# 1 ***Maaya waab*** *(play with sound): song language and spoken language in the south-west of Western Australia*

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## Abstract

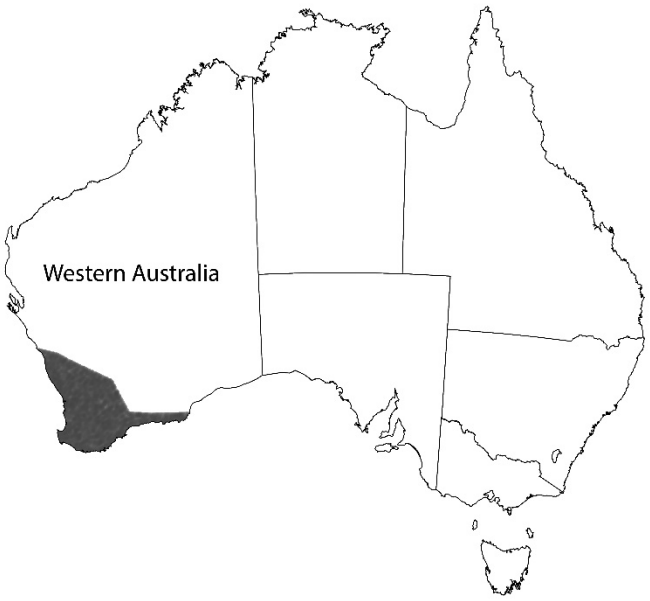
Records of song performances in the endangered Nyungar language from the south-west of Western Australia offer examples of language usage by fluent speakers and are powerful symbols of cultural identity. These songs hold inherent potential for enhancing Nyungar language transmission and could also contribute to the objectives of Aboriginal empowerment often sought by language revivalists. However, as Aboriginal languages can sometimes be used with greater phonetic and morphological flexibility in song, an understanding of the differences between spoken and sung varieties of Nyungar language is vital to informing attempts to utilise traditional song texts in language maintenance activities. Nyungar words may be modified, extended or abbreviated in song. Analysis of such phenomena is complicated by the inconsistent nature of archival recordings and written records of the Nyungar language. Although a process of comparison and deduction may assist in interpreting song texts, Nyungar songs must also be understood and respected as powerful embodiments of culture and Country. As a Nyungar music researcher and language activist, I undertake the analysis and consolidation of a Nyungar song repertoire as a step toward the recirculation of Nyungar song traditions.

*Keywords:* revitalisation, singing, song, south-west, Western Australia, Noongar, Nyungar, cultural sustainability, endangered language, song language

## 1 Introduction

Nyungar (also spelled 'Noongar') is the endangered Aboriginal language of the south-west of Western Australia, an area stretching from Cape Arid National Park in the east, moving in a northwesterly arc to Dongara and encompassing Perth, the capital city of Western Australia (see Map 1.1). Over 30,000 people identify as Nyungar (SWALSC 2009), constituting one of the largest Aboriginal language groups in Australia. As is the case with many Aboriginal music styles, traditional Nyungar songs are primarily vocal music, featuring lyrics in the Nyungar language. This implies an inextricable link between Nyungar language and Nyungar song traditions, a co-dependency that is critical for their vitality. Since 1829, various factors associated with colonisation have caused the intergenerational oral transmission of Nyungar language and song to diminish (Bracknell 2014a). The Australian Bureau of Statistics census lists Nyungar as a language spoken at home by 167 people in 1996 (McConvell and Thieberger 2001: 44); 196 people in 2001 (AIATSIS

2005: 75); 240 people in 2006; and, 369 people in 2011 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017), reflecting a slowly growing community of speakers, or at least a growing identification with the language. This small statistical increase is a likely result of Nyungar language revitalisation efforts undertaken over the past three decades. Walsh (2001) notes similar gains made by Aboriginal language revival movements elsewhere in 'settled' Australia. While a few senior Nyungar remember old songs, a significant number of song texts are also found in archival notes and audio recordings.




