1 Introduction

The extinction of language is a common phenomenon. The demise of such languages as Sumerian, Egyptian and Etruscan in the course of history illustrates this. In more recent times, numerous examples have been attested of languages going out of use as a result of vast expansion of a relatively few languages of enormous political and cultural potency like English, Russian, Spanish and Mandarin Chinese. Indeed, the loss of American and Australian Aboriginal languages well exemplifies the effect of a technologically advanced society impinging upon an indigenous community. Dixon (1980:18) estimates that 'of the 200 or so languages spoken in Australia before the European invasion about 50 are now extinct... there are probably around 100 languages that are on the path towards extinction... perhaps 50 languages are in a relatively healthy state...'.

Today language death is found in virtually every part of the world: in Scotland (e.g. Gaelic - Dorian 1981); in Western Europe (e.g. Breton - Dressler 1972); in the Middle East (e.g. Parāči, Īrmuṟi - Kieffer 1977); in North and South America (e.g. Yahi - Swadesh 1948; Luiseño, Cupeno - Hill 1973); in Australia (e.g. Gamilaraay - Austin mss); in South Asia (e.g. Limbu - Miller 1969:438); in Africa (e.g. Bom, Mmani, Shebro - Sapir 1971:63); in the Soviet Union (e.g. Batsbi - Lewis 1972; Kamas, a Uralic language - Comrie 1981:15). Hill (1978:69) suggests that 'at least half the languages in the world have disappeared in the last 500 years'.

Despite the widespread nature of the language death phenomenon, surprisingly little attention has been given to language death as a subject worthy of study in its own right. Two major
reasons for this neglect have been:
(a) the preference of the investigator to work with the oldest, most fluent speakers in order to capture the structure of the language in its most 'uncontaminated' form. The imperfect speaker, as imperfect representative of the cultural group in question, was consequently avoided;
(b) pressure from within the speech community for the investigator to deal with its most knowledgeable members.

1.1 PREVIOUS WORKS

The first monograph on the subject of language death is thought to be *How does a language die?* by Coteau (1957). Other works on dying languages can be grouped into three categories. First are studies dealing with socio-cultural aspects of language death. These include: Swadesh 1948; Darnell 1971; Miller 1971; Schlieben-Lange 1977; Kieffer 1977; Grassi 1977; Denison 1977.

In the second category are studies describing changes in the linguistic system:
(a) In phonology, rule loss in a dying Breton dialect is discussed by Dressler (1972); Dressler & Wodak-Leodolter (1977). Other works include Kieffer (1977), Austin (mss), and Pym (1984).
(b) Morphophonological rules are simplified and lost in a way revealing the structure of the morphophonology, e.g. Dorian (1973:418ff, 1977b); Dressler & Wodak-Leodolter (1977); Dressler (1972).
(c) Loss of morphology proper is discussed by Dorian (1973, 1978a) and Dressler (1977, cited in Dorian 1981:3).
(e) Many works have appeared on the lexicon. Among these are: Austin (mss) on Gamilaraay; Hill & Hill (1977) detailing the impact of Spanish on Nahuatl vocabulary. Kieffer (1977) deals with changes in the vocabulary of Iranian languages in Afghanistan.
(f) Stylistic shrinkage and loss of stylistic options are discussed by Dorian (1977a); Hill (1973:43–6).
Introduction

Comparisons of language death with language acquisition (Vogel & Vogel 1977), and with pidginization (Samarin 1971; Dorian 1978a; Trudgill 1976) have emerged as a result of the reduction process evident in both.

Thirdly, the work of Nancy Dorian thoroughly documents both social and linguistic conditions of East Sutherland Gaelic in its terminal stage. Her volume, Language Death: the Life Cycle of a Scottish Gaelic Dialect (1981), is recognized as the first detailed analysis on the subject of language death.

