

# **Learning to Speak Again: Towards the Provision of Appropriate Training for the Revitalisation of Indigenous Australian Languages in New South Wales**

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## **Abstract**

In the 200 or so years since the colonisation of Australia began European culture and English have had a devastating effect on the indigenous peoples of Australia and their languages. While some languages from the more remote parts of the continent are still vital, many more have been lost without ever being recorded. Many have ceased to be spoken and survive only on paper, and others are celebrated only in the memories and speech of a few old people. Nowhere has this been more apparent than in the south-eastern corner of the continent where the colonisation process first started.

The New South Wales government in consultation with Indigenous Australian people and community organisations has recently implemented a number of policy initiatives that seek to stop this process and begin its reversal. Principal among these is a new Aboriginal languages syllabus that mandates the teaching of these endangered languages in the state's primary and secondary schools. But, as is often the case with such substantial changes in policy direction, the human and material resources necessary for delivery are presently lacking.

In recognition of this logistic gap the Koori Centre of the University of Sydney in collaboration with its Linguistics department and the New South Wales Board of Studies is responding with a number of strategies. These include the immediate introduction of basic language teaching methods as a topic in the Centre's existing teacher training course, and the conduct of a state-wide survey of indigenous communities to determine the feasibility of and best ways to deliver training for native speakers and Aboriginal teachers. It is anticipated that this training will range from regular immersion-based teaching events for community members wishing to become better speakers of their languages, through formal courses in applied linguistics, to second language teaching methodologies and practical materials production techniques for existing indigenous educators.

This paper reports on the form and progress of the consultative process to date and current indications as to the nature and extent of training programs that are expected to emerge.

## **Background**

Prior to British colonisation in 1788 Indigenous Australian<sup>1</sup> languages were numerous and diverse. Most linguists agree on there having been a total of 600-700 dialects that constituted some 250-270 discrete languages. These have been further grouped into 27 families of similar languages with the greatest density in the northernmost part of the continent and adjacent islands. There is no indication of immediate genetic relationships between Australian and surrounding languages (Yallop, 1982).

The ensuing 216 years of non-Indigenous occupation have had a devastating effect on both Indigenous populations and languages. By the 1980's it was estimated that over 100 languages had become extinct<sup>2</sup>; over 100 were in danger, and about 50 were still viable (Yallop, 1982). Less than ten years later even more alarming figures of 160 extinct; 70 in danger, and 20 vital were suggested (Schmidt, 1990). It is currently believed that only five languages remain with active speaker populations numbering in the thousands<sup>3</sup>. In New South Wales (NSW), the state that hosts the site of the original colony, this process of extermination has come dangerously close to completion with only six or seven languages of an estimated original 20 to 70 still having sufficient speaker populations to be used on a regular basis (Walsh, 2004).

The historical events that have led to the present crisis are beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice to say that they have included epidemics, forced relocation, undeclared warfare and a raft of policies and actions by both state and church designed to oversee the elimination of Indigenous Australians as a distinct race. A key element of this process has been the active suppression of Indigenous Australian languages as a mechanism for and indicator of cultural survival.

Fortunately recent decades have seen an overwhelming shift in public attitudes and government policy towards reconciliation between Indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. Racist and draconian laws such as those that permitted the exclusion of Aboriginal children from NSW schools up until as recently as 1972 have, thankfully, been repealed.

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<sup>1</sup> Indigenous (Australian) is used throughout to refer to Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander languages and people.

<sup>2</sup> The linguistic definition of dead or extinct languages is strongly disputed by Indigenous Australians who are currently engaged in the revival of those languages.

<sup>3</sup> There are also a number of post-contact languages with comparable populations.

In this context extended lobbying by Indigenous Australian communities supported by linguists and other allies has persuaded governments to give recognition and resources to the maintenance and revival of these languages. In some other states and territories this has even extended to the provision of bilingual education (McKay, 1996). However, in NSW, the model remains largely one of revitalisation and is still in its early stages.

### Recent Policy Initiatives

A watershed in the recognition of linguistic rights for Indigenous Australians in this state was the implementation of the then Department of School Education's current *Aboriginal Education Policy*, just eight years after the bicentenary of colonisation. Although it primarily advocated the recognition of Aboriginal English as a valid medium of communication in the classroom, it also instructed schools to ensure that "Aboriginal languages are maintained, revived and reclaimed", principally through the strategy of "teaching and resourcing of Aboriginal languages as part of the Languages Other Than English key learning area and community languages program" (1996, p8) Another eight years later an *Interim Aboriginal Languages Framework* was issued by the NSW Board of Studies to give some practical guidance as to how this might be achieved. A few schools in regions where human and other resources and, most importantly, community support existed were able to respond to these early initiatives and expand nascent language programs or implement new ones with varying degrees of success. But the level of participation remained fairly limited and localised.

