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Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

Manuscript Finding Aid

MS 2901

Yuendumu sign language project

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Collection Summary

Creator:	Kendon, Adam
Title:	Yuendumu sign language project
Collection no:	MS 2901
Date range:	1981 – 1982
Extent:	0.4 linear metres (2 archival boxes)
Repository:	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

Cultural Sensitivity Statement

Use of the material

When using this finding aid, and the collection described within it, clients are encouraged to be mindful and sensitive to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; particularly with regard to the use of this material. This includes:

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Deceased persons

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Access to the Collection

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Preferred citation

Items from this collection should be cited as: Title or description of manuscript item, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, MS [Number], Series [Number], Subseries [Number], Item or Folder [Number].

For example:

Transcripts of YSL 81 videotapes and films, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, MS 2901, Series I, Item 4

Collection Overview

Scope and contents note

The Yuendumu Sign Language project began in 1978 with support from Australian National University. The fieldwork recorded in this collection was undertaken in 1981 and 1986, with support from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS), the Wenner-Gren Foundation and the National Science Foundation of Washington DC; analysis of the material was supported by the National Science Foundation.

Although the earliest reports to the scientific community of sign languages date from the mid-1870s, Adam Kendon's study was the first to seek to understand the structure of one of these sign languages and to analyse its relationship with the spoken language. At the time Adam Kendon was undertaking this study, the place of sign language in Australian Aboriginal culture was a neglected area of investigation.

Yuendumu was the primary site of this research because sign language was used extensively in daily life and because Warlpiri, the spoken language, had been documented, enabling comparison between the two languages. Also, Dr Mary Laughren, a linguist, was living at Yuendumu and Kendon was able to collaborate with her.

The study aimed to gather extensive visual recordings of the sign language used almost exclusively by older women at Yuendumu. Used mainly during periods of mourning, the sign language was also used whenever silent communication was warranted. Men had considerable knowledge of the women's sign language but used a somewhat different range of signs.

Further field work was undertaken to gather data about other Central Australian sign languages. The sites of this field work were Elliott, Neutral Junction, and Ti Tree.

A sign list, film and video recordings from the Yuendumu Sign Language project were produced. The material was glossed in both Warlpiri and English and an index in both languages compiled. These items and other analysis of the fieldwork were produced until 2004.

Sources:

PMS 3197 The sign language of the women of Yuendumu; a preliminary report on the structure of Warlpiri sign language

PMS 3626 A study of sign language among the Warlpiri at Yuendumu; summary of progress March, Sep 1982

Manuscript, typescript, photocopies, exercise books, loose pages

Provenance

This collection was received by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in August, 1987.

Material separated from the collection

No material has been separated from this collection.

Related material

For a complete list of works by Adam Kendon held by the Library, and for other related material consult [Mura®](#), the AIATSIS catalogue.

For access to Audio / Visual material please go to the 'Contact us' page on the AIATSIS website at aiatsis.gov.au or phone (02) 6246 1111

Important: Before clicking on the links to the catalogue entries please read our sensitivity message found on the 'Search the Collection' page on the AIATSIS website at aiatsis.gov.au

Administrative / Biographical history note

Adam Kendon was born in 1934 in London and grew up in a small village near Cambridge. Between the ages of fourteen and eighteen, he became interested in birds and bird behavior; the parallels with human behavior intrigued him and stimulated the beginning of what would become the focus of his academic career. His tertiary education ranged over a variety of subjects and institutions, following and developing his interest in human interaction. He studied botany, physiology, zoology and experimental psychology at Cambridge and, after working in a number of American institutions pursuing the same interest, was awarded a D.Phil from Oxford in 1963. He worked in the United States, Australia and Italy on face-to-face interaction, sign languages, and gesture.

Kendon held research posts at Oxford University, University of Pittsburgh, Bronx State Hospital, New York, The Australian National University, the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander Studies, Indiana University and the Max Planck

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Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen. He taught at the University of Oxford, Cornell University, Connecticut College, the University of Pennsylvania, Istituto Universitario Orientale, Naples, the University of Salerno and the University of Calabria. He co-edited (with Cornelia Mueller) the journal *GESTURE*, until 2009 and was then sole editor until 2017. His research interests focused on the implications of gesture and sign for conceptions of 'language' and the place of gesture in theories of language origins.

His books include *Sign Languages of Aboriginal Australia* (Cambridge 1988); a collection of previously published papers, *Conducting Interaction* (Cambridge 1990), and *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance* (Cambridge 2004). He has also published an English translation of a treatise from 1832 by Andrea de Jorio on Neapolitan gesture under the title *Gesture in Naples and Gesture in Classical Antiquity* (Indiana 2000).

Adam Kendon retired in 2015.

The Yuendumu sign language project began in 1978 while Kendon was Senior Research Fellow at Australian National University. In that year preliminary material was collected during two short visits to Yuendumu. In 1981, with funding from AIAS, further data was gathered during a ten week visit there. During 1982 one more visit was made and the material gathered during all trips was analysed extensively. The last visit was supported by AIAS, the American Council of Learned Societies and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research.

The data was further used in the initial preparation of a sign language dictionary. The AIATSIS Collection includes progress reports on the dictionary and an audiovisual version of it.

References

Professor Adam Kendon, <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/dcal/people/collaborators/kendon> (viewed 18 April 2017)

Publications by Adam Kendon, <http://www.ciolek.com/spec/kendon.html> (viewed 3 February 2017)

PMS 3197 The sign language of the women of Yuendumu; a preliminary report on the structure of Warlpiri sign language

PMS 3626 A study of sign language among the Warlpiri at Yuendumu; summary of progress March, Sep 1982

MS 5101/1/6 Kendon Vitae current

Controlled Access Headings

Communications – Nonverbal – Sign language and gestures

Language – Text and translations – Aboriginal to non-Aboriginal language

Warlpiri language C15
Yapa people C15
Yuendumu (South Central NT SF52-12)

Series Description

Series I, Field Work records 1981-82

- A. List of signs
 - i. Field lists of signs from Yuendumu-revised 1981 [Item 1]
 - ii. Alphabetical index to revised field list of signs [Item 2]
 - iii. A list of signs from the sign language in use among the Warlpiri at Yuendumu, May 15, 1982 [Item 3]

- B. Transcripts of YSL 81 videotapes and films [Item 4]
 - i. Stories record on videotapes and film
 - a. 'Parraja' story – Winnie Nangala
 - b. Ruby and Winnie's story
 - c. Ruby's story [Ruby Nangala]
 - d. Wangarla story (Winnie Nangala)
 - e. Wiiniinya story (Winnie Nangala)
 - ii. Videotape logs for Tapes I-XVII [Item 5]
 - iii. Scaled transcripts of films YSL IV, X, XX; transcripts of YSL IV and X by M. Laughren [Item 6]

Box List

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I	1-4	1
I	5-6	2

Finding aid updated by Robyn Garcia, January 2022.

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