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Waving a Tattered Banner? Aboriginal Language Revitalisation

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Nationalistic movements in the 'Celtic fringe' of Britain have succeeded in reviving dying tongues but it would be unrealistic to pretend that such shots-in-the-arm can do more than provide energy for waving a tattered banner.

Burgess (1992: 138)

Introduction

This paper examines the philosophy and practice of programs that aim to maintain, renew, or revive Aboriginal languages in Australia. I focus here on languages, mainly those of urban and rural rather than remote areas, for which there are few if any fluent speakers left. I will refer to them as dead or dying languages although I am aware that in the Aboriginal tradition people consider themselves to own languages that neither they themselves nor their close kin speak, and that this ownership is very much a part of a living culture. I begin by reviewing some basic issues that arise

in planning language programs for such languages. The final section considers some of the factors affecting the success of such programs.

Unfortunately, there is a sad history of the best planned and executed language programs, even those working with strong languages, grinding to a halt (Hercus, 1991). Nor can many revival programs point to success in terms of numbers of fluent speakers produced (Rigsby, 1987: 374). This has led some professional linguists to be pessimistic about how much can be achieved (e.g. Dixon, 1989; McKay and McConvell, 1994). Although it is not always possible to predict which languages will be most susceptible to engineering (Spolsky, 1990: 129), a number of experienced linguists are of the opinion that money spent this way is money wasted. Bob Dixon warns that speakers of dead or dying languages:

... cannot hope to regain their original language. They may wish to learn as much as they can about it from old sources. This will help to enhance a sense of identity and pride in tradition. But it is not language maintenance and should not be funded from money earmarked for language maintenance (Dixon, 1989: 32).

In a similar vein Bruce Rigsby says:

To my knowledge, no language revival programs in either Australia or North America have been successful, and perhaps

in the future, scarce human and other resources should not be spent on them (although the tasks of documentation and helping communities prepare materials on their language heritage are certainly worthy ones). Rather, I suggest we should concentrate our research and helping efforts on those communities where the intergenerational continuity of (relatively) full indigenous language transmission has not been broken (Rigsby, 1987: 374)¹.

While I have no argument with this concern to make the best use of available resources, I am concerned about assumptions that are widespread in the monolingual majority, and are reflected also in the quotation from Burgess from which this paper takes its title, about what constitutes success for a language program. There is a tendency to assume that a program must produce speakers who know a language 'right through' and can use it to say everything that they need to say in all circumstances. As a result, the fragmentary knowledge of a dead or dying language, which is what many programs will produce, is seen as a kind of failure. In its extreme form, this ideology regards revived languages as heraldic but useless, 'tattered banners' waving disconsolately over embattled minorities. Speakers and owners of these languages experience them differently. Used in intimate contexts, owned in common with close kin, they certainly are emblematic of group membership. But it is a group membership that is an addition to, rather than a contrast with, that of the English-speaking majority.

Some of Peter Sutton's work (e.g. Sutton, 1991) suggests that the well-attested multilingualism (Brand and Walsh, 1982) of 'classical' Aboriginal

Australia may often have been evident only in the use of relatively small, fragmentary amounts of various language varieties. The final section of this paper aims to encourage Aboriginal people who wish to revitalise their language/s to use their truly multicultural, multilingual experience as the critical point from which they can ensure that language revitalisation becomes more than the waving of a tattered banner. But first, what kinds of problems can a community that wishes to establish a language program expect to encounter?

The Decision To Have A Language Program

It has been estimated that over half the money available to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) for language work over the next few years will be spent on dead or dying languages (Amery, 1994: 141). This indicates that there is widespread support in Aboriginal communities for at least some degree of reclamation of these languages. Despite the pessimism of some linguists as to outcome, there is a long-standing argument that Aboriginal communities have a moral right to revive their languages, and that they should be the only ones to decide what languages are worth working on (Johnson, 1987: 54; Thieberger, 1990: 334). One of the factors in funding being made available for work on dead and dying languages has been the urging of this moral argument to government:

The significance and value of partially lost languages is still very high to those belonging to those language groups. It is inappropriate to further disadvantage those whose language has been weakened or

¹ Rigsby is less pessimistic about the possible success of revival programs today in the light of his work with Gitksan people in North America and the success of the Maori language nests.

partially lost, often through external pressures, by not providing support to that language (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992: 13).

This statement pinpoints one of the factors that often contributes to a community's decision to instigate a language program, the perception of forced cultural loss. This perception is experienced differently in different communities, but it seems always to be necessary before community members begin to actively pursue a language program.

Where English is already the first language of the community, there has sometimes been resentment that the indigenous language was actively suppressed. There are many reports of the physical punishment meted out in schools, missions and reserves to those who spoke their own language instead of English and it is remarkable how much has been retained under such circumstances. Language loss, language retention, and the possibility of language revitalisation, then, can be emblematic of the whole history of colonial dispossession, Aboriginal persistence and a self-assertive and self-determined Aboriginal future. However, the perception of loss and the desire to revitalise often comes rather late in the day. In Queensland it is often the case that older people who were amongst the last generation to be moved onto missions or reserves will retain some knowledge of their language, even when they have not had the chance to practise it for some time. Younger members of the community are not made aware of their own degree of language loss until prompted by some event such as the death of one of these good speakers.

