Language maintenance: why bother?

NICHOLAS THIEBERGER

Abstract

What do we mean by 'language maintenance'? It is an enterprise that, understandably, has the support of most linguists, but for what reasons, and to what possible outcome? There are at least seven arguments used in defence of the effort placed on 'maintaining' Australian Aboriginal languages, and these are discussed and evaluated in this paper. While each has merit, it is ultimately by appeal to morality and social justice that we find justification for Aboriginal language maintenance.

1.0. Introduction

There is an acceptance in linguistic circles that languages should be maintained; arguments for the development of language courses usually begin from the position that languages should not be allowed to 'die' (witness the Language Maintenance Conference in Canberra in May 1986, or the establishment by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies of a Language Maintenance Fellowship, or the Language Maintenance Newsletter put out by staff at the School of Australian Linguistics, all taking as given that what they designate as 'language maintenance' is both necessary and good). Why should an effort be put into maintaining languages whose speakers are either no longer using them, or are using them rarely in an increasingly smaller number of domains?

As linguists, we often are too deeply involved in the everyday effort of fieldwork, training and literature production to step back and examine the issue in a broader context. This article arises from my own concerns as a linguist working with Australian Aboriginal people to record and to
maintain 'small' languages in what is officially an overwhelmingly monolingual society. It attempts to cover the arguments used in promoting language maintenance, both as a guide to reading, and hopefully as a step towards the resolution of conflicts that I and others have experienced in reconciling theory and practice. This is especially necessary given the recent trend for linguists (in Australia) to be interventionist rather than participant/observers of a decline in the use of Aboriginal languages. It is only through the efforts of linguists and speakers of Aboriginal languages that lobby groups have been established to raise the public profile of Australia's indigenous languages, and to extract funding from the federal government for a 'National Aboriginal Languages Programme'.

The term ‘language maintenance’ has been used to mean either (1) a description of the state of shift that a language has undergone (that is, how much of the language is actually maintained), or (2) those activities engaged in with an aim of maintaining languages. The distinction is one of diagnosis and intervention. It is the second use that will be the basis for discussion in this paper. The effort spent in maintaining Australian Aboriginal languages (or, more accurately, in maintaining bilingualism in Aboriginal languages and English) may have results other than fluency in a language (see Dorian 1987), but these results may adequately suit the needs of the 'clients', the people with or for whom the language course or material is designed.

This paper reviews and draws out common threads of the arguments that are used to justify language maintenance, broadly categorized under the seven headings listed below (there is no significance to their ranking):

i) from the national heritage point of view, preservation of the linguistic resources of the nation.

ii) social cohesion

iii) identity

iv) diversity

v) language maintenance as part of cultural maintenance

vi) individual well-being

vii) social justice

1.1. Languages as national resources

The argument that languages are part of the nation's resources appeals to the notion of preservation of the national treasure, and to the idea that languages are resources like minerals, technical skills or numbers of workers (Rubin 1972; Thorburn 1972; Clyne 1980). The Australian National Policy on Languages discusses the maintenance of languages and bilingualism as valuable and necessary for the benefit of all Australia, not just the individuals involved (Lo Bianco 1987: 5). Typical of the views put in this argument is O'Brien (1979: 84), for whom the death of a minority language represents a loss both to the world community, and to the state or federation of which that minority culture is a part. He quotes Steiner's assertion that 'every language mirrors and generates a possible world, an alternative reality', a view discussed below that owes much to Whorf.

While it is possible to retain something of the linguistic richness of a nation by 'salvage' work, that is by preservation of languages as artefacts, reduced to academic grammars and collections of texts, this can never approximate the diversity of languages in use. That this work is useful is undeniable, but it is usually only entered into because it is of more use to the expropriators, the dominant culture, than it is to the speech community it is abstracted from. Thus Johnson (1987: 5) talks of our Aboriginal languages as national treasures, part of our national heritage and so deserving of protection'. He continues, eulogizing 'our' ancestral languages and cultures as being 'magnificent as national parks'. The work of recording indigenous cultures is part of the colonial treasure but it is also a source of information for 'revival' programs which may provide descendants of the language's speakers with a valuable resource, however abstracted from its original context it may be.

On a more pragmatic level Fishman (1972: 23) points out that a nation's political and cultural foundations are weakened when large parts of the population do not feel encouraged to express behavioral patterns that are traditionally meaningful to them. While respect for 'traditional behavior patterns' is laudable, it runs into difficulty where those behavior patterns conflict with the dominant society. In section 1.5. I suggest that the nation requires only certain aspects of 'traditional behavior patterns' to be retained to satisfy the image of polyethnicity. Nevertheless I agree with Fishman that a nation that incorporates linguistic diversity will be stronger than a nation that is largely monolingual (see section 1.4 for a discussion of diversity). This is especially the case with respect to Aboriginal languages, which convey a wealth of knowledge from a number of groups of people who have lived in Australia for at least 40,000 years. This knowledge is usually made accessible through language
maintenance work both to descendants of members of the speech
community and to the nation. As Rowley points out, 'time is long overdue
for the development of appreciation by all Australians of the cultural
heritage of Aborigines. Only as this understanding and appreciation
grows will the Aboriginal point of view add to the richness and variety of

