Excerpt from Lowell, A., Gurimangu, Nyomba & Yingi (1996). Communication and learning at home: A preliminary report on Yolngu language socialisation. In M. Cooke, (Ed.) Aboriginal Languages in Contemporary Contexts: Yolngu Matha at Galiwin'ku. DEETYA Project Report . pp 119-121

Sign language

The use of signs in Aboriginal communication is widespread in many parts of Australia (Kendon, 1988). For example, among Western Desert children, Jacobs (1986) reported that a complex of conventionalised gestures has developed by 6 months; by 18 months children commonly code two or three meanings through gesture, which Jacobs suggests assists them to make a rapid transition to the use of oral grammatical structures. Hamilton (1981) observed an acute sensitivity to non-verbal cues in Aboriginal people in North Central Arnhemland, which she suggested is consistent with their extensive exposure to non-verbal communication systems from very early in life.

The sign language used by Yolngu in Northeast Arnhemland has been described as an autonomous mode of discourse, which is sometimes used as an alternative to speech (Cooke, Chapter 5, this volume). This sign language is widely used to fulfil a number of communicative functions including communication over distance, such as when hunting, or when silence or privacy is required. It is also often used in the classroom between children who do not want to be heard by the teacher, and by Yolngu educators as part of their communicative repertoire (Lowell, 1994). For Yolngu children, signing is part of

their normal communicative development, and most Yolngu also become proficient in lip-reading as silent mouthing of utterances is commonly used when privacy is required in interactions in public (see Chapter 5).

This formal **sign language, as well as informal gesture, is used extensively with young children in Yolngu families - but almost always simultaneously with speech**. Yolngu often use the term 'actions' to refer to non-vocal forms of communication which includes sign language, informal gesture or mime, as well as lip reading. 'Actions' are considered to be important in ensuring effective communication with very young children (see below for further discussion). The use of signs can often be invisible to an outsider - sometimes the slightest movement of the lower lip or lift of an eyebrow can constitute a response to question. At other times the use of signs can appear to be particularly prevalent: in the earlier stages of contact with Yolngu children the first author had the impression that they were using formal signs before speech but it later became apparent that this predominance of non-vocal communication was due to their reticence in the presence of an unfamiliar Balanda. As she became more familiar to the children they increased their use of oral communication but quickly reverted to sign and gesture when any other outsider was present. A reluctance by Yolngu adults and children to talk in situations where strangers, particularly Balanda, are involved in the interaction is common and can be very disconcerting for those who aren't used to this reaction. In the classroom context this has been described as the 'shyness syndrome' by Malcolm (1989) who points out that guarded or taciturn behaviours in the presence of teachers from the majority culture are reported in many minority groups. In fact, Yolngu children are reported to use spoken language first (see below) but begin to use sign language soon

after, that is, formal signs which are distinct from the range of gestures used by babies that are not part of the adult sign system. **Adults actively encourage use of signs by babies and toddlers** through repeated modelling and physically assisting the child to perform the gesture. Some of the earliest signs used by young children reflect those that are used most frequently by adults and older children in communicating with young children, for example:

go - come here: beckoning using all fingers pointing down;

ga' - give it to me: hand held out with palm up, moving a little up and down;

ta-ta - (borrowed from English) whole hand held flat and vertically with fingers pointing up with partial rotation from the wrist; and later,

ba - (*bäyŋu*: nothing)[23]: one or both hands rotated towards then away from the body and/or protrusion of bottom lip.

Other common non-vocal responses to questions include: quick raising of eyebrows or nodding head to signal affirmative; tilting head back with raised eyebrows to request more information or clarification; and indicating someone's departure and/or specific direction

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[23] 'Baby talk' (either developmental child language or the modified register used by adults to children) words, referred to by Yolngu as yalnggi matha, are followed in brackets by the adult form: (ţ *adult word)*

through movement of whole hand (see '*wanha* routine' below). Some of the other signs which are frequently used with, but not so much by, very young children include:

nhini - sit: hand held horizontally with palm down and moved up and down in a patting motion);

dhärri - stand up: the same as *nhini* but with palm up and movement directed upwards;

galkurr - wait: hand held diagonally and moved back and forth with palm facing out and fingers pointing up;

waŋi - talk: touching the tongue tip with fingertips;

ga'! ga'! - give (yourself) to me: a welcoming or 'come to me' gesture with arms outstretched and both hands moving gently up and down with palms up;

yä - signifying sadness, worry or regret: exaggerated facial expression and mouth movement while tilting head from side to side;

The sign which appears to be used most frequently is an interrogative gesture (one hand rotated from palm down to palm up with a flicking motion) which, depending on context, can signify who, what, when, where or how. Another sign which is not so commonly observed is the 'good luck' sign used when someone is going hunting (touching tongue and saying '*djirridjirri*'). This was observed when Balang's grandfather was about to walk away with his gun to shoot wallaby: as he was leaving he stopped to show Balang (0;8) how to do this sign by modelling the action and sound.

In all the families 'actions' are used extensively with babies and children up to about preschool age. The signs used are very similar to or the same as the adult form but are often exaggerated, emphasised and/or repeated more when communicating with young children than in interaction with older children and adults. Actions are also used more extensively with children who have some form of communication difficulty such as delayed development and/or hearing loss - in addition to, but not instead of, spoken language. All children develop a repertoire of signs by school-age but those children with a profoundly deaf person in their close family are reported to have the greatest proficiency in Yolngu Sign Language as this is the predominant mode of communication used by profoundly deaf Yolngu.