Sometimes the prompt to think about a language program comes in another guise. Thus, one of the things that prompted Gureng Gureng people in Bundaberg to actively pursue a language program

was a plan by the education authorities to use a Northern Territory language or Waka Waka or Bundjalung in Aboriginal Studies curricula in local schools. Some Gureng Gureng people felt that the effect of this was to write them and their ancestors out of the history of their region. In other areas there has been a very clear perception that exclusive use of English in schools and administrative business not only makes it harder to maintain the local language, but also helps keep local Aboriginal people out of decision-making (Christie, 1990).

On the other hand, where there is no perception of a need to assert a particular cultural identity, there is often no initiative to institute a language program. In 1991 on Cape York Peninsula I heard Lamalama people tell an Education Department inspector that they were not as interested in having bilingual education in their outstation school as they were in having access to computers. This group enjoyed undisputed access to at least parts of their own ancestral land and their cultural identity was never in dispute. From a linguist's point of view there has already been some language loss and people acknowledged this fact but were not anxious to address it at that time or in the context of their outstation. In contrast, in 1994 language program initiatives were begun by the Lamalama kindergarten teacher in the local small town of Coen, not just for her own language but for others in this multi-ethnic and multilingual town. It is precisely in such a setting, where language marks politically significant difference, that the most pressing need is felt to preserve distinct varieties.

A further political encouragement to the establishment of language programs has been the land claim process arising from the passing of Queensland's *Aboriginal Land Act, 1991* and the Commonwealth's *Native Title Act, 1993*. This process provides the opportunity and

encouragement for people to assert particular rights and interests in defined areas of land and one way that they do this is by use of the language associated with it. This option will not often be available to people in the more settled parts of the country. Nevertheless, certain assumptions about the relationship between land and language mean that language ownership and use will often be used there as a means of asserting and reconstituting community (Varcoe, 1994: 34).

This puts a heavy burden on community members. It has been pointed out that no matter the degree of language loss or official support for language programs, funding alone will not maintain a language if its speakers are not committed to increasing their own and their children's use of the language (Dixon, 1989: 32). But we are also told:

The expectation that children might start speaking or writing a language fluently and in a traditional form as a result of a language revitalisation program is one of the unrealistic expectations that are sometimes found in indigenous communities (McKay and McConvell, 1994: 11).

This begins to look like a Catch 22 situation for Aboriginal communities. On the one hand, they are told that the success of the language program, and hence perhaps other community aspirations, depends entirely on them. On the other, they are told that their children cannot hope to speak and write their traditional language. What are they to do?

I want to suggest that what is needed is a critical approach to 'the unrealistic expectations', many of which derive from the dominant, monolingual ideology of non-Aboriginal culture, which I have already mentioned. As I have said, the multilingual precolonial history, and the contemporary

experience of Aboriginal communities, can be used as the starting point for a creative critique of the aims and successes of language programs. Before developing that critique, I will give an outline of what a community might expect a language program to entail. Many models exist and commentators agree that particular communities will have to adopt strategies to suit their particular circumstances. My suggestions here form a bare-bones outline that may be applicable to many dead or dying languages. It is mainly intended as background to the critique developed in the final section of this paper which aims to suggest ways of maintaining the indispensable enthusiasm and commitment of the community.

What Counts As Language?

Many communities will have the task of deciding which of the languages owned and/or used by community members to put their energies into. ATSIC funding for language work is currently made available to local communities through a number of regional committees. Each region encompasses many languages and even within what outsiders may consider to be a single community there may be more than one language. Sometimes the formal differences between what language owners consider to be different languages may be so small that linguists might want to label them dialects of a single language. But such differences may be very important for owners in distinguishing them from their neighbours. In such a situation community members may want to establish separate programs for each language variety, but it is usually unlikely that funding will stretch so far.

Even where there are significant differences between Aboriginal languages used in, for

instance, one small town, there is a tendency for funding to be channelled through a single 'community' group. As a result, either the funding is spread very thin over a number of languages, or one language variety is favoured over others, causing some discontent amongst less favoured groups. Then again there is the situation where various members of a community have different aims and aspirations for a language program. Some people might want to have it in the local school and others don't, for instance. Such issues are usually resolved by the degree of enthusiasm various sectors of the community bring to bear on their program, but they can sometimes be disabling and need to be addressed within the critical framework I suggest at the end of this paper. For now, I want to bring up the issue of the other language that nearly everyone in urban and rural communities speaks but which is rarely addressed in discussions such as these – Aboriginal English.

