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## INDIGENISING ABORIGINAL WRITTEN LITERATURES?

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I think those of us who are interested in what is written in Aboriginal languages need to be much more open than we have been in the past to shifts of emphasis in the development of written Aboriginal literatures. Looking at the way the Northern Territory bilingual program developed is one way in to thinking about this issue.

### THE N.T. BILINGUAL PROGRAM

The N.T. bilingual program began in 1974. It was born of Labor Party political idealism. It was introduced from the top down. Aborigines were consulted in their communities and were enthusiastic, but nevertheless the program was designed centrally and managed from Darwin. I am not being critical. There was probably no other way the bilingual program could have been started at that time, or maintained.

The N.T. bilingual program now operates in 21 schools in 14 languages. About half the enrolled Aboriginal children from remote areas attend bilingual schools - that is, from 3,500 to 4,000 children.

I think the bilingual program has been successful and a positive force in some crucial ways. For example, it has given Aboriginal teachers a central role in schools, and helped open up the way for Aboriginal leadership in schools. Also, the program has made a positive impact on academic performance, but nowhere near enough: Aboriginal children in bilingual schools are still way below national "norms". Also, it has caused a relatively large number of Aboriginal people to be confidently literate in their own languages and no matter what direction written Aboriginal literatures take in the future, that direction will need those Aboriginal literates. However, what the program hasn't done yet is to produce a truly indigenous Aboriginal written literature. There are very roughly 200 to 600 titles in most of the 14 languages in the program. These are mostly books for primary aged children and of very widely varying interest value. They could include tiny supplementary reading books, Big Books, through to fiction, non-fiction, translations, and so on.

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In relation to Aboriginal language use, two of the main features of the N.T. bilingual program are:

First, it is primarily a bi-literacy program. Most of the effort of specialist staff has been put into developing a written Aboriginal literature. (In large schools there are three or four full time specialist staff.)

Second, the Aboriginal languages have been given roughly the same functions and jobs as English in the school. They are mostly used for academic purposes. For example, the question-and-answer teaching technique is often encouraged in Aboriginal languages; and learning extensively through verbal instruction is also encouraged. Also, the Aboriginal language literature has roughly the same range of *genres* and *purposes* and *means of control* as English. If you can read it you can control it. Put another way, each individual who reads it is free to decide what to do with it. So most written Aboriginal literature is public knowledge in the same way that English literature is in schools.

And all that has a historical context too. People involved in an innovation can only do what they think best at any point in history. Promoting the parallel functions of written English and written Aboriginal languages goes back to the main original rationale for bilingual education, which was the idea that if a skill was first learned in the Aboriginal language it could be transferred more efficiently to, and learned more easily in, English. There was political pressure to prove (in the context of an expensive program) that initial use of the Aboriginal language produced better academic results in English. And the further historical perspective on that situation is that that's all anyone knew about how to go about bilingual education at the time: that was a common model in use in North American Indian bilingual education.

## EFFORTS TOWARDS DEVELOPING WRITTEN ABORIGINAL LITERATURES

While the Northern Territory Department of Education is the largest organisation working in written Aboriginal languages in the N.T., with probably about 150 Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal classroom staff and about 50 others such as writers, artists, printers, photographers or linguists involved, two other significant bodies also work in promoting Aboriginal writers and Aboriginal language literature. Those two bodies are S.I.L. (Summer Institute of Linguistics), a group of linguists, bible

translators and literacy workers; and S.A.L. (School of Australian Linguistics), which had the task of training Aboriginal linguists and Aboriginal workers for the bilingual program. S.A.L. has now amalgamated with Batchelor College.

As a result of the efforts of these organisations, probably 10-20% of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory between the ages of 15-30 are literate in their own languages, i.e. 2000-3000 people out of a total Aboriginal population of 25,000. I am talking about those Aborigines confidently literate in their own languages - not about those literate in English. But very few Aboriginal people spontaneously either write or read very much in their own languages outside school. (By "very much" I mean in comparison to how much many white people read). I am not implying that all Aboriginal people *should* write and read in their own languages. But many have expressed positive attitudes to a written literature in their own languages and therefore it is legitimate to think about why more is not happening spontaneously in this area. After 15 years perhaps it is time to ask "Why?".

## WHY IS THERE NOT MORE WRITING IN ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES OUTSIDE SCHOOL?

The first reason is that the formal education system - and the bilingual program - has concentrated on children, not on adults.

The second reason is that, while 15 years seems a long time to funding bodies, it is a very short time in terms of the history of development of indigenous written literatures overseas. For example, several North American Indian groups and African groups have had well over 100 years to develop their own literatures - and some much longer.

