



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

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LANGUAGE DEATH AND LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE: ACTION NEEDED TO SAVE ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES

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Language death can occur naturally, and in different ways, or it can be caused by deliberate policy. This is how deliberate practices and policies brought it about in Australia.

- Diverse linguistic groups of Aborigines were forced into small missions or reserves to live together; consequently languages that were numerically stronger squeezed the others out of use.
- Anxious to 'Christianise' the Aborigines, missionaries enforced harsh penalties on users of Aboriginal languages, even to the point of snatching babies from their mothers and institutionalising them, so they would not hear their parental languages.
- Aboriginal religious ceremonies were banned; initiations did not take place, and so liturgical, ceremonial and secret languages were unable to be passed on. As old people died, their languages died with them.
- Assimilationist/integrationist policies were enforced which required Aborigines to attend schools where English-only was the medium of instruction.
- Finally, denigration of the Aboriginal languages set the seal on their fate in Victoria (within forty years of white settlement, all Gippsland languages had become extinct), most of New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland. Labelling the languages "rubbish", "heathen jargon", "primitive jibberish", and so on, made Aboriginal people reluctant to use their normal means of communication.

In order to spare their children the torment and trauma that they had experienced, parents stopped passing on their languages to the children, believing that they had to live in a world ruled by white people, and that not knowing the languages would save them suffering; when the parents died the languages died with them.

In parts of Australia, however, (for example, in Northern NSW) some Aborigines who knew their languages and who went through the

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"mission-reverse" system, remembered what had happened. They resolved, therefore, that those of them who still retained their languages would ensure that Aboriginal children, the next custodians, must be taught the languages before non-Aborigines. To quote one member of the Bandjalang tribe, speaking recently to the author, "Whites have robbed us of everything else - I want Aboriginal children to learn our language first".

Even so, attempts to start language programs for Aboriginal children in schools (even those where Aboriginal children have been in the majority) have resulted in extreme expressions of racism from non-Aboriginal Australians.

Some languages, particularly those in Western Australia, Northern Territory and South Australia, which were more distant from the early English colonisation process, have managed to survive with viable numbers of speakers. Given the pressure of assimilationist practices, their existence, however, cannot be ensured into the future unless positive, immediate maintenance steps are taken.

LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE

In looking at language maintenance, one notes two major groups of factors to be considered: those that are internal to the community and those that are external. Both of these are key elements in linguistic maintenance within a community.

Internal maintenance must include community support and involvement in deliberate actions to maintain the language. The school alone cannot be relied upon to carry out and succeed in language maintenance. An example of this can be found in Ireland where the community very actively campaigned for several years to have Irish Gaelic introduced into the school system. When this goal was achieved the community relaxed. Now, because of apathy on the part of the community, in parts of Ireland Irish Gaelic stands on the verge of extinction.

Community involvement can take various forms. The following have been successfully tried in other countries:

- The encouragement of adults who are not proficient in the language to increase their expertise via specific community-based programs.
- Concerts involving songs and plays of a pop nature, but in the language, to encourage the interest of youth.

- In special events within the community, the use of the language is given high prestige by being the medium of communication, with use of interpreters for non-language-speakers.
- The participation of community speakers in the school program itself (rather than only teachers) is important.
- Children should be encouraged to use the language outside the school, by means of special games, excursions and trips led by language speakers.

The taking of spouses within the same linguistic group also aids language maintenance.

It is important in the school itself that certain subjects be used as language maintenance programs, the community language being used as the sole medium of instruction. Equally desirable is a truly bilingual system that carries the community language right through the school curricula, especially at the primary level, and then into the secondary level. If possible, at tertiary level students should be able to undertake language subjects in the language of their community. In Australia, because of the variety of languages, this could take the form of external courses offered by a central body such as a languages institute which acts on behalf of a university and a community in granting accreditation for Aboriginal students.

Within the internal sphere it is important that persons entering the community be required to use the language of the community, either directly or through an interpreter - thus ensuring that the community does not have to change its language to meet the language of the visitor. The encouragement of interpreter-training courses, therefore, should be an important part of the economic base of the community language.

Communities should be encouraged to devise methods of extending language maintenance within their own areas. It is important to remember that initially *human resources* are far more important than material resources. It is important not to waste precious time waiting for the development of grammars, dictionaries and other written materials. Oral classes can begin immediately. Overseas evidence shows that a language can be saved by using this method in the beginning. Long-term consideration, however, should include the development of material resources, as this helps to 'stabilise' the language.

External factors can be the most damaging of all to language maintenance for a community, particularly when a dominant group makes very deliberate efforts to suppress the language of the community, either overtly or covertly.

One very obvious area of language control is the medium of instruction in the school. In Australia the medium of instruction in the school has always been English. It is important to remember that the use of English in Australia has a particular place for most members of most communities. However, it is essential that the place of English in the curriculum of a school and in a community be put into proper perspective. It is also worth remembering that the linguistic goals of native speakers of Standard Australian English are not necessarily the goals of other linguistic groups.