As I have pointed out above, the most common rationales behind language programs concern language as an important marker of identity, the need to foster community pride and autonomy and so on (McConvell, 1994: 239). Aboriginal languages obviously mark their speakers as different from Australians of European descent. But, as Diana Eades points out:

While many Aboriginal people may speak English as their first language, the context of conversation has significant Aboriginal cultural and social aspects which lead to distinctively Aboriginal interpretations and meanings (Eades, 1988: 97).

In this way, English becomes an Aboriginal language too, quite apart from any systematic formal differences between Aboriginal and Standard Australian English.

Nevertheless, there are those both inside and outside the Aboriginal community who see Aboriginal English as sub-standard English, not worthy of attention in a language program, rather than as positively non-standard English, culturally distinct from the standard and thus suitable to function as an identity marker in the way other indigenous languages do. Although linguists have described Aboriginal English as 'a vital, expressive and creative linguistic resource — a living tongue which serves the speakers in a large array of functions and situations and which expresses and reflects their culture and social world' (Kaldor and Malcolm, 1991: 72), it is hard for teachers and others to see it as equal to Standard Australian English. For instance, in a paper addressed to teachers in the Queensland Department of Education, Neil McGarvie emphasises that Aboriginal English is 'a viable socially constructed form of English, which is part of students and their culture' (McGarvie, 1986: 18) and not to be eradicated. However, he still concludes that it is not suitable for school use and gives strategies for teaching the standard dialect that relies on analysing Aboriginal English in terms of 'Error Analysis' (McGarvie, 1986: 62). Since the schools are concerned to equip students with Standard Australian English, it is hard to see how Aboriginal English can be a positive part of Aboriginal identity and social life unless the community actively fosters it.

Since so many Aboriginal people speak Aboriginal English at least part of the time it would seem paradoxical to exclude use of it from language programs that aim to strengthen Aboriginal identities. Nor is it the case that it does not need any active fostering, given the negative attitudes to it. Something else to be taken into consideration before ruling out some attention to Aboriginal English by language programs is the fact that the wider society sometimes needs to be reminded

that one does not have to speak an indigenous language to be a 'true' Aborigine. For all these reasons, then, communities may wish to consider the possibility of using Aboriginal English in a language program, even if not as the focus of the work. It must be admitted, however, that there is at present no prospect of funding being forthcoming either from ATSIC language committees or education authorities for such work.

What Counts As a Program?

Since the success of any program will rest heavily on the members of the relevant community, and since most community members will be unaware of what is involved in committing themselves to any particular level of program, it may be advisable to aim to work up a program in stages. Each stage could build on the one before at a rate and to the extent that suits a particular community, and funding applications could be spread out over time and over various sources. Another advantage of a staged approach is that participants can experience success at each stage, rather than struggling to achieve distant goals. Authorities (Harris, 1994; McConvell, 1994) urge the importance of having clearly worked out goals and methodologies for a program, but there is no reason why these goals and methodologies should not be changed as the need arises. The exact aims and levels of each stage will vary with local needs but I suggest that there are three kinds of work that could be thought of as stages in a program: gathering materials, extending language use and school-based programs. At each stage, professional help from specialists such as linguists and teachers may be necessary, but these experts must work with the community to ensure that the program serves local, rather than professional, goals.

Gathering Materials

For the languages of settled Australia it is vital to record as soon as possible as much as possible of what is known by today's speakers, if any exist. In addition it will be useful to gather archival material. In many areas, early European colonists such as pastoralists, missionaries and government officials made wordlists of local languages. It is rare to find any information on grammar but the possibility of finding wordlists, and sometimes associated cultural and historical information, means it is still worth searching library and museum archives for such material. There are also some published sources such as Curr's three-volume *The Australian Race* (1887) and many articles in the journal *The Science of Man*. Curr gathered information, including wordlists, from correspondents all over Australia. In Queensland the Police Survey includes information on language and Protectors sometimes also took wordlists. It must be remembered, however, that the people who did such recording were not trained linguists and they often had trouble hearing correctly Aboriginal languages which were so different from English. The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra also has a large archive of linguistic material which it readily makes available to communities. The help of any remaining language speakers in the community and a linguist will probably be necessary to gather and make sense of some of the archival material.

At the same time as archival research is going on, as much as possible of what is presently known of the language in the community needs to be recorded. It would be useful to have all of the language information gathered at this stage written down, whether or not community members aim to develop literacy in their language. A written record allows for comparison with the archival

material and helps promote and facilitate further study of the language. However, if time and resources are at a premium, tape recordings of speech, or better yet video recordings, can be made fairly easily. Videos are well worth making as most people will enjoy watching them and they record a lot of incidental information, such as gestures and the etiquette of conversation. Recordings are also useful when they preserve the ways in which people mix language and English (either Standard Australian or Aboriginal English) in their speech.

Recordings can be transcribed at a later date (as long as it's not too much later), but when compiling written records it is worth keeping in mind that they may later be used in a more extensive language program and so should be interesting enough in style to appeal to future users, and should reflect the aims of the community. There may also be the need in some communities to consider the sensitivity of some types of information. Community members may wish, for instance to have two maps of the local district, one containing information on sites that is not open to everyone, but remains within the control of the appropriate community members. There is a place for academic works such as dictionaries, but they need to be balanced by things the community can use with pleasure. Reading and speaking for pleasure will be an important factor in the continuing vigour of any language program.

