



The Struggle to Reclaim and Revitalise Aboriginal Language in NSW

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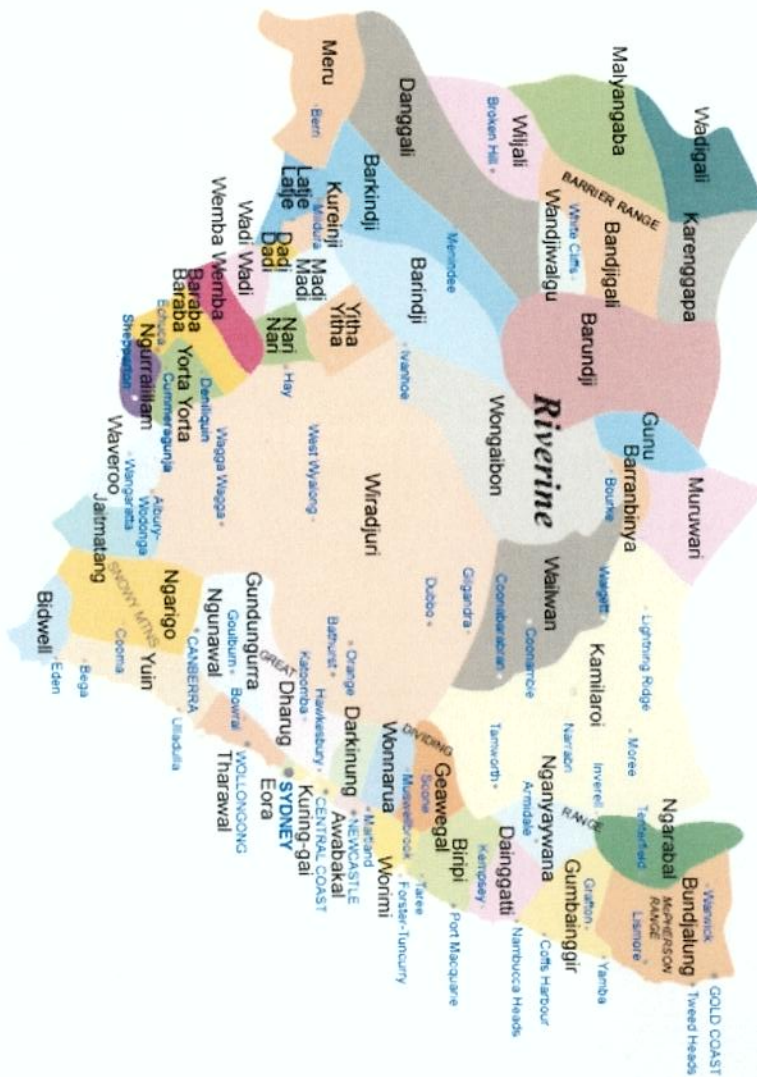
The Struggle to Reclaim Aboriginal Language in NSW

What is the importance of Aboriginal languages to people in NSW?

How were Aboriginal languages lost and how did this impact on the people of NSW?

How can Aboriginal languages be revitalised and reclaimed in NSW, and how effective has this process been?

Case Study: Dharug (Eora)



Foreword.

When I first received the major project I knew it was important to choose a topic that interested me, especially when I saw that there was an expected minimum of around 25 hours to be spent on the task. I figured you could choose an easy topic and not enjoy yourself, or choose a slightly more difficult and challenging topic and enjoy the research; either way you're still doing the expected 25 hours, just one is much more pleasant and most probably better if you were interested.

So my original research periods were spent exploring Aboriginal issues of interest. The issue of greatest interest for me was Aboriginal people in custody, probably choosing to research the social justice and human rights issues behind the differences in incarceration rates of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. I was going to use long bay prison as my primary research facility, as I know a helpful contact that works at the gaol. This however was deemed unsuitable and far too difficult. My next option was going to be Aboriginal languages, as I have always studied languages at school so thought I would thoroughly enjoy studying the traditional languages of the country I now call home. This ended up being the direction that I chose to go on my major project.

This decision was not made easily however; the teacher, my parents and other outside influences were constantly proposing ideas that interested me. So I delved further into the topic of Aboriginal languages and found that useful information was few and far between. This was not because there had been very little research completed on Indigenous languages, rather, as I soon discovered it was because of the scarcity of Aboriginal languages that remain.

To kick off my project I met a man from the University of Sydney, who works as a part of the Koori Centre. He is an Aboriginal linguistic specialist, working in the field for over 35 years, conducting 15 years of primary research himself. He was soon to change my opinion on Aboriginal languages and their presence in today's society, leading me to believe how troublesome the issue has become. As our first interview came to a close, he guided me on my way, providing me with sources and other

contacts I could use on my major project. John became my mentor throughout the duration of my project.

In particular for my project, I wanted to focus on the following aspects of Aboriginal language:

- What is the importance of Aboriginal languages to people in NSW?
- How were Aboriginal languages lost and how did this impact on the Aboriginal people of NSW?
- How can Aboriginal languages be revitalised and reclaimed in NSW, and how effective has this process been?
- Darug/ Eora; mini case study

I soon met with Richard Green, a Darug Elder; Cathy Eatock, Senior Policy Officer (Culture and Heritage) for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs; Dr Mari Rhydwen, Aboriginal Languages Consultant at Department of Education and Training NSW; Susan Poetsch, member of the Aboriginal Curriculum Unit at the Office of the Board of Studies NSW; and Craig Ashby, an Aboriginal student from rural NSW. Each of these contacts helped me throughout my project, whether it is with first hand information, providing secondary sources or simply guiding me on my way with advice.

After meeting with my teacher and a brain flash from myself, I decided it could be a good idea to support my written report with a presentation of either an Aboriginal person or someone of knowledge in the field of Aboriginal languages. The first people that came to mind for me were firstly, Professor John Hobson, an Aboriginal linguist who spent 15 years working in Aboriginal communities and a further 20 years of teaching and research in the field of Indigenous languages. The second person was Craig Ashby, an Aboriginal person from a very poor background, who had felt the full effects of language lost through the Protection Period in his home community. He was educated through St Josephs College, and is now studying to be a school-teacher at the University of Sydney.

