Teaching Minority Indigenous Languages at Universities

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Abstract

I describe the courses in Indigenous languages at university-level in Australia, dividing them into two principal types: *emblem language programs* **focussing on learning a language which is being revived and re-created, and** *communication language programs***, directed to languages which are still spoken by children. Properties of the different types of program are outlined, considering the different audiences. While the audiences for the two program types have different needs, there is overlap, and they face similar challenges within universities. I outline some of the challenges, and describe an attempt to address them through the proposed University Languages Portal Australia (ULPA), to be run through the Languages and Cultures Network of Australian Universities (LCNAU). This aims to make courses in these languages more visible and thus more accessible to students across Australia.**

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Introduction

Languages are both emblems and means of communication. By 'emblem' I mean that language can be a sign of belonging to a particular community. Linked to the uses of language as emblem is the view in many Australian Indigenous communities that a language is property inherited from parents and grandparents, and that languages are associated with land. Thus a language may be an emblem for a group because it is a shared means of communication, but it may also be an emblem because in the past it was a shared means of communication for the ancestors from whom the present-day group inherited their land.

As communities of speakers move from speaking Indigenous languages to speaking the language of government, Indigenous languages may lose their function as means of communication, but remain as emblems of identity. People stop using them for everyday conversation, but may retain emblematic uses such as singing songs in the Indigenous languages or using names from the Indigenous language for anything from people to places to institutions to wines to varieties of wheat.

Emblem languages and languages that are means of communication both deserve better representation at universities. In 1995 Bill Edwards, a long-term teacher of the Western Desert language Pitjantjatjara at university-level, wrote that Australian universities had "largely failed in their recognition and promotion of Aboriginal languages" (Edwards, 1995: 11). The situation has only minimally improved since then.

Representation of languages at universities includes not only teaching (to be discussed below) but also research. The teaching of languages at university-level is underpinned by research into the languages, and the history, society, and cultural and aesthetic traditions of the associated speech communities. This is the difference that university language teachers point to between themselves and their colleagues at intensive language schools. Research has a special place in teaching emblem languages, because, as Giacon observes, rebuilding a language requires considerable research into, and anlaysis of the sources (Giacon and Simpson, 2012). Practically, most speech communities are not in positions to undertake that research, and so often find it helpful to partner with researchers.

There are essential differences between teaching emblem languages at university and teaching communication languages, although there is some overlap between the ways of teaching them, the participants (teachers and learners), and the reasons for teaching them. Communication language courses include L1 courses aimed at first language speakers of an Indigenous language, and L2 courses aimed at Indigenous and non-Indigenous people wanting to learn an Indigenous language to communicate with speakers (Giacon and Simpson, 2012), as well as L2 courses for people, such as linguists, who want to learn about a language. Emblem language courses can be characterised as L2 revival courses aimed at Indigenous and non-Indigenous people wanting to learn an Indigenous language that is being revived or restored. I discuss each in turn.

Teaching languages for communication at universities

Indigenous languages as means of communication have several potential audiences at universities: non-speakers who want to learn to communicate with Indigenous

people, Indigenous language speakers who would like to explore their own language more deeply (or learn a related language), non-speakers who are interested in Indigenous languages as objects of study, whether for better understanding of language, of Indigenous societies or Indigenous aesthetic practices.

Non-speakers who want to learn to communicate with Indigenous people

Awareness of the existence of Indigenous languages is essential for professionals such as teachers, legal and health professionals, and community workers working in communities where Indigenous languages are the everyday means of communication. Without an understanding of translateability and the complex linking of language, beliefs, knowledge and assumptions by speakers of other languages, these professionals cannot successfully help the Indigenous language speakers grapple with State education, health, legal and other institutional bodies. A simple example comes from Devitt and McMasters (1998) who describe the experience of Aboriginal renal dialysis patients in the Northern Territory. Here is a story from the daughters of a dialysis patient.

> 'Cause sometimes if a doctor talks to her.. sometimes she doesn't understand a word what they are saying, and it is best for someone to stand beside her just to explain what it means. And you know it is hard for her... Sometimes -- you know what Europeans are like - they like to speak hard English.. [but] most of us now, we just know.. easy English -- that [like] we speak now.. it's real hard sometimes for White people to understand [that] (Devitt and McMasters, 1998: 148)

And here is a view from a renal specialist:

> Interviewer: Do [patients] routinely ask you questions?

