

Language Hacking Tips for Aboriginal & Other Non-‘World’ Languages

In this post, I’m going to outline the methods I’ve used for getting past the beginner-beginner stage of **learning an Australian Aboriginal language**, Central/Eastern Arrernte.

As this is a very long post, you may wish to download it and print it out. You can download the PDF version of this post here.

Essentially, I’ve cherrypicked from a few unorthodox language learning methods that I’ve found useful, and adapted them somewhat, as they’re most often aimed at learning ‘world’ languages (i.e. Spanish, German, Chinese etc) rather than Aboriginal languages.

The main purpose of this post is to document the methods I’ve used, setting out the process, including a brief discussion of the methods I’ve cherrypicked and how I’ve adapted them. My other aim is to provide some further language resources (i.e. word lists and spreadsheets) that others learning Aboriginal languages may find useful.

Please note that I am NOT a linguist – I am an anthropologist who works everyday with Aboriginal language interpreters- so I cannot present any kind of detailed linguistic analysis or explanation.

The posts I’ve written on learning an Aboriginal language are aimed at non-linguists (such as teachers, doctors, nurses and others) working on Aboriginal communities or working closely with Aboriginal people for whom English is a second, third or fourth language –and of course, for those just interested in what it’s like to learn an Aboriginal language.

Step 1. Get Basic Grammar – A Short Cut Approach

We all have to start somewhere. For me, I start with the mechanics of the language. Yes, I’m talking about the bit that most people hate learning the most: the grammar.

I can hear people groaning already.

The truth is, when you’re learning a ‘difficult’ language like Arrernte, if you just learn words and not grammar then you’re going to end up lost and mishearing what’s being said.

In fact, you’re probably *not* going to understand a lot of what’s being said.

For example:

Artweye = man

Ampe = child

Aleweme = wash (present tense)

HOWEVER: to say 'the man washes the child', we have this:

Artweyele ampe aleweme
Man child washes

What do you notice about this sentence?

Probably, you'll notice that the word order is different to English. In most Australian Aboriginal languages the word order is similar to Latin: subject-object-indirect object-verb (Capell, 1946:149).

Then there's that funny little '-le' on the end of artweye (man). That's the subject marker. It tells you who's the 'doer' in the sentence. If you were to hear the sentence spoken, you'd also notice that the -le on the end of artweye changes the way the word is pronounced.

If we have the man washing himself, then things get even more interesting:

Artweye alewelheme soap-ile
Man washes himself soap-with

There's only one doer in this sentence (the man) and he's doing it to himself ... but how do we know this? The give away is the '-lhe' in the middle of the 'to wash' word, aleweme. This indicates that the man is doing the action to himself.

My point is: if you learn the basic grammar in any language, then pretty soon you'll be able to figure this out for yourself.

To do this, at the very least, you're going to need a basic learners' guide or a grammar for your target language. (If you don't have these things, then you'll have to wait for a future post, where I'll describe resources for learning when there are absolutely no resources).

For Arrernte, I was able to attend language classes, there's a small learners' guide and a large, detailed dictionary. There's also an excellent (but not widely available) grammar within what must be the world's most readable linguistics PhD thesis.

So here's the shortcut.

To start off with, you need to really know the following in any language in order to have a basic conversation:

The word order of sentences

How to mark the doer, the receiver and thing the doer is doing it to the receiver with (subject/object/indirect object)

How to phrase questions
How to mark past/present/future tenses (perfect tenses)
How to negate verbs & nouns
How indicate possession/movement/ownership

That sounds like a lot of grammar learning!

However, there's a simple way to do this, devised by that master learner, Tim Ferriss of 4 Hour Work Week and 4 Hour Body fame.

<http://www.fourhourworkweek.com/blog/2007/11/07/how-to-learn-but-not-master-any-language-in-1-hour-plus-a-favor/>

In this post, Tim sets out his method for learning the grammar of a language fast (actually, it's the method he uses to determine how difficult a language will be to learn, but it's super useful for learning basic grammar).

To get the basics, translate the following statements into your target language:

The apple is red.
It is John's apple.
I give John the apple.
We give him the apple.
He gives it to John.
She gives it to him.
I must give it to him.
I want to give it to her.

To this I would add:

Where is the apple?

If you read through Tim's post in detail, you'll soon see why learning how to say these sentences teaches you a lot about the grammar of a language – without you even knowing.

Step 2: Which Words to Learn?

Whilst I've previously written about a mnemonic method for learning massive amounts of vocabulary (*vocab* – sorry, I'm an Australian and we shorten everything we possibly can!) quickly, I haven't written anything about how to select the vocab you learn.

One method is to get hold of an English frequency list, set up a spreadsheet and flashcard program (more in a future post), and learn the equivalent words in your target language.

One of the most popular lists of 'useful' conversational words is to be found on Gabriel Wyner's very useful website, 'Tower of Babelfish'.

<http://jbauman.com/gsl.html>

Drawing from the General Service List for English, a frequency chart of over 2000 commonly used words, Gabriel has put together a list of 400 words that he calls a 'base vocabulary'. You can see the post (and I recommend reading through the entire site on Gabriel's method for learning languages) [here](#).

http://www.towerofbabelfish.com/the-method/vocabulary/base-vocabulary-list/#.Upvu_43K5B5

This is a great resource for figuring out which words to learn –with one BIG caveat for learners of Aboriginal languages: the list contains a large number of nouns such as: *train, plane, car, bicycle, bus, boat, tyre, petrol/fuel, (train) ticket, city, house, street, airport, train station, bridge, hotel, farm, a crowd, court* which are unlikely to have equivalents in Aboriginal languages.

