



# The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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# Re-Awakening Languages: Theory and Practice in the Revitalisation of Australia's Indigenous Languages

John Hobson, Kevin Lowe, Susan Poetsch, and Michael Walsh (Eds.)

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Reviewed by John Henderson, Linguistics, University of Western Australia, 35 Stirling Highway, Crawley, Western Australia, 6009, Australia

This volume takes stock of recent developments in the renewed interest in Australian Indigenous languages, and helps to identify what will lead to further progress. It consciously follows the revitalisation spirit of Hinton and Hale (2001), 'the green book', which has had a significant impact on thinking about responses to language endangerment around the world. *Re-awakening Languages* has a very broad scope but it also has enough detail to be useful to many specific interests. It is an excellent introduction to the current issues around Australian Indigenous languages. It would be particularly valuable to managers in the various education systems who have too often demonstrated rather limited understanding of this area.

There are 34 chapters organised in seven topics assigned by the editors: language policy and planning (three chapters), language in communities (five chapters), language centres and programs (four chapters), language in education (10 chapters), literacy and oracy (three chapters), language and technology (three chapters), and language documentation (six chapters). The divisions are not strict; most papers include discussion on themes in other sections. Each section has its own useful introduction by one or two of the editors. Among the authors there is strong representation from linguists, educators and support professionals, and the introduction tells us that a third of them are Indigenous. For the readership of *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, this review focuses on educational issues, which are raised in the dedicated section and which also run through other chapters.

The discourse in this area is full of 're' words, with sometimes subtle distinctions for different situations: re-awakening, revitalisation, reclamation, retrieval, revival, rebirth, re-kindle, renaissance, renewal, re-creation and so on. The editors have chosen to use *revitalisation* as a general term but, for example, in Claire Bower's and Bentley James' chapter, *revitalisation* means that the goal is that there are more speakers of the language. In the Yarnangu situation that they describe, they do not see that as an achievable goal, though of course there are also questions here about what it means to be a speaker. Trevor Stockley takes up the general issue: clarity about what outcomes are expected by the community and others, and

what would be required to achieve those outcomes, in the long term and in relation to particular activities or programs. Michael Walsh's focus is on the conditions and actions that can make revitalisation programs successful. All these issues are long-standing ones, between aspirational goals for the long term and the art of managing goals for more discrete steps.

To an important extent the teaching of a particular language is a tradition unto itself, one that grows over time through the concepts and resources that are developed and in the professional experiences and interactions of teachers and their teachers. This might be less obvious from within such a tradition because from that perspective it tends to look more like natural truths than useful inventions. Perhaps these traditions stand out more in their negative aspects, for example, in the occasional criticism of language teaching that it tends to uncritically re-create what the teacher experienced as a student, or where it fails to cast the net widely enough in search of better methods or greater understanding of the task. But these traditions also have many positive aspects, and we should not underestimate how much of a foundation they provide for even the most innovative approaches. That point is at the heart of the issues of Australian Indigenous languages in institutional education because in every case it is a recent tradition, or at least a recent development in an older tradition. If you identify the Australian language in the best educational position, with the best resources, and then look at what is available for any of the major world languages taught in Australian schools, it is not much of a comparison. Not only are the traditions of institutional teaching relatively recent for Australian Indigenous languages but they also have relatively small language communities and relatively limited economic resources behind them. This should give some idea of the task faced by teachers of Australian Indigenous languages and those who support them by developing curriculum and resources, by providing training, and by developing and implementing the necessary policy. The 10 papers on language in education reflect these developing, if relatively new traditions, as well as the range of contributions to them, from specific teaching activities (Ursula Brown,

Richard Green), design and development of particular programs (Jackie Cipollone, Karen Lane, Stephen Maier, Diane McNaboe and Susan Poetsch, Felicity Meakins, Julie Reid), and policy and support (Kevin Lowe and Peter Howard, Mari Rhydwen). These, together with other papers in the volume, both reflect some real achievements and point out some ways forward. There is one gap though that seems increasingly large as other areas make progress: the teaching of Indigenous languages in tertiary education.

The majority of the chapters in the section on language in education relate to situations in New South Wales, so the breadth of activities nationally is less well illustrated in this section of the book than in the others. This is in some ways a balance to earlier works such as Hartman and Henderson (1994) that, reflecting a different context and point in history, focused more on areas where Indigenous languages were in extensive everyday use, and included only a single chapter that related specifically to New South Wales as against many relating to the Northern Territory. However, the New South Wales focus in this book is useful not just for historical balance but because, together with other chapters in this book, it indicates the kinds of larger framework or ecology in which Indigenous language education can be advanced: policies, institutions, resources, personnel, training, community engagement. The government education policies are a coordinated approach across the whole region of New South Wales, but the rest of the picture is of independent and interdependent players moving roughly in the same direction although perhaps on different paths. There are a number of references to the policy and syllabus development work of the New South Wales Board of Studies, in which editors Kevin Lowe and Susan Poetsch have played an important role. Anna Ash and her co-authors describe the contribution of a language centre, the Many Rivers Aboriginal Language Centre based on the north coast of New South Wales, in research and resource development, and in developing adult courses and supporting school programs. Geoff Anderson describes how a school program, in Wiradjuri in Parkes, sends ripples out into the wider language community. John Giacon describes the development of a major language resource, the Gamilaraay, Yularaay and Yuwaalayaay dictionary. Cat Kutay and co-authors describe a collaboration between technologists and community teachers in developing infor-

mation technology to support language revitalisation in Sydney. Ursula Brown credits her chapter on teaching Dhurga to her studies in the Master of Indigenous Language Education which is offered by the Koori Centre at the University of Sydney (a course established by editor John Hobson). So the New South Wales focus is not a weakness but a kind of case study.

Of particular interest to schools will be the relationships between school and community, and for that matter all the other parts of the ecology of language revitalisation in a given area. Kevin Lowe and Peter Howard's chapter, 'So you want to work with the community? Principles and strategies for school leaders affecting the establishment of Aboriginal language program', will provide schools with some practical questions, information and recommendations. Geoff Anderson's chapter gives a perspective from the community side, and together with a number of other papers, give a teacher's perspective.

Finally, the section on information technology points to opportunities that are only just becoming apparent. The three chapters show how, with community engagement, technology may be able to overcome some of the economic and other constraints on resources such as dictionaries, interactive learning activities, and document collections. As Wilson's chapter reports, the increasingly sophisticated mobile phones have become a tool for language revitalisation because they can now host materials such as electronic dictionaries. Young Indigenous people's engagement with digital media such as *Facebook* (Kral, 2011) is also presenting new avenues for language activities, and we might predict that this will be a focus of a future volume on Indigenous language revitalisation, one which may well be available only in digital form.

## References

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