

OPINION

Australia's unrecognized resources boom – languages for Australia's future

Michael Clyne

This year, the UN International Year of Languages, countries all over the world have been reflecting on their achievements in languages and what they could be doing better. In Australia, we have seen the continuation of a public discourse which started the previous year, on the benefits of second language learning and the decline in language programs over the years. I will argue that this discourse will remain on the surface if it does not take into account the linguistic diversity we are blessed with, and if we cannot overcome our pervasive monolingual mindset. I will also suggest a different, more holistic way of thinking about the benefits of plurilingualism, that is the use of more than one language.

When the Warrunjeri people of the Kulin nation inhabited the land on which this university now stands, they were part of a multilingual continent in which most people needed several languages to communicate. Some of the communities in Australia practised compulsory exogamy, where the men of one community had to marry women from another and the children learned a different language from their father and mother.

Today there are many Australian children from different backgrounds acquiring their bilingualism in the same way.

The First Fleet and subsequent British settlers introduced monolingualism as the norm to the Australian continent - though sizeable numbers of them spoke Irish, Gaelic or Welsh. Political and economic conditions and the lure of gold brought many languages other than English to Australia from Europe and Asia as is reflected in the numerous community language newspapers published in the Australian colonies in the 19th century. Bilingual education was more prevalent in Australia in the 19th century than in the 20th or so far in the 21st.

But the first World War and the period immediately before and after it created an environment for the next seven decades in which if you had a language other than English, you had best forget it, or at least keep it to yourself. The history of non-indigenous Australia has been one of tension between monolingualism and multilingualism.

Today's Australia is a multilingual nation, in a multilingual world in which there are far more plurilinguals than monolinguals. Among the almost 400 languages used in the homes of Australia's residents are our unique indigenous languages, Auslan, and community languages from all corners of the earth. None of them are foreign languages in this country.

The number of languages and their diversity have been increasing. The 2006 Census tells us that 16.8% of Australian residents speak a LOTE at home; it is 31.4% in Sydney and 27.9% in Melbourne; 40.7% in the NT outside Darwin where most of the indigenous languages are concentrated.

This understates Australia's multilingualism, for the data is limited to use in your own home. But many people speak a LOTE not in their own homes but in those of parents or other relatives or in community groups. Those living on their own are automatically counted as monolingual English speakers because of the wording of the question. Table 1 shows the top 20 languages in Australia.

Note that they include five of the six most widely taught languages in Australian schools, three of the four languages of our main Asian trading partners, and nine of the 20 most widely used first languages in the world.

Italian and Greek are the top two community languages, followed by Cantonese, Arabic, Vietnamese and Mandarin. The past 15 years have seen substantial decreases in the home use of a number of

European languages especially German, Maltese, Italian, and Greek but far greater increases in Mandarin (305%), Hindi (206%), Persian, Korean, Filipino, and Vietnamese.

Table 2 indicates that each capital city is developing its own sociolinguistic profile. Though Melbourne and Sydney share the top six, Melbourne retains Italian and Greek as numbers 1 and 2 and a balance of four European, four Asian, Arabic and Turkish in the top ten. In Sydney, Arabic and Cantonese are in positions 1 and 2 and six of the top 10 community languages originate from Asia, three from Europe and one from the Middle East. But the school age population, depicted in Table 3, already presents a different picture in Melbourne, dominated by Vietnamese and to a lesser extent Arabic and the Chinese languages.

If the present trends continue, Mandarin will leapfrog into first place nationally by 2011, with possibly Arabic overtaking Italian and Greek in second place. The number of community languages with more than 100,000 home users in Australia will probably rise from six to nine – Mandarin, Arabic, Italian, Greek, Cantonese, Vietnamese, Hindi, Filipino, and Spanish.

Melbourne's most contiguous multilingual area is the one around Monash University's Clayton and Berwick campuses. Of the three local government areas, Casey has the greatest number of community languages with more than 1000 home users – twenty – though the % of LOTE speakers is about average for Melbourne. Greater Dandenong has the largest % of people speaking a community language at home of any Melbourne LGA – 61.5% and many contact situations between languages from south-east Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Monash has 12 community languages with over 1000 home users, with high concentration of Greek, Cantonese, Mandarin, Tamil, and Sinhala. However, it is when you look at individual suburbs that you find really fascinating situations. Such as in Dandenong South, where merely 21.8% speak English only at home, but 27.5% use one other language – Albanian- and nearly 16% Dari, Russian, Arabic or Mandarin.

