

## Language and Linguistic Knowledge: a cultural treasure

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When you have children you want to teach them, and [I'm] always wanting to acquire and seek that knowledge and become aware of the processes - revive, reclaim, regenerate and revitalise and remember. These are the five 'R's' which I follow. (V. Couzens 2008, pers. Communication, February)

### **Introduction:**

In this paper I discuss the work being carried out in Australia by Aboriginal people dedicated to the cause of language revival and maintenance in their endeavours as trained linguists, language workers or community researchers. These people are regarded as language activists in their community and wider and regularly work with non-Indigenous linguists who specialise in the field of Australian Aboriginal languages. Many of these relationships work well in different situations, and continue to do so particularly when the Aboriginal member of a language team is in a position of power to negotiate their role and contribution to the project from a non-compromising starting point.

At times tensions arise in the working relationship between these two groups, and if these are not addressed early in a project, discontent and sometimes resentment can become an issue for the Aboriginal member of the team. Aboriginal people working in language teams on collaborative research projects or revival and maintenance language programs, may feel powerless because of a lack of experience, training, knowledge or understanding of linguistic concepts. It also could be they don't have a high level of speaking competence in their own language or the language they may be working with.

As a practising Aboriginal community linguist for over 20 years, I<sup>1</sup> experience this type of situation when I don't have the confidence to speak up about something that is bothering me, or become overwhelmed into silence by ongoing frustrations.

While the relationship between non-Aboriginal linguists and the Indigenous language workers and community is now more dynamic, bad feelings from the past won't just

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<sup>1</sup> I have chosen to speak in the 1<sup>st</sup> person in order to assert my voice as an Aboriginal linguist and writer rather than conforming to the standard academic writing conventions.

disappear, they must be confronted and resolved. Any dialogue relating to roles and relationships or power and control over language material must be conducted with a community based approach and process<sup>2</sup> recognizing changing roles of Indigenous people in research as opposed to the earlier roles of researcher and researched.

Even when there are good intentions on both sides roles and outcomes need to be clearly stated from the outset. Throughout the project team members must regularly review the process to ensure that outcomes such as the return of useable language-based products and linguistic advice or assistance back to language communities remains a shared priority. The Indigenous language worker may have to remind the team of this priority if they feel it is being neglected.

### **Indigenist Research methodologies and opinions:**

In considering some pertinent issues related to language activity in Australia stemming from my personal experience and perspective as a long time Aboriginal linguist I placed the discussion within the current research paradigm known as Indigenist research methodology. Linda Tuhiwai Smith's ground-breaking publication 'Decolonizing Methodologies' (1999) is renown for introducing this concept which has been applied locally by Indigenous researchers such as (Nakata:2007) and others. This research paradigm examines common threads across disciplines in methodology, intellectual and cultural property rights, and the 'reporting back' of results to the community of focus.

As Linda Tuhiwai Smith states:

Some methodologies regard the values and beliefs, practices and customs of communities as 'barriers' to research... Indigenous methodologies tend to approach cultural protocols, values and behaviour as an integral part of methodology. ...This does not preclude writing for academic publications but is simply part of an ethical and respectful approach. There are diverse ways of disseminating knowledge and of ensuring that research reaches the people who have helped make it. Two important ways not always addressed by scientific research are to do with 'reporting back' to the people and 'sharing knowledge'. Both ways assume a principle of reciprocity and feedback.  
(Smith 1999, p 15)

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<sup>2</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith defines 'process' as 'methodology and method' (1999:p128)

My approach and understanding of the Indigenous research framework is defined by my perspective on endangered language work in Australia, both past and present. The interpretation I offer is through my own cultural lens, based on my own particular experience and interpretation of events in this field over four decades.

**Brief history of Aboriginal language developments:**

Of the 250 traditional languages once spoken on the continent of Australia as recently as 100 years ago, there are now today only 20-30 languages (which may include several dialects) considered to be healthy and viable into the foreseeable future as full languages.

In Australia, as in many other developed post-colonial countries around the world, the dominant language English along with several varieties of Aboriginal English and a widespread creole language spoken across most of Northern Australia, have rapidly become the languages of choice or *lingua franca* for the majority of Indigenous people from a diverse range of socio-linguistic groups.

