

Part Two

Language in communities



Introduction

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There is wide agreement on the centrality of the revitalisation of Indigenous languages to the sovereign aspirations of Aboriginal communities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia, along with other decolonising peoples in the world, see their languages as providing a window through which they can view their past and envision their future.

When respected Gamilaraay Elder Auntie Rose Fernando said, ‘Language is our soul’ (Board of Studies 1998) she articulated a view that both knowledge of and access to language is a key to the long-term survival of Indigenous people’s own unique place and identity within Australia. Indigenous people have been overwhelmed by the pressure to adopt the coloniser’s tongue as their own first language. Attempts to bring about the restoration of local languages and dialects are not only hampered by the number and diversity of languages, but also by complex histories of massacres, dispersal, tribal relocations, and inter-marriages that have stretched to breaking point the links to local language and cultural knowledge. The work of individuals and small groups within communities, however, has kept tenuous links to Indigenous ontology and epistemologies open, with their activities forming the basis of the renaissance of traditional languages across Australia.

This work is not without deep tensions, as those working in the area of language revitalisation will attest. Questions regarding who is capable, let alone entitled, to teach language are bandied around communities, often masking broader issues such as which language will be privileged in which location. These questions, coupled with the potentially divisive issues of authority, language ownership and fluency have often been the focus of community concerns as they commence work on revitalising their languages. Yet, as is attested elsewhere, the nurturing of language within families and communities has provided an avenue for engendering real and sustained interest in language and cultural reclamation. This nurturing gives form and substance to the long-held community aspirations for language revitalisation (for example Palmer 2000). Along these lines, Walsh (this volume) provides an outline of the range of

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potential factors that maximise the chance of success for the revitalisation of any given language. These authors make the point that foundational strength comes from being able to assert a direct link between cultural connectedness and the uniqueness of Indigenous identity. The revitalisation of Indigenous languages is part of the larger renaissance of indigeneity where a community's involvement is an act of reasserting their sovereignty in their own country and maintaining it, even when living elsewhere.

There are many realities, theoretical and practical, associated with successfully establishing these programs as community driven and controlled. They include such questions as: what is the role of linguistic support? How are the differing partial remembrances of language to be incorporated? Can Indigenous people living off country be taught language, especially if it is not their own? What access can non-Indigenous people have to languages? The capacity to resolve these and other questions will test the mettle of Indigenous communities, community language workers, and the agencies which employ them in successfully negotiating solutions. There are immense tasks facing communities in the challenge to make the transition from language slumber to awakening.

The papers in this section of the volume consider the importance and value of language revitalisation both to communities themselves and to wider public understanding.

Amery's paper on the Kurna community – represented by the key individuals in Kurna Warra Pintyandi (KWP) – highlights the importance of self-assertion as the authority on language, as well as the means that the KWP developed to control requests to use Kurna in the public domain. Amery outlines some of the methods that the KWP working group used to protect the integrity of their language and also make it accessible to the general public in the form that they want. The development of the *Kurna Placenames* website has been one means by which this has been achieved. The paper also foregrounds how the establishment of a long-term relationship between a non-Indigenous linguist and an Aboriginal community has enhanced the quality and quantity of resources and training that the community has been able to access over the life of the larger language revitalisation project.

Anderson's paper is a personal journey of reconnecting with language and sharing it for his own and the community's health and pride. He looks directly through the lens of community to show the extraordinary redemptive power of language learning. Anderson focuses on the enormously positive impact of language work on the whole community, the willingness of schools and others to support community projects and the growing pride with which the local Aboriginal community has sought to engage themselves and the non-Aboriginal community in the building of belonging within their own country.

Olawsky describes a range of strategies to increase the profile, value and recognition of the Miriwoong language. He argues that even in the early stages of revitalisation, these efforts play a positive role in supporting community pride by providing the language with legitimacy in the speech community itself as well as in the broader

public view. Olawsky suggests that current thinking on language revitalisation strategies needs to be more inclusive of activities that engender pride and linguistic identity, particularly through seeing language privileged by diverse usage across the community.

Sometimes & Kelly further the argument for the importance of the wider use of language by discussing its use in public theatre. Using the *Ngapartji Ngapartji* Pitjantjatjara community arts project the authors discuss how reconnection to language has been embedded in the theatre production, linking language to Dreaming, kin, community and place, and, through the theatre-goer, to a wider Australian audience. Sometimes & Kelly argue that Indigenous languages need the efforts of all Australians to nurture and protect them as they are icons for the whole nation.

Stockley's paper challenges any notion that language revitalisation is an easy project. He shows that community-driven language revitalisation is fraught with deep local and regional tensions. While Stockley argues cogently that language work is a lifelong project, he also clearly illustrates the enormous community benefits that are to be had through community members coming together, picking up challenges, having fun, and reconnecting through the deeper cultural domain of community cohesion and connectedness.

References

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