

Prof Steven **Bird**

Charles Darwin University

Title: Language learning in the wild: entering the life-world of a remote Indigenous community

Abstract: In remote communities across Australia, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people come together to work at the intersection of Western and Aboriginal knowledge systems. This work is called 'Caring for Country' and includes managing the land and conserving cultural resources. In places where the ancestral language is still spoken, work is often conducted in a simplified form of English with Aboriginal language words thrown in; misunderstanding is rife. Most non-indigenous learners struggle to get very far with the local languages because they are profoundly different to English and because the available learning materials are usually not well suited to the context of oral interaction. I argue that we need to reconceive the task, not as learners learning language, but as newcomers seeking to enter the life-world of an indigenous community by learning new ways of learning, of being, of interacting. I explore the implications for the design of non-intrusive mobile technologies to assist with "language learning in the wild", and report on first-hand experience prototyping these technologies in an Indigenous community in West Arnhem. This work is applicable to any place where aid and development agencies seek to engage with marginalised or displaced communities across a linguistic and cultural divide.

Bio: Steven Bird is researching new methods for documenting and revitalising the thousands of small languages still spoken in the world today. His career began with a BSc and MSc in computer science at Melbourne University, followed by a PhD in computational linguistics from Edinburgh University. He has held academic appointments at the Universities of Edinburgh, Pennsylvania, Melbourne, and Berkeley, and conducted fieldwork in Australia, West Africa, Melanesia, Amazonia, and Central Asia. He is a research professor in the College of Indigenous Futures, Arts and Society at CDU, and he divides his time between Darwin and a remote community of 50 speakers of the Kunwinjku language.