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PARABLES IN LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE¹

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The maintenance, or in some cases revival, of Aboriginal languages has become an important issue to Aboriginal people, and should be an important issue in Aboriginal schools if local people show concern about it. There is good reason for this concern. Predictions vary among linguists about how vulnerable Aboriginal languages are. There are about fifty Aboriginal languages spoken today. One informed estimate is that by the year 2000 a dozen of these will still be naturally reproducing themselves, that is, still spoken spontaneously by young children. Another informed estimate is that by that time only about three languages will be vigorous and spoken by children. These three are the related Yolngu languages in North East Arnhem Land, the related Western Desert languages of which Pitjantjatjara is the best known, and Kriol which is a new Aboriginal language and the largest, and growing rapidly.

Our assumption that there is a best way to go about language maintenance is not supported by a well established theory that can be applied in all contexts. Even though a good deal is known about language shift there is not agreement among linguists about what causes it in different situations. For example, it is assumed that isolation would help Aboriginal languages to stay strong, and that closeness to a large town would cause an Aboriginal language to weaken under pressure from English. But linguists have pointed out that some really isolated Aboriginal communities seem to be losing their language and that the language of some groups living near towns is staying stronger. It has also been assumed that if a community has one dominant Aboriginal language then it will remain stronger than those languages in a community where there are a number of different languages in use. Again linguists have observed that that is not always the case.

Also, it is assumed that the shift away from the many small Aboriginal languages is to English, but it has been noticed that many Aborigines who are losing their ability to speak their mothers' or fathers' language are not necessarily moving over to English but are tending to learn a larger local or regional Aboriginal language. This may be a new Aboriginal language such

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as Kriol, or an old language such as Djambarrpuyngu which is growing by being adopted by nearby related groups whose own language is spoken by comparatively few people. And there are many Aboriginal children and teenagers in some districts with a particular history of contact with whites who will not use their Aboriginal language even though they know it. So it appears that it may not be English that is the threat to Aboriginal languages so much as the perceived low status of those Aboriginal languages. Fortunately some Aboriginal languages still have very high status in the eyes of their speakers.

Not only can we not be dogmatic about how to go about language maintenance in every situation, but we can't be dogmatic about how schools can help. To some extent schools are a special situation. One advantage of a school is that it has a captive audience which can be taught things in ways that wouldn't work outside school. This can be very efficient but use of those skills outside school is not guaranteed. This is the dilemma of how schools can help in language maintenance. In the rest of this paper I want to tell some parables, or stories with a message, which may help teachers to work out their priorities in terms of what they can do to support language maintenance. I know the field is controversial, but I hope to avoid that and keep to principles which are pretty well agreed on.

1. HEBREW

About 150 years after Christ the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Jews were scattered widely into other countries outside their homeland. There they learned to use many other languages, and Ashkenazim Jews (those living in the ghettos of Poland, Germany and Eastern Europe) even developed their own Creole, Yiddish; and the Sephardic Jews (those living around the Mediterranean and in Arab lands) used Ladino. So the Hebrew language was not used for oral interpersonal communication from about 150 A.D. to the 1880s. There was a lot written in Hebrew, and Jewish worship took place regularly in it and Hebrew religious school was held in it, but in a sense it was a dead language because people didn't use it for social purposes. Then, in Palestine in 1887, Eleasar Ben Yehuda (who spent his life working on a detailed Hebrew dictionary) decided to do something about this. He insisted on Hebrew being used at all times as the language of his families' home. He worked hard to turn this into a fashion in Palestine, and his dream finally came true in 1948 when the country of Israel was formed and Hebrew was made the national language. People had to work hard at it because the Jews flock-into Israel after this spoke other languages of the countries from

which they came. The need was so great that soon Hebrew was again used orally, for social purposes, right across the country.

Message: How determined parents are in the home about what language is used makes a lot of difference. This is especially true if there are strong political forces supporting those parents' stand.

