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Reclamation process for Dharug in Sydney using song

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Abstract

I have been learning my language, the Dharug *dalang*, since my youth and have accessed linguistic work on the grammar and pronunciation of the language. Because of my efforts with reclamation I have been given permission from prominent members of the Darug² clan and community to reclaim and implement paradigms suitable for teaching in classroom settings.

I have used a variety of approaches to bring the language alive. I have linked the students' learning to their local community through looking at the Dharug root of many Australian placenames. Also I have taken modern English words and translated their root into Dharug to enable students to talk about their present life. Finally I have made their learning highly interactive with games, songs and weather reports.

Games such as Bingo are used to reinforce learning the words for animals. 'Simon says ...' and the song 'Head, shoulders, knees and toes' provide reinforcement of the names of body parts. In particular, in songs the melody provides a reference point for remembering words and their pronunciation. Weather reports provide a practical exercise that is carried out purely in language. Teachers can also implement report making in classes when I am not there.

This work has now extended to classes with community Elders. The participants include speakers from other nations as well as fluent Dharug speakers. The result is that those who come are starting to agree on a common pronunciation and semantics for the languages in the greater Sydney area. They are also looking at how different these languages may really be, in terms of reclamation for Sydney.

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2 The preferred spelling for references to the people is currently Darug, while the language is more commonly spelt Dharug.

History of the language

The Dharug language was spoken around Sydney for thousands of years BC (before Cook). It is similar to the languages now studied as Dharawal and Eora, and they may have all been forms of the same language. As such it is an important language for the people of Sydney, whether they moved here or were originally from the area. It is the language in which the land around Sydney was described and in which the care of country was carried out. The culture of the Darug nation also has other unique forms, such as X-ray art where an animal's bone structures and internal organs are displayed, which is now popular throughout Australia. This heritage is an important part of the present culture for Aboriginal people and for all Australians.

As it has become safer for people to speak their language and openly practise their culture, there is now opportunity for those who have carried knowledge to stand up and contribute to the reclamation process. This will include a long period of establishment where the different knowledge parts fit together, as well as the role of those who have been told these parts, in a larger framework of cultural practice. This will be verified in the environment of a long oral history of descent and cultural relations that will constitute an extended process. This is the story of the reclamation of the Dharug language from what has been remembered and recorded and the story of the Dharug courses now being run in Sydney schools for children and adults.

The heritage of the tutor

Due to the long period of occupation of Sydney there is much debate as to the heritage of the language of the area and of the people now living here. While many people have been moved here by force or looking for work, there are families who are descended from the original people around Sydney. Also, as most Darug men were killed early in the settlement period, the Aboriginal men who came to work here married the Darug women. One family recorded as from this area was the Webbs. The Webbs were pushed to the mountains from Parramatta then went north to Bundjalung country. I am descended from this family and live in Sydney.

I learnt the language as a child in Parramatta by listening to the stories told by the men, as the women were not speaking it then. I lived among Elders, including my great grandmother, who were still speaking around Parramatta when I was born in 1963 in Katoomba. My contact with the language had begun and I was acknowledged as a storyteller from a young age by my people. I was relocated to Parramatta then later to Queensland and Aotearoa (New Zealand). This common dislocation of Aboriginal people from their community is one issue in trying to track peoples' place and identity.

When I was 20 I tracked down my dad who was impressed by my use of Dharug words and encouraged me to speak in full sentences. My father died in 1997 and I continued an interest in languages in general and mixed with the Bundjalung, Dhanggati, Gamilaraay and Wiradjuri speakers around Redfern who, while pronouncing their

own languages, provided the different sound patterns for me to learn my own *dalang* or tongue. In particular the Australian coastal languages such as Bundjalung, Dhanggati and Dharug have long been known to be similar and thus can support each other in their reclamation or revival.

The Aboriginal linguist Jakelyn Troy researched the archives and existing speakers of Dharug for her book *The Sydney language* (Troy 1994). This work provided me with a systematic spelling and grammar, as it is a complete study of the Sydney language. It is now being recognised by some community members that what was called Eora, which means people in Dharug, is in fact the same language as Dharug.

I have proven to be a very quick learner of many languages including Arabic, Greek, Turkish, Japanese and Chinese. It has been this unique skill with languages, and my love and knowledge of music and musical patterns, which has enabled me to produce a spoken Dharug for teaching which is fluent and poetic, enabling me to teach in song. I have been working with the Elders of the Darug nation to secure their permission to teach their language and to provide a consistent form of Dharug for teaching to all students. Most importantly for the reclamation process is that I am acknowledged as a songman, a man able to revive the songs of the culture and land around Sydney.

