

# Language Revival in Australia

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## Introduction

*If successful language revival is taken to mean the full restoration of the language to a state of strong vitality (by re-establishing the broken language transmission link; regaining full conversational language knowledge and fluency; and active use of the language by all generations in a wide range of social contexts), the chances of success for threatened Aboriginal languages are, in all probability, fairly remote.*

(Schmidt 1990: 106)

When Schmidt offered her assessment of the loss of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and their future potential, it was widely decried as overly pessimistic. A quarter of a century later, there has been evident and substantial growth in language revival activity across the country. The survival of Australian languages is increasingly apparent to the wider population in dual naming, publications, and performance, while media frequently feature good news stories about languages being “saved.” Revival languages are increasingly taught in schools, and the formation of small groups of adult social speakers has been reported from disparate locations. In the current year alone, our prime minister began a speech to Parliament in a language local to the nation’s capital, while a new Aboriginal member opened her inaugural speech in hers, after being sung to her seat in another. Yet, despite such very public and symbolic uses, there has not been a documented case of an Australian language for which intergenerational transmission as a first language has been restored and the language re-vernacularized across all age groups.

While this raises questions of the broader meaning of language revival and measures of its success, it also touches on the particular nature of Australian language loss and re-awakening. This chapter briefly reviews the present state of Australian languages with potential for revival, and some of the historical, social, and political influences that have led them here. It canvasses the need for terminological clarity, better policy and planning, and considers the present emphasis on school-based revival. It also offers a cursory overview of contemporary language revival activity nationally. It does not, however, recount a substantial history

of Australian language revival, but is indebted to and informed by the comprehensive one prepared by Amery and Gale (2008).

## Background

The fate of Australian languages has followed a depressingly similar trajectory to those in most other post-colonial societies. Generations of dispossession, disease, forced relocation, and active suppression of language use by church and state have taken a savage toll. Generations of people from disparate language groups were concentrated on reserves and missions, and children's connections to their languages were forcibly severed in dormitory and public schools. After over 200 years of imposed English dominance, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have long grown weary of surveys that purport to document the health of their languages but read like battleground memorials instead. Nonetheless, it is pertinent to note that, from an original total suggested to be in excess of 250, it was recently reported that only 13 languages are currently spoken by all age groups and being transmitted to children (Marmion, Obata and Troy 2014: xii). Of the largest living languages, it is widely reckoned that only a handful has speaker populations over 1,500.

This combination of multiple languages and relatively low speaker numbers also stands Australian language communities apart from neighboring reviver groups in Aotearoa/New Zealand and Hawai'i. And, unlike those states, Australia and its precursor colonies have no history of treaty-making with local nations, so no guarantees of Indigenous Australians' particular rights exist beyond restrictive land and native title rights begrudgingly conceded in the last four decades. Most Australian reviver groups thus have little independent access to resources, recognition of sovereignty, or consequent autonomy, and only limited fiduciary obligations obtain upon the state in respect of Indigenous interests—none specifically in relation to languages. Given these circumstances, and the long-standing, aggressively monolingual mindset of mainstream Australian society, it is perhaps unsurprising that the cause of reviving local languages has enjoyed neither political nor widespread public support until relatively recent times.

## Policy

This history is clearly reflected in the paucity of strategic government support for Australian languages, which were not formally recognized in any policy until the implementation of bilingual education in the Northern Territory in 1973, and which did not become a focus of national language policy until Australia's first was produced in 1987. The current Australian Indigenous languages policy, "Indigenous Languages—A National Approach," has remained unchanged since its inception and lists five weakly broad objectives, only one of which specifically addresses language revival: "[t]o restore the use of rarely spoken or unspoken Indigenous languages *to the extent that the current language environment allows* [emphasis added]" (Department of Sustainability 2009).

