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PLACING TORRES STRAIT ISLANDERS ON A SOCIOLINGUISTIC AND LITERATE CONTINUUM: A CRITICAL COMMETARY

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Much of the literature on Torres Strait Islander, as well of Aboriginal, education begins from the assumption that oral traditions and cultures have a profound effect on educational achievement. But how easy is it to plot Islanders on an oral/literate continuum (cf. Goody, 1978)? The purpose of this paper is a critical examination of a sociolinguistic model designed to describe Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal peoples in terms of oracy and literacy by Watson (1988). As part of her attempt to explain mathematics education as it relates to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, her continua attempt at an analysis via a theoretical framework built on socio-demographic and linguistic differences between orate and literate traditions. Watson (1988, p.257) suggest that, "...there exists the same type of continuum linking use of Torres Strait Islander languages and English."

To investigate the appropriateness of the application of such continua to Torres Strait Islanders, this discussion follows Watson's theoretical construction of the model through its various stages. To gain this insight into the suggested relatedness to Torres Strait Islander linguistics, Anna Shnukal's research in the Torres Straits on the Torres Strait Creole - Broken (1989), will be employed to plot Islanders along the continua using Watson's criteria.

Watson (1988, p.255) "examines mathematics education as it relates to the Aboriginal-Australian community." In this analysis, she takes the view that mathematics is a "linguistic enterprise" (p.259). To distance herself from past assimilationist, interventionist policies on Aboriginal schooling, Watson aligns herself with an educational curriculum and pedagogy that addresses the bicultural experience of Aboriginal people. With this bias, Watson (1988, p.255) claims, "(b)icultural education

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will reproduce the economy and culture of Aboriginal Australia through dynamic interaction with European Australia". This attention to biculturality and the pursuing of bicultural education poses problems for the teaching of a mathematical system derived from the Indo-European language system.

My concern here is not with the application of this model to maths education. Rather, it is to attempt to focus on the languages used by Torres Strait Islanders to see whether the model Watson has developed for Aboriginal children may also have some bearing on the relationship of Torres Strait Islander children to the English language. It is interesting to note that Torres Strait communities are located at one end of the continua as a separate group but fail to appear as a separate group anywhere else. This reflects the tendency to treat Aboriginals and Islanders as one and the same in mainland communities, and to assume that traditional island communities are subjected to the same influences as traditional Aboriginal communities. In many research studies, policies and laws - islanders are, to borrow a phrase from recent feminist theory, "commatised" (O'Brien, 1984).

Following a brief description of Watson's model and Shnukal's understandings of the Torres Strait and its languages, the analysis will begin by contrasting their claims about the Torres Strait context. Variations will be noted and illustrated on a comparative scale to Watson's continua.

WATSON'S MODEL: A DESCRIPTION

To describe how far removed the Aboriginal child is from the maths register of the English language, Watson has constructed a model which attempts to map Aboriginal sub-groups according to their linguistic characteristics. This model employs two continua. The first relates to the "ordinary everyday" language spoken amongst a group (see Fig. 1). The second concerns the degree to which oral or literate communication predominates in community groups (see Fig. 2).

The first continuum involves differences in semantic structures of the ordindary everyday language spoken in Aboriginal communities with the English and traditional

languages at opposite ends of the continuum. Watson (1988, p.257) argues that the systematic ordering of reality which occurs with traditional languages has profound differences in semantic or meaning structures to those of the English language and its dialects. Hence their location along the continuum at opposite ends (see Fig.1). Different language groups categorise their world distinctly. On this basis, Watson is able to locate the different language dialect use along the continuum.

Consequently traditional Aboriginal communities are located at one end of the continuum with a trend towards Aboriginals dispersed in metropolitan and urban areas at the other. There they live as members of the European-derived Australian community; and speak dialects of English.