As I felt I was moving forward into the project I was confident I had gathered the right resources and contacts, and had some good guidance and ideas behind me in order to create a successful Major Project.

Introduction – Aboriginal languages

Aboriginal language is a fundamental expression of the longest continuous living culture in the world. ‘For Aboriginal people, language is critical to maintaining, strengthening and asserting Aboriginal cultural identity’¹. Before European settlement in 1788, there were more than 70 Aboriginal languages that were commonly and strongly spoken throughout New South Wales. Today, most Aboriginal languages in New South Wales do not have enough speakers to function properly and only ten languages are being significantly revitalised...

Indigenous languages – a historical perspective (Australia)

At the time of European settlement in Australia in the late 1700’s, Indigenous people across the continent spoke an estimated 260 languages. Most of these are now in danger of disappearing, if they haven’t already. However, due to this rising issue, Australian governments, educators and researchers have been developing sophisticated programs and strategies to maintain and preserve Australia’s Indigenous linguistic heritage and to support those Indigenous peoples who still continue to speak their traditional tongue and/or wish to revitalise their own people’s language and culture.

In the 2006 census, however, only one in eight, or 55 695 people, said that an Indigenous language was their primary household language. The National Indigenous Languages Survey in 2004 found that only 145 Indigenous languages were still spoken in Australia and about 110 of these were either considered severely or critically endangered. There is clear evidence of widespread community support for language projects to assist the revival and maintenance of Australian Indigenous languages. This was evident through the introduction of bilingual education to many

¹ Aboriginal Languages Newsletter - Term 1, 2009 - Message from the editor.

Indigenous communities in the early 1970's and is still continuing and increasing to this day.

As discovered in an Indigenous languages survey in 2002, Indigenous languages were more commonly spoken in remote areas: 50 per cent of young Indigenous people in remote areas spoke an Indigenous language, compared with a mere 6 per cent of those in non-remote areas. Similarly, the proportion of Indigenous young people who identified as speaking an Indigenous language at home was 37 per cent in remote areas, compared with only 2 per cent in non-remote regions. 'Generally, Indigenous languages have complex grammar and large vocabularies that reflect the cultures, experiences and traditions of Indigenous communities'.²

Many of the Aboriginal words and concepts cannot easily be translated into English, as they often don't even have equivalent words in the English language. Indigenous were traditionally spoken and not written, and thus linguists endeavouring to write them down have faced difficulties with spelling and pronunciation. Most languages consist of words that contain sounds, which don't occur in English. Thus, Indigenous languages continue to change, where speakers may borrow words from other Indigenous languages or even English. This has brought about the modern Aboriginal languages known as Creole.

How many Aboriginal languages remain?

The term 'extinction' or 'dead language' is no longer used among linguists because of the development of new strategies that have proved to be successful in reviving languages. These terms can also be considered offensive to Aboriginal people. These terms have been replaced with 'sleeping' languages. There are languages that are deemed to be at a very high risk of loss without intervention by the community with the help of linguists because there are very few speakers remaining or the language only survives as written recordings. 'There are also many Indigenous languages that

² Brenzinger, M. *The Endangered Languages of the World*. Presented at the Colloquium: Language Endangerment, Research and Documentation - February 2000. Karl-Arnold-Akademie, Bad Godesberg, Germany.

are healthy, dynamic and evolving because they are being spoken within communities and taught within the new upcoming bilingual education system'.³

*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*⁴

An Australian national research team estimated the state of Aboriginal languages finding that 8 per cent of languages were healthy, 28 per cent were at high risk and 64 per cent were at very high risk of loss or had already been lost. Without community intervention and help from language experts, all Indigenous languages in New South Wales fall in the very high risk of loss category. And also 'today of the 70 plus languages current in New South Wales, only ten remain healthy enough to be taught in our schools and only four of these have enough speakers to record the language, with the other six undergoing serious revitalisation projects to help re-introduce and revitalise them'.⁵

Modern Aboriginal language – Creole

When people who speak very different languages come into contact, the result is generally a complex mix of these languages. This is also known as pidgin as it has a very simple vocabulary and simple grammar. A mixture of English and Aboriginal Languages has developed in Australia. Over time this has created a new language, slowly developing into a language with a larger vocabulary and new grammatical rules. This language is called Creole. It is broadcast on national radio programs, recorded as a form of oral history and issued and taught in courses for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people. Creole does not always replace traditional languages; rather many as an addition to their own language speak it in order to communicate with people from other language groups.

³ CHR: South Land of the Holy Spirit. Chapter 7; missionaries. John Watsford. P. 39

⁴ Strehlow, T.G.H. (1957). Dark and White Australians. Melbourne, Vic: Riall Bros. p.53

⁵ Professor John Hobson, (2010) linguistic journalist, Koori Centre, University of Sydney

Indigenous Australian language since European settlement

Prior to European settlement, and still to this day, there are hundreds of different Aboriginal languages spoken throughout the continent. Although, post European settlement, many languages have struggled to live on though many still, even though they aren't fluently spoken in the first person, remain through individual words and phrases from different language groups. The steady decline in Indigenous languages in Australia has resulted in linguists extracting all possible information on Aboriginal languages that have survived to the present day to avoid further decline, and to revitalise Aboriginal language use in Australia.

The invasion of Indigenous Australia by the English language has had a devastating and enduring impact on its linguistic heritage. Of the 250-70 languages believed to have once existed nationally, estimates by Yallop in 1982 showed that over 100 had become extinct, 100 more were in danger and around 50 were still in daily use and being transmitted to the next generation. Only a decade later in 1990, Schmidt made an alarming assertion that over 160 languages had become extinct, 70 were in danger and only 20 were still strong. In New South Wales, the process of extinction has come dangerously close to completion with only six or seven languages, out of the estimated total of 70, still having sufficient speaker populations to be used on a regular basis.

'The importance of Aboriginal language maintenance and revitalisation cannot be understated. Language is the main vehicle of culture for Indigenous people, as with any culture. Aboriginal culture would simply be non-existent without language'.⁶

Aunt Phyllis Darcy, an Awabakal descendant, sums this up:

*"Language is very important to us, it is our connection to our ancestors and for those of us who still use our language can connect with the ancestors of the past. We belong to the land...without the land we are nothing. Our lifeblood comes from the land and what is of the land. Language holds secrets to the connection of the land"*⁷

⁶ Bernard, H. R. *Preserving Language Diversity*. Human Organization (1992). Language Preservation and Publishing.

