

Raising Babel: Language Revitalisation in New South Wales, Australia.

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Abstract

Not long ago (Dixon 1991) it was reported that there remained just a handful of speakers for one language in New South Wales [NSW]. In 1788, when NSW was first 'settled', there were around 70 distinct languages. In 2003, there are already language learning programmes in about half a dozen NSW languages and more are under development.

In this paper recent developments concerning language revitalisation in NSW are sketched out and future directions are indicated. In 2002 NSW State government made a major commitment to NSW Indigenous languages. Part of this commitment is evidenced by the establishment of a NSW Aboriginal Languages Centre with funding for four years in the first instance. In addition, the government is concluding the framing and consultations which will result in a NSW Aboriginal languages policy.

Despite the gloomy (and rather misleading) account of the NSW Indigenous language situation in 1991, by now many Aboriginal languages in NSW are on the move: from the supposed singularity in 1991 to the current multiplicity of linguistic traditions: raising Babel in NSW.

A Multiplicity of Languages

This multiplicity raises many issues concerning identity and connection to country. Most Indigenous people in NSW see a traditional language as crucial to a sense of group identity. But which language? Should it be the language of the landowners or some other, non-local, language? In some instances, Aboriginal community opinion is fairly uniform but in other settings, particular in and around major cities the choice is less clear. Many Aboriginal people have moved in to urban areas, sometimes after forcibly being removed from their traditional lands. Not only have they lost close links with their land but their language has been in decline for generations. In the short term, the prospect of re-learning their own language is problematic: on the one hand their language may not yet have a sufficient pool of resources to mount a successful language programme and on the other hand they are 'off country'. Even if they could mount a programme the local landowners may object to having a non-local language being promoted on their land.

For many Aboriginal people there is more than one linguistic affiliation: from each Aboriginal parent and even from grandparents. While most people will have a primary linguistic affiliation it can be a painful choice when the range of actual language learning programmes available is quite limited. Is it better to learn some Aboriginal language – not even from NSW – rather than

no Aboriginal language at all? Some Aboriginal people are clear that it must be their own language and the language of the land while others allow a wider accommodation.

While there are no simple answers to such questions we will consider some of the actual responses in NSW and examine the issues that arise.

Assessing the Language Situation in NSW

In the latter part of 1999 a process began in which the Indigenous language situation in NSW was assessed. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission [ATSIC] commissioned a study which appeared as *Strong Language, Strong Culture* (Hosking et al. 2000). This study basically sought answers to two questions: what is the current situation with regard to Aboriginal languages in NSW, and, what do Aboriginal people want to see happen in the future. Around 140 meetings were conducted across NSW and there were numerous phone calls and chance face-to-face encounters. The overwhelming majority of this contact was with Aboriginal people. From 2001 the Aboriginal Curriculum Unit of the NSW Board of Studies began a series of consultations to consider the possible introduction of an Aboriginal Languages syllabus¹ into NSW schools. This has involved another 40 or so formal meetings and the distribution of questionnaires as well as numerous other less formal encounters. In total around 200 meetings have taken place with key Aboriginal people across the state². I have been involved in most of these meetings.

Meanwhile the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs has been developing a NSW Aboriginal Languages Policy and this has involved more consultative meetings, mainly with Aboriginal people. Most recently the NSW Aboriginal Language Research and Resource Centre has been established. The centre was proposed in 2002 and activated in 2003 with the appointment of Dr Jaky Troy, an Aboriginal woman who had been closely

¹The draft syllabus is downloadable from: http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/writing_briefs/index.html?stamp-2#table [accessed 24 June 2003]; the final, approved syllabus will become available through the main site: <http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/>

²The total area of NSW is 800,628 square km (approx. 312,745 square miles) i.e. significantly larger than the state of Texas (261,914 square miles), a little larger than France and the United Kingdom put together and therefore many times larger than the United Kingdom itself (241,590 square km).

involved with the consultations in the ATSIC study and to a considerable extent with the initiatives of the NSW Board of Studies. In 2003 a major meeting to establish an advisory board and future directions was held on June 11. Once again the majority of participants have been Aboriginal people and they have canvassed the range of issues involved in language revitalization in NSW.

Within the five years from 1999 to the present there has been more consultation about the NSW Aboriginal language situation in general and language revitalization in particular than at any other time. What has come out of these consultations?