The third reason is the very small size of Aboriginal language groups. We've expected an extremely high level of creativity from very small groups of people. The numbers of speakers in Aboriginal language groups with bilingual programs vary from about 300 to 3000 - with most around 1000. How many towns of 1000 people in NSW produce all their own written literature? In this context it is clear that we hope for a lot in a very short time.

The fourth reason why there are not more writers in Aboriginal languages outside school is the psychological matter of control. Bilingual education was introduced from "above".

Aboriginal people were consulted - but the shape of the program is a white interpretation of what seemed most workable. Current sociological thought seems to be telling us that unless the group concerned *controls* the program, then the program does not tap lasting grass-roots initiative. (An example of the psychology of control that I'm talking about would be the observation that voluntary migrants learn to speak a new national language much better than conquered ethnic minorities do. For example, say, Italian, Greek or Chinese migrants to the USA or Australia seem to learn to speak and write English much more quickly and better on average compared with American Indians or Aborigines.

Of course, Aboriginal people *were* consulted, and *are heavily involved* in the NT bilingual program, but key white people have been at least equal mainstays. That was probably unavoidable historically, but a change of emphasis is now needed. However, so far even the more self-determining or Aboriginal-controlled Aboriginal schools have not produced a notably larger written literature than other schools. But again, I believe it is too soon to tell.

The fifth reason why not more Aboriginal language literature is being written is the matter of Aboriginal people finding the *right functions* for their own literature, or even the right *medium* of how a previously oral culture might wish to supplement its forms of expression today. When, in 1974, Aboriginal groups said they wanted bilingual education they said "Yes" enthusiastically - but what they were probably saying "Yes" to was the *treating of Aboriginal languages seriously*, not necessarily the purposes to which their written languages were put in schools. But again it was something new to all involved.

Perhaps the first time different groups of Aboriginal people really had an opportunity to work out together what their language priorities are, was at the Batchelor College conference in August 1977. At that conference, 250 Aboriginal people drew two main conclusions:

- 1) that they wanted *control* over their schools and language programs, and
- 2) that they wanted a focus on Aboriginal *language maintenance* - which is quite different, or *could* be quite different, from using Aboriginal languages for academic purposes.

Now, just because very few Aboriginal groups seem to be actively pushing for those two priorities in a formal way, does not prove that those are not real aspirations.

For most of the rest of this paper I will follow up this fifth reason, that is, the indigenisation, or the Aboriginalisation of the *purposes, styles and functions or jobs* of written Aboriginal languages.

## EXAMPLES OF INDIGENOUS LITERATURES

What examples of an *indigenous recorded* Aboriginal literature do we have in Australia? Occurring *outside* of schools? One is bark painting, body painting and sand paintings where symbols are "read" by those who have the right to read them. There are also some isolated examples of Aborigines independently putting their stamp of support on aspects of vernacular literacy. Lee Cataldi, teacher-linguist at Lajamanu, told me recently that there is virtually no writing of Warlpiri outside school, but that anything written inside the school in Warlpiri is read straight away by everyone outside the school who can read. But more importantly, Lee Cataldi said that older Warlpiri people are saying that written Warlpiri has the job of *recording* and *preserving* Warlpiri culture. They are beginning to say "You can get that in a book", when people ask questions such as how shelters were built in the old days. Another example was given by Cliff Goddard, linguist at Ernabella, in a talk at a recent conference. Goddard explained that, whereas the school and church have tended to promote a *literature oriented* Pitjantjatjara literacy, Pitjantjatjara people seem to be spontaneously supporting Pitjantjatjara print materials which have a *reportage* function (reporting facts or events, making proclamations, validating opinions, or stressing the emotional impact of an event) or for *advocacy* (persuading, condemning, praising or complaining. For example, a page was spontaneously written in Pitjantjatjara, photocopied and posted up all around the community by the Council secretary to appeal to people to stop embarrassing her by asking her if they could borrow the Council's car.

It is worth noting here that Goddard's observation has a parallel in Tuareg, Cherokee and Vai written material - where writing in these languages has important functions but where there is no need to develop a large body of written literature to service those functions. Another example of indigenous recorded Aboriginal literature is video production, for example, at Yuendumu. Video use could turn out to be the chosen medium for

recorded languages among Aborigines, but again it is too soon to tell.

What precedents do we have from minority cultures overseas which have incorporated a written literature into their own cultural expression and way of life?