1.2. Social cohesion

Multilingualism can be seen both as contributing to (Galbally 1978;
Horvath 1980) and detracting from the cohesion of a society. An example
of the former is Gillhotra (1985: 66), who argues that maintenance of
community languages will result in a 'more cohesive, integrated and just
multicultural society'. An example of the latter is Fichte (1968: 190), for
whom each separate language indicates a 'separate nation' which has the
right to take 'independent charge of its affairs and to govern itself'.
Certainly language has been the focus for separatist movements attempt-
ing to establish autonomous rule (Basque, Welsh, French in Canada
[Williams 1984]). To some, linguistic difference is seen as causing conflict
(Quinn 1981), as a barrier to the harmonious workings of a single nation
(Kelman 1972; Zubrzycki 1977), hence the arguments for the develop-
ment of such 'non-national' languages as Esperanto. Similarly, linguistic
or cultural diversity has been seen as dysfunctional for a 'developing'
society. Criticizing that notion, Liberson and Hansen (1974) consider the
relation between mother tongue diversity and indicator(s) of national
development indicated by studies such as Pool (1969) and Fishman (1966)
to be 'spurious'. They state that while mother-tongue diversity shows a
positive correlation with low levels of urbanization, industrialization, low
GNP, energy use and literacy, there is no causal link (Liberson and
Hansen 1974: 533). The assumption that most speakers of languages
other than English do not also speak English is implicit in the notion that
multilingualism is divisive.

In fact, according to Clyne (1981) while 12.3% of Australians (in 1976)
regularly used a language other than English, only 1.4% did not regularly
use English. Of those, there are are no figures to indicate how many did
not actually speak English, but I suspect the figure would be very low.
Multilingualism, at least in Australia, is thus not a threat to national
unity. The argument that linguistic (or cultural — see section 1.5)
diversity is divisive is essentially conservative. It obscures the numerous
reasons for social conflict that have nothing to do with linguistic (and
cultural) difference, and a lot to do with the distribution of the resources
of the society. To suggest that people will live in harmony together if they
speak the same language ignores the variation within any given language
(for example, Labov [1978] describes some of the linguistic variation
associated with socio-economic status, or with a particular subculture
[Labov 1972]). It also ignores the examples of Ireland, Lebanon, and
Nicaragua, to name a few countries where the same language is used by
opposing groups in a civil war, or Switzerland where linguistic difference
has not affected social harmony. It would be more socially divisive to
attempt to impose a common language on unwilling speakers of minority
languages (for example on speakers of Welsh in Wales, or French in
Quebec) than to support the co-existence of the metropolitan and
minority languages.

1.3. Identity

Calls for language maintenance may include claims about the role of
language in identity. Identity may be at the level of the group or the
individual, hence language is seen as an integral part of a group's identity
and of the identity of the individuals within the group. When a group's
identity is threatened, they may make claims about the social importance
of maintaining or resurrecting 'their' language (LePage and Tabouret-
Keller 1985: 236). Enhancing 'identity' may be seen as the rationale for
inclusion of a study of Aboriginal languages in schools (Sykes 1986: 86),
or for support of Aboriginal languages generally (Brennan 1979). Dixon
states that 'if a minority group is to maintain its ethnic identity and social
cohesion it must retain its language. Once a group has lost its language it
will generally lose its separate identity and will, within a few generations,
be indistinguishably assimilated into another, more dominant group'
(Dixon 1980: 79).

It is not clear that language and social identity are necessarily linked in
the way that Dixon claims (see Sutton's 1981 review for example). If they
are, then it is not always language in the sense that Dixon uses it, but may
be 'associated' language (Eastman and Reese 1981: 110, and Eastman
1984), that is a language that we associate with a chosen heritage. The
idea of 'associated' language is similar to Dorian's (1980: 39) 'linguistic
lag', a 'lag' between the usage of a particular group of Gaelic speakers and the changing usage of the population around them which has 'taken a variety of forms over time: a Gaelic that was unusually pure; a monolingualism that was peculiar to them; an imperfect English at a time when mastery of English was the local norm; and finally, a persistent bilingualism in an otherwise monolingual population'. The essence of the 'lag', then, is in its marking of difference; language can be a marker of identity 'without taking the form of the presence or absence of some particular language or dialect' (Dorian 1980: 36). Similarly Hill and Hill (1977) point out that, with the narrowing functional range of Nahuatl, it is becoming a 'language of solidarity'. Language, like other cultural forms, can lose its instrumental value while still retaining a symbolic or affective value.

It is possible to envisage two separate social groups who share the same language but whose separate identity is maintained through dress, religious observance, political beliefs, shared history, or any number of other features (including minor linguistic differences or styles of gesture, see De Vos 1975: 15). Rigsby and Sutton (1980–82) show that, for Cape York communities, 'language is used emblematically for certain levels of grouping, but these are among the least salient of all forms of social identification in the region' (Sutton and Rigsby 1980–82; see also Sutton 1978: 66). Other examples of groups for whom group identity does not rely on communicative use of a minority language are found in Arvanitika in Greece (Trudgill and Tzavaras 1977) and North American immigrant groups (Gumperz 1982: 39). On the other hand the Sami (Lapp) language 'possibly surpasses any other single cultural trait as a unifying force ... the viability and continuity of the language is almost a necessary condition for the community of the ethnic group as such' (Keski-Ilando 1981: 153). Rigsby (1987: 2) observes that linking identity and language is useful in allowing the state and mainstream population to 'deny the legitimacy of the claims to special status and land rights made by an active people who have shifted from their indigenous language to varieties of English'. Significantly, he suggests, the same philosophy is used by indigenous people to justify language maintenance programs.