**Map 1.1**: The Nyungar language region

As a Nyungar of the Wirlomin clan from the south coast of Western Australia, I have participated in language revitalisation activities with the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project (Wirlomin Project) – a voluntary organisation with over 80 members – since 2010. Holding regular workshops, the Wirlomin Project combines archival data, the knowledge of senior Wirlomin people, and community development agendas to consolidate and enhance Nyungar cultural heritage, developing four illustrated, bilingual books since 2007 (Scott and Woods 2011; Scott and Roberts 2011; Scott and Nelly 2013; Scott, Brown and Winmar 2013). On the invitation of senior Wirlomin people, I undertook archival research on Nyungar song in 2013 and subsequently shared audio recordings and song transcriptions in subsequent Wirlomin Project workshops. In these workshops, we practiced reading stories we had developed in the Nyungar language, but found it more straightforward to sing the old songs. The songs were shorter and easier to remember, plus we could all participate at the same time.

As songs are of particular cultural importance across Aboriginal Australia, this should not have come as a surprise. Records of colonial interaction with Nyungar throughout the nineteenth century, including the journals of surveyor Sir George Grey (1841), suggest that the Nyungar language was once sung almost as frequently as it was spoken, with song constituting a primary domain of language use (Bracknell 2014b). Today, as rare examples of compositions by fluent language speakers and powerful symbols of cultural identity, old Nyungar songs have the potential to enhance the maintenance of Nyungar language and bolster cultural sustainability agendas. Clear links exist between singing and increased aptitude for second language learning (Jolly 1975), and teachers of threatened Aboriginal languages often rely on song as a mnemonic device (Hobson et al. 2010).

One of the greatest obstacles for the Aboriginal language revitalisation movement may well be the Australian accent, with its prominent near-open front unrounded vowel (æ), This sound is not found in the Nyungar language, but is common to the varieties of English most Nyungar speak as their first language today. To compensate, as Techmeier (1969) suggests, the repeated performance of songs in language learning promotes and reinforces correct pronunciation.

Edwards and Hobson (2013), moreover, assert that traditional Aboriginal song performances are valuable in language learning contexts as they reflect the correct stress and rhythmic patterns of Aboriginal languages. Nonetheless, terms and phrases in Aboriginal languages can sometimes undergo syllabic alteration when sung in order to meet the metrical requirements of various Aboriginal song genres (Turpin 2007a), often resulting in distortion of the patterns of syllabic prominence found in regular speech (Turpin and Laughren 2013). This kind of change is evident at the beginning of a Nyungar song performed by Charlie Traveller (Hercus 1965-1970):

**Table 1.1**: Comparison of sung phrase with spoken equivalent

| | **Sung phrase** | **Spoken equivalent** |
|---|---|---|
| **Rhythm** | ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♩ ♩ | ♪ ♪ ♩ ♩ |
| **Accent** | > > | > > |
| **Lyric** | *ma nga rda -nga dwerd a* | *mangardang dwerd* |
| **Gloss** | jam.wattle -COM dog | |

In this example, stress is placed on the third syllable of the first word, rather than the first syllable as is common to most spoken Aboriginal language. Aboriginal song language also may be variously distinguished from spoken language by its economy of expression, allusion or specialised vocabulary (Walsh 2007). Clearly, in light of the current need to consolidate Nyungar song texts both for potential use in language maintenance activities and to assist in ensuring the sustainability of Nyungar musical traditions, an understanding of the differences between spoken and sung Nyungar language is essential.

As Barwick (2006:57) observes, Aboriginal song texts 'may be short but they are often tricky' to analyse. The endangered state of the Nyungar language itself and the limited nature of archival resources available renders the task of interpreting meaning, form and function of the language used in Nyungar song particularly challenging. As a Nyungar person, my motivation to investigate Nyungar song traditions is Nyungar-centric, coalescing around individual and collective aims to consolidate and enhance a shared local cultural heritage (Bracknell 2015a). From the perspective of an ethnomusicologist and language activist with no formal linguistic training, this chapter will discuss the complexities associated with the interpretation of Nyungar song language, especially when dealing with written colonial records. The primary sources for this study consists of 102 public Nyungar song texts, including 80 fragmented and inconsistent written archival examples of lyrics collected between 1839 and 1930 and, additionally, audio recordings of 22 songs performed − sometimes multiple times − between 1965 and 2015 (see table 1.2).[1]

**Table 1.2**: Nyungar song text sources for this study

| **Source** | **Original documentation** | | | **Repeat performances** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Written song texts** | **Texts with musical notation** | **Audio recordings** | |
| Grey 1841 | 10 | | | |
| Hassell and Davidson 1936 | 1 | | | |
| Calvert 1894 | | 3 | | |
| Bates, Daisy 1904-1912 | 65 | | | |
| Laves 1931 | 1 | | | |