This formal recognition and promotion of Indigenous Australian language teaching in the state did, however, foster a gradual increase in activity and interest. By the turn of the century enthusiasm had developed to a sufficient level that a strategic survey of the status of NSW Indigenous languages and community aspirations for them could attract the necessary support<sup>4</sup> to be conducted. Hosking *et al* (2000) reported that a substantial majority of the state's Indigenous population clearly regretted the loss of their linguistic heritage and were supportive of revitalisation. The authors also strongly advocated substantial increases in funding and resources to realise this ambition.

The subsequent publication of the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs Draft Aboriginal Languages Policy in 2002 further advanced the cause of language revitalisation in the state and extended the scope of government participation beyond schools to include Indigenous Australian communities, the custodial system, and the wider population. It committed the Government to assist language revitalisation activities,

recognised the ownership of languages by traditional custodians, and gave a commitment to Indigenous Australian participation in all relevant decision-making. This was a truly revolutionary change in approach.

With particular regard to the implementation of language programs in schools the policy made a number of explicit statements that left no doubt as to its intent:

- *That all Aboriginal students in NSW have the opportunity to learn an Aboriginal language, preferably their language of origin.*
- *Aboriginal languages taught in NSW schools will be recognised as a subject for which a formal language curriculum may be developed and implemented in partnership with Aboriginal people.*
- *All school teachers and principals, including those working in early childhood, will actively support Aboriginal language programs, where these are supported or desired by the local Aboriginal community.*

NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs (2002, pp6-8)

Since then developments and progress in the field have been rapid and substantial. A NSW Aboriginal Languages Research and Resource Centre<sup>5</sup> was established in Sydney last year to promote and support language revitalisation efforts, and the Board of Studies finalised and released its *NSW Aboriginal Languages K-10 Syllabus*. This is a model teaching document with detailed and comprehensive practical advice on the development of appropriate sequenced curricula, framed in terms of three overall objectives of using language; making linguistic connections, and; moving between cultures. The syllabus is currently being widely promoted across the state as well as trialled in a number of schools, and is scheduled for staged implementation in the first and third years of secondary schooling from 2005. The stated aims of the syllabus are:

*For all students... to develop communication skills, to focus on languages as systems and to understand the relationship between language, culture and land, leading to lifelong personal, educational and vocational benefits.*

*For Aboriginal students... increasing self-esteem through an enhanced understanding of their linguistic heritage and an ability to communicate in (an) ancestral language(s); assisting them to obtain skills in language revitalisation that can be used to enhance long-term cultural revival in their local Aboriginal community; and increasing the links between schools, student learning and community language revival in their local Aboriginal community.*

NSW Board of Studies (2003, p14)

<sup>4</sup> From the Australian Institute of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Studies.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.alrrc.nsw.gov.au/>

## The Community View

While there has clearly been a wealth of policy generated in the field and some remarkable local successes in the implementation of Indigenous language teaching in the state, substantial revitalisation programs presently exist in only six languages. The vast majority of Indigenous Australians in NSW are yet to have any direct experience of learning their languages.

The widely divergent social and linguistic histories of Indigenous communities have stimulated a range of responses to these policy initiatives. The absence of a broadly-based representative organisation for all Indigenous Australian communities in NSW also means that there is currently no mechanism for a collective response, and reactions thus far have mostly been at an individual or local level.

In areas where language is strong and programs are already active, the support and acknowledgement entailed in these various policies has largely come as a welcome recognition of past effort and an incentive to keep going. For others, over two centuries of government intervention and control have engendered strong suspicion leading to very real concerns as to the true agenda and the safety of participation. In some communities, where people's linguistic heritage is markedly heterogenous and languages may not have been actively spoken for many years, the reaction can be one of bewilderment as to how such apparently complete loss could ever be overcome. Many communities are also struggling with continuing and substantial crises in health, education, welfare and housing. To such people the apparent imposition of another matter requiring accountability to government can, quite reasonably, seem both impossibly idealistic and an unwanted burden.

