

Pronunciation of Wamba Wamba Vowels and Consonants

- based on - 'WembaWemba Dictionary': Hercus L.A., 1992, pages 5 - 8

(select  icons to listen to recorded examples)



Wamba Wamba is one of over 500 Indigenous Languages spoken through Australia. It is one of a group of languages of South West and North West Victoria and South West New South Wales. Like all Indigenous Languages it has different rules of pronunciation and grammar from English. See - <https://culture.yarkuwa.org.au/> for more information.

Standard Wamba Wamba Vowels



'a' as in 'path' or 'car'

'kālī'  (dog), 'kanak'  (heel), 'kakāt' (white ibis), 'kama' (swamp wallaby), 'kanya' (to breath)



'e' as in 'pet' or 'shed'

'ken'  (frilled neck lizard), 'kepin'  (one), 'kena' (to tie up), 'pulety' (two), 'kethawil' (many)


'i' as in 'sit' or 'pit'

'kiki'  (here, now), 'mityuk'  (skin), 'kiluwity' (today), 'kiya' (to speak), 'turmi-mum' (turtle)


'u' as in 'put' or 'foot'

'kurruluk'  (magpie), kapel-kup  (river mint), 'kuli' (people), marrung (pine), 'mum' (bottom)

'o' as in 'on'

'Kolety'  (Edward R.), 'poty' (grass), 'ponga' (to smell), nongwe (yes), 'mowe' (nest)

'ə' a neutral vowel as in 'the'

'kapəl'  (river) 'withən' (feather), wembakən (never), wirrengən (dog), 'wilək-wilək' (galah),

Vowel Variations (& other variations) (not as common as the standard vowel sounds)

'a' 1 - when 'a' follows an initial 'w' and is followed by an 'r', 'm', 'ng', 'ny', or 'n',

the 'a' is pronounced as in 'water' or 'war'

eg 'waripa' (to dance), 'warrangga' (to sing), 'wanap' (fire), 'wam' (idiot), 'wanggəl' (cumbungi),
'wany' (egret), 'wan' (boomerang) (the second or third 'a' in each of the words above is 'a' as in 'path')
- as well, this 'a' as in 'water' sound variation may also be used in those words where an 'a' just follows a 'w'
eg in 'watha' (brown sand goanna) the first 'a' can either be the standard 'a' as in 'path' or the 'a' as in 'water'. The second 'a' in 'watha' is always the standard 'a' sound ('a' as in 'path')

2 - when 'a' is followed by 'w'

the 'a' is pronounced as the diphthong 'au' sound as in 'ground' or 'owl'.

eg 'tawā' (to hit) is 'taou-wah', 'kawenda' (to crawl) is 'kaou-wend-ah'
(the second 'a' is pronounced 'ah' or the 'a' as in 'path')

(note: There are some English 'a' sounds that either not used or not used often in Wamba Wamba. These include: - 'a' as in 'pay' or 'hay'. For example 'Mayrung' is an anglicisation of 'marrung' which is pronounced with the standard 'a' as in 'path' and the standard 'u' as in 'put'. In 'Kakat' (white ibis) both 'a's are the standard 'a' as in 'path'. The agreed on spelling and pronunciation of 'Wamba Wamba' is an exception rather than a common use.)

3 - when 'a' is followed by 'y' and another vowel esp. 'a'

the 'a' can be pronounced as the diphthong 'ai' sound as in 'ice' or 'buy' ¹

eg 'telkaya' (to be well) is 'tel-kai-ya', 'kalaya' (to ask a question) is 'kal-ai-ya', 'paraya' (to hunt) is 'pah-rai-ah', (all stative verb endings will include the 'ai' sound), 'mayotyā' (distant place) is 'mai-o-tya'

¹ The standard 'a' and 'i' sounds are combined to produce the one 'ai' sound. Hercus didn't list 'diphthongs' in the 'WembaWemba Dictionary', but it is in 'Victorian Languages: a Late Survey' and on recordings with fluent speakers eg Nancy Egan. In VL's-a Late Survey, Hercus writes the pronunciation of 'telkaya' as 'delgaia' (it is well) and 'delgainj' (it will be well.)

