Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities.

Response from:

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See attached CV for more details on language work.

Submission

I focus on questions 8 (aims) and 7 (difficulties). In summary, there needs to be better **planning for language work**, which takes into account the huge **variation in language situations** across Australia and **worldwide experience** in revival, which acknowledges the **complexity of the task** and addresses all the **components needed for revival**, and moves away from simplistic approaches.

Introduction.

I have worked on Yuwaalaraay and Gamilaraay since 1995, much of the time closely associated with St Joseph's Walgett, and always working with other language programs. I have seen the great benefit language has had for the Indigenous people including school students. It has an impact on identity and pride, and these flow over into all areas of life. See, *'It makes you proud to be you'* [http://www.arm.catholic.edu.au/documents/Pat%20Cavanagh%20Report.pdf], an independent report on the St Joseph's program, for more details of the impact.

Question 8: (slightly modified): *What do I hope to see in future?*

A. YG used in homes and community and education, in public and private, across a broad range of areas: Ceremonies: welcomes, funerals, weddings, baptisms; Performances: song, dance, festivals; Home: with some families using it as their main language, others using a few words; Education: from pre-schools to universities. A YG which is faithful to the traditional languages and developed to meet current needs. The plan below details steps that are necessary to make this possible.

Question 7: What are the main difficulties facing your project?

A. A poor understanding of language rebuilding by many groups - administrators, governments, funding bodies and often enough by community groups. This results in both funds and efforts being poorly used, and then people often burn out.

Essentials elements (for rebuilding languages)

A plan based on sound research**, a good team** and some **passionate individuals.**

The plan needs to include community, linguistic, organisational and teaching elements.

The team needs to include people who want to use the language, linguists, language planners, teachers, administrators and bureaucrats, and generally an existing organisation.

I will now focus on some **linguistic issues**, though I have been involved in many other aspects.

A basic question, before rebuilding, is 'What language resources are there?' YG is relatively lucky in having some 60 hours of tapes of relatively fluent speakers, and some hundreds of pages of other material. In contrast Ngunnawal, associated with Canberra, has perhaps 300 words, and very little grammar, so what can be relearnt is very limited.

Secondly, the historical resources need to be analysed, and put into an easy to learn form. A dictionary lists the words, and a grammar the rules. So, for instance in YG *ngaya* is 'I', *ngali* is 'we, 2' and so on for the pronouns. (See Gamilaraay Yuwaalaraay Yuwaalayaay Dictionary p 342 for more details); to say 'I cut myself' add *-la-nhi* to *garra-* 'cut', getting *garralanhi ngaya*; and so on for the many rules that are part of a language.

With work in the language, someone is becoming expert in the language and can stay involved for many years. That person/people are essential in teaching the language to others, especially teachers. And answering questions from people who want to use the language (A recent email asked for a Gamilaraay name for hospital places: waiting room, mortuary, birthing room.) That person/people needs a job, and preferably a peer group of linguists to work with.

There need to be language courses for teachers, schools, community and others, but teachers especially. These need to be written and run regularly.

The problem is that people too often focus on quick and easy outcomes: teaching 'head shoulders knees and toes', without looking at a long-term strategy. This is based on a simplistic understanding of language work. So often funding is for 'local' programs rather than developing the fundamentals and assembling the full team needed.

The solution:

A language rebuilding plan that incorporates the experience of many people around the world: Aotearoa/New Zealand; Hawai'i; Israel, Ireland, North America, and more.

Funding for fundamental work, including more funding for Indigenous people to become linguists.

Courses in language for teachers, with education departments and groups taking responsibility to ensure that their people are well qualified. Then secure jobs for them.

Indigenous language centres at Universities - the ideal place to do the research and analysis and development of key people.

Resources and courses in language for all types of learners.

Recognising the great hunger for language in urban centres.

Cooperation: Indigenous individuals, organisations, and communities; education bureauracries, univeristies, TAFEs, government and others working together.

This has focussed on the linguistic and planning side of language work, with some other areas mentioned briefly. Much more could be said about all those areas.

A footnote: Who and where is the community?

Many of the people I work with belong to Yuwaalaraay or Gamilaraay **community**, but they live in Sydney or Newcastle or London - and their language is important to all of them. So it is important to acknowledge this broad use of 'community'. Secondly there is no representative Yuwaalaraay or Gamilaraay body, so 'community' decisions on language are highly to be desired, but at present there is no mechanism which can make those decisions. This inquiry may be one more consultation on language which is not paying sufficient attention to the large numbers of urban Indigenous people who are living off country, but who can benefit so much from language, and do so much for it.