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Jo Caffery and Mark Stafford Smith

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Linguistic and cultural factors that affect the documentation and maintenance of Australia's traditional languages

Jo Caffery[1] & Mark Stafford Smith[2]
University of Canberra[1] & CSIRO[2]

1. Introduction

Over many years we have benefited from Luise Hercus' insight, experience and generous sharing of her knowledge to enhance our own research. The three of us have often discussed the linguistic and cultural factors ingrained in language maintenance and documentation; often these discussions have led to treasured laughter due to our individual and personal experiences. However, the following discussion is based on research and analysis by the authors only, and any errors are ours.

This chapter outlines research[1] exploring how the capacity of Indigenous Australians to document or maintain traditional Indigenous languages is enhanced or constrained by various local realities that are generally outside the control of the Indigenous researchers and usually deeply ingrained in the community (see also Gale, this volume). In particular, through discussion with Indigenous language researchers and other community members, it looks at the cultural and linguistic factors that affect language documentation and maintenance activities by Indigenous language researchers. It examines what these factors are through the eyes of Indigenous language researchers and Elders who were participants in our research project, which interviewed 98 Indigenous

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[1] The original research was conducted in 22 Indigenous communities that represented 32 Indigenous languages across northern Australia. See Caffery (2008) for further details.

and non-Indigenous language researchers and Elders across northern Australia (northern Western Australia, Northern Territory and northern Queensland, including the Torres Strait Islands).[2]

2. Linguistic and cultural factors

Traditionally, Australian Indigenous Elders are responsible for passing language and culture on to future generations. It is easy to posit how important this was in pre-colonial times, particularly in the highly variable environments of the inland where survival in the face of extreme conditions, possibly only encountered every few generations, depended on the fidelity of information being passed between generations (Stafford Smith & Cribb 2009). In fact, there is evidence of such information being carried orally for over 8,000 years in memories of sea level rise around Kangaroo Island and in the Gulf of Carpentaria, a time depth far older than anything from the pyramids or Sumerians. Such rigorous record keeping does not occur without powerful cultural standards and traditions. If anyone could doubt the richness of cultural knowledge that is embedded in language, they only have to read Luise's poignant record and interpretation (Hercus 1985) of Mick McLean's story in Wangkangurru. This describes how the second-last Wangkangurru group left their ancestral lands of sand dunes, soakages and richly seeding grasses in what we now call the Simpson Desert in the year that we now call 1900 to go to the flowing rivers and Bethesda Lutheran Mission in northern South Australia – movements of a type they would probably have made in extreme drought conditions many times before, but this time never to truly return. The narrative expresses implicit pressures to change mixed with an incredible richness of local knowledge that hints at how people could actually survive with confidence in a landscape that today most Australians would regard as an arid wasteland.

Such movements have had consequences for languages and for the loss of cultural knowledge that have led to the need for such traditions to change over the past 250 years in many Australian Indigenous communities. With languages dying at an increasingly fast pace (AIATSIS & FATSIL 2005; Marmion et al. 2014; McConvell & Thieberger 2001), younger Indigenous people now want to assist with the responsibility of documenting and maintaining their traditional languages (Ober 2003). Linguists also want to be a part of the documentation and maintenance and offer various methods to do so (see AIATSIS and FATSIL, 2005; Bradley & Bradley 2002; Dixon 1991; Gale, this volume). However, in an understandable echo of the very strong forces for maintaining cultural integrity, some Elders across northern Australia are reluctant to support these younger people in doing this. They are fearful of breaching thousands of years of traditional culture and practice, which may have been selectively critical to survival. Traditionally, only those who have

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2   All participants consented to their interviews being published, provided their identities remained confidential.

gained a higher status in the community have learned all the linguistic and cultural knowledge to hand on to future generations; generally, the younger generations do not have this knowledge and therefore cannot pass it on to others (Caffery 2008).