In their analysis of Australian Indigenous languages policy, Truscott and Malcolm identify the persistence of "invisible, or de facto, language policy that puts . . . Standard Australian English (SAE) literacy above all other language objectives" (2010: 7). Indeed, its presence is not particularly well concealed in the current national policy given that it gratuitously advises, "[t]he learning of English is also a fundamental skill that all Australians, including Indigenous Australians, must have in order to maximize their learning opportunities and life chances" (Department of Sustainability 2009).

Of Australia's seven states and territories, only New South Wales (NSW) has introduced its own Aboriginal languages policy that, in its initial implementation, offered a comprehensive, whole-of-government approach, focusing specifically on Aboriginal communities, the education system, and jails and detention centers, as well as the broader community (New South Wales Department of Aboriginal Affairs 2004). While many felt the policy served the state's nascent language revival movement well, its goals and strategies were subsequently softened, and both community and administrative interest in more locally responsive delivery of government services led to the assimilation of languages into the current OCHRE plan (Aboriginal Affairs 2013).

Apart from a worrying trend towards consolidating the state's support of Aboriginal language revival within its own education system, the inaugural NSW policy and OCHRE (Opportunity, Choice, Healing, Responsibility, Empowerment) plan both illustrate some pervasive features of Australian language revival more widely. The 2004 policy typically conflates multiple, differently purposed forms of language activity, such that "[l]anguage revitalisation' is used in its generic sense, and covers activities such as language reclamation, revival, renewal, maintenance and awareness" (New South Wales Department of Aboriginal Affairs: 2), while the OCHRE plan reflects a limited understanding of broader language revival theory and praxis, identifying the language-focused service delivery centers it establishes as "language (and culture) nests," but that do not, as an integral feature, include immersion preschools.

## Typology

Notwithstanding the widespread acceptance of a discourse that eschews notions of death and extinction, and embraces instead the concepts of "sleeping" and "re-awakening" languages, there remains considerable ambiguity locally about the nature of revival. In an effort to institute some clarity of terminology and purpose, the Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia (SSABSA) developed standardized descriptions of school program types that distinguished first-language maintenance, second-language learning, and language awareness from language revival, which was further divided into the sub-types of:

Revitalization . . . where the language is still spoken by a small group of older speakers within the community . . . and the aim is to . . . extend the use of the language into younger generations of speakers;

Renewal . . . where the language is no longer actively spoken "right through" or in its full form, but where Aboriginal people actively identify with the language and a significant amount of linguistic heritage remains within the community . . . and;

Reclamation [that applies] . . . in contexts where little linguistic heritage remains within the community . . . and . . . relies primarily on historical documentation and archival material.

(1996: 22)

Although questioned by some as imposing differentiation not reflective of observed revival processes, the distinction between reclamation and revitalization remains a useful one. Applying it, much of the current revival activity in Australia might best be placed at the reclamation end of the spectrum, with efforts primarily focused on retrieving and reconstructing languages from records or living memory and, increasingly, teaching them. Notwithstanding that language maintenance is not the focus of this chapter, for the few remaining first-language

maintenance programs operating in remote northern Australia, continued language shift means some are now functionally approaching revitalization instead. Outside of school systems, much of the activity identified as revival taking place could be described more accurately as awareness, such that knowledge of the language and its cultural environment is the main focus, and substantial communicative competence is not a goal.

The ideological distinction in the SSABSA framework between language revival and second-language learning, undertaken by learners without cultural affiliation, has become problematic over time given that the vast majority of Australian students now in school-based revival programs are non-Indigenous. It is also telling that all forms of revival in the framework assume second-language learning as revival, and the possibility of re-establishing first-language speaker populations is excluded; although this is perhaps unsurprising, given that the framework explicitly targets language education programs. In this context, current efforts by the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages (VACL) to establish a local typology for revival languages independent of the delivery of education programs is most welcome (Eira and Couzens 2010). Hopefully, it will take into account not only the commencing health of languages and communities' aspirations for them, but also what level of communicative competence, if any, is sought, or whether only emblematic use is expected.

