

## BOOK REVIEWS

## Aboriginal Ways of Using English

Diana Eades

*Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2013, 245 pp, ISBN 9781922059280*Reviewed by Eleanor Kettle, Institute of Continuing and TESOL Education, University of Queensland, St Lucia QLD 4072, Australia. Email: [eleanorkettle@gmail.com](mailto:eleanorkettle@gmail.com)

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The recent publication of *Aboriginal Ways of Using English* brings together a selection of articles written over a 30-year period by one of Australia's leading researchers and experts, which examine the ways in which usage of English by Aboriginal people differs from Standard English, particularly within the field of sociolinguistics and forensic linguistics.

The book is divided into two sections, with Chapters 2–5 exploring Aboriginal ways of using English, and Chapters 6–11 highlighting ways in which the usage of Aboriginal English has impacted on the treatment of Aboriginal people within the criminal justice process, drawing on a number of actual court cases to provide specific examples. The 10 articles reproduced as chapters in this publication have been drawn from over 50 chapters and articles written by the author between 1982 and 2012, resulting in a book that can be read either as a whole or selectively as individual chapters, according to the reader's interests.

In Chapter 1 we are introduced to the focus group for this book: Aboriginal people in non-remote Australia for whom English is their first and principal language and who do not speak a traditional Aboriginal language fluently, and not for Aboriginal people who speak English as an additional language, although the author acknowledges that certain similarities in the usage of English may exist for both groups of speakers.

Chapter 2 highlights the contrasts in ways of exchanging and seeking information between 'middle-class white Australians', for whom information exchange is open and easily available, and Aboriginal people from South-East Queensland, for whom there are strong social constraints as to who may either give or have access to information. The author discusses some of the ways in which these differences may impact on education, with teachers (who, it is implied, are middle-class white Australians) often claiming Aboriginal children to be 'uncooperative or lazy or verbally deficient' (Eades, 2013, p. 32), as they do not respond as expected to questioning; and also on the legal process, with a white lawyer citing failures arising from Aboriginal people's apparent unwillingness to comply with the questioning process central to the legal system.

'Misunderstanding Aboriginal English' (Chapter 3) illustrates how misunderstandings may occur between Aboriginal people (in the chapter, the author references South-East Queensland Aboriginal people; however, she acknowledges that their use of language is typical of language use among southern Aboriginal Australians) and middle-class white Australians, through reference to future forms. The author explores the ways in which the structures used may be the same for both groups, while the meanings associated with these forms may be quite different. Thus, while using 'I will' demonstrates a commitment to undertake a particular task for a middle-class white Australian (with an implicit need for an apology should this not in fact occur), the meaning of the same phrase for an Aboriginal person may show an intention to do so, with an unspoken but implied conditional clause 'if nothing else happens' (and no apology or explanation required if this does not take place). While this difference may seem rather minor, its implications for intercultural misunderstandings are significant, with Aboriginal people being perceived by non-Aboriginal people as being 'unreliable' and unable to 'make plans and ... organise for future events' (Eades, 2013, p. 54). However, as this chapter describes only one variation between the usage of Aboriginal English and Standard English, the reader is left wondering what other differences there may be, and what impacts these may have on intercultural communication between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

In the following chapter, 'They don't speak an Aboriginal language, or do they?', Eades describes some of the important ways in which the contemporary social and cultural context of Aboriginal people in South-East Queensland have flowed on from traditional Aboriginal cultures, and highlights some of the ways in which this context impacts upon interactions, such as the 'importance of responsibilities to kin, priority of social relationships, and the need for indirectness in interactions' (2013, p. 75). The author provides examples to demonstrate how these aspects, which are central to Aboriginal people's ways of interacting, can lead to difficulties in communications and can also create negative perceptions because non-Aboriginal people feel that it is appropriate to be direct

and confrontational during discussions, while Aboriginal people tend to understate their own views in order to lessen confrontation and argument, and consequently feel that they are not given sufficient time to expand upon their viewpoint and present their ideas.

Developed as an introduction for primary teachers, Chapter 5 explores some of the differences between Aboriginal English and Standard English, and examines some of the implications for the classroom. While this chapter provides explanations of the variations in terms of phonology, morpho-syntax, lexico-semantics and pragmatics, more examples of Aboriginal English would have been beneficial for the reader to gain a deeper understanding of these differences. In order to highlight the richness and complexity of Aboriginal English, it would also have been ideal to include descriptions and examples, such as of the distinction between second person singular, dual and plural and the differences in kin terms (both of which are briefly discussed in Chapter 4).

Chapter 6 relates the fictional account of an Aboriginal woman, Nancy, who pled guilty to an offence that she did not commit. The author states that a number of actual cases in the early 1980s were drawn upon to develop this case study, and that it was still pertinent to the circumstances of many Aboriginal people who faced the criminal justice system in 2012, which was 13 years after the original article was written. After providing a description of Nancy's background and the situation in which she discovered that she had in fact driven a stolen car and was arrested for this offence, we are then presented with a summary of her challenging discussions with police officers and a lawyer, and Nancy's final decision to plead guilty to the offence of unlawful use of a motor vehicle. The author then outlines some of the social, cultural and linguistic factors that may contribute to the difficulties Aboriginal people face in their interactions with the criminal justice and legal systems, four of which seem to be particularly relevant to these situations, such as ways of information-seeking, *gratuitous concurrence* (agreeing in response to a question, irrespective of whether there is comprehension of or consent to the proposition), and non-verbal elements of communication, including the use of silence and of eye contact.

