Chapter 11

LANGUAGE PROGRAMMES FOR TRADITION OR FOR TODAY?  

by Nick Thieberger

In this paper I want to discuss some of the issues involved in designing language courses for Aboriginal languages. I am a non-Aboriginal linguist working with Aboriginal communities on language programmes and this paper is a result of having to figure out what programme might best suit a particular situation. As this is the first paper in the language section of this conference it will be useful to briefly outline types of programmes that are available, and suggest that there are a range of possible outcomes for language courses apart from fluency in language.

I pose the question, 'for tradition or for today?' because the way that language courses are often approached is from the point of view of keeping traditional languages alive. There is a danger that we will fall into the old stereotype that the RSL recently revived about 'true' Aboriginal people. We have to be careful that we are not saying that you are not a 'true' representative of your cultural heritage unless you can speak your language. This assertion supports the same stereotype as the notion that Aboriginal people who, for example, do not use spears for hunting, or who do not rely on bush tucker are not 'true' Aboriginal people. Of course we don't accept this idea anymore because we understand that Aboriginal lifestyles have gone through changes over the past two hundred years, as have the lifestyles of all people in Australia. In exactly the same way as there have been changes in Aboriginal ways of living, so have there been changes in Aboriginal languages. There is not a simple dichotomy between 'traditional' and 'modern', rather there is a whole range of responses to the cultural differences that exist among Aboriginal people and between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people. The linguistic concomitant of this is that Aboriginal languages have undergone great changes, including the development of lingua francas (pidgin or creoles) based both in indigenous languages and English.

We should distinguish, then, between keeping languages alive and keeping traditions alive. It is quite possible to pursue either of these aims without the other. What I am suggesting in this paper is that a language programme will not be as effective if it does not address the changes that a language has gone through, and with that also the role of tradition as defined by the current generation of speakers or descendants of speakers of the language. The way in which we perceive our own tradition is with reference to our present needs. Traditions only exist in the way in which we interpret them today. When people talk of maintaining or preserving their culture or their language, I suggest they may be talking about a recreated form that is suited to present needs. This phenomenon is related to what Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) call 'Invented Tradition', a set of practices which automatically implied continuity with the past, where possible, with a suitable historic past (see also Morphy and Morphy 1984). Similarly European
Australians, for example, have an image of their own tradition of hard work in conquering a harsh country, an image that excludes their use of Aboriginal slave labour. What people remember about their past, their tradition, is not fixed, but is tied into their current perceptions and needs. When it comes to deciding on a language programme we have to realise that there is a difference between wanting traditions recorded and having children speaking an ancestral language.

Let me give a practical example. I have been working with people from Punnu, a community in the Great Sandy Desert. Punnu is located in what has recently become the Rudall River National Park. As in many Desert communities, Punnu people come from various linguistic backgrounds, among them Manjiljarra, Kartujarra and Warmman. Punnu community was formed earlier in the 1980s when a group of people broke away from the Strelley mob. Since then the relationship between Strelley and Punnu has been strained.

Throughout this time a mining company, CRA, has been exploring for minerals in the Rudall River area. The area around Rudall is Warmman country. They call the river Kartamilyji. In the past few years there has been a conflict between some of the people at Strelley and Punnu over who should speak for the country. CRA has found a very rich uranium deposit and expects to develop a strip mine when the federal government changes its uranium policy. Warmman people at Strelley have cleared the sites where CRA is exploring without talking to Warmman people at Punnu, nor with members of the two Aboriginal communities who live in the National Park.

Both Strelley and Punnu have recently begun ‘Warmman programmes’, using the language. I suggest, as a way of reidentifying or of reinforcing the identification of Warmman people with their country. Being Warmman has become important, so people who have always been Warmman but, for example, who had been sending their children to a school where they were learning Nyangumarta or Manjiljarra, decided they wanted a Warmman language programme. At both Strelley and Punnu Warmman is not the main language being used everyday. Children are growing up and hearing very little Warmman spoken around them. Consulting speakers about their aims for a language programme makes it clear that what is wanted is a dictionary and books for use in the school. A language programme in this situation will need to be a language awareness or a language reproduction programme.