[1] Additional Nyungar songs recorded by Wooltorton (1989) and McCabe (2004) are not considered in this brief study. Chauncy (1878) also notated a Nyungar melody with no text.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hercus 1965-1970 | | | 2 | |
| Tindale 1966-1968 | | | 5 | |
| Douglas 1965-1967 | | | 1 | |
| Tindale 1968 | | | 1 | 2 |
| Brandenstein 1967-1970 | | | 8 | |
| Brandenstein 1971-1976 | | | | 2 |
| Thieberger 1986 | | | 2 | |
| McCabe and Miniter 2001 | | | 1 | 1 |
| Bracknell 2015b | | | 2 | |
| **Total per category** | 77 | | 22 | 4 |
| **Total original song texts** | 102 | | | |

## 2 Spoken and sung language

The breadth of difference between language used in everyday speech and that used in song varies considerably across Aboriginal Australia. At one end of the spectrum, certain musical traditions may feature songs consisting entirely of non-lexical vocables, or employing spirit languages (Apted 2010), which may be incongruent with the local spoken language to the point of being completely un-translatable (Walsh 2007). At the other end, sometimes there is great similarity between song language and spoken language (Koch and Turpin 2008). A survey of archival records initially suggests reasonable correlation between spoken and sung Nyungar language. However, some song texts appear more economical than the spoken language, while others feature the embellishment or extension of comparable spoken terms.

Turpin (2005) demonstrates considerable differences in pronunciation between spoken and sung language in Central Australia, with language often changing in song as a result of particular rhythmic and structural constraints. However, in some Aboriginal language contexts, the omission of syllables, softening of consonants and the elongation or diphthongisation of vowels can be common in both singing and normal speech (Walsh 2007). In spoken Nyungar language, for example, Brandenstein (1988:1) defines ‘a’, ‘i’ and ‘e’ as ‘filler vowels’. Additionally, Bates (1914:66) describes Nyungar speakers altering words purely for ‘the sake of euphony’. Conversely, a similar range of variation exists in terms of the extent to which Aboriginal song language may employ the same morphemes and syntax as spoken language (Walsh 2007). When sung, certain Aboriginal languages may be simplified, with singers relaxing typical grammatical conventions (Koch and Turpin 2008). On the other hand, some insights on particular grammatical structures in endangered Aboriginal languages have only emerged as a result of examining song (Barwick, Birch, and Evans 2007).

Due to the small number of recorded song performances and the limited documentation of the language, an appraisal of Nyungar song language is challenging, particularly as the language has changed considerably in recent decades (Dench 1995). Few living speakers remember songs, let alone possess capabilities to ‘straighten them out from the perspective of a participant’ (Donaldson 1984:230). As Walsh (2007:132) observes, the rich expressive language commonly found in Aboriginal songs is usually one of the ‘first casualties’ of a ‘rapid decline in language use’. Therefore, in the case of endangered and sparsely documented languages such as Nyungar, it can be extremely difficult to make distinctions between specialised poetic terms that were only used in song and vocabulary just rarely used – and thus undocumented – in spoken language. It is similarly problematic to recognise with certainty when spoken language is being altered in song.

## 3 Interpreting the archive

As with any oral tradition, Nyungar songs can only be recorded or transcribed from performance, and performances may vary in a range of ways. Rather than representing examples of singing within a traditional performance context, most audio recordings of Nyungar songs feature singers trying to remember or 'bring up' songs as they perform them, often for the first time in many decades. The singers on these recordings sometimes stop singing altogether at various points of a song to offer explanations to the researcher. While incredibly valuable in terms of providing melodic, rhythmic and lyrical information, the sparse and disjointed nature of most archival recordings of Nyungar song clouds analysis of the structural characteristics of particular song texts.

Written records of Nyungar song lyrics are even more problematic. Early transcribers rarely understood the complexities of Nyungar language, nor possessed formal linguistic training. As a result, Nyungar song lyrics are often written using a range of inconsistent, problematic orthographies. Even if the orthography can be interpreted, the text may or may not be properly split up into words. Indeed, misheard song lyrics – known as 'mondegreens' – are not uncommon in a range of language contexts (Turpin and Stebbins 2010). It follows that linguists, native speakers and even skilled Aboriginal music practitioners would struggle to consistently identify the exact intended terms in a given song text. Tomlinson (2007) goes so far as to suggest that the act of writing down and notating an Indigenous song is tantamount to its colonisation; reducing and enshrining it in written form according to an imperialist's narrow and perhaps erroneous interpretation, and consequently trapping it as an artefact of the past. Translations, transcriptions and notes provided by non-Nyungar researchers and writers can assist in the process of interpreting Nyungar song texts. However, relying exclusively on this material is problematic, as it is all refracted and possibly distorted through the lens of the colonial interpreter.