Smolich and Secombe (1985) suggest that each group has certain features that are 'core values', which are the 'most fundamental components of a group's culture' (1985: 11), or the 'heartland of the ideological system' (Smolich 1984: 26). If the 'core values' of a group of people include language, then the language may be retained as a means of communication longer than if they do not include language. 'Languages constitute the core values of many, probably most cultures. If these are lost or destroyed, the cultures become residual and intellectually deactivated' (Smolich 1984: 39). However, the only way to ascertain what the core values of a group are, as far as I can tell, is by post-hoc observation. If this is so, then the circular definition of 'core values' (x is a core value because it is retained under difficult circumstances) renders their predictive power useless. Thus it will provide no evidence about the likelihood of retention of languages. In addition I disagree with the implication that 'core values' are a constant that marks a particular group of people transhistorically. I suggest that 'core values' do not exist for all members of a given culture, but rather they must be an interplay of members' ability to support them (economically) and the types of changing social environment the group's members encounter. I also suggest that it is common for groups of people to reinterpret their traditions and the aspects of their past that are important to them in the present, and that these 'core values' are likely to be reinterpreted in such a manner.

Self-identity is always associated with a language or jargon according to Eastman and Reese (1981), regardless of what language is actually used everyday, or even how much knowledge one has of the language. Thus, 'plumbers as a group have an argot. Americans as a nation have American English as an associated language. Italian-Americans have Italian as an ethnically associated language and so forth' (Eastman and Reese 1981: 115). Giles et al. (1977: 326) claim, furthermore, that language, unlike other variables of identity, can be chosen to a large extent by the individual, and hence 'is a truer reflection of one's ethnic allegiance ... than one's cultural heritage as determined by the fortunes of birthright'. This view is supported by Huffines' (1980: 55) finding that inability to speak Pennsylvania German indicates 'a lack of identification with Pennsylvania German ethnicity'. Hence we can conclude that language can be consciously used by people in their attempts to identify themselves and their affiliations both within a society and across societies, language is used partly as a 'series of acts of identity in which people reveal both their personal identity and their search for social roles' (LePage and Tabouret-Keller 1985: 14).

Groups use certain markers of identity to distinguish themselves from other groups, rather than forming a thoroughgoing inventory of features that identify members or nonmembers of the group (Barth 1969). Definition of membership of a group is negative, that is, one is defined as
being not an outsider, or more commonly, outsiders are marked as being not insiders by their use or lack of use of certain critical features. Language may be used to mark the difference in group affiliation, but such a marker need not be a separate language, it could be a small number of words or morphemes with a high functional load, as in the Western Desert (Miller 1972) where languages continue to be used every day, or the ‘few linguistic shibboleths’ (Dixon 1980: 85) used by Aboriginal people who no longer speak their ancestral language (see also Haviland 1982: 63), or distinctive ‘ways of speaking’ (Tades 1983). Identification with a language group may occur long after that language is no longer spoken according to Brandl and Walsh (1982: 78). Giles et al. (1977: 327) also argue that a distinctive language need not be a necessary or sufficient symbol of one’s ethnicity, but some distinctive speech style might be. Thus the identity function of language can be carried out by a relatively small part of a language, or even by a language that one associates with, regardless of one’s proficiency in it (Eastman and Reese 1981; Dorian 1980). This appears to be the case in the description by Barber (1987) of meetings at Port Keats, in the north-west of the Northern Territory, where language affiliation is one of a number of variables used in associating oneself with a part of the country, or with a particular sociopolitical grouping. Participants in the meetings can choose from a number of potential affiliations (including linguistic affiliation) depending on their current needs.

Identity is relative to context and time, it is not a given that accompanies groups of people throughout their history. Language may be a central feature in a group’s projection of its identity to other groups. It may also serve a ‘boundary’ function in maintaining group identity, the amount of language required for this function need not be great. Language may also be associated with a group who never actually use the language and who may wish, from time to time, to reassert their link with the language in courses of instruction of some type. The implications for language maintenance are that, if a group feels that language is an important feature of their identity at a particular time, they may maintain the language or the parts of the language that are of importance to them. I suggest that the above discussion leads to the following three identity functions of language. The first two are self-explanatory, the last relates to the ‘associated’ language:

1) Language as a marker of self-identity.

2) Language as a marker of group identity

3) Language as a link with the group’s tradition, with its past.

1.4. Diversity

In this section I want to consider the argument for language maintenance from the point of view of linguistic diversity. If linguistic diversity exists, is it of benefit to encourage it through language maintenance programs? And if so, of benefit to whom? The most familiar argument for the strength of diversity comes from biology; ‘although the global “need” for diversity is not entirely clear, the survival values of ecosystems that contain this diversity are real’ (Ehrenfeld 1986: 39). Biological diversity provides a greater pool of resources to draw upon in times of crisis. Ehrenfeld points out that it is economists who pose the greatest challenge to the legitimacy of diversity. ‘Rightly or wrongly, the other reasons for preserving diversity — religious, ethical, cultural, sentimental-historical, intellectual and aesthetic — (are) deemed to lack the punch of the interrelated themes of economics and survival’ (Ehrenfeld 1986: 39). The same arguments that Ehrenfeld discusses as lacking economic punch apply to maintaining languages. They are discussed throughout this paper.