2. A GUPAPUYNGU PARENT'S EXPERIENCE

Djambarrpuynu is the Yolngu dialect that is virtually the lingua franca at Elcho Island and at Milingimbi in North East Arnhem Land. Gupapuynga is an important Yolngu dialect which is falling in numbers because of the influence of Djambarrpuynu. Brian Devlin tells a story from when he worked on Elcho Island. He used to have long conversations with the middle-aged son of an important Gupapuyngu clan leader who had lived on Milingimbi. The clan leader had made a determined effort to ensure that his son would speak Gupapuyngu. In a sense, this dream was realised, for the son can use and understand Gupapuyngu well but it is Djambarrpuynu which he uses for everyday purposes. Brian asked him why this was so. 'I learnt it from the other kids', he said.

Message: Parents' aspirations are important and can have a profound effect, but the influence of the peer group can be decisive.

3. TURKEY CREEK TEENAGERS

Turkey Creek is a small Aboriginal community near the WA - NT border. Patrick McConvell tells a story of Turkey Creek teenage reaction to the use of traditional language by other Aboriginal teenagers. These Turkey Creek teenagers could understand their parents' traditional language but did not speak it. They spoke Kriol. When Patrick showed them a film in which Pitjantjatjara teenagers in South Australia were seen using Pitjantjatjara feely among themselves, the Turkey Creek kids broke into hysterical laughter.

The matter of status seems to be important here. John Sandefur has implied that one informal way to tell how high the status of an Aboriginal language is in the eyes of Aborigines who know it is to observe whether or not Aboriginal speakers change to English in the presence of Whites. If Aboriginal people switch to English or insist that their children switch to English, then their language possibly has a low status in their eyes.

(This may be an unfortunate side effect of having good White-culture manners where people are not supposed to keep using a language when others join the group who can't speak it. This is something many dominant White people - including teachers - have insisted on as good manners.) The perception of status may be quite unconscious. How can non-Aboriginal people be supportive here? Perhaps they can recognise that in this context there are more important things at stake than good White manners. Children's identities are formed partly by how other people regard them; what they 'read back' to them.

As an aside, perhaps one of the best but unexpected benefits of bilingual education is that a written literature has helped keep the status of particular Aboriginal languages high, and this status helps towards their vitality in *oral* form.

Message: There are probably a number of messages here. The most important of them is that the perceived status of a language might be decisive in whether teenagers decide to use it or not. Perhaps planners of Aboriginal language programs need to think as much about the status of a language as how to teach it.

4. GAELIC IN SOUTHERN IRELAND

In the first half of this century the people of Southern Ireland struggled to gain independence from Britain. One of the things they kept complaining about was that the British made them have all their schooling in English and they kept on asking to have Gaelic in school too. Eventually the school system gave them Gaelic as well as English and thousands of children learned Gaelic very fluently in school. Then in 1947 Southern Ireland got independence from Britain and the issue of Gaelic became much less important! Because English was so useful economically most people just spoke English all the time. So, in Ireland for the last thirty years there have been more people who *know* Gaelic and can use it if they want to than for at least the last 100 years, but there are fewer people who actually *use* it than before it officially became a major school language.

Message: Schools can teach children languages but they can't make them use them outside school.

5. USING A LANGUAGE VERSUS LEARNING A LANGUAGE

James Cummins, an expert on bilingual education who lives in Canada now, tells a story about his childhood which can say

something to us here. When he was a child he lived in Ireland. Until he was eight years of age he went to a public school that used Gaelic as a language of instruction : the teachers simply taught what had to be taught in Gaelic. Then he moved schools and until he was eighteen went to a private Jesuit school. (This Jesuit school must have been an excellent school or presumably his parents wouldn't have sent him there.) The Jesuit school taught Gaelic as a subject: they didn't teach anything *in* it, they just taught *it* and *about it* very well. When Cummins left school at eighteen he could not speak Gaelic in everyday conversation as well as he could when he was eight. But he knew a lot about it.

