

## **Addressing the Ground of Language Endangerment**

**Dr Christina Eira**

Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages

### **Abstract**

In our urgency to address language endangerment, linguists may have lost sight of why this situation has occurred. Language endangerment in our time is not separable from issues of inequality between peoples, in contexts of colonisation and related situations. To play our part in addressing the trend effectively for the long term, it is essential that we address our potential to perpetuate these conditions through our practices as linguists.

As linguists, we are trained to act as authorities in language work. In addition, our positions in the social schema train us to maintain unequal relationships with language communities. Historically, we have moved through roles of benefactor, advocate, and empowerer. But all of these roles are based on a position of power – and ultimately it is power differentials which endanger languages. In my view, the next vital step is to understand our roles as participants in the project of decolonisation.

This paper opens up for discussion my current understandings of the practices I need to develop, as a non-Indigenous linguist working with language renewal programs in Australia, to ensure that I assist in decolonisation rather than continued colonisation – and thereby participate positively in the bigger picture of language reclamation.

### **Introduction**

It is commonly understood by linguists working on endangered languages that their status as endangered is no accident. Languages are endangered because of colonisation, stealing of children, genocide, and the need to use another language for access to health care, legal services, education and jobs. Simply put, what causes the loss of languages is dominance of one group of people over another. Nonetheless, when linguists participate in work on endangered languages, we focus on the language itself – collecting language, analysing language, its grammar, its words, etc. This has the effect of ignoring the ground of language endangerment. More importantly, it ignores the ways in which our work can actually perpetuate the status quo of unequal relations between groups. We are thereby risking unintentional collusion in the disappearance of languages. Because we still interact from a position of authority in the languages we are working with, we are maintaining the dominance of an outsider instead of acknowledging and supporting the authority of the community in their language.

In this paper I propose a shift in perspective on our work with communities in order to address the ground of language endangerment, and thereby improve the effectiveness of this work for the long term.

### **Context of the Paper**

This paper emerges most directly from an ongoing process of understanding and re-understanding my role as a non-Indigenous linguist working with Indigenous communities in south-eastern Australia. The Narungga,

Gunnai, Kulin, Gunditjmara, Dhudhuroa<sup>1</sup> and other peoples of this region are reviving their languages, from a starting point of very little in the way of active language knowledge held in the community, therefore requiring a heavy reliance on archival records and their analyses. The communities listed above are all directing their own language programs, which have been running for anything up to 20 years, despite significant obstacles such as drastic funding cuts, restrictive regulations on teaching and copyright, and the skeptical views on language revival of many linguists. Typically, the programs are directed by a reference group of Elders and other knowledgeable people, and employ one or more language workers from the community to do the bulk of the research, awareness raising and teaching. They collate and analyse the data, develop spelling systems and new words, prepare resources, and write stories, songs and speeches in language<sup>2</sup>. Linguists are not prominent. The urgency of community ownership in the process of reclamation is far more important than the need to ensure conformity with a linguist's notions of analytical process and verification. While I myself have taken up various roles in different communities, my central role is training-on-the-job and support of the language workers and other community members involved.

---

<sup>1</sup> Some of these group names cover several languages. For example, later I refer to Boonwurrung, which is a language of the Kulin nation.

<sup>2</sup> In Australia, it is usual to use the word 'language' (no article) to refer to an Indigenous language.

## Outline

I begin by outlining some of the roles that linguists in Australia have taken up in recent times, as part of the history of professional practice that leads us to where we are now. I then propose a next step, justifying it on discipline-internal grounds, then turning to look at problems now occurring without this step in place. An example from one language project is explored to demonstrate the possibilities of an alternative balance of roles. I then briefly consider some of the barriers to change, and indicate how the status quo is deeply entrenched in the fabric of our profession, requiring transformation at several levels. I offer some suggestions for ways forward, from both my own experience and the expressed views of a number of Indigenous community representatives. The questions raised, however, are necessarily left for ongoing consideration, by the conference, by all involved in fieldwork, and at the level of the discipline.