Audio recordings may offer much more veracity and contextual data than written records, although the existing archival audio recordings of Nyungar song mostly consist of poor-quality, frequently interrupted recordings of song performances, which are rarely accompanied by detailed explanations. Further complicating matters, it is not uncommon in any given region of Australia for singers to know songs in neighbouring languages or even languages far removed from the local area (Turpin 2011:33). Thus, a web of contingencies may obfuscate any understanding of Nyungar song based on archival examples alone. Given the potential for divergent understandings amongst singers, let alone the additional variables impacting on endangered song traditions, my interpretation of meaning in Nyungar song texts can by no means be considered authoritative, but may be better conceptualised as entering into dialogue with the archive, the endangered language and the song tradition.

Due to their poetic and sometimes abstruse nature, Nyungar song texts, like much Aboriginal music, may hold multiple meanings (Walsh 2007). As spoken Nyungar words may be elongated or abbreviated in song, the process of translating Nyungar songs needs to begin with the identification of Nyungar root-words within lyrics. As Nyungar is characterised by the complex use of functional suffixes, the secondary part is to establish whether these suffixes appear in song. The third step involves distinguishing 'poetic' or 'musical' alterations to spoken Nyungar language. This whole process must be underpinned by contextual understandings of Nyungar song. In efforts to ascertain the actual meaning of particular Nyungar song texts, rather than simply furnishing a literal translation, songs must be considered as constituting just one element of a 'package' of meaning, which may also include ownership, melody, rhythm, dance and performance context (Turpin 2005).

In his attempt to reconstitute an extinct language spoken by Indigenous people of the Californian coast, Broadbent (1957:287-279) asserts that the process of language 'reconstitution' involves the comparison of different versions of what various recorders of a language hear and transcribe. A diverse body of both scholarly and historical sources contains information about Nyungar language, with various investigators and observers employing a range of different, and somewhat unreliable, orthographies to document a number of similar-sounding Nyungar dialects (Thieberger 2004). English-speaking explorers and pastoralists with no linguistic training have compiled most of the

primary sources of Nyungar vocabularies. However, Nyungar language includes a number of sounds not heard in English and difficult to represent using Roman script (Douglas 1968).

As is common in most Aboriginal Australian languages, the Nyungar language includes soft consonant sounds vocalised between 'b' and 'p'; 'd' and 't'; and, 'g' and 'k'. Generally, northern Nyungar speakers seem to favour the 'b' and 'd' sound, while southern speakers emphasise more of a 'p' and a 't'. Although perceivable to the point of identifying the local 'accent' of a speaker, these differences do not affect the interpretation of literal meaning. Hence, disagreement still exists among scholars and community members on the most appropriate orthography to use for writing Nyungar language, the definition and usage of particular words or phrases, and the degree of dialectic diversity in the south-west of Western Australia. The variety of spellings systems used across Nyungar language resources and in written archival examples of Nyungar song necessitates a flexible approach to word identification, in which various options are voiced and considered in a process of comparison to arrive at deduced, if not authoritative, interpretations. Employing this method, I have identified over 250 distinct Nyungar language root-words found in song texts.

Linguists offer explanations of Nyungar grammar and morphology (Laves 1931; Douglas 1968; Brandenstein 1988) but the pressures of language shift and the presence of few fluent speakers constrain efforts to fully document the Nyungar language and its linguistic conventions as applied in its original spoken form (Dench 1995). The Nyungar Language is similar to other Pama-Nyungan languages in that it is agglutinative, featuring root-words that can take on one or more suffixes. Dependent on context, these suffixes can serve various functions and may be slightly altered to achieve 'euphony' in spoken language (Bates 1914: 66). Table 1.3 lists some of the posited Nyungar suffixes found in the songs. One can reasonably conclude that spoken and sung Nyungar language employ similar morphology.