## Planning

Fishman's Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale and derived model for Reversing Language Shift (RLS) have also lost favor locally (Walsh 2009) and appear unknown to many now active in the field. From the outset, there was criticism that RLS's goals in the higher domains of education, employment, media, and government were irrelevant to Australian languages (Lo Bianco and Rhydwen 2001), which is somewhat surprising given the prominence these are now given nationally as evidence of revival. Without blindly endorsing Fishman's assertion that "success in intergenerationally unimportant functions is merely camouflaged failure" (1991: 86), or insisting that stable diglossia is an essential milestone, it is still appropriate that Australian revival activity be guided by some structured planning, which responds to research and experience as well as community desires.

However, there remains a marked duality of positions within and between different Indigenous populations and Australian linguists regarding the intended goals of language revival. While the Second National Indigenous Languages Survey found that most respondents were looking to achieve psychosocial benefits rather than increased proficiency levels and speaker numbers (Marmion et al 2014: 19), one of the report's authors, a senior Aboriginal linguist, recently proclaimed: "I look forward to a day when every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child is able to study their own language, study in their own language and—most of all—grow up speaking their language" (Troy 2015, December 1). Such apparently opposing views are not uncommonly heard and, while many revivers express their contentment with witnessing some emblematic language use within their community, others clearly aspire to the restoration of first-language-speaking populations. Nor is this divergence of goals inherently problematic, until it comes to deciding which strategies to implement if they are to be achieved. For example, teaching second-language programs to classes of predominantly non-Indigenous students in schools will not, in and of itself, produce first-language speakers, nor guarantee substantial and regular language use in Indigenous homes and families.

At the moment, what little explicit planning that can be identified appears largely focused on status and corpus outcomes, but rarely targets acquisition in any depth. It is most likely to be driven by the few funding opportunities that exist and predominantly favor short-term projects

with documentation outcomes, or the production of classroom materials, digital applications, and other tangible items. Paton and Eira (2011) have sought to address the need for more comprehensive community-based planning by producing an accessible local guide, although it too gives only limited emphasis to acquisition goals.

As Amery notes, “it is easiest to begin with symbolic use of the language” (2001: 150), and many Australian reviver groups have yet to progress beyond that achievement. It is still not too late for them to undertake Fishman’s recommended process of prior ideological clarification (1991), determine what it is they most want to achieve, and agree on productive strategies that will see them succeed in meeting those goals.

## Education

In the absence of widespread, evidence-based planning and substantial support for language revival activities that emphasize language in families and communities, many Australian reviver groups have found a receptive home for their languages in schools instead, and over 40 are currently being taught nationally (Hobson 2014). While such programs often provide instruction only to local Indigenous students at inception, their long-term viability usually demands that delivery be extended to all, and community members who initially might have been reluctant usually report positive social outcomes from broader inclusion. This apparently successful strategy has led to and been fostered by the publication of targeted syllabuses in six of the eight states and territories over the last 15 years, culminating in a national framework for their teaching (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority 2015).<sup>2</sup>

In most locations this development has in turn led to a marked surge in demand for teachers and created employment opportunities, substantially enhancing its appeal. However, it has simultaneously created crises around the supply of trained teachers with both language abilities and teaching skills, and stories of prospective programs languishing for lack of a suitable teacher are commonplace. It is also becoming apparent that much of the community-based revival that was occurring has been substantially repurposed to service school-based activity. Thus, classes originally intended to foster communicative competence in adults have, in some locations, transformed into training for community language tutors and a fast track to employment. Although this is of obvious benefit to the individuals concerned and their prospective students, the potential to undermine revival activity outside of schools is equally disturbing. Some community activists have also begun to realize that the limited time allocated to languages in most Australian schools does not afford students the opportunity to develop substantial language skills, and that control of their language, its performance standards, and the means of its transmission may have inadvertently been placed in state hands (Hobson 2010).