Some of the relevant artefacts might include:

- alphabet books, interspersing English and local language words (see Donaldson (1994) for a full description)
- a map of the district using local names and indicating sites of significance to the local community
- short books, some illustrated, describing the community's daily life and using the whole spectrum of local language varieties, including English
- audio and video tapes of members of the community telling stories, both traditional and contemporary, in whatever language, or mixture of languages, comes naturally to them
- recordings of songs and dances, from post-contact as well as traditional times
- an archive of the historical and linguistic studies of the local language, including tape recordings and their accompanying transcripts
- a dictionary.

There are a number of ways in which the community could preserve their language in artefacts which could be kept, like other tangible cultural property, in a keeping place or museum, without necessarily being used for language learning at all. Apart from the employment provided by the compilation of such artefacts, Nancy Dorian (1987: 65) has noted the potential their existence can provide for stimulating interest in community heritage generally. Treating language as cultural heritage purely on the pattern of archaeological or architectural heritage has some disadvantages which are discussed below. But artefacts could be produced as heritage items and still be useful in language programs, if the community decided to proceed to that step, if they were well-designed and interesting to read.

Beginning a language program by manufacturing language artefacts as cultural property also opens up new possibilities for funding. For instance, the Australian Cultural Development Office, part of the Commonwealth Department of the Arts and Administrative Services, offers 'support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the management and collection of their cultural heritage'. While priority is given to the repatriation

of human remains from museum collections, a case could be made for the repatriation and management of linguistic material such as the archival material discussed here. Other Arts funding may also be available for the production of books and other literacy materials.

Once such artefacts exist, they can be used as part of cultural awareness programs, particularly the songs and video recordings. That is to say, to teach people about the local language, rather than teaching them to speak it. Of course, they would also constitute a basic set of resources for any program aiming to teach people to speak the language, and as such represent the starting point for any language work that the community might envisage. The kind of professional help that may be needed at this stage will be mainly linguistic. For instance, it is common when dealing with archival material to find that some of the sources contradict each other and contain mistakes. To be useful to the community they will have to be checked with living speakers.

It is not strictly necessary but it is likely that the example of English will lead many communities to aim for a standardised pronunciation and spelling. If a dictionary is to be produced, these word lists and other tape-recorded data should be transcribed in some computerised form. Such work is technical and specialised, but needs to be done in close consultation with the community. There are questions to be decided such as:

- which dialect or dialects to use in print
- whether to make a choice between older and more modern styles of the language, or to admit both
- what spelling or spellings to adopt.

While in the last analysis the community must decide on such matters, the most informed decision

will be made after consultation with linguists and teachers who are aware of the likely consequences of particular decisions (McGregor, 1986: 71).

The linguistic work necessary for the production of useful archival material has a number of other uses. Once an orthography (spelling system) is decided on, teaching materials, maps and so on, can be produced. However, the fieldwork necessary to gather the information can be carried out before an orthography is in place. For instance, if the community wanted to produce a map showing local place names, or a book listing plants and their uses, the necessary fieldtrips should be made by a party (perhaps including a linguist) of older speakers familiar with the subject and other members of the community, including children, interested in it. The proceedings could be recorded on audio and/or video tape. The session thus combines data-gathering with teaching and stimulation of language use among community members. Once decisions such as those regarding spelling have been made, the material can be put into print. A number of such productions would be helpful in language learning programs but such programs could begin by concentrating on the spoken language. The production of materials, then, will be an ongoing process throughout the life of any language program and can be expected to contribute to extended use of the language.

Extending Language Use

Not only is it often unrealistic to expect to reinstate an indigenous language as the vernacular of the community, with people knowing it 'right through', it is not even necessary to aim for complete revival. If an important social function of dead or dying indigenous languages is their identification with a particular culture, and if the

aim of a program is to foster self-respect through the strengthening of identity, language programs do not need to aim for total 'intergenerational proficiency' (Fishman, 1991; Thieberger, 1991: 21). The language may fulfil significant social functions when used only in very restricted contexts and in a form significantly influenced by the first-language status of English. A language program that aims to provide just enough language to meet social aims is one possibility that should be explored. Rob Amery (1993, 1994) and Nelson Varcoe (1994) have described how Aboriginal people in the Adelaide region have revitalised the Kaurna language, beginning with children's songs and formulaic expressions such as greetings.