1. *The Tuareg of the Sahara.* The Tuaregs maintain a centuries old use of the written Berber language, which is limited pretty much to graffiti on rocks, talismans and brief love notes. (A talisman is something with writing on it that you carry with you or wear as a necklace or headband and which you hope has magic powers.) The uses of Berber are very different from purposes for which Arabic and European languages are used in that region.
2. *The Cherokee of Oklahoma.* The Cherokee have only a few Cherokee-literate people in each group to read or scribe. Parents do not require all children to become literate. Children learn by observing others read and write Cherokee and by participating in home and church routines which use written Cherokee. Often English literacy skills learned at school are brought alive again at home later in life and transferred to Cherokee. Formal instruction in homes is resisted. The functions of Cherokee are internal to the group: private, personal and religious.
3. *Black factory workers in South East U.S.A.* The third overseas example of an indigenous form of literacy is from Shirley Brice Heath's major study of language and literacy uses in three social groups in the south-east of the U.S.A. This study revealed some very interesting features of reading behaviour in an all Black group of textile factory workers. Children learned to read at home, but not in the typical "reading home"/"bedtime stories" way that seems so effective in mainstream Western society, and which many teachers have come to assume is best for all in all contexts.<sup>1</sup> This is an English speaking group, but this account shows how a particular cultural group can both learn to read in their own unique way, and use written language for their own internal range of function. For example -
  - these working class Black kids learned to read without deliberate parental initiative;

- these children learned from environmental print (with comprehension being the *context*, rather than the *outcome* of learning to read.)
- the parents did not have *critical, aesthetic, organisational* or *recreational* uses for literacy which seems typical of middle class "reading homes".

This Black working class group had seven uses for literacy:

1. instrumental (price tags, street signs)
2. social interactional (greeting cards, cartoons)
3. news related (local news, political flyers. International and national news was got from T.V., not from reading)
4. memory supportive (reminder messages)
5. substitutes for oral messages (notes to school teachers)
6. permanent records (loan documents, tax forms)
7. confirmation (supporting attitudes already held, e.g. bumper stickers/bible)

These people did not read novels, national news journals or text books. At work the workers got their instructions *orally*, even if these instructions also happened to be written down. Most importantly, reading was a *social or group activity*, not an *individual* or *solitary* activity. People were actually teased as being anti-social if they read privately - on their own.

This case study provides evidence that when literacy meets socially established purposes it is used regularly and the skill can be passed on spontaneously.

4. *The Vai of Liberia*. Another example of a truly indigenous literacy (written about by Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole) is the Vai of Liberia, West Africa. The Vai maintain three literacies in three languages for three different purposes.
  - English for schooling and for business outside the family and outside the Vai group.
  - Arabic for Muslim religious expression and reciting the Koran

- and Vai for private uses between Vai, such as letters, family history and business records for the extended family and for private planning, such as the building of a family house.

There is very little written literature in Vai, though they are very proud of their *Vai Book*, and their syllabary (or writing system). Most readers are male, and only about 20% of the population is literate. No outsiders seem to be sure how the Vai learn to read, but the skill seems to be learned informally during bush initiation schools.

5. *Hebrew Literacy*. This is a useful example of the way literacy need not mean the end of control over knowledge by older people or by particular people. Hebrew is a good example to draw a distinction between *mediated* and *unmediated* literacy. A mediator is, of course, a middleman/woman, a go-between. In mediated literacy the reader (or at least the young reader) needs a second person to explain. The reader needs an oral commentary by a second and more knowledgeable, usually older, person. In mediated literacy, reading is a social or group activity, or an activity of pairs of people.

Unmediated literacy is the aim of Western schooling: it is where the reader independently holds all the skills and knowledge needed to understand the text.

Mediated literacy leaves authority and full understanding outside the written text. Hebrew is normally read aloud in groups - it is a social\* activity.

How is mediated literacy controlled? How does the society keep it as a group activity and keep the young people dependent on outside input?

- i) the orthographical or alphabet system is purposely left incomplete in two ways:
  - a) it doesn't print vowels, so it is harder to read. (For beginners they sometimes use a system of dots under the consonants to show what vowels are there. These dots are taken away by about grade three.)

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\*This is apparently true for many functions of Hebrew literacy today, but would not be for all. For example, as the language of the Israeli army, Hebrew would need to be read as an individual activity in some contexts.

b) it doesn't contain all the cantillation or chanting or timing-of-chanting marks. (In a sense this means it is deliberately missing some punctuation marks.)

ii) also, the texts contain some deliberate mistakes - which must be replaced by knowledgeable people outside the young reader.

