

# Have you ever wondered why Arrernte is spelt the way it is?

By linguist Myfany Turpin

Many literate English speakers have lots of questions when they first see a word written in Arrernte. Even the name of the language is confusing: sometimes it is written 'Arrernte' (the modern spelling) and sometimes 'Aranda' (a left-over spelling from the old days).

This article answers some of the frequently asked questions about why Arrernte words are spelt the way they are. What you see in brackets is designed to be read aloud according to English spelling to approximate the sound of the Arrernte word. Capital letters show which syllable is stronger (stressed). A double-r ('rr') means the sound is rolled. However, the only way to learn how to say Arrernte words properly is by listening to an Arrernte speaker.

As you travel through central Australia you may come across Anmatyerr (ahn-MAchur-rra), Alyawarr (arl-YOW-wa-rra) and Kaytetye (KAY-ditch) speakers. These languages are written with much the same spelling system as Arrernte because they all have similar sounds. These sounds are very different to the sounds in most other Aboriginal languages (not to mention English!).

To English speakers, and people literate in other languages, the 'look' of these spelling systems can be imposing.

## Why don't the Arrernte use the English spelling system to write Arrernte?

When you start to write down words from another language, it's natural to want to use the spelling system of your own language; but often it won't work.

There are two reasons why English spelling can't be used for Arrernte.

Firstly, the sound systems of the two languages are different. At first it's hard to pick up sounds that are different from your own language. This was a problem for the first Europeans who wrote down words from Indigenous languages. They couldn't hear important differences, like the difference between the word for 'lice' *arreme* (which has a trilled 'r') and the word for 'look' *areme* (which has an 'r' like Australian English 'r').

Arrernte speakers can hear the difference; it's as easy for them as the difference between 'liver' and 'river' is for an English speaker. At least half of the sounds in Arrernte simply aren't in English and vice versa. This means that there are no English spellings for these sounds.

Secondly, English doesn't spell the same sound with the same letters each time, for example 'r' and 'rr' is the same sound in 'bury' and 'berry'; and English often uses the same letters for different sounds, such as the sequence of letters 'ough' in the words 'through', 'bough', 'cough', 'enough', 'bought' and 'although'. It would be impossible to spell Arrernte words based on English because English spelling is irregular.

No one would be able to agree what the English spelling for an Arrernte word might be.

Would you spell atyewe, 'friend', as archoowa, atchoower, achuwa, achuewa, achewa, achoo or achouwe.

Furthermore, Australia isn't just a multicultural country, we're a multilingual country, and this means that we have a lot of spelling systems. More and more you'll see signs written in different Indigenous Australian languages. Like signs in French and German, these signs mostly use the Roman alphabet, as used in English. But, like French and German, the words that have these letters or combinations of letters in them may not be pronounced the same as the English words.

For example, the German word *volk*, 'people', starts with an 'f' sound in German, not a 'v' sound; and the 'l' is pronounced, not silent as it is in English 'folk'.

### **Why isn't Arrernte written phonetically?**

Some people say that words should simply be written 'phonetically' or 'the way they sound', and by this they usually mean writing things the way they sound to them. This is in fact very different from writing words using the International Phonetic Alphabet, which has hundreds of letters and special symbols.

Technically, words in any language can be written using the international phonetic alphabet, but no practical writing system actually uses it.

### **What's wrong with spelling the language name as 'Aranda'?**

Some people think that the Arrernte spelling system should make an exception for one word— the language name itself – Arrernte, and spell it Aranda. One thing wrong with this is that it leads English speakers to pronounce the name incorrectly. For example, a suburb of Canberra is named Aranda, and Canberrans pronounce this to rhyme with 'veranda'. This doesn't sound much like "UH-rrahn-da", which is what the Arrernte call themselves.

### **Is the Arrernte spelling system difficult for Arrernte speakers to use?**

Arrernte speakers who can read English usually learn to read and write Arrernte in only a few lessons. They just have to learn which letters represent which Arrernte sounds. What's required to increase Arrernte literacy is for Arrernte speakers to be taught the spelling system. They don't get much chance to do this in school, unlike many Warlpiri and Pitjantjatjara people who learn to read and write their own languages in bilingual schools.