Elders and Indigenous language researcher participants explained that for thousands of years the learning of language and culture has been progressive; the older a person is, the more linguistic and cultural knowledge they have attained. Certain knowledge is provided through various ceremonies and at various stages of life, but it is not provided to those who are not yet ready for it. The more traditional knowledge people gain, the higher the status they have within their community. Elders have the highest cultural and societal status as they have been through the relevant traditional ceremonies and gained the relevant linguistic and cultural knowledge. Therefore, traditionally, it is their responsibility to hand knowledge on to future generations. This must be done at the right time and only to those who are ready, culturally and linguistically, to receive that knowledge. As clearly stated by one Indigenous Elder in the Kimberley region:

> There are rules about who and what information can be discussed or developed or dealt with by certain people, and everyone knows and understands that it is the senior people and the older people in our language community who have the language knowledge. They're older, they've been occupying their space for longer than young people … the senior people have this tremendous amount of knowledge about their language and life, Aboriginal society, their language community, their whole life. These people have a wealth of understanding and knowledge of their presence here, their existence.

Since colonisation, many of the traditional ceremonies and methods for handing on such knowledge have ceased to be practised across northern Australia (Kunoth-Monks 2006). Many Indigenous people expressed concern that their traditional knowledge will die out if Elders do not teach the younger generations their language and culture, or document their language and culture for future generations. Yet among these Elders, some expressed their concern that if their traditional language and culture is handed on to people who are not at the right stage of their life, linguistically and culturally, they will breach thousands of years of cultural law and practice. On the other hand, others contend that Elders need to pass on their traditional language and culture to the younger generations, even if they do not hold the correct status, as their languages are rapidly dying. Through much negotiation over many years, some communities have developed and implemented ways to hand on their traditional knowledge to the younger generations without breaching their cultural traditions. Even so, certain information cannot be handed on until the recipient is culturally ready for it. Our research explores this tension.

The following quote, by an Indigenous Elder who is a senior person in a Western Australian language centre in the Kimberley region, explains with much pride the traditional method of handing on language:

we also acknowledge that young people need to learn that history and learn that knowledge from the senior people. But, those senior people also know what can, what information can be made available to younger people and what they withhold until it is time to inform people of different things. So, it is a gradual [thing]. No young person can just have all the knowledge because people know that they're not ready for it in their own minds and their own development and so the older we get different knowledges is disclosed to us. But [they] also know, and the senior people that I spend a lot of time with also know, that they need to capture the interest of the young people and therefore they know they need to be allowing the young people to participate, to be exposed to events or activities and knowledge. They need to be exposed to that. But that's done gently and in the right way ... And there's stages of life that different ages will be taught, from four to when they enter into primary school there's different things, [that's] the way we do things. We try to make children aware of different things at different stages of their life. So whilst there is a concern that young people aren't being given information, we need to be clear the fact that at different stages of life different information is disclosed. Different knowledge is made available to young people and the senior people know what information they can provide to young people, and that they're safe … at the same time they're disclosing this information, they know what information to give that won't create conflict or trouble or concern for the senior people in the community. And I think they['ve] handled that really well.

There's rules that have been here for thousands and thousands of years and people do that. Then, and they're very observant, people see which of the young people are genuine and wanting to know and wanting to, people that are hungry for information but they know how to deal with people like that. They know how to respond to the needs of those people, because one of the key things … they have to release some of this information to the next generations because that's about the survival of the people and skilling the people to be able to perform different roles and continue the linguistic survival of that community.

In communities that are supported by a language centre, Elders share this opinion and practice, but undertake the passing on to future generations in different ways. The following quote, from a language centre coordinator in Central Australia, also emphasises the importance of passing traditional knowledge and languages on to younger generations but at the same time not breaching any customs. The manner in which Elders in this particular region pass information on differs from the practice stated above, but, nevertheless, the language and culture are still being recorded and handed on. The Elders allow their language centre to record information either directly from the Elders or by recording a ceremony. They then lock it away until the next generation of people are ready to learn it. They do not hand the information directly to the younger generations:

> A couple of years ago you could not touch certain stuff and you couldn't do certain stuff. Last year we recorded the men's ceremony and we recorded men going back burying people, in traditional country burying people. Now, those things were requested to us by the traditional Elders because they're concerned that it is going and is leaving. It's restricted. It's locked in a safe. We've got a safe … that those cultural things go into and only men are allowed to look at it. Now we're doing the same for the women. So those things are still being recorded, being handed down but what they're making sure is that what's being handed down is as pure as it was … and like, Mrs [Brown], we're doing work with her and she's going "when I go you mob make sure everybody sees this. You make sure"... So we're getting a lot more stuff saying it should be seen. Where in the past we've been told we're never to show this or "no turn that off you're not recording this". It's making a big difference in our society … And it has only been happening in the last three or four years.