However, there are potentially sound economic reasons for maintaining Aboriginal languages. There is a wealth of botanical and zoological knowledge incorporated in language which can be recorded and passed on in the activities associated with a language maintenance program (if there is a receptive audience). This is recognized by non-Aboriginal researchers who have produced ethnobotanical information (Feil and Goddard and Kalotas 1985), and by Aboriginal people who realize that the everyday knowledge of the past generation is not being transmitted to their children, or that Europeans have a lot to learn about living in the Australian bush; ‘There are many things the Europeans don’t understand about the way the bush can help us … We can teach Europeans all about these things, they are things we have known always’ (Lanley 1980: 38). Knowledge about uses of plants and animals is not bound in any one language, but typically it is the older people in a situation of language shift who retain knowledge of language, and also of the uses of their natural environment. While logically there is no necessary connection between any Aboriginal language and knowledge of the bush, it is nevertheless common for such knowledge to be the focus for language maintenance work.
Mühlhäusler (1987: 19) argues that it is because of the diversity of metaphors encapsulated in each language that languages should be maintained; 'Just as the diversity of plants in a tropical rainforest may contain the solutions for future medical and genetic problems, the diversity of languages may contain a source of alternative philosophies, scientific metaphors and ways of living in harmony with one's natural and cultural environment'. In what could be construed as a contradictory argument, Volosinov (1973) suggests that language is stratified into dialects as well as into languages that are socio-ideological: languages belonging to professions, to genres, languages peculiar to particular generations, etc. This stratification and diversity of speech will spread wider and penetrate to even deeper levels so long as a language is alive and still in the process of becoming. Hence a diversity of styles and jargons will always exist if there is a community of speakers according to Volosinov. These styles will surely reflect a variety of metaphors in Mühlhäusler's terms. If the diversity of a monolingual society were the same as the diversity that would be found in a multilingual society, then there is no argument here for language maintenance.

If we agree that diversity is of value, we first have to establish that linguistic diversity can exist. One might, for example, agree with Chomsky (1965) that all languages share certain universals, and that superficial differences between languages are not of interest. On the other hand we could, with Whorf (1956), see each language as encapsulating (and perhaps determining) an entire world-view. Followers of Whorf have supported linguistic diversity as a 'good' in itself (for example Fishman 1982). Thus we must support 'ethnolinguistic diversity for the benefit of pan-human creativity, problem solving and mutual cross-cultural acceptance' (Fishman 1982: 1). If languages encode varying world-views, then with these languages would die the world-views incorporated in them. For example, Wurm (1986: 537), discussing the Ayiwo language from Santa Cruz, claims that the complex noun class concordance system of the language is based on concepts underlying the traditional culture, and 'significantly, much of the concordance system is decaying, and becoming simplified, in the language as used by the younger generation'.

Hale (nd) posits two senses in which 'world-view' and language are connected. The first can be learned separately from the language, it is incorporated in words, 'manners of speaking' and some syntactic operations (which will be used in different ways by members of the speech-community, depending on their understanding of the implications of the particular aspect of world-view incorporated in the syntactic operation). The second sense of world-view is shared, necessarily, by all speakers of the language. It is the 'analysis of phenomena' in semantic themes which function as integral parts of the grammar and hence it is acquired by all members of the speech-community (Hale nd: 3). But if there is an interaction between language and world-view, and hence culture, and not the causal link of linguistic determinism, then changes in the culture will surely be reflected in the language. Hale's first type of world-view would, one suspects, be more susceptible to change since it is more superficial (Hale claims it is learned later than the second type). However, it is also the most accessible to speakers' intuitions and may therefore become the object of their attention as their awareness of the decline of use of the traditional language increases. In fact, it is precisely 'ways of speaking' (Philips 1970, and Eades 1983) and certain lexical items (Austin 1986) that are retained as languages change function and are replaced by other languages. Hence we find a contradiction in that the diversity that we seek to maintain is incorporated in the more inaccessible parts of language, those acquired first according to Hale, and the aspects that are maintained for the longest are lexical items and 'ways of speaking'. As more accessible markers of difference, these parts of language may be more or less consciously chosen (perhaps for purposes of identity) by speakers who fear the loss of the entire system. A fruitful area for further research would be a study of what happens to the features of a language that are considered to be an integral part of its speakers' world-view as speakers use the language in fewer domains.

The diversity of world-views and metaphors, while providing a compelling argument for language maintenance, may be the most difficult items to maintain. Their symbiotic link to the ongoing reproduction of a group's culture suggests that changes in the cultural environment will have effects on the language. So, to maintain the type of diversity of world-views incorporated in language suggested by Hale's world view two, the best approach would appear to be cultural maintenance, which is discussed in the next section (1.5).