While today many languages are being revived and maintained in different ways for future generations, there is increasing concern to the speakers and traditional custodians for the future of these languages. With rapidly diminishing numbers of fluent speakers and decreasing intergenerational transmission in communities where languages are still relatively strong, only limited long-term success is possible.

Shared concerns about language loss by Aboriginal language workers and linguists stemming back to the 1970's was expressed by Aboriginal linguist Dr Eve Fesl in her book "Conned" (1993):

In chapter 7 Dr Fesl discussed the pros and cons of transitional bilingual education in five Northern Territory schools and why the program failed to deliver in terms of strengthening Ancestral languages both in status and viability. Dr Fesl believed this was mainly due to the focus on English language teaching and the lack of trained language teachers in the classrooms.

The ongoing debate around bilingual or two-way education continues today in the Northern Territory with the Government stating recently that all primary school children in remote community schools will receive a minimum of 4 hours English

language teaching a day. If this policy is implemented it will drastically impact on the long term maintenance of the already highly endangered traditional languages in those communities.

**Aboriginal linguists and language workers:**

Aboriginal people involved in language and culture business in their respective communities tend to ground their methodologies in community focus and practical application of ideas and products in the development of a language program. While they may not explain their work in the same terms as those used by Smith (1999) their work closely reflects her philosophy. An example of this type of approach is shown in the current planning proposal for the Butchulla language program in Hervey Bay (Bonner 2009). Joy Bonner has managed this program for many years and I have also been involved as both a teacher and an advisor.

As part of our traditional song and dance revival... we have incorporated repeated words that ghundus<sup>3</sup> can remember quite easily. This is just another way we are improving the language revival in our community.

(Bonner 2009, p. 4)

In 2006, Aboriginal linguist Lesley Woods wrote a 'research essay' for her Masters in Endangered Languages at Monash University in Melbourne, reflecting on the future direction of the Ngiyampaa language community in Western New South Wales, of which she is a member. In 'Discussions around intellectual property and traditional knowledge rights and responsibilities' she stated:

...the Ngiyampaa community are beginning to realise that they too must be the ultimate judges of what happens to the language and traditional knowledge and cultural materials. (Woods 2006, p. 4)

Community based language programs often operate alongside school based programs with a shared goal that reclamation, revival and maintenance involving different generations will hopefully ensure successful outcomes. All of the programs involve dedicated Aboriginal language workers and often non-Aboriginal linguists who collaborate in different ways in attempts to slow down the decreasing use of our highly endangered ancestral languages.

Other programs are supported by recognised Aboriginal language centres which operate in Western Australia, the Northern Territory, Victoria, South Australia, Queensland and Tasmania. They receive limited financial government support and involve community people committed to the goal of language use and survival, an entitlement stated in Article 13 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (National Indigenous Times March 6 2008).

There are many examples in Australia of community directed approaches to language maintenance and revitalization and these can apply equally to a reclamation situation. The model of community-directed language centres is at the heart of this... (Woods 2006, p. 4)

Many Australian Aboriginal language groups are actively working to regain control over their languages and if this were to effectively happen linguists would need to willingly participate in the return of language material back to the community, as well as provide support to community people to carry out this task. Such a process is never likely to be straightforward and would involve careful negotiation. Current moves are already happening in this direction in language projects across the country. (see Woods and Carew 2008)

Such a process can be even more complicated for Indigenous linguists and language workers particularly when working with our 'own community'. After completing my MA thesis on a 'Sketch Grammar of the Badjala language of Gari (Fraser Island)' in 2003 I joined the Butchulla language team to share the material from my study with interested community members. While for me it was an opportunity to 'give back' to the community, doubts about whether I was an 'insider' or 'outsider' occasionally made life difficult.

The familiar discussion around orthography and the mixing of dialects from the Mother language and who was considered by whom to be the authoritative speakers of the language past and present was fairly straightforward. However the most trying issue for me as an Aboriginal community linguist was to do with questions about my genealogical connection to country and language.