At the seventh FEL conference in Broome Walsh (2003) identified a range of issues that needed to be addressed in the revitalisation process in NSW that had been either voiced by Indigenous Australians or observed by him. These included:

- pessimism about the prospects for revitalisation and a consequent tendency to understate surviving knowledge and usage;
- a disparity between stated interest in revitalisation and a capacity to act on it;
- uncertainty and disagreement over which language(s) would be appropriate and/ or feasible for which people and places;
- the availability of resources;
- divergent views over how and whether to use ancient languages for contemporary topics;
- the authority and ability of potential teachers;
- the right of different people (especially non-indigenous) to learn a particular language, and;
- the role of experts and professionalism (both Indigenous and non-indigenous).

## Filling the Gaps

The simple reality is that most of these issues will only be resolved locally by Indigenous Australian communities themselves and will require a good deal more discussion and time. Some of the more discrete and practical concerns such as the lack of access to recorded information on NSW Indigenous Australian languages are already being addressed in part by initiatives like the NSW Aboriginal Languages Database (Lowe *et al*, 2004). However, there remains a clear and pressing need for training to provide interested community members and Indigenous educators with the skills, experience and qualifications to enable them to actively engage in the language revitalisation process. The University of Sydney's Koori Centre in association with its Linguistics Department and the NSW Board of Studies is endeavouring to make a positive contribution in this area.

The Koori Centre is an autonomous unit of the University under Indigenous Australian management with a majority Indigenous staff. It has a long history of providing training for Indigenous Australians from throughout NSW and across the country, as well as offering units of study in Indigenous studies in several of the University's wider degree programs. Currently the Koori Centre offers a number of courses in the area of teacher training. Chief amongst these are the Diploma in Education (Aboriginal); a two-year qualification for Aboriginal Education Assistants to work in NSW schools, and a four-year Bachelor of Education (Secondary) with teaching subjects of Aboriginal Studies and History. A one-year vocational Tertiary Preparation Certificate is also offered to provide candidates with skills development for entry to these and other university courses.

Apart from the fact that they are only available to Indigenous Australian applicants, these courses are distinguished from the mainstream by their delivery mode. Rather than the normal method employed in Australian tertiary teaching of several hours of classes per day each week over a 14 week semester, the Koori Centre's courses are delivered over six week-long blocks of intensive teaching with multiple supplementary tasks to be completed independently by students at home.

This mixed mode of delivery, while uncommon in the wider Australian tertiary system, is routine in Indigenous Australian higher education. Its development has been in direct response to the circumstances of many Indigenous people's lives; in that a significant proportion of the population do not reside in areas directly serviced by universities and the overwhelming majority are encumbered by professional, community or family obligations that do not permit their long-term absence from their home or employment. In key development contexts like teacher education there is also well-established government and employer

recognition that allows for release from employment and coverage of essential travel and accommodation costs.

In 2003, as an initial reaction to the pending release of the Aboriginal languages syllabus, the Koori Centre instituted a six-hour module on teaching Indigenous Australian languages within the second year of its diploma course. Although only a minimal innovation, the overwhelmingly positive response of students and staff led to its expansion to nine hours in the present year. Based on its ongoing success and the desire to meet anticipated need, this topic has been scheduled for development into a full unit of study by 2007, constituting one eighth of the Bachelor program's third year, and setting Indigenous language teaching firmly in the context of contemporary second language pedagogy. But this will clearly still be inadequate to deal with the demand for training in the field that is expected to develop.

Consequently the Centre is considering the feasibility of adding a mixed mode diploma level course in Indigenous Australian languages teaching to its offerings to substantially meet the need of Indigenous educators who wish to participate directly in the language revitalisation process in schools. The content of the proposed course will include instruction in, at least; basic linguistics relevant to Indigenous Australian languages; second language teaching methodologies, and; language teaching materials development and delivery. The course will most likely be of one year's duration with an entry requirement of two years completed study towards a recognised teacher training qualification. Input and partnerships will be sought from the University's Linguistics Department and Faculty of Education and Social Work in both its development and delivery.

At the suggestion of the NSW Board of Studies consideration is also being given to the feasibility of offering intensive fluency development in a number of NSW Indigenous languages, modelled in part on a North American strategy<sup>6</sup>. Potential candidates for training of this nature are expected to be community members who may wish to participate in the revitalisation process as classroom demonstrators, or simply wish to learn a language but not necessarily teach it, and will not be able to access school-based revitalisation programs themselves. Such training may also be of immediate interest to Indigenous teacher trainees.