1.2 DEFINITIONS OF LANGUAGE DEATH

The term 'language death' has been accorded various definitions. Certain scholars view the phenomenon in terms of internal coherence of the linguistic structure and ability of the language to change: 'a language must be regarded as dead as soon as it stops developing' (Vachek in a lecture on the Prague School in Graz, cited in Denison 1977:14). The problems of such a definition are reflected in the following paradox: on the one hand a no-longer-developing language is seen as a 'dead' language; and on the other hand a language which changes too rapidly (or, if over a long period, even gradually), is often no longer regarded as the 'same language'.

Most definitions focus on diminishing social function. Denison (1977:21) states that a language disappears when 'there is nothing left for them [it] appropriately to be used about'. According to Schlieben-Lange (1977:102-3):

every time a language no longer performs a function, it will be abandoned, and if this abandonment extends to the whole geographic area, where the language is spoken, it will die.... As a language loses its dual function of establishing common actions on the one hand and establishing identities on the other, it stops functioning as a language.

The words 'death' and 'die' should not necessitate the view of language as a biological organism. Indeed as Denison (1977:13) remarks, 'it is of course not languages which live and die, but those who speak them'.

A dying language does not simply fade away due to old age; rather it will die in one of two circumstances: (a) If all
Young people's Dyirbal

speakers of that language die, e.g. the extermination of speakers of Tasmanian, and Yahi in California. This has been referred to as 'language murder' (Dressler & Wodak-Leodolter 1977:5). (b) If the language is gradually replaced by another more prestigious one, i.e. a language shift process. For detailed discussion of language maintenance and shift, see Williamson & Van Eerde (1980). Various other terms have emerged for describing the disappearance and diminishing function of a language, e.g. 'linguistic cannibalism', 'language suicide'. These are discussed by Denison (1977). The definition of language death in this study is 'the reductio ad absurdum of the narrowing of function, where a new language replaces the older one over its entire functional range' (Hill 1973:33).

The diminishing social function of a dying language is often accompanied by reduction in linguistic form. Dorian (1977a:29) observes this in terminal Gaelic: 'certainly the performance of all the semi-speakers in my sample indicates the accuracy of Haas' assumption that reduction in the use of a language will be matched by reduction in its structure'. Similar observations have been made earlier, albeit impressionistically, by scholars such as Bloomfield. Like many earlier accounts of language in its terminal stages, Bloomfield's description involves generalized comments rather than specific accounts of reduction in linguistic form, e.g. in the tribe of Menomini Indians of Wisconsin, Bloomfield found 'men who speak little English, yet bad Menomini'. Birdhawk's speech is described thus: 'he spoke with bad syntax and meagre, often inept vocabulary'. Of another Menomini speaker it was noted that 'his Menomini is atrocious. His vocabulary is small; his inflections are barbarous; he constructs sentences on a few threadbare models. He may be said to speak no language tolerably' (Bloomfield 1927:437).

While reduction in linguistic form is common to many dying languages, it is important to note that the rapidity of the death process varies greatly, e.g. Ian Green (p.c.) reports that Marithiel (North Australia) is dying out fairly quickly, in two to three generations. The Dyirbal language is also dying relatively quickly; linguistic death changes are compressed into a limited
Introduction

A timespan of about 25 years. In contrast, the Gaelic death process is much more gradual; Gaelic's demise has extended over hundreds of years.

1.3 QUESTIONS OF DEBATE TO BEAR IN MIND

A study of language death necessitates certain questions important to current linguistic debate. The questions are of two kinds. First are those dealing with the grammatical specifics of the language concerned, e.g. which linguistic features show change? Are certain features more resistant to change than others? Is a loss in the language system compensated for by changes elsewhere in the grammatical system?

The second set of questions deals with universal implications of change in dying languages. Considerations such as direction, processes and rate of change in terminal stages of various languages are grounds for comparison. Specifically, can grammatical change in the final stage of a language facing extinction be shown to proceed in much the same orderly way as grammatical change in less drastic phases of linguistic evolution? Which features of language structure generally indicate tendency to change?