Initial Pessimism and Under-Reporting

Often Aboriginal people were pessimistic about the prospects for language revitalization in NSW and quite frequently they under-reported the state of Indigenous language knowledge and usage. The latter is reflected in the 2001 Census in which it was claimed that just 788 (out of a total of nearly 200,000 Indigenous people in NSW) speak an Indigenous language³. Other surveys support this apparent low level of use and knowledge (Nash 1998; McConvell & Thieberger 2001). In our consultations it was common enough to hear a person say: There are only a few words left. The last 'good' speakers have died and the language has not been passed on.

I claim that Aboriginal people were under-reporting because their words too often belied what they had claimed. A person who had just told us there was very little language left in this area would talk in an Aboriginal language to the next Indigenous person who walked in! When queried about this there would often be a dismissive statement: That's just a bit of lingo. Basically many people in NSW felt that the languages had declined too much for anything to be done. They had perhaps not been aware of just how much knowledge was available in 19th century sources, in linguists' field materials and across the Aboriginal community. However this initial pessimism could be offset once people had heard about language revitalization efforts elsewhere in NSW, Australia and other parts of the world.

Discussions and Degrees of Acceptance

Even when Aboriginal people had been pessimistic the link between language and group identity had been foremost in people's minds. They saw an ancestral language as crucial to their identity and regaining that language as a means of maintaining and strengthening that identity. As initial pessimism shifted to cautious optimism Aboriginal people began to discuss a range of issues – some of them quite contentious. Before we turn to some of these issues it should be emphasized that different groups of Aboriginal people had differing

degrees of acceptance about the possibility of language revitalization and the intention to carry it through. Particularly in parts of the Sydney metropolitan area some Aboriginal people felt that there were so many problems to overcome that language revitalization might simply be unachievable – at least in the short term. On the other hand some Aboriginal groups had already made substantial progress towards language revitalization before any of these discussions had taken place: in particular, the Gumbaynggir of the north coast of NSW (McKay 1996: 45-54; Walsh 2001).

'We want our languages back!'

As consultations with Aboriginal people progressed a common reaction was: 'we want our languages back!' However Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer (1998: 63) have warned that 'While it is generally politically and emotionally correct to proclaim resoundingly, "Yes!" [to the question of preserving one's language and culture] the underlying and lingering fears, anxieties, and insecurities over traditional language and culture suggest that the answer may really be, "No." Many of the issues they raise for southeast Alaska have counterparts in Indigenous NSW: official discouragement of the use of ancestral languages; intergenerational dislocation; shame, anxiety and embarrassment over the use of ancestral languages. Simply stating that 'we want our languages back!' will not be enough to achieve this aim, with whatever determination it is expressed. Part of the necessary process is to consider a number of key issues of which one of the most important is: which language?

Which Language?

A recurring issue in consultations was which language should underpin language revitalization efforts. Many Aboriginal people in NSW have multiple linguistic heritages and even when their primary linguistic affiliation is clear they may not be living within the territory of that language group. To take just one example, Stan Grant was born in NSW of a Wiradjuri father and a mother of Gamilaraay descent. He and his children currently live in Hong Kong where he anchors a news programme for CNN (Grant 2002). His father, Stan Grant Sr, is engaged in teaching the Wiradjuri language and believes the language should be taught on its own country. So where does that leave his son and grandchildren? More typically people whose Aboriginal heritage is within NSW are living 'off country' but within NSW.

Particularly problematic is the city of Sydney with an overall population of some 4 million and an Aboriginal population of around 39,000 of which just 244 claim to speak an Indigenous language⁴. Most of these people have come from elsewhere. For such Aboriginal people the question is which language should they learn: the language of the territory in which they now reside or the

³<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs%40census.nsf/343b70397d0e3967ca256b9d00208f91/1df72dc8ef306adeca256bb4000b9d92!OpenDocument>

⁴<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs%40census.nsf/343b70397d0e3967ca256b9d00208f91/162d1aad0ee272cca256bb4000b9d9b!OpenDocument>

language(s) which they regard as their own. Given the geographical spread of Sydney there is more than one Aboriginal language and none of these are at a point where a suitable language learning course could be mounted without a good deal of work. For instance, Dharuk, the language of Sydney's CBD, is mainly known from 18th century materials compiled by a British navy officer, William Dawes. While useful preliminary work has been carried out (Troy 1994) much needs to be done before suitable pedagogical materials become available. In the meantime Aboriginal people living in Sydney must make a choice between choosing a local language like Dharuk or their own language: for instance, Wiradjuri whose traditional territory covered a large area of central NSW.

