

Book Reviews

thinking of non-Aborigines working with language and culture programs in communities, schools, Aboriginal training institutions and the bureaucracy. As several authors stress, programs involve integrating expertise, provision of resources and training and official recognition of the program. Any program also has to respond to specific local needs.

It is still by no means automatic that a community wishing to start a language/culture program will easily find the necessary resources, personnel and administrative support. It must also be recognised that a few communities have actively chosen not to have such programs and this is acknowledged in various places in the book. This choice highlights a fundamental principle, acknowledging Aboriginal ownership of programs.

This volume is a dense and demanding read because of the range of situations, issues and voices presented. It will be a rare reader who has experience and expertise in all the areas covered. Henderson's introductory article, 'Aboriginal languages in education: A summary of the issues', is useful, outlining issues raised within chapters as well as isolating additional issues and giving some more explicit recognition. In part it serves as a conclusion, moving the discussion beyond what is presented in the body of the book.

There is a weighting towards programs that are well resourced and long standing, as well as those occurring in the Northern Territory, but the book covers enough different language contexts and potential types of programs to offer encouragement and something of value to all. It fills a vacuum of readily accessible information about what is, and has been, happening in Aboriginal language and culture programs.

Editor's Note: This Review originally appeared in *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 1995/Number 1:75-77. We thank *Australian Aboriginal Studies* and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies for allowing us to reprint it here.

Melanie Wilkinson is the regional linguist, East Arnhem Region, Northern Territory Department of Education, Nhulunbuy. □

Conned!

E.M.D. Fesl

University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1993, 265 pp.

Reviewed by Ian Green

For those of us involved in Australian language issues, this book should have been a landmark publication. Its author, Eve Mumewa Fesl, has solid academic credentials: she holds a doctorate in linguistics, has occupied several academic posts, and has a long record as an outspoken language-policy activist. So we come to this book, a product of her doctoral research, with strong expectations. Here, we might think, we will find something exciting and interesting – if not some original research, at least some unique synthesis of already available material, an authentic Koori voice speaking to us through the medium of Western scholarship. Unfortunately, this is not the case; in virtually all respects, this is a disappointing work. There is little here that is new in itself; there is nothing that has been put together in an interesting way. The book is poorly written and only loosely, ramblingly organised. And the standard of scholarship gives no indication

Book Reviews

of its origins in a doctoral program; in respect of its depth and breadth of research, it operates more at the level of popular journalism.

The book is divided into eight major chapters. About half of it is concerned with post-contact and colonial history, the rest looks at contemporary education and language policy issues. The unifying theme, to which the text regularly returns, is the central place of language in Koori culture, and the consequently crucial role that language destruction and, more recently, alienation from the language policy-making process, play in the suppression of Koori people by the white invaders. This is clearly a theme worthy of serious documentation, but that is not what we get here.

Designed to set the background for the book by impressing us with the 'power' of Australian languages in their traditional settings, Chapter 1 is, rather, a grab bag of sociolinguistic and grammatical tidbits, the majority of them culled from Dixon (1980), and few of them explained with any clarity. The data presented here could perhaps give the linguistically naive some inkling that Australian languages are not as primitive as popular (mis)conception has held them to be for so long, but the superficiality of the treatment and the general lack of coherence in the text make me reluctant to recommend it for such an audience. (The kinship diagram on page 17, apparently taken from Williams (1986), but decontextualised here to the point of incomprehensibility, at least to the non-specialist, is a pertinent example of this.) And the attempts in the following chapters to weave language issues into the fabric of the historical narrative rarely rise above the level of the obvious. Indeed, more often they are simply vague:

... the abduction of thousands of Koori children from their linguistic groups ...

occurred over a period of approximately one hundred and eighty years. The use of euphemisms for these activities was also maintained throughout the continent [p. 103].

Or lame:

... dramatic changes such as the Ice Ages and later, during the interglacial periods, the warming of the continent accompanied by the rising of the waters in some areas as the ice melted, but in others, dried up lakes and turned them into claypans, thus changing the landscape vegetation and fauna of Australia. Linguistically the Kooris have always absorbed new concepts, words and in other ways made adjustments in the languages to the changes [p. 83].

Or fatuous:

Koori linguistic ability and the power of their communication network was demonstrated when, not long after the arrival of the British, "The party was surprised one day when naked Larrakias broke off their own corroboree to sing 'My Old Kentucky Home.' Weeks were to pass before it was discovered that the song had been eavesdropped and memorised by the Maranunggu at Escape Cliffs" (Lockwood 1968:35) [p. 47].

This is really selling short Australian languages. Demonstrating Koori 'linguistic ability' via one of Lockwood's campfire yarns only serves to trivialise the whole issue. And asserting that Koori languages evolved new words to describe their changing environments is making no real claim at all; this is nothing special, that is what *all* human languages do. Further, simply to hint, without any further documentation or explanation, that euphemism played a significant role in the whitefella justification for the removal of children

Book Reviews

from their parents is to beg the very question that the author claims to address, that is, to expose the 'linguistic ploys ... used to attain and maintain white supremacy' (p. 6).

There is no improvement in standard as the book moves into educational and language policy issues. The treatment of bilingual education (Chapter 7), for example, pivots on the thesis that 'transfer' models of bilingual education – that is, those which rapidly shift, once initial literacy has been established, from the local Aboriginal language to English as the major medium of instruction – are 'assimilationist'. This is, of course, by no means a new thesis; concerns about the possibly assimilationist nature of the transfer model in this country go back at least twenty years (cf. Harris, 1975). This is an easily made polemical point, and should lead on to discussion of the substantive issues; for example, what are the appropriate 'nonassimilationist' models for Koori schooling? How can Koori schools achieve the twin aims of language maintenance and academic English fluency? These are important questions, and ones that have been much debated in recent years. But to these discussions, of vital concern to the Aboriginal communities in which I have worked, Fesl is oblivious. Astoundingly, the most recent reference of direct relevance cited in the bilingual education chapter is Bourke (1980). A whole decade of shifting policy and evolving models in bilingual education has been ignored.

The author's clarion-call hope for this book is that it will inspire its readers to 'whip up a storm strong enough to bring about much needed reform in educational circles ...' (p. 6). But if reformist storms are to be built from sound research and intelligent analysis linked to a practical agenda for what needs to be done, I fear that this book will barely raise a breeze.

References

- Bourke, C. (1980) *Aboriginal Bilingual Education: A Case Study of Schools in the Northern Territory and Several States*, Melbourne: Monash University Office Services.
- Dixon, R.M.W. (1980) *The Languages of Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Harris, S. (1975) 'Beyond common sense in bilingual education', *The Aboriginal Child at School* 3(4):3-27.
- Lockwood, D. (1968) *The Front Door: Darwin 1869-1969*. Adelaide: Rigby.
- Williams, N.M. (1986) *The Yolngu and Their Land: A System of Land Tenure and the Fight for Its Recognition*, Canberra: Aboriginal Institute of Aboriginal Studies.

Editor's Note: This Review originally appeared in *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 1994/Number 1:60-61. We thank *Australian Aboriginal Studies* and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies for allowing us to reprint it here. □