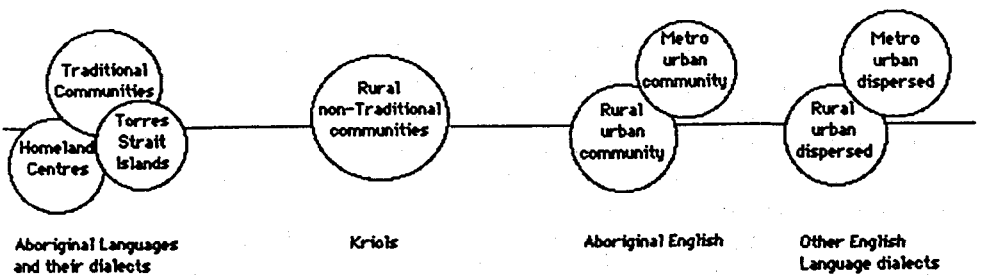


Figure 1 Distribution of constituent communities of Aboriginal Australia along a continuum of change in the semantic structure of everyday language used in the community.

Source: Watson (1988:257)

The second continuum attempts to locate the extent to which oral and literate modes of communication predominate in each community. Watson maps groups from traditional communities where print does not figure in their modes of communication on one end of the continuum moving towards metro-urban Aboriginals whose modes of communication are heavily involved with the use of the printed material (Watson, 1988).

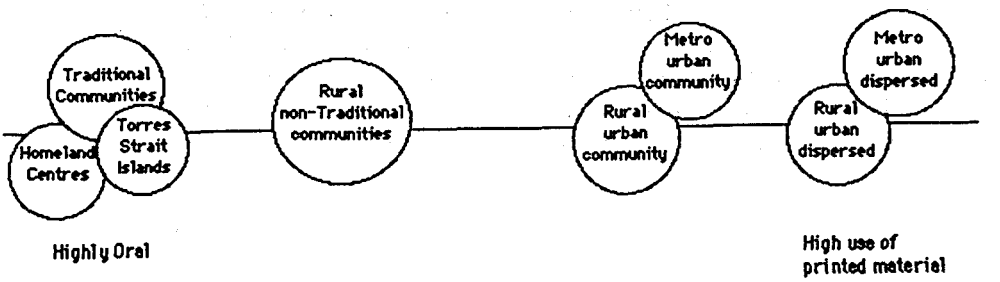


Figure 2 Distribution of constituent communities of Aboriginal Australia along a continuum of change in the preferred mode of communication.

Source: Watson (1988:258)

By placing these continua as axes on a grid, Watson (1988, p.260) is able to map, "the relations between constitutent communities of Aboriginal Australia with respect to linguistic characteristics". Further to this, she has categorised the sub-groups into three areas (see Fig.3) Within these categories, Watson discusses the everyday languages; register; mode; degree of removal from the maths register of English; and the problems that these, and the biculturality of the three groups may bring to bear on maths education. Her particular emphasis is on current Northern Territory programs.

