



VACL NEWS

Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages

J u n e 2 0 0 1

WORDS THAT WHIRL ROUND IN YOUR HEAD

I sat down to write about football. But my mind keeps wandering to something I heard on the radio. The idea that the second language we teach in our primary schools should be Aboriginal. The idea that until we do this we are, in fact, all assimilationists.

The grazier's wife speaking on the ABC put this far more delicately than I have. But basically that's what she meant. And she got me thinking.

That isn't possible. There isn't just one Aboriginal language; there are hundreds. You couldn't do it. Maybe you could take the dominant regional languages in each state and territory. No, that still wouldn't work.

And suddenly I heard myself. I think like a whitefella.

It's hard to explain how realising that you have been supporting the notion of assimilation, as opposed to reconciliation, is uplifting. But for me, possibly due to my Catholic upbringing, there's nothing like a good moment of revelation.

Language, of course! We talk about giving Aboriginal people a voice. But they've already got one. Hundreds in fact. But we don't want them to have those voices. We want them to speak with our voice, see things our way.

I'm no great linguist, as many an insulted Tibetan will testify. But the one thing I know about language is that it dictates the way we see the world. If you are a Tibetan, and a boy on a bike is hit with a stone, it is not the boy who is the subject of the story; it is the stone. For that moment the stone has more weight than the boy.

Since then I've talked to quite a few people about the idea of teaching Aboriginal dialect in primary school. Not many people have readily embraced the idea, as it would of course be a logistical nightmare. Us all being whitefellas, we look at things that way.

But there's more to it than that. "Why teach a dead language?" for me that was the question that nailed it. I knew what he meant. As white Australians we carry benign acceptance that the Aboriginal culture has died and there's nothing much we can do about it. Even though people are still alive who can and do speak in their native languages. In some cases just handful of people. Yes, these dialects are on the verge of extinction. But as yet, they are not dead.

The awful truth is we don't care if Aboriginal languages die. We've decided they're not important. Let's face it, in terms of educational value - value-equalling money - learning Japanese is going to be far more lucrative than learning Woi wurrung.

Excited, feeling like a blind woman who can suddenly see, I ran my newfound understanding past a Koori friend. "What do you think?" I asked. "Is that sort of right?"
"You're gettin there," she said.

Yesterday I would have said a lot had changed in 200 years. Now I'm not so sure. A week before I went to Bali I learnt to say "hello" and "thank you" in Balinese. Today was the first time I wondered how to say hello in Woi wurrung; and I've lived around Carlton and Fitzroy for nearly 30 years.

I can't help wondering what the other parents at my kid's primary school would think about the idea of teaching Aboriginal as a second language. If enough of us thought it a good idea, perhaps we could add it to the curriculum without having to bother the education department.

By Penelope Trevor

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TEACHING LANGUAGE IN CONTEXT IS A WINNER IN GIPPSLAND

Doris Paton and Lynne Dent conduct language and culture sessions with the cultural officers who are working out in the field.

Each month they visit different areas and sites of significance. This month they visited the old site of the Ramahyuck Aboriginal Mission and the cemetery. There the cultural officers are shown the bush foods of the area and given their language names. By taking cultural officers, language workers, and students out to the sites and the traditional areas it gives them a different perspective and enables them to learn the language in context.

They also visited the Knob Reserve. This was and still is an important working and meeting area to the local people. Here the cultural officers were able to observe the canoe trees and axe grinding grooves.

The Knob Reserve is the start of the Bataluk Trail and there is an information board, which gives all the details of the trail. The board also gives a presentation of the local wildlife and the cultural officers were able to learn the language names of these animals. Once again this is a positive reinforcement of teaching language in context.



Photo: Mick Harding - Cultural Officer Morwell



Photo: Jerry Loughton - Cultural Officer Sale

COMMUNITY LANGUAGE PROGRAM WORKSHOP Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation – Wodonga

VACL held a Community Language Program workshop at Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation on Thursday 24th and Friday 25th May 2001.

VACL staff, the community language workers, attended the Workshop and Ms Sharnthi Pillay gave a presentation.

The main focus of the workshop was to address the areas of Research, Language Retrieval, Linguistics and Education.