⁷ Aunt Phyllis Darcy, Awabakal descendant (2005). DAA, media press conference, Aboriginal Language Research and Resource Centre, NSW.

Language is not only a means of communication, but it also provides a link for people with their past, grounding their social, emotional and spiritual vitality. It is critical in passing on culture and identity from one generation to another. The dreaming stories, performed and expressed in different rituals, initiations, song and dance, all require language, and thus for this essential element of Aboriginal culture to be passed onto younger generations, Indigenous languages must remain.

European settlement in Australia had a significant influence on Indigenous languages. This had a particularly devastating impact during the 'protection period.' This period entailed the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families and communities based on the colour of their skin. They were taken to missions and reserves where they were forced to give up all connection with their language, culture and families, and to adopt a new way of life; assimilating into the new, European influenced, culture. This involved learning the English language and practising the Christian -often Catholic- religion. 'Children were left with no identity, becoming stuck between two very different cultures, mainly due to the loss of their traditional language. The loss of their language meant that even the children who eventually made it home to their communities had lost their identity and access to culture, as they were unable to communicate with their people and to fully understand their history'.⁸

The Protection Period had the most profound impact on all Aboriginal communities leaving a gap where nobody was able to pass on ritual, song, dance and dreaming stories because there was a missing generation, later becoming known as the stolen generation. 'The suppression of the Aboriginal language and culture, over-time, united Aboriginal people as one Indigenous body to initiate a fight back to the attempted cultural genocide that was the protection period'.⁹ This included the reclamation and revitalisation of Aboriginal languages, which were affected by the removal of Aboriginal children during the protection period.

The wider Australian community began to show signs of coming to terms with its Aboriginal heritage, aiding in the establishment of many strategies designed to

⁸ 'The Sydney Language' Jakelin Troy. (Canberra 1993). The Aboriginal people of Sydney, p.5

⁹ Indigenous Languages Programmes in Australian Schools; a way forward. Nola Purdie, Tracey Frigo, Clare Ozolins, Geoff Noblett, Nick Thieberger, Janet Sharp. P. 54-55.

revitalise the culture, which was threatening to become extinct only a few decades before. The application of policies, by both State and Federal governments, that removed Aboriginal children to missions and reserves and the assimilation of these Aboriginal and half-caste children into 'White' Australia, is a perfect display of an attempt to extinguish the cultural and political sovereignty of the people. There were significant losses in community knowledge of their heritage resulting from the forced removal of children. The most significant impact was the inability to maintain language and thus the incapacity to locate their heritage and identity or to express their thoughts in the words of their language, which was rooted in their country.

'Communities have struggled with the legal system to demonstrate their ongoing connection with the land due to them being disconnected from language as a result of the protection period'.¹⁰ Aboriginal language is finally receiving the recognition it deserves. Australians now accept the value and significance of Aboriginal language in our collective history and contemporary society. This has been made clear through the many strategies that have recently been adopted in Australian schools, correctional facilities and the organisations that have been set up in Aboriginal communities, in particular, in New South Wales. If the community, Aboriginal people themselves, and organisations, supported by the government combine forces and resources, Aboriginal language can be reclaimed, maintained and sustained in the communities where it had been lost. 'Language is a critical tool to establish and locate individual, community and collective identities'.¹¹ Educational authorities cannot impose identity: it has to be owned and controlled by the community themselves.

Language diversity in danger – a global perspective

All over the world, minority languages are dying out, giving way to the pressure of major world languages, which are rapidly expanding. Indigenous languages are among the most threatened by the developments of great European empires in the

¹⁰ Hollinsworth, D., *Race and Racism in Australia*, Second Edition, Social Science Press, 1998.

¹¹ Green, R., Darug Elder and Yellamundie. Interview, 2010.

nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the current era of commercial and cultural globalisation. These include traditional languages spoken by Indigenous people for hundreds and even thousands of years in the area, and new languages such as pidgins and creoles, which derive from initial language contact in the colonial period.

*Language goes to the very core of one's identity and Aboriginal languages contain, embedded in them, much of the culture, social values and world view of its speakers – Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, 1997.*¹²

A language is endangered when it is on the path towards extinction. A language is in danger when speakers cease to use it; cease to pass it on from one generation to the next; or use a language influenced by the dominant European people. Essentially it becomes in danger when there are no longer any new speakers, either adults or children. Over 97 per cent of people speak about 4 per cent of the world's languages. 'UNESCO estimates that around 90 per cent of languages will be replaced with dominant western languages by the end of the twenty-first century'.¹³ Generally the nation-state has a national language, which it decrees all citizens should learn; and those other languages, which are spoken by Indigenous groups, are generally not recognised and even actively suppressed by governments. In some countries, minority Indigenous languages survive and are tolerated as languages of the nation state, though in other places many Indigenous people abandon their languages and cultures in the hope of overcoming discrimination, enhancing social security, and securing a better quality of life or livelihood, in addition to an attempt to assimilate into a particular place or dominant culture.

¹² Proceedings of the Inaugural Indigenous Languages Conference (ILC) 1996, Rob Amery and Joshua Nash

¹³ International Expert Group Meeting on Indigenous languages; United Nations Headquarters Conference Room 7, 8-10 January 2008

...there is an urgent need in almost all countries for more reliable information about the situation of the minority languages as a basis for language support efforts at all levels...¹⁴

In countries such as Australia, where Europeans settled in a large and rapid influx, the traditional Indigenous languages have been embattled right from the beginning and are in great danger of disappearing altogether within the next century. Groups that have successfully survived the earlier years of settlement, massacres, disease and other social and environmental impacts of the colonial situation have often been able to retain their own native tongue while learning English, or whatever the dominant language may be, known as multiculturalism and the primary focus of bilingual education. 'The eventual extinction of a language is a result of the irrecoverable loss of unique cultural, historical and ecological knowledge'.¹⁵ When a language becomes extinct and even endangered, it becomes very difficult to record sufficient information to be able to understand and document the language of the people. More importantly however, traditional speakers of such languages may consider the loss of their as a loss of their original ethnic and cultural identity.

