

Spelling and Pronunciation of Yolŋu Languages

(Developed by Beulah Lowe and Yolŋu coworkers, Milingimbi, 1952 - 1974)

There are only three vowels:	a	i	u	(short)
but these vowels can also be	ã	e	o	(long)

There are 24 consonants:

made with the two lips	b	p	m	w	
made with tongue between teeth	dh	th	nh		
made on the ridge behind the teeth	d	t	n	l	rr
retroflexed (tongue pointing back)	[=]	l	r
made against your palate	dj	tj	ny		
made in throat	g	k	\		
glottal stop			'		

nh dh th

nh is produced by trying to say "n" as in *nut* but holding the tip of the tongue between the teeth. It is difficult for Europeans to hear the difference between the sounds "nh" and "n" because the sound "nh" carries no meaning for us, yet it is an important distinction in Yolŋu languages.

eg. gana *alone* gãna *carry*

dh is produced by trying to say "d" as in *done* while holding the tip of the tongue between the teeth. Even though the difference between "d" and "dh" may be hard to hear the meaning of words in Yolŋu matha can depend on it.

eg. mundhurr *gift* mundurr *still*

th is produced by trying to say "t" as in *melting* but keeping the tip of the tongue between the front teeth. Remember that as a voiceless stop this sound never occurs at the beginning of a word. Note that "th" is not pronounced like in English words mother or think.

eg. Matamata *place name* ba-i *barbed spear*
matha *tongue* bathi *box, bag*

ny dj tj

With these sounds the blade of the tongue is pushed forward towards the upper gum ridge and the tip of the tongue is behind the bottom teeth.

The **ny** sound is close to the way we say the first "n" in *union*. "dj" is similar (but not the same) as the "j" in *jug*, and "tj" is similar (but not the same) as the initial "ch" in *church*.

When the **tj** sound occurs at the end of a word eg. witiŋ (a kind of snake) or Gumatj (the name of a tribe), you must be careful not to aspirate at the end as one would in English words which end in "ch", eg. witch, which, church.

] [= r `

These sounds are produced with the tongue curled back so that the tip of the tongue touches the roof of the mouth. These letters are distinguished by the underlining. There is no need for this with the letter "r" because there is no non-retroflexed variation. There are no English equivalents to the Yolŋu retroflexed consonants.

eg. win'ku *parrot fish* bilkthun *cover*
wi]`ku *left* bi`kthun *defecate*

\ is the same sound as the "ng" in the English word sing. The difficulty for English speakers comes because "\ " is used at the beginning of words in Yol\u (as in '\arra') or after "n" (as in 'nhan\u'), or "l" ('wal\u'), or "r" ('mar\u'gi'). It is an important sound to get right because it is very common and the meaning of words is dependent upon it.

eg. g\uana *alone* g\u\ua *wild passionfruit*

r and rr

rr The flapped or rolled "r" is represented by the symbol "rr". Some non-Aboriginals find this sound very difficult to produce since it is not found in English. The flapping of the tongue is produced by the flow of air past it and not by the muscles of the tongue. It is important to get it right as the meaning of words is dependent upon it.

r as in Garma. There are no English equivalents to the Yol\u retroflexed consonants, except perhaps for the way Americans say the letter "r". The tongue curls back but does not touch the roof of the mouth.

eg. waryun *urinate* dharwa *hip* Maratja *man's name*
warryun *pull* dharrwa *many* Marratja *certain grandch*

' (glottal stop)

The glottal stop is produced by closure of the vocal cords and examples are found in English, eg. as in "Oh! Oh!" (The breath is choked off between the syllables.) It is widespread in Yol\u languages and must not be ignored as the meaning of words is dependent upon it:

eg. djawar'yun *spear* bala' *house*
djawaryun *be tired* bala *movement away*