1.5. Cultural maintenance

Arguments for language maintenance may be couched in terms of preserving traditional cultures (i.e. Friends of Bilingual Education 1986).
In this section I will suggest that language maintenance implies cultural maintenance, that societal multilingualism does not exist except as a result of cultural pluralism of some sort. In doing so I will present some arguments for cultural maintenance and point out their similarity to arguments used for language maintenance. The same arguments that are used with reference to the former can be or are being used in discussions of the latter. Shnukal (1984: 32) notes that, for Torres Strait languages, there is a high degree of correlation between cultural maintenance and maintenance of language. Smolich and Secombe (1985: 12) claim that for some language-centered minority groups, the preservation of their language is indispensable for the transmission of their cultures to the next generation. Navajo people interviewed by Fuller (1982: 99) indicated that language maintenance was necessary to facilitate communication with older people who are a link to a cultural heritage.

Bullivant (1984) suggests that culture is 'a programme or blueprint to enable a society to survive in its environment in such a way as to maximize what its members take to be their best advantage' (Bullivant 1984: 2). In this definition, culture is a product of interaction between people, and between people and their environment. In addition to culture, ideology justifies the activities of the cultural group in maximizing their best advantage. The role of language in the reproduction of culture is self-evident. However, while it may be necessary for the vernacular to be used in the transmission of ideology, it is not clear to me that it is necessary for the language to be the traditional language associated with the particular culture. For, while there will be key concepts in a minority culture that are best understood using the minority language (and which are central to the group’s construction of its social reality (Berger and Luckman 1967), the broader ideologizing that is necessary for cultural maintenance could be conducted in any language. And as was discussed in section 1.3, all cultural groups associate with particular language varieties. What does cultural maintenance mean and what possibilities are open to members of a culture that is faced with domination by another group? We could crudely characterize the outcomes of culture contact as:

1) Acceptance by the minority or indigenous group of the dominant culture.
2) Rejection of the dominant culture and cultural conservatism.
3) Attempt to control the dominant culture using aspects of the indigenous culture.

The three idealized positions outlined above would correspond to:
1) adoption of the dominant language;
2) monolingual use of the Aboriginal language; and
3) the use of the traditional language or creole in new contexts.

The choice made by an indigenous minority of opposition to or control over cultural change, if it aims to make any claims (of an economic nature) on the dominant society, ultimately requires the sanction of the dominant society. Unless the society is built on a structural pluralist model, in which each group is virtually a mini-state (Bullivant 1984: 103 gives the examples of South Africa, Switzerland and francophone/anglophone Canada), there may be conflict between the cultural and economic demands of the dominant and the minority groups. Furthermore, Aaby (1978: 71) points out that a defence of ‘cultural autonomy’ (our option 2 above) implies ‘that a policy of isolation is realistic, or that these groups in their traditional culture and structure have the best defence against the kind of encroachments and pressures they are liable to be exposed to’. Nowhere is the conflict between a dominant and a subordinate group more apparent than in the Aboriginal cultural emphasis on land and the importance of the relationship of groups of Aboriginal people to a particular part of the land. Bullivant (1984: 86) gives six case studies of Aboriginal groups and their adaptation of aspects of their traditional culture to present needs. He suggests that ‘the resultant cultural and structural synthesis, going by the term Aboriginality in recent literature, may be the key to further Aboriginal advancement’. It is not that people are either ‘traditional’ or ‘modern’ (i.e. representatives of the dominant society), but they are defining what they consider to be of value in the limited choices available to them (see also Maddoch 1974; Ackerman 1980; Dagmar 1984). The linguistic concomitant of this is the development of lingua francas based both on indigenous languages and in English (i.e. Aboriginal English and Creoles) since there is a syncretism of pre-and post-colonial forms (see Herskovits 1964 for discussion of syncretic culture). Fabian (1986), discussing the colonial history of Swahili, argues that ‘the colonial system needed a type of individual who, separated from a traditional context, derived strength and continuity from symbolic vehicles of identity such as the langue maternelle and had the personality traits expected of wage-earners, consumers and supporters of nuclear families’ (1986: 80). So Fabian suggests that certain symbols of identity are retained in the syncretic post-colonial culture, but only those that are not threatening to the dominant group.
Similarly, traditions may be revived out of their traditional context to provide a tangible token of ethnicity. For example, arranged marriage among Australian Greeks is ostensibly a continuation of a Greek custom. However, in Greece, it was part of a social system and a particular economy. Now it has become ‘divorced from its original structural conditions. It is now simply a matter of morality’ (Kalantzis and Cope 1984: 36). 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 Hobbsawm and Ranger (1983) call ‘Invented Tradition’; a set of practices which automatically implies continuity with the past, in fact, where possible, ‘they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past’ (1983). Spitzer (1974: 120) describing the creoles of Sierra Leone, talks of similar phenomenon which he calls ‘defensive Africanization’, in which the people search back in history and, ‘through a filter dictated by their current needs and expectations, seek evidence of great deeds and glory’ (for an Australian example see Morphy and Morphy 1984). This phenomenon is known to oral-historians (Price 1980) who realize that a person’s own account of their past or of their group’s past ‘can be interpreted to yield etic conclusions in ways doubtless quite alien to the original “intentions” of the authors’ whose ‘intentions’ may have been ‘purposes of propaganda and of factional or individual glorification’ (1980: 159). Thus she concludes that the Aztec account of Aztec history that she analyzes, is etically, not so much an historical account of their origins as it is the ‘justification of an existing social and political order’ (1980: 177).