Chapter 7 provides overviews of several court cases in which the use of Aboriginal English by the defendants was an important factor (though not necessarily recognised as such at the time). One of these is the chilling 1995 'Pinkenba' case in Brisbane in which three Aboriginal boys made a complaint relating to their treatment by six police officers, and were required to give evidence as prosecution witnesses in the committal hearing. Following an intense cross-examination by two barristers, the charges against the police officers were dismissed. The author, noting that the defence lawyers possessed a copy of her handbook for legal practitioners (Eades, 1992), examines the ways in which the defence lawyers appeared to manip-

ulate the Aboriginal ways of using English in their cross-examination of the witnesses to their advantage, such as exploiting the use of *gratuitous concurrence* and of silence, in order to depict the witnesses as unreliable, ultimately resulting in the case being thrown out of court.

Two of the cases presented in the previous chapter are discussed in further detail in Chapter 8, 'Aboriginal English on trial: The case for Stuart and Condren', highlighting the similarities of the two Aboriginal men who alleged that their 'confessions' to police were fabricated, with linguistic evidence of Aboriginal English, particularly in the area of pragmatics, being of key significance to these cases. With incarceration rates of Indigenous people being 14 times higher than non-Indigenous people (age-adjusted figures), and juvenile detention rates being 22.7 times greater for Indigenous youth (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2011, p. 294), it is clear that all facets of the legal and criminal justice systems must be examined in order to address these alarming figures. Indeed, it is in relation to this challenge that Eades states the necessity for linguistics to be made accessible to legal professionals, in order to gain a better understanding of the challenges faced by Aboriginal people in terms of language and communication needs.

The shortest chapter at only three pages, 'A case of mistaken assumptions' presents a list of seven 'facts' relating to sociolinguistic issues of communication, such as silence indicating ignorance or unwillingness to cooperate, lack of eye contact showing the person wishes to conceal something, and responding 'I don't know' to questions demonstrating ignorance. The reader is then invited to consider that these are not in fact universal truths, but cultural assumptions (with the unwritten inference that this is so for 'middle-class white Australians'), and that many Aboriginal people learn markedly different cultural assumptions, with a list of seven provided, including that silence indicates thoughtfulness and recognising the value of time, direct eye contact is not a polite way to show respect, and answering 'I don't know' is one method to deal with excessive questioning from non-Aboriginal people. Given its brevity and clarity, Chapter 9 would be a useful tool for teachers and educators as a means of promoting discussion and increasing awareness about cultural differences in communication between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

In Chapter 10, Eades first outlines several ways in which linguistic practices within the courtroom affect how stories are told and retold, and then describes the potential implications for Aboriginal people, who are 20 times more likely than non-Aboriginal people to have contact with the criminal justice system. With examples provided from actual court cases, we are shown how assumptions about repetitive questioning, *gratuitous concurrence*, the use of silence and cultural differences in the meanings of words can add to the difficulties faced by Aboriginal

people within this setting. In addition, Eades notes that body language (such as avoidance of eye contact) and the power dynamics of race relations can also further compound these challenges. While the courtroom cases cited in this chapter provide evidence to support the arguments, further illustration of these examples, or the addition of new examples, would have offered stronger support and clarity for these assertions, and therefore a greater understanding for the reader.

The final chapter, 'The social consequences of language ideologies in courtroom cross-examination', explores how the assumptions of language usage ('language ideologies') may impact not only on the proceedings within the criminal justice system, but also more widely within the community, focusing once more on the Pinkenba case (previously discussed in Chapters 7, 9 and 10). The author highlights how the defence lawyers (acting on behalf of the police officers charged with deprivation of liberty) attacked an apparent inconsistency within the testimony of one of the boys (relating to the use of 'grab'), and employed the techniques of repetitive questioning and ongoing harassment until the boy finally gave the answer sought by the counsel, which could likely have been an instance of gratuitous concurrence. While the language ideologies are highlighted as relevant within this case, the author also emphasises the struggles between Aboriginal people and the state, particularly in terms of the broader social context in which there is 'moral panic' about Aboriginal people as criminals, and therefore the wider community may accept that police control over the activities of Aboriginal people is justified, even if this occurs outside the boundaries of the law. This chapter provides insights into the ways in which the patterns of courtroom interaction and language ideologies may further disadvantage Aboriginal people, which are particularly harrowing in this case, as it involved the harassment of three young

boys who were in court as prosecution witnesses, and not due to an offence committed.

As the original articles from which the book chapters are drawn were originally published between 1982 and 2012, the author provides introductions to give the background of the articles, and reflections in the form of notes to highlight changes in terminology or further research. However, it seems as though the validity and relevancy, particularly of the older articles, would have been strengthened (and made more coherent for the reader) by being edited or rewritten in order to ensure all content reflected current research and knowledge, as well as to reduce the repetition of themes and arguments across the various chapters.

Overall, *Aboriginal Ways of Using English* is an engaging and thought-provoking book written in a clear and compelling style, aimed at a wide variety of readers who may interact with Aboriginal people, whether they have a background in linguistics or not. I would strongly recommend this book as highly relevant for legal and health professionals, teachers, linguists and anyone with an interest in gaining a greater understanding of Aboriginal people.

## References

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# A Theory for Indigenous Australian Health and Human Service Work: Connecting Indigenous Knowledge and Practice

Lorraine Muller

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Reviewed by Tania M. White, Humanities and Social Sciences Faculty, School of Education, University of Queensland, St Lucia QLD 4072, Australia. Email: [t.white6@uq.edu.au](mailto:t.white6@uq.edu.au)

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Until now, there has been an absence of strong theoretical frameworks relating to Indigenous Australian health and human services. Muller's text seeks to fill that void. The book is long overdue and I am confident that it will be embraced by those who live and work at the 'cul-

tural interface' (Nakata, 2007). The text is an invaluable resource that draws on experiential learning that is as equally informative as it is multilayered. It will raise awareness among those working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of the significant and distinct