Notwithstanding the existence of some highly effective “natural” teachers in Australian revival classrooms, they remain an evident minority, and the supply of skilled language tutors continues to be a pressing need in most regions. While there may be introductory classes in the language and some basic languages education training to get them started, options to enhance people’s language skills and teaching abilities beyond beginner levels are usually limited. Adult classes with ascending levels in re-awakening languages may be provided by vocational institutes or community-based training organizations, although it is often difficult for these classes to maintain sufficient cohorts for regular offering. Some universities are also engaged in the teaching of Australian languages, but the majority of these are “strong” languages, and most students are not members of the relevant communities.

This can mean many school classes have difficulty advancing from formulaic exchanges, wordlist learning, and singing (often translated) songs. Programs that are attached to language

centers or are affiliated with universities are likely to have better outcomes in this regard, although the language teaching methods promoted by linguists can be more closely aligned with the nature of linguistic fieldwork than with contemporary methods of languages education. In this context the appeal of “magic bullets,” such as Total Physical Response (TPR), Accelerated Second Language Acquisition (ASLA), and *Where Are Your Keys?* has seen these techniques eagerly adopted, even if their limitations soon become evident to most.

Similarly, government interest in rapidly produced, tangible, and “high-tech” outputs has given rise in recent years to targeted funding for the development of applications and websites. These usually feature talking dictionaries and games that supposedly obviate the need for communication or teachers in language learning while automating acquisition. In reality, they often lack in quality instructional design and are unlikely to have significant acquisition outcomes, especially given the lack of speaker communities for solitary learners to engage with.

There are currently few prospective solutions to this supply crisis nationally. In 2006 the University of Sydney established the Master of Indigenous Languages Education—a professional development program allowing trained Indigenous teachers to add languages as a method—that has graduated over 60 candidates since (Hobson et al 2018). Subsequent attempts to develop an initial teacher education degree with languages as a minor method have failed to proceed, and there remains a national need for entry-level, degree-based teacher training (Hobson 2014). The Western Australian Department of Education, through its Professional Learning Institute, provides an in-house professional development Aboriginal Languages Teacher Training course for people in that state aspiring to teach their language locally. Otherwise, only a few vocational certificates offer some languages education training, but all afford only limited authority to teach.

## National Survey

### *Queensland*

Language revival in Queensland commenced in the mid-1990s in association with Djabugay tourism development and short-lived Guugu Yimithirr and Guugu Yalanji school programs. Since then regional centers have continued to auspice an array of small community-based projects. These organizations rely on Commonwealth funds for their existence, supporting both documentation and revival while providing access to existing materials. In 2005 they banded together to form the Queensland Indigenous Languages Advisory Committee to advocate for the development of a state language policy.

The State Library of Queensland is a major repository of linguistic material and supports access by prospective revivers through a network of Indigenous Knowledge Centers in partnership with local government councils. Queensland is the most recent jurisdiction to implement an Indigenous languages syllabus in 2010, and it currently provides revival programs in four schools while another 20 offer language awareness classes.

### *New South Wales (NSW)*

The teaching of revival languages began in the first Australian state in the mid-1970s with programs in Dharawal/Dhurga, Bandjalang, and Awabakal. Since then, activity has expanded substantially to include multiple languages and develop into a close partnership between communities and state authorities. The current administrative structure includes five regional language and culture “nests,” each devoted to a single language. NSW remains the only state to

have implemented an Aboriginal languages policy, now in its second iteration, and it was also one of the first to implement an Aboriginal languages syllabus.

The state has also long been a stronghold of community language programs such as Muurrbay Aboriginal Language and Culture Cooperative, which has actively supported multiple north coast languages since 1986. Miromaa Aboriginal Language and Technology Centre has developed internationally utilized language database software and auspices Australia's biannual, community language conference, Puliima.

### ***Australian Capital Territory***

Community-based revival of Ngunawal commenced recently in the national capital, one of only two Australian jurisdictions still without an Indigenous languages syllabus.

### ***Victoria***

Given the high density of colonial settlement and consequent Indigenous depopulation, Victoria's loss of languages has been most acute, second only to that of Tasmania. In contrast, the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages (VACL) is perhaps the largest, best organized, and most productive language center nationally, having facilitated and coordinated community efforts state-wide since 1994, and serviced 26 of the state's 38 languages at its peak. VACL has a prolific research and publication profile, currently emphasizing digital projects, and it is a major community access point for training, support, and materials.