(Vowel Variations cont.)

4 - 'a' as in 'man' or 'bat' variation was recorded

eg 'mayomanda' (over there) is 'mai-o-man-dah' - contains three 'a' variations - the diphthong 'ai', 'a' as in 'man' and finally the standard short 'a' as in 'path'.² (Not common)


'e' when 'e' is followed by 'l' or 'r'

the 'e' is pronounced as in 'fern' (or the last sound in 'apple')

eg 'kapel-kuk'  (river mint), 'pert-pert'  (needle), 'Perəpaperəpa'

- when 'e' is followed by a nasal consonant eg 'm', 'ng', 'ny', 'n' in the same syllable

the 'e' is long and slightly nasalised

eg 'wemba' (no), 'pembengguk'  (children), 'peng' (man), 'weny-weny' (clothes), 'pen' (hollow tree)

'i' when 'i' follows a 'p' an 'm' or a 'w' and is followed by 'r', 'rn' or 'rt' (not a 'rr')

the 'i' is rounded off like 'tu' in French. (top of the tongue touches the back of the palate)

- 'mirnuk' (his eye) is pronounced 'moorn-uk', 'miri' (hole in the ground) is pronounced 'moor-iih'

- 'pirna' (appear, to rise) is pronounced 'poorn-ah', 'wirta' (to whistle) is pronounced 'woort-ah'

Vowel Sounds to Avoid

'a' avoid - 'a' as in 'pay'

'e' avoid - 'e' as in 'she' or 'e' as in 'hey'

'i' avoid - 'i' as in 'hi'

'o' avoid - 'o' as in 'oh' or 'go'

'u' avoid - 'u' as in 'bucket' or 'putt'

Wamba Wamba Consonant Sounds³

The 17 main consonant sounds can be divided up as:

- type of sounds

ie stops, nasals, laterals, semivowels and r-sounds

- p, k, th, ty, t, rt (stops)

- m, ng, ny, n, rn (nasals)

- l, rl (laterals)

- w, y (semivowels)

- rr, r (r-sounds)

or as:

- how the sounds are formed

ie labial, velar, dental, palatal, alveolar, retroflex

- labials p, m, w, - involve the lips in making the sound

- velars k, ng,

- involve the velum or soft palate in making the sound,

the blade of the tongue touches the soft palate towards the middle or back,

the 'k' is a 'velar stop' - ie the tongue touches the soft palate & stops,

the 'ng' is a 'velar nasal' the tongue touches the soft palate and a nasal vibration is produced as well

- dentals th - the tip of the tongue touches the back of the upper teeth

- palatals ty, ny, y - involves the hard palate in making the sound
(in ty and ny the tip of tongue touches the hard palate)
(in y blade of the tongue touches the hard palate)

- alveolars t, n, l, rr - tip of tongue touches just above the upper teeth ⁴

² This example can be heard from tape 998A with Nancy Egan speaking with Louise Hercus. Nancy Egan pronounces 'mayomanda' with three 'a' variations - the diphthong 'ai', 'a' as in 'man' and finally the standard short 'a' as in 'path'

³ (See pages 5,6,7 in 'WembaWemba Dictionary', Hercus: L.A., 1992)

⁴ See detailed explanation - https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Place_of_articulation&oldid=1139758448

Voiced and unvoiced consonants

The list of 17 main consonant sounds in Wamba Wamba doesn't include 'voiced' consonants like 'd', 'b', 'g'. Hercus found that fluent speakers of Wamba Wamba didn't distinguish between the voiced and unvoiced consonants as English language speakers do. When a voiced consonant is being said in English, a listener can hear a vocal chord sound and a non-vocal chord sound together. In English when we say 'b' 'w' or 'd' we can hear a 'urr' vocal chord sound as well as the initial 'plosive' 'b' or 'w' or 'd' sound.