## Conceptualising Professional Practice

Linguists have seen ourselves in different ways over time, developing in our understanding of the inappropriacy of the 'researcher-researched' model. While in the experience of many Indigenous people this model clearly remains dominant, I would like to focus here on the more positive roles we have taken up. For me, to interrogate the roles that I might be happier to be associated with, rather than the ones I can easily condemn, allows me to reflect on the implications of my own professional practice, and thereby understand the need for a fundamental shift in our thinking.

## Researcher Roles

**Benefactor** We have seen ourselves as people with something to give Indigenous communities – skills in particular areas, an orthography, etc. In Australia it has been standard practice to structure research as an exchange – we investigate some aspect of grammar or phonology; the community gets a dictionary or some teaching materials.

**Advocate** We have seen ourselves as acting on behalf of Indigenous people, speaking to government, schools, or funding bodies about their needs. This became particularly prominent from the time of the Mabo and Wik cases in the 1990s<sup>3</sup>, when some of us were acting as expert witnesses for communities (see Sutton, 2002). Problems inherent in the advocacy model are discussed in detail in Cameron *et al* (1993).

---

<sup>3</sup> These were turning-point cases in which communities first achieved legal recognition of their rights to their land, with major ramifications for views of Australia's history as well as legal directions from that point on.

**Empowerer** Some of us came to value the principle that *knowledge is power*, and saw empowering communities as an important aspect of what we were doing. In Cameron *et al's* (1993) well-known article, this model is summarised as 'the use of interactive methods, the acknowledgement of subjects' own agendas and the sharing of expert knowledge' (p. 87).

This pathway through different roles perhaps describes a movement of increasing awareness of the inseparable nature of research and social context, and the intention to steer the effects of our involvement to positive ends. Each of these roles, however, is possible only if we see ourselves in the position of power. I can only give a community something if I have it and they lack it. I might advocate on their behalf if I expect to command more attention and respect than they. I would argue that even the notion of empowering communities relies on the view that I have both knowledge and power and therefore can elect to give some to someone else. As Gunnai teacher Lynnette Solomon-Dent says, 'They think they are doing a good deed helping the poor old blackfella' (p.c.).

The pathway, then, has reached a dead end at this point. We need a way forward that sidesteps this continued imbalance between 'researcher' and 'researched'.

## A Way Forward?

For Indigenous communities, reviving language is part of a much bigger picture of reclaiming sovereignty or self-determination. Australia is currently in a phase where every form of Indigenous sovereignty is falling under threat. Indigenous-run organizations and representative bodies have been defunded and disbanded; there are proposals in place for Government to micromanage the finances, healthcare and education of Indigenous communities, as well as enforcing dry zones with military backing if deemed necessary. Colonisation is in no way a thing of the past, and the need to reclaim authority over their own business is high on the Indigenous agenda. Reclaiming language, then, is an act of decolonisation embedded in these larger goals.

If language revival is ultimately reclaiming authority, reclaiming the right to be listened to, reclaiming respect for one's knowledge and abilities, and reclaiming power over your own business, then a linguist hoping to contribute will have to become part of that agenda:

Reviving language can be easily seen, thus, as a capacity building project, where people who recover their language...develop their capacity to become autonomous in Australian society, without losing their Indigenous identity. (Duarte, 2004)

This agenda needs to inform all aspects of our methodology. The way we analyse language, write about language, collect data – what we accept as important, what we accept as authoritative, how we come to decisions about what is correct – all of it must be done from the position that the Indigenous people are the ones with the authority to judge, and to decide, and to speak.