> Specialist: Never. Never -- very few. I mean a couple..will probably ask a few questions, [generally] people who are a little more educated and urbanised. But the majority ..don't talk to me.[...] even sometimes when I want to make sure that the person understands, it is very difficult to get a positive feeling from my side, that this person does understand., and wants to do this, or doesn't want to. (Devitt and McMasters, 1998: 150)

Devitt and McMasters sum up the interactions as follows:

> It is true to say that in the examples given above both patients and carers understood 'only half' of what was being communicated, rather than simply that patients were unable to understand carers' English. The carers' point of view and priorities in relation to health and well-being, among other things, were as opaque to the majority of the renal patients as the renal patients' perspectives were to their carers. (Devitt and McMasters, 1998: p.151)

Similar gaps in understanding are found in interactions between Indigenous people and other professionals. Lawyers wrestle with explaining ideas such as 'suspended sentence':

> Further, the concept of a 'suspended' sentence remains a mystery to many. They serve a period in jail, are released and go home. Unfortunately, many are unaware that they are now subject to a Good Behaviour Bond. Even if they have this level of understanding, they are often totally unaware it is requiring them to be of good behaviour for a particular period and, should this be breached, they must return to court and most likely serve the remainder of their suspended sentence in addition to receiving further punishment for the new offence. (Ford and McCormack, 2011 [original 2007]:p.x, xi)

Training in Indigenous languages, let alone tertiary-level training, is rarely available to professionals. As a result, they struggle with communicating vital information such as management of renal disease or bail conditions. It also means that they may often have limited understanding of the people with whom they interact, e.g. speech pathologists who are not trained to detect the difference between children who happen not to speak English and children with a physiologically based language or cognitive delay. Devitt and McMasters suggest that this can result in Indigenous languages being seen negatively:

> 'Although we lack 'hard evidence' on this point, there was also a recognisable attitude or ethos among service providers, albeit subtle and covert, that Aboriginal patients were somehow culpable in their linguistic difference; that Aboriginal language itself was perceived as yet another negative feature of that particular group of people. (Devitt and McMasters, 1998: 148)

The need for non-Aboriginal people to learn Australian Indigenous languages to communicate with their speakers was recognised in some missions in the 1930s, most notably by Presbyterian missions in the north of South Australia on the lands of people speaking the closely related Western Desert languages Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara. This led to the first tertiary-level course in an Australian Aboriginal language in 1966 when Pitjantjatjara began to be taught at the University of Adelaide (with materials prepared by a missionary linguist, Wilfred Douglas, and a pioneer of language laboratory teaching, Henk Siliakus) (Amery, 2007; Simpson et al., 2008). The course has benefited from the availability of native speakers of Western Desert languages living in Adelaide, in particular Ngitji Ngitji Mona Tur, probably the first Indigenous tertiary-level language teacher in Australia. At the height of interest, students could progress through up to six term-length

courses, but in recent years this has been reduced to one level, taught as an intensive summer school run through the University of South Australia.

Perhaps the most successful L2 course has been the Yolŋu Studies program at the Charles Darwin University in Darwin. Yolŋu Matha is the name for a group of related dialects and languages spoken to the east of Darwin in Arnhem Land. The program has done well, if success is measured through the number of student enrolments, the continued deep involvement of Yolŋu teachers, the possibility of taking up to six courses on Yolŋu language and culture, and continuation of this program over a number of years despite financial hard times in universities. Some factors in its success has been its innovativeness. Charles Darwin University is a relatively small university and so they arranged to offer the courses online, and to make it available through Open Universities Australia, thus increasing access to the course. An excellent publicly available webpage with links to resources has helped ensure knowledge of the course: http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/yolngustudies/

Another major innovation was "Teaching from country". This was an attempt to address two issues: the importance for Yolŋu of living in their country and teaching about that country as part of teaching the languages, and the need for access to natural interaction in the language as part of online learning of a language in order to communicate (Christie and Verran, 2010). Yolŋu teachers are able to address classes via Skype from their homelands as part of the course. Undoubtedly this has helped continue the deep interest of Yolŋu teachers in continuing in the program, although there are still logistic challenges.

Speakers who would like to explore their own language more deeply or learn a related language

Australian universities cater well for English speakers, who can explore aesthetic and cultural traditions using English language through courses on English literature, drama, film, and cultural studies. Their understanding of their own language, history and society is enhanced by studying them at university and sharing ideas with other colleagues.

Universities sometimes also cater for native speakers of immigrant languages through advanced courses in the language on history, music, art etc (e.g. courses for background speakers of Korean, courses in Classical Chinese which native speakers may take, etc). Whether they do this depends on factors such as the size of the immigrant community and the perceived prestige of the language (for example, despite the small size of the immigrant French community, French native speakers are well catered for at a number of universities).

However there is little provision for native speakers of Indigenous languages to explore their own language

more deeply at university. Again, the Yolŋu Studies program at the Charles Darwin University in Darwin has provided this to some extent through guided research programs.

The general lack of such programs means that speech communities miss out on the enrichment that can be derived from systematic exploration of language and aesthetic traditions at university-level in collaboration with other scholars. While people can enrich their languages in their own communities, the lack of university-level recognition has long-term consequences for the languages both in terms of the perceived standing of the language, and in the available registers of the language.

Teaching Indigenous languages at university may also result in the longer term in developing a register of academic talk in those languages, which in turn increases the domains in which the languages can be comfortably used, and may also increase the prestige of the languages.

