

Call for a national Indigenous languages policy

Patrick McConvell, 8 November 2008

The debate about the future of Australia's Indigenous languages is reaching a crucial stage. On the one hand there are calls for a coherent national Indigenous languages policy from many local and regional Indigenous organisations. On the other we are seeing the government of the Northern Territory, where many of the strongest languages are spoken, bending to pressure to remove what is perhaps their last vital support, their use in some schools.

'Two way' or bilingual programs, which teach in Indigenous languages as well as teaching English, have been the subject of much contention and changes of policy over the years, with a new wave of attacks launched earlier this year by Helen Hughes of the Centre for Independent Studies. But, though so vigorously criticised from some quarters, the introduction of bilingual education programs in the 1970s, in Northern Territory schools, was arguably the most important step forward in Australian Indigenous language policy since, for the first time, it was recognised that children initially learn better in their home language. The program also enabled Indigenous Australians to take over significant roles in education using both their western education and their own cultural traditions. Then, in a national language policy report in the 1980s, came the recognition of the right of Indigenous Australians to maintain their languages, as well as the funding for Indigenous language centres.

These advances were followed by reversals in the 1990s, including the closing down of the bilingual education programs in the Northern Territory and in the Pitjantjatjara lands of South Australia. A string of reports called then, again, for better organised support, including the National Indigenous Language Survey report of 2005, but such recommendations were largely ignored. Though one bright spot was the development of Indigenous language policy and school programs in New South Wales. For the first time a state government was giving recognition to the languages of the first peoples of the regions as well as requiring schools to make efforts to incorporate teaching about these languages in their curriculum in a structured way.

When Labor won the right to govern federally, late last year, there were hopes for action on Indigenous languages policy and support. Instead though, much of the talk was understandably about 'closing the gap' in areas like health, housing and education, with the main emphasis in education on improving English-language skills as a route to better results generally for Indigenous students.

While everybody supports improvement in English teaching, the dominant positions in debate were taken by those who, like Helen Hughes, attacked bilingual and bicultural education as the main culprit for the poor performance of Indigenous students in the Northern Territory. This is quite wrong and unfortunately stands in the way of getting to the real problems.

It builds on a long assimilationist tradition which opposes Indigenous language and culture in education.

It also builds on the common misunderstanding in Australia, that people cannot learn in more than one language without a bad effect on English learning. This is of course

contradicted by the experience of billions of people around the world, and research which shows the cognitive advantages of bilingual upbringing and education.

A number of Indigenous leaders have taken positions on this question which seem to be influenced by the rhetoric of emphasising 'English-only' at school, while at the same time recognising the vital role of Indigenous languages in maintaining their cultural heritage.

Marion Scrymgour, an Aboriginal woman and Minister of Education in the Northern Territory, has been in a better position than most to see the real achievements of Indigenous bilingual education and has, until recently, supported it against the 'English-only' line of others in her government. Last month, however, faced with very bad results from the National Assessment Program for literacy and numeracy in remote schools with Indigenous students, she too is now blaming the use of Indigenous languages for the problem and instituting what is, in my view, an ill-conceived program, close to an 'English-only' model.

Behind the poor school results lie a number of factors. There are serious social and health problems in many communities which hamper the children in attendance and ability to study. These are unrelated to the language they speak or the type of school program and should be addressed as a separate issue. The testing itself relies heavily on knowledge of English so can be expected to bias results against people whose first language is not English. Yet, despite this, the results from bilingual schools were better than those in remote 'English-only' schools. The teachers' union and other groups in the Northern Territory have been publicly making these points.

How does this relate to national Indigenous languages policy? We have seen the Northern Territory following an erratic policy on Indigenous languages over a number of years based more on ideological positions than actual evidence and the current events in the Northern Territory are the latest chapter in this history. What is important to understand is that such policy confusion could spell the end of the road for Indigenous languages, which are already recognised internationally as the most endangered languages in the world.

The whole of Australia needs a policy to affirm the value of these languages which, like in New South Wales, ensures that they play a role in education. The specific nature of the programs could be worked out locally, but a bilingual education model can work for areas where the languages are still strong, as has been proved in the Northern Territory in bilingual schools like Yirrkala.

The renowned Yolngu educator who died recently, Dr. Marika - along with other dedicated bilingual teachers in Arnhem Land and elsewhere - developed a strong philosophy for 'two-way' education with the aim of teaching English and the mainstream culture as well as maintaining Indigenous cultures. She was herself a wonderful product of bilingual-bicultural education and teacher training who reached great heights and was a role model for young Indigenous Australians who want to keep their own language and culture as well as achieving recognition in the wider society. It would be sad to see her life's work destroyed by ill-considered decisions.

As part of a national effort to support Indigenous languages, one thing that is needed is a national centre, to make available national and international evidence on Indigenous languages and language programs, as the foundation for well-thought

out curricula, so that our policymakers need no longer be at the mercy of ideologically-driven rhetoric based on little more than anecdote and personal observation. The knowledge of Indigenous experts in languages, following the tradition of Dr. Marika, can also feed into such a centre.

The proposal for a national Indigenous languages centre was a key one in the National Indigenous Languages Survey, the NILS report of 2005, but has not been implemented.

Most of the Indigenous languages of Australia still spoken are not strong however, but are severely endangered, spoken only by older people and not by children. If there is no urgent program to combat this trend, these languages will surely disappear within the next 50 years, leaving probably only about 15 languages of the original 250 surviving, and those will probably, in turn, become endangered.

There is an initiative which has been successful in revitalising languages in this kind of situation overseas, the 'language nests' movement, which began in New Zealand and scored remarkable successes with turning around the rapid decline of the Maori language. They are early childhood programs based on indigenous people using the indigenous language in pre-schools or child-care centres.

For those who like to oppose language and culture to the 'real economy', it is salutary to talk to Maori people about their experience. Revival of Maori language and culture has gone hand in hand with economic revival and a new sense of purpose which is based on their heritage but also engages with the contemporary world.

Language nests have spread to Hawaii and mainland North America and have been tried in one or two areas in Australia. Given the urgency of the situation, the NILS report proposed a national pilot of language nests in Australia. Once again, nothing has been done about this recommendation but, in the context of a national policy, it could be kick-started soon.

A national Indigenous language centre could help in planning such a language nests initiative by bringing together the relevant research and investigating how such an initiative could plug into the existing systems in states. Language nests could work together with other initiatives the government is taking in early childhood. But, in considering this, we must avoid the fundamental misunderstanding about bilingual education mentioned. Early childhood education need not be a question of either Indigenous languages or English, but can be both!

Helping to plan language nests is only one of a number of important functions which a national centre could carry out. The main institutions currently carrying out language recording and maintenance work are Regional Indigenous Language Centres, set up in the 1980s and funded mainly by the Maintenance of Indigenous Languages and Records section of the Department of Environment Water, Heritage and the Arts. These bodies need continuing funding but also support in a number of areas which they cannot necessarily manage fully themselves, such as: information about other research and researchers who might assist them, technological support for on-line databases, assistance with accessing other funding sources and international links to other similar Indigenous language groups and programs.

The clock is ticking for Indigenous languages in this country. There is no time to prevaricate - action is needed soon or the consequence will be the loss of a huge treasure house of knowledge. Actions in support of the languages are what are needed, not the dismantling of important supports for them in education. There is a need for a clearer policy framework on the safeguarding and nurturing of the languages nation-wide. Calls are currently being made by an alliance of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people through a petition to the federal government to take action now to support Australia's first languages, and these should be heeded before it is too late.

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<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/linguafranca/stories/2008/2410952.htm>