

Chapter 4

Australian Aboriginal Languages: Their Decline and Revitalisation

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ABSTRACT

The present chapter describes the decline and revitalisation of Australian Aboriginal languages — also called Australian languages. As preliminaries, it looks at the following: (i) a brief history of Aboriginal Australians, (ii) degrees of language viability, (iii) current situation of Australian languages, (iv) value of linguistic heritage, and (v) methods of language revitalisation. It then describes five selected language revitalisation activities, concerning Warrongo, Kurna, Bandjalang, Thalanyji and Wiradjuri languages. In particular, it provides a detailed account of the Warrongo language revitalisation activity (in which the author has been participating). It finally examines a problem that is frequently encountered in language revitalisation activities: confusion over writing systems. The entire chapter pays careful attention to the changing political climate that surrounds Australian languages and activities for them.

INTRODUCTION

The present chapter describes the decline and revitalisation of Australian Aboriginal languages — also called Australian languages (see Blake (2006) and Dixon (2002) among others). As preliminaries, it looks at the following: (i) a brief history of Aboriginal Australians, (ii) degrees of language viability, (iii) current situation of Australian languages, (iv) value of linguistic heritage, and (v) methods of language revitalisation. It then describes five selected language revitalisation activities, concerning Warrongo, Kurna, Bandjalang, Thalanyji and Wiradjuri languages. In particular, it provides a detailed account of the Warrongo language revitalisation activity (in which the author has been participating). It finally examines a problem that is frequently encountered in language revitalisation activities: confusion over writing systems. The entire chapter pays careful attention to the changing political climate that surrounds Australian languages and activities for them.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-2959-1.ch004

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIANS²

Archaeological evidence indicates that humans reached what is now Australia more than 53,000 years ago (Flood, 1995, p. 32). At the time of the first British colony at Port Jackson (Sydney) in 1788, the Aboriginal population is estimated to have been from 300,000 up to several times more. There were about 700 different political groups which have been called “tribes” and there are estimated to have been about 250 languages. Over the subsequent centuries, most Aboriginal Australians were dispossessed of their land, and their population reduced drastically, due to massacre (by shooting, poisoning, etc.), introduced diseases such as smallpox, measles and influenza (diseases to which they had no immunity), forced relocation, and so on. (The preceding account is based on Blake (2006, p. 587), Blake and Dixon (1991, pp. 1-2), Dixon (1991a, pp. 235-236) and McGregor (1994, p. xi).)

DEGREES OF LANGUAGE VIABILITY

Languages can be classified in terms of the degree of their viability. A number of proposals are put forward for this purpose (Tsunoda, 2005, pp. 10-12). As Tsunoda (2005, p. 9) notes, “the survival of a given language crucially depends on whether or not the children learn it”. In view of this, almost all the classifications consider the factor of the transmission of a language to children, or learning of the language by children, among other factors.

For Australian languages, Hudson and McConvell (1984, pp. 29-30) and Schmidt (1990, p. 54) put forward four-level classifications, and they are adopted in Tsunoda (2005, p.13).

(a) Strong, healthy, safe, flourishing.

Strong languages: the traditional language is still the main, first language for everyone, including children (Hudson & McConvell, 1984).

Healthy languages: all generations actively use the language in a wide range of activities (Schmidt, 1990).

(b) Sick, weakening.

Sick languages: they will pass away soon if they do not receive treatment. Young people may understand a sick language when it is spoken in a simple way and may be able to say only a few words (Hudson & McConvell, 1984).

Weakening languages: they are usually spoken by older people, but not fully transmitted to the younger generation (Schmidt, 1990).

(c) Dying, moribund.

Dying languages: no young people are learning them (Hudson & McConvell, 1984).

Dying languages: only a few speakers remain (Schmidt, 1990).

(d) Dead, extinct.

Dead languages: they are no longer spoken (Hudson & McConvell, 1984).

Extinct languages: no speakers remain (Schmidt, 1990).

Tsunoda (2005, p. 14) refers to (b) and (c) jointly as “endangered”.

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