

INQUIRY INTO LANGUAGE LEARNING IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander Affairs

SUBMISSION BY DAVID THOMPSON

Summary

- A 3-year Language Learning Resources Project commenced at Lockhart River in 2010.
- Lockhart River people face pressure of change at the home base and in residence in the city of Cairns.
- The development of bicultural skills is important for modern living and is better achieved from a base of strong cultural identity.
- Language learning/revitalisation is an important element along with other arts and cultural activities for supporting strong Indigenous identities.

Introduction

Linguist Clair Hill and I are involved in a language maintenance project at the Aboriginal community of Lockhart River, Cape York Peninsula. I am also a trained linguist. The project has 3-year funding from DEWHA under the Maintenance of Indigenous Languages and Records (MILR) program, commencing from July 2010. I have also been involved in the region as a consultant anthropologist in native title matters for 16 years and I am currently involved with the Lockhart River community in research for a PhD in anthropology on the topic of Aboriginal mobility and cultural change. My earlier linguistic work in the 1970s included the recording and analysis of Umpila and Kuuku Ya'u dialects and establishing a working orthography for them. I also clarified the coastal dialects and their boundaries.

Cultural background

My current PhD research is considering the situation of Aboriginal people of Lockhart River both at the remote township and in the city of Cairns. At both centres there is an evident resilience of cultural values and identity among Lockhart River people but there is ongoing tension in relation to pressures to adapt and conform to mainstream social and economic expectations and attractions. Modern technologies aid their mobility and also their means of communication in family networks. I find in Cairns that Lockhart River people have regular contact with people at the home community and in the local Cairns network. I observe the continued use of an English-lexifier Creole that dominates communication at Lockhart River together with a range of common words from traditional dialects of their home community.

These intercultural tensions lead to some individuals learning to successfully operate biculturally in employment in the city environment. A greater number remain unemployed and interact mainly in their own cultural networks or enclaves in the city. A smaller number are homeless, being unable to obtain suitable affordable accommodation or through being affected by substance abuse.

At the home community of Lockhart River, I find that most people prefer the rural environment, their closeness to family, traditional country and values. A few have spent time away in the city for work or education but have returned to contribute to the life and development of their home community. Individuals often travel out of the community for health services or education or artistic events or to visit relatives for a while, but ones I have spoken to do get homesick and are glad to get back home. The closeness of extended family networks is the most enduring feature of the cultural life in both remote and city locations.

The home community is also subject to cultural change and stress in the impact of modern influences alongside weakened traditional authorities and customary practices and values. With the Alcohol Management Plan in operation in the community, people have told me that it has greatly improved family life and safety, but alcohol is still accessed outside the community and there has been an increase in drug use. There is a challenge to community leaders and workers to build a productive environment of activities for the younger generations to ensure a positive future for them.

I have arrived at the view after many years involvement with the Lockhart community that Aboriginal people are best able to develop bicultural skills for modern living on the basis of a sound and stable cultural identity on the one hand, and an exposure to the wider world through secondary and higher education on the other hand. Without a sound and stable cultural identity, people find it more difficult to deal with change and they are more prone to fall into aimless and dysfunctional living. Language learning and the use of traditional and contemporary language forms are important elements in recovering and holding a strong and confident cultural identity.

Language learning and use is an important complement to the dynamic work of the local Community Arts Centre (established in 1997) and the renewal of customary dancing that I have observed in recent years. These all support in a holistic way the development of strong foundations for such a confident cultural identity. The Alcohol Management Plan has brought a renewal of family life to the community and provides an encouraging environment for such activities to flourish. In particular, elders, men, women and children made extensive preparations for a large body of Lockhart River people to participate in the Laura Festival in July 2011. The benefits of this cultural activity was seen when the 40 dancers were presented with the winning shield.