The languages of Australia have been stolen, in the sense that the right and capacity to maintain the knowledge was removed from the communities. The maintenance of this knowledge now is largely restricted to documentation in books, recordings and manuscripts in mainstream institutions. Access to these institutions remains most readily available to academics and to authorities recognised as such within this system. Moreover, it is academic evaluation and analysis of the data which is generally accepted as valid. The task of the linguist, then, is to act as a channel for ensuring that this stolen knowledge and authority flows back to the communities. If we continue to maintain ourselves as the authorities, the keepers of knowledge, then we haven't 'returned' anything. This work has parallels with the current project of returning Indigenous human remains to their people from museums and universities across the globe.

### **A View from Linguistics**

The proposal that linguists need to shift to an active contribution to the bigger project of decolonisation involves a step backwards in our control of procedures and analyses which is strongly indicated by fundamentals of linguistics itself – in both the defining limits of our discipline and the core principles of our theoretical base.

### **The Scope of Linguistics**

Recently I was invited to teach in a course in language revival for Indigenous people. At the start of the day I asked the group what their involvement with language was currently, and what they hoped to do with their language. I had allowed about 15 minutes for this introduction. The group proceeded to spend the entire morning explaining to me all manner of things, from their enjoyment of music through their love of the land to how important children are. I was reminded again what a very small slice of language is the focus of linguistics. Essentially, in linguistics, we look at structure. It's an important perspective. It allows us to build words and sentences in languages that haven't been spoken for decades. But I have to remember that this area, which is my claim to specialist knowledge and skills, is much, much smaller than language. I am simply not an authority on most of what people want from language.

Many Indigenous people complain that the linguist's way is irrelevant to language. Some see our processes of organising language, setting it out in tables etc. as containing and controlling it (K-M. Graham, interview

2006). The Gunnai language program has run successfully for years on a primarily oral basis, so that many issues dear to the heart of linguists, such as orthographic development, remain a low priority. Lynnette Solomon-Dent (p.c.) sees this privileging of the oral as more appropriate to a living language. In her experience, the ways that linguists like to record and then rely on the language in books is static – obscuring, restricting, or even challenging the life and growth of her language.

### **The Descriptive Principle**

According to the descriptive principle, a language is by definition that which is used by its community. This principle requires the linguist to accept that a language being renewed in the present, for the future, will necessarily diverge from the pre-colonisation language. This directly challenges our assumed definition of language revival. We know, it appears to us, what the language should be. With the best of intentions, we want to direct the community towards our view of their language. But their language, according to linguistic theory itself, is what they are using.

A current project in the Boonwurrung community involves selecting words to use in a series of children's books. As Elder Fay Stewart-Muir goes through the wordlists reconstructed from historical sources with me, she identifies words which are not pronounced according to the reconstruction. The word for Eagle, an important ancestral figure, is listed as /bunɖʒil/<sup>4</sup>, but everyone in the community says /bʌnɖʒil/. 'Bucket' or 'billycan' is reconstructed as /daŋʊk/<sup>5</sup>, but this word is known as /tanuk/. There are two possibilities in such cases. Either the reconstruction is incorrect for whatever reason, or the pronunciation of these words has changed. Either way, it would be absolutely incorrect in the present to claim that the reconstruction is correct and the community wrong. The descriptive principle requires that the language is defined as its current usage – which necessarily includes features of language change.

### **Objectivity**

This was expressed nicely in the Call for Papers for this conference (N. Ostler), as a risk that 'prior knowledge may interfere in [linguists'] objectivity'. In the face of the unfamiliarity of the landscape with which revival languages present us, collecting and analysing data with objectivity requires us to put aside our prior knowledge as an obstruction to comprehending the new knowledge

---

<sup>4</sup> The source in question, Blake (1991), uses a reconstruction spelling which is not necessarily read the same way internationally, so I have transcribed it into IPA.