It is through adaptation to change that a group takes an active role in redefining its ‘culture’ to suit its perception of present needs. Language has a role in that it is both a medium for transmission of cultural information, and a part of a group’s culture itself. As is pointed out in section 1.4, the link between language and culture is symbiotic, so changes to either will affect the other. Cultural maintenance is best seen as a dynamic process, not necessarily the creation of separate groups who exclude the potential for change.

1.6. Social well-being of individuals

In addition to all of the other factors discussed above which are of relevance to the well-being of the individual, there are two linked arguments more specifically related to the effects of bilingualism. One argument is that bilingualism is preferable to monolingualism, and, the other, perhaps more serious, is that children whose linguistic development is interrupted by being withdrawn from one language environment and placed in another are likely to be ‘semilingual’. They are linked in that the first sees bilingualism as enriching or additive, the second sees the potential of failure to achieve bilingualism to be detrimental. An example of the second is ‘Kee’, a Navajo boy who was punished for speaking Navajo and subsequently withdrew from both White and Navajo worlds. He became ‘a man without a language. By the time he was 16, Kee was an alcoholic, uneducated and despondent’ (Platero 1975: 58). Kee is presented as a ‘non-lingual’, someone whose first language was not allowed to develop before he was placed in a second-language environment.

Peal and Lambert (1962) show that a group of Montreal bilingual school children performed significantly better in both intelligence and language tests than did a monolingual control group. Similarly, Beng-Zeev’s (1972) study of Hebrew-English bilinguals in New York found that bilinguals have ‘greater cognitive flexibility’. Both of these studies are limited, as Lambert (1985: 119) himself observes, in that they deal with ‘additive’ bilingualism, that is a situation in which the two languages involved are both prestigious within the dominant society, for example French and English for English-speaking children in Canada. ‘Subtractive’ bilingualism arises where a dominant language is learnt by the member of a minority whose own language has no value in the dominant society, with the accompanying possibility of replacement of the original language entirely as is the case with Australia’s indigenous languages.

Cummins (1976) has shown that there may be a threshold of bilingual competence which a person must attain which will affect both the benefits associated with ‘cognitive flexibility’ and the deficits discussed below. A later study has shown that age of bilingualism is a factor (Vaid 1977) in the right hemisphere of the brain interpreting meaning, with older onset of bilinguality not affecting lateralization. After summarizing the literature on the cognitive effects of bilingualism, Skutnabb-Kangas (1981: 223) concludes that ‘balanced bilinguals’, those who have high levels of competence in both languages from an early age, show ‘positive effects when various aspects of cognitive development are measured’.

‘Semilingualism’ (Skutnabb-Kangas 1981: 248ff.) is a controversial topic in that it carries with it implications of deficit theory, the possibility that it is the product of a middle-class white investigator not finding the
same usage that s/he is used to. It is used in discussing the situation of children whose linguistic development in L1 is interrupted by the shift to L2, also known as 'subtractive' language learning (see above). Note that this is different to Dorian's (1977) 'semispeaker' who is fluent in at least one language but not in the ancestral language that may be undergoing language shift. An example is found in Harris (1987: 150) who suggests that 'too early an emphasis on learning English causes some yolngu children not to learn any language well and can damage the development of normal intelligence in yolngu children.' I would like to see some data that support Harris's assumptions, but I suspect that the differences he is citing should be explained first by reference to socio-economic power and status relations between groups, before looking at linguistic aspects.

In summary, bilingualism appears to be of value if it is developed in early childhood. It is unclear if later language learning has the same cognitive benefits. This argument supports efforts to maintain bilingualism, but it suggests that the degree to which bilingualism is useful depends on social and economic factors.

1.7. Social justice

While the six arguments for maintaining languages outlined above are important and have wide currency, I think one of the central and most commonly used arguments concerning language maintenance is from social justice or sentimentality. For example, Calvet (1974: 11–12) suggests that, after having served colonialism, 'linguistics (that is to say linguists) should and could fight against neo-colonialism in opposing the deterioration of the dominated languages from which it derives its daily bread. This fight is not, as some could imagine, marginal: it is a fight for humanity, for its right to existence in the centre of its own culture, its right to a lifestyle that it chooses.'

Unfortunately arguments based on sentiment are often difficult to prove, especially to funding bodies who are generally concerned with electoral popularity, or cost/benefit types of analyses (although one example of the socially useful nature of language maintenance efforts is the potential for employment of local people. Each program requires speakers of the language to participate as teachers, teaching assistants, literacy workers and so on. The resulting jobs are newly created and do not take people away from their communities).

The Aboriginal Languages Association (ALA) talks of language maintenance as necessary because Aboriginal people request it and 'to abrogate the defaults of the past which have led to the present situation of general ignorance in the matters relevant to Aboriginal languages' (Papertalk-Green and Bell 1986: 11).

Brennan (1979: 14–16), in a report on the need for an interpreter/translator service in the Northern Territory, suggests that language issues are, like land issues, central to the future of Aboriginal people. She also sees that formal recognition of the value of Aboriginal languages will lead to respect for them and for their speakers.

