw **field notes** of other linguists, (un)published **descriptions** (texts, grammar, dictionary), accounts by **anthropologists** or **historians**, memoirs of **travellers, explorers, local residents, or missionaries**,
 - Are there other places where important materials may be found but where linguists typically do not look?
 - How can cross-disciplinary research open windows for linguistic materials that can change knowledge and impact language communities and their interests, including language and culture revitalisation?
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Legacy linguistic materials

Legacy sources (as seen by linguists)

- Dobrin & Schwartz (2021) “historical, often analog records (field notes, recordings, texts) created by earlier researchers, missionaries, or speakers, providing crucial, sometimes exclusive, data for documenting, analyzing, and revitalizing languages.”
 - Weber (2023: 2) “the artefact as a medium containing language data – be it a Sumerian clay tablet, an early modern ethnographer’s field diary, or a present-day audio recording”
 - Silva (2025) “In linguistics, we often refer to these resources as ‘legacy materials’. They are secondhand linguistic data, acquired from past documentary efforts, mainly undertaken by outside scholars and/or missionaries.”
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Legacy sources (as seen by linguists)

- DiLEgMa website 2026: “exploring earlier descriptive materials— Legacy Materials — as objects of study in their own right, and/or to complement field data collected in person”
 - For Australianists, legacy materials typically include 19th century sources, especially for “sleeping languages”, particularly lexical questionnaires distributed by scholars like Curr, Brough-Smyth, Bates and completed by local amateurs, e.g. Digital Daisy Bates project (<https://bates.org.au/>)
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Case study: Dalton materials

Some history

- 1846 Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria established by Colonial Superintendent Charles La Trobe
- 1853 Ferdinand von Mueller (born Germany) appointed first government botanist (and 1857-1873 director of RBGV) transformed the gardens into a scientific institution, introducing thousands of plant species and founded the National Herbarium of Victoria (currently holds 1.56 million specimens of preserved plants, fungi, and algae)