In the context of settled Australia the most ambitious language program might aim for bilingualism, but English is probably always going to be the dominant language. There is some debate over how to ensure that community languages are not swamped by English, even where they are currently rather strong. There has been extensive discussion over whether the means to achieve this should be a separation of language use such that English is used only in some domains (say school) and the community language is used in others (Harris, 1990, 1991, 1994; McConvell, 1991a, 1991b, 1994). McConvell has pointed out that people routinely choose which language to use on the basis of who they are talking to or what they are talking about (McConvell, 1991b: 145), rather than where they are when they are talking. But he also notes that a lot of the debate over this issue suffers from confusion over just what is meant by domain separation (McConvell, 1994: 242-244). Jim Martin (1990: 14), for instance, makes the point that 'Bilingual communities can only survive as long as the role played by the different languages in the community is different. Each must enable members of the community to do different things.' For dead and dying languages,

the different thing that they allow their speakers to do is to interact in culturally specific ways but it would be surprising to find this happening only in certain settings and not others.

On the other hand, for a language to live and prosper 'there must be either a home or community setting for it ... part of the challenge of language teaching is to create such a situation' (Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer, 1991: 121). In the case of severely threatened languages it is particularly true that conditions must be created that will foster language use. These might include social gatherings, children's playgroups, cultural courses, bush visits and the transaction of community business in committees, Land Council offices and so on. The actual amount of language used is not as important as the fact that people feel comfortable using it. The community therefore has to promote suitable occasions for language use.

Since it is often going to be the case that it is older speakers who must pass their knowledge on to the younger generation, it is of the utmost importance that they are encouraged to use the language as often as possible, both in speaking and writing. Because of past negative attitudes to the language amongst the wider community, some older people might be shy in coming out with their language, or feel they have forgotten a lot owing to lack of use, so it may take some time before the use of language to people other than close family members becomes spontaneous. Also, since people have many demands on their time, language work, and particularly the acquisition of literacy, might be seen as too much of a chore. Both these problems can be overcome by making language learning and transmission sessions as social as possible, particularly in the early stages. Providing opportunities for older people to get together on their own often provokes the kind of reminiscing

that brings out examples of language use and is enjoyable to the participants. Trips to significant places and involvement in cultural activities, such as the performances of local singers and dancers, perform a similar function.

In New Zealand, language revival has been based on 'language nests', pre-school centres where Maori speakers, most of whom are of the grandparental generation, care for toddlers, who, when they enter school, have good enough command of Maori to make the best of existing bilingual education programs (Spolsky, 1990: 123). The intervening generations are not well served by this system. Given the relative scarcity and sometimes absence of older speakers, Aboriginal communities may not be able to afford to skip a generation. Young adults and some middle-aged people will have to put some time into acquiring oral fluency and literacy in their language if any extensive revitalisation is to take place. The difficulty of this task should not be underestimated. Adults have many responsibilities and demands on their time, and many people find language learning slow and boring. Any program would have to build in meaningful rewards for such learners to keep up their commitment and have any chance of success. Adults' motivations for being involved in a language program are crucial here and this issue is addressed in the final section of this paper.

Older people can be incorporated into the formal linguistic work by their presence at meetings making decisions on standardisation and other language matters. Part of the work of extending language use may be the formulation of new words, either because their previous form is now unknown or because it was not needed until modern times. In the Kaurna case, Amery (1993) has described how productive processes in the language, as well as borrowings from English and

other Aboriginal languages, have been used to extend the range of things that modern speakers can refer to in Kaurna. Other types of 're-working' of the language have occurred in a Nyungar class in Bunbury, Western Australia (Thieberger, 1988: 100). It would be highly desirable for older speakers to acquire literacy in the language so that they could enjoy the written materials to be produced. Literacy amongst older and more fluent speakers also acts as a check on the linguistic acceptability of such productions.

A literacy course will therefore often be desirable, and in fact may emerge naturally out of any standardising of the written language that is carried out. Younger adults, especially any with teacher training, should also be encouraged to take part in any literacy course that is developed, since they would be the most appropriate people to teach in any courses funded by bodies such as State Education Departments. The existence of paid positions for language workers is probably the surest way to maintain commitment and application to a language program, and such positions should be occupied by appropriately qualified people from the community. However, it is important to seek funding on as permanent a basis as possible so as to provide the possibility of long-term employment. Programs that are funded year-to-year run the risk of falling apart through experienced workers' seeking more stable positions elsewhere.

However, Stephen Harris (1994: 132) has pointed out that leaving children's language education to schools promotes a false sense of confidence. Children are unlikely to find school language programs important if they are disconnected from meaningful community use of language. Letting children tag along on data-gathering trips with older speakers means that they will hear language being used and have their interest in it stimulated.

They can also be the recipients of older people's reminiscences and stories. Involvement in cultural activities such as an Aboriginal dance troupe is also good for stimulating children's interest in and acquisition of language. Literacy needs to be acquired in more formal ways, but that does not necessarily mean through normal chalk-and-talk methods.

Children can be involved in the production of literacy materials by being allowed to make suggestions as to content, providing illustrations, and figuring in the stories told. They are more likely to be interested in a book containing photographs of themselves and people they know than in the standard sort of textbook. If it is decided to aim for considerable fluency, formal classes will have to be provided, of course, but they should be seen as supporting other activities, rather than being the focus of language work. After-school programs are a good venue for such courses and community organisations could stimulate such courses by offering prizes for various kinds of language work, such as designs for posters. School-based courses have their place in any language program, but it cannot be stressed enough that it is the links between generations of speakers that ensure the health of a language and this cannot be maintained by school programs alone. It is also unfair to expect children to assert their cultural identity through language use if their elders are not setting them a good example in this regard.