**Table 1.3**: A list of Nyungar suffixes found in song, illustrating some of their functions

| **Suffix** | **Functions** | **Example** |
|---|---|---|
| -iny | Inceptive, Progressive | Waang (talk) > Waang**iny** (starting to talk, talking) |
| -idj | Completive | > Waang**idj** (just finished talking) |
| -an | Continuative | > Waang**an** (continuous or repetitive talk) |
| -l | Nominative, Locative | Kura (the distant past) > Kura**l** (in the distant past) |
| -ng | Possessive, Comitative | Wardan (sea) > Wardan**ang** (of or belonging to the sea) |
| -ak | Locative | > Wardan**ak** (on or by the sea) |
| -ak | Purposive | Kodj (axe) > Kodj**ak** (using an axe) |
| -ap | Associative | > Kodj**ap** (place associated with axes) |
| -min | Associative, Collective | Wirlo (curlew) > Wirlo**min** (group of 'curlew-associated' people) |
| -kar | Collective | Kulong (child) > Kulong**kar** (group of children) |
| -bərt | Negator | Dwongk (ear) > Dwongk**bərt** (without ears, deaf) |

## 4 Poetic alterations

Describing Nyungar song language, Bates (1985:338) writes that ordinary terms 'undergo certain changes when they are utilised in song in order to ensure a certain harmonious equality of syllables'. Similarly, Gordon Locker, a singer from the Pilbara region of WA (cited in Brehaut, Stevens, and Vitenburgs 2001:63), notes that singers 'sometimes change the words a bit to make them fit in'. The phenomenon of aesthetic alteration of spoken vocabulary in Aboriginal song indicates that the translation of Nyungar songs requires a great deal more consideration than the comparatively straightforward translation of speech. Such changes to language imply the adherence to particular rhythmic structures or intended rhythmic, dynamic or poetic effects as found in Aboriginal song elsewhere in Australia (Barwick Birch and Evans 2007; Turpin 2007b; Treloyn 2009).

Using song lyrics performed by Nebinyan of Two Peoples Bay as examples, Bates (1904-1912) explains how a kind of '[p]oetic licence was indulged in when necessary', with the singer adapting words from their spoken context to better suit their sung context. In tables 1.4 and 1.5, I illustrate such differences between the language in each song text and the comparable spoken root words and suffixes, based on my interpretation of various excerpts of Nyungar songs.

**Table 1.4**: Five Nyungar song texts and comparable spoken text

| **Performer/Reference** | **Song text** | **Spoken equivalent** |
|---|---|---|
| **A.** Nebinyan<br>(Bates 1904-1912) | *kaeb-uru kumbar-a*<br><br>*kaarl-a-iny-a yirra-ng-a*<br><br>*kumbar warin*<br><br>*yirra-ng-a kumbar warin* | *kaeb kumbar*<br>water large<br>*kaarl-iny yirra-ng*<br>fire-PROG above-COM<br>*kumbar wardan*<br>large sea<br>*yirra-ng kumbar wardan*<br>above-COM large sea |
| **B.** Ngilgian<br>(Bates 1904-1912) | *maang-arl-a maang-arl-a*<br><br>*warda baal*<br><br>*dawool ken ken ken*<br><br>*bard-i bard-i bard-i bard-iny* | *mamang-al mamang-al*<br>whale-LOC whale-LOC<br>*wardan baal*<br>sea it<br>*dawool ken ken ken*<br>thigh dance dance dance<br>*bard bard bard bard-iny*<br>dart dart dart dart-PROG |
| **C.** C. Dabb<br>(Brandenstein 1967-1970) | *dely-bərt*<br><br>*mando mandorn-ap* | *dely-bərt*<br>sea foam-NEG<br>*mandorn mandorn-ap*<br>Mondrain Isl. Mondrain Isl.-ASS |
| **D.** S. Dabb<br>(Brandenstein 1967-1970) | *kokandjeri waab-iny-eri* | *kokandjeri waab-iny*<br>Sheep play-PROG |
| **E.** L. Roberts<br>(McCabe and Miniter 2001) | *kurli maat waang-an-ang-a* | *kurli maat waang-an-ang*<br>bush-turkey leg talk-CONT-COM |