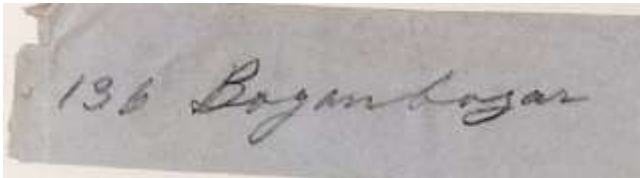


Some history

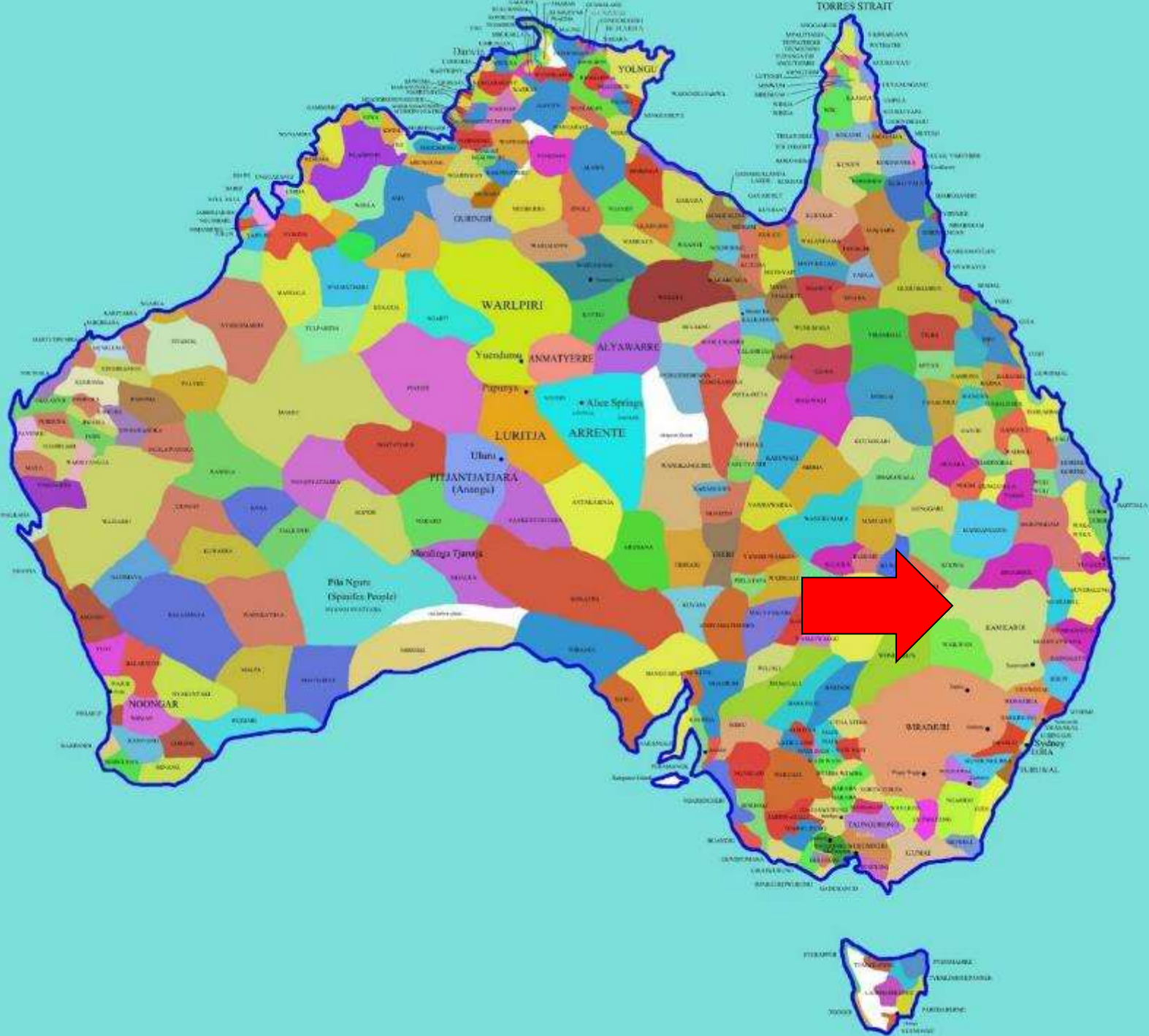
- Mueller publicized national collecting effort, receiving specimens from many amateur collectors, including local pastoralists and settlers (male and female) – newly identified plants named and scientific reference collections established
 - About 500 collections contain incidental information about Indigenous languages and cultures (e.g. names and use of plants for food, medicine, or artefacts) collected by nearly 90 individuals from across the continent.– see [Alison's map](#)
 - Collection metadata now fully digitized but record fields with any Indigenous content are not published and visible to external users (while management policies on intellectual property rights, Indigenous rights, and data sovereignty are being developed). Any outsider looking for Indigenous knowledge would not find it.
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And now

- Until 2025 no linguist had ever looked at database records or specimens until I was approached by Tom, Alison, and Sara for possible collaboration (see also below)
- Digitised collections metadata database contains a number of errors due to misreading of handwriting, especially for items not in English (e.g. Indigenous plant names mistranscribed, some given as locations or place names rather than language forms)



- <Boganzozar> → misreading of g as “z”
- <Gidgin> → misreading of rr as “n”, cf. GY *gidjiirr*,
- <Rebill> → misreading of b as “r”, cf. GY *bibil*.
- <Langarra> -- Indigenous words generally cannot begin with l





St. Cinnamulla

St George

Ballendine

Curriwilingi St.

Culgoa R. Balonne R.

Mungindi

Elalie
Eringa
Distr

R. Bellambi
R. Bokhara

R. Narran
Nollymangoult
Pockatahru

Towndry

Moree

Narran Sumpf

Ballyran Lbe

Darling (Barwan)

Thalaba

Table Land

Walgett

Pian Cr.

Mt. Lindesay
2000

Wee Waa

Macquarie



S. Duttonii

MEL. 275043

NATIONAL HERBARIUM OF VICTORIA
Seneccio Duttonii F. v. Mueller 1867
HOLOTYPE
Determined by P. O. Ballew, 5 Sept. 1989

19
Kalia

**HOLO-
TYPE**

BOTANICAL MUSEUM OF MELBOURNE.
Seneccio Duttonii
F. v. Mueller
Carrivillilly Bay
S. Dutton
1867
PUBL. MELBOURNE, 1868