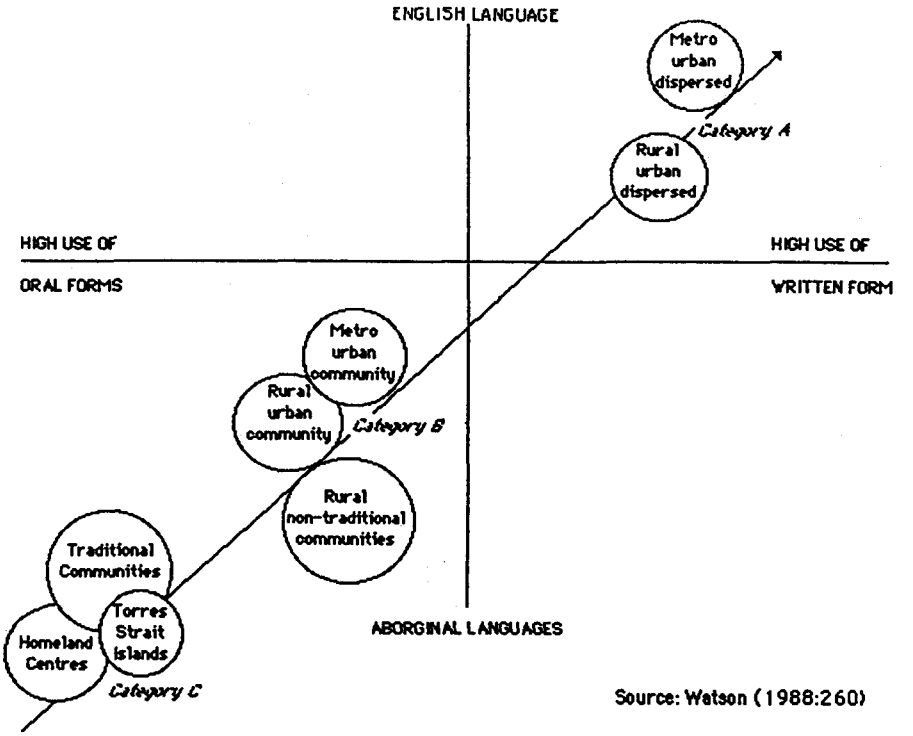


FIGURE 3 A 'map' of the relations between constitutent communities of Aboriginal Australia with respect to linguistic characteristics

TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER COMMUNITIES AND LANGUAGES

How well do the foregoing characterisations fit the demographics and sociolinguistics of Torres Strait Islanders? There are seventeen Islander communities in the Torres Strait. From Shnukal's research (1989) we can deduce that eight of these communities use as their first language, one of the two traditional languages - Kala Lagaw Ya (KKY) or Meriam. She claims traditional language use in nine communities has "almost entirely" been replaced by the Torres Strait Creole as the first language. However, they may still understand traditional languages which in some of these communities are spoken only by the very old. For some communities this creolisation began four generations ago and even for those still maintaining traditional languages, the Creole remains the lingua franca across all communities.

Immediately, we see a divergence from Watson's first continuum. Those 'outer' island communities speaking Creole as their first language may have as their second language either a traditional language or English. In any case they would still consider themselves as traditional communities, nor could they be confined to one sub-group on a continuum of change in semantic structure (Watson, 1988; Shnukal, 1989).

The main centre of population in the Torres Strait, Thursday Island, could be considered on Watson's continuum a rural non-traditional community: the majority of the first language Creole speakers in the Torres Straits can be located there. The integrated traditional and "mainstream" lifestyle that exists on Thursday Island is moving towards western technological and commercial ways. As well, most all children speak Creole as their first language and increasingly use English as their second language. This does not discount the fact that some children may still maintain a traditional language, either as a first, second or third language, depending on the language(s) used by parents (Shnukal, 1989).

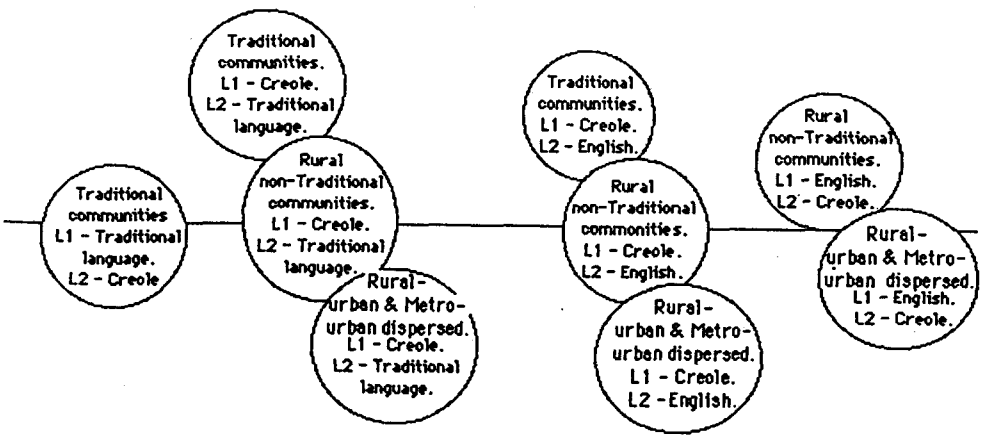
The mainland communities on the tip of Cape York - Bamaga, New Mapoon, Seisia, Inginoo and Umagico - can be located like Thursday Island on the continuum in the category of rural non-traditional. However, unlike Thursday Island, these are relocated traditional communities of the outer Torres Strait Islands. Shnukal (1989) states these communities speak Creole as their first language. Further, unlike Thursday Island's mixed race people, members of these communities are predominantly from a background of traditional languages. The important difference between these communities and Thursday Island, as far as placing them on this continuum, is the proximity of the member's second language to the semantic structure of English.