There are two points I would like to draw out of this example. One is that tradition is interpreted to meet current needs. It is largely because of the current difference of opinion over land ownership that a language programme has been initiated by Warmman people.

The other point is that there will be different types of language programmes depending on the linguistic situation of a particular group. Some will aim at teaching children to speak a language, others will be used for identity purposes, to provide a link with whatever traditions the community identifies as important to pass on.

All languages are constantly undergoing changes. You just have to read Max Harris in the Australian to see his opinion of how Australian English is departing from the ‘traditional mother tongue’. So when it come to language programmes I suggest we
have to deal with the present state of languages rather than some 'pure' form of the language that existed once.

**Aboriginal Societies in Australia**

Before looking at the various models of language work possible in Aboriginal communities, it is necessary to understand something about the different Aboriginal communities in Australia. A language programme must conform to the needs of the particular group of people it is designed for. In some communities a bilingual programme might be appropriate, in others there may no longer be any traditional language spoken but a creole may be well established, in yet others some variety of English is the medium of communication. The contact between the invading Europeans and the indigenous population occurred at different times in different parts of the continent, a fact that is reflected in the present linguistic situation.

Willmot (1981) discusses the National Aboriginal Educational Committee (NAEC) socio-geographic description of Aborigines in contemporary Australia as being of four basic types:

1. Traditional — geographic and social isolation from the rest of Australia (e.g. Arakur, Papunya, Murray Island, Yirrkala, Western Desert Communities of WA).
2. Old reserves — considerable geographic and social isolation, but not as traditionally oriented as (1) (e.g. Pt Pearce, Lake Tyers, Cherbourg, Maribank).
3. Urban communities (e.g. Redfern, Inala).
4. Urban dispersed

Prior to Willmot’s classification, John (1977) identified four degrees of language use in Aboriginal Australia that parallel the four NAEC categories.

1. Speakers who have an indigenous language as their first language (e.g. Yuendumu, Eastern Arnhemland).
2. Speakers who have a creole as their first language (e.g. Ngukurr, Bamyili).
3. Speakers whose first language is a non-standard variety of English which is not a creole (e.g. many urban and rural town dwelling people).
4. Speakers whose English is indistinguishable from that of standard Australian English.

While these four categories do not capture all possibilities, they are useful as a guide to typical situations. We should be aware that the people in John’s category (1) may be monolingual in an Aboriginal language, or may be bi- or multi-lingual with their other languages including a variety of English or creole. In category (2) there will certainly be older people who are speakers of Aboriginal languages. Similarly, John’s four categories of speaker may all be present in one Aboriginal community so that there is no direct correlation between Willmot’s types of communities and John’s types of speakers.

It is important to bear both Willmot’s and John’s four categories in mind as we discuss language programmes. There are still Aboriginal communities (type 1) where English is not used except for dealing with government agencies (e.g. in the Western Desert and Arnhem Land) and even then its use may be restricted to the few members...
of the community of whom such interaction is required (council members, spokespeople and so on). While we would expect these communities to have the greatest probability of maintaining their languages, it cannot be taken for granted that this is the case. For example, Lee (1983) discusses the differences between old and new Tiwi. The changes are so great that a dictionary written twenty years ago is no longer applicable to current usage. Bavin and Shopen (1985), and Bavin (1988) in a study of children’s acquisition of Warlpiri at Yuendumu, show that there are changes occurring in the word order, morphology and lexicon of what is generally considered to be a strong language. From these studies we can conclude that all remaining indigenous languages in Australia are undergoing relatively rapid changes.

In Ngayampaa in NSW, few of the younger people still speak the old language (Donaldson 1985:137). When they talk to the old people don’t correct them, even though the way younger people speak is very different from the way old people speak. Some would say that the young people are making mistakes, and that might be true, but these mistakes can also be looked at as the new way of speaking Ngayampaa. It is no good saying that there is a pure form of the language that has to be stuck to if there is no one around who is speaking that way.