Dalton collection

- 131 specimens submitted by C. Dalton to Mueller 1865-1871 (no correspondence survives, unfortunately)
 - 45 specimens have Indigenous names associated with them
 - I identified language as Yuwaalaraay from my research (1972-now, see Austin, Williams & Wurm 1980, Austin 1993, Austin 2008), and comparison with *Gaman Guladha* online Gamilaraay, Yuwaalaraay and Yuwaalayaay Dictionary (<https://dnathan.com/gaman/index.php>)
 - e.g.1 Dalton “ciaga” = Gaman **gayga** *Aeschynomene indica* L
 - e.g.2 Dalton “bumbol” = Gaman **bambul** *Capparis mitchellii* Lindl.
 - some instances of different identification of species in *Gaman Guladha* compared to vouchered reference specimens in RBGV Herbarium
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Dalton collection

- e.g.1 Dalton “ningle” *Rhagodia spinescens* R.Br
 - ≠ Gaman **nhingil** *Atriplex holocarpa*
 - e.g.2 Dalton “cabbien” *Rostellularia adscendens* R.Br
 - ≠ Gaman **gaabiin** *Eucalyptus tessellaris* (but ALA *Corymbia tessellaris*)
 - editors of Gaman confirm plants identified from amateur local knowledge and published plant identification book (Cunningham et al. 1981) **NOT** by professional botanist (cf. ALA listing)
 - Common practice by linguists and language documenters
 - Dalton collection allows checking against national reference collection (vouchered plant names) – valuable for Yuwaalaraay community, especially local Ranger Programme for training young community members about ecology and Country
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Other Dalton sources

- Sara and Susan did professional historical research on Dalton's name (and initials) using *Trove*, National Library of Australia collection of digitised books, magazines, journals, and manuscripts.
- Located series of four articles in *Brisbane Courier* newspaper 1867, republished in weekly summary edition for country areas, *Queenslander*. Series entitled 'Travelling with sheep; or the Aborigines and their habits' with the author given as 'J. C. D.'
[link](#)
- articles include 22 additional Yuwaalaraay words and phrases (with three plant names) as well as cultural descriptions like kinship and marriage sections system of Indigenous people – 10 years before major anthropological findings of Fison & Howitt 1880. System is known today but does not function socially, however personal names reflect it, e.g. Hippi ← **yibaay**

Other Dalton sources

- Dalton (1867) describes instance of missing, apparently stolen sheep -- he confronted purported thieves, shouting “Curra inda bunnaci”. This can be analysed as (Austin 1993, Williams 1980):

Curra	inda	bunnaci
<i>garraya</i>	<i>nginda</i>	<i>banaga-ya</i>
neg.imper,part	2sg.nom	run-imper
Don't run!		

- Dalton clearly knew Yuwaalaraay well enough to speak grammatically well-formed sentences -- rare in 1860s
- Location of sheep story is outside Yuwaalaraay Country, so this example shows functional multilingualism of local Aboriginal people (Dalton mentions one term in a Maric language)

Some outcomes

Challenges

- Dalton's collection in RBGV specimens numbered between 2 and 605, but 239 to 604 are missing (surviving catalogued specimens could represent just 20% of Dalton's original collection)
 - Mueller sent "duplicate" specimens to Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle; Botanischer Garten und Botanisches Museum, Freie Universität Berlin; Conservatoire et Jardin botaniques de la Ville de Genève
 - Digital catalogues of these collections are incomplete so perhaps more Yuwaalaraay materials have been planted there?
 - Future research will include checking possible international sources, and extending to Mary Kennedy's collection from Wonnaminta NSW in Malyangapa Country (140 Indigenous names), and Max Koch's collection from Mt. Lyndhurst SA in Diyari Country (both are locations of languages I have studied)
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Value of sources

- The creation and survival of vouchered specimens for Indigenous words from the 1860s is highly unusual
 - Allows anthropologists, linguists, and language revivalists more certainty about identification of plants referred to by Yuwaalaraay words
 - Wordlists of Indigenous languages (e.g. Bates) usually cite only English common names for plants, which vary across time and region
 - “scientific names” in linguists’ publications may not be botanically established – should be more transparent about this
 - This legacy material is “hidden” in places linguists typically do not look (cf. Beer 2021), and required cross-disciplinary research from botanist, historians, archivist, and linguist to locate and identify it
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Finally: the role of serendipity

- Tom and Sara found Peter's personal website via Google – **lesson:** have an easily accessible web presence setting out your research projects with a simple Contact form
 - Tom and Alison are spearheading a new initiative at RBGV that moves beyond a colonialist view of itself as a holder of scientific objects to being a place of relationship building that reconnects tangible Indigenous Knowledge associated with herbarium specimens with the traditional Country and people from which they were collected – **lesson:** the socio-political and institutional time for our collaboration is right
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Finally: the role of serendipity