In all these areas we have people of many different cultural backgrounds, including Latin American, Indian, Serbian, Chinese, Lebanese, Afghan, Sudanese, all interacting in their own varieties of English as a lingua franca. – at work, at school, in housing estates, in shopping centres. Research conducted here at Monash over a long period has demonstrated how at the grassroots, people have developed strategies for overcoming inter-cultural communication breakdown and in the process have got to understand one another's cultural values. Because of our unique cultural mix Australia is ahead of the rest of the world in developing such skills which we should be harnessing at a time when they are needed internationally.

This hasn't escaped European companies establishing their Asia-Pacific headquarters or call centres in Melbourne or Sydney. The utilization of our multilingualism and the cultural links with other parts of the world, notably Europe, resulting from it can be a special contribution that we can make to our region. Australia could become an important link between Asia, Europe and other parts of the world if we made more use of our linguistic diversity and our grassroots experience in inter-cultural communication.

In the words of the motto of the UN International Year of Languages, why do languages matter?

Plurilingualism enables us to operate in more than one cultural framework. It makes us understand that there is more than one way of thinking and behaving and helps us understand others, whether they are business people, new migrants or refugees, tourists, fellow-academics or representatives of another government. Plurilingualism often goes hand in hand with multiple identity, and a significant proportion of the Australian population feel cultural links to one or more other countries, while at the same time feeling completely Australian as well.

The links facilitated through language and culture with so many other parts of the world can make Australia a more effective member of the international community and a more successful trading nation. This was exemplified through the trade initiated with eastern and central European countries after 1989 and more recently with Vietnam, Hong Kong, India and Sri Lanka by Australians of respective language and cultural backgrounds – all our languages are of importance nationally. This

point is made in the National Plan for Languages Education in Australia, 2005-08 which is still waiting for extension by the Federal Government. Plurilingualism is essential for family cohesion; it ensures that there is a deep and full understanding between the generations.

Recently the media, some politicians and business lobbies among others have rediscovered the importance of languages, and that is really gratifying. The argument is motivated by instrumental economic and sometimes also by strategic arguments. The federal government wants students to learn the languages of our major Asian trading partners. This is a powerful point and it is well supported.

In a 2006 report commissioned by the British Council, the English linguist David Graddol, examining a range of data bases, predicts a bleak economic future for monolingual English speakers. This is because English is becoming a basic skill for educated people round the world, other languages will start to rival English internationally in the next decades and European and Asian education systems are adopting a policy of requiring students to take at least two languages other than their first, giving them the edge.

In 2000, an international survey of chief executive officers found that its Australian sample averaged proficiency in fewer languages than those from any other of 28 countries, including the US, the UK and New Zealand. But I would like to approach the economic benefits in a different way.

The greatest benefits of plurilingualism are cognitive. They start in early childhood and continue throughout one's life. Because plurilingual children grow up with two (or more) sets of representational symbols, they develop thinking patterns different to those of monolingual children. Psycholinguistic studies have shown that young bilingual children are able to differentiate between form and content in a disciplined way. They can separate information on the size of a word and the size of the concept that it denotes in a way in which their monolingual counterparts don't. When asked if a dog can be called a cow, 4-6 year old monolingual children tend to laugh and say 'That's stupid. When you look at a dog, you can tell it isn't a cow'. Their bilingual counterparts tend to think of their other language and say 'Well, there could be a language in which the word for 'dog' is 'cow'. Again a separation of form and content and an understanding of the arbitrary nature of language.

But thinking of the monolingual youngsters – Could the retort 'That's stupid' be the start of the monolingual mindset which pervades this multilingual society? The mindset that regards plurilingualism as extraordinary, unnecessary, undesirable or divisive? Because the bilingual children are constantly switching between languages, they develop more flexible problem solving strategies; they are more likely than monolingual children to try a different strategy when the other fails. Because bilinguals synergize the use of two languages, it is not surprising that recent Belgian research finds they develop more economic ways of performing neural activities.

At the other end of the life span, recent Canadian studies suggest an average delay of 4 years in the onset of dementia among people who have used more than one language throughout their lives. I won't be bold enough to propose that supporting multilingualism will relieve the current shortage of nursing home places. But I will be bold enough to suggest that if Australia supported its latent multilingualism more, the multidimensional thinking and the various cultural styles in contact working in harmony could lead to more creative, dynamic, innovative workplaces and therefore an increase in productivity.

One challenge for researchers is to find out how minimal a LOTE program can be and still deliver some of the cognitive benefits of plurilingualism – but this cannot be taken for granted. Certainly any educational initiative that strengthens the development of both languages of a bilingual – English and the other language – would support opportunities for them and be in the interests of the economy.

