Note on the Orthography of Australian Aboriginal Languages
Christine Nicholls

Introduction

What *is* an orthography?

An orthography is a standardised, conventional system for writing a specific language. It includes a prescribed system of spelling, punctuation and diacritical marks, also known as diacritics. Diacritical marks (also sometimes called "signs") include the accents that are often placed either on top of or underneath a letter in a particular word as a guide to correct pronunciation.

For one example, in French, the word *français* (meaning "French"), in which the "ç" sound is pronounced like the English "s", as in the word *garçon* ("boy"). This indicates to readers how to pronounce that word correctly. To English speakers this word sounds more like 'gar-sonn'.

The French word "élève" meaning "pupil" uses two different pronunciations of the letter "e", indicated by two differently-oriented accents. The second "è" is pronounced like the "e" in "bed". So, the whole word is actually pronounced a little like, although not exactly like, 'ee-lev').

Another example, which in English is called "diaeresis*"*, means that two dots are placed above a vowel sound. In English today, diaeresis is dying out (if not already dead!). For example, a word that was derived from French was always spelled "naïve" in my Australian childhood—describing a person without much experience, or someone who's easily taken in by scams or other things. Diaeresis was routinely used in English until about 30 years ago, but this has now (mostly) been dropped by English speakers. Now the word is simply written as "naive". The diaresis is still used in many other non-English languages in the world, though.

The diaeresis is still very useful in many other world languages because when there are two vowels next to each other, it shows that these two vowels need to be separated. English speakers tend to run two vowels together into a single syllable (sound unit), for example "beef", but diaeresis marks signal that there are two different syllables in the word "naive" (pronounced "nay-eve" or "ny-eve" by most Aussies".
Other examples include the girls' names "Zoë and Chloë", but these days English speakers rarely use the two dots on the "ë" when the words are in written form.

Diacritics are useful though because if people (especially children learning to read and write) write "Chloe" and "Zoe" they'll most probably pronounce those words 'Clo' and 'Zo', in other words, incorrectly). The word "Noël", meaning Christmas, is pronounced "No-ell" and is part of a popular Christmas carol, also separates the "o" and the "e" so it too actually has two syllables—while in the boys' name Noel, now pronounced with only one syllable, sounds like "Noll". Other European and non-European languages also use diaresis, like Spanish – for example "*pingüino"* meaning "penguin". In Arabic, the name 'Ishak' for a boy or man also uses the diaresis, in this example to separate the first two letters of that name.

The example above is translated into English along the lines of "I know a man called Is-hak." (a name similar to "Isaac" in English and other languages). Arabic, like Hebrew, is written from the right-hand side to the left-hand side, not like Anglo-European languages including English, that are written from left to right!

The Many Different Orthographies of Australian Aboriginal Languages

Why these orthographies have changed over the years is partly because non-Aboriginal Australians and other English or European speakers who arrived by boat were often amateurs, not trained linguists. Numerous orthographies have been applied to Australian Aboriginal languages, properly known as "Australian languages" because they belong and are spoken only in Australia and nowhere else in the world. Why these orthographies have changed over the years is partly because non-Aboriginal Australians and other English or European speakers who arrived by boat were often amateurs. More than 220 years ago, some of Captain Cook's sailors developed the first written words from Australian languages from the Guugu Yimithirr people's language (earlier spelled Guugu Yimidhirr, and in other ways, too). That was back in 1770, now more than 250 years ago – the time when Captain Cook stuck the British flag into this country, claiming it for the Brits.

The Endeavour crashed into a reef off just off Guugu Yimithirr country, along coastal Queensland. That area is now called "Cooktown" – no prizes for guessing why!

The crew had to stay there for quite some time (months) to mend the holes in the boat to make it seaworthy again. That's the place where Cook and the crew first saw their first-ever kangaroo, a word that has now entered many world languages. They got to know the friendly locals, who taught them some Guugu Yimithirr words. The problem is that there were MANY different words for "kangaroo" in the Guugu Yimithirr language, dependent on their colour, size, or whether or not they had joeys in their pouches and even more.

Some crew members who wrote down these words were gifted, but many were most definitely not up to the task of accurately recording words from Australian languages. This happened well before tape-recording was invented, and some non-Aboriginal people made bad - and lasting – spelling errors.

One reason for this is that there are some very different sounds in Australian languages, unlike sounds in English (and vice versa). One different sound in many Australian languages is "ng" which can be only ONE sound, unlike the English pronunciation of words like beginni**ng.** In many Australian languages, "ng" is used not only *in* a word, but also is at the ***beginning*** of a word. That makes it hard to pronounce it correctly. If you think of how the *ng* sound in Si***ng***apore is pronounced then you will come close to the mark.

The Yolngu Matha-speaking people, who live in the extreme north of the Northern Territory and on some nearby off-shore islands, have come up with a different

symbol for "ng" as only one sound unit, which is "*ŋ"*. As a result, they often spell Yolngu like this as: "Yolŋu Matha".

That literally means *Yolŋu* (the name of this group of people) while Matha means either "language" or "tongue". The Yolŋu people have even adapted their computers to include the symbol "ŋ" to write correctly in their own language but also to educate non-Aboriginal public and the many people who visit their country each year to attend the Garma festival. They, like other Aboriginal groups, are very proud of their language.

The Orthography of Ada Petyarre's language— the Anmatyerre language

In the case of this exhibition, showcasing the artworks of the late Ada Bird Petyarre, we're using the orthography that was in place during Ada's lifetime. She was born at Atnangkerre on Eastern Anmatyerre country. More recently the "e" at the end of this word and many other Anmatyerre words have been dropped, because it's misleading – it doesn't reflect how those words should be pronounced properly. Nowadays those two words are spelled as "Anmatyerr" and "Atnangkerr".

There have been many different ways of spelling this language name over the years, including:

Nmatjera

Unmatjera

Anmatjara

Yanmajara

Janmadjara or Janmadjar

Yanmadjerra

Imatjera

Urmitchee

Janmatjiri

Yanmedjara

Yanmadjari

In the past 'Anmatyerre' has been spelled in the ways listed above, and even more. Some of the variations are a result of different pronunciations of that word by nearby Aboriginal groups, who spoke different languages. For example, the Warlpiri people, with whom I lived for many years, begin this word with a "Y" sound, because every word in the Warlpiri language begins with a consonant and always ends with a vowel

sound. In other words, Warlpiri people have "Warlpiri-ised" the pronunciation of Anmatyerre, just as English-speaking people have "anglicised" the pronunciation of Aboriginal words.

For years now, professional linguists have become successively more involved in creating more accurate orthographies. In the case of the Anmatyerre language, the linguist Jenny Green has been very helpful in the process.

More recently though, there's been much greater input from Aboriginal speakers into the spelling of their own, unique Australian languages. They are now making decisions about how the languages that *belong* to them should be spelled. This increase in Aboriginal decision-making and participation in the spelling of their own languages is happening all over Australia. And this is how it should be – these languages rightfully belong to their owners and speakers.