The workshop also provided an avenue for the language workers to form networks in order to support each other, as researching indigenous languages can be isolating and tedious work.



Photo above left:

Antoinette Smith, Sandra Smith, Sharnthi Pillay, Lynne Dent, Doris Paton, Lisa Arnold, Robyn Bradley, Bruce Pascoe and Bill Nicholson

Photo above right:

Antoinette Smith, Lynne Dent and Bill Nicholson

Photo below: Staff and Board Members Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation

Doreen Hemphill (Secretary to the board), Shirley Baerken (Systems Administrator), Carmen Dennis, Pam Griffin (Vice Chairperson) and Simon



THE FIELD OF LINGUISTICS – BY PROFESSOR BARRY BLAKE

Language is the means by which we study any subject and the study of language itself has a long history, but it is only recently that the study of language has emerged as the autonomous discipline of Linguistics.

In the late eighteenth century it was noticed that Sanskrit appeared to be related to Greek and Latin. This stimulated the study of historical Linguistics, and one of the

major achievements of the nineteenth century was to establish that most of the languages of Europe and India could be traced to a common ancestor, which could be partly reconstructed and which came to be known as Indo-European. Historical Linguistics, including dialectology, predominated until the 1940s, often under the name of philology. By then structuralist, descriptive Linguistics was becoming dominant, and in the United States there was an emphasis on the description of the native languages of North America. During this period phonetics, phonology (the organisation of speech sounds) and morphology (the structure of words) tended to be the focus of study.

By the 1960s Chomsky had begun to attract a large following. Chomsky claimed that children can acquire the complexities of natural language rapidly because they come to the task with innate, language-specific abilities. The emphasis came to be on syntax, mainly the syntax of English, although phonology was also treated in the new paradigm, and Chomsky's work attracted the attention of scholars in other fields such as philosophy and psychology and gave great stimulus to the discipline. Linguistics grew rapidly in the 1960s both in North America and Europe. A number of new departments were established and a number of departments of Phonetics became departments of Phonetics and Linguistics. The growth of Linguistics was not confined to syntax and phonology; branches of Linguistics that were neglected or under-developed began to flourish. These include semantics, sociolinguistics, pragmatics and psycholinguistics.

Linguistics in Australia

In the nineteenth century linguistic work in Australia consisted almost entirely of descriptive work on Aboriginal languages. This work was carried out by amateurs and culminated in the work of R. H. Mathews, a retired surveyor, who, though an amateur, published grammatical information in journals here and overseas up to 1909. The professional study of language started in the late 1930s with the first publications of Arthur Capell, who studied under Elkin, then Professor of Anthropology at the University of Sydney. In the 1940s professional Linguistics was again concentrated on descriptive work on Aboriginal languages and was carried out by scholars such as Tindale, Ronald and Catherine Berndt, and Strehlow, as well as Elkin and Capell. These were all either anthropologists or linguists-cum-anthropologists. In the 1950s the trend continued with scholars such as Wurm and O'Grady, along with Hale, an American who did extensive fieldwork on Australian languages and who remains a leading authority today.

Linguistics began to establish itself as a separate discipline in Australia in the 1960s at much the same time that it was expanding overseas. The first chairs were established (Monash 1964, Macquarie 1967, ANU 1968 and 1970) and a professional association was formed, the Australian Linguistic Society (1967). The sixties also saw the establishment of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (1964), which became for a decade or so the major funding source for those working on Aboriginal themes, including linguists. The Summer Institute of Linguistics, an international organisation dedicated to making the Bible available in as many of the world's languages as possible, began teaching summer courses in 1950 and established branches at Berrimah (NT) in 1961 and Kangaroo Ground (Vic) in 1983. In the 1960s and 1970s they were responsible for a major part of the linguistic research done in Australia on indigenous languages of the region. They are still active today.

Linguistics in Australia in the 1960s and 1970s was still largely focused on the study of Australian languages and to a lesser extent on languages of New Guinea and the Pacific.

In the wake of the Chomskian revolution linguistic theories proliferated, more than a score of syntactic theories appearing in the 1970s alone and a dozen or so phonological theories. A notable feature of the Australian linguistic scene is that these fashionable theories hardly ever came to dominate the new departments, except at Newcastle where an independent department was formed in 1975 under Cattell, a follower of Chomsky. Today adherence to a particular linguistic theory is still not a feature of the Australian scene.