<sup>5</sup> The choice of /d/ over /t/ in the reconstruction spelling is arbitrary.

in front of us. The language names Wergaia and Bangerang are known respectively as /wɜ'gaja/ and /bæŋə.æŋ/. My prior knowledge tells me that the phonology of both languages fits into a three- or at most five-vowel system – not to mention first-syllable stress. This gives me considerable difficulty in accepting the expansion of the vowel system to include /ɜ/ and /æ/. But the principle of objectivity requires that I do accept the changes in language evidenced in contemporary speech – and not just the ones I am comfortable with. These are living languages – and living languages change:

It needs to be now assumed, in our understanding that communities are at the forefront of it being an integral part of the actual archival or the continuation of the language, modifications of it, because a language is not static, and so languages grow, they continually grow, they're always changing. (A.W. Rigney, interview 2005)

### Language in Context

Descriptive linguistics is understood to be an investigation of language in its context. In Indigenous Australia, there is no escaping the fact that the context of language includes the effects of colonisation, past and present. I would argue, then, that any coherent analysis of the languages must incorporate an understanding of this context. This will include the various ways in which communities decide to amalgamate or separate sources, words and orthographies as they balance the need for enough language to use against the need for distinct identities. It includes the influence of not only English but also Indigenous contact languages arising from enforced cohabitation during the mission period. And it includes the need to understand and address the adverse effects of the processes of linguistic research in themselves.

### Subverting Our Goals

Linguists assuming control over a project can be in the way of language revival in a number of ways. In the first place, our desire for optimal reconstruction from available data can stand in the way of a community's interest in and potential for reclaiming their language. As Alitja Wallara Rigney says,

... they'd say, 'Oh, I don't know, there wouldn't be enough information', or 'You can't try and find it'. But we do in the end, because we've all made this commitment – we've all got a passion for language, and we want to see it work. For our spirit, because we've been looking for it since contact, and we can actually reclaim some of it. (interview 2005)

Indigenous people are often quite cynical about the apparent insistence of non-Indigenous academics on

being the ones to *know*. Lynnette Solomon-Dent (p.c.) reports the 'offer' of one linguist to come and teach her her language, after 20 years of teaching it herself and 40 years of learning it. There is also the question of who decides what is important to know. Thieberger (2002) raises this question in language maintenance contexts, challenging the linguist's choice of sometimes quite esoteric elements of a language as crucial to the 'genus' of the language. Such emphases can be at best irrelevant to what motivates people to reclaim their language. Community emphases may be on quite different aspects, such as detailed cultural associations with particular words.

The research view of knowledge assumes that it is important for its own sake, and therefore should be made available for all, into the future. The irony here is that actually only a few are able to access knowledge developed and held in institutions. The practice of communities can be quite at odds with this view – for some, the right to knowledge must be earned; for most, the heritage community have first rights, if not exclusive rights, to the knowledge:

The first thing is that you want to give it back to the traditional owners really don't you, that's the first thing. ...And then, well if other people in the broader community want to come in and learn that, well that's fine. But the main thing is that you give it back to your own people like we are doing. (Anon., interview 2005)

It must be remembered that the condition of rights to knowledge can be so strong that in the past Elders sometimes declined to pass on their knowledge at all in order to protect it from the invaders (Mattingley *et al*, 1992). To cross this line too far can be to risk a great deal.

Linguistics fieldwork is plagued with projects, materials, orthographies and other products that remain unused by communities, or unused outside of the classroom. Perhaps worse still, in some communities splits develop over who uses the linguist's work and who doesn't. Orthographies are particularly prone to this. Several language workers have pointed out to me how counterintuitive the linguist's orthographic choices are. A common complaint is that our standard representation of /u/ as <u> looks like /ʌ/ to an English speaker in many contexts.