### **Why is Arrernte hard for English speakers to read?**

So why do English speakers find Arrernte difficult to read? The answer lies in the language itself rather than the spelling system. If you don't know how to make the sounds used in Arrernte then you won't be able to read it. That's not a problem with the spelling, that's a matter of learning how to make the sounds. Arrernte has many sounds that are not in English, Warlpiri or Pitjantjatjara. One such sound is spelt 'kng', which is made in a similar way to the 'tn' when you say 'chutney', in that a puff of air goes through the nose following the 't' part of this sound. But with 'kng' the puff of air follows the 'k' sound. You need to know how to pronounce the sounds of the language first before you can learn to use a foreign spelling system. After all, you wouldn't expect to know how to pronounce a French word from the spelling, unless you know how to make the sounds used in French. Once you learn how to say the

sounds used in Arrernte, and which letter(s) are used to represent them, then you can't go too far wrong, unlike English.

### **Why are the same words spelt differently in different Aboriginal languages, such as 'Kwementyaye' in Arrernte and 'Kumanjayi' in Warlpiri?**

Words that sound more or less the same in Arrernte and Warlpiri are spelt differently because Arrernte and Warlpiri speakers put sounds together in different ways, and so have to have different spelling conventions. Some sounds that Warlpiri and Arrernte put together differently are discussed in the next two questions. Arrernte and Warlpiri aren't the only languages that spell the same word differently. Many words in English occur in other languages also, and they too are often spelt differently. For example, 'complex' is spelt in Danish *kompleks*. Even different English-speaking countries use different English-spelling systems, such as American English (neighbour/neighbor), not to mention Kriol. One reason why many English-speaking countries change their spelling from British English to a more regular spelling system is to make literacy and language learning easier; they figure that this is more important than having the same spelling.

### **Why does the Arrernte spelling use 'w' when Warlpiri and Pitjantjatjara use 'u'?**

Look at Kwementyaye in Arrernte and Kumunjayi in Warlpiri. Arrernte kwe corresponds to Warlpiri ku, and in both languages the vowel sounds like the 'oo' in foot. What's the advantage of writing kwe? Well, in Arrernte some words sound different when endings are added. There's a word akwe, 'arm', which is pronounced 'uh-KWA'. But when the ending-le (which means 'on') is added, there's a change in pronunciation: akwele, 'on the arm', is pronounced 'uh-KOO-la'. This doesn't happen in Warlpiri; ku is always pronounced KOO. By writing 'w' after a certain consonant Arrernte keeps the same spelling of the root word even when it has an ending that changes the 'w' sound to OO. This is the same principle that operates in the English spelling system with words such as 'call' and 'roll'. When the past tense '-ed' is added, these words are spelt 'called' and 'rolled', and not 'cald' and 'rold'. This is because a writing system is easier to learn when it keeps the spelling of the root word even when it has endings.

In Arrernte the letter 'u' is used to represent the vowel sound OR, as in apurte 'group' (uh-POR-ta). This is different to the OO sound in the word apwerte, 'hill' (uh-POO-ta). With these two words the different vowel is the only distinguishing feature, so the spelling system must have two different ways to write these two different sounds. For language speakers and people who have learnt to hear the difference between 'u' and 'w', the way they are used in the spelling system is entirely consistent.

A good start for learning the sounds is A Learners Guide to Eastern and Central Arrernte.

### **Why do all Arrernte words end in 'e' when you can't always hear 'e'?**

The choice to pronounce the vowel on the end of an Arrernte word or not doesn't make any difference to the meaning of the word. Sometimes Arrernte speakers pronounce this vowel 'a', sometimes it sounds more like 'er', and sometimes Arrernte speakers don't say it at all. This is like in English where sometimes you might say 'the' and sometimes 'tha', or when you talk fast you might not say the ends of words at all. Because all Arrernte words can be said with a vowel sound on the end, a decision was made to write 'e' on the end of all Arrernte words. Speakers of other related languages, such as Alyawarr, decided not to write a vowel on the end of their words (except for very short words which

have 'a' on the end). So the word meaning 'water', which sounds the same in both Arrernte and Alyawarr, is spelt as kwatye in Arrernte and as kwaty in Alyawarr.