Message: Use it or lose it. To stay healthy languages must have a job: an oral job. Social speech is stronger than reading and writing and study in keeping a language strong. Reading and writing can help but interpersonal speech is the real centre of language. Languages stay healthy when they do a social job between people.

6. COMMUNITY DECISION MAKING

Jerry Lipka has been working in Eskimo teacher training in South West Alaska for a decade. He tells a story about something he thinks happened in two Yup'ik villages, Manokotak and Stuyahok, both with about 350 people each in the Bristol Bay area.

In approximately 1953 the Stuyahok village elders made a decision to move the village from where it then was to its current location approximately 100 kilometres down river. The reason for this move was to have a school for the village children. The bureau of Indian Affairs, the governmental organisation in charge of schooling for Indian and Eskimo children, would not agree to establishing a school in Stuyahok as it was too far and inaccessible from the regional centre. The elders were so concerned about the economic and political future of their children that they agreed to move their village to have a school. They believed that English was the language of power and influence and it appears that the village made a concerted effort to support English language usage among their children. In fact, the chief on occasion spoke English to his grandchildren. Also, some of the early teachers punished their students for using Yup'ik in the school. Today none of the children speak Yup'ik much to the chagrin of the chief, who is now deceased.

At the same time Manokotak, which is nearer to a regional town than New Stuyahok, made a firm decision to support Yup'ik in as many situations as possible.

While this is, of course, not the whole story of those villages and of what is affecting their language, Yup'ik is today spoken amongst the children in Manokotak while it is no longer spoken among the children in New Stuyahok.

Message: If the people support community decisions and there is determined local leadership, then those decisions can make a big difference. Community leaders do not need to despair that keeping the language strong is something they can't do anything about if they have true community backing.

7. INFLUENTIAL TEACHERS

Jerry Lipka tells another story that is a bit like the Ben Yehuda and Hebrew story, but this time it's about two teachers. Two very determined Eskimo teachers, husband and wife, decided to speak Yup'ik to their class.

The couple were determined to keep the Yup'ik language alive. At that time the students were not speaking Yup'ik although they had passive receptive knowledge of the language. The Yup'ik teaching couple decided that they would speak Yup'ik to the parents of the children as well as to the children in class. This decision and the subsequent active use of Yup'ik between the teachers and the parents seemed to inspire the children as they started to more actively use the language.

Message: Determined influential and clever teachers can make a difference to keeping the traditional language in use. If they are the only influence and if this influence is not maintained by teachers following them, then they probably won't win the day. But if long term teacher trend setting behaviour is combined with other positive forces then their influence on keeping language strong is important.

CONCLUSION

None of these stories explain the whole situation of language maintenance, but they all offer pieces of the puzzle. One thing is sure. If language change keeps going the same way

as it is now, many small languages will not be spoken in ten years time. That is as true in Alaska as it is in remote Australia. (Some linguists think that by the year 2000 Yup'ik will be the only local language still spoken in Alaska by young people.) But while it is not easy to do anything about small language loss, and we are not always sure what is the best way to help, these stories show that something can be done if enough people care enough, and there is enough reason to do something.

¹Some of the stories in this paper come from Chapter 4 on language maintenance and schools in a book *Two-way Aboriginal Schooling : Western Education and the Survival of a Small Culture* by the same author, to be published by Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, this year. This paper will not include all the references which go to support some of the information in it, and readers are invited to check that book if need be.

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CONTRIBUTORS

The Aboriginal Child at School is designed principally to be a national forum whereby teachers of Aboriginal learners may exchange insights about their students' learning, and teaching strategies they have developed that have proved successful.

Readers of the journal find particularly valuable the practical teaching ideas developed by teachers in the field to cater for specific characteristics of their students, school and community.

The journal is able to accept articles and ideas in almost any form (see p.2).

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