As yet there is insufficient empirical evidence about terminal language stages to provide definite answers to these questions and establish universal implications about the process of language extinction. Lehmann (1962:111) notes this need for further empirical studies:

Numerous instances are attested of languages going out of use: Cornish in the eighteenth century, Dalmatian in the nineteenth, and today many indigenous languages throughout the world. Thorough documentation of the stages leading to their extinction would be of great interest to historical linguists. Many languages we know about are now extinct; the steps to their extinction may be understood more clearly if we have thorough descriptions of languages now on the way to extinction.
2 Aim and method

This study investigates language death in Dyirbal. Originally this language of at least ten dialects was spoken over more than 8,000 square kilometres in the rainforest area of north-east Queensland. Today, Dyirbal is virtually limited to isolated pockets of the Jambun community at Murray Upper. Even within this closed group, Dyirbal is currently being replaced by a variety of English. The aim of this study is to examine the sociolinguistic situation at Jambun, and provide an account of linguistic changes taking place in the last phases of Dyirbal. The Dyirbal situation was ideally suited to a case study of language death. A thorough documentation of the traditional language had been made by Dixon (1972). By comparing young people's Dyirbal with Dixon's traditional data, it is possible to identify changes as the language moves toward extinction.

2.1 DATA COLLECTION

Setting. The data on which this analysis is based was collected in the course of six months' fieldwork (January - June 1982) at Murray Upper. During this period I worked with the young people who are the children and grandchildren of Dixon's traditional Dyirbal speakers. Most Murray Upper Aborigines live at Jambun, but a few live some seven kms away at Bilyana and Warrami. The Jambun Aboriginal community is located approximately 180 kms south of Cairns. It has a resident population of about 100, and is the last area where Dyirbal is spoken in a sizeable community. (Further details of the sociolinguistic situation are given in chapter 3.)
2.2 PROBLEMS

It is necessary to be aware of various problems associated with data collection of a dying language for such problems influence the outcome of a field study. The first set of problems stems from the stigma associated with a language in its terminal stage. Unlike older traditional Dyirbal speakers (35 years and older), many of the younger speakers (15–30 years) held their own 'simplified' brand of language in low esteem. They considered their 'bits an' pieces' Dyirbal unworthy of investigation. This negative impression presented initial difficulties in the availability of informants and the elicitation of data. For example, it was two to three months before certain younger speakers, my peers of 20–24 years, addressed me in Dyirbal. Until then, ability to speak their language was rigorously denied.

Secondly, the presence of an outside investigator in an indigenous group may well affect the 'naturalness' of social and linguistic behaviour, thus influencing observations.

The third problem involves the importance of natural context in data collection. There is likely to be considerable difference between speech recorded in formal elicitation and that of more natural, informal contexts. In dealing with language in its terminal phase, it is often possible to elicit isolated grammatical structures in formal elicitation sessions. This data indicates the informant's more careful speech style, and ability to form such structures. However, the actual frequency of the particular linguistic feature in the informant's natural speech is quite a different matter, e.g. EH's careful speech consistently lacked ergative inflection. In contrast, in informal conversation to a peer, EH frequently used ergative case affix -gù. Thus it is important to distinguish between how the informant thinks Dyirbal should be spoken, i.e. careful elicitation speech, and the way she/he actually does speak in informal situations.

2.3 METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

In order to study Dyirbal in its terminal stages, data was collected according to the following plan:
1. A set of stimulus sentences for translation into Dyirbal was presented to the speaker. Approximately 200 sentences were designed to include, when translated, many of the significant morphological and syntactic features of Dyirbal (e.g. ergative case marking; S-O pivot syntactic operations; verb tense system). To check for consistency, the same stimulus sentences were repeated at the end of my six months work, and inconsistencies noted. Such data enables us to identify and observe linguistic change ceteris paribus (i.e. without complication of variation triggered by social variables such as setting, interlocuter, topic), as the language moves towards extinction.