When some story books were written in Ngayampaa, the old people decided they would write things down in the old way. The young people didn’t object, probably because they were respectful of the old people. These books are an important record of what Ngayampaa was like. They are like the classics in English, like Shakespeare, in a type of English that no one speaks anymore, but that we all know as an old way of speaking English. While useful, these classics may not have the same appeal to younger speakers as would an approach which related more closely to their own understanding of Ngayampaa.

I had the experience of writing introductory lessons for Paukantji in Wilcannia in Western New South Wales. The lessons follow a second language teaching approach, and assume that people want to speak Paukantji. The course material has not been used to my knowledge, and there have been no requests for further lessons to be written. Either the material fail to address the needs initially expressed by the users, or I misinterpreted the wishes of potential users. In retrospect I think the latter is the case, and that the high regard in which the ancestral language is held is part of a more general nostalgia, a point that I have discussed previously.

Models for Maintenance

Unfortunately there are a number of different terms currently being used for language programmes. McConwell (1986a:9-10) uses three terms to discuss ‘Mother tongue programme types’ which are specifically for use in schools: (1) Bilingual Education; (2) Language Maintenance — in which the language is still spoken, but not so much by younger people; and (3) Language Renewal, used where the language may be spoken occasionally, but younger people do not know more than a few words. These are similar to the categories used by Catholic Education in WA.

Johnson (1987) describes four programme types but does not elaborate on the different strategies that would be employed in each of them: language continuation,
when the language is still in use; language renewal, when older speakers still remember the language; language revival, when there is little still spoken, but there are records available, and; language resurrection, when all speakers have died and only written or taped material survives.

The models I will consider below are a combination of the above.

i) language continuation programmes for languages that are still spoken (including bilingual schooling).

ii) language renewal/reintroduction.

iii) language revival.

iv) language resurrection.

Levels of Maintenance

Tied into each of these programmes is an implicit belief about the level of language maintenance that can be achieved. In areas where the language is not used everyday there is still a need for language maintenance, in the sense of maintaining what still exists of the language. For example, language death studies (Dorian 1981) have shown that languages usually do not just disappear, but that they undergo a series of structural and functional changes ending up in shift to the dominant language. Dorian (1980) shows that choices among alternative sentence structures with similar meanings are collapsed as use of the language declines, or that one structure is favoured by semispeakers of the language. Dressler and Wodak-Leodolter (1982) show the stylistic shrinking of the language that is involved in language shift. McConwell (1986b:8) also notes that loss of style/register distinctions in the old language is a feature of language shift. Bavin (1988) notes the reduction in morphological complexity in Warlpiri. Austin (1986) discusses phonological, morphological, lexical and syntactic changes that have occurred in languages of New South Wales; McConwell (1986a) discusses the change in function that languages go through; and Eades (1983) points out the 'Aboriginal' nature of discourse that is, structurally, English. These and other studies show that at every point in the shift from an Aboriginal language speaking community to an English speaking community there is the possibility of intervention to ensure that something is retained of the old language. This is what I understand to be the larger project of language maintenance. While there is also a need for language programmes for cases where the vernacular is a syncretic or post-contact language, I have not had experience with these situations, and so will not deal with them here.

In table 1 I list the features that should be targeted by a language programme, correlated with typical community situations. The table is presented as a guide to the potential for language work. I do not claim that a community will be as easy to categorise as is suggested by the labels in the left hand column. Similarly it is likely that language programmes will draw from a few of the models listed. The reason for defining types is to emphasise that language programmes are possible in many more situations than just those requiring bilingual schools. In addition, language sensitisation or awareness courses (McConwell 1986a, Richards 1982) can be run in all of the situations listed. Such courses are common where there is limited time available in the school curriculum for language work, or where the education department wants to be seen to be
recognising Aboriginal languages in schools without committing resources to them (as for example at La Grange).