For a non-Indigenous linguist to teach the language raises a plethora of issues. There are questions of who is an appropriate person to develop language. While a language undergoing revival is not fully developed, any use of language, let alone the fairly intensive use involved in preparing class materials, is developing

language. Beyond a certain point, then, it becomes a question whether the language being developed in this way still belongs to the community. There are also issues of depth of knowledge. As Lynnette Solomon-Dent explains (p.c.), the Elders pass on little bits of knowledge over many years in relation to their assessment of the growing understanding of their apprentices. How, then, could a linguistics study of two years hope to encapsulate enough knowledge to teach? From the linguistics point of view, sounds, words and some grammar can be taught, but language is much bigger than linguistics. For me, a key issue in the area of teaching is the role of the teacher as an authority figure. If the goals of language revival include to reclaim authority and autonomy, then it is vital for Indigenous students in a language class to see their own people modelling this role. In situations where a non-Indigenous linguist is positioned (intentionally or otherwise) in the role of gatekeeper of knowledge, I have often observed the phenomenon described by Uncle Lewis O'Brien:

If they went and did this whole guru bit, well they'd fail – it wouldn't get anywhere, would it? It'd fail because people get annoyed at mental blocks they have when they speak the language, they'd get caught every now and again, they'd – oh, that didn't sound right, or – they don't make sense of that. (interview 2005)

In all of this, our urgency to revive language can be quite counterproductive to our own goals. It is not the case that languages should be revived at any cost, as some costs can endanger the success of language reclamation itself.

### Letting Go of the Process

To be successful, language revival has to be directed and controlled in the day-to-day detail by the community. This includes many of the more linguistic aspects of language planning, such as making final decisions on pronunciation, filling the 'gaps' in the records (or deciding not to), and making decisions about spelling.

Early in the Narungga language revival project, a speech written by Kevin O'Loughlin was influential in forming the basis for generations of speeches since. Below are extracts from three successive texts, showing different stages of language reclamation:

(a) from speech by Kevin O'Loughlin, 2001

Barni ngaitju banggara, barni ngaitju wardly  
 Ngai bamadja with Narungga wara, Narungga wampana  
 Ngai Narungga yardly  
 Narungga banggara goongarradja Narungga wara

This is my country and this is my home.

I am travelling with the Narungga Language and Narungga culture  
 I am a Narungga man.  
 The Narungga Language is born of the Narungga land.

(b) from speech by Tania Wanganeen, 2003

Ngayi Narungga anggi.  
 Barni ngayidju banggara, barni ngayidju wardli.  
 Narungga banggara gungaradja Narungga wara.  
 Yarda ngadlugu mayi yunggadja

I'm a Narungga woman.  
 This is my land, this is my home.  
 The Narungga language is born of the Narungga land.  
 The land provides our food.

(c) from dedication poem introducing the community dictionary (Narungga Aboriginal Progress Association, 2006)

Warra miya wandidja,  
 Walli bammari.  
 Ngallugu dhura graadi-graadidja,  
 Warra walli barluna.  
 Warra, Nharungga banggara gungaradja.  
 Ngallugu warra,  
 Ngallugu banggara,  
 Ngallugu wardli.

The language was sleeping,  
 It was not lost.  
 Our people are proud,  
 The language has survived.  
 The language is born of Narungga land.  
 This is our language,  
 Our land,  
 Our home.

These extracts reveal a number of features of the development of the language over this period. In the first place, Extract (a) does not use a phonemic spelling – there are variations between <u> and <oo>, and the use of <tj, dj, p, b> implies that voicing is distinctive. Extract (b) is mostly spelt phonemically, but further adjustments to the orthography are evident by the time of Extract (c) (e.g. *Narungga* > *Nharungga*, *ngadlugu* > *ngallugu*)<sup>6</sup>. The 2001 speech represents an advanced relexification, with some English words retained, and word order which largely follows an English norm (e.g. Ngai bamadja with Narungga wara, lit. 'I travel-PRES with Narungga

<sup>6</sup> The former indicates a late decision to apply the project spelling to the language name itself; the latter represents a shift from morphophonemic to phonemic spelling in this case (but not all cases).

language')<sup>7</sup>. From Extract (b) onwards there are no English words, and the writers are experimenting with variable word order for expressive purposes (such as the line-by-line emphasis on *warra* 'language' in Extract (c)). The texts also demonstrate cumulative lexical extension: *wampana* 'knowledge' > 'wisdom', *yunggadja* 'give' > 'provide', *graadi-graadidja* 'vain' > 'proud'. The 2003 speech shows initial adjustments to and expansions of the original text, but the 2006 text has moved a long way in terms of new ideas and forms of language.

