

Submission to the Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities

Submission from:

Lauren Gawne
School of Languages and Linguistics
The University of Melbourne
Victoria 3010

In my role as a linguist I work with communities in Nepal who are losing their language. This is due to similar pressures that the Indigenous language communities of Australia are facing. The maintenance and revival of a language is deeply tied to the cultural health of a community. Language, culture and self-identification are all deeply interwoven and affecting one of these parameters has an effect on the others.

There are two communities that need to be considered in the scope of this enquiry - those speakers that still use their language and those that have lost their language and want to reclaim it as part of their Indigenous identity. Both are equally important but also have different needs.

For those who still use their language there is pressure on Indigenous language speakers to move to English as their language of communication. This is an issue of maintenance. Once speakers move to English as their main language of communication it becomes harder to pass their language on to their children. This makes it a harder job to restore the language to being a living language. Those who are trying to maintain their Indigenous language mainly live in remote areas and have little access to the kind of government funding and services to help them maintain their language. There is lots of enthusiasm but very little material assistance.

If we value existing Indigenous languages we need to be more aware of the needs of speakers of these languages. Like other non-English speakers in Australia we need to ensure that speakers of Indigenous languages have access to interpreting services while engaging with government and corporate administration, and public spaces such as hospitals, courts, and in engaging with government agencies.

We need to ensure that children with indigenous languages as their mother tongue are not disadvantaged within the school system. They need to be engaged so that the twin-fold aim of encouraging them to use their language and encouraging them to remain positive participants in their education. This includes ensuring that their mother-tongue can be an option for their classroom medium, and that a high school curriculum reflects their language skills and interests. To do this will require the recruitment, support, training and professional development of speakers of Indigenous languages as language teachers. This should not just be in the homelands and outstations where the languages are currently still being used, but also in the cities and growth centres as a way to counteract the detrimental effect that external pressure to move to English brings.

For those speakers who have lost their language, or had it taken from them there are actions that could be undertaken to ensure that they have the best chance of reviving their languages.

This is an issue of revival. This can be done by making Indigenous languages attractive to young people, through community-level engagement. By providing training we will be able to give people the skills to once again transmit their language, through both informal and formal channels. This can be done through a range of existing structures including the

education system, the community and language centres and more informal community structures. A language revival curriculum at secondary and tertiary level will give people a legitimate avenue to study their own languages, culture and history. For Indigenous language maintenance and revival be sustainable, it is essential that the wider community recognise Indigenous languages as the first languages of Australia, and that in many communities maintenance and restoration of language is essential for reconnecting to culture and identity, and for community well-being. This needs to be enshrined through recognition of Indigenous language rights.

Lauren Gawne