

○ **J. HOBSON, K. LOWE, S. POETSCH & M. WALSH, *RE-AWAKENING LANGUAGES. THEORY AND PRACTICE IN THE REVITALISATION OF AUSTRALIA'S INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES***

(SYDNEY UNIVERSITY PRESS. 2010. PP. 457 + XXX)

Review by Nick Thieberger School of Languages and Linguistics, University of Melbourne

Re-awakening languages (RL) provides a snapshot of an impressive number of activities around Australia that aim to support the continued or renewed use of Indigenous languages. The range and number of programs is a tribute to a great deal of hard work by those involved, and also by those (in particular the Aboriginal Language Association) who have worked to get federal funding for language projects. It comes as a surprise to many to know that the current funding source for language work (as described in this volume and currently titled “Indigenous Languages Support [ILS]”) is the latest incarnation of a program operating since the late 1980s that has disbursed millions of dollars to support IL work in Australia.

In thirty-four chapters the volume covers the continent (with the unexplained exception of Tasmania) and also a range of types of programs organised into the following seven sections: Language policy and planning; Language in communities; Language centres and programs; Language in education; Literacy and oracy; Language and technology; Language documentation. RL is not a book that is likely to be read from cover-to-cover, so the topical organisation works well, as does the detailed index which provides a useful, long, and cross-referenced point of entry. The editors are to be congratulated for bringing this collection together, and for making it available as a freely downloadable PDF file¹.

We are told of local initiatives that are sometimes based in schools, sometimes in language centres and sometimes in community centres. There is a certain amount of duplication of descriptions of the same programs from different perspectives. For example there are a number of accounts of programs working with Wiradjuri, Dhurga, Gamilaraay, and Dharawal. Clearly the editors decided that a plurality of views of the same programs was an important aspect of the story of language programs in Australia.

In addition to the topics given as section headings, a number of common themes are discussed, including: the authenticity of revived languages; dictionary development; the urgency of documentation with the few remaining speakers; uses of technological aids for language learning; language nests; weekend workshops or summer schools for language

learning. In the range of activities the Master/Apprentice model is quoted often, it was developed by Leanne Hinton (2002) and involves an older speaker spending time with a younger learner (but it is not that clear how much it is working or what time commitment there is in the individual cases). The fact that such programs exist at all is important, and maybe a follow-up volume in ten years can report on what has resulted.

As a language centre linguist frankly states of one program (p.151), only a few words were learned and participants attended only a few hours of classes. He goes on to note that bush trips are a more productive learning environment than classrooms and that funding is required to run such trips. Short sessions (half an hour a week [p.157]) with little content are commonly reported on and suggest the need for more assistance from language teachers.

Overall, RL gives a fairly rosy picture of the state of language projects in Australia, often presented as sets of good intentions rather than studies of real outcomes. It is clear that long term commitment is a key to learning any language and many of the activities reported on here seem to be in the first blush of enthusiasm. With few exceptions the contributors talk about the ideals of their programs, a discourse which may be necessary for funding applications but does not give an entirely realistic idea of what can be achieved. For example, in one chapter the author suggests that learning a language will lead to getting employment in tourism (p.153), in another we are told that “learning an Indigenous language can increase [...] self esteem, improve decoding skills in literacy [...] and may positively influence attendance and retention rates of Aboriginal students” (p.167). These claims may be true, but no evidence is supplied to substantiate them. An exception to the more rosy descriptions is the report from North Queensland that talks of the:

“hopeful assumption that Aboriginal languages are still there, sleeping, recumbent, just waiting for a community of speakers to come and make a bit of wake-up noise. [...] We cannot avoid the tough historical reality for Indigenous people arising from the loss of their lands and the denigration of their culture and languages for generations, which has resulted in many Aboriginal languages no longer being spoken in homes. [...] As a consequence of this relentless attack on Aboriginal languages their re-awakening involves the processes of language retrieval, revival and revitalisation and will need many years of hard language work and research, and more years of dedicated practice for learners to make new sounds, learn many new words and their meanings, learn new ways to form words and sentences, and to master the different grammar of an Aboriginal language” (p.92).

It will be interesting to see what priority is given to language learning in those communities who have access to their own funds via Native Title rights to resource royalties. As pointed out in one instance where the language is relatively strong, ‘the impetus for language documentation and for increasing the use of the language comes from those who already speak it, not from those who do not’ (p.366).

In some cases a language centre is the locus and guide to the appropriate conduct of activity (p.110) and in others it an impediment (p.132), and this clearly depends on particular combinations of the quality of staffing and the amount of funding available, as well as any number of factors related to local politics (p.59, p.194ff). After some years of funding and running language centres, it is useful to have a more critical discussion of their role and there are glimpses of this more critical discussion in parts of RL.

In one case (p.132) language documentation is strangely opposed to the use of language nests for a language with one remaining speaker, but these are not competing activities, and both should be carried out. In another case, the linguist fears that their presence is taken by speakers to mean that the language will be safe (p.134).

One of the criticisms of language recording is that it embalms the language and creates records locked away and useless to the source community and their descendants. However, it is clear that most of the projects working to reintroduce languages are heavily reliant on exactly these recordings and in one project, with Yan-nhanu speakers, there is clear recognition among speakers that the documentation created should not become a 'museum piece' but rather is to be used in future by speakers themselves (p.369).

It needs to be made clear that the linguist can provide well-structured records of the language—texts and a grammatical description as well as recordings—and nowadays all of these things should be linked. Admittedly it has not always been the case that linguists produce more than a rather impenetrable academic tract, but today there is a stronger emphasis on language documentation that includes the production by the linguist of reusable records of the language.

Among the chapters that stood out for me, the Ngapartji Ngapartji experience of using theatre and arts performances to support the language in practice was exciting: 'Instead of simply preserving the language (in dictionaries, footage of classical speakers, and so on), speakers themselves are revitalising it, and at the same time participating in a discourse about the importance of language which extends across generations' (p.86). Another chapter, dealing with mixed languages and the variable input that younger speakers receive, observes that the target for a language program needs to be tailored to the language input that children are receiving in the community as '[a] whole-language approach that is purist and imposes itself on an existing language ecology which is characterised by mixing is unlikely to achieve any discernable results' (p.234).

A feature of many of the chapters, as well as being a section heading itself, is the use of new technologies in the process of recording and producing records, or in the representation (312) of the language, or in the use of video-conferencing to link up geographically dispersed speakers (240).

The volume begins with a quote from Strehlow in 1957, and, while it is remarkable for its prescience and its advocacy of the same central themes that permeate RL, it is sobering to note that it still applies 50 years on:

Above all, let us permit native children to keep their own languages – those beautiful and expressive tongues, rich in true Australian imagery, charged with poetry and with love for all that is great, ancient, and eternal in the continent. ... Today white Australians are among the few remaining civilised people who still think that knowledge of one language is the normal limit of linguistic achievement (Strehlow, 1957, p. 53).

REFERENCES

- Hinton, L. (2002). *How to keep your language alive: a commonsense approach to one-on-one language*. Berkeley: Heyday Books.
- Strehlow, T. G. H. (1957). *Dark and white Australians*. Melbourne: Riall Bros.

ENDNOTES

- i http://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/2123/7888/1/RAL_TEXT_eReserve.pdf