In fact, apart from a couple of exceptions (like *marnte* = bus) most of these words are borrowed from English straight into Arrernte.

However, all is not lost!

<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/capell-arthur-12292>

There is a wonderful resource written by linguist and anthropologist, Arthur Cappell, which provides a fabulous wordlist specifically aimed at learners of Aboriginal languages in the article: *Methods and Materials for Recording Australian Languages* (Oceania journal, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Dec., 1945), pp. 144-176).

Capell's entire article worth reading if you're interested in learning Aboriginal languages. It's written for the anthropologist or fieldworker who's going to an Aboriginal community to undertake research, and who needs a quick and easy primer on recording languages from a non-linguist's perspective.

If you'd like a copy of the article, either contact your local public library or university library, or you can purchase the article online for \$14 USD at JSTOR.

<http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/40328076?uid=3737536&uid=2&uid=4&sid=21103101080593>

To help you out, I've taken the introductory wordlist which Capell devised (*ibid*: pp.150-155), adapted it for contemporary use and put the words into a handy spreadsheet. You can download the spreadsheet [here](#).

One of the great things about Capell's wordlists are that they not only *overlap* with many of the English words found in the General Service Lists, they are drawn from an Aboriginal worldview- so they also contain words which are used by Aboriginal people in everyday speech *today*.

One final source I'll mention here is Moses McCormick's *Foreign Language Roadrunning* (FLR) technique. Moses (AKA Laoshu505000) is an impressive polyglot who's devised his own method for getting past beginner-stage language learning fast.

In a nutshell, Moses's method involves learning to ask (and answer) a series of questions in your target language.

The magic comes from creating answers using what Moses calls 'road running keywords'. His excellent post on this method and his You Tube clips explaining the FLR method can be found here.

http://how-to-learn-any-language.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=18808

It's the *roadrunning key words* I wish to focus upon here.

I have LEARNED THE KEYWORDS in Arrernte, because I've used Moses's method to get me talking to people in Arrernte – more about that later.

To help you out, I've put the FLR Keywords into a spreadsheet, which you can download here.

Step 3. Get Learning!

With all these words to learn, I've had to find a way that works for me to remember them all.

I've described the Magnetic Memory Palace technique in a previous post here, so I won't describe it again.

It's not the only method I use to learn Arrernte vocab, however. I make extensive use of online flashcards and spaced repetition programs.

I use the online spaced repetition site, Memrise, to learn vocab. You can see some of my wordlists online, and also through the free apps for my iPhone and iPad. You can even 'join' my course and start learning Arrernte (it's free. I derive no benefit from this, apart from the satisfaction of someone else using the resources I've created).

<http://www.memrise.com/course/173460/arrernte-vocab/>

I've also created several series of flashcards at Quizlet:

<http://quizlet.com/30678656/arrernte-pronouns-flash-cards/>

<http://quizlet.com/30648040/arrernte-flash-cards/>

I learn these on my Ipad using the app 'Flashcardlet'

https://itunes.apple.com/au/app/flashcards*/id403199818?mt=8

Both Quizlet and Flashcardlet are free to use, and very simple to set up.

Step 4. Get Listening, Speaking and Writing

Yes, I know this is a really long post. Not sure if you're still with me, but if you are, thanks for reading this far.

The final part of my post covers what to do with the massive input you've accumulated in the way of word lists, and also, what to do with the basic grammar.

The first thing I try and look for is a way to listen to the language. This is where Aboriginal languages are at a massive disadvantage to other languages: there simply are not that many audio/video resources out there.

For Arrernte, I've largely listened to Arrernte people speaking the language whilst I've been with them.

Some Aboriginal languages have CDs accompanying their learners' guides. These have been priceless for me – listening and SPEAKING in my spare time, when I'm running or walking or doing housework.

Another source has been finding clips on You Tube in Arrernte – the iTalkLibrary people have created a number of these in a number of Aboriginal languages.
<http://www.italklibrary.com/>

There's even a complete beginner's lesson in Arrernte there:

<http://www.italklibrary.com/italk/language-learning/>

A final source is the community service announcements and advertisements recorded for CAAMA radio. These are fabulous to listen to and repeat out loud.

<http://caama.com.au/>

You might have noticed that I've talked about not only listening (and I listen LOTS), but that I also repeat what I've heard.

This is a technique that I've always used, but didn't know that it had a formal name, *shadowing*, until recently. This technique has been extensively explained by Professor Alexander Arguelles, who recommends that you move around repeating the words/sentences that you're hearing as you go.

You can watch a clip of Prof Arguelles explaining his shadowing method here <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xHYDBYHi2bc> I also recommend taking a look at his extensive website on language learning, here:
<http://www.foreignlanguageexpertise.com/>

I also practice using the FLR method that I've discussed above – asking and answering questions using the vocab and linking with the keywords. Usually, I do this to myself. It's a rehearsal for the best method of all...

... actually sitting down with an Arrernte person and having a chat!

Nothing beats interacting with the people whose language you're learning.

Of course, you might not be able to do this all the time, and unlike world languages, I haven't yet found any Arrernte language speakers on iTalki. Sad to say that unlike Yolgnu and Warlpiri, there is no language chat group on Facebook, either.

Finally, yes, I'm going to admit that I do write in Arrernte. Many language learners seem to put this method of language learning down – saying that it's fine if you want to become a translator, but it's not for conversationalists- however, I find that writing in Arrernte helps me to remember both vocab and grammar.

THANK YOU!

If you've made it all the way to the end of this post, I'd like to say thanks for reading.

I do hope you've found it useful (as well as the resources) and if you've got any of your own techniques to share, comments or suggestions, please leave a comment below.

The next post in this series looks at resources specifically for learning unwritten languages.