- Linguistics is heavily dominated by the view that it is about form and structure and universal properties shared by all languages. Working with endangered and moribund (and “extinct”) languages not seen as “proper linguistics” as well as being “too messy“. Finding plant names in archives would be seen by some as a kind of low-level activity not worth doing – **lesson**: be willing to be eclectic and to cross disciplinary “boundaries”. It may have to potential to impact Indigenous communities positively.
 - Thank you!
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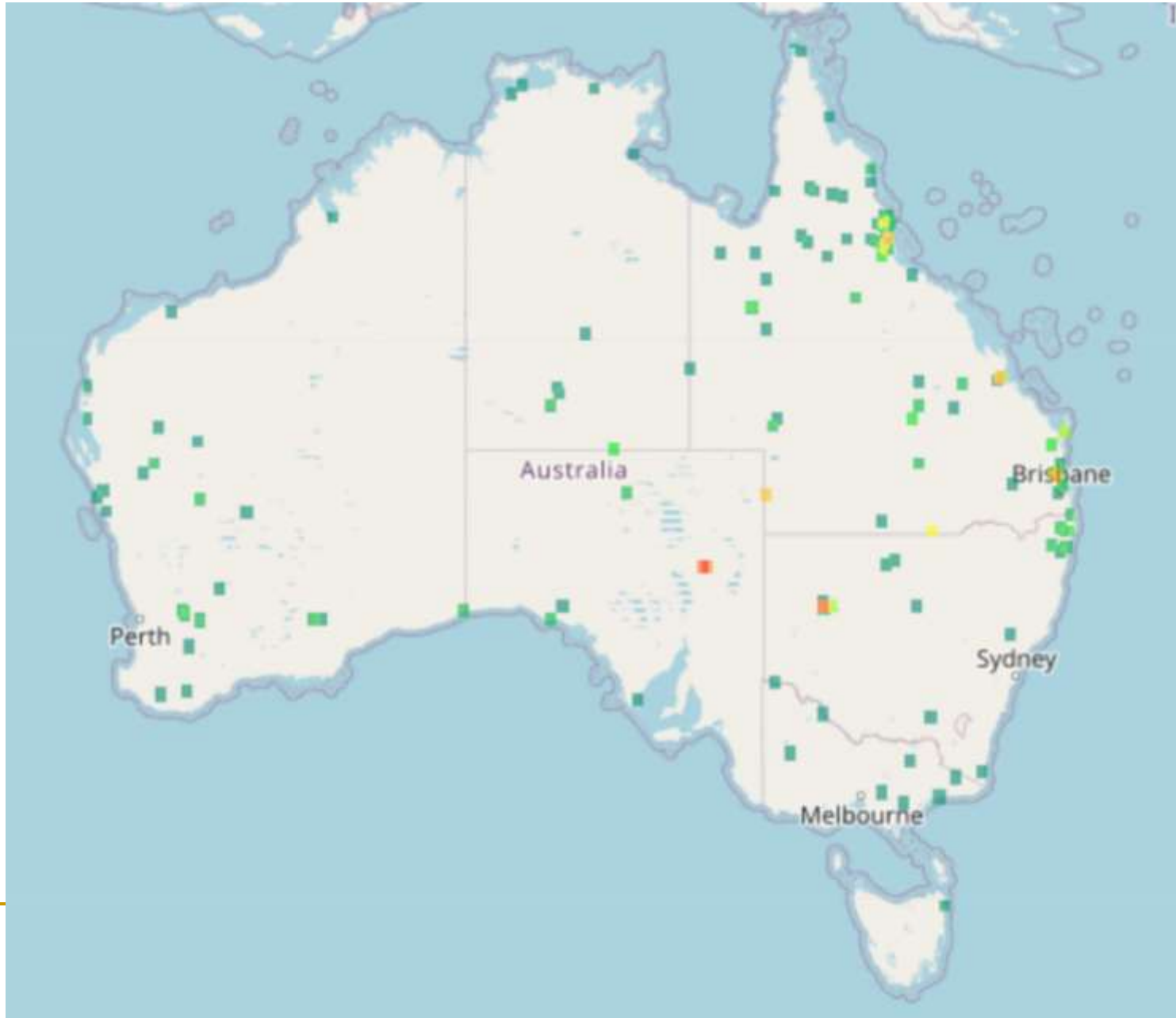
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Alison Vaughan map ([back](#))



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