Similarly, Johnson (1987) considers that Australian society as a whole should feel it necessary to assist Aboriginal people to preserve and restore any aspect of their culture that has been damaged by what he terms foreign rule. Such appeal to 'rights' is necessary and important, however there is nothing 'natural' about rights, they are not recognized out of benevolence by the government or funding bodies (especially in the absence of a bill of rights in the constitution), but out of the need to appease potentially troublesome pressure groups.

Language maintenance efforts also respond to what we might consider to be calls for a voice by a colonized people. The assumption is not that Aboriginal people do not talk, but that the talk of a subordinated people is not recognized by the dominant group as being valuable. Dorian (1981: 106) points out that 'a group undergoes a long period during which its language is actively devalued, while speakers of that language are penalized socially and economically, before members of the group see fit to withhold that language from their own children'.

Not only is it the case that the dominant society places no value on the indigenous people's culture, but the success of colonialism lies in its ability to engender these beliefs of the dominant culture in the dominated. Memmi (1965: 106) in an essay on the effects of colonialism on the colonized points out that 'the entire bureaucracy, the entire court system, all industry hears and uses the colonizer's language'. All conspire to 'make the colonized feel like a foreigner in his own country'. An example in Australia is the renaming by colonizers of parts of the country, which Calvet (1974: 57) notes is a common practice of colonizers, revealing a wider disdain for the indigenous people: 'the country and the inhabitants didn't exist before the arrival of the coloniser.' The seemingly incomprehensible claim that pre-colonial Australia was uninhabited, encapsulated in the term Terra Nullius (cf. Maddock 1983: 15), reflects Calvet's point.
Another example is the title of a recent report by Willmot (1984) ‘Out of the Silent Land’, which reinforces the colonial myth of either an empty land, or a land inhabited by people too backward to survive without the intervention of European know-how.

The acceptance by Aboriginal people of the values of the dominant group fits in with Gramsci’s (1971) notion of ideological hegemony, a form of social control which he opposes to physical coercion. He reasons that societies cannot be held together purely by coercion, and that there is a degree of participation even by those who stand to lose by it. Merlan (1978) discusses the way that Aboriginal people were ‘made quiet’ or pacified in and around Elsey Station in the Northern Territory. She points out that Aboriginal stockmen (‘compelled by circumstances’, 1978: 102) participated in shooting ‘wild blacks’, and in subduing their countrymen and foreign tribesmen as did Aboriginal police trackers that McGregor (pc) has worked with. Memmi (1965: 107) illustrates this co-operation with the colonizer with reference to language; the colonized person ‘himself sets about discarding this infirm language, hiding it from the sight of strangers’. In a similar fashion Ferguson (1959) points out that the prestigious (or High) language variety in a community is considered by speakers to be ‘more beautiful, more logical, better able to express important thoughts and the like’, even by speakers whose command of the High variety is quite limited. Day (1985: 180) points out, for Chamorro and Hawaiian that, while outsiders play a major role in the destruction of native languages, it is only when the speakers themselves see the benefit (or perhaps the necessity) of speaking the dominant language that their own language falls into disuse. Thus speakers participate in the devaluing of their own language.

Ideological hegemony permeates all parts of society and is considered by most members of the society to be ‘common-sense’ (including linguists, see Dittmar’s [1976: 245ff.] discussion of the role of linguists in ‘stabilizing the system’). Subgroups (in the present example, Aborigines) within the society do not see their models of the world reflected in the same way that the dominant model is reflected (as, for example, in mass media). Such groups are ‘muted’ according to the social anthropologist, Ardener (1975: xii). Some feminist theories have treated women as a ‘muted’ group within a society in which males determine the norm (1975: xii). It could be argued that other subordinate groups (for example Aborigines) are similarly muted, their voice is not encouraged and they are forced to use the dominant system, especially in interactions where the dominant group has power (education, law, welfare).

As Cameron points out (1985: 105), the notion of muting does not imply that women are unable to experience their culture, but that they must use dominant forms to be socially productive and politically expedient. The members of a subordinated group use their own language with each other (Illich’s 1983 vernacular), but are ‘institutionally constrained and negatively judged in the public arena’ (Cameron 1985: 108). Part of the project for language maintenance, then, is the revaluing of the vernacular. Where the vernacular differs from the traditional language and the dominant language (i.e. in syncretic or post-contact languages), then those conducting language maintenance programs must be careful not to reinforce the notion that ‘traditional’ is better than ‘untraditional’, since the ‘untraditional’ of this generation may be the ‘tradition’ of the next (Morphy 1980: 81; also Thieberger 1988).

Language is one of a number of areas in which Aboriginal people have been disenfranchized, their power to choose has been lessened, and language maintenance is one of the ways in which Aborigines, if they so choose, can assert the value of their own tradition in the face of an insistent and overbearing metropolitan language and culture.