Language and identity

Strong Language makes a Strong Culture (Troy, 1999)

Language revival has become an important issue for many communities as they struggled to reassert those elements of their cultural heritage that can be pieced together from documents and records salvaged from the repositories of past anthropological endeavours. The revival of language has taken on a special place for Aboriginal people as it acts as a marker by which they can set out to redefine their sense of place and belonging in these new contemporary but still hostile environments.

¹⁴ International Expert Group Meeting on Indigenous languages; United Nations Headquarters Conference Room 7, 8-10 January 2008

¹⁵ State of Indigenous Languages in Australia – 2001, Patrick McConvell and Nicholas Thieberger

Feelings of exasperation felt by Indigenous communities over the protection and ownership of their language, have been exacerbated by a legal system that has failed to understand or conceptualise that a group or community of people do not have sovereign ownership over it. Instead of picking up and learning from current and past speakers of their language, communities have instead had to locate and negotiate access of their language found in the vaults of libraries and museums.

...It's a sadness, actually, and a disadvantage that we were never taught the Aboriginal language...¹⁶

Issues continue to be raised over the legal entitlements that people have over their language, and the means they have in asserting and protecting the unchallengeable rights of their own cultural and spiritual icons. 'There is no such protection of the language that provides the unique linguistic vehicle through which these icons of identity can be explored, discussed and inherited across generations'.¹⁷

The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991) recognised the importance of language in providing critical focus for Aboriginal people. The report recommended:

...That Government and funding bodies reflect the importance of the national Aboriginal Language Policy in the provision of funds to Aboriginal communities and organisations...¹⁸

The 1996 Bringing them home report by HREOC also recommended that:

...The Commonwealth expand the funding of Indigenous language, cultural and history centres to ensure national coverage at regional levels...these programs be funded to teach languages especially to people whose forcible removal deprived them

¹⁶ Evelyn Webb; first Australian Aboriginal teacher, SMH article 'English will be the death of Aboriginal languages' Thursday, 20 November 2008.

¹⁷ Keeping Aboriginal Languages Strong, Christobel Swan (2009). Section 3, pgs.16-17.

¹⁸ Grants to revitalise Aboriginal languages, 12 July 2009. (Quote by; Johnson, 1991 p.43)

*of opportunities to learn and maintain their language and to their descendants...*¹⁹

Both of these reports recognised the importance of language to the revival and maintenance of cultural identity, the impact that it could have on the developing of strong senses of self esteem and self worth throughout Indigenous communities that had the sense of belonging eroded by the policies of removal and language denial. Both these reports also acknowledged the uniqueness of language in providing a vehicle for the explicit expression of the cultural sovereignty of people. Implicitly, languages provide an expression of the wholeness of people, sanctioning feelings of belonging to both place and family, and having the capacity to connect people to the centrality of their being.

Survival of languages

‘The survival of Aboriginal languages has been largely dependent on the activities of the colonial and early postcolonial chroniclers, amateur linguists, and anthropologist who recorded Aboriginal languages. This has meant that Aboriginal languages have been able to be revitalised if there are an insufficient number of speakers present to assist in redeveloping and passing on Indigenous languages’.²⁰ A subsequent of this loss of language speakers following European invasion and settlement, has led to an increased reliance on non-Aboriginal linguists to assist in the revival and maintenance of language programs. ‘While these linguists have contributed invaluable assistance and documentation to many language programs, they have also been seen to stand between Aboriginal ownership, and the control of programs and actual reclamation of languages for the Aboriginal owners’.²¹

Any impediment, which acts to restrict access to language, is a reminder of the loss of their intellectual sovereignty by having to use the language of their persecutors. The revival of languages has become an emerging marker of cultural, social and political difference. ‘While the ownership of Aboriginal languages is not located in any group

¹⁹ (1996) Bringing Them Home Report, Chapter 17. Language programs and policies.

²⁰ Susan Poetsch, Aboriginal Curriculum Unit, Office of the Board of Studies NSW

²¹ Stefaniuk, Hanya, Manager Community Language Section, DET NSW, Address delivered at the Gamilaraay/Yuwalaraay Language Network Conference (transcript), 2003.

or custodian, a critical problem exists in the scarcity of community members who have any substantial language knowledge'.²² Communities are at present very reliant on a decreasing number of people who are in a position to provide language instruction. The consequence of this very precarious position is that while communities have an interest in the controls and ownership of the language, essentially it is vested in the few remaining language speakers, who may not be, in some cases, of Aboriginal descent. This is of course a major result of reclamation and revitalisation programs. Thus, the only way of addressing the issue is to deny access to the language from other, non-Aboriginal people; or developing programs, which aim to lift the number of speakers to a critical mass so as to ensure the survival of the language.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities have continued to object to the controls exerted over their language by non-Indigenous people, institutions and corporations. General public awareness of Indigenous languages has been raised in the past ten years especially by the use of Indigenous languages in music, dance, other performances and books. This growth in recognition has helped in the revitalisation and reclamation of Indigenous languages in Australia and New South Wales in particular.

Preserving and Maintaining Indigenous languages

The Australian Government supports Indigenous languages through the Maintenance of Indigenous Languages and Records program. The program assists with the revival and maintenance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages as living systems of knowledge shared by communities and passed down from generation to generation.

...Few people seem to know or care that most of Australia's 250 languages have already vanished and few are likely to survive over the long term...²³

The imminent loss of the Indigenous languages has not worried many Australians, or their governments. Over the past 15 years however, there has been a huge shift in

²² Dr Mari Rhydwen; Aboriginal Languages Consultant, Languages Unit, NSW Department of Education and Training. Interview 2010

²³ Nettle and Romaine 2000: ix, Extinction of the World's Languages

attitude, but whether it will be effective enough to turn the tide on language loss, remains to be seen. The Indigenous languages of Australia represent a great storehouse of knowledge and tradition about the environment and ancient culture of Australia, both for the Indigenous people themselves, and for all Australians.