School-based Programs

The teaching of any language in schools is often slow, inefficient and alienating in the absence of significant opportunities for use of the language outside the classroom (Johnson, 1987: 55). Children tend to learn about a language rather

than achieve any fluency in it. For Aboriginal languages and culture, mainstream schooling has been characterised as 'the biggest threat to Aboriginal languages' (Johnson, 1987: 57) precisely because it removes language from its living context and presents it within a framework of foreign, English, language and understanding (Christie, 1990). Support for language programs within the school system is also frequently slight and vulnerable to sudden budget cuts. Such schemes are liable to be dependent on the support of a sympathetic head teacher or other staff member who may be transferred or forced by a multitude of pressures to withdraw that support. The only sure support is community support (Thieberger, 1991: 10).

Nevertheless, children spend a great deal of their time at school and the existence of a language program there could be a useful adjunct to community use of the language. Such programs also create 'Aboriginal space' within the school system, which is important to the process of cultural revival, demonstrates to the children and the community at large the positive status of the language, and thus helps to promote community interest in its extended use. School programs, then, are not to be refused as long as a number of principles are taken into account.

First and foremost, any school program should be under the control of the community with respect to content, setting, participants and integration with community programs. One authority is of the opinion that: 'Self-help and self-regulation in everyday intergenerational mother tongue transmission contexts, ... are the *sine qua non* of RLS [Reversing Language Shift]' (Fishman, 1991: 277). Widespread involvement of community members in such a scheme, either through the establishment of a local Language Committee or more informally, would be one way of promoting

language revival generally, as well as sharing the workload. There may be owners of a given language spread over a number of schools and it would be convenient to have community members in each such centre taking responsibility for the running of the programs. This also allows for the language program to reflect the diversity of language usages and the diversity of aims that is almost sure to exist in any community.

With respect to content, the main issues to be decided by the community will concern the scope of the subjects discussed and whether to aim for standardisation of the language in spelling and grammar. It is important to introduce students to aspects of life most different from Anglo-Australian experience and deriving from the precolonial past. But it is also important to demonstrate the contemporary daily life of Aboriginal people as inheritors of that tradition, living in the modern world. The extent to which issues of Aboriginal English use should be covered, as well as particular topics, would be issues for the community to decide.

As to the standardisation of the linguistic forms, the community will have to decide whether and how much to aim for reconstruction of previous generations' pronunciation and grammar, or whether to accept the present generation's usages, and which local variant or variants of them to enshrine in print. This is an important issue since, as Nicholas Thieberger points out 'the "untraditional" of this generation may be the "tradition" of the next' (Thieberger, 1990: 351). The very act of writing down a particular variant will tend to give it status and authority, so this is a decision that must be weighed carefully. Once such a decision has been made, help from a trained linguist will probably be necessary in developing systems of spelling and the like.

Some Aboriginal people object to their children being taught Aboriginal languages that are not their own, and this may cause problems in schools with students from more than one language group. One compromise would be to make the school-based language program voluntary for non-owners. Another, potentially more fruitful strategy would be to limit the scope of the school program so that it becomes a 'learning about' language program, while keeping serious language learning efforts within the community, perhaps within after-school programs. This would allow all children in the region to learn about a typical Aboriginal language through a local variety, while not forcing it onto those whose primary linguistic affiliation is elsewhere. Whatever the origins of the students, the teachers should as far as possible be owners of the language. If older speakers can be involved, that would be ideal, but adults who have recently re-acquired, or are in the process of re-acquiring, their language are to be preferred over regular classroom teachers. Where there are qualified teachers in the community their involvement would no doubt give the program greater credibility in the eyes of the education authorities.

The setting in which language is taught has often been found to be pedagogically and politically important, and is another matter the community needs to address. While the schools will expect to run language classes in the way that they run all other classes, this can seriously cramp the style of a language revitalisation program, and result in its being seen as somehow secondary to other parts of the curriculum. One way this can be combated is in working to decorate the teaching space in a distinctively Aboriginal way. Another is to make the classroom an Aboriginal space for the duration of the lesson by insisting on Aboriginal forms of address, manners and so on.

But the best way to avoid cultural domination in the school is to take the class elsewhere. Visits to places of significance to local Aboriginal people, whether it be story places or places significant in people's personal histories, are useful, as are bush trips for the identification of plants by their local names, and so on. But such trips are expensive and require lots of planning and thus are usually not possible to arrange for every session, especially from urban centres. Taking the class out into the school grounds is easy and cheap, and running part of the program on community property or within community programs such as an after-school centre is another answer to this problem.