The value of plurilingualism and second language acquisition has become much easier to demonstrate since 9 April. In a Mandarin unusual for any non-native speaker, let alone a foreign prime minister, Kevin Rudd offered Australia and himself as a zhengyou to China – a trusting friend in a lasting relationship who can provide frank advice. This was a diplomatic masterstroke in the given political

context and enabled him to both promote closer links between the two nations and criticize China's human rights record. It also potentially annihilated the belief in the sufficiency of 'global English' and in the sustainability of minimal LOTE programs (54% of Victorian primary language programs are allocated less than 45 minutes per week.)

Rudd became the role model for the early 21st century Australian prophesized in 1974 by the then Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, Al Grassby himself a trilingual:

'He (for this was before the days of gender-inclusive language!) will be outward looking, and will have a keen awareness of Australia's place in the world and, in particular, in the region of the world in which we live. He will be at least bilingual and possibly multilingual and thereby heir to the fullness of mankind's past...confident both of his identity and Australia's'.

On 9 April Rudd demonstrated the folly of the pre-election accusation of his being a show-off because the only natural thing for Australian ministers to do was to speak English. What a relief from the parochialism and xenophobia of the past decade! The way you really achieve something internationally is through participation in the others' cultures and especially languages. And we can start at home because Australia is a multilingual society.

However, where is the federal government saying this? Where, for instance, did languages and cultures feature in the agenda of the 2020 summit?. Even the way in which languages are currently supported does nothing to relieve this country of its monolingual mindset. In fact, it links closely with that mindset.

There was no section on Australia's cultural diversity in the summit. So far it has been invisible from the social inclusion policy discourse, in which migrants are included *if* they happen to be poor, homeless or unemployed. In the summit, 'Australia's capacity in *foreign* languages 'was a sub-topic under 'Australia's future prosperity and security in a rapidly changing region and the world', where a group of mainly political scientists, comparative lawyers and economists endorsed an already announced government agenda.

We want our young people to learn particular languages, foreign languages, that are spoken over there, because it will be good for our prosperity. It is interesting how languages become foreign languages and then Asian languages, which ultimately means four particular languages.

'Mr Rudd, lamenting the decline of the teaching of foreign languages in schools, announced a \$68 million plan to revive Asian languages' (Age, 24 March 2008).

But these languages are actually here too, alive and well in large numbers, as we have already seen. The representation of community languages as *foreign* languages is another instance of social exclusion. Paradoxically the ambition from this section of the summit reads: 'To ensure that the major languages and cultures *of our region* are no longer *foreign* to Australia but are familiar and mainstreamed into Australia society.'" What does this mainstreaming really entail? Will Chinese-, Korean-, Indonesian- and Japanese-Australians and their contributions be more accepted in Australian society? I fear not; we also read the complaint that 'the vast majority of Victorians studying Chinese languages were from a Chinese background'.

This also tallies with a widespread belief that, now with the commodification of languages other than English, specifically Mandarin, Japanese, Indonesian and Korean, those languages should be for Australians of the 'mainstream', not for those with a background on which they can build. This view is expressed by a letter to a newspaper by a teacher;

*'Living in a first-language family is such an advantage that they merely practice their learned skills and dominate the exam. .. (those starting Chinese in Year 7), **the very ones who should be learning Chinese** (my bold), are being put off by the inequality...Witness the domination of Chinese surnames in the study scores over 40.'*

This somewhat simplistic position disregards the complexities of having a Chinese surname. This may not necessarily mean that the child actually speaks a language other than English at home. It may

mean that the background is in Cantonese or other fang yan other than Mandarin. The high shift rate from Mandarin in the second generation has demonstrated how complex the diversity of students in a classroom is – not just ‘native’ and ‘non-native-speakers’. This has been the subject of extensive research at Monash and Melbourne over the years across language communities. I commend to you the pamphlet Catering for Linguistic Diversity as well as the suggestions to teachers as to how community language resources can be utilized in language teaching (www.rumacc.unimelb.edu.au).

Students ‘mixing’ their languages, those employing non-standard varieties, and those with little or no experience with the written language come to class with a background that can be a resource waiting to be developed. It is formal instruction together with motivation that enables students to develop their skills to the point where they and the nation can substantially benefit from them in domains such as business and the professions, where they can act as cultural mediators. Because the categories of learners are on a continuum, wherever you draw lines for eligibility for a particular examination, you discriminate and demotivate some.

The ever increasing number of multiple examinations for differentiated groups of students suggest a model based on fear of the Other rather than social inclusion in the interests of shared national benefits. Discriminatory practices are limited to a few Asian languages and do not apply, for instance, where students are advantaged by their home background in subjects such as Art, Music or Information Technology. I would recommend differentiated syllabuses according to needs and incentives to attain higher levels. Students who have grown up in Australia with high levels of proficiency in a language other than English and a deep knowledge of its respective culture/s are, for instance, very well suited to become excellent language teachers in Australian schools because of their experience of the sub-culture of the Australian school and their ability to act as cultural mediators.