*...We, the Indigenous people of Australia are the owners and custodians of the languages, but many groups are prepared to share access to the heritage and identity of their native tongue, to preserve a unique national body of knowledge and tradition...*²⁴

Indigenous Australians are struggling to maintain and revive their languages and associated traditions against great odds. 'There have been recent efforts to recognise Indigenous languages and give them a place in our society, rather than continuing on what has happened all too often in our history, the complete annihilation of a people's language and culture'.²⁵ If we, as an Australian community can find out where languages are staying strong and why, we have much better chance of putting those favourable conditions in place in other areas, addressing the issue of lost Aboriginal languages.

Keeping languages strong

'In the last 30-40 years the world seems to be emerging from a period where minority languages were almost universally denigrated, marginalised and in some cases ruthlessly suppressed by nation-states'.²⁶ A new mood of recognition and respect for small languages, and the rights of ethnic groups to use them, is spreading although still far from universal. The Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights proposed in 1996 has gained support in society. This report was inclusive of the following rights:

- 1. To be recognised as a member of a language community;*
- 2. To the use of one's language both in private and in public;*
- 3. To the use of one's own name;*
- 4. To interrelate and associate with other members of one's own language community*

²⁴ Green, R, Darug Elder and yellamundie. Interview, 2010.

²⁵ Stage 4, Aboriginal Languages Campfire. State of NSW, DET 2009. V1.0 – cd-rom.

²⁶ Cathy Eatock; Senior Policy Officer (Culture and Heritage), NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs. Interview, 18-1-2010

of origin;

5. The right to maintain and develop one's own culture',²⁷

Language Revitalisation and Reclamation

*...Language is the expression of our culture and our land. We cannot have one without the others. We cannot describe our culture and our land if we do not have language...*²⁸

Linguists and language educators have now broken Language Revival into three sub-types:

- Revitalisation: where a language still spoken by the older generation needs special support for it to be passed on to the younger generation
- Renewal: where a language is no longer spoken 'right through' by anyone, but enough knowledge exists to develop a language learning program
- Reclamation: where there has been a complete break in the transmission of the spoken language, but there is sufficient evidence (e.g. historical records, related languages) for language reconstruction and learning.

There are several steps involved in reviving languages successfully, the most important and integral of these include:

- Assess documentation on the language
- Find sources of knowledge within the Aboriginal community
- Gather information such as wordlists, examples of sentences and narratives
- Sort, store and deploy the information for relevant purposes, such as a resource for a classroom situation
- Identify what language work best reflects the community's language

²⁷ Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights Article 3.1, (1996)

²⁸ Queensland Indigenous Languages Advisory Committee, 2006

revival needs

- Identify what resources or support (e.g. attachment of a linguist) that may assist the language revival project

Aboriginal people have been fighting for over 200 years to keep their languages alive. 'Particularly since the implementation of the New South Wales K-10 Aboriginal Languages Syllabus in 2005 there has been a significant increase in interest in the revitalisation of the states linguistic heritage'.²⁹ Hopes for the future are at an all time high as an expansion of Aboriginal languages in school projects and community-based activity. There are, however many issues to be faced in determining the responsibility and capacity for teaching the languages. Aboriginal Elders, language centres and technology are namely the best candidates for the state that is New South Wales for addressing each of these problems being faced.

What actually can be done?

*...As languages disappear, cultures die...*³⁰

The deterioration of languages does not mean there has not been a great deal of effort exerted by individuals, communities, linguists and sometimes governments to halt or even reverse the damage. There has been many instances where the damage has been stopped and supposedly extinct languages have been reversed and revitalised. It is still however, a long uphill battle in the face of an overwhelmingly strong and well-supported national language. The main process being implemented in Australia and New South Wales in particular has derived from a concept known as 'linguistic activism'.³¹ This UNESCO inspired concept mobilises academics, communities and governments in identifying strategies to ensure a language's viability and its function in society. Linguistic activism can be broken up into three distinct sub-types:

²⁹ 'Aboriginal Languages help more stay on' Geoff Noblett (2007) – SMH article

³⁰ N. H. Hornberger, *Indigenous Literacies in the Americas: Language Planning from the Bottom up*. Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter, 1996, 139- 156.

³¹ Aikawa, N. *UNESCO's Programme on Languages*. In: Conference Handbook on Endangered Languages of the Pacific Rim. Osaka, Endangered Languages of the Pacific Rim Project, 2001,13-24.

- Language Revival: reintroducing a language that has been in limited use for some time
- Language Fortification: increasing the presence of the non-dominant language to counterbalance a perceived threat of a dominant language
- Language Maintenance: supporting the stable use, in speaking and in writing, of the non-dominant language in a region or state with both multilingualism and a dominant language

For language vitality, speakers not only strongly value their language, but they also know in which social domains their language is to be supported. A positive attitude is critical for the long-term stability of a language....³²

Languages must be recorded for the revitalisation of a language to take place. Without sufficient documentation and records, it is very difficult to revitalise a language and for people to reclaim a language, especially if there are very little or no fluent traditional speakers of the native tongue still alive. Recording an Aboriginal language also contributes to the pride that a community has for its culture. These recordings are a legacy for future generations, but also, in the shorter term, recordings provide input to the development of resources for the use of schools, correctional facilities and the like, in the wider community.

NSW Aboriginal Languages Policy

Aboriginal Languages in New South Wales

Before European colonisation, at least seventy Aboriginal languages and dialects were spoken in the area that is New South Wales. These languages, complex in structure and rich in vocabulary, are an essential aspect of Aboriginal culture. However, to Aboriginal people, language is much more than just words; it is a direct link to land and country. It holds traditional songs and stories about spirituality and contains a very deep meaning to its people. It reflects cultural concepts and varying ways of looking at the world.

³² UNESCO, Indigenous linguistic research exercise booklet, 2003, Clare Ozolins

*Language is our soul...*³³

Thus, language plays a vital role in sustaining a person's sense of self and cultural identity. The impact of colonisation in 1788 led to the forced removal of Aboriginal people from ancestral lands and the loss of freedom and autonomy. Language speakers were discouraged, shamed and forbidden to use or teach traditional languages. As a result, Aboriginal languages and cultures suffered enormous erosion. Today many Aboriginal languages have fallen into disuse, and despite the declining use of Aboriginal languages due to the significant impact of colonisation, there is no such thing as a 'dead' or 'extinct' language in New South Wales.