People in the Pilbara region collect linguistic and cultural data for future generations quite differently. While the Elders allow younger people to collect language data, they are still reluctant to hand on certain knowledge, especially if that younger person does not have the right cultural status or has not been recognised and accepted as a language researcher. Therefore, the Elders have selected two Elders to document their traditional language and practices; in this way they do not breach their traditional practices and the information is then available to the younger generations when they are ready.

Both of these selected Elders are male and have had on-the-job linguistics training and field experience for many years as language researchers. One of them has had formal training. Both are fluent and literate in several Indigenous languages and one is also literate in English. It is because these two people hold the right cultural status and are fluent in their traditional languages that they are able to do the complex language work required to document their languages in detail without breaching any of their cultural and linguistic practices. In addition, both of these men assist their language centre with promoting the importance of language documentation and maintenance activities as they are highly respected and have the cultural right to negotiate such issues with community Elders. The coordinator of this language centre said:

> The difference between our two most competent language workers that work here … and the other language workers, who are often younger, … is that [these men] have incredible liaison skills with the community. They both are significantly up in the law order and so they can actually pull in a lot of muscle, very rapidly. … I think the success of this organisation is down to the fact that [these men] are very high up in the law.

In contrast, in Queensland and parts of the Northern Territory, where there are no language centres or other linguistic or cultural supports, Elders generally do not

support language activities by individuals who do not have the relevant status or fluency. Once again, this is in fear of breaching traditional law and practices. They also find it difficult to allow or assist Indigenous language researchers to run language programmes if they are not fluent in their traditional language, even if they hold an Elder status within their community. For example, one Torres Strait Islander commented:

> Oh, yes, it's natural. It's natural across the board to be concerned [about documenting and maintaining our traditional language] but to, actually, them [Elders] to cooperate you got to know a lot of things. I think that's the cultural aspect of putting things together.

Five participants in these regions stated that their Elders would rather see their language die than see someone who does not have the right status within the community, or who is not fluent in their traditional language, try to document or maintain it. The following quote comes from two Indigenous language researchers who had completed three years of formal linguistics training. Throughout these three years, they felt they had full community support in documenting and maintaining their traditional language, so much so that when they finished their studies they sought to set up a language and cultural programme at their local primary school. However, at this point they came across some unexpected problems: they could not understand why the Elders (who had encouraged their training) would not support them or assist with the teaching of the language. They knew that they were not fluent in the language but believed that the Elders who were fluent would be the language speakers and advisors in the programme. They knew they could not run the programme without fluent speakers.

Then one day when they were running a language lesson in the school an Elder came into the classroom and 'publicly shamed them' and 'kicked them out' of the classroom because they were not fluent in the language and they did not have the right cultural status within the community to teach language. These two Indigenous language researchers thought they were doing what the community and the Elders wanted – to keep their language strong. They were both very upset by what had happened, so much so that during the interview their emotions quickly shifted between anger, frustration and not caring. This was something they did not expect and had thought was important to the Elders before they started the programme:

> We try to go up to the school to teach it but we couldn't teach up at the school because we weren't fluent speakers and we tried to explain what we were doing but still they told us not to go up there so we stopped.
>
> Oh, the Elders asked you not to go up there? (interviewer)
>
> No. They told us not [*shouting*] to go up there. We shouldn't be teaching up there because we weren't fluent speakers. We told them that we may not be fluent speakers but we are willing to teach the kids, and [*brushing it off*], whatever. The council wasn't much help, they ignored us in the end.

Cultural and linguistic status is part of a hierarchical system. Indigenous people need to work their way up the hierarchy and as they do they gain status. One Torres Strait Islander Elder, who is a linguist, stated that no-one can claim they have that status; it is something that must be recognised by others and once it is recognised then that person will have more support from the community.