In 1986 Census figures indicate 13,168 Torres Strait Islanders living in Queensland. Whilst 4,837 Islanders reside in the Torres Straits. The majority of Islanders live in Queensland's coastal towns and cities. In Shnukal's (1989, p.3) estimates, the majority of these islanders would be second-language Creole speakers. According to her research (1989, p.7), mass migration took place around the 1960s, which signals almost thirty (30) years of participation in

"mainstream" Australia. Unlike the Aboriginal population, there has been no concentration of Torres Strait Islanders into urban or metropolitan communities. Acknowledging that Creole and traditional languages may be maintained in the home; and that children are raised in a predominantly "western" environment and are using English as their everyday language at school work and in recreation; without a closer investigation of language use, one can only speculate on the children's first language (Bureau of Statistics, 1989; Shnukal, 1989). Torres Strait Islanders living in Brisbane and coastal cities and towns would appear to fall into Watson's category of metro-urban dispersed. However, locating Torres Strait Islanders here in the category of 'other English language dialect' remains speculative (Bureau of Statistics, 1989; Watson, 1988).

In weighing information from Shnukal's research on the Torres Strait Creole against the template of Watson's continuum (Fig. 1), Islanders can be contrasted on a similar continuum which I here propose to demonstrate the differing patterns:

Figure 4 Distribution of Torres Strait Islander communities along a continuum of change in the semantic structure of the everyday languages in the community.



Shnukal would agree with Watson in terms of the differences between semantic structures of traditional Torres Strait languages and those of English. She concedes that in terms of meaning systems, Creole, although English-based, is closer to traditional languages than English. It is easier for Islanders to translate traditional languages than English. It is easier for Islanders to translate traditional languages to Creole than it is for Creole to English. However, she notes that as Islanders' patterns of living become westernised so do the semantic structures of the Creole. This may support Watson's notion that the more integrated with white communities that Aboriginals become, the more the semantic structures of the Aboriginal English or English dialects move towards the semantic structures of English (Shnukal, 1989).

It should be noted here that there is a current emergence of status for Torres Strait Creole and a strong desire on the part of many young people to maintain Creole. This may possibly have a slowing effect on the decreolisation process of the Torres Strait Creole (Shnukal, 1989).

I have shown here that Torres Strait Islander Communities can be placed in similar positions to Aboriginal communities on Watson's first continuum. However, had I considered only the predominant language and not the second language I would have obtained a more general and less accurate representation of communities along the continuum. Although Shnukal does not address the degree to which oral and literate speech registers predominate in Islander communities. I will now attempt to place Islander communities along the second continuum according to Watson's criteria.

ORAL AND LITERATE TRADITIONS

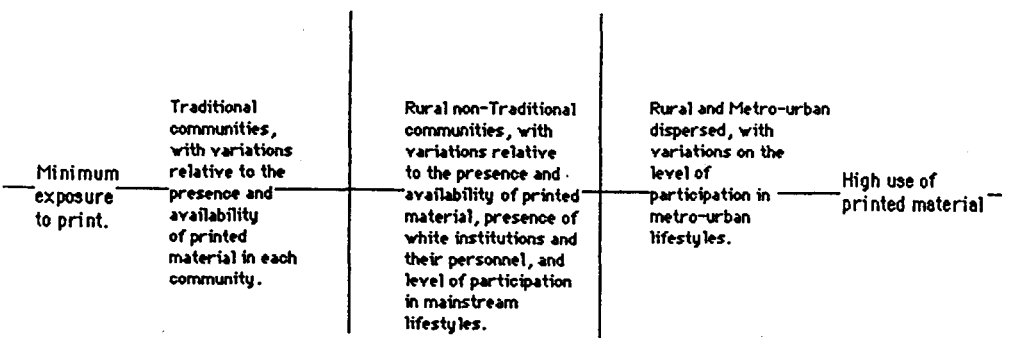
Watson's second continuum concerns the degree to which oral or literate communication exists in communities (see Fig. 2). Watson has arranged the Aboriginal sub-groups according to the extent to which the presence of printed material influences speech registers used in their daily lives.