History of the language program

I initiated the Dharug language program when I started teaching it in the community and taking it to the schools. Through my work, consultations were held among Chifley College Dunheved Campus and the Darug and community Elders. From this an agreement was developed among the Elders, the College and the Department of Education and Training to run the program. These school programs, however, are only part of a broader community re-awakening.

The next stage involved aligning my teaching with the Aboriginal language syllabus from the Board of Studies. The linguist Amanda Oppliger wrote the program that was accepted for use in the schools. At present the program is 15 hours for all students in Years 7 and 8 at the College. This provides the students with enough word and language structure to start talking language and using it in their daily lives. However this needs to be extended, particularly with the training and accreditation of more Aboriginal languages teachers.

Chifley College is located on Darug land, and the staff members are aware that they are surrounded by the many artefacts and past experiences of the Darug people. While much of this is not visible to many people today the language is alive and present, and it is vital to bring this awareness back to all people living in this land. The College has incorporated in its strategic plan the statement, 'Our journey with the Dharug Language program is teaching us that we must listen to the Land as it speaks to us of Darug ways of knowing, learning and teaching.' (Chifley College 2005, p. 2).

I have now been teaching the Dharug *dalang* for three years at Chifley College Dunheved Campus, which has a 23% Aboriginal enrolment. The success of the

program has been acknowledged in the western Sydney region and I have also been employed by Doonside Technology High School for the past two years.

Teaching Dharug as a familiar language

I have developed the language program over many years, finding what will motivate students and what they need to learn to be able to use the language. As with all unfamiliar languages the first step is to teach the new sounds of the language. Most of the students laugh when they first hear the language spoken. Yet I am able to explain that Dharug is the language used on most of their local street signs and for some suburb names of western Sydney, as this is the original language of the area. That is, they are living where the language still exists, even if dormant. This brings the language to life for the students and shows that it is a more appropriate source of a youth language than the Pig Latin they are already speaking. After the very first class at Dunheved the pupils begin using *yuin* as yes instead of the *eshay* they used previously.

The next step for me is to bring the language up to date. Words such as the days of the week were not found in Dharug. However, these words have a history or root in their English form, and that root can be translated from the ancient stories into similar Dharug words. The days of the week are a great tool to help students practise using the tongue in their everyday life. Even the front office staff at the College and School can use these words for the calendar.

This process involves teaching students the history of the English words, the equivalent Darug stories, and the new words. This provides a link between the old cultures of Australia and Europe in a way that is ignored in many presentations of ancient 'mythologies'. It suggests that the Aboriginal people in Australia have retained a history and knowledge which many Europeans have lost, particularly in coming to other lands, establishing colonies and claiming some advanced 'civilised' status.

Talking Dharug as relevant

The days of the week are presented as part of the cycle of time, rather than just a time-keeping measure. Therefore the seasons are also described: not the four seasons of Europe, but those of the central eastern coast of Australia. Also the weather is described in Dharug. This is important as Australia has unique seasons and weather patterns and, as the effect of climate change increases, it important our children understand what are the long-term cycles of Australia, and what are the changes to which they and the environment will have to adapt.

The lesson in weather is then followed by the students giving weekly weather reports from the morning paper in Dharug. The compass directions are also introduced for this reporting. This is both topical and a regular exercise that the teacher can continue with on the days that I am not in that class. This process enables the students to think and listen in Dharug each day, encouraging fluency and the use of Dharug for entire parts of the lesson, rather than needing to mix with English.

Teaching Dharug as fun

The next step is to enforce and increase vocabulary to improve pronunciation and extend this into singing. I use a process of interchanging between games and revision for this process. Games such as 'Simon says ...' for the body parts, and Bingo for the words for animals, are good for repetition. Similar to Bingo is the game *Ngan diya giyara?* (What's its name?), with the Dharug word on the card and the names called out in English, or vice versa.

Then the words can also be used in songs that repeat around a thematic structure, introducing new words each verse, such as 'Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes'. I have taught the children to sing this for all parts of the body, even down to the fingernails.

These songs introduce the ergative form in the repeated sections; a characteristic of many Australian languages – as well as some other Oceania languages – that is different to English (Lynch 1998, p. 199; Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia 1996, p. 140). It is also an important first step in terms of learning to construct Dharug sentences, and move on from the wordlist approach to language revival that has been followed for many years.

Once students have reached Year 8 they are able to form grammatical sentences and have an understanding of what is being said in Dharug by the teacher and their peers. Every lesson is practised using song for two reasons. Firstly, the language was a sung language. Its flexible form and loose structure, compared to English, enable the generation of a poetic form and the maintenance of rhythm throughout a long story. Secondly, the stories were always sung, as the song format is important for memorising words and sounds, and otherwise young learners would forget the stories. Once students have sung a lesson they seem to find that point of melody that can enable them to recall at will.