2. Texts were recorded in the casual context of 'story-telling' sessions within the in-group. These texts included a wide range of topics including traditional stories, events of everyday life, and situations in which the speaker was in great danger. (I also taped texts from two fluent young speakers who were not peer-group members.)

3. Informal conversation between various members of the speech community was recorded, with notes of the particular social variables involved.

4. A lexical count was taken using a 500-item list. Informants were asked to give Dyirbal equivalents for English words.

5. Understanding skill was tested by: (a) playing traditional texts told by older fluent speakers, and asking the informant to retell them in his own Dyirbal; (b) (more successfully) presenting a set of ten Dyirbal sentences for response or translation into English.

6. Questions on attitudes and use of Dyirbal were asked in an informal context.

7. During my six months visit to Jambun, informal observations were made of socio-cultural and sociolinguistic features of the community.

In the following, chapter 3 provides a sociolinguistic account of terminal Dyirbal, describing the historical setting and contemporary language situation at Jambun. In chapter 4, structural changes in the language system are described. Chapter 5 deals with the use of Dyirbal in a natural context, and
Aim and method

details characteristic speech features of two peer-groups within the community. Chapter 6 focuses on semantic change in noun class membership. Lexicon is dealt with in chapter 7. Lexical counts and areas of resistance in vocabulary are detailed. Chapter 8 gives brief mention of phonology. Chapter 9 describes distinctive linguistic features of Jambun English and the influence of the Dyirbal language system upon this non-standard English variety. Chapter 10 views the findings of this study in the light of current linguistic debate, taking issue with various claims. General summary and prognosis for the future of Dyirbal is provided in chapter 11.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 2

1 There are a few other Dyirbal speakers at Mt. Garnet, Ravenshoe, Boogan, Malanda, Millaa Millaa and Kennedy who remember the language and use it occasionally.

2 All of the socio-cultural and linguistic data in this volume was collected between January and June 1982, and the figures given (e.g. ages, population, linguistic quantification) are consistent with the time of the investigation. There are a few gaps in the linguistic data; these were filled in at a later date, and the results were found to be surprisingly consistent with the 1982 responses. Such data, however, is not included because the time inconsistency, albeit slight, would erode the true effect of a time scale comparison.

3 This method of testing change in a dying language was first developed by Dorian (1973).
3 Sociolinguistic perspective

3.1 SOCIO-HISTORICAL SETTING

3.1.1 PRE-WHITE CONTACT 1860 - TRIBES AS ISOLATED UNITS WITH SEPARATE LANGUAGES

Before the arrival of European civilization, Dyirbal was spoken by at least six contiguous tribes in north-east Queensland. Each tribe was basically endogamous and functioned as a political unit. It is likely that each tribe had about 500 members. There were a number of local groups within each tribe named after the terrain in which their members lived for the major part of the year. As hunters and gatherers, local groups would move about within the tribal boundary. Certainly the tribe formed a cohesive unit. Social interaction between tribes was infrequent, perhaps limited to occasional gatherings such as corroborees. To cross over tribal boundaries without due cause, such as a message stick, was to risk death by spearing (see also Dixon 1976a). There was a name for each tribal 'language' - Ngajan, Gulqay, Girramay, Dyirru, Jirrbal and Mamu. Mamu speakers were divided into Waribarra, Dulgubarra and other groups; the tribe speaking Jirrbal was divided between Gambilbarra and Jabunbarra groups. In this way, at least ten dialect units may be distinguished. (The map indicates traditional boundaries.)

For members of each tribe, language served an important identity function; speakers recognized the speech of the neighbouring tribe to be a different 'language'. To the linguist, however, the tribal 'languages' are clearly varieties of a single language. These dialects have almost identical grammar and neighbouring dialects have 80-90% common vocabulary. On these