

Inquiry into Language Learning in Indigenous Communities.

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To the Secretary, PO Box 6021, Parliament House, Canberra, 2600

I am a linguist with some thirty years of experience of working both in Australia and in Vanuatu. I established the Wangka Maya language centre and co-wrote the report *State of Indigenous languages in Australia – 2001* (McConvell and Thieberger 2001). I also edited *Macquarie Aboriginal words* (Thieberger and McGregor 1994) which attempted to provide authoritative information, including wordlists, about a selected group of Australian languages in popular format. I worked at AIATSIS in the early 1990s and ran a workshop about retrieving Indigenous language material from historical records. The results of this workshop were published in a volume titled *Paper and Talk* (Thieberger 1994/2005)

Australia has a shameful record in not understanding its Indigenous cultures, and governments have often treated Indigenous languages very poorly. There has been a failure by successive governments to recognise that Indigenous people speak different languages and therefore have particular needs, for example, for interpreters and for appropriate school programs that are designed for second-language learners of English. It is imperative that we support speakers of currently spoken languages to assist them to pass the languages on to their children, and that we record as much as possible in these languages to create a rich set of material, for use in both current and future language programs.

Historical language records need to be made accessible and usable to Indigenous people today. This includes digitising analog records to allow them to be accessed from remote areas in the country and not just at central repositories in Canberra.

Every language has been built up by its speaker community over time and encapsulates novel ways of thinking of the world. Recording this information gives everyone (speakers and outsiders) insights into Indigenous cultures. The value for the broader Australian society is that we will all be able to appreciate Indigenous societies in greater depth if we are able to understand more of their languages.

There needs to be adequate training for those working to support their languages, whether as first language speakers developing curricula in schools or as descendants of speakers who are looking for material to retrieve their languages. It is not good enough to fund stop-start programs and then to decry their failure.

There is a need for support for monolingual (L1) speakers of Indigenous languages in interpreting in courts, hospitals, other government agencies and business transactions with large companies.

There needs to be a longterm commitment to bilingual education as a principle with sufficient resources to allow it to be implemented and then supported over time.

In order to support language programs in schools there has to be proper recruitment, support, training and professional development of L1 speakers of Indigenous languages as language teachers.

Speakers of L1 are not only in homelands and outstations, so work must be done in cities and “growth centres” to support language maintenance, and counteract the likely detrimental effect on language use and language maintenance of policy that pressures people from outstations and homeland centres to move to the growth centres.

The Federal government should be commended for its ongoing, albeit inadequate, funding of Indigenous language projects since the late 1980s. I hope that the present Inquiry will find that there is great value – at the level of the individual, the local community, school or NGO and at the national level – of providing increased support for the ongoing use of Australian languages both as mother tongues and as heritage languages relearned by those whose opportunity to learn their ancestral language was denied them by oppressive policies of the time.

References

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