The point here is that non-phonemic spelling, use of English word order and a translation approach to creating new texts are all strategies which as a linguist I find difficult to cope with. But in reclaiming their language according to their own priorities and allowing it to develop organically, the Narungga people are succeeding in reinstating forms of their language that are steadily less reliant on English models, establishing a consistent (and phonemic) orthography, making the language available as soon as possible to people who have little language experience outside of English, and, perhaps most importantly for the life of a language, developing their own discursive traditions. If I myself had developed new meanings for words, designed an orthography, written a speech or insisted on historically verified grammar, none of this would have happened. The Narungga language might even now have been largely a sterile object of study, and I would still be the person responsible for deciding what was correct.

### Barriers to Change

Why do we continue to maintain problematic approaches to language revival? There are a number of issues here, and certainly not predominantly lying within the control of the individual.

#### Internalised Training

The process of gaining accreditation as a qualified linguist entails becoming an authority in our specialist areas. We are expected to acquire the practice of this authority in a variety of contexts. We publish our work in peer-reviewed, ideally international, journals. We gain confidence in standing at the front of a lecture theatre transmitting our knowledge. So in fieldwork contexts we have to re-learn not being an authority, re-learn that there are many kinds of knowledge and ways of becoming knowledgeable, and re-learn that the academic way of knowing is only one way. It is no better than other ways.

Secondly, people with higher education are privileged in society. We can expect access to prestigious and well-paid employment. What we say is listened to and respected in the broader community. This is also a form

---

<sup>7</sup> The default word order of Narungga according to the earliest sources of sentences (around 1919) is verb final.

of training. We learn at a deep level that we are the people who should be listened to and valued in many ways. There is certainly no problem in being valued! But in my view, gaining this position then entails the responsibility to rebalance, working to ensure that other people are valued, listened to, respected and recognised (even paid!).

#### Institutional Paradigms

A very significant issue which is beyond the scope of this paper is the fact that our profession actually requires us to take on these roles of authority. To publish in our own names, claim responsibility for work done, obtain research funding and so on is a precondition for continuing in research, maintaining employment as an academic, being listened to. Ultimately, if we neglect these aspects of our position, we will not be able to continue working for communities. This is a much bigger problem than one person can handle. It requires large-scale change.

#### On the Ground

It is crucial to move from thinking about all these issues to actually doing something different in areas where we can, in the day-to-day practice of linguistics. The ideas listed below reflect only the directions I myself am trying to take in my attempts to move towards participating in decolonisation. I apologise if some of this comes across like a list of New Year's resolutions! My hope is that the community of linguists, as well as Indigenous people, will dialogue with me, to help me develop these ideas, to expand them into a range of styles and pathways applicable to our various situations, and ultimately to redress the bases on which linguists are trained and progress in our careers.

#### In the Community

I now think it is important to –

- Actively sit down and remember not to take charge (otherwise we'll do it in spite of ourselves).
- Listen most of the time, talk when asked to. People are so used to non-Indigenous people talking over them, they often need a lot of listening space before they are willing to talk.<sup>8</sup>
- Avoid deciding things, even when asked to. Communities and linguists alike are used to the norm where the linguist or non-Indigenous person decides things. It can take a while to unlearn.
- When decisions are being made, avoid being the person 'holding the chalk' (Stebbins, 2001). The

---

<sup>8</sup> I once referred to this as the 'sit down, shut up and listen' model to two senior Indigenous women. They laughed, and said they call it the same.

person writing up decisions necessarily has the role of deciding what to write.