Certainly we need to create incentives for students without a home background to continue with languages, but not through discrimination against those who have taken great trouble to develop a high level of bilingualism. It is very important that, especially for more ‘difficult’ languages such as Mandarin, time allocation is adequate. It should be acknowledged that all Australians learning a second language are advantaged because there are many opportunities to use the language in Australia. The issue of grading is a product of the scoring system.

When we read a comment like that of Education minister Julia Gillard :

‘the modern environment will require (young Australians) to be able to converse with people *in our region in their own languages*’ (Julia Gillard).

we might wonder what could happen to the other languages.

As a predominantly English-speaking country, we can afford to choose from a broader range which is the second language we want to opt for in the educational system and have a number of Asian and European languages which are strongly represented. Among Australia’s great achievements is the accreditation of 47 languages as Year 12 subjects, emphasizing the reality that the study of any language is valuable. Through government schools of languages here and in other states, students are prepared for the examinations in languages not available at their mainstream schools.

Currently only 13.4% of Australia’s Year 12 students take a LOTE. In Victoria it is 20.2%, thanks largely to non-government schools.

Various targets have been set to increase this -

- 25% by 2001 (Dawkins 1991),
- 25% by 2006 – namely 15% in one of the prioritized Asian languages and 10% in other languages (Rudd 1993).

I understand the proposed target for 2020 to be 12% for one of the prioritized Asian languages without any mention of other languages.

Will that constitute merely a replacement of some languages by others? Will the target be lower than the current participation rate in Victoria?

Much of the discussion about the newly emerging super-nations mention China and India in one breath and yet Hindi, Australia's second most rapidly growing community language, doesn't rate a mention despite having about the same number of L1 speakers internationally as English.

Nor does Vietnamese, the best maintained community language and the one most widely used in Melbourne among school-aged children.

It could be argued that Spanish is a language of 'our region' with two of the APEC members having it as a national language. Spanish too is one of the major languages of the world in terms of first language speakers. Among languages of wider communication with a presence in the Australian education systems are French, German and Arabic.

While we can feel great relief at having evaded the Howard Government's proposed exclusionary core curriculum (English literacy, Maths, Science, Australian history), the current government still hasn't assured us that languages will be treated like other core subjects. It is delegating to the National Curriculum Board the decision on whether and for how long languages should be compulsory. There is never any doubt that Maths and Science will be compulsory. The term 'compulsory', which is unpopular in Australia, seems to be reserved for discussions outlawing languages.

But, Yvette Slaughter has found in her Melbourne University PhD thesis, that schools that required students to take a LOTE in Year 9 had significantly higher retention rates to Year 12 than those which did not.

Valuing, supporting and strengthening multilingualism is undermined by the monolingual mindset which confuses and distorts the issues. Languages are problematized in Australia. The monolingual mindset projects them as burdensome. They overcrowd an already crowded curriculum.

It is strange that most other countries, including those performing better than us in comparative measures of educational attainment, see languages as enriching and not burdensome. The example of Finland, constantly top of the international rankings, where all children take three languages throughout their schooling, a large proportion take a fourth language and a considerable number a fifth, is now well known in the discourse on languages in this country.

Another instance closer to home is Hong Kong, where Cantonese, English and Mandarin are part of everyone's education.

Language study requires an adequate time allocation. The absence of this and of a supply of suitably qualified teachers have been lamented by report after report for decades. It would now be timely to act on such reports rather than to commission yet another.

An example of the mono-dimensional thinking that pervades this country is the widespread assumption in educational circles that bilingualism or even second language acquisition impairs literacy.

In fact, most of the international and Australian research literature shows a close link between literacy in all your languages. Preoccupation with the structure of words, sentences and sound patterns in any language enhances literacy across all languages. Practice in scanning and skimming are also transferable. Where this is not happening it is usually because the conditions for literacy are not being stimulated. The fallacy is in the mono-dimensionalism that leads to the assumption that each language is a separate entity and not connected in neural processing.

There is local evidence that those already bilingual (regardless of their LOTE) are likely to go about the task of learning a third language in quite a different way to monolinguals learning the same language as a second one. This is because bilinguals have a better understanding of how language

works. We also found that bilingual students doing a third language developed a strong interest in languages generally and in acquiring more languages.

And yet, even in our multilingual society, there is little scope to do this within the education system.