**Table 1.5**: Poetic alterations in song texts A, B, C, D and E

| **Device** | **Examples** | **Change** |
|---|---|---|
| Vowel epenthesis | A. *kumbar* > *kumbar<u>a</u>*<br>A. *karliny* > *karl<u>a</u>iny<u>a</u>*<br>A. *yirrang* > *yirrang<u>a</u>*<br>B. *mamangal* > *maangarl<u>a</u>*<br>B. *bard* > *bard<u>i</u>*<br>E. *waanganang* > *waangananga* | + 'a'<br>+ 'a' x 2<br>+ 'a'<br>+ 'a'<br>+ 'i'<br>+ 'a' |
| Whole syllable epenthesis | A. *kaeb* > *kaeb<u>uru</u>*<br>D. *waabiny* > *waabiny<u>eri</u>* | + 'u' + 'ru'<br>+ 'e' + 'ri' |
| Consonant modification | A. *wardan* > *war<u>in</u>*<br>B. *mamangal* > *maangar<u>l</u>a* | 'rda' > 'ri'<br>'l' > 'rl' |
| Consonant elision | B. *mamang* > *maang*<br>B. *wardan* > *warda*<br>C. *mandorn* > *mando* | - middle consonant 'm'<br>- final consonant 'n'<br>- final consonant cluster 'rn' |

In analysis of Aboriginal song from the Kimberley in Western Australia, Treloyn (2009: 61) describes how the modification of spoken terms to fit particular semantic rhythmic structures in song can be used 'negotiate a fabric of relationships' between living and deceased composers, performers, ancestors and entities associated with the creation and maintenance of the universe. Indeed, at a deeper cultural level, ancestral Aboriginal songs can hold significant functional power. They can both heal or inflict injury, and are capable of creation and destruction, affecting changes in the physical world. In activities with the Wirlomin Project in the south-west of Western Australia, singing an ancestral Nyungar song about the *kurli* ('bush turkey', *Ardeotis australis*) for the first time in decades has coincided with increased sightings of the seldom-seen bird (Bracknell 2015c). Furthermore, senior Nyungar people remember their elders singing out to dolphins to bring salmon in to shore (Henderson et al. 2006). It is therefore not unreasonable to assume that changes to spoken terms in Nyungar song may function to imbue words with meaning and power.

## 4.1 Vowel and whole syllable epenthesis

Every Nyungar song considered in this study features either 'filler vowels' or other seemingly non-lexical word-extensions. In the songs provided as examples, a vowel is commonly added to the end of consonant-final words. Words ending with nasal sounds are less subject to this kind of vowel epenthesis, perhaps because nasals are sonorant sounds. One can sing holding a nasal sound, but cannot easily hold other consonants without adding a following vowel. Although 'filler vowels' are also common in spoken Nyungar language, this phenomenon is likely to be due to particular rhythmic or melodic considerations that require the extension of certain words to achieve an aesthetic or semantic intent. Whole-syllable epenthesis is less common, but follows a similar principle in the examples above, where a vowel plus an additional syllable is added to a consonant-final word.

## 4.2 Consonant modification and elision

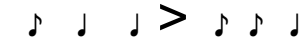
Aesthetic and structural considerations may also be responsible for the abbreviation of spoken terms in almost half of the song texts analysed. In the case of *wardan* > *warin* in example A, the retroflex stop is sung as a rhotic. This change softens the enunciated rhythm of the second syllable, perhaps as to allow the singer to 'glide' over the substituted consonant or simply to sing the word faster.

The second-vowel 'a' also changes to 'i'. Dench (1994) alludes to the idea that second-vowel sounds in the Nyungar language are often interchangeable and sometimes indicative of regional dialect. Based on experiences listening to Nyungar speakers, I propose that this and many other unstressed second-vowel sounds occurring before consonants in the Nyungar language could be more accurately written using a schwa, e.g. *wardən* > *warən*.

In the alteration *mamangal* > *maangarla* in example B, an apical consonant is sung as a retroflex, suggesting a more emphatic or perhaps accentuated second syllable. The middle-consonant elision in this same item presumably results in the production of a long middle-vowel sound. Word-ending vowel epenthesis, along with these two alterations, suggests a change in rhythm:


*mamangal* > *maangarla*

This reflects a likely stylistic composition decision to alter and expand a word for a particular musical effect. The final-consonant elision of *wardan* > *warda* in example B allows for the word to retain two syllables but nonetheless suggests that the second syllable is sung more quickly than in normal speech, perhaps reflecting a new rhythmic pattern:


*wardan baal* > *warda baal*

Similarly, listening to the audio recording of Charlie Dabb's whaling song (example C in table 1.4), it is clear that the term von Brandenstein records as referring to Mondrain Island, '*mandornap*' is altered and partially repeated to suit the rhythmic setting:

♩ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪
*man-do man-dor-nap*

Further analysis of rhythms implied by written Nyungar song lyrics and the stylistic differences between sung and spoken Nyungar language may well inform a process of grafting suitable rhythms and melodies onto songs with no recorded music.