### **Why doesn't Arrernte spelling use a 'd' when it sounds like a 'd'?**

English speakers can hear a difference between the 'd' sound in Arrernte and the 't' sound in takwe, 'windbreak'. But Arrernte speakers don't hear this difference. You might think this unusual, but each language chooses to distinguish between different kinds of sounds, and Arrernte, like most Australian Aboriginal languages, doesn't differentiate between 't' and 'd', 'p' and 'b', 'ch' and 'j', and 'k' and 'g'. Sometimes you'll hear Arrernte pronounced with a 't' sound, and sometimes with a 'd' sound. English spelling doesn't differentiate between the two different 'l' sounds of let and tell. But this difference is important in Arrernte (the 'll' in 'million' is what Arrernte writes as 'ly'). Neither do English speakers distinguish between the 'th' in 'thistle' and 'this', yet these are two different sounds. Nor do we distinguish between the 'p' of 'pit' from the 'p' of 'spit' (the former is pronounced with a much stronger puff of air than the latter). In some languages, like Hindi, this difference can produce an entirely different word. Just as in English it is unnecessary (and would be confusing) to write these sounds in two different ways, it is unnecessary to write the Arrernte sounds discussed above in two different ways.

### **Why does Arrernte spelling use 'ty' when Warlpiri uses 'j'?**

The Arrernte spelling system uses 'ty' when Warlpiri uses 'j' and Pitjantjatjara uses 'tj' for the English sound which is a bit like that in 'badge', 'age', and 'jar'. Many spelling systems use two letters to make one sound, just as in English we use 'ng' for the sound in 'sing'. In the case of 'ty' in Arrernte, the 'y' shows the way the sound is made, in this case the way the tongue is shaped. Just think about the way 'j' and 't' are made in English. When you say 't' you use the tip of your tongue, whereas when you say 'j' you put more of your tongue near the roof of your mouth.

In Arrernte, the sounds made with 'more of your tongue' are represented with the letter 'y'; so 'ty', 'y', 'ly' and 'ny' are all sounds made with 'more of your tongue', but in four different places. The Arrernte spelling system consistently represents sounds made in the same place in your mouth with a particular letter, and sounds made in the same way with a particular letter. In this way they combine to represent a single Arrernte sound.

The fact that Warlpiri and Pitjantjatjara use different letter(s) reflects the different history of these spelling systems. Different non-Aboriginal people were involved in developing these spelling systems, and sometimes they came from different language backgrounds and so chose the letter(s) in their language to represent a similar sound in the Aboriginal language. For example Pitjantjatjara and the Finke River Mission (FRM) spelling used at Hermannsburg and surrounding outstations use 'tj' possibly because German uses these letters for a similar sound, whereas Warlpiri uses 'j' because English uses this letter for a similar sound.

### **When and who decided on the modern Arrernte spelling system?**

No Aboriginal language had an alphabetic writing system before the arrival of the Europeans. When English speakers first met the Arrernte and started writing the language down in the late nineteenth century, they wrote words down in all sorts of ways. Over the last 25 years or so Arrernte people have worked together with linguists to develop a spelling system that is consistent and reflects the sound system of the Arrernte language. This modern Arrernte spelling is used in the Eastern and Central to

English Arrernte Dictionary, by Henderson and Dobson (1994), published by the Institute for Aboriginal Development (IAD). This system is also used in schools, government agencies, and organisations around Alice Springs.

## Why can't people make up their minds about Arrernte spelling?

It's taken the English over a thousand years to come up with the modern English spelling, and most people complain about the inconsistency of English spelling. So, we shouldn't be surprised that the Arrernte spelling system is taking a couple of decades to settle in. There are two main spelling systems, the one we have been describing here, and the FRM Western Arrernte spelling system used in Hermannsburg and surrounding outstations. The differences are mostly in the way vowels are spelt.

Here are some examples of words spelt in the modern Arrernte spelling and in the FRM Hermannsburg spelling:

Modern Arrernte	Finke River Mission	meaning
aneme	nama	'sit'
thapethape	thaapa-thaapa	'darkness'
urrpetye	urrputja	'few'
rewe	rua	'flood water'

The Western Arrernte picture dictionary, from which these examples are drawn, explains this spelling system and is due to be published in the near future by IAD Press.

## Can the Arrernte spelling system be improved?

Languages are constantly changing, so no spelling system is perfect. The English spelling system could be improved, but that won't happen, because it would cost too much. The Arrernte spelling system could be improved too, because of facts about the language and about reading that we are only just discovering. However, Arrernte people successfully use the spelling system and the minor improvements that could be made might not be worth the inconvenience for them (not to mention the financial cost). After all, a spelling system must work for the people who speak it.

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### Further reading:

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