Part Five
Literacy and oracy
Introduction
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Given their importance it is actually quite surprising that relatively little has been written on literacy and oracy in the context of the revitalisation of Australian Aboriginal languages. Many of us have been present when a prepared speech in some Aboriginal language is read out very slowly and haltingly by a person not very familiar with the language in its oral form, let alone its written representation. This can be awkward for the person attempting to perform in a public setting and may trigger some unease among members of the Aboriginal group as they monitor audience reactions. Aboriginal people who are fluent in an Aboriginal language as well as non-Aboriginal people may judge the performance to be a poor reflection of the ancestral language. They may question the authenticity of such modern renditions of a re-awakened language and even suggest that the enterprise is fundamentally flawed.

This section is therefore a welcome contribution to a little researched area. Jones, Chandler and Lowe surveyed some 114 children from Aboriginal as well as non-Aboriginal backgrounds across four primary schools. Although they stress that the research is very preliminary they were able to gain some evidence that there might be a positive relationship between learning a re-awakened language and learning to read in English. English spelling of course is notorious for its poor correlation between sound and symbol, whereas the spelling adopted for re-awakened languages typically is much closer to a one-to-one correlation. It is this greater consistency that may assist students in that initial hurdle of acquiring literacy.

However, as is pointed out by Reid, the pronunciation of re-awakened languages may be strongly influenced by English spelling. Particularly where people first encounter their re-awakened language as adults, they already have a lifetime of familiarity with English spelling. For non-Aboriginal people it is scarcely surprising that an encounter with a word like Tabidgi (the Aboriginal name of the maternal uncle of Jimmy Blacksmith in the Thomas Keneally novel) produces a pronunciation which is not very faithful to Aboriginal languages of the region in question: stress on the second

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syllable; the reduction of the first vowel to schwa; the equation of the first consonant with the apico-alveolar t of English (although it is much more likely that the sound should be lamino-dental) and the rendering of dg as in English jug rather than as a lamino-palatal. Of the six sounds represented by Tabidgi only two (the b and the final vowel) are pronounced ‘accurately’. And this is an instance where one has no oral source to fall back on.

But even when we encounter the name of the famed singer from north-east Arnhem Land, Gurrumul Yunupingu, it is quite common for most of the vowels to be mispronounced as well as two of the consonants, even when there is immediate oral feedback. As Reid points out we need to consider the aspirations of the community whose heritage the re-awakened language is. It may be that a phonemic orthography is suitable for one group but not for another. And sometimes the purpose for which the particular spelling system has been devised will determine its shape. Troy and Walsh (2009), for instance, developed a spelling system for reinstated Aboriginal placenames in the Sydney Harbour area which seeks to use English spelling conventions to approximate what the original pronunciation might have been. This is a practical approach in which the intention is to have the majority of readers getting the pronunciation about right rather than a slightly improved accuracy being limited to a tiny minority of academic specialists. In this and other situations future generations of relevant Aboriginal people may choose to coincide more strongly with ‘authentic’ pronunciations, but the choice should be theirs and evolve in concert with community aspirations.

This leads to the important paper by Hobson, which addresses questions of fluency in relation to re-awakened languages. As foreshadowed in the opening paragraph of this introduction there are plenty enough people who are skeptical about the whole enterprise of revitalising languages. Such people are apt to comment, ‘They don’t really speak it, do they?’ And some of the people involved in regaining their ancestral language(s) are ambivalent about their abilities. This ambivalence is fuelled not just by skeptical non-Aboriginal people but also by Aboriginal people from northern Australia who have acquired their language(s) as children. Hobson stresses that this is a sensitive issue but one that needs to be addressed, not only to underpin the validity of revitalising languages, but also to add credibility to Aboriginal language teaching and learning. He predicts that education and funding bodies will insist on some form of appropriate certification and encourages us to consider models that have already been tried elsewhere.

References


2 The final vowel in the rapid pronunciation of English word, the.