A plosive sound is when we stop the air exiting from the lungs and then let it push out past the tongue etc. The 'stops' above are unvoiced 'plosive' sounds. For example, in Wamba Wamba, the 't' is produced by stopping the air and then releasing it while the tip of the tongue is touching the top teeth (there is no vocal chord sound).

English can be said to have 'voiced/unvoiced vocal pairs' eg 'b' and 'p'. This results in words such as 'ball' and 'web' (voiced 'b') and 'pop' and 'tap' (unvoiced p and t). This distinction doesn't happen in most Wamba Wamba words but there is **an exception**. The exception is **after 'nasal consonants'**⁵ - 'm' 'n'. Hercus says 'because here the **consonants were strongly voiced**' it is more correct to write them as the voiced consonant e.g. 'wamba' rather than the unvoiced e.g. 'wampa'.

eg - 'wemba' (no), 'pumbəl' (blossom), 'wirimbula' (ear), 'tyarrmba' (to yell at), 'pumba' (to be cold) & - 'tanbil' (cloud), parnbandila (shine in many colours), 'yandang' (I), 'windya' (where),⁶

Wamba Wamba specific consonants

Many of the consonants in Wamba Wamba are said the same as they are in English but, like Aboriginal languages in general, a number are said differently. This is especially so with the consonant sounds that have to be written down as a group of letters.

'rr'

Roll or lightly trill double 'rr's (if you can) but not a single 'r'

eg 'karr' (nose), 'yirri' (to slip), wirrengən (dog), tyurrila (to gossip), tyarrrəmbayin (Uncle)

(If you're not currently able to roll or trill your 'rr's' you can probably learn. You don't have to roll your tongue up. Just place it in the right place - just above your top teeth - as you breathe out. It's a good idea because there are over 300 Wamba Wamba words with the 'rr'. There are plenty of youtube videos to tell you how. [This one is not bad.](#))

'th'

- 'th' is a hard sound, a dental plosive sound with the tongue right against the teeth, like the English 'd' eg 'Dad'

eg 'kutha' (to be sorry) say kuud-ah, 'wuthu' (man) say wuud-uu, 'thathakuk' (arm) 🗣️ 'dah-dah-kuuk'

'ty'

'ty' is a palatal stop. To pronounce it, say 'ty' together with tongue tip touching your palate just above the top teeth. It is an 'unvoiced consonant' ie it is not pronounced like 'tyurr' but just the sound of the air passing the tongue on the palate for the 't', combined with the 'y' sound.

e.g. 'tyuluk' (calf), 'tyina' (teeth), puletya (two), Kolety (name Edward River), 'tyang-manya' (palm)

(For those of us whose first language is English, our English brain will tend to want to split the 'ty' up into two separate sounds like in 'city' or 'beauty'. Just think 'Wamba Wamba' and keep the 'ty' together as one sound. As Hercus says on p.6. 'the final of the word 'purtity' (cumbungi root) is **not** pronounced as in the English word 'purity', but as 'ty'. This is closer to the final of the English 'stich' though by no means identical to it. Similarly the final of 'katy-katy' (evil magic) is **not** pronounced as in 'Cathy', but more like the final of 'muchy', though not identical to it.)

⁵ A nasal consonant can be made with the lips closed. The air flows out through the nose and the sound vibrates in the nasal sinuses. (Try putting a finger under your nostrils as you say 'm')

⁶ There are also 7 words with the 'mp' unvoiced combination listed in the dictionary eg 'tyimpang'. These words would be pronounced without a lot of emphasis on, or with a gap before, the second syllable eg tyim-pang (billy can)

'ny'

- 'ny' is a single palatal nasal consonant. It is made by touching the top of the tongue to the top of the mouth behind your teeth and adding some nasal vibration while saying 'ny'. An English equivalent is the 'ny' in 'canyon'. In Wamba Wamba 'ny' is pronounced together as one sound. There are 148 words listed in the dictionary that contain 'ny'.

eg 'mir pa kanyuk' (face), 'munyuk' (elbow), 'tyang-mannya' (palm), 'manyə' (five), nyuwa (here, near)

Hercus reminds us on p. 6 of the 'WembaWemba Dictionary' that : 'puny' (hot ashes) is **not** pronounced like English 'puny' or 'many' but as 'puny' with the 'y' forming part of the 'n' sound.

