

Introduction

Re-awakening Australian languages

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Above all, let us permit native children to keep their own languages – those beautiful and expressive tongues, rich in true Australian imagery, charged with poetry and with love for all that is great, ancient, and eternal in the continent. There is no need to fear that continued knowledge of their own languages will interfere with the learning of English as the common medium of expression for all Australians. In most areas of Australia the natives have been bilingual, probably from time immemorial. Today white Australians are among the few remaining civilised people who still think that knowledge of one language is the normal limit of linguistic achievement. (Strehlow 1957, p. 53)

As in other parts of the postcolonial world, the Indigenous languages of Australia have been undergoing a renaissance over recent decades. Many languages that had long ceased to be heard in public and consequently been deemed ‘dead’ or ‘extinct’ have begun to emerge from hiding to reveal themselves as only having been dormant, awaiting a world in which it was safe for them to re-awaken. While a tragically large number of languages have undoubtedly succumbed to 200 years of violence and repression, it is an inspiring testament to their speakers’ resilience to see how many have resisted and survived to be heard again. This is especially so in the face of Australia’s obsessive tradition of English monolingualism that manifests itself even today, half a century after Strehlow’s plea, in government policies that mandate daily hours of English-only instruction in bilingual schools and assume that literacy only exists in English (Simpson et al. 2009; Truscott & Malcolm, this volume).

It is in this environment that this volume seeks to provide the first comprehensive snapshot of the courageous actions and determined aspirations of Indigenous people

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and their supporters for the revitalisation of Australian languages in the 21st century. Many of the papers convey Indigenous narratives of the efforts of individuals and small groups whose aggregated achievements underpin the long-term revitalisation of many of Australia's Indigenous languages. Language revitalisation is underpinned more fundamentally by notions of cultural sovereignty – Indigenous people asserting their ownership and pride in their heritage – past, present and future. To move from being an act of colonial resistance, to genuine acceptance of the value of Indigenous languages and cultures in Australian society more broadly, the legitimacy of language work can no longer be in question: we know *why* we are doing this work. However, we must continue to ask, *how can we do it better?*

The contributions to this volume describe both the satisfactions and tensions of this ongoing and life-long struggle. They also draw attention to the need for effective planning and strong advocacy at the highest political and administrative levels, if language revitalisation in Australia is to be successful and if people's efforts are to have longevity. Sustained and appropriate support is required to ensure that programs are not just available but that they are sufficiently robust to clearly match linguistic and educational needs across a range of unique contexts.

Geographically and linguistically isolated, revitalisers of Indigenous Australian languages have often struggled to find guidance for their circumstances unaware of the successes and failures of others walking a similar path, whether at home or abroad. Viewed from far across the seas, the possibilities being created by others can appear doubly remote. Even close at hand the inspiring successes of the Māori can sometimes seem disheartening, given the apparent luxury of a single language, single state government and linguistic rights enshrined in a treaty. However, as those of us who have been fortunate enough to witness revitalisation activity in other countries can attest, the practice is often more alike than different, and the theory remains largely the same (Lowe & Walsh 2004).

Notwithstanding these issues, the guiding light for local language revitalisers in the new century has clearly been *The green book of language revitalization in practice* (Hinton & Hale 2001) – so much so that it is sometimes referred to locally as 'the Bible'. Many of the contributions in the Green Book relate specifically to situations in North America, but the intention was to provide a series of case studies of language revitalisation in practice that could inform the activities of practitioners across the rest of the world. At the same time some of the contributions, drawing on wide experience, tackled more general issues and could shape not just the practice but also the theory of language revitalisation.

It cannot be denied that the current volume is an Australian homage to Hinton and Hale. However, rather than simply replicate, we have intentionally sought to supplement it by providing local people with the incentive and opportunity to share the learning from their language journeys. The guidance provided in the Green Book is clear, simple, practical and just as applicable here and now. In this volume our

emphasis is simply on Indigenous Australia and we follow the model of the Green Book to the extent that we present case studies and try to meld theory with practice.

Based on the varied experience and imperatives of the different members of the editorial team we have also sought to span distinctions that are sometimes construed as exclusive. Thus we have actively solicited contributions from community-based practitioners, professional linguists and academic theorists, and accorded them equal prestige. We have also particularly invited papers by Indigenous authors and, through the generosity of the Office of the Board of Studies New South Wales, were able to provide grants-in-aid to Indigenous community writers in that state. A central device with this intent was also to invite non-Indigenous writers to partner with community members to co-author their work. We are therefore delighted to report that, of the 47 named authors, one third are Indigenous Australians – itself a notable achievement in Australian linguistics.