Teaching revival languages in Victoria commenced with a Yorta Yorta program at Worowa College in 1995. The state syllabus that was implemented in 2004 is now being delivered in seven schools and emphasizes reclamation processes, although communicative competence has begun receiving greater attention in recent years.

### ***Tasmania***

Revival in Australia's island state has followed a unique trajectory. Having endured the greatest dispossession and consequent loss of language since invasion, the descendants of Tasmania's first people took a pragmatic approach in the mid-1990s and embraced hybridity to construct a new language. Collating the remnants of indeterminate ancestral varieties, and allowing a high level of influence from the English substrate at all levels, they have produced Palawa Kani (people talking)—a language not taught in schools but retained largely within the community.

### ***South Australia (SA)***

South Australian revival began in 1985 with Ngarrindjeri. Seven revival languages are now offered in schools, and a generic syllabus framework has existed since 2005. The state is distinguished by also having specific syllabi for two of its revival languages, Adnyamathanha and Arabana. Most SA revival groups have a long history of collaboration with university and education department linguists, and Kaurna revival is known nationally for its reclamation processes, public uses, and development of the Formulaic Method of language teaching (Amery, Chapter 32, this volume).

The Mobile Language Team, facilitated by the University of Adelaide, provides linguistic advice, technical support, and local training to the state's more remote language communities.

Adelaide also recently appointed Australia's first professor of endangered languages, who has proposed a new interdisciplinary field of "revivalistics," locating the linguistics of language revival within broader social, political, legal, and economic contexts (Zuckermann and Walsh 2014).

### ***Western Australia (WA)***

Aboriginal language centers were first developed in WA and remain a dominant feature locally, although most are more active in documentation and maintenance than revival. The state is also home to the Western Australia and Northern Aboriginal Language Alliance, which coordinates language activities across WA and the NT. Mirima Dawang Woorlabgerring Language and Culture Centre in the remote north provides a visiting Miriwoong "language nest" team offering short immersion lessons in local schools, and has facilitated a modified Master-Apprentice model that seeks to foster adult transmission. By contrast, Noongar from the more populous southwest has been under reclamation since 1986 and is one of 16 languages currently taught in schools under WA's 2005 syllabus. Noongar revival notably emphasizes public and symbolic uses including broadcast media, performance, and the recently developed Noongarpedia.

### ***Northern Territory (NT)***

Language activity in the remote NT focuses on language documentation, maintenance, and resistance to ongoing loss, rather than revival. The bilingual maintenance model, once a keystone of the NT education system, has been degraded by successive governments, and schools that once taught children in their own language are now obliged to run English-dominant programs (Simpson, Caffery and McConvell 2009). Nonetheless, a few revival programs exist in locations with a language center to resource second-language learning for schools where Kriol or Aboriginal English now prevail, although their operations may be sporadic, contingent upon the willingness of principals, the availability of teachers, and the funds to employ them.

### **Future Directions**

Language revival in Australia has made remarkable progress in a short space of time in reconnecting Indigenous peoples with their languages and bringing awareness of them to the wider population. In the absence of strong policy and comprehensive language planning, greatest emphasis has thus far been given to school-based second-language learning and public and symbolic uses. An opportunity to engage in some ideological clarification that clearly identified communities' desired goals and relevant, evidence-based strategies could substantially enhance the potential for their achievement. In some cases, that may yet include the restoration of first-language speaker populations and see languages normalized in people's homes and lives.

### **Notes**

- 1 Thanks are due to Desmond Crump, Christina Eira, Rob Amery, Mary-Anne Gale, Coleen Sherratt, Knut Olawsky, Jane Simpson, and Ailsa Purdon for their advice in compiling the national survey of Australian language revival. Any shortcomings are mine, not theirs.
- 2 These documents may also encompass non-revival contexts.



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## Further Reading

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