So, one of the crucial variables amounts to language on country vs language off country. Aboriginal opinion is sharply divided on this issue. Some insist that it is simply wrong to teach an Aboriginal language outside its territory: it contravenes traditional law. Others think that any Aboriginal language is better than none – even if its territory is in a distant part of Australia. Still others believe that only a NSW language should be used within NSW for teaching and learning. Even where there is general agreement about which language should be used some Aboriginal people have expressed grave concern over the wrong dialect or variety being taught. In one case an adult education course in a NSW Aboriginal language came to an abrupt halt when one Aboriginal man declared that the wrong variety of the language was being taught. He felt that it was disrespectful to one of the Elders and walked out. Out of solidarity most of his fellow students also departed. It is difficult enough to mount such courses at all let alone have to tailor them to the particular linguistic subvariety that suits the students. In this and many other situations successful language revitalization is bedeviled by a lack of resources.

Availability of Resources

For most Aboriginal languages of NSW suitable pedagogical resources are simply unavailable. In many cases even basic descriptive materials are unavailable as well. According to Blake (2002: 164) the Yitha-Yitha/Dadi-Dadi language has just 150 items of vocabulary and five pages of grammar. This language stretches from the neighbouring state of Victoria into NSW including the town of Hay. For Aboriginal inhabitants of Hay the choices are rather stark: adopt Yitha-Yitha as the language for revitalization with the realization that it is hard to see how full language reclamation could be possible. Otherwise they must choose a language from somewhere else which is better documented and this choice entails negotiations with the Indigenous owners of that language as well as debate within the local Aboriginal community as to whether this is an appropriate choice.

A number of NSW languages have a sufficiently rich descriptive base to make language reclamation a viable option. Even for such languages there will be gaps. It is

very much a matter of chance as to how much detail has been recorded by early amateurs (particularly in the 19th century) or by linguists more recently. This means that a language revitalization programme will have to make decisions about how the gaps are to be filled. In some instances one can infer what a particular grammatical form 'should' be – based on neighbouring languages and a general knowledge of how NSW Aboriginal languages work. Vocabulary poses additional difficulties and some solutions have been canvassed by Amery (1993) in connection with the Kaurna language of Adelaide in South Australia. The problems involve not just accidental lexical gaps but also neologisms: what should a language revitalization programme do about terms for 'computer', 'skyscraper', 'giraffe' and so on?

Neologisms

The issue of neologisms has created sharp divisions in the discussions about language revitalization programmes in NSW. In our consultations some Aboriginal people have declared that there should be no words for new, non-Indigenous objects and concepts like 'computer', 'photocopier', 'parliament' and the like. Others are equally insistent that an Aboriginal language must be able to talk about anything that one encounters in daily life so there should be introduced terms.

Who can Teach; Who should Teach; Who should be Taught

Another recurring issue in consultations concerns access to and management of Aboriginal language programmes. Again there is a considerable range of opinion. Some Aboriginal people say that only Aboriginal students should be allowed to learn an Aboriginal language. One reason often advanced for this view is that quite often non-Aboriginal students are better equipped to acquire the Aboriginal language than their Aboriginal counterparts. This is not because of some inherent superiority but rather because the non-Aboriginal students enjoy a number of advantages over their Aboriginal fellow students. Often the non-Aboriginal student will have a home environment which assists their learning: a quiet room in which to study, access to a computer, parents who have completed high school or further post-secondary education and are well placed to foster their children's learning. In NSW schools programmes in Aboriginal Studies have been in place for about 11 years and Aboriginal parents have looked askance as non-Aboriginal students have performed 'better' than their Aboriginal fellow students. The result has been embarrassment and shame as Aboriginal students feel that outsiders know more about Aboriginal society and culture than they do. Parents therefore are wary of having the same thing happen when Aboriginal language learning programmes are introduced. On the other hand, some Aboriginal parents feel that mixed classes are better because it will lead to better mutual understanding between Aboriginal people and others. As with many of these issues in a single consultative meeting there can be heated debate leading

to no clear consensus.