In 1975 the University of Sydney appointed Halliday, one of the most eminent of linguists, as its foundation professor. Halliday had developed a theory known as systemics, which is quite independent of Chomsky. This is a comprehensive taxonomy, which facilitates the description of language in its social context, particularly text or discourse, and it relates language and ideology. Halliday has a great number of adherents here and abroad, particularly in Education.

At present there are departments of Linguistics at the ANU (one in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies and one in the Faculties), Sydney, Macquarie, Newcastle, New England, Monash, La Trobe and Melbourne, the last emerging as recently as 1996. There are sections or sub-departments at the University of NSW, the University of Queensland, the University of Western Australia, and the Northern Territory University, as well as the Institute for Aboriginal Development in Alice Springs and the Centre for Australian Languages and Linguistics in Batchelor. The University of Adelaide established a chair of Linguistics in 1992, but there is no Department of Linguistics -- only a program. There are also numerous linguists scattered through language departments, departments of Aboriginal Studies, Anthropology, Education, English, Philosophy, Psychology and Speech Pathology. In fact fewer than a third of the members of the Australian Linguistic Society are employed in departments of Linguistics.

MURA - THE ON-LINE CATALOGUE

AIATSIS (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies)

<http://mura.aiatsis.gov.au>

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- ◆ VIDEO ARCHIVE
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AUSTRALIAN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES COLLECTION

AIATSIS (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies)

The Australian Languages Collection was established early in 1981 to bring together printed material written in Australian items. The Collection, arranged by language, comprises the output of literacy centres where bilingual education programs exist, traditional and original stories, Bible translations, and factual and topical information on health, science, history, and other subjects.

There are over 900 languages represented in the Collection. It is the aim of the Library for the Collection to become a comprehensive collection of works written in all Australian Indigenous languages. The Library welcomes donations of materials and information about new publications.

As well as published materials, the Library holds manuscripts and other materials of linguistic interest. Researchers, particularly Institute grantees, deposit field notebooks and elicited language texts, songs and word lists.

Clients can access bibliographic details of items in the Language Collection using specific language names or by searching on Language as a location within the catalogue. Other search terms include:

Language & communication, Language acquisition, Language centres, Language classification & evolution.

See Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia for a good overview of Languages, Language Centres, Language Change and Language Classification.

www.aiatsis.gov.au

VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL PLACE NAMES DATABASE

The VACL's Victorian Aboriginal Place Names database project is nearing completion. Approximately 2,900 placenames have been entered into the database, which now makes it the most comprehensive collection of Aboriginal placenames in Victoria.

The database contains numerous categories of names including Existing Aboriginal placenames; Aboriginal names for places that have a non-Aboriginal placename; and Aboriginal names for 'unnamed' places.

The project has been a collaboration with project researchers Ian Clark and Toby Heydon, and linguists including Barry Blake, Lynne Dent, Luise Hercus, Bill Nicholson, and Bruce Pascoe. The database will be launched later this year, and will be available in several formats: as a single volume, in four regional volumes, and as

a CDROM. It is also intended that the database will be able to be accessed via the Corporation's Internet site. The database is in many respects the beginning of more research into Victorian Aboriginal placenames, and it is hoped that more intensive local studies will now be undertaken to add more names to the database.

VACL COMMITTEE

The Governing Committee and staff of VACL would like to take this opportunity to welcome three new members to the VACL Governing Committee. The new members (Mrs Lilian Tamiru, Mr Bruce Pascoe and Mr Herb Patten) were voted onto the Committee at the VACL AGM late last year.

Mrs Tamiru, Mr Pascoe and Mr Patten have extensive knowledge in indigenous languages and culture and will provide an invaluable contribution to VACL and the development of indigenous languages throughout Victoria.

Mr John Atkinson	Chairperson
Ms Jill Gallagher	Vice Chairperson
Ms Sandra Smith	Secretary
Ms Doris Paton	Treasurer
Ms Lynne Dent	
Ms Lilian Tamiru	
Mr Bruce Pascoe	
Mr Herb Patten	

Members of the Committee can be contacted through this office.