Given adequate resources, Aboriginal languages can be revived, but it is critical to act rapidly as the remaining speakers are very few and are speedily disappearing. 'The New South Wales Aboriginal Languages Policy will assist Aboriginal people and communities right across New South Wales to revitalise traditional languages by utilising and building on existing knowledge, and encouraging the structural changes necessary, to implement language projects to assist in the revitalisation and reclamation processes'.³⁴

The need for a NSW Aboriginal Languages Policy

*Aboriginal languages were here before we came, they are here now and they'll be here long after we've gone*³⁵

Over half of the world's 6800 languages are likely to completely vanish within two generations. In New South Wales, the situation is particularly critical as the very few languages that do continue to exist have few surviving fluent speakers. In response to this critical situation, several agencies and other major areas of government prepared a New South Wales Aboriginal Languages policy. The need for this policy arose from:

³³ Auntie Rose Fernando, a Gamilaroi Elder. (1997), Aboriginal Languages Conference, Sydney.

³⁴ Aboriginal Languages Newsletter, NSW Department of Education and Training (Term 2, 2006). Michael Vaughn.

³⁵ Brother John Wright, principal St Joseph's Primary School Walgett (2007)

- The importance placed by Aboriginal people on the revitalisation of traditional languages and to be able to continue to access these languages
- The uniqueness of Aboriginal languages, and the fact that these languages are presently at crisis point and may disappear unless appropriate and timely action is taken
- The role of both Federal and State Governments to assist Aboriginal people to preserve traditional languages, both as a fundamental part of Aboriginal Culture and as a unique aspect of the Australian heritage
- The need for greater support to aid in the preservation of New South Wales Aboriginal languages
- The general lack of public awareness about New South Wales Aboriginal languages
- The need for increased coordination between language revitalisation programs both within State Government and between Federal and State Governments

The main goals of this policy are to develop and improve:

- **Language programs in Aboriginal communities:** Those Aboriginal communities wishing to implement local language revitalisation programs are supported to do so

- **Language programs in the educational system:** That Aboriginal students in New South Wales have an increased opportunity to learn their Aboriginal language of origin or another language.

- **Language programs in gaols and detention centres:** That Aboriginal people in gaols and detention centres have an increased opportunity to learn their Aboriginal language of origin

- **Aboriginal languages in the broader community:** That the New South Wales population have an understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal languages as an integral part of Aboriginal Culture and the Australian heritage.

The agencies identified as holding a primary responsibility in making progress toward these goals are:

- The NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs

- The NSW Office of the Board of Studies
- The NSW Department of Education and Training
- The NSW Department of Corrective Services

These primary agencies work in close partnership with ATSIC, FATSIL, NSWALC, AECG, AIATSIS and other relevant Aboriginal organisations. Together they will ensure that Aboriginal people and local Aboriginal communities are actively involved in all decision-making processes relating to the implementation of this policy. ‘The policy includes a commitment to teach and revive New South Wales’ 70 Aboriginal languages, and is the first of its kind’.³⁶ Under the policy, students were given the opportunity to study an Aboriginal language in many schools, particularly schools in areas with a large and strong Aboriginal population. The results of this new policy in schools for example has seen an increased engagement and retention of Indigenous students, increased literary skills and strengthened positive ties between schools and local Aboriginal communities.

The New South Wales Aboriginal Languages Policy is a significant step forward in the revitalisation of Aboriginal languages in New South Wales. It is also a significant step forward in the attempt to bridge the gap in equality of educational outcomes for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. It is helping a very ancient culture, greatly affected by European colonisation to revitalise, reclaim and rebuild their culture in a modern, westernised society.

The Darug Aborigines

The largest group of Aboriginal people in the Sydney region was the Darug, who lived from the coast to the Blue Mountains. Since Darug was not traditionally a written language there is some confusion about the correct spelling. The Darug were a group who spoke a common language, but within that there were three or more different dialect groups. ‘There is some dispute about the extent of the Darug nation. Some historians believe the coastal Eora people were a separate tribe to the Darug, while others believe they were part of the same tribe’.³⁷ This began a lengthy

³⁶ A Case of Language Revitalisation in ‘Settled’ Australia, Michael Walsh; Department of Linguistics, The University of Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia

³⁷ Craig Ashby, Aboriginal language teacher, Redfern. Interview, 14-1-2010

disagreement between two major parties known as the Eora-Darug Debate.

The Darug people of the Sydney basin were greatly affected by colonisation, more so than many other Aboriginal communities. Historians have reported that the population reduced dramatically with the introduction of smallpox into Sydney's Aboriginal community in the first years of European contact. 'Almost half of Sydney's Indigenous population died in the smallpox epidemic of 1789 and it is said only three Cadigal (a clan of the Darug people) people were left by 1791'.³⁸

The Darug country included: *Table 1*³⁹

Balmain	Wangal
Botany Bay	Kameygal
Bradley's Head	Borogegal
Camden	Cobbiti-barta
Cammeray	Cameraigal
Castle Hill	Bidjigal
Cattai-Windsor	Cattai
Colo River	Colo
Cowpastures	Muringong
Darling Harbour	Gomerrigal
Duck River	Wategoro
Eastern Creek	Wawarrawarri
Figtree Point	Gorualgal
Hawkesbury River	Marramarra
Kurnell	Gweagal
Kurrajong	Kurrajong
Liverpool	Cabrogal
Manly	Cannalgal
Maroubra	Murubora
Mulgoa	Mulgoa
Padstow	Bediagal
Parramatta	Burramattagal
Prospect	Warmuli
Richmond	Boorooberongal
Ryde	Wallamattagal
South Creek	Wianamattagal

³⁸ Kohen J. 1993. The Darug and Their Neighbours. Chapter 3, tribes and clans.

³⁹ Aboriginal People of Coastal Sydney (Australian Museum Online) includes language group information and map, and place names of the Sydney Harbour area.
<http://www.livingharbour.net/aboriginal/introduction.htm>

Springwood	Aurang
Sydney	Cadigal
Toongabbie	Toongagal

Professor Kohen, Green and Dr. Troy have been working on the reclamation and revitalisation of the Darug language in the Sydney basin for over 5 years now. The projects these researchers have been working on are not large scale, high cost, high publicity programs, rather a small scale project that has a big significance to the lives and culture of future generations of Aboriginal people. The three academics were motivated by their belief that there is no such thing as a dead language.