Of course we would have liked more, and are acutely conscious of a number of excellent initiatives and practitioners nationally that could have been showcased. But while the call for papers was made through every connection at our disposal, and generated considerable interest, many potential contributors were unable to meet our deadlines due to pressures of other work – including language revitalisation. We are most grateful to those that were able to fit this additional chore into a very busy array of commitments. Notwithstanding, we should confess that our original aspiration was that we *might* be lucky enough to secure a dozen or so contributions, not the 34 we are delighted to present herein. This is an indication of the range of people participating in the revitalisation process, some of whom would now be referred to as language activists (Floreay et al. 2009).

Another heartening feature of the volume that emerges is the consistently positive view of the future it offers and the recurrent emphasis on sharing, partnership and moving forward. There is little of the fearful rhetoric of needing to protect the languages from the ravages of insensitive linguists or defend Indigenous intellectual and cultural property from those who would abuse it that has so often characterised the field in the past. Equally there is little of the assertion of assumed academic authority over Indigenous people's knowledge and rights. Perhaps this is an indication that we are coming of age; that the various participants are capable of recognising the value of each other's contributions, needs and interests, and can readily work together if afforded the necessary mutual respect. Let us hope so.

With that in mind we urged authors to ensure their papers were written in accessible language. There is little use in reams of turgid academic prose to community activists who are unused to navigating it; it has given them little assistance to date. We hope we have been largely successful in that aim also.

As editors we preferred to keep a loose rein on content. However we were rather insistent about some terminology, in particular to eschew terms like *moribund*, *dead* and *extinct*. Such terms, as applied to their languages, are most often offensive to

Indigenous people and are avoided in favour of terms like *sleeping* (for example Leonard 2008). In any case it seems absurd to continue with such labels for languages that may now have hundreds of speakers as a result of language revitalisation efforts (Walsh 2009). Even the term *speakers* is potentially problematic as distinctions can be made according to levels of proficiency: partial speakers, semi-speakers, fluent speakers, and so on (Hobson; Reid, this volume). Again our preference has been to simply adopt terminology that reflects the current idiom of Indigenous people who usually would use the term without qualification.

Another terminological issue relates to the process and activities connected with ‘bringing languages back’. Among the terms that have been used are *revival*, *renewal* and *reclamation* (Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia 1996, pp. 21–22). Although we are well aware of these and the desire to bring clarity to the field, we have chosen for the most part to adopt a single term, language *revitalisation* to cover a wide range of situations. This not only creates a resonance with the Green Book but also simplifies the task of applying more fine-grained distinctions to complex, on-the-ground situations that may invite more than one description, and currently be in a process of developmental change. Nevertheless we have sanctioned the innovative terminology adopted by the contribution from the Kimberley Language Resource Centre: language *continuation* – referring to all strategies used to keep languages ‘alive’. Also Stockley (this volume) cautions us on the use of terms like *awareness* versus *awakening*. In an evolving field we can expect the terminology to continue to be the subject of debate. There are however some special conventions adopted in this volume, particularly with regard to *Aboriginal*, *Dreaming*, *Elders* and *Indigenous*: the reader is referred to the Conventions section.

The papers are presented under a range of sections predetermined by the editors: policy and planning, centres and programs, education, literacy and oracy, technology, and documentation. Of course, as might be expected, the final contributions sometimes defy such simplistic categorisation and could just as easily appear in more than one section. For example there is hardly a chapter that does not make some mention of education or technology. We have responded by assigning them on mixed criteria of best fit and producing relative balance across the volume. If any therefore seem misaligned, the responsibility rests with us rather than the authors.

In the Green Book, Clay Slate, a long-term practitioner in the Navajo language program, outlined attempts to promote advanced Navajo language scholarship as:

badly needed work that might be considered too technical, pedagogical, ‘applied,’ or politically aggressive for academia. For instance, there is a need for coinage and elaboration work in election terminology, medical interpreting, courtroom, interpreting, and other professional areas. Such direct work on the Navajo lexicon must be collaborative and thus based in extensive oral critical interplay. (2001, p. 402)

Such elaboration has also been in progress for languages in the Asia-Pacific region for some time. For instance since mid-2004 the Māori language has had an Institute

of Excellence in the Māori Language (Te Panekiretanga o te Reo Māori) and, in the Australian context, ARDS (Aboriginal Resource Development Services)⁵ have been pivotal in advancing various domains including law, government, the economy, health and so forth, among the Yolŋu of north-east Arnhem Land. We look forward to this kind of extension of Indigenous languages to engage with the wider community becoming a part of language revitalisation.

We also hope that this volume will not only suggest new possibilities for language revitalisation practitioners but also inform policy development for Indigenous languages in this country and the position of Australian languages generally (Liddicoat 2008; McKay 2007, 2009a, b; Walsh, forthcoming; Truscott & Malcolm, this volume).

Ultimately we are greatly pleased by the breadth, depth and diversity of the papers offered. They represent a detailed profile of the current status of Indigenous Australian languages revitalisation and provide many examples and much guidance for others to follow. Most importantly they clearly demonstrate that we have achieved much and should look positively to the future.

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