With singing it is possible to teach students the different parts of words; the tenses, the different forms of nouns and the various endings to do with time and location. They can first learn new constructions in song, with repetition, and then this can be explained as they become familiar with the form. At the same time as I teach language I am teaching music to the students, the scales they are using in the Dharug songs and the intervals they need to learn.

Tricks of the trade

I have found that perhaps the most rewarding aspect of teaching is not just the passing on of the language, but also the amount of understanding of the language and language learning that I have gained through this.

The most important aspect is to make the language relevant, and accessible. For example, in modern culture singing is not a strong point for many boys. However, Aboriginal stories are traditionally sung in a high-pitched voice. This makes the songs more accessible to young men, and less confronting.

I have realised that there are many tricks to teaching and learning languages. Firstly is the strength of song as a teaching tool; secondly is how the structure of the music supports the learning of particular words or language structures. Also I have learnt to study my own learning and convey these tricks to the students, such as how you learn to see a word on the back of your eyelid when you want to remember how to pronounce it.

What has been most important to the strength of the language reclamation has been the fact that it is being taught on the land which it describes and that it has been taught under the control of, and in the manner specified by, the Dharug speakers. By teaching the students Dharug I am teaching them about where they live and who they are as residents of Darug land. I also set up the program in consultation with the community and Dharug speakers. As a result the method of teaching has been much more fluid and derived more from telling the story of the culture, than from syllabus or linguistic requirements. It is this method of teaching that is an integral part of Aboriginal ways of knowing.

Community involvement

The students speak Dharug every day at Dunheved and it has carried over into the community. What started with ten adult students at Dunheved is a class that has grown to 60 men, women and children including Uncle Wes Marne, a Bidjambul man, Greg Simms and the accomplished Dharug speaker Auntie Edna Watson. These people come from many different backgrounds yet are all very respectful of my knowledge in the area of language reclamation. By working with people who have maintained the language orally I have been able to introduce the work of linguists such as Jakelyn Troy to them. This is leading to a consistent pronunciation of words across the region and recognition of the unity of the Sydney languages, while acknowledging local variations if they exist.

Also, while people such as Edna Watson speak the language and readily understand most of what is being said, she acknowledges that she doesn't have the skills to teach in a formal classroom setting. I have been able to both learn the language and to explain the language to others. The adult program at Chifley College Dunheved Campus has unearthed at least six Aboriginal people who could teach if there was some way of them gaining accreditation. With the support of the federal government we are building a Dharug language centre next year at Chifley College to continue this work.

Modern communication tools

Another feature of my approach to language, which is common among Aboriginal people, is my interest in using modern technology. The linguist working with the Dharug and Dharawal languages, Amanda Oppliger, has put about 100 of my words onto a phone database (see Wilson, this volume). This means that I can SMS Dharug to others learning the language. Stuart Marshal, who has been given permission to

speak Dharug in Queensland, is learning with support from me using phone calls and texting. Chris and Jacinta Tobin in the Blue Mountains are also using this medium.

I have also just been approached by the National Parks and Wildlife Service to set up a website to share sound bites in language. This will be an interactive site where speakers can add their own material. It is important we hear our language again, as the words have always remained in the names of places and in our children's slang. We need to build on this and bring back the full meaning of the language as the sound of this land.

Conclusion

In teaching Dharug, grammar is covered with comparisons to both English and the Kriol spoken by many of the students. By providing a holistic approach to their studies the classes are engaging the students as never before. This has been linked to a great improvement in attendance at the schools and has resulted in increased support for Aboriginal languages in Sydney. As the next step we are organising children's choirs in schools in western Sydney to learn songs about the land where they live.

Through classes run at Dunheved College I have also trained many adult speakers to reclaim their language. We now need more of their people to be trained and employed as language teachers. There have been many dictionaries and grammars produced by linguists over the years and many people have studied our language to try to speak it again. Now we need to have access to these resources and bring together these people to use this knowledge in reconstructing our speech.

This process has involved confronting the many attempts to discredit me as a language speaker, and to discredit the language I speak – saying it is not correct, or is a combination of many neighbouring languages. I have been learning my language since very young, from those who still spoke it then, and have stood by my right to speak and teach it, as granted me by my Elders. It is only through the strength of this backing from the knowledge holders of our community that I have succeeded in reclaiming a language that was called 'dead'. Yet there are still people who would rather criticise the efforts of my and others' learning than value the language which we have, and with which we must move forward.

References

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