In other words, the Hebrew written religious text is important, but never autonomous: it never stands by itself; it must be explained by other people.

Earlier in this paper I gave five possible reasons why Aboriginal languages are not yet being spontaneously written very much; these are:

- we've concentrated on children more than adults
- there hasn't been enough time
- it is a tall order for such small language groups
- The Aborigines don't yet fully control the writing production institutions and may therefore not be putting as much initiative into it as they otherwise would; and
- truly indigenous functions for written Aboriginal languages have not yet grown up.

I now want to conclude with a sixth possible reason why Aboriginal people don't seem to be writing more in their own languages. It's crucial for minority groups to maintain their own distinctive *world view* if they are to maintain their identity. Distinctive world views (or value systems and cultural priorities) can be supported or attacked by the types of literacy to which young people are exposed in their own language.

This is the view of Ron and Suzanne Scollon, writing about a Canadian group, the Kutchin, at Fort Chipewyan in Alberta. They use the term "reality set" instead of "world view". They build an argument claiming that essayist literacy (where all the information is in the text, where the reader can understand everything on his or her own without depending on outside input) supports the Western culture world view. The Scollons argue that with

Western type essayist literature young people begin to see authority in the written word, and that this takes authority away from the social group. They argue that the Western essayist style promotes individual independence and autonomous behaviour and that young people need older people less because they can interpret the information on their own. This style of writing tries to be objective, depersonalised and explicit. This Western essayist approach makes new information available without the reader having to bother about who owns the information, and personal ownership of some types of information is an important part of some world views.

Essayist writing has a long tradition in Western culture. For example, Martin Luther tried in the Protestant Reformation to take authority away from the priests in the Catholic church by putting authority in the written word - the Bible - so people could go independently to God and not have to go through the Priest. Another example is the Royal Society of London, which made a rule late last century that all texts that it published must be "clear and sufficient in their own right".

This decontextualised, autonomous type of writing is both the medium and goal of English/Western schooling. The Scollons say that Kutchin Indians can't write about their world using this type of writing. The Scollons praise the Anglican missionaries of last century for not trying to force Western writing functions onto Kutchin written language. So today Kutchin writing has only a few personal and religious functions - not a wide use, but an indigenous use. In the same way we can be careful not to undermine the Aboriginal world view by trying to force Aboriginal written language into Western type writing functions. How that is to be done will have to evolve among Aboriginal people, but non-Aboriginal people involved can perhaps help by being more aware of the dangers.

## HOW CAN WRITING IN ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES BE MORE ABORIGINALISED?

How can Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal linguists and educators help? Maybe in three main ways:

1. We might put our Aboriginal literacy efforts into adults more than into children.
2. We might support much more flexibility in the design and shape of bilingual education programs. I think this is

already happening within the Department of Education in the Northern Territory. Aboriginal written functions will be indigenised through *Aboriginal* action, and that will be more likely if their initiatives have freer passage across *all* bilingual education and Aboriginal language issues, and not just the issues directly affecting writing styles.

3. We might support the general principal of functional differentiation between English and Aboriginal written materials. I'll say that another way. We might try to avoid competition for jobs between the two written literatures. In this way the purposes of written Aboriginal languages may end up being narrower than non-Aboriginals might hope for, but possibly more alive and spontaneously used. And all this will, of course, take years to evolve, but we supporters should try not to be in the road of it.

I'm not suggesting non-Aborigines take a lot of new initiatives - except perhaps trying to work more with adults - but I am suggesting we develop eyes to recognise sometimes faint Aboriginal initiatives towards indigenising the functions of their written languages. I guess I'm suggesting that unless indigenous functions of written Aboriginal languages are evolved, by Aborigines, the long term spontaneous use of written Aboriginal languages is doubtful.

*(This is a shorter version of a keynote address given at the Joint Australian Reading Association and Australian Association for the Teaching of English National Conference, Darwin, 30th June - 4th July 1989. The title of that address was "Alternative Aboriginal Literatures?" Readers interested in the references contained in that fuller article could obtain Conference Proceedings, or write to the author, Faculty of Education, Northern Territory University, PO Box 40146, Casuarina, NT, 0811.)*

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<sup>1</sup> If Aboriginal people do not develop a "bedtime stories" or "lap method" approach to reading with their young children at home, outside observers should not assume that those children will therefore not learn to read at home. Heath's study shows otherwise. However, this statement should not be taken to suggest that the "lap method" of teaching Aboriginal children to read *in schools* is not one of the best possible ways. In the context of the school, I believe the lap method is one of the very best of reading activities with Aboriginal children.