Part One
Language policy and planning

Introduction
Language policy and planning

John Hobson[1]

As the proverb suggests: those who fail to plan, plan to fail. This is no less applicable in language revitalisation, particularly in the Indigenous Australian context where the current dearth of governmental policy and planning is little short of alarming. When we look to similar postcolonial, English-speaking societies the absence of Australian legislation guaranteeing Indigenous language rights is starkly obvious. The Canadian Assembly of First Nations developed its first policy on language and culture in 1972 and in 2004 presented the government with draft legislation (Assembly of First Nations, n.d.). The Māori Language Act was passed in 1987 (Māori Language Commission, n.d.) and, in 1990, President Bush signed the Native American Languages Act (Rehyner 1993, p. 31). Of course the lack of a treaty history underpinning the recognition of Indigenous populations, their cultural and linguistic rights in Australia cannot be overlooked in this regard.

What minimal Indigenous languages policy that does exist across Australian jurisdictions often seems more honoured in the breach than the observance,[2] or languishes for want of meaningful implementation; lots of good words, but not much action. The lack of broadly-based planning and coordination for language revitalisation in many parts of Indigenous Australia can also make it very difficult to build on the achievements of others and advance the process beyond first steps.

While the existence of a robust policy framework for government informed by community ambitions can undoubtedly be of great value, it is still not sufficient to ensure that languages will survive and flourish. Governments will not save your language – only you can do that – and the task may need to be accomplished without, or even in spite of, the implementation of any official policy.

One recently productive area of policy and planning by Australian governments for Indigenous languages has been the development of syllabuses and curricula for languages education in schools, and this is encouraging. However communities must

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2 Witness for example the Northern Territory Department of Education and Training's directive that the first four hours of instruction in bilingual schools must be in English (2009).

be mindful that positive outcomes in classrooms alone are not enough to revitalise languages. The effort must be broader than just schools, and language communities must be vigilant to retain control of their languages, not allowing departments of education to fill the policy gaps for themselves.

Government policy almost always privileges government interests over those of its constituents and seeks to establish limitations on what is deemed appropriate or relevant. The more cynical might even suggest that policy is habitually tied to the electoral cycle, so that what funding is meted out attracts primarily to short-term, fixed-cost, tangible outcomes; a CD, website or book that the minister can launch in front of the media, or sets goals that will not be evaluated until well after the next election.

But policy and planning for language revitalisation do not have to be the sole province of government, or necessarily be beholden to government funds. In fact it is probably essential for success that Indigenous organisations, communities, families and individuals take control of the issue for themselves and develop and implement their own strategies. There are many revitalisation strategies that do not require money; talk is cheap.

I have had the great pleasure of spending the night in the households of indigenous language activists in both New Zealand and Canada where the family plan to ensure the children retain their language includes a policy of no English at mealtimes. I am also aware of activists locally who have a policy of only speaking to their new baby in their heritage language to fulfil their family plan to produce the first new native speaker in a generation. Then there are others implementing a personal policy of saying everything in their own language first wherever possible, relegating the dominant language to second place.

The movement to institute a new tradition of giving Indigenous Welcome to Country speeches (ideally in language) has been highly successful across Australia with only modest support from governments but a strong groundswell of enthusiasm from within communities. There is no reason why a similar movement for wider application of Indigenous languages could not take place. The boards of many community organisations, for example, could conduct voting in a local language without significant preparation or cost. It would take little more than a declaration of policy and a plan to implement it.

Of course there is already one very strong locus of language policy and planning across Indigenous Australian communities – the language centre movement. This function alone validates their existence and suggests that the goal of establishing a language centre should be firmly embedded in language communities' long-term revitalisation plans. In the interim such organisations as land councils, native title groups and Elders' councils have the potential to foster language policy development and planning for their constituent communities without necessarily having to take on practical language work as part of that initial step.

There is a lot that can be done. It just takes some planning.

The three papers in this section offer us substantially different but equally significant perspectives from which to approach Indigenous languages revitalisation in Australia, and establish three useful lenses through which the remainder of the volume can be viewed.

The paper by Truscott and Malcolm gives a comprehensive and insightful overview of the history of Indigenous languages policy in Australia, the failure to implement it successfully and the apparently entrenched custom of either ignoring it completely, or subverting it in practice, which they term *invisible* policy. Their discussion illuminates the underlying political landscape of Australian languages policy that makes redundant any need to engage in a broader discussion of the issues here.

Walsh, on the other hand, offers us the considerable benefit of several decades spent in the documentation, analysis and revitalisation of Australian languages in addition to a detailed familiarity with the literature internationally. From this he distils the essential elements of 'Why language revitalisation sometimes works'. While clearly not proffered as a checklist, those engaged in language revitalisation planning could do worse than compare both past and proposed strategies to assess how these factors might be implicated in their success or failure.

Finally, Yunkaporta provides an eloquent expression of an essential ingredient in the revitalisation process, the Indigenist perspective. Although principally concerned with planning for Indigenous languages education his discussion of the importance of story sharing, learning maps, non-verbal learning, symbols and images, land links, non-linear processes, deconstruction and reconstruction, and community links serves to ground consideration of the issues outside the Western academic realm and firmly within the perspective of language-owning communities.

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