In order to focus where Torres Strait Islander speakers may fit along this continuum, it may be necessary to look a little closer at Watson's use of "register" as it

relates to language use. In her words, "the various patterns of styles of language use which are associated with the various social context and purposes of language use" (1988, p.258). Although she introduces registers as an aspect of language, her purpose is to use the term in discussing the degree of written materials in Aboriginal communities and its effect on language registers. She claims in a community where print hardly exists, speakers will use only a minimum of print-associated registers, which she locates at one end of the continuum. As the move towards the opposite end of the continuum progresses towards an increasing literate environment (see Fig. 2), she is able to map the registers as they change towards the registers of mathematics.

To locate sub-groups on this continuum, it is important to note that Watson's analysis of the predominate mode of communication is measured in relationship to the existence of other sub-groups. For example, if we begin with an acceptance that Torres Strait Islander families in the metropolitan and urban areas have the highest influence of print through its many institutions, we are able to scale other sub-groups accordingly. Using this analysis, communities in the rural non-traditional category like Bamaga and Thursday Island would be located separately on the continuum. This separation can be explained on a similar basis: on such indicators as the existence of commercial enterprises, mainstream institutions, the White: Black ratio of the population, and the degree of "mainstream" influence on children of today. The same measuring devices can also be made to differentiate between traditional communities, and non-traditional communities. If Torres Strait Islander groups were presented along this continuum using Watson's distribution procedures, we would have the following:

Figure 5 Distribution of Torres Strait Islander communities along a continuum of change in the amount of exposure to printed materials.



Watson has avoided estimating the functions, uses and genres of print in the various sub-groups. And without further detail it is difficult to assess with any accuracy the impact of printed materials on each sub-group's speech registers (see Heath, 1983). For example: the amount of printed material available in each community; the quality of the text; the degree of interaction with print; the levels of participation in the written modes of communication; the levels of comprehension of the written texts; and the duration print has been available in these communities, would have to be considered before locating sub-groups on such a continuum. Here Heath's (1983) major ethnography of literacy among U.S. Southern Afro-Americans is significant, particularly in its systematic demonstration that stereotypes of "oral culture" among non-mainstream groups can be erroneous and ethnocentric.

For example, according to Finch (1975) formal education was first established in the Torres Strait by missionaries in 1891. A teacher training institute was also established by them on Murray Island. Therefore today the Torres Strait region can claim almost a century of exposure to white and black missionaries; Government protectors and admininstrators; a cash economy; and the presence of functional literate texts as part of the daily life of at least some Islanders. With the arrival of technology to the region, Aussat and Telecom facilitates a regular television program to some islands; a local radio program and telephone communication to all islands; and all entail, directly and indirectly the use of various texts or at the least exposure to them. The availability of video on all islands also provides similar access to (video displayed) print. Regular transport within the region also improves the distribution of newsagent texts. At the same time a seventy year old member of the regional education committee is able to read and write; a fifteen year old leaving school in the 1980s cannot read or write. These observations and influences hint at the wide variance possible in the effects and presence of literate text to the region.

With this in mind, consider that Watson's continuum primarily acknowledges that the further removed geographically a group is from Western society then the less the degree to which they become involved with print, and consequently the less such textual 'ways with words' influence their speech registers. Hence her continuum

appears to deal with the interaction of the written forms only in general terms of 'contact' and does not in any way address the qualitative aspects of interaction with the text (Watson, 1988).