Finally, communities need to consider the fact that teaching Aboriginal languages in, or in association with, schools raises questions about the testing of individuals' progress and the success of the program as a whole. The very fact that formal evaluation is often lacking in such programs (McConvell, 1994; Nicholls, 1994) has on occasion led to criticism and loss of support from education authorities and community members. Patrick McConvell (1994: 239) urges that programs and their evaluation need to be matched to the goal the community wishes to achieve. Like most practitioners, he is preoccupied with getting the program right. He suggests that part of planning a program should be the inclusion of a statement of minimum requirements along the lines of: '... if the basic language situation is x, and the goal is y, then you will need so many hours of a particular kind of input per week' (McConvell, 1994: 252). Even if the community has a good detailed knowledge of the local language situation (and that cannot be taken for granted) how are realistic goals to be set?

The model offered by the monolingual mainstream, whether in foreign language teaching or teaching English to foreigners, assumes that

the aim is complete fluency of expression in an instrumental sense. Language is conceived of as being primarily a means of exchanging information. But in the Aboriginal situation neither of these points can be taken for granted. Typically, multilingualism and multidialectism have been the norm, with people using language in complicated and subtle ways to locate themselves in geographic and social space (Sutton, 1991: 66). I want to suggest that Aboriginal communities need to take a critical stance on what language means for them in order to be able to set goals that they can achieve and feel truly successful in achieving.

Taking a Critical Stance

It has been suggested that programs dealing with dead or dying languages should be called 'language heritage' rather than maintenance or language learning programs (Amery, 1994: 140). The intention in using the label 'heritage' was to recognise that the learners were already owners of the languages, that the languages are part of what they inherit from the past. There are some advantages in such an approach, as the history of Aboriginal participation in more conventional cultural heritage management has shown. The incorporation of Aboriginal viewpoints and participation in the management of heritage is now common for archaeological sites, for instance. The extent and nature of the participation may be contested (e.g. Mowaljarlai *et al.*, 1988) but there is growing recognition of Aboriginal custodianship of Aboriginal tradition. The disadvantages in thinking of language as heritage come from the association of the heritage industry with the preservation of what is prized of the past. It has been noted that this leads to the heritage industry tending to have an embalming effect on what it touches (Sullivan, 1993: 57). If the

Aboriginal languages of the more settled parts of Australia are to have any vitality, a more critical and political approach is needed.

Language programs may peter out for reasons that are unclear to the participants. Linguists and teachers often blame lack of resources or waning school and/or community support. The reasons for lukewarm attitudes or sudden waning in support are not always clear, although as Luise Hercus (1991: 196) points out the human factor is vital. An aspect of the fact that it is humans and not programs that are in question relates to the fact that the various participants in a program often have different understandings of what a program means to achieve and how its success is to be measured.

A case in point concerns a small-town school in Far North Queensland with 85-90% Aboriginal enrolment, drawn from four or five language groups. A few years ago, a new headmaster at the school responded to initiatives from some of the older Aboriginal people in town to start an Aboriginal Culture program with a language component. Elders of each language group volunteered to spend an afternoon a week with the children teaching them about subjects such as bush tucker, using local languages and English. Sometimes they just taught language. The program was judged a great success by everyone concerned and after one term the headmaster applied to the Education Department for financial support for materials and wages. He was surprised and hurt when the program fell apart just a few weeks into its second term, for reasons he was at a loss to understand. He lamented 'We got them money and they stopped coming'.

But it was precisely the headmaster's enthusiasm and provision of funding that changed the nature of the program, as the elders themselves were

well aware. His plans for expansion included the production of language primers and he felt (probably rightly) that the employment of Aboriginal teaching assistants would be necessary. The formalisation of the course, the use of and aim for literacy, and the introduction of the younger Aboriginal people were all positive moves in themselves but they resulted in the elders feeling 'cut out'. The last straw came when, by a bureaucratic bungle, the first wages to be paid were those of the younger workers. One of the older women complained to me: 'I was the first woman to go up there. Those other ones follow after, but they got their money, I haven't got'm yet. Must be something wrong up there. Might be I talk to Mr _____ [headmaster]'. This woman had comprehensive knowledge of her tradition and of several of the local languages but she had never learned to read and write. She was unimpressed by assurances that her money was on the way and the headmaster failed to appreciate that something more than money was at stake. Although his intentions were good, he had taken over control of the program. The impression this elder had was that younger and less knowledgeable people were valued and respected before her. This was not only an insult, it was a blow to her confidence. The younger people were aware of her discomfort and it was not long before the program lost all its workers, despite the fact that everyone wanted a program to continue.

