To Watch, Hear and Re-Learn
Electronic Revitalisation Tools for the Gumbaynggir Aboriginal Language

Michael Donovan
Editors
Howard Dare, Collie Director, International Centre of Graphic Technologies, RMIT University, Melbourne.
Prof. Mary Kalantzis, Dean, Education, Language and Community Services, RMIT University, Melbourne.

Editorial Advisory Board of the International Journal of the Book.
Jason Epstein, Chief Executive Officer, 3 Billion Books, New York, USA.
Jan Fullerton, Director General, National Library of Australia.
José Borghino, Executive Director, Australian Society of Authors.
Susan Bridge, Chief Executive, Australian Publishers Association.
Michael Cairns, President, Bowker, USA.
Alfred Rolington, Chief Executive Officer, Jane's Information Group.
Oliver Freeman, Neville Freeman Agency, Sydney, Australia.
Dr Renato Iannella, Chief Scientist, IPR Systems Pty Ltd, Australia.
John Man, Author, London, UK.
Colin Steele, Director Scholarly Information Strategies, The Australian National University.
Laurie Gerber, Director of Business Development, Language Weaver, San Diego, USA.
Richard Vines, Enhanced Printing Industry Competitiveness Scheme/Print Industries Association of Australia.
Dr Bill Cope, Common Ground Publishing, Melbourne, Australia.
Dean Mason, Common Ground Publishing, Melbourne, Australia.
To Watch, Hear and Re-Learn

Electronic Revitalisation Tools for the Gumbaynggir Aboriginal Language

Michael Donovan

History of the loss of some Aboriginal languages

With European settlement on the Australian continent occurring in the boundaries of the Eora Nation (around Sydney), the South Eastern Coast of Australia has taken on the brunt of many of the effects of invasion. This initial contact might have developed into some form of co-existence between the two different cultures of Aboriginal and European Peoples. But this co-existence did not occur instead some systematic destruction and later assimilation of Aboriginal culture was to take place, as noted by many contemporary Australian historians. (Reynolds