### 4.3 Repetition and onomatopoeia

In addition to extension and abbreviation, Nyungar songs also employ other poetic devices. In Ngilgian's song (example B in Table 1.4), repetition of the terms *ken* ('dance or step') and *bard* ('jump, hop or dart') produces the effect of a person dancing on top of a whale whilst attempting not to lose balance. This kind of wordplay is reflective of a Nyungar term Bates records for 'singing' (1904-1912), *maaya waab*; literally, 'to play with sound'. So too is the prevalence of onomatopoeia in Nyungar song. One song described by Bates (1904-1912) and performed by Joobaitch (also known as George Ngoorweel) begins in Nyungar language and concludes with an imitation of the magpie's long morning call. Other onomatopoeic devices present in Nyungar songs include *baabur* (like 'babbling brook'), to describe water moving, and *dji-dji-dji-dji* ('drip, drip, drip, drip'), to describe blood dripping. Similarly, *wurangura wurangura* is the noise of a train approaching, and *nyu nyu nyu* is a ghostly cry (Bates 1904-1912).

Still, spoken Nyungar language is onomatopoeic in nature. Terms for birds such as *waardang* 'Western Australian raven' and *wirlo* 'bush stone curlew' are based on the calls of each bird. The sound of words like *bam* 'strike' or 'put' and *boony* 'kiss' is highly suggestive of their respective meanings. Spoken terms such as *wely-in-in-iny* to describe profuse weeping or water flowing (Brown 2002) also indicate some of the playfulness, flexibility and sensuality of the Nyungar language. As most archival recordings of fluent Nyungar speakers feature elicited wordlists rather than fluent speech, it is difficult to determine if onomatopoeia and repetition are more or less prevalent when the language is sung. Nevertheless, the boundaries between speech and song in Nyungar communicative culture were far less demarcated before the intrusion of English as the dominant language (Bracknell 2014a). I propose that the qualities of Nyungar language we might today consider playful, sensual or perhaps more befitting song than spoken language, are distinctive language characteristics worth retaining when undertaking language revitalisation.

## 5 Conclusion

Interpreting Nyungar song requires a significant degree of educated guesswork. Even with extensive and sometimes creative analysis of terms in song texts and comparison with word lists, many of the songs included in this study feature terms which defy identification, suggesting that they could possibly be: non-lexical vocables; archaic terms not used in speech; or imported terms from neighbouring Aboriginal languages. Unidentifiable words could also be the product of a writer's mistake or a singer's mispronunciation. In light of this, as much as I attempt to deploy rigour in the interpretation of Nyungar songs, the task is necessarily underpinned by a degree of speculation, albeit speculation informed by considering the cultural context around each song text. Of the difficulties in working with songs in endangered languages, Donaldson (1979: 74) explains that 'those who make translations from oral literature in languages which are neither widely spoken nor written have to prove that they really are translations'. In light of this, my interpretation of Nyungar song texts has necessarily involved cross-referencing with Nyungar language resources.

In examples of Nyungar song from the early twentieth century and more recent times, the vocabulary and morphology appears relatively consistent with that of spoken language. However, sung language may be more likely to feature epenthesis, elision, modification to consonants and changes in rhythmic speech patterns in order to fit the rhythmic setting of a given song. While repetition and onomatopoeia are prevalent in song, such poetic devices are also likely to have been common to regular speech in the past. The recirculation and performance of old Nyungar songs could be one way to promote and conserve the lyricism and artistry of Nyungar language in the present context of language revitalisation.

The interpretive translation and consolidation of Nyungar language song texts in collaboration with the Wirlomin Project is a first step towards the broader goal of recirculating Aboriginal-language songs in the south-west of Western Australia. Analysis of the ways in which language is used in these song texts provides a blueprint for the continuation of Nyungar oral literature and song traditions. The reliance of this interpretive process on language documentation, the potential for old songs to bolster language revitalisation and the inherently powerful nature of Nyungar song signifies the ongoing co-dependence of Nyungar language, song and cultural sustainability. The proliferation of similar projects focusing on the songs of endangered languages, as discussed in the following chapters, may prove increasingly critical to global language maintenance agendas.

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