At the time of European arrival, approximately 600 larger Aboriginal groups were present in Australia, with around 250 separate language-speaking groups. Today, it is thought that only 90 languages remain, with 70 of these close to extinction. One of these surviving languages is Gumbaynggirr.

Gumbaynggirr is spoken by traditional owners living between Nambucca Heads and the Clarence River in northern New South Wales. The Yaegel language, from the lower Clarence River, and the Baanbay to the west on the Northern Tablelands are both relatives of the Gumbaynggirr language. Within Gumbaynggirr, three local dialects are recognised. The Garby Elders speak Northern Lowlands Gumbaynggirr.

Background
The Gumbaynggirr dreamtime stories speak of Yuludarla, the first man. Because they believed that he looked like the sun, a group of men from one tribe chased Yuludarla, who, in order to escape capture, laid out rivers. Each time the men crossed these rivers, Yuludarla changed their language to confuse them. Some men were left behind at each river. In the north, the men that remained spoke Bunjalung. Further south, when he laid down the Clarence River, the men left behind spoke Yaegel. At Nambucca, the men that made it south of the river spoke Dhanggati, and those left between the Clarence and Nambucca rivers spoke Gumbaynggirr.

The Gumbaynggirr Dictionary
The slow erosion of the traditional Gumbaynggirr way of life all but destroyed the Gumbaynggirr language. Many people were forbidden to speak lingo, conduct ceremonies or use traditional medicines, and were often punished if they disobeyed. Hundreds of words and expressions, as well as the shared meaning of sets of words, were therefore lost and forgotten with passing generations. However, through the sheer determination of Elders and supporters, the Gumbaynggirr language is now re-emerging.

Did you know?
The author of the Gumbaynggirr dictionary, Steve Morelli, holds lingo classes every week at the Yarrawarra Aboriginal Centre.

FACT SHEET 18 Gumbaynggirr Language
Believing that it is vitally important to keep the language alive for their children, their children’s children, and for the community as a whole, Gumbaynggirr Elders came together in 1986 to form the Muurrbay Aboriginal Language and Cultural Co-operative. With the help of Steve Morelli, a talented linguist, the group - which comprised some of the last fluent speakers of the language - worked to document and revive their language, and begin language classes.

In 2008, with funding assistance provided by the New South Wales Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Muurrbay published *The Gumbaynggirr Dictionary and Learners’ Grammar*, or *Gumbaynggirr Bijaarr Jandaygam, Ngaawa Gugaarrigam* (literal translation ‘Gumbaynggirr word collection, language explanation’). At the launch of the dictionary, Garby Elders Uncle ‘Bing’ Laurie and Uncle Keith Lardner of Corindi Beach were acknowledged as two of the last fluent speakers who had not learnt their Gumbaynggirr from books and classes.

**Lingo Basics**

There are three vowels in the Gumbaynggirr language: ‘a’, ‘i’ and ‘u’, which are also commonly used as double vowels: ‘aa’, ‘ii’, ‘uu’. The double vowels are spoken longer and louder, and change the meaning of a word. For example, *yilla* means ‘cook’, whereas *yilaa* means ‘here’.

**Alphabet and Pronunciation:**

- **a**..........................as in *but*
- **aa**............................as in *path*
- **i**............................as in *bit*
- **ii**...........................as in *feet*
- **u**.............................as in *put*
- **uu**..........................as in *boot*
- **b**............................as in *baby*
- **d**.............................as in *did*
- **g**............................as in *gag*
- **j**.............................most like *dew*
- **l**.............................as in *lily*
- **m**............................as in *mum*
- **n**............................as in *nan*
- **ng**..........................as in *sing*
- **ny**..........................as in *onion*
- **r**............................as in *arrow*
- **rr**..........................like Scottish ‘r’ (the tongue is trilled)
- **rl**..........................a bit like poorly
- **w**............................as in *wow*
- **y**............................as in *yet*

Photos: Chris Lyburn; Margie Mohring.