> First of all like I said there is like a hierarchical system... There is a time limit for you. You must show yourself to the community, to prove yourself, just. You have to show your skills for them to label you that you are the … the man who can do it.

> So how does a person who has just finished a course do that? (interviewer)

> The person finish the course and when he go back he doesn't know how to write a submission to the government to get an income. First of all he doesn't know anything about it and even though you got these skills and knowledge from the institute he has to find his way around because there is always a pressure "Oh no, you're not in the place yet to teach in the community". There are certain ones above you, you got to become much older before you teach it. But if you have the power to speaking it then you would be able to break barriers.

> See you don't advertise yourself. That is not our system, to advertise yourself with the radio that you have that qualification. It is all through by speaking, the way you talk to people and you attract them to you. And people spread the news around the community.

> So you think that's one of the reasons why people don't do language work in the communities? (interviewer)

> That's right. Yeah.

One northern Queenslander Indigenous language researcher argued that people are prepared to let their languages die if researchers do not prove themselves capable of documenting or maintaining their language, and do not hold the right status to do it.

> Once the community get to know you and you got that skill and you got that knowledge with you …

> Who are these people in the communities? (interviewer)

> The Elders and the council and the children … The community is sleeping: your path is that you have to spray them with water and make them awaken.

> But what about a Indigenous language researcher who doesn't have that confidence to wake them up, will the community just sit back and let the language change and die out? (interviewer)

> The community will sleep.

> Even if the language dies? (interviewer)

> Yes.

These linguistic and cultural factors were found to be issues across northern Australia. Often the younger people, including those who had undertaken years of formal linguistics training, generally do not realise that these factors exist in their community, and if they do, they do not realise how much these strong cultural beliefs will affect them when they start language and cultural projects. Indigenous language researchers who work through a language centre or other formal language projects with non-Indigenous researchers are fully supported and have no cause to know this is an issue. Others think that the community, in particular the Elders, do not want to support them in these activities, but do not understand why, as the Torres Strait language researchers again report:

> It's like we went to school and wasted three years of our life for nothing. Even though we want to do it, and we are willing to teach it, we need the council to support it. And the community… No one, it's like nobody is interested in doing anything… Yeah, like since that course we come back here and do nothing really. There is no real support from council or from community.

Some people argue that community awareness courses and proper planning with everyone in their community could resolve some of the problems that prevent Indigenous language researchers from doing language work. They argue that documenting and maintaining their traditional language needs support from the community as a whole for the success of the program, therefore the community needs to be aware of what the issues are, as stated by two Indigenous language researchers in two different Queensland regions:

> People need more planning or something. Like planning in the classes.

> Who would need to do that? (interviewer)

> It would have to be council, school, by everybody. So, everybody got to have time to have input into the language. So it needs to be a whole community effort.

> There should be an awareness thing happening. Educating the community in the situation of their language in the community. What are the dangers and how it can happen, and try to strengthen those areas where there are weaknesses. Like, even at home, people need to be aware and focus on their language use in their house, in schools, in churches, on the streets, in all the different language domains. So, they need to be aware all the time how the language is used. If people are not aware of that, we are slowly seeing a decline in language.

Some participants argue that the community status and linguistic fluency factor is a problem that particularly affects women. They argue this is because women do not go through initiation as men do, so it is difficult for them to be accorded the same status, and, therefore, they are not provided with the same language and cultural information that men have access to at a similar age. Considering almost 77% of Indigenous graduates of the linguistics courses in the study are female (Caffery 2008), this significantly affects the documentation and maintenance of traditional languages.

Again, this differed from region to region. In the regions where there are no linguistics support organisations, Indigenous language researchers generally do not use their linguistic skills to do language work at all. By comparison, in regions where there are language centres the communities are more supportive of anyone doing language work as long as they are not breaching their cultural beliefs and practices. To support women in being recognised for their linguistic skills and to gain the relevant status, various activities have been put in place by some language centres.

