Sounds and writing of Aboriginal languages of NSW

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Objectives

Assist you to distinguish between the idea of a sound and the way it is written

Indicate that there are similarities and differences between the sound systems of NSW Aboriginal languages

Explain that different communities make different orthographic choices to represent the sounds of their language(s)
The 3 basics

1. Phoneme - a class/group of sounds within a language used to distinguish meaning
2. Allophone - a variant of a phoneme
3. Phonotactics - where the phonemes are allowed to occur
Some examples of phonemes

- English /p/ vs /b/ as ‘pan’ vs ‘ban’
- Wembawemba /p~/b/ as ‘peng’ or ‘beng’ = ‘man; human being’
- Paakantyi /n/ vs /nh/ as ‘ngina’ = we plural vs ‘nginha’ = this one
- Paakantyi /rt/ vs /th/ as ‘ngartu’ = nardoo vs ‘ngathu’ = ‘I’

Note: rt/rd are retroflex sounds ie the tip of the tongue is turned back unlike the ‘usual’ t/d
Some examples of allophones

- Wembawemba [p]~[b] as ‘peng’ or ‘beng’ = ‘man; human being’
- English - 4 l-sounds as in ‘late’, ‘slate’, ‘plate’, ‘filth’
- English - 3 n-sounds as in ‘nail’, ‘snail’, ‘tenth’
By way of explanation

• English - 4 l-sounds as in ‘late’, ‘slate’, ‘plate’, ‘filth’
  - the 1st ‘l’ is voiced but the ‘l’ in ‘slate’ is voiceless/less voiced; the ‘l’ in ‘plate’ is also voiceless but can also have some friction as in Welsh [written as ‘ll’]; finally the ‘l’ in ‘filth’ is dental

• English - 3 n-sounds as in ‘nail’, ‘snail’, ‘tenth’
  - the 1st ‘n’ is voiced but the ‘n’ in ‘snail’ is voiceless; the ‘n’ in ‘tenth’ is dental
Recognizing allophones

• Mostly native speakers of English are quite unaware of such allophonic differences
• For them English has just one l-sound and one n-sound and the spelling system reflects that
• If I spoke English with all my l- and n-sounds dental I would sound a little strange but you would still understand me
Some examples of phonotactics

• English - initial ‘ng’ not allowed but in NSW Aboriginal languages not only allowed but common

• English allows lots of monosyllabic words like ‘like’, ‘dog’, ‘moon’ etc but most NSW Aboriginal languages don’t allow them
Describing consonants

- lips interdental alveolar retroflex palatal velar
- nasal stop lateral glide rhotic
## Paakantyi Consonants

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Wangkumara Consonants

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# Djangadi/Dhangadi consonants

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# Dhangadi [up river] consonants

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Djangadi [down river; coastal] consonants

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Vowels in NSW languages

• many NSW languages make just 3 vowel distinctions: i a u

• some also have a length distinction: i ii a
  aa u uu

• the ‘maximal’ vowel system in terms of quality seems to be Wembawemba

  i u
  e & o
  a
Some generalisations

all NSW languages have at least 4 stops
these have 4 corresponding nasals
at least one lateral = l
at least one rhotic = r
at least 2 semivowels = w, y
no language makes a phonemic distinction for voicing in stops
all have at least 3 distinct vowels
Underspecifying

- Some orthographies (practical spelling systems) underspecify
  
  e.g. English ‘th’ in ‘thin’ and ‘this’

  e.g. Aboriginal placename spellings for dual naming around Sydney Harbour
Overspecifying

- Basically 2 (or more) symbols for one phoneme
  - English ‘s’ and ‘z’ for [z] as in ‘miser’, ‘Les’, ‘zoo’
  - English ‘a’, ‘o’ and ‘u’ as in ‘above’ and ‘numb’
  - English ‘k’, ‘c’ and ‘ck’ as in ‘kill’, ‘cat’, and ‘sick’

- Wembawemba ‘p’ and ‘b’ although no voicing distinction [voiced symbol ‘b’ after a nasal as in Wembawemba but voiceless symbol ‘k’ elsewhere as in wanyakayi ‘catfish’]
Orthographic choices

• although underpinned by linguistics

• mostly a matter of politics

• please, everyone, relax!
An issue for orthographic choice

• The language just mentioned has two dialects: up river (in which speakers use dental nasals and stops) and down river (in which speakers use palatal nasals and stops)

• Should the language have two orthographies (spelling systems) to reflect these dialectal differences?
Orthographic choice (continued)

• Or should the language have just one orthography?
• If so, who should be ‘favoured’: up river or down river?
• If not, any language resources would need to appear in two versions and this could create confusion as well being costly.
Investigating the phonetic past

• Australia has many placenames of Aboriginal origin - but how did they originally sound

Consider the Aboriginal part of the placename, Nambucca Heads, on the north coast of New South Wales
What did Nambucca sound like?

• With our knowledge of the way NSW languages work we can be quite certain that Nambucca did not sound the way it is now pronounced as a placename

• It has taken on the phonetics and phonotactics of English
Using phonotactics

• In NSW Aboriginal languages it is very unusual to have a word start with ‘n’
• So the ‘n’ of Nambucca is suspicious
• Most likely it was really ‘nh’ or ‘ng’
• Sometimes we will not know but for this language there is a recent dictionary which reveals that it should be ‘nh’
Stress

• In NSW Aboriginal languages it is very usual to have the main stress on the first syllable of the word
• So although the placename is now pronounced Nambúcca
• In fact it is much more likely to have been pronounced Námbucca
• Sorry, I meant Nhámbucca
Vowel quality

• In NSW Aboriginal languages it is usual to have a short ‘a’ vowel pronounced as in ‘above’
• So although the placename is now pronounced Nâmbúcca [vowel as in ‘Vietnam’]
• In fact it is much more likely to have been pronounced Nhámbucca [vowel as in ‘numb’]
• And the second vowel should be written as ‘a’ as in ‘above’ to give Nhámbacca
Representing stop sounds

• No NSW Aboriginal language makes a phonemic distinction for voicing in stops
• So although the placename is now written Nambúcca
• In fact it is better written as Nhámbaga
• However it could also be written as Nhámppaka
Making orthographic choices

• There are at least three ways stops could be represented in Nambucca:
  1. Nhámbaga [Gumbaynggirr ‘style’]
  2. Nhámpaka [Paakantyi style]
  3. Nhámbaka [Wembawemba style]
The basis for the 3 choices

1. Nhámbaga [Gumbaynggirr ‘style’] - all stops are represented using voiced symbols: b, g etc

2. Nhámpaka [Paakantyi style] - all stops are represented using voiceless symbols: p, k etc

3. Nhámbaka [Wembawemba style] - although no voicing distinction, voiced symbol ‘b’ after a nasal but voiceless symbol ‘k’ elsewhere
Making the ‘right’ choice

• Usually this should be a matter for the Aboriginal community to decide
• The community may decide to adopt a phonemically ‘accurate’ orthography or one that is underspecified or one that is overspecified
• In this case the language from which ‘Nambucca’ comes is Gumbaynggirr and they have made their choice
Orthographic choices

To repeat!

• although underpinned by linguistics
• mostly a matter of politics
• please, everyone, relax!