If Indigenous languages are taught at university, it can act as a sign that these languages are as rich and effective means of communication as any other language taught at university. This helps counter the misinformation and many negative stereotypes of Indigenous Australian languages that abound even in a well-off well-educated country such as Australia which has moved towards reconciliation with its Indigenous peoples.

Non-speakers who are interested in Indigenous languages as objects of study

Linguists, anthropologists, historians and so on may wish to study Indigenous languages, not for communication purposes, but rather for better understanding of language, of Indigenous societies or Indigenous aesthetic practices. These people are perhaps better catered for than the other two categories of student, first because there is an increasing body of material (learners' guides, dictionaries, reference grammars, YouTube videos) which allow people who are familiar with language learning to make considerable headway on their own, and second because many linguistics programs teach introductions to Indigenous languages generally.

Teaching emblem languages at universities

There has been increasing interest by Indigenous people in reviving heritage languages in Australia (Amery, 2000). Several revived Indigenous languages have been taught at university: Kaurna from 1997 (University of Adelaide), Gamilaraay (University of Sydney and Australian National University), Wiradjuri (Charles Sturt University). Amery and Buckskin (2013) give a vivid history of the elatons between a community wanting to revive a language and a university which

eventually resulted in a memorandum of understanding between the two, a first for Australia.

An important audience for these courses are Indigenous people who want to teach their revived language to children at pre-schools and schools (Gale, 2011; Hobson, 2013; Poetsch, 2013), as well as non-Indigenous people wanting to learn more about Indigenous languages and societies. By taking part in the courses, people are creating the beginnings of communities reviving the languages, and their ideas, and materials they make in the courses, may well help shape the future of those languages. However, since in Australia there are many languages, it is hard to find enough students to make the courses viable at universities (Amery, 2007; Giacon and Simpson, 2012), even when they are offered online. Moreover, unless Indigenous students need to have certification that they have passed the course (say for teaching accreditation purposes), the cost of a university course may make private study groups a more useful and attractive option.

Visibility of Indigenous Australian languages at universities

It is a national embarrassment that it is so difficult for Australian students to study any Australian Indigenous language at tertiary level. As of 2014, only six Australian Indigenous languages are taught in any form at universities across Australia (three emblem languages, Kaurna, Gamilaraay and Wiradjuri, and three languages still spoken as a first language by children, Yolŋu Matha, Pitjantjatjara and Arrernte). Of these only Yolŋu Matha is taught as a major. While it is understandable that we do not yet have advanced courses in Indigenous languages comparable to the advanced university-level courses in French or Chinese that native speakers of French or Chinese can profit from, we should lay the groundwork for these to develop.

A first step is having courses available online which are as well organised and content-rich as online courses in other languages, and in which native speakers or language owners are heavily involved. The online Yolŋu Matha course at Charles Darwin University provides a model which may be attractive to other Indigenous communities - combining teaching using standard grammatical activities with interaction and teaching about Yolŋu society through on-country teaching.

The second step to getting this to work is for potential students to know that the courses exist and that they can be included in their degrees. A general problem with this has been the overall reduction in languages offerings at universities and the obstacles to collaboration across institutions. (Dunne and Pavlyshyn, 2012; Hajek et al., 2013; Lo Bianco and Gvozdenko, 2006).

In collaboration with the Languages and Cultures Network for Australian Universities (LCNAU http://www.lcnau.org/), our proposal (accepted by the Australian Office for Learning and Teaching) is to create "University Languages Portal Australia" (ULPA) to allow students and others to readily find information on:

1. which languages, including Indigenous Australian languages, are offered at which levels at which universities, and which are offered online

2. how to enrol cross-institutionally in these units of study from any university in Australia.

We want to make courses in Indigenous Australian languages a priority for sharing across universities, and so part of this work would be to help forge agreements across universities to simplify the process of cross-institutional enrolment in language units of study.

While there have been a number of attempts at sharing language units across institutions (Lo Bianco and Gvozdenko, 2006), including of Indigenous languages (Amery, 2007) several factors make it difficult (Hajek et al., 2008; Winter, 2009), one of them being that competition by universities for students inhibits cross-institution sharing. Second, while online language learning is growing in popularity and attractiveness (e.g. Duolingo) there is little availability of attractive grammar testing and language strengthening activities in Indigenous languages. (However, a starting-place is the greater availability of texts through projects such as the Living Archive of Aboriginal Languages (http://laal.cdu.edu.au/)). To make the online courses attractive there needs to be more interaction (as in the Yolŋu Matha Skype sessions). Third, sharing Indigenous language units are subject to the constraints for collaboration on sharing units of study identified by Hajek et al (2008) and more globally in Winter (2009), namely (i) managing intellectual property rights on curriculum and teaching materials, (ii) the complexity of cross-institutional enrolment processes, which includes information on dates, enrolment processes, credit transfers, and fees.

These challenges will not go away, but a first step is the establishment of the University Languages Portal Australia, to allow people to find out information on what languages are taught where. Indigenous Australian languages will be taken as a test case for online delivery and cross-institutional enrolment.

Acknowledgements

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