While most secondary schools offer a choice of languages, most schools, especially in the government sector, do not permit students to take more than one. It is particularly schools in very multilingual areas that prevent students who are already bilingual from studying a third or even refusing to offer a LOTE to anyone on the grounds that three languages is too burdensome for ESL students. Many students do take two LOTEs, one at their day school and the other at VSL or a community language school. Unfortunately only 2% of VCE students do that, and only 0.0044% take three or more LOTEs.

A recent innovation being trialled in parts of Europe is the EUROCOM program which enables students to study a whole family of languages passively along with active skills in one of them (such as studying all the Romance languages with Italian as the main object of learning).

Our history and our international opportunities should convince us of the importance of all Australian students taking both a European and an Asian language.

In any case, it is important for Australia's creativity for its people to know a range of languages.

Crucial to Australia overcoming its monolingual mindset and benefiting from its languages resources boom is for this nation to reassess what it means to be multicultural.

Any social inclusion policy must include cultural diversity, It must go beyond overcoming deficits. Social inclusion should also be about empowering people so that they can fulfil their potential, make a contribution to this country, be included under the label 'Australians', and represented positively and fairly within the nation. Part of the misunderstanding based on a monolingual mindset is a confusion between plurilingualism and monolingualism in a language other than English.

If there are ways in which encouraging and facilitating high levels of bilingualism can help many Australians find a more secure place in this society and contribute to the nation, then a social inclusion policy must do that.

The achievement of Australian multiculturalism policies from the 1970s to 2003 has been to create the basis of a social inclusion agenda. We need to progress in the development of a society based on multiple connectedness - not assimilation, not even just two-way integration but connecting all sections of our society in an inclusive way. Australia is not just two groups – a majority and a minority. Multiple connectedness is the notion which underlies institutions such as SBS, the government Schools of Languages, the Collaborative Curriculum and Assessment Framework for Languages and the Translating and Interpreting Service, which provide frameworks for an almost unlimited number of languages.

There are some schools and universities which have engaged their students in community-based language study. Also, a group of Mandarin-speaking volunteers, the Association of Learning Mandarin in Australia, has been helping non-Chinese Australians in Canberra with their Mandarin and conversing with them. In this scheme, based on the Home Tutors for English, a great deal of cultural exchange takes place and the Mandarin speakers are learning some English from their students. A research project at Monash, in which linguists and gerontologists are collaborating through the Language and Society Centre and the Monash Research on Ageing, is bringing together students of German, Italian or Spanish with older speakers of these languages. It will be assessing students' gains in second language acquisition, cultural attitudes and attitudes to the elderly and the impact on the older speakers' self-esteem and inter-connectedness.

But encouraging ALL Australians to participate in some way in our multilingual society needs to happen not only in educational institutions but in the wider community. A recently established

Languages Action Alliance is hoping to raise awareness of this. Multilingualism is catching but monolingualism is curable. .

So what do we do with other resources?

- We can keep them buried.
- We can dig them up and then ignore them.
- We can invest in them for the good of the nation and empower those who understand them.

They can bring in dividends for the owners.

We can all learn to benefit from them in an ecological way.

When it comes to our languages, we must use our resources ecologically for both the social and economic good of the nation – to make it both more prosperous and more inclusive. Languages can be an individual asset and a way of empowering the otherwise socially excluded plurilingual. In an inclusive Australia, languages should be a means of inclusion not of exclusion.

Even those who do not want to take courses in another language must be given a chance to feel part of multilingual Australia and the multilingual world and understand what is involved in being plurilingual. Only then can we as a nation liberate ourselves from the monolingual mindset and from linguaphobia that dominates so much thinking and decision making – for the sake of future generations. Developing our language potential and harnessing our language resources is a co-operative agenda involving governments, education systems, schools and universities, business, ethnic communities, and families.

In planning and decision making we should be asking ourselves: Are we now thinking monolingually or leaving open the opportunity for plurilingualism?

There were many now abandoned policies and practices of the 1970s and 1980s, especially in multicultural education, which we need to revisit and revamp in the context of Australia and the world in 2008.

This evening I have tried to draw attention to languages as valuable resources to Australia. I have also suggested that social inclusion, cognitive benefits of plurilingualism and economic gains can and should go hand in hand.

Positive harnessing of our multilingualism and our inter-cultural communication experience will, I argue, enhance our contribution to the region and the world.

Professor Michael Clyne is author of "Australia's Language Potential" (UNSW Press 2005) and professorial fellow of the University of Melbourne. Michael's work is respected and celebrated across the world, and in this International Year provides outstanding inspirational leadership to everyone with a commitment to Australia's multilingual future.