In Watson's final analysis, the locations of the various sub-groups of Aboriginal people are collated and presented on a grid (see Fig. 3) defined by axes. From the first and second continua, she narrows the sub-groups into three categories.

Category (A) according to Watson, are groups that "use English and are generally experienced in the use of written registers." To apply Torres Strait Islanders to the categories of metro-urban, rural-urban dispersed may be appropriate. However, there appears no clear evidence of the degree of participation in the English language. Although, Shnukal assumes high probabilities of these families, in particular the children, using English as their first language. (Shnukal, 1989).

In category (B), urban communities in metropolitan and rural areas are grouped with the non-traditional rural communities. Watson, having taken great steps to emphasise vital linguistic differnces, clusters them together as having similar linguistic characteristics - specifically, semantic structures and the presence of printed materials as it influences speech registers (see Fig. 3). In regard to Torres Strait Islanders in this category, Bamaga and Thursday Island residents would appear to share similar non-traditional aspects of community. But, because they have different linguistic and socio-demographic histories an additional subgroup is required to show differences: in black:white ratio of population of each community; in exposure to "mainstream" commercial institutions; in linguistic characteristics, for example, the level of predominance of the Lingua Franca and/or traditional languages; and in its proximity to mainstream or traditional lifestyles. This will enable the effects of exposure to print and literate genres to each community to be plotted relative to its presence.

In her final category, Watson has maintained consistency with traditional communities on one extreme of the continuum. As this analysis of the Torres Strait Islanders indicate, traditional communities will vary in their language use from traditional languages to the Torres

Strait Creole. Therefore, it requires additional subgroups to accommodate the variations as indicated in Fig. 4 and Fig. 5. (Watson, 1988; Shnukal, 1989).

The following model attempts to place Torres Strait Islanders along such a revised continuum.