The teaching of English as a second language (or Standard Australian English as a second dialect) should be considered rather than using English as the medium of instruction. The goal of English language programs should be in line with the goals of students and members of the particular community. That is, English for specific purposes only may emerge as a goal for some rather than English *per se*.

Another area where a community language may be deliberately affected is the arena of the electronic media. It is extremely important, therefore, that a community has access to television and radio programs in order to be able to broadcast in the language of the community. Norway offers an example of how community languages numbering up to 200 can be accommodated in the media of a very small country. The task in Australia is not as great and should be tackled immediately, particularly in regard to remote communities. Much can be learnt from the success of programs in Wales, where Welsh is actually the medium of the most popular television program in that part of the British Isles. In the Welsh success stories were some very important factors which should be considered in Australia:

- Programs developed by the Welsh are deliberately of an extremely high quality in order to compete successfully with the British programs.
- Programs are not limited in subject matter to the area of Wales itself, but Welsh-speaking reporters and journalists are despatched to other parts of the world to bring back programs and news stories which are relayed in Welsh to the people of Wales. For instance, if a particular event occurs in Australia, a Welsh-speaking person is required to tape and send a report to Wales. It is then broadcast on the Welsh television program.

- Programs are not restricted to cultural or folk topics but include pop and modern programs; pop-songs are sung in Welsh and there are other programs which cater to the needs of the youth of the community. This is important because it is the youth of a country or a community who will carry on the language into the next generation.
- Although the Welsh programs are of a very high quality of presentation, photography and so on, they are not restricted to 'highbrow' material. When asked how they compete with 'junk' programs, the Welsh answer was "We produced our own junk - but better junk than the British". Cartoons and animated films are also produced, using Welsh as the language of the program.
- Programs in the Welsh language with English subtitles are also produced, thus encouraging people from the numerically stronger group to also watch the Welsh programs. A similar example is offered by Channel O/28 in Sydney and Melbourne, where speakers of English are also watching the channel and are reading subtitles in English because of the quality and interest value of the programs.

ECONOMICS

The economic argument is often used against Aboriginal language maintenance - you need English to succeed, to get a job, and so on. To date, this has been true to an extent, but the trend can be reversed to produce positive effects.

Language in and of the school

At the present time it is speakers of English who are monetarily rewarded for teaching in Aboriginal schools. But if the language of the community were to become the language of the school, then native speakers of Aboriginal languages would be eligible to become the teachers. Retention of the Aboriginal language would be rewarded. Aborigines must be encouraged to undertake teacher training, otherwise non-Aborigines will defend their rights to the more highly paid teaching jobs in Aboriginal schools on the grounds that Aborigines are not suitably trained. Teacher aides speaking the language will thus remain in the lower paid 'interpreting' positions.

Language of the workplace

Where a majority of Aborigines work together, particularly where cultural items are produced, the language of the workplace can be an Aboriginal language. Thus, fluency in the language would become at least an unofficial qualification for the job.

Government and European workers in Aboriginal communities.

Present practice is that Aboriginal people are addressed in English when government and other workers enter their communities - doctors, nurses, police, mining workers, and so on. It will be in Aboriginal communicative interests if such people are required to use interpreters to converse with them. Additionally, the requirement to pay accredited interpreters at standard rates will provide an economic incentive for young people to become fluent in their own language, thus contributing to language maintenance.

Tourists and other visitors to Aboriginal communities

Again, the requirement to use and pay an accredited interpreter when entering Aboriginal communities where the majority of residents do not speak English will add prestige to the language and reward fluent speakers. Aboriginal interpreters could also act as tour guides themselves, thus profiting from the lucrative tourist industry which makes money out of Aboriginal culture.

Interpreters

Aboriginal people, if not fluent in English, need to insist on being provided with an accredited interpreter when required to move into another area of government business such as attendance at a police court.

Apart from implementing a basic linguistic right (accepted in other countries), more jobs for fluent Aboriginal language speakers will be created.

Teaching Aboriginal languages

With growing awareness and a wish by some non-Aborigines to learn Aboriginal languages, it is important as an economic incentive for language maintenance that the job of Aboriginal language teaching be done by Aborigines. This has three distinct advantages:

- . Encouragement for language maintenance.
- . Employment for Aborigines in an area in which they are skilled (with minimum training in techniques).
- . Students will have native speakers to teach them language and culture.

When a government puts money into an Aboriginal language maintenance program, it receives in return an entree to the history, world view and culture of Australia. It, in effect, buys some Australian culture for future Australians whether they be Aboriginal or not. When Australian languages are allowed to die, the ethos that is lost is Australian - a national tragedy. The linguistic loss is the world's - a heritage gone!