- If someone asks an open question, leave it for someone else to answer. We assume very easily that any question is directed to us.
- If someone wants a story, song etc. written or translated, don't do it – help the person to do it themselves.
- Remember, re-learn, that the people we are working with are the people with the right to know their language – not us.

## Writing Up

It is a required convention of academic research to ground everything in other published research. We need to begin turning this around in order to privilege how the community sees things.

In relation to studying languages of revival, I believe we need to move away from the emphasis on analysing the language as if it stopped in the 1830s and start discussing what people use right now. If Aboriginal people in the present use the affricate /ɖʒ/, as those from the south-east invariably do, then it is incorrect to list the stop /ʒ/. In addition, we need to ensure that our analysis is broad enough to incorporate issues of pronunciation and meaning which remain unsettled, resisting the imperative to 'solve' a 'problem' before community usage settles on a norm. Hoogenraad (1999) suggests that even an orthography may take a few decades to settle into a 'standard' form through trialling in the community.

At the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages, we are embarking on a plain-language project, intended to present linguistics concepts, analyses and procedures in terms that can readily be understood by the non-linguist, and by people without a higher education. Our position is that it is not excusable to say 'they're not interested' or 'they wouldn't understand'. 'They' will understand if 'we' write it in a way they can understand, instead of writing in our own linguists' language. This example comes from earlier work, in the Narungga language project :

When you are talking about something happening *now*, add **-dja** to the end of the verb. We will call this the **present**:

Nharangga warra wardli-nu bamma-dja  
Narungga language home-to come-

### PRESENT

'The Narungga language is coming home'.  
(Wanganeen & Eira, 2006, p. 32)

In all likelihood, linguists are generally aware of the range of work that community participants are or could be involved in:

... all aspects of the project, including developing language research skills, collecting language data, documenting language, using equipment / technologies, analysing language data, making decisions about publication... (FATSIL, 2004 p. 16)

In our writing, however, the work done by the community participants tends to become invisible. In a recent study of ten linguistics texts on research involving fieldwork in Aboriginal communities, verbs in the semantic fields of recording, analysis and product development were overwhelmingly attributed to linguists alone, and assistance and instruction were also more often attributed to linguists than to community participants (Eira, forthcoming). While activities relating to language planning were attributed to community participation, the only other fields relating to language which referred to communities were relationship, psychological association, and language use.

Although rebalancing this will require significant focus by individual researchers, this is one area where a shift will be needed in our academic systems of accreditation at all levels. I personally think that a period of overbalance is needed, comparable to principles of positive discrimination – as a non-Indigenous linguist I am already acknowledged enough!

People interviewed in 2005 underlined the need to redress this invisibility, not only for the present and future, but also for the past:

Language to me is the power from the past. Language to me brings about a spiritual commitment to the past, and it's going into the future. Because I think the continuum is never-ending, and we must acknowledge where it comes from. That is just so essential, because our old people must be acknowledged. And they must be given the status that others – that non-Indigenous people have been given. And through the same process. (A.W. Rigney)

Tindale did a lot of work in advancing and documenting language. But you know, it's still that old imperialist idea. You put the academic, the researcher in front, highlighting his or her importance. When in actual fact, you know part of the language is actually, and part of keeping the language and having it out there, is to actually keep it, recognise where it comes from, and to recognise whose language it actually is. And so, that's the way it's got to be. (B. Marshall)

Redressing credit for work and knowledge was seen as a high priority even in the face of established systems for tracking sources:

If we go down the track of just doing it because it's under a recognizable name like Tindale, we'll never ever get the point across that Louisa was the one that gave Tindale the information. And so we're in the process of change, and we've got to change people's way of looking at the world. That means that we're going to have to start again so that we get the information across that it is Louisa's work and Tindale worked in partnership with her, and therefore we've got to change the way that people think. (A.W. Rigney)

With the power that writing has to create and maintain attitudes, concepts and even practices, the ways we write may well have significant power to effect change in the fabric of our discipline.

