

September 4, 2011

This is an individual submission to the Inquiry into Language Learning in Aboriginal Communities.

I am an Associate Professor of Linguistics at Yale University and have been working with Aboriginal people on language topics since 1998, when I was an undergraduate at the Australian National University. This letter is a submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into the use of Aboriginal languages in communities. My comments here are based on work in the Kimberley Region of Western Australia, Eastern Arnhem Land (especially Milingimbi Community), and far Western Queensland. My research also involves considerable archival work, especially through the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra. I have been working as an academic in the USA since graduating with a Ph.D. from Harvard University in 2004. This work span communities with both highly endangered languages, as well as ones where English is not much used in daily life.

Background

Firstly, there have been several previous Inquiries which have made recommendations specific to language and culture. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, for example, includes findings that staff in service organisations are ill-equipped both linguistically and culturally to meet the needs of many of their Indigenous clients. The 2007 Northern Territory inquiry report, Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle: “Little Children are Sacred”, also made considerable reference to the 2004-2005 report Indigenous Languages and Culture in Northern Territory Schools. The authors of the Ampe Akelyernemane report noted that many of the recommendations of the 2004-2005 report were yet to be acted on, and made many of the same educational recommendations.

I have yet to see evidence that the educational recommendations of the Ampe Akelyernemane report have been enacted; therefore my first general comment would be to urge the committee to take these educational recommendations seriously and to find ways in which they can be taken on board. Many of us in the research community are more than a little skeptical that yet another inquiry will have any effect on the current situation. We have had several inquiries which have made sensible recommendations based on considerable evidence, but these recommendations have not been acted on. It seems that there is quite a bit of money and good-will in parliament for inquiries, fact-finding missions, surveys (we are about to start the third survey of Aboriginal Language Use). These inquiries do not result in any meaningful changes to the situation for language speakers unless their findings are implemented.

I have two points to make in this submission. First, language policy has to be founded on a principle of respect for the languages and their speakers. Aboriginal people are frequently treated as a 'problem to be solved', not as people with rights, feelings, and opinions of their own. Secondly, measures to improve education outcomes in indigenous communities where English is not the dominant language must be based on a serious commitment to education in the local language, by qualified staff. This issue of staff qualification is important, and is part of a more general problem of schooling in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Respect for Language Respect costs nothing, and one of the most useful things that an inquiry such as this could do that would not cost anything would be to give greater recognition to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. These languages are just as good as any other languages, just as complex, just as capable of being used in 21st Century Australia. Speakers of these languages are not subscribing to some Stone Age tool of communication, as was suggested in the NSW Parliament as recently as 1996. I am still occasionally asked by White Australians why a Yale professor would be interested in languages that have no grammar. I find this appalling. I have tried to do something to change this (for example, by talking about my work on Ockham's Razor broadcasts through the ABC) but much more could be done in this regard.

More tangible respect for the languages could take the form of better (and more permanent) funding to language centres, funding earmarked for Indigenous studies at Group of 8 and regional universities (e.g. through targeted ARC programs or through the Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies), and greater aid to State Libraries and AIATSIS for language promotion activities both within Aboriginal communities and in urban settings.

Language and education as a human right

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees a right to education. Article 26.1 says that "everyone has the right to education." Aboriginal children who come to school without speaking English have a right to education in their own language, and they are being deprived of that right by the schooling being a language they don't understand. It would be quite feasible for primary school to be entirely in local languages in the A-P lands, Arnhem Land, Warlpiri and Kriol areas (at least) for the first 3 years of school, with gradual hand-over to English as the main medium by 4th grade.

Providing education in a foreign language is not something that mainstream Australia thinks much about, on the whole. When it does come up, it is mostly in the context of urban bilingual schools such as Canberra's Telopea Park, which is bilingual French/English and which is highly regarded. Bilingual education is good for urban white kids, but bad for Aboriginal kids? Aboriginal bilingual education schools have consistently shown higher attendance rates. Bilingual education scores (no matter what the languages) tend to show lower test scores in early primary (e.g. grade four) tests, but by early high school are equal and by the end of high school, the bilingual students usually do better than monolingual students. Without a serious and sustained commitment to bilingual education in the non-English speaking parts of Australia, nothing will improve. The commitment has to be long-term, however. These programs need to be given a chance to work. They need to be properly implemented and funded, by staff who are qualified.

Measures to improve education outcomes in Indigenous communities where English is a second language

I have been amazed at the lack of language support for teachers in communities where English is not widely spoken. Particularly important here has been the lack of training for teachers in dialect differences. Aboriginal English differs from Standard Australian English, just as Australian English differs from American English or Singaporean English. Many teachers are unaware that their students' variety of English is systematic, and that there are patterns that map the sound systems of Aboriginal English to Standard Australian English. An exception has been One Arm Point School in recent years, where the former principal, Mr Steven Price, has been instrumental in improving student attendance and educational outcomes in language by focusing on systematic language teaching and respect for three languages in the school (Bardi, Aboriginal English, and Standard Australian English). This program has continued with the current principal.

Another important lack in current communities is staff with training in ESL. There are very few fully trained ESL teachers in remote communities, and it is unrealistic to expect regular teachers to be aware of the techniques needed for work with English as a Second Language Speakers. The same is true for the language programs. In my experience, the teachers in charge of Aboriginal language programs are seldom qualified foreign language teachers; the programs are often run by Aboriginal teacher aides who do not get the same support for curriculum development that regular teachers get. This makes the success of such programs all the more remarkable.

There is tremendous dedication to education and a better future for kid in the communities where I have been a guest. This dedication could be much better supported by providing appropriate training to teachers and by training more local teachers.

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