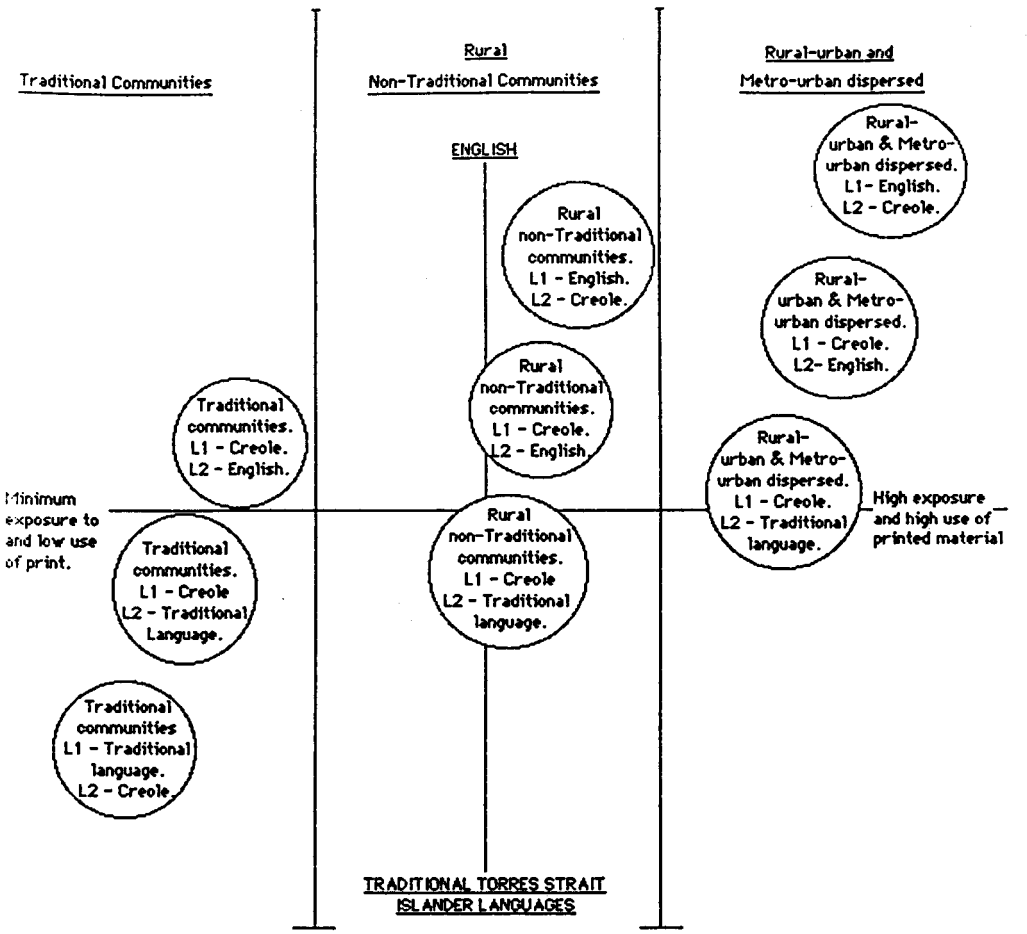


Figure 6 A 'map' of the relations between language communities of Torres Strait Islanders with respect to their proximity to printed materials and the English language.

It seems valid to attempt to place these language groups along the continua, though it serves to illustrate what we already know: that because Torres Strait Island communities have only been involved with print since the latter part of the nineteenth century and because groups vary in their degree of involvement with mainstream society, English speakers, and their institutions - they also vary in the degree to which they are able to make sense of the more 'specialised' registers of English (Shnukal, 1989).

CONCLUSION

Watson's continua, while an ambitious preliminary attempt to identify "difference" among Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders to the English language, stops short of placing constitutent communities appropriately. For example, the aforementioned limited investigation of the influence of the printed material on speech registers in each community; the lack of consideration given to the influence of the second language; the low priority to migratory movements between constituent communities; the inconsistencies of groupings from continua to grid (e.g., the merging of rural non-traditional, metro-urban and rural-urban communities); and the inclusion of Islander people would group along a similar continuum, all point to the need for more research and understanding of the sociology of language of both Islander and Aboriginal groups.

Categorising these groups in order to develop appropriate curriculum and pedagogy would best be treated with caution. Placing groups along an oral/literate continuum is to generalise, perhaps inaccurately, about certain groups of people. Amongst educators and curriculum developers, such categorisation can lead to standardisation, which when reflected in pedagogy and curriculum, leaves teachers no closer to addressing the complexities of individual linguistic and social backgrounds. Here I have critiqued the claim that, for instance, all Islander children can be readily described in terms of a common sociolinguistic and orate/literate background.

In reference to Torres Strait Islander people, consideration of only the predominate language used in each community is insufficient. The first, second, and often times the third language spoken, also become significant factors in understanding the sociolinguistic characteristics of Islanders, and make any categorisation of Torres Strait

Islanders more complex and problematic. Therefore, it is necessary to pay closer attention to the individual linguistic capabilities of each child before associating the linguistic relationships to the English language.

Can Torres Strait Islanders really be placed on a continuum? Will a continuum be able to accommodate the many variables involved in the interrelatedness of multilingual communities? Should we begin with a continuum? Perhaps, but I have argued here that a good deal of primary qualitative and sociolinguistic research remains to be done prior to any definitive model building.

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LANGUAGE:
Maintenance, Power and Education in Australian Aboriginal Contexts

Edited by
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The 1987 conference on Cross-Cultural Issues in Educational Linguistics was a particularly significant event in Aboriginal education in the Top End of the Northern Territory. Held at Batchelor College, a leader in Aboriginal tertiary education in Australia, the conference attracted over 300 participants from Australia and overseas, a majority of them being Aboriginal educators.

The papers in this volume are organised around three themes which are central to Aboriginal Education:

- Language and Power
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They include significant contributions from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants, such as, Mandawuy Yunupingu, Michael Christie, Jim Martin, Eve Fesl, Robert Kaplan, Brian Gray, David Bendor-Samuel, Beth Graham, and many others. The papers also briefly report some of the discussion of participants around language-related issues emerging in their communities.

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