While teaching the Butchulla language to interested community people I was

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<sup>3</sup> Ghundus is the Butchulla word for children

occasionally reminded by some of my 'outsider' status while my immediate family conducted language business with me totally as an 'insider'. Similar issues do arise for many Indigenous people working within their own communities. Non-Indigenous linguists who have worked with Aboriginal communities for long periods would know how such issues can cause tensions and divisions within a community, and affect the outcomes of a language or research project.

**Role of academic linguists:**

Significant support in carrying out language documentation and interpretation and/or other linguistic research, is provided to community people by qualified linguists who are either employed by a regional language centre or may be attached to a linguistic department in a major university as a post-graduate student or lecturer. The linguist may be funded by a successful research grant or recurrent funding received by the language centre. Some linguists working on Australian languages are affiliated with overseas universities, placing them in a strong position to attract highly competitive research funding.

The need to carry out linguistic research or fieldwork may be due to a genuine commitment on the part of the linguist or a requisite of their academic institution or perhaps a project developed as a result of an Aboriginal community request derived from an ongoing relationship between the linguist and the language community.

For most non-Indigenous linguists a scientific interest in Australian languages is motivated by a specific semantic, grammatical or typology feature in one or more of these languages, which often requires research involving ongoing investigation and analysis. While many share a desire to give something back to the Aboriginal language community they work with, they also wish to contribute to global endeavours to document and analyse the dwindling numbers of endangered languages worldwide in order to maintain linguistic diversity for future generations of scientists and hopefully the speakers of these unique languages.

Academic linguists working to document and describe minoritized and endangered languages share with speech community members a devotion to the language of study. For the academic, language provides a unique window into cognition and the capacity of the human mind. For the speech community member, language represents cultural heritage and, for many, a tie to place and a sense of identity. Though their ultimate goals may differ, both have a vested interest in the

documentation, description, and preservation of lesser-spoken languages as a way of perpetuating global linguistic and cultural diversity and/or maintaining ties to heritage. (Yamada 2007, p. 1)

There are views expressed by other Indigenous scholars such as Martin Nakata in his recent book 'Disciplining the Savages, Savaging the Disciplines' (2007) around the historical separation of the language for the purposes of scientific study from the human connection through the speakers and custodians of that language.

If the history of a language and its users is not factored into the theory as a primary standpoint then any knowledge generated about the language is flawed. This is not to reject entirely what linguists have done, or are currently doing. It is to make the point that the grammarians' concentration on formal aspects of a language fundamentally separates the language from the people: it falsely separates the act of speaking from what is being spoken.' (Nakata 2007, p. 37)

An example of how this type of situation unfolded in more recent times is described by R.M.W. Dixon in 'Searching for Australian languages' where he talks about his early travels in northern Australia searching for '*a language of my own - some interesting and complicated tongue that was in need of study.*' (1984:5)

While Professor Dixon still works with endangered languages, not always in Australia, younger generations of the language speakers he worked with back then now utilise the grammars he wrote in the development and implementation of contemporary language revival and maintenance programs. Genuine gratitude for this early work is expressed by Aboriginal woman Bridget Priman, who is currently involved in the revival of one of her Ancestral languages Warrgamay, a language from North Queensland which Dixon worked on in the 1960's and 70's.

(It is) a good thing for us (because) if we didn't have the linguist writing it down then it wouldn't be there for us today, but when you want that information it can take a long time to get it back. (B. Priman 2008 pers communication 1 May)

While Professor Dixon and other linguists may approach fieldwork today quite differently to how it was done in the 1960s and 70s, generally speaking many still aim for similar linguistic revelations as those described by Dixon (1984).

Then I made a thorough assessment of Warrgamay. It had always seemed a bit too

similar to Dyirbal to be truly interesting (in the way Yidiny was), but suddenly, one day in November, things fell into place. That week camping in Ingham provided the sort of intellectual discovery that is for me the high-spot of linguistic work. ' (Dixon 1984, pp. 308-309, p. 311)

Dixon talks throughout his book of the close personal relationships he formed with some language consultants he worked with in North Queensland, and the strong emotions he felt when different ones passed away. Today members of the families of these old people express mixed emotions toward Dixon as they grapple with the challenges of regaining control over this invaluable cultural information.