The language context

The two dialects that have remained extant at Lockhart River are the closely related *Kuuku Ya'u* and *Umpila* dialects. These coastal dialects, originally spoken to the north and south of the present community, were part of a cluster of four closely related dialects including inland *Kaanju*. When I lived at Lockhart River in the 1970s, cultural traditions and language were under pressure from the assimilationist policy of the time. Middle and older generations had a working knowledge of the main local dialects but the younger generations were now growing up with a local Creole as their first language. At that time I was able to record and analyse the local traditional language to develop a standard orthography.

Today there is only a handful of old people who have a reasonably fluent knowledge of language while the next generation can understand more than they can speak. Younger people have a limited knowledge of a few common words to speak and some passive knowledge through popular songs in traditional language that still form a vibrant tradition. Recordings of these songs from the 1960s and 1970s now on CD are frequently requested today. These songs and accompanying dances, together with periodic revival of initiation ceremonies since that period, support the retention of language knowledge and have been and remain important elements of contemporary tradition and identity. This has extended in the last few years to several local bands producing and recording new songs, some in their traditional language.

Today there is an increased awareness of language heritage such as in the naming of sites and locations in country and by artists providing relevant names to accompany their artwork.

The current language-learning project

Over the years, the local school has attempted to have a culture program with occasional language classes at different times, mainly by bringing in elders to the school for cultural activities. The current language learning project that Clair Hill and I are undertaking is home/community-based, however, on the basis that language maintenance and learning needs to take place in the home between generations if it is to be an effective part of everyday life. Nevertheless, the local school will have a complementary role in supporting and using the resources of the project.

In a community survey prior to the commencement of the project, many people expressed concern at the decline in language use and supported a program to help the community to recover and maintain knowledge and use of language. In the 3-year project we aim to produce ten language-learner's guide modules based around short conversations in language and illustrated with local artwork. These conversations on particular everyday themes are interspersed with language learning segments related to them. For example, they feature useful conversational words and phrases; information on counting, talking about number and size; information on how one constructs a noun phrase that describes a quality of an entity; explanation and examples of verb tenses and different types of sentence structures; explanation of correct use of case endings; information on talking about locations and directions etc. etc. Two learning booklets have been produced so far, each with an accompanying CD containing audio of the conversations. These resources have been well received and they are stimulating informal home-based learning and sharing.

An additional small grant enabled us to trial a language dictionary using a java application that operates on mobile phones. This has also created positive responses and is getting casual use by young people in particular.

Recommendations for Indigenous languages policy

1. Language learning and maintenance works best in home and community-based programs that complement and integrate with other cultural activities.

2. School-based learning of traditional language supports cultural self-esteem and is strengthened when it complements a community-based program.
3. A bilingual approach with traditional language is not appropriate at Lockhart River but a bilingual approach to the use of Lockhart River Creole (the children's first language) should be implemented in the early years to assist with the learning of both standard English and the traditional language.
4. Provide for study and use of vibrant Aboriginal Creole languages in giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages in Australia.
5. Similarly, Lockhart River Creole should be used in providing interpreting and translating services, particularly in the legal and health systems and in the city environment.
6. The use of multimedia such as computer, mobile phone, CD, DVD and printed materials is effective in providing and using a diversity of contemporary communication devices both in the home and in the wider community.

David Thompson
30 August 2011

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QUESTIONNAIRE
CONCERNING LOCKHART RIVER, CYP
PREPARED BY DAVID THOMPSON and CLAIR HILL

1. What are the languages spoken in your community?

Of the four closely related dialects – Kuuku Ya’u, Uutaalnganu, Umpila and Kaanju – which comprise a language group of north-eastern CYP, the predominant dialects still spoken at Lockhart River are Kuuku Ya’u and Umpila. Umpila and Kuuku Ya’u are respectively the southern and northern coastal varieties from this language.

Today, the local vernacular in the community is Lockhart River Creole, and has been since a decade or two into Mission times, i.e. approx 1940-50s. This is an English-lexifier Creole.