While linguists are right to emphasise that it is the support of the community that will decide a program's success, how is the enthusiasm to be maintained and what is to count as success? Attention has been called recently (Faraclas, 1994) to the success of language maintenance programs in Papua New Guinea which have been informed by the philosophy of Critical Literacy. This philosophy derives from the work of Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire, who was involved in

literacy and indigenous language programs in former Portuguese colonies in South America and Africa. For Freire, this work was a vital part of the national reconstruction these states went through in recovering from colonisation. In a passage that sounds strikingly familiar to anyone with an interest in Aboriginal Australia, he says:

And what happens to the dominated culture when it strives for liberation? When it was merely the dominated culture, it was subject to indoctrination, and it was domesticated. But now, though still dominated, it wants to liberate itself. And in this process of wanting to liberate itself, it also discovers that the dominant culture, precisely because it is dominant, was forced to develop a series of analytical, and scientific strategies to achieve its own purposes. The dominant culture develops these strategies to analyze and explain the world in order to dominate. When the dominated culture perceives the need to liberate itself, it discovers that it has to take the initiative and develop its own strategies, as well as those of the dominant culture. The dominated culture does this, not simply to suit itself, but to better fight against oppression (Freire, 1985a: 193).

Freire's work reiterates many of the concerns expressed by Aboriginal people, although his language is more Marxist and revolutionary. There is the same insight that the education, including the language programs, offered by the colonising, or formerly colonising, powers tends to bolster up their own dominance. Freire and his followers (Freire, 1985b; Freire and Macedo, 1987) have criticised most language and literacy programs for emphasising the mastery of technical skills in the absence of any context or life experience that makes the skills meaningful and useful. According to Freire (1985b), the only kind of program that can hope to succeed in motivating a learner must use materials that derive their content from the

learner's daily experience. Furthermore, he holds that programs can only be successful where they are part of learners' campaigns to create a new social reality for themselves.

In contrast, the usual mechanistic kind of language-learning programs are 'instruments for "depositing" the educator's words into the learners. And since they limit the power of expression and creativity they are domesticating instruments' (Freire, 1985b: 8). What he means here is that most programs are designed according to what the dominant culture considers is necessary, and learners tend to come to accept that view of the world. Rather than allowing people to assert a distinctive identity, such programs merely train people to have the same expectations as the dominant culture — they are assimilationist. In the Australian context it is clear from books such as Ralph Folds' *Whitefella School* (1987) that where mechanistic programs are unsuccessful they can be damaging in another way. Folds describes how State Government schools presented Aboriginal students in remote areas with the values and goals of White Australia only, goals that were quite inappropriate to the local situation and impossible to achieve anyway. As a result the learners were cut off from both the dominant culture and their own local one.

Another thing that the Critical Literacy school of thought has in common with Aboriginal thinking is the concern with community aspirations to take back their history and decide their own future (Marika-Mununggiritj, 1990; Bucknall and Bucknall, 1994), and the perception that language programs can be potent means to achieve these ends. Aboriginal linguist Jeanie Bell (1994: 52) has pointed out the need to include language revitalisation as part of the current Aboriginal cultural renaissance (or reconstruction). She notes that problems in areas such as health and housing

are seen by many people in the community as more urgent than language issues: 'people see money for language programs as a bit of a luxury ... But my argument will always be that if we are stronger in our culture and our language some of those other things will improve as well' (Bell, 1994: 58). A critical viewpoint goes further than saying language programs must be supported because in the past people were forcibly deprived of their language. A critical viewpoint says language programs must be used to talk about making people and communities stronger. How is this to be achieved?

A prominent adherent of Critical Literacy, Henry Giroux, points out that 'educators have to work with the experiences that students, adults, and other learners bring to schools and other educational sites. This means making these experiences in their public and private forms the object of debate and confirmation ... to provide the conditions for students and others to display an active voice and presence' (Giroux, 1985: xxi). As far as Aboriginal language programs are concerned this means local Aboriginal experience must be the OBJECT of the programs from start to finish.

I have said that communities frequently decide to start a program in the light of the realisation that they have been deprived of their languages. If the owners just want to learn about the language, then what is required is the limited data gathering heritage program, which Dixon said was not language maintenance, and which cannot address the social conditions that brought about language loss in the first place, persist today and contribute to all the other problems Jeanie Bell mentioned. This kind of program is worthy but 'domesticated', it offers no opportunity for Aboriginal people to come to a new understanding of their situation or develop strategies for dealing with it. The

experience of language loss must, I suggest, be central to any revitalisation program. We need to be asking not just what the language sounded like, but why we don't hear it today, or hear only parts of it, how it can be spoken now to contribute to the future of its owners.

In part, this will mean replacing alphabet books that use animals and dilly bags as their keywords with texts that reflect today's realities, Toyotas and policemen. It will mean accepting all the languages that Aboriginal people speak, including varieties of English, as the basis for future developments. It will mean adults taking on the task of linguistic reconstruction and not leaving it to the schools and the kids. It will mean asking people to talk about painful things in their past and their present. But it also has the potential to reveal to those who take part distinctively Aboriginal strategies for living in modern Australia that the dominant model's concern with technical skill can never provide.

The monolingual ideology imagines language revitalisation near the beginning of a process that leads to Aboriginal identity-formation and self esteem, and ultimately to the improved social welfare of the group. In my experience, the identity and the self-esteem are already there. Language can connect to social welfare only when language programs take up the urgent issues of the moment directly. I believe that only such a program, one that lives in the real world of daily events, can succeed in revitalising a dead or dying language.



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