It is not unusual for Aboriginal people who are actively involved or merely interested in language recovery and revival work today to be critical of the linguistic fieldwork carried out by linguists in those early days. They share their feelings openly from the view that it benefited the linguists more than anyone in the community. Many language activists express the belief that the language cause in their community was portrayed to them and their community in pessimistic terms such as 'dead, dying or extinct' often by the same linguists who worked on their languages in earlier times.

The following sentiment of the language documentation situation in Australia was given to me by an Aboriginal woman who is a fluent speaker of her own relatively strong language, as well as being a teacher, interpreter, linguist and language activist working full-time on maintaining her language within her family and community.

It is the history of how things were done, and people were affected by it. Old people have been teaching the white people (linguists), and the young people have missed out on learning the language.' (2008, pers communication 1 May)

The use of technical linguistic terms such as 'extinct, moribund or dead' to describe the state of declining languages either gives people little hope of language recovery or alternatively they become resentful because of the perceived way their older relatives were 'used' by linguists to provide language data which often is not returned to them or their communities in it's recorded format. When an Aboriginal language worker seeks to reclaim this information in later years they often come upon barriers such as complicated and/or restricted access rights to recorded material, which may be the original handwritten field notes and audio tapes. While this can be due to a range of factors it inhibits easy interpretation of the material.



Dr Christina Eira, a linguistics graduate of the University of Melbourne stated in a paper she delivered at the Foundation of Endangered Languages annual conference in Malaysia in late 2007 the following:

Nonetheless, when linguists participate in work on endangered languages, we focus on the language itself - collecting language, analysing language, its grammar, its words, etc. This has the effect of ignoring the ground of language endangerment. More importantly, it ignores the ways in which our work can actually perpetuate the status quo of unequal relations between groups. We are thereby risking unintentional collusion in the disappearance of languages. Because we still interact from a position of authority in the languages we are working with, we are maintaining the dominance of an outsider instead of acknowledging and supporting the authority of the community in their language." (Eira 2007, p. 82)

While not all linguists trained by the academy would share Eira's views, they must take heed of the issues raised and be prepared to address any differences which arise when language communities and linguists interact. This may involve issues around language ownership, access to materials and cultural property rights, which often relate back to the perceived purpose and value of linguistic research to the language community.

Again Bridget Priman shared her thoughts by saying:

A lot of work the linguist does, they (community people) can do themselves. (We are) trying to get our mob to be more educated, and they can do it, they can get that little bit of skills. You can bring the linguist in for some things but you don't need them there all the time.  
(B. Priman, pers. communication 1 May)

There are good examples of collaborative projects happening within Australia at this time, located in diverse linguistic situations such as remote communities in Central Australia to smaller language communities in Victoria. The Northern Territory language projects have developed out of a vocational training program delivered by lecturer linguists from the Centre for Australian languages and linguistics (CALL) a section of the Batchelor Institute for Indigenous Tertiary Education of which I am

also a staff member.

Over a number of years the linguists involved have developed close working relationship with language speakers from particular Aboriginal communities, resulting in the production of high quality language materials and public art exhibitions. Training for the Aboriginal students and team members is always a priority and core part of any project. (Woods and Carew: 2008)

**Opportunities for professional discussion:**

At a recent Indigenous Languages Conference in Adelaide in late September 2007, discussions were held around areas of concern to Indigenous people from communities and language centres, included the working relationships between community people and linguists. This discussion at times became quite heated and personal. While some people did not think that this was the most appropriate forum for such discussions, because of the large and diverse audience and rigidly designed agenda, it is often the only time and place where community people come together in larger groups and feel confident enough to challenge some of the ideas and practices held by certain linguists working in the field. While the odd linguist may feel personally defensive about the airing of such concerns in public, others choose to hang in there and engage in the discussion, regarding it as an opportunity to resolve some of the concerns being voiced.

As an Aboriginal community linguist affiliated to the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, a past post-graduate student at the University of Melbourne and a long-time elected member of the Research Advisory Committee of the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), I have formed both working and personal relationships with other linguists from within the academy as well as linguists working closely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. At times I am regarded by other linguists as a bridge between the community and the linguistic fraternity, a common role for Indigenous people who find themselves in this position. At other times I get the feeling from some of my mob that they see me as standing too close to the 'academic' linguists.