'ng'

- 'ng' is a soft sound, a velar nasal sound as in 'English' or 'song'. The back of the tongue vibrates against the soft palate along with a nasal vibration.

eg 🦋 'ngapa' (grandfather), tyalingin (tongue), 'tyang-mannge' (palm), 'tyarrng' 🦋 (blue sky), 'yinga' (this way)

'ngg'

- 'ngg' - soft 'ng' followed by a hard 'g' kingga (here) pronounce king-ga

eg - 'parngga' 🦋 (to be thirsty), 'kingga' 🦋 (here, hither), 'pathingguk' (knee) 'yangga' (to walk),

Lengthening of some consonants

The consonants 'n', 'ny' and 'l' 'tend to be lengthened, even doubled when they follow a stressed first syllable' (Hercus, 'WW Dict. p7)

eg 'kanak' (heel) - the 'n' tends to be emphasised and lengthened - pronounced 'kannnak'
'wile' (brush-tail possum) - the 'l' is emphasised and lengthened. pronounce - 'wille',
'wanyakayi' (crayfish) - the 'ny' is emphasised and lengthened - pronounced - 'wannyakayi',

Pronouncing consonant clusters eg 'ndy' and 'rnd' (Hercus, 'WW Dict. p7)

eg 'pandyil' (Murray Cod) - pronounced 'pany-dyil' - the spelling is simplified, only one 'y' is written
or 'windya' (where) is pronounced 'winy-dya' but spelt 'windya'
or 'pandyewang' (shoes) is pronounced 'pany-dye-wang'
or 'karnda' (to scream) instead of 'karnda'

Word beginnings

There are no words in Wamba Wamba beginning with vowels and only 12 consonants begin words
p, k, th, ty, t, m, ng, ny, n, l, w, y

(note: Hercus appears to leave out 'l' as a beginning consonant, p6 of Wemba Wemba Dictionary', but it was possibly an error as there are 47 words in the dictionary that start with a 'l')

This combination results in the Wamba Wamba dictionary starting with a word that begins with the letter 'k' - 'kakat' (white ibis).

Emphasis & Syllables

In normal Wamba Wamba speech, we usually place the emphasis on the first and third syllables with the first being stronger of the two. This gives a rhythm to normal speech. In day to day speech, traditional fluent speakers speak and pronounce sounds quite quickly and don't normally draw out sounds. This can change in songs however.

Wamba Wamba is one of over 500 Indigenous Languages spoken through Australia. It is one of the group of related languages of South West and North West Victoria and South West New South Wales that have previously been referred to by linguists as 'Kulin Languages'. This group of languages have many common features and similarities. It has a lot in common neighbouring languages such as Yorta Yorta and Werkaya (Wergaia). The Pererapa-Perəpaperəpa language is so close that only a few words are different.

Like all Indigenous Languages Wamba Wamba has different rules of pronunciation and grammar from English. Teaching and Learning resources are being developed and published.

Resources and Information

See - The Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Wamba Wamba language site - 'Wurrekangurr' (we all speak) <https://culture.yarkuwa.org.au/> for more information.

You can use the [Dictionary Word Search](#) to search for individual words in either Wamba Wamba or English, or [Category Browse](#) to browse subject lists of Wamba Wamba words. Individual word pronunciation recordings are being progressively added to Wurrekangurr and can be found in the Word Search and in Detailed Word Views, Category Browse lists and Learning Lists. The [Documents](#) section allows you to download documents, posters, songs and stories. [Learning Lists](#) are also available on Wurrekangurr to learn and teach Wamba Wamba.

This pronunciation guide will continue to be updated as more research, learning and resources become available. This version was uploaded in January, 2024.