The question also arises as to who should teach an Aboriginal language. Again opinion is polarized: some say it must be taught by an Aboriginal person while others have no difficulty with non-Aboriginal people taking on the teaching role. In the school system the practical problem arises that a trained teacher with appropriate qualifications must be present when a class of students is being taught – regardless of the subject matter. Given that there are very few Aboriginal people to date who are trained teachers with the appropriate qualifications the school system may be required to stop an Aboriginal language class from proceeding. Not because of antipathy towards an untrained Aboriginal person teaching the language but because of the regulations. One solution is to have an Aboriginal person doing the teaching but have a trained teacher present in the classroom at the same time. Again this has pluses and minuses: on the plus side, at least the class can go ahead; on the minus side, it can be costly for a school to provide two teachers for the one class. In addition, where the local Aboriginal community prefers a separatist approach it can be galling to have an all-Aboriginal classroom inhibited by the presence of a non-Aboriginal trained teacher who is there simply to satisfy some non-Aboriginal bureaucratic requirement.

The Role of ‘Experts’

Yet another recurring issue in consultations concerns the role of experts. Some Aboriginal people feel that an Aboriginal Elder is the ideal person to pass on not only Indigenous culture but the language as well. A few Aboriginal voices have pointed out that merely knowing the language is not enough – professional training is required. These voices are very much in the minority and considerable debate has taken place over the need for specialized training and expertise from outside. The tragedy is that some Aboriginal Elders – through no fault of their own – have little actual knowledge of their own ancestral language(s) but nevertheless are expected by members of the Aboriginal community to be the ones to teach the language. This is a delicate issue in terms of community politics but an issue that needs to be faced squarely. The issue is not confined to NSW nor to Indigenous Australia in general as Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer (1998: 84) advise: ‘Pride and ego play a role in the resistance to professional training but the cause may run deeper. Many Native people feel that if they already speak their traditional language, they can automatically teach it, and they don’t need anybody to teach them how ... Race and gender are also involved. Many Natives are reluctant to take advice from white people on Native subjects, and many Native men will refuse to take instruction from a Native woman. Jealousy and rivalry may be involved. People may look at a product done by others and easily say “I can do that, too” – but denying or failing to consider or appreciate the many years of professional training, preparation, and experience that went into the ability to produce the product.’

In NSW one Aboriginal man lamented his lack of professional training: for years he had been trying to teach his language in a school situation and now regretted how much wasted effort had been expended because of his lack of expertise (Kevin Lowe, personal communication).

Apart from training in language teaching some Aboriginal people have queried the need for expertise in linguistics. People have referred to past occasions when, in their view, they have been ripped off by linguists: their people have freely given up their knowledge and been given nothing in return. Regardless of the truth of such claims some Aboriginal people have also acknowledged the benefits that have flowed from the records left behind by linguists and other recorders. In some instances a language programme has benefited considerably from a productive collaboration with outside linguists. As with many of the issues so far discussed there is a wide range of opinion from those who see no value whatsoever in expertise in linguistics to those who see it as an essential ingredient in the process of reclaiming one’s language. For those in the latter camp the idea of having Aboriginal people trained in relevant areas of linguistics has considerable appeal. A few NSW Aboriginal people already have some expertise in linguistics and more would like to gain the relevant training. Preliminary discussions have commenced about mounting a training programme for Indigenous people modelled in part on the American Indian Languages Development Institute (McCarty et al. 1997).

The views of linguists from outside the Indigenous community may also be in conflict with the actual aspirations of that community. This is not because the linguists want to do harm but because they may unconsciously bring with them the inappropriate assumptions. Thieberger (2002) argues that decisions about the appropriate target for language maintenance programmes are too often driven by structural linguistics where the supposed ideal is intergenerational transmission of the language with all its complexity retained. Such a position is often in conflict with the actual preferences of the group of people who identify with the language in question and in any case may not be achievable.

Raising Babel

The activities since 1999 outlined in this paper have triggered much discussion among Aboriginal people in NSW: this has led to a greater awareness of the multiplicity of languages in NSW and the issues that thereby arise. To a large extent these issues had been in the background but now they need to be confronted: thus the title ‘Raising Babel’. The term, Babel⁵, can suggest simply a multiplicity of languages but also a confusion of language. As we have seen both have some

⁵ a state of confusion caused by many people talking at the same time or using different languages
[<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>]

validity: potentially around 70 linguistic heritages are involved, and, not so much a confusion of languages but the multiplicity of issues to be addressed because of the multiplicity of languages can be confusing. Unless the issues are to pass back into the background 'Raising Babel' is unavoidable. This can have good outcomes as can be seen with some current activities, especially the Gumbaynggir, but in some situations can be painful and confronting.

After some five years of talking about language revitalization Aboriginal people have had to confront some difficult issues: it remains to be seen how much these Aboriginal people will end up talking their languages rather than talking about them.

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