Because the range of candidates interested in acquiring fluency is likely to be much wider than those who are currently employed in schools, it is unclear whether funding to meet costs for all participants in such an activity can be secured. Training in this form may thus

need to be provided on a low or no-cost basis with many participants meeting their own expenses. It is also probable that such events would need to be of no more than one or two weeks duration to meet with people's other obligations.

Coincidentally, the Centre has recently been approached by one of the more substantial community language revitalisation programs from the northwest of the state, who are in receipt of funds to develop a post-secondary module to teach basic fluency in their language, and have indicated a need for technical advice and assistance. An agreement has been reached between the parties, and the author has been contracted to provide second-language curriculum development expertise for the project in the second half of this year. It is anticipated that the resulting material will be available to the Centre for delivery within one or more of the teaching frameworks discussed above.

Establishing courses within the University context is a long and complex process. Where these might be implicated in training teachers for the state's education system they must satisfy the requirements of not only the Centre's board of studies and the University's Academic Board, but the Faculty of Education and an independent government Teaching Qualifications Advisory Panel as well. Progress through each stage is by no means automatic and specific criteria are rigorously applied.

But it is not just the demands of educational bureaucracy that must be met. It is absolutely critical that any training developed for Indigenous Australians to revitalise their languages have the support of the people concerned, and be responsive to their needs and ambitions. Without community consultation and participation it is highly unlikely that any training developed will be acceptable or appropriate. Consequently a team of two Indigenous researchers have been contracted to undertake a state-wide survey to determine community wishes and interest in this regard.

At the time of writing, this research had only recently commenced and it is therefore too early to give a substantial report on any of its findings here. However, its design incorporates a comprehensive program of promotion and visits to communities and existing language programs throughout the state seeking direct contact with interested parties. Additionally, past and present students of the Centre, community organisations and media are being directly approached. A multi-part questionnaire has been developed and is being distributed to those who wish to make written contributions, as well as being used as a focus document for community meetings and interviews facilitated by the researchers. An associated function of the research is the identification of those community members who are potential participants in these various forms of training, either as students or instructors.

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<sup>6</sup> The American Indian Language Development Institute (McCarty et al in Walsh, 2003)

## Which Way is Up?

Viewed in isolation it would be easy to construe recent developments in the revitalisation of Indigenous Australian language in NSW as distinctly top-down in character. Government policies and university course provision usually appear to be delivered from 'on high'. Indeed, such a view is often voiced by Indigenous Australians hearing of them for the first time. However, such a perception is a reaction only to the superficial details.

The formulation of these major policy advances has been clearly driven by Indigenous interests and individuals. The development of the NSW Aboriginal Languages Policy, for example, was an initiative of senior Indigenous staff within the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and informed by their own extensive process of community consultation. Similarly, as Walsh (2003) observes, both the survey resulting in the *Strong Language, Strong Culture* report and the *NSW Aboriginal Languages Syllabus* were closely based in extended consultations across the state, taking in around 200 individual meetings. In the former case the research team conducting the survey also had an Indigenous majority, and; in the latter, the head of the relevant curriculum development unit responsible for development was an Indigenous man with a long-standing passion for language revitalisation in the state. The Koori Centre also maintains a majority Indigenous management and staff and is closely linked to many communities through its staff and students. Thus at each stage these policies and consequent initiatives have been informed by consultation with and largely progressed by the agency of Indigenous Australians.

Further, each of the policies discussed makes explicit the need of government departments, agencies and schools to consult and at all times act in accordance with the wishes of local Indigenous communities in relation to their languages. As much as is possible in the constraints of the current NSW state administration they set the standard for voluntary and equal partnerships in which Indigenous Australian linguistic rights are recognised and upheld.

## Conclusion

After 200 years of neglect and active suppression the tide appears to have turned for the inheritors of Indigenous Australian language rights in NSW. This has been and continues to be achieved by a cooperative approach that synthesises the aspirations of government, educators and those who will speak these languages. In this environment the Koori Centre at the University of Sydney is positioning itself to be a major provider of appropriate services that will meet the needs of its primary client groups in a way that will satisfy both their interests and the constraints of the local educational system. It is sincerely hoped that through this action there will truly be a meeting of top-down and

bottom-up ambitions to produce outcomes rewarding for all concerned, and many Indigenous Australians in NSW will soon be learning to speak again the languages of their birthright.

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