



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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BOOK REVIEW

BRIDGING TWO WORLDS: ABORIGINAL ENGLISH AND CROSSCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

BY JEAN HARKINS.#

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Bridging Two Worlds presents a social and linguistic study of a variety of Aboriginal English spoken in town camps around Alice Springs. The book explores the distinctive way in which Aboriginal speakers employ the linguistic resources of English to express Aboriginal concepts and ways of viewing the world.

The research upon which the book is based was initiated and directed by the Yipirinya School Council in Alice Springs, in accord with community principles and aspirations. Harkins bases the core of the study on the analysis of 30 hours of recorded Aboriginal English language use and observations made in informal speech contexts.

After brief forewords by the Yipirinya School Council and Diana Eades, Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the study with a brief background on the way the project developed and an outline of the organisation of the book and the research questions defined by the community as the aims of the study. Essentially, the project was initiated to obtain a better understanding of the use of English in the total language community as a basis upon which to formulate subsequent educational programs and strategies.

Chapter 2 contextualises the study in the local language environment and contact history of the speakers and includes a brief review and critique of selected approaches to the study of Aboriginal English varieties. Harkins discusses the use of Aboriginal English in Alice Springs in terms of the other languages spoken (Arrernte and Luritja),

demonstrating the complex interdependence of language varieties and their expression in various social contexts. A set of rules is formulated to explain people's choice of language varieties in different contexts. Other investigators (in particular Walker 1982, 1983) are criticised for employing inappropriate referential frameworks and methodological approaches to data collection and analysis which exclude the cultural and social contexts of language use.

Chapters 3 and 4 present the more technical aspects of the study, focusing on noun and verb forms. Harkins discusses the apparent non-standard usage of nouns and verbs not as mistakes or errors, but rather as additions and modifications employed to articulate meanings not readily expressible in standard English. These modifications are introduced in a consistent and structured way in Aboriginal English and not randomly employed as some have argued. As Harkins suggests (p.4), those less interested in the technical linguistic details of the study may wish to skip these two chapters.

Chapter 5 is devoted entirely to counteracting the stereotypical characterisation of Aboriginal English as lacking logical connective strategies. A range of examples is presented to demonstrate the presence and flexibility of numerous cohesive strategies in Aboriginal English. Harkins argues that the methods employed by some previous investigators, using arbitrary analytical categories, can pre-determine outcomes and thus inhibit the recognition of linguistic devices which are related to specific speech or cultural contexts.

It is argued that a “multidimensional” and “interactive” approach to analysis which is not confined to the text dataset but draws on knowledge of the language environment can transcend some of the common limitations of text-based analysis.

Chapter 6 discusses the unique semantic structures or systems of meaning in Aboriginal English. Harkins argues that features of Aboriginal English are best understood in terms of their ability to articulate Aboriginal ways of viewing the world. In other words, the distinctive way Aboriginal speakers use English words in Aboriginal contexts reflects their use in indigenous language categories to express a range of meanings.

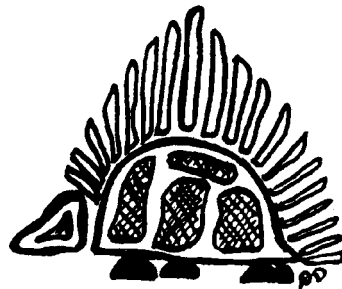
Chapter 7 concludes the book with a discussion of some of the educational implications of the study. Throughout the text Harkins challenges the notion of Aboriginal language deficiency (and its equation with cognitive deficiency) which continues to persist amongst some linguists and educationalists in various guises. In contrast to this view, Harkins argues that Aboriginal speakers manipulate the grammatical and lexical resources of English to express Aboriginal conceptual frameworks or ways of viewing the world. Harkins demonstrates that the way English is employed and modified by Aboriginal speakers often reflects continuities with, and the underlying structures of, traditional Aboriginal languages. To this end Harkins makes creative use of transcripts to illustrate points and introduce indigenous perspectives of language use, many of which are drawn from teacher-student discourse contexts. Four texts from which many of these examples were drawn are reproduced in full as an appendix.

The book has a few minor drawbacks. An inset of Australia on the locational map (p.xii) may have been useful for readers unfamiliar with the study area. While the text is generally accessible to the non-specialist, more extensive use of summary tables/points may have helped simplify

the more technical aspects of the study. Although most of the linguistic terminology is lucidly described in the text, a glossary may have been useful for easy reference. Finally, as Harkins notes, a larger sample of speakers may have permitted differentiation of English language use within the community. This last point is not so much a limitation as an outgrowth of the research agenda defined by community aspirations. Despite this, however, the results of the study can be seen to be broadly similar and applicable in many Australian contexts.

Varieties of Aboriginal English are central components in the construction of contemporary Aboriginal identity and the maintenance of social relationships. Aboriginal language choice and modification expresses the identity of the speaker in relation to others. It is important for educators and others to recognise Aboriginal English varieties not as aberrant so much as different. Non-recognition of Aboriginal English varieties is a form of denial of Aboriginal identity.

Bridging Two Worlds is an important and timely contribution to the understanding of contemporary Aboriginal English varieties and, in particular, to understanding the operation of these varieties in continuing language contact situations. As such, the study complements the pioneering work of Eades (1983, 1988) on Aboriginal English varieties in southeast Queensland. This will be a particularly valuable text for Aboriginal people, educators and others interested in crosscultural communication. An extensive and up-to-date bibliography will be invaluable to those interested in pursuing the subject further.



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- # St Lucia: University of Queensland Press (1994) xii+228 pages. ISBN 0 7022 2544 4 (paperback). Price \$29.95
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