2. How well are they spoken by children, adults and elders?

Language is spoken fluently at depth by 3 or 4 elderly adults. Many mature age adults are semi-speakers of language. Many young people have some hearing knowledge of language but may speak only a few words interspersed in their first language, Lockhart River Creole.

3. Describe your group and project

- We are two linguists who have worked with speakers of this language over varying periods of time and we are now collaborating in a project to develop language learning resources and support language maintenance in various ways in the community.
- We commenced a 3-year part-time language maintenance project in July 2010 funded by the Maintenance of Indigenous Languages and Records (MILR) program in DEWHA. We do not reside in the community but travel there periodically to record and develop the resources. This project is auspiced by the Lockhart River Council, and is additionally affiliated with the Lockhart River Art Centre.
- The main activity of the project is to produce a set of multimedia language learners guide modules (booklets and CD packages).
- This is a critical time to initiate this project while the few remaining elderly people who are fluent speakers are still with us. The first priority has been to record sufficient narrative and conversational material to ensure completion of the project.
- This is a community-based project (as opposed to a school-based project) so we are creating resources targeted at all age groups to encourage inter-generational language interaction.
- A core group of 10 persons are involved in the recording of language material, reviewing draft learning materials and preparing artwork to illustrate the resources.
- In the first year of the project, we have distributed approximately 200 copies each of the first two learners guide modules (booklet and CD) to Lockhart River people. These will also reach more family members in their homes.

Copies have also been distributed to the School, Clinic and Knowledge Centre/local library.

4. What activities do you do to record or encourage the use of languages, including local languages?

Developing resources: We are primarily involved in developing a series of ten language learners guide modules using illustrated booklets and other media such as CD, DVD, computer and mobile phone dictionaries (java phone app).

Contributing to language documentation: The project is recording new language material, mostly conversational narratives and mock dialogues for use in the learners' guides. Much of the guide focuses on presenting under-documented everyday conversational events. Documented conversational material is currently lacking for Umpila/Kuuku Ya'u, but is the material of most relevant to revitalisation work in the speech community.

Increased language awareness: Our involvement in the project and Clair Hill's PhD research and documentation work (as part of a 3 year ELDP funded CYP documentation project) have helped to stimulate greater language awareness in the community and its use in place names, publications and art.

Across organisations and age-groups: We are involving multiple organisations and age-groups in the project. For example, the local school is assisting with contributions of stories and artwork by the children for one module and will benefit from use of the project's resources as they are developed; the Art Centre is supporting the project with facilities and access to speakers and artists; language activities and the Art Centre jointly support cultural retention work (e.g. supporting production and documentation of traditional material culture); the project is developing resources targeted at youth, e.g. mobile phone language app.

5. How are your languages, including your local languages taught in the school?

The local school has had a limited program of basic language learning run with the help of a local speaker. This is part of a cultural retention program at the school, and largely deals with lexical knowledge. The school plans to make use of the learning materials from our project also.

6. What interpreting and translating services are available in your local languages?

There are no formal interpreting and translating services available at Lockhart River. We provide informal assistance on language use in the community, mainly in checking correct spellings for community resources and promotional materials.

There are no interpreting or translating services available for Lockhart River Creole. There is limited awareness that Creole is a distinct language from English, either within the speech community or within the transient support staff in Lockhart River.

7. What are the main difficulties facing your project?

The project is limited by the lack of a Language Resource Centre (local or regional) and fulltime linguist in the community - there is not the infrastructure or available personnel to support this. Their provision would greatly assist the promotion and application of the language learning project in the community. Given the extremity of the language loss situation and the age of the speakers, fulltime language work in Lockhart River is particularly much needed at this time.

8. What are you aiming to achieve in the future?

Most specifically, we are aiming to complete the series of 10 learners guide modules (booklets, CDs/DVDs) in the next two years and support their use as far as practicable.

More generally, we are aiming to continue general documentation and descriptive work with speakers as is practicable given their age and health.

Umpila and Kuuku Ya'u Publications/References

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