1.8. Conclusion

In this paper I have outlined some of the arguments that are used to support intervention in maintaining languages. To conclude I suggest that Aboriginal languages which are part of the national resource should be recorded, and their speakers given the opportunity to pass them on to their children, regardless of the current state of the language (i.e. there must be provision for revival or reintroduction of languages as part of language maintenance). There is nothing socially divisive about maintaining Aboriginal languages in Australia, unless it is to the detriment of Aboriginal people by not allowing access to positions of power. This assumes that maintaining an Aboriginal language implies lack of competence in English, an assumption for which there is no evidence. While a language may be associated with a people’s identity, there is no necessary link between them, as both are functions of an ongoing dialog between individuals and between groups. The diversity of world-views and metaphors incorporated in languages are valuable, but the associated notion of cultural maintenance is more difficult to support. Cultural maintenance is best seen as redefinition of traditions to suit the group’s present needs.
Similarly there will be groups who are no longer using their traditional language who will want to redefine it to suit their present needs.

In this paper I have shown that language maintenance is part of a set of broader issues. The arguments for and against maintaining a particular language depend on how much the language is used. There is a difference, for example, in whether a language’s link to identity is based on everyday use or on relatively few markers, or whether diversity of world-view and metaphor is more useful than diversity of ways of speaking or words, or whether an individual’s well-being is benefited by use of parts of a language or not.

The strongest argument in support of language maintenance is from the point of view of social justice. Through identification with their ancestral language this generation of speakers is identifying with their chosen past, part of a process of giving themselves a ‘voice’ in neo-colonial Australia.

*Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre*

**Note**

1. This paper was originally presented at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in April 1989. It has been substantially improved by comments from members of the audience there, and from Peter Austin, Edith Bavin, Janet Sharp and an anonymous reviewer. None of these people is in any way responsible for any errors that remain, which are, of course, of my own doing. This paper was finalized while I was working for the Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre, a project funded under the Federal Department of Employment, Education and Training’s National Aboriginal Languages Programme.

**References**


Brennan, G. 1979 The need for interpreting and translation services for Aboriginal Australians, with special reference to the Northern Territory. A research report. Research Section Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Report no. 7.


Eastman, C.
1984

Eastman, C.M. and Reese, T.C.
1981

Ehrenfeld
1986

Fabian, J.
1985

Ferguson, Charles A.
1959

Fichte, J.
1968

Fishman, Joshua A.
1966
Some contrasts between linguistically homogeneous and linguistically heterogeneous polities. Sociological Inequality 36, 146–158.

1972

1982

Friends of Bilingual Education
1986
Ensuring the survival of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages into the 21st Century, submission to the Federal government for a national language policy.

Fuller, J.E.
1982

Galbally, F.
1978

Giles, Howard, Bourhis, R.Y., and Taylor, D.M.
1977

Harris, S.G.
1987

Haviland, John B.
1982

Herskovits, M.J.
1944
Cultural Dynamics. New York: Knopf.

Hill, J.H. and Hill, K.
1977

Hobsbawm, E. and Ranger, T. (eds.)
1983
The Invention of Tradition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Horvath, B.M.
1980

Huffines, M.L.
1980

Illich, I.
1983

Johnson, S.
1987

Kalantris, M. and Cope, B.
1984
Multicultural education and the meaning of 'culture'. Sydney: Social Literacy Monograph.

Kelman, H.C.
1972

Keskitalo, A.I.
1981
Labov, William
Lambert, Wallace E.
Lanley, L.
LePage, R.B. and Tabouret-Keller, André
Lieberson, S. and Hansen, L.K.
Lo Bianco, J.
Maddock, K.
Menini, A.
Merlan, F.
Miller, W.
Morphy, H.
Morphy, H. and Morphy, F.
1984 The 'Myths' of Ngalakan History: Ideology and Images of the Past in Northern Australia. Man (N.S.) 19, 459–78.
Mühlhäusler, Peter
O'Brien, T.
Papertalk-Green, C. and Bell, J. (eds.)
Peel, E. and Lambert, M.
Peile, A.
(n.d.) The Botanical Terms and Concepts of an Australian Desert Tribe. (Ms).
Philips, S.U.
Platero, D.
Pool, J.
1969 National development and language diversity. La Monda Lingua-Problema 1: 3, 140–156.
Price, R.J.
Quinn, T.J.
Rigsby, Bruce
1987 Indigenous Language Shift and Maintenance in Fourth World Settings. (Ms).
Rigsby, Bruce and Sutton, P.
Rowley, C.D.
Rubin, Joan
Shnukal, A.
Skutnabb-Kangas, T.
Smolczyn, J.J.
Smolczyn, J.J. and Seembe, M.J.
1985 Community languages, core values and cultural maintenance: The Australian experience with special reference to Greek, Latvian and Polish groups.

Spitzer, L.

Sutton, P.

Sykes, R.

Thieberger, Nicholas

Thorburn, T.

Trudgill, Peter and Travaras, G.

Vaid, J.

Volosinov, V.N.

Whorf, Benjamin, L.

Williams, C.H.

Willmot, E.

Wurm, Stephen A.

Zubrzycki, J.
Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:
Thieberger, N

Title:
Language maintenance: why bother?

Date:
1990

Citation:

Publication Status:
Published

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/34090

File Description:
Language maintenance: why bother?

Terms and Conditions:
Terms and Conditions: Copyright in works deposited in Minerva Access is retained by the copyright owner. The work may not be altered without permission from the copyright owner. Readers may only download, print and save electronic copies of whole works for their own personal non-commercial use. Any use that exceeds these limits requires permission from the copyright owner. Attribution is essential when quoting or paraphrasing from these works.