*...there is no such thing as a dead language...given the right resources, most languages can be revived...*⁴⁰

This is the attitude of each of Professor Kohen, Professor Green and Dr. Troy; they were prepared to take on projects that would revitalise languages otherwise considered 'dead'. They seek out every single piece of information they can possibly lay their hands on, and use it all in order to fulfil their ultimate goal of recreating a language that was spoken in the Sydney area for many thousands of years.

It was disease; violence and displacement that had a devastating impact on the existence of Aboriginal people and their culture in the Sydney region. The Darug language was the first Indigenous language on the continent to be threatened with extinction. Just as Darug was to be considered extinct, early documentations and writings were discovered of the pidgin form of the language; developed early in the new colony. The Aboriginal people used it to communicate with the new, white European settlers, as it was a mix of both their native tongue and the language of the new arrivals.

Pidgin, which is still retained by some elders, incorporates traditional native words and phrases, and is an integral part of the reclamation of the Darug language in the Sydney region. 'The pidgin language has remained a part of modern day Australian society. Words such as Dingo, Waratah, Boomerang; and place names such as

⁴⁰ The Aboriginal Languages Research and Resource Centre (The Languages Centre)
<http://www.alrrc.nsw.gov.au/> - (DET re-statement, 2009)

Yagoona, Cronulla and Kembla are examples of words that have derived from the pidgin, as they are not fully Aboriginal words'.⁴¹

William Dawes

The more educated First Fleet officers took great interest in the Aboriginal culture and heritage. Many documented their studies and works on languages, cultures and the people of many Aboriginal tribes and communities across the continent. Any research that was conducted in the twentieth and twenty-first century owes a lot to the works of these early officer's studies. Probably recognised as the most important study is that of Second Lieutenant William Dawes. He came on the First Fleet in 1788 and returned to his English homeland at the end of 1791.

His manuscripts have been used among the key pieces of evidence being used in the reclamation of the Darug language by Troy, Kohlen and Green. Dawes' work is significant as he was one of the first and leading researchers of Aboriginal culture, in a particular language. He was a European researcher who, unlike other pioneers, got directly involved with the Aboriginal people and their culture. Dawes, who moved around the continent during their discovery, became particularly interested in the language of the Sydney people. 'Dawes, in his early works, speaks of being tutored by a young girl he met from a community on the east coast of the Sydney basin. It is also believed that this girl, while tutoring Dawes in the native tongue, developed a close relationship with his student; soon they were reportedly living together, teaching each other, servants for one another, and possibly lovers'.⁴²

Throughout Dawes work, he did not focus on the Aborigines who were most effected by colonisation, once living in the areas the Europeans now occupied. These people were known as the 'fringe dwellers'.⁴³ Rather, Dawes researched the Aboriginal

⁴¹ 'Strong Language, Strong Culture'. New South Wales Strategic Language Study. DF Hosking, TJ Lonsdale, JF Troy, MJ Walsh. Edited by K Palmer

⁴² Green, R., Darug Elder and yellamundie. Proceedings of the Inaugural Indigenous Languages Conference (ILC) 2010, Rob Amery and Joshua Nash

⁴³ A Case of Language Revitalisation in 'Settled' Australia, Michael Walsh; Department of Linguistics, The University of Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia

people in their natural context, completely undisturbed, allowing him to get a greater understanding of their culture, heritage and identity; stemming from their language. Through Dawes' studies, he developed a feeling of respect toward the Aboriginal people of Sydney Cove, refusing to join any expeditions to punish the Indigenous people of the land. It is his respect for the Aboriginal people that makes his studies so significant to the reclamation processes of Darug in Sydney, for the Eora people.⁴⁴ His general appreciation, respect and sympathy for the Aboriginal people his direct engagements with the culture and language of Sydney eliminate any bias that could be present in other research diaries and documents.

Whilst Dawes' work has been integral and the most important work for the reclamation and general study of Aboriginal languages, it goes without saying that his works have copped their share of criticism from fellow researchers, particularly in recent years. Anne Ross contested the conclusions of Capell, Kohen and Lampert (Dawes' manuscripts) and claimed that the coastal people spoke a different language to the inland people who spoke Darug. Her claims were made on the grounds that the linguistic evidence is poor, for the simple reason that it was collected by amateur academics. Furthermore, the evidence was collected at a time when Aboriginal people were undergoing massive depopulation and social upheaval from disease and the trauma of invasion. 'To justify her conclusions, Ross used ethnographic evidence from eighteenth century sources and their records of comments by Aboriginal people about the differences between themselves and the inlanders'.⁴⁵

Richard Green

In response to such criticism of William Dawes' works by Anne Ross, Darug elders along with many non-Indigenous academics still maintain the viability of Dawes' work. Richard Green, a Darug man said:

⁴⁴ Troy, J. *The Evolution of Pidgin*, Radio National interview, 23/1 1999.

⁴⁵ Ross, A. "Tribal and linguistic boundaries: a reassessment of the evidence" in *A difficult infant: Sydney before Macquarie*, edited by Graeme Alpin. New South Wales University Press, 1988, p.51-2.

...the only people saying we can't use William Dawes are the white researchers. Aboriginal, Darug people say that he is true, he had a love affair with one of our women didn't he? Darug say he is right, that's why we use his work...⁴⁶

Green holds a Bachelor of Arts in both Linguistics and Education. He is very proud of his Darug heritage as seen in his work on his own native language and culture. He has been widely acknowledged among the Indigenous community at the highest level, receiving numerous prizes for his contribution to his people's language and culture. Green is fluent in five different languages, three of these being different Aboriginal dialects, along with English and Arabic; showing his own personal knowledge of languages outside of his work with his own community.

Green believes that through reclaiming and slowly revitalising the Darug language in the Indigenous community of Sydney, people will attain a heightened appreciation of their own culture. His position as Darug story teller and elder enables him to take on this role and at the same time helps in the actual linguistic study required to reclaim Darug for the Aboriginal people of Sydney Cove. The community, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous trust Green and thus his project has the full cooperation and permission of the Darug and all other community members to continue.