A very personal experience of this kind took place when I worked in the prisons in the early 1990's in SE Queensland on a cultural heritage program set up by a group of Aboriginal prisoners. This was just after the release of a report on Aboriginal Deaths in Custody supporting the call for more culturally based programs for Aboriginal

inmates. While facilitating some language work with interested Aboriginal prisoners, an older male cousin of mine, himself an inmate and a competent speaker of the Wakka Wakka language of SE Queensland refused to endorse my teaching of the language or to share his language knowledge with me. He believed I would take it away and ‘give it to the university’ (sic).

While being an Aboriginal linguist affiliated with an academic institution, either as a student or an employee can have its benefits, it can be a real challenge at times and a test of your ability to maintain your moral and cultural responsibility to yourself and your community. I take seriously any comments received from community members in regard to how I behave professionally as a teacher and researcher.

### **Who makes decisions about community rights?**

With regard to the cultural and intellectual property rights of language and associated documentation and storage of materials, whether historical or contemporary, community delegates at a 3 day Indigenous Languages conference in South Australia in 2007 categorically stated that this was an area in which they must be allowed to have more control. Endorsed community language representatives and Elders of respective tribal groups demanded to be consulted and involved in any discussion around matters relating to research.

Many Aboriginal language workers and linguists in communities have taken on the role and responsibility for collecting language and linguistic information from historical sources stored in various regional libraries around the country, as well as large central storage repositories of Indigenous knowledge like the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra. They often endeavour to form a working relationship with the original linguist who collected the earlier material which they may have analysed and published in a grammar or learner’s guide of the language. It is ironic in some ways that the onus to follow up these connections is often left to the Aboriginal community linguist who is keen to work with their language as well as strive to receive linguistic training of some kind.

Such relationships can prove difficult if the original linguist is not available or forthcoming with support or mentoring for the Aboriginal linguist on a journey to understand the materials she is working with. While skills and experience are invaluable to getting a language program off the ground it can be hard to sustain a program without support. This situation can leave Aboriginal language workers

operating in isolation both geographically and academically.

In addition, linguists working with Aboriginal communities must strive to have a better understanding of how and why Aboriginal people working in the field have come to be in this position.

Rather than attempting to impose our research interests, our project was formed as listening to the community's needs, forming lasting relationships. (Otsuka and Wong 2007, p. 9)

### **Conclusion:**

The future relationship between the community and the linguists along with the motivation for each individual or group to carry out this very important work needs ongoing discussion. The different approaches and methodologies utilised when doing this important work is just one part of it. Projects will become more productive for all involved when linguistic research is more inclusive and collaborative, with practical or applied outcomes likely to enhance the revival and maintenance efforts aimed at the revival and maintenance of our rapidly decreasing ancestral languages.

Again Vicki Couzens gave a personal account of her lived experience around language and culture when she was growing up in SW Victoria and what motivates her present commitment to working in this area:

With cultural remembering... the old people take you on journeys in dreams and other ways. You are given a certain role and we grow into that and there are certain things that happen along the way, different experiences and dreams. That's what motivates me, it is so central and language is at the core of that culture and all the information is held in the language. The different languages once you get into the different levels. We have lost a lot of that. Keeping things going, because culture has had to be hidden and submerged because of what has happened historically. It won't be the same and some of it you wouldn't want to bring back its not relevant (Bell 2009).

More opportunities must be created to allow the dialogue around pertinent issues to happen in a non-threatening way for either group in order to ensure the project becomes more productive all around. To ensure a more inclusive collaborative

approach to language work, mentoring needs to be provided to Indigenous team members by a more experienced or qualified Aboriginal linguist, as well as ongoing training in areas required within the project.

Only some of the many issues have been touched on in this paper, and we need to have many other published papers from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people working in the field of language and linguistics to further the discussion between the relevant groups. Dialogue could happen in the workplace or at regional, national and international seminars and conferences when opportunities arise.

We must consider where we are now and where we are heading, particularly in relation to protocols relevant to collaborative language research projects and the return of useful language materials and products back to involved Indigenous language communities. Ultimately we must strive together towards the urgent goal of keeping traditional languages alive and active and this will be further enhanced with more productive working relationships between Indigenous language workers and linguists.

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