Language awareness activities can make people aware of their usage, and can make clear the extent to which the traditional language is or is not used. During one such course that I was involved in at Numbulwar, in eastern Arnhem Land, the participants (Aboriginal teaching assistants) were devastated to find just how little the children could understand of their ancestral language, Nunggubuyu. At the same time, the teaching assistants (mostly women) used Kriol in most of their interaction with the children (including their own offspring). The course focussed on language use and provided the impetus for conscious change in language choice among the participants. (There is, however, no evidence that this change actually eventuated; as is pointed out below, intervention is just one of a number of variables in language change).

It should also be noted that there are results achieved by a language programme beyond language learning, such as increased knowledge about heritage (a point raised by Dorian 1987 for programmes in Irish Gaelic), or involvement of adults in the running of the school (as literacy workers or language teachers) (Harris 1987:149).

Another aspect of language maintenance that is included in the models discussed below is language preservation, or 'salvage' work aimed at recording as much as possible of languages (on audio- and video-tape) that have only a few speakers left. Such recording is of enormous value to descendants of speakers, and can provide the input for future language programmes.

Table 1. Aims and types of programmes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPICAL SITUATION</th>
<th>OSTESENSIBLE AIM</th>
<th>TYPE OF PROGRAMME</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Continued use of</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Language in everyday use 'strong' language</td>
<td>— stylistic variation (genres, 'avoidance' ritual)</td>
<td>i) Language continuation. Programmes for languages that are still spoken (including bilingual schooling)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older speakers, shift beginning in younger speakers</td>
<td>— communicative competence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only 'Rememberers' of the language left</td>
<td>— stories — limited functions, short utterances etc — discourse style</td>
<td>ii) Language renewal/ reintroduction  iii) Language revival</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only recorded sources available</td>
<td>— words</td>
<td>iv) Language resurrection</td>
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1. Language continuation, models for languages that are still spoken.

Under this heading come programmes designed to support the diversity of styles and registers used in a language that is spoken everyday. In Australia such variation would include special speech styles (Dixon 1980:58, Haviland 1979:233). There is little in the literature about models of language maintenance for languages that are still spoken, except for the use of bilingual education programmes. Paradoxically, while maintenance of languages as everyday media of communication appears to be the most
commonly discussed form of language maintenance, its implementation is the least understood. Strategies aimed at whole communities of speakers are rarely discussed, especially in comparison with the extensive literature on language programmes in schools. This could be because speakers of languages do not recognise their children's need for language instruction until the children are noticeably speaking a different language to that spoken by their parents.

The uses of a bilingual programme in maintaining a language are not easy to assess. A major difficulty is that the use of a language relies on more than participation in school activities. The influence of a bilingual programme could be to encourage use of the target language outside of school hours, but only, according to Folds (1987), if the community participates and has influence over the direction taken by the course. They may feel that the school is simply not the place for the language to be taught. "Most annu (local Aboriginal people) do not want the Pitjantjatjara language taught in the present schools at all and point out that their permission was not sought when the bilingual programme was introduced" (Folds 1987:92).

Bilingual education has the potential, then, to assist in maintaining languages, with the proviso that it is controlled by the people it is meant to serve. The school has to employ local Aboriginal teachers who speak the language (as in McConwell's 'two-way' schools, the South Australian 'Nganampa' schools, or the Western Australian community schools).

2. Language Renewal/Reintroduction.

Language reintroduction is appropriate when there is still abundant knowledge of the language in the community in which the programme is to run. Since there are still speakers of the language, they will be involved in teaching and planning language work. The main aim of such a programme is to encourage younger people to use the language, and to enhance the status of the language (the Maori language nests are an example).

Schools can be a base for language renewal. Benton (1986) describes the use of second-language teaching in schools as the major source of language reintroduction for Irish Gaelic and Maori. Most New Zealand schools now offer tuition in Maori language. Irish primary schools have to devote one fifth of each day's teaching to Irish, and on 1978 estimates 10% of the English-speaking population of Ireland had been made 'truly bilingual' through the schools (Benton 1986:63). A language insertion course, where the Aboriginal language is used for part of the time in the classroom, could be part of a school's language renewal programme.