Each language centre approaches this issue in different ways. For example, one language centre in Western Australia has one female and one male Indigenous language researcher. Both are Elders, both have appropriate community status, and both are fluent in their traditional language. In this language centre the female researcher only works with women and the male only works with males. The female usually only works on language projects in the language centre rather than in the field, whereas the male does both and does the necessary liaison with the all-male council.

By contrast, another, much larger language centre in the same state, which deals with many language groups, encourages males to work with the females so that they recognise that the women have the skills to do the job. This also builds the status of women within the community. The language centre's non-Indigenous researchers do this by directing the male Indigenous researchers to the female Indigenous researchers who have the necessary linguistic skills and knowledge of the relevant language to check their work rather than having the non-Indigenous researchers check it. The centre's coordinator said:

> We're very lucky because it's [language centre] built up enough credit in the community, like I can go into a community and there's credit because we've got the [centre's] name. So we always take the women language workers with us and very carefully make sure that they are doing the work, that they really know what they are talking about [and] that they're doing the work that everyone has seen is important … this is a good example, the CDEP workers we've got [community name] there's eight men. And they've just started too. Once they've done some work, come into town and sitting down at the computer and writing down their stories and so on. I can sit and check their work with no worries, … But instead I say "[Natalie] is the editor here in [that language]". So we get [Natalie] to check their work through. And straight away those guys are seeing that she knows what she is doing and that she is really literate and so on. This is just our perspective of how we give these people credit. And [Ruth] is [language name] and again being a young women. But she now runs a cultural awareness training and she is the person up the front the whole time. So it is giving her a lot of credit and got her a very public persona. And we think that is having quite an effect … And each of those language workers have to give a report to the committee every month ... So those people on the committee it starts giving the workers status as well, because they start to see what the workers are doing and it just goes on and on.

In this way, the female Indigenous researchers build status, or recognition, within the communities based on their ability rather than their cultural status or linguistic fluency. In addition, cultural practices and beliefs are not breached. However, it can take time for these women to build up sufficient status so that they are not just judged on their linguistic skills, but also on their behaviour and the respect they show for their culture. These women would not have this status in the community if they went out into the community themselves, without being a part of the language centre and working hard to learn the necessary skills.

3. In summary

The issues of community status and linguistic fluency are key factors in documenting and maintaining Australian Indigenous languages. They can significantly constrain or enhance the progress of language documentation and maintenance projects as they are the reasons why, in certain communities, Indigenous language researchers do not continue to do language work, even if they have completed many years of training. However, it appears to be more of a problem in Queensland and parts of the Northern Territory than in other regions where there has been a long-term presence of language centres that have raised the issues over decades. Communities in these regions have found ways to document language without breaching their traditional linguistic and cultural practices, which, as we have seen, have deep roots in the survival of peoples in variable environments over many generations. The language centres are able to work around these issues through many years of trust building and negotiation by the centre's Indigenous council with the community Elders. As a result, the Elders are now willing to work with the younger Indigenous language researchers on certain language projects, and recognise female language workers' skills, even though there are still restrictions on what these language workers can do and be told.

In regions where there are no linguistic supports, such negotiations have not been possible. It appears that those in the community who are aware of the problem have not realised that there could be a way of supporting the younger generations in documenting and maintaining their traditional language without breaching traditional cultural and linguistic practices. In a practical sense, this highlights the importance of a long-term commitment from the highest level in Australia to supporting regional language centres in all areas of Australia if these cultural riches are not to be lost completely in some regions. Those regions lacking such centres urgently need the investment.

Cultural status is a problem that particularly affects women, as they rarely go through initiation ceremonies, so it is harder to recognise when they have the correct cultural status. As the majority of Indigenous language researchers are women, this factor significantly constrains linguistic activities in all regions. Again, this is more of a problem in areas where there are no linguistic supports, since regions with language centres have developed strategies to support the recognition of women's skills.

Whilst not all the issues addressed above can be easily resolved, this project shows that, despite the intense cultural forces at work, Indigenous communities can evolve their practices to successfully document or maintain their traditional languages. However, a commitment to a long-term engagement with the local Indigenous perspective is vital. As Luise has demonstrated through her long-term work on Indigenous languages, negotiation, patience and understanding are key to future success.

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