

The Value of Our Imperilled Native Tongues

Noel Pearson

In 1973, a linguist doing field work on Aboriginal Australian languages realised he had met the last speaker of Yaygir, a language once spoken in present day northeast of NSW. The custodian of this invaluable piece of Australian culture, Sandy Cameron, was living in obscurity and had not spoken Yaygir for several years.

He was however eager to work with his university-educated guest to record and preserve his ancestral language. The linguist decided to return to Cameron's home in a couple of months to finish the recording of this national treasure. But Cameron died before the linguist returned. A region of Australia lost a large part of its heritage.

Such tragedies happened in many parts of Australia in our lifetime, and are still happening. Our nation's culture and history is needlessly impoverished.

A few years ago, my old friend Urwunjin died as the last speaker of his people's language from Barrow Point on the south-eastern coast of Cape York Peninsula.

Urwunjin's knowledge was at least recorded to a large extent. In the late 1960s and into the 70s an organised effort was made by many young anthropologists and linguists, urged by an indefatigable sponsor, Peter Ucko, then Director of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra, to describe the country's cultures and languages before it was too late. Their salvage operation was dubbed Before It Is Too Late, or BIITL. Many of today's senior ethnographers of Australia were involved in this push.

The original BIITL preserved a large amount of information, now archived in Canberra. Much of this record is inaccessible to laymen, however. When I was a boy starting primary school, an American linguist, John Haviland, came to live with a local family two doors away from us, and in the following years he compiled a grammar and dictionary of Guugu Yimithirr – the language that James Cook encountered in 1770 and which gave the world the name kangaroo, after the Guugu Yimithirr word for a species of wallaby called *gungurru*.

Haviland accomplished an astonishing feat in his mastery of classical Guugu Yimithirr. His grammar is a great work of scholarship, that is a necessary but by itself insufficient foundation for the maintenance of your language long into the future.

It is hard enough for privileged people to learn languages. It is near impossible for dysfunctional people. Few of my people can learn anything from Haviland's published grammar, though it is an invaluable resource.

The social inaccessibility of the scientific work compiled through the BIITL period has not been answered with effective language transmission efforts such as has occurred in New Zealand through indigenous language nests. The multitude of Australian languages compared with New Zealand means that our challenge is so much more vast and complex, but we should learn from the strategies adopted across the Tasman.

A new BIITL is urgently needed in Australia, because we risk losing our country's languages as spoken tongues. Intergenerational transmission of a large number of Australia's languages is declining or has ceased. This is not the result of Aboriginal Australians' choice to abandon our culture.

As almost everything else in our communities, it is a result of our desperate disadvantage. Social dysfunction disables cultural and linguistic transmission.

Our country must understand that a new BIITL effort is an indispensable part of reconciliation. It will be difficult to save our languages if the gap in transmission becomes much wider than it already is.

Other than the work undertaken by AIATIS in Canberra, the single most important (and promising in terms of providing a solution to the problem of intergenerational transmission) effort has been undertaken through the translations of the international subsidiary of the Wycliffe Bible Society, the Summer Institute of Linguistics. Two languages of Cape York Peninsula, Wik Mungkan and Kuku Yalanji, have been the subject of magisterial translations of the New Testament by SIL, along with a number of other languages across the country.

The SIL website (www.ethnologue.com) provides an estimation of the vitality of each of Australia's remaining indigenous languages, and the number of languages that are on the brink of extinction should be the cause of national consternation and urgent response.

But, notwithstanding the richness of this country's linguistic heritage, there is almost no public recognition of this national priority. To find an eloquent expression of the preciousness of this heritage you would need to go back to W.E.H. Stanner's Boyer Lectures of 1967. Since Stanner there have been no prominent voices, the last being that of the American ethnographer and author, Jared Diamond, in his 2001 Centenary of Federation address. Reading Diamond's lecture I was struck by how it is that the only prominent advocate on behalf of Australia's original languages is an American.

Let me make some points about language policy. A first step is that Australia must recognize its languages. It is ridiculous that Australia is behind Europe in this respect. The European states have signed the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. The status of minority languages varies greatly, but a large number of European minority languages are now official in the provinces in which they are spoken. But Australia has not even adopted an official listing of its languages.

Second, the purpose of preserving and maintaining Australia's indigenous languages is not just that these languages serve a communication purpose within indigenous societies (for many communities they often do not) but because they are inherently valuable as part of the country's rich heritage. And these languages comprise the identity of their custodians and are the primary words by which the Australian land and seascape is named and described. These languages are intimately related to the nature and spirit of the country that all Australians now call home.

Third, indigenous people must understand that indigenous language transmission must move decisively from orality to literacy if there is to be long term

maintenance. This means that indigenous children must be fully literate in the language of learning – English – in order to be literate in their own languages. Reliance upon oral transmission alone will not work in the long term.

Fourth, there must be a separate domain within indigenous communities for cultural and linguistic education from the Western education domain. Schools are not the places for cultural and linguistic transmission, and we must stop looking to schools to save our languages. This is because the primary purpose of schools is for our children to obtain a mainstream, Western education, including full fluency in English. Schools will never be adequately equipped to solve the transmission imperative, and all we end up doing is compromising our children's mainstream education achievement. Indeed, without full English literacy our children are then illiterate in their traditional language.

Fifth, language learning must start in earliest childhood, and this means both English and Traditional languages. Children must have access to both domains from the start if they are going to become properly bilingual. Communities that delay the learning of English to late in primary school in favour of traditional languages in the early years, end up disabling their children because they remain far behind in the language required for them to obtain a mainstream education.

Sixth, a new generation BIITL must integrate the newest technology. It is the information technologies that provide the bridge between the scientific record and its application to the transmission imperative between generations. There are many break-through demonstrations around the country-side of how information technology provides solutions to cultural transmission, and these need to be brought together as part of a concerted program.

Finally, the basic infrastructure for this national project needs to be developed and supplied as a national responsibility. There should be room for a lot of regional and local adaptation, but there must be a range of off-the-shelf technical solutions developed by people with the necessary expertise at a national government agency such as AIATSIS.

There needs to be a generous government funded campaign for the maintenance of each indigenous language employing full-time linguists and other expert staff. Private, not-for-profit and public organizations should work together, but language policy and adequate funding must be provided by the national government.

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