3. Language Revival

Language revival programmes typically rely on recorded sources, and on the knowledge of remaining speakers who have been unable to pass their knowledge on to the present generation. Both sources will provide only partial information about the language; in the absence of a speech community it can be assumed that there will be some attrition in the discourse styles and syntactic structures of remaining 'semispeakers'. Even if historical written records of Aboriginal languages are reliable, which in my experience is rarely the case, there is not always going to be the type of information recorded that is required in revival programmes (see Barlow & Triflett 1987:92). Thus the forms that will be used in this type of programme will have to be
reconstructed or drawn from similar languages. The question then will be, what language is actually being revived?

If a revival programme is requested, we can assume that there is an interest in the community in learning the language, and that there is a group of people who will undertake the course and will engage in finding out about the language. 'Revival' programmes deal with a language that is still used or still remembered. Typical among the revival programmes discussed in the literature are Gaelic in Ireland (Benton 1986), Hobbema in Alberta, Canada (Kent-Gooderham 1975), Same in Scandinavia (Paulston 1976) and, in Australia, Awabakal (Health 1982), Ngarrindjeri (Kirke 1987), and Wangkamarra (ALA Newsletter April/May 1985). The methods used in these courses vary, depending on resources available, but usually language revival relies on recorded sources and on a linguist who can interpret the recorded information.

An example of this type of revival is Cornish, whose last monolingual speaker died in the late eighteenth century (although it may have been spoken for up to a century after that (Shield 1984)). A movement to resurrect the language began in the seventeenth century, but the revival of the 1950's resulted in approximately 1000 people attending classes, of whom only 50 were subsequently capable of holding a conversation in Cornish. Similarly, Mithun and Chafe (1979) describe a Mohawk revival course planned and developed with Mohawk teachers over several years. The language is taught from kindergarten through to sixth grade and only Mohawk is spoken in the classes. It is a programmed approach roughly following the order of a child's acquisition of Mohawk, aiming at communicative competence in the language. The authors consider a key factor in the success of the programme to be community attitudes and assistance in devising the course. At the same time there were objections to the programme from Mohawk people who had been punished for using the language in their youth and who now considered the language to be 'backward' (Mithun and Chafe 1979:29). This type of programme benefits from having a large population of potential users, and this is one reason that such a course is rarely practical in the Australian context. In the cases where it is possible, the materials devised for Ngarrindjeri in South Australia or Wangkamarra are a good example.

4. Language Resurrection

Typically a language resurrection programme is instituted when there are no more speakers of the language. It differs from language revival in that it relies entirely on recorded sources. Examples of this type of programme are rare, but the use of Banjulang in Victorian schools is a form of resurrection. The aim of such courses cannot be expected to be more than an awareness of what some parts of the language were like.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have given a number of examples of language programmes and of types of programmes. There are a number of reasons for running programmes, and often the aim is not fluency in a language, but rather is knowledge of one's heritage or tradition. Language programmes can obviously help to 'keep languages strong', this may be one aim of bilingual schooling for example. However, a language programme is only one small input. If people are not using the language themselves then usually
the programme is really aiding in awareness of traditions rather than aiming at teaching children to speak the ancestral language.

When people ask for a language programme it may well be with the aim of passing on traditions to their children, or of identifying themselves with some set of traditions as they are defined today. It is possible to create fancy programmes with lesson plans and elaborate teaching materials, but if these do not address the reasons for the establishment of the programme in the first place, they run the risk of sitting on the shelf, as did the materials I produced in Wilcannia.

As linguists we have to be clear about what is wanted in the language programme. Just because a programme does not aim at fluency in a language does not mean there is no role for a linguist. The challenge is to assess the reasons for initiating language work, and to design programmes and materials so that they address the current needs of Aboriginal people.

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Author/s:
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Title:
Language programmes: for tradition or today

Date:
1988

Citation:

Publication Status:
Published

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/34078

File Description:
Language programmes: for tradition or today

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