

OPINION

The International Year of Languages 2008:

Where has it brought us? Where to from here?

Michael Clyne

For the United Nations 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 a newspaper article published at the beginning of this year, I argued that this was an appropriate time for us to take stock of how we as individuals and as a nation make the most of our language resources, and how we communicate with and about those of differing cultural backgrounds.

I pointed to the opportunity for our then-new government to consider the place of languages in schools, to review the citizenship test, provide better funding for English as a second language and to commit to our cultural diversity.

So what has this year achieved for Australia?

A considerable number of conferences have taken place around the country, focusing on the teaching of languages other than English. A grassroots Languages Action Alliance has been formed to promote multilingualism. Perhaps the most spectacular affirmation of the importance of mastering a second language and its value to the nation was Kevin Rudd's speech in Mandarin in Beijing.

A report appeared on the state and nature of languages in Australian schools, one of a long series of reports over the years to make sound recommendations for improvement.

In the past couple of years the media, some politicians and business lobbies, among others, have rediscovered the importance of languages. The case for languages in the wider public discourse is largely 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: Mandarin, Japanese, Indonesian and Korean. But there is no indication that the promotion of particular languages is actually achieving an expansion and improvement of languages programs as a whole, or merely a replacement of some languages in schools by others. And the government is still not prepared to make a commitment to requiring all students in the compulsory years of education to take a language other than English as is being taken for granted for some other core areas.

On the other hand, the Rudd government has reviewed the citizenship test in a way that departs from the overt assimilationist zeal of its predecessors.

Yet there has been relatively little discussion on the endangerment of Australia's Indigenous languages, almost all of which are among the 75% or so of the world's languages that are in danger of extinction by the end of this century. The booby prize should go to the Northern Territory government for the regulation that the first four hours of the school day in all schools, including those with bilingual programs, have to be in English only, starting from the beginning of the 2009 school year.

This disregards the learning transfer that occurs between languages; it disregards the symbolic identity function of language; it disregards the well known effects of having to learn in a language before you are sufficiently proficient in it.

Policy decisions such as this demonstrate that the discourse promoting second language learning will remain superficial if it does not take into account the linguistic diversity we are blessed with, and if we cannot overcome our pervasive monolingual mindset. But I'd like to suggest a different, more holistic way of thinking about the benefits of plurilingualism, that is, the use of more than one language.

Australia today 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, Australian Sign Language (Auslan), and languages originating from all corners of the earth. The 2006 census data shows that this diversity is increasing; 16.8% of Australian residents speak a language other than English (LOTE) at home; it is 31.4% in Sydney, 27.9% in Melbourne and 40.7% in the Northern Territory outside Darwin where most of the Indigenous languages are concentrated. But even these figures understate Australia's multilingualism, for the data is limited to language use in your own home.

Australia's top 20 community languages include five of the six most widely taught languages in Australian schools, three of the four languages of our major 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 but far greater increases in Mandarin, Hindi, Persian, Korean, Filipino, and Vietnamese. If the present trends continue, Mandarin will leapfrog into first place nationally by 2011, with possibly Arabic in second place. The number of community languages with more than 100,000 home users in Australia will probably rise from six to nine.

In the words of the motto of the UN International Year of Languages, 'languages matter'. Being able to speak more than just one language enables us to operate in more than just one cultural framework. It makes us understand that there is more than one way of thinking and behaving and helps us understand others.

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 point is made in the National Plan for Languages Education in Australia 2005-08, which is still waiting for extension by the federal government. And, in Australia in particular, plurilingualism is essential for family cohesion; facilitating a depth of understanding between generations.

But the greatest benefits of plurilingualism are cognitive, starting in early childhood and continuing throughout 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 better between form and content. 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- to 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".'

Could the retort 'That's stupid' be the start of the monolingual mindset which pervades our 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.

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

As it is, here at the end of 2008, cultural inclusion seems to have completely disappeared from the national public agenda. It is missing from the government's social inclusion framework and was left off the list of topics at the 2020 summit. Social inclusion could be enhanced by motivating young Australians with some home background in a LOTE to build on this background to achieve those high levels of competence that would be a great asset to them and to the nation. Also, the multilingualism resources of those members of our community could provide greater opportunities for those acquiring those languages. Ironically though, language learning - especially that of targeted Asian languages -- has become an arena of social exclusion and division.

Speaking or hearing at home a language now regarded as a commodity is considered by many to be an 'unfair' advantage. Competition from students of particular Asian language backgrounds is being blamed for other Australians not wanting to take those languages.

A recent report on Chinese language in Australian schools sensibly emphasises the need for differentiated syllabuses and classes, rather than and not just discriminatory assessment. It differentiates between international students and recent migrants on the one hand and 'background speakers' on the other. But it too describes upper secondary Chinese classes as 'Chinese teaching Chinese to Chinese'. However, 'background speakers' are by no means a homogeneous group, as research on Chinese and many other languages in Australia has shown.

Maintaining a language well is not something that happens effortlessly and, just as with second language acquisition, needs to be encouraged and rewarded. Background speakers of languages other than English also need incentives, not obstacles, to attain higher levels. And care should be taken not to demotivate students from developing their full potential, as wherever you draw boundaries for eligibility for particular examinations you discriminate against some students.

There are those receiving different kinds of input at home -- 'mixed' language, regional languages, such as Cantonese or Hakka, which in their spoken modes are both quite different from Mandarin, and varieties already separated by a generation or two from the language of the homeland as well as a language similar to that of the classroom. There

are those who hear but do not speak the community language at home, those with little or no experience with the written language. And there are students of non-Chinese background who have spent some time in a Chinese-speaking country.

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, teaching and other professions, where they can act as cultural mediators.

With the Government targeting 12% of Year 12 students to take one of the prioritised four Asian languages by 2020, the chances of three different Year 12 classes in Mandarin in many schools are minimal. So differentiated examinations are likely to dominate in a system based on fear of the Other, rather than social inclusion in the interests of shared national benefits. It's worth noting that such discriminatory practices are limited to these few Asian languages and do not apply to home backgrounds in subjects such as art, music or information technology, in which some students are also notably advantaged.

I have tried to show that social inclusion, cognitive benefits of plurilingualism and economic advancement go hand in hand. We need to be open to these advantages as we were starting to be thirty years ago and thereby enhance our nation's wellbeing.

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