Indigenous Languages in Schools

The 200 years since settlement is a minute fraction of the 40 000 year history of Australia's native people. But within this tiny window of time, the devastation of an ancient culture and many of its languages has been brutally effective. Today, many community based language projects are undertaken in a number of forms, and continue to develop in size and scope as the momentum for language revival grows.

Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are the first languages of this continent. This status, and their unique value in the world's languages, makes it imperative for them to be learned, taught, used and protected from their current state of endangerment. School programs have much potential to contribute greatly to the health and vitality of Indigenous languages. *Indigenous Languages Programmes in*

⁴⁶ (Richard Green, 2007) Darug Elder, and yellamundie. Department of Aboriginal Affairs investigation into research of Aboriginal linguistic heritage.

*Australian Schools: A Way Forward*⁴⁷ is concerned with suggesting concrete ways forward for schools and Indigenous communities developing programs.

School programs have both high cultural and high educational value, leaving schools with a crucial role in supporting the delivery of such programs to develop Indigenous languages as a part of the reclamation and revitalisation process. Just recently there was an enormous amount of support for new programs being adopted in schools for the teaching of Indigenous languages.

*...learning an Aboriginal language – in addition to English – will become compulsory in schools with large Indigenous populations under a State Government strategy to improve Aboriginal retention rates and literacy standards...along with assisting in the reclamation and revitalisation of key Aboriginal languages in New South Wales...*⁴⁸

This was identified as a way of helping Aboriginal students to identify with their culture, which would improve their confidence and sense of identity.

Conclusion

The Aboriginal language of Sydney was greatly affected by European colonisation. It could be referred to as a complete cultural genocide, though the intentional forces imposed through the 'Protection Period' also combined with diseases such as smallpox, violence, displacement and a complete cultural and social traumatisation. The Indigenous culture and language in some areas was so badly annihilated that all that was left was the documents written from early settlers such as Dawes' manuscripts.

Most cultures still have a very small number of proud, native speaking and living descendants left, though even these traditional elders have not been able to fully participate in their own culture due to the impact that white Europeans had on them. The Indigenous culture is one of the oldest in the world, with very strong links with their land and ancestral heritage, expressed in the main vehicles of culture being song,

⁴⁷ Aboriginal Languages Newsletter, NSW Department of Education and Training (Term 2, 2006). Michael Vaughn.

⁴⁸ State of Indigenous Languages in Australia – 2002, Patrick McConvell and Nicholas Thieberger

dance and most importantly language. When Aboriginal people are stripped of their culture, they are essentially stripped of their entire culture and identity, subsequently; Aboriginal people have suffered and struggled to fully assimilate into a modern, westernised society.

The Darug people of Sydney Cove are a prime, if not the worst example of the effects of colonisation on the Aboriginal people of Australia. The work carried out by linguists, academics and the Darug community has been so highly successful, bringing back a language, and the culture that is carried on its shoulders, from a state of 'extinction' to a new state of being written down and fully recorded and even being taught again to younger generations. This has been done through the works of Jakelin Troy, Richard Green and James Kohen, in conjunction with Dawes' manuscripts. Aboriginal youths in the Darug community are now able to communicate in their ancestral language and have now begun to feel pride and fully appreciate and acknowledge their own culture, which has stood for the past 40 000 years.

Aboriginal language has, at last, been fully recognised as pivotal to the survival of Aboriginal culture; a culture that has been around for many thousands of years, one of the oldest cultures in the world. This magnifies the impacts of colonisation on Aboriginal culture, as a culture that has survived for tens of thousands of years has taken under a hundred years to be transformed into a critical state.

The non-Aboriginal people of Australia cannot take back what they have done in the past, and an apology will not wipe away the memories that Aboriginal communities have of the attempted cultural genocide, though this does not mean that the non-Indigenous Australians can become involved in the revitalisation of language, to strengthen ties between the Aboriginal population and their culture and identity.

The government have made significant progress in changing the past, and helping Aboriginal people to re-connect with their native language, culture and identity. The many policies and programs implemented by government and organisations respectively have combined to make significant progress in the revitalisation process of Aboriginal languages. In particular, the NSW Aboriginal Languages Policy has made the reclamation, retention, and revitalisation of Aboriginal languages possible for the Indigenous communities of NSW. The recent focus on teaching of the Aboriginal languages and culture has helped bolster Aboriginal retention rates among

Indigenous students, providing outstanding results nation-wide, both academically and in terms of retention of culture.

The recent encouragement from governments and educational institutions has been the most significant step in the right direction for Aboriginal language retention and the strengthening of culture.

New South Wales has led the way in the development of Aboriginal language initiatives. Although federal recognition has now become the most vital step in the survival of Aboriginal languages and culture, it took a long time for Federal recognition to come about. This did not hold New South Wales back from beginning the reclamation and revitalisation processes for many Aboriginal communities. The inclusion of Federal support and development of policies has helped boost the level of support from Aboriginal communities themselves, probably the most important inclusion in the process since they began.

Australian Aboriginal culture probably represents the oldest surviving culture in the world. As in any culture, its language is the main vehicle of culture, heritage and identity, and it is even more vital to Aboriginal culture, both in Australia and globally, as there are no formal writings of their language and thus culture. Aboriginal language is passed on orally through song, dance and the Dreaming stories. Dreaming carries stories of who Aboriginal people are, and how and why they are where they are, thus, once Aboriginal language is destroyed, culture will diminish.

In the case of this report, the Darug community are working closely under the leadership and guidance of Richard Green, in conjunction with policies and organisations established by the NSW Government to be leaders in the revitalisation and reclamation of Aboriginal language and their culture.

The Aboriginal culture, the oldest in the world, has survived for up to 60 000 years prior to European settlement. Since white colonisation, it has taken only one hundred years to take Aboriginal languages from strong and fully functioning as the primary vehicle for Indigenous culture, to a critical state, facing endangerment. This has had detrimental effects on the heritage, culture and identity of Aboriginal people nationwide. Through the help of leading Aboriginal linguistics, using the works of early academics, Aboriginal people have been able to reclaim and revitalise their languages

and renew their connections and cultural ties to their ancestors and land. Educational institutions and Government policies have made it possible to revitalise and reclaim languages in Aboriginal communities, building strong foundations for generations to come.

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