### Conclusion

Linguists can have a vital role in addressing language endangerment. Our training gives us a great deal to share with communities in terms of revitalising knowledge held in archives, recreating forgotten grammatical structures, and applying linguistic principles of their language as available through historical and typological investigation. The potential of this usefulness is often obstructed at this stage, due to our maintenance of the underlying imbalance of power and authority. A shift to learning a new role as contributors to the broader project of decolonisation could release considerable potential in increasing the effectiveness of our work, as well as assisting in bringing parallel goals of (re)conciliation and collaboration into a new phase.

### References

- Blake, B. (1991). Woiwurrung, the Melbourne Language. In R.M.W. Dixon & B. Blake (Eds.), *The Handbook of Australian Languages*, Vol. 4 (pp. 31--122).
- Cameron, D., Frazer, E., Harvey, P., Rampton, B. & Richardson, K. (1993). Ethics, Advocacy and Empowerment: Issues of Method in Researching Language. *Language and Communication*, 13(3), 81--94.
- Duarte, P. (2004). *Indigenous Languages of Australia: Revival and Reclamation*. Unpublished Report to the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (Indigenous Languages of Victoria Implementation Group).
- Eira, C. (forthcoming, 2009). Linguists and Communities: Discursive Practice and the Status of Collaborative Language Work in Indigenous

Communities. *Language and Intercultural Communication*.

FATSIL (2004). *Guide to community protocols for Indigenous Language projects*. Available at [http://www.fatsil.org.au/images/pdfs/fatsil\\_protocols\\_guide.pdf](http://www.fatsil.org.au/images/pdfs/fatsil_protocols_guide.pdf)

Hoogenraad, R. (1999). *Why Warlpiri is Hard to Read: Designing Optimal Orthographies for Minority Languages*. Unpublished paper presented at the Applied Linguistics Association Australia Conference, Perth 1999.

Mattingley, C. & Hampton, K., with Nungas and others (1992 [1988]). *Survival in our Own Land: 'Aboriginal' Experiences in 'South Australia' since 1836*. Hodder & Stoughton, Sydney.

Narungga Aboriginal Progress Association (2006). *Nharungga Warra – Narungga Dictionary*. 1<sup>st</sup> edition. Maitland, South Australia: Narungga Aboriginal Progress Association.

Stebbins, T.N. (2001). Emergent Spelling Patterns in Sm'algyax. *Written Language and Literacy*. 4(2), 163--194.

Sutton, P. (2002). Linguistic Evidence and Native Title Cases in Australia. In J. Henderson & D. Nash (Eds.), *Language in Native Title*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.

Thieberger, N. (2002). Extinction in Whose Terms? Which Parts of a Language Constitute a Target for Language Maintenance Programmes? In D. Bradley & M. Bradley (Eds.), *Language Endangerment and Language Maintenance* (pp. 310--328). London: RoutledgeCurzon.

Wanganeen, T. & Eira, C. (2006). *The Fragments of Budder's Waddy: A New Narungga Grammar*. Maitland, South Australia: Narungga Aboriginal Progress Association.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude for the openness and support of a number of people and groups, including their readiness to allow me to use their words and ideas in this paper, read drafts and offer further advice. These are especially: Lynnette Solomon-Dent (Gunnai), Fay Stewart-Muir (Boonwurrung), Michael Wanganeen, Tania Wanganeen and Monique Smith (Narungga Aboriginal Progress Association), and some of the students of Certificate III in Australian Indigenous Language Studies. I have also made use of publicly available material from earlier interviews with Uncle Lewis O'Brien, Alitja Wallara Rigney, Kathleen-Mary Graham, Brian Marshall, and another person who wished to remain anonymous. Thanks also to Laura Cook and Tonya N. Stebbins for comments on ideas and drafts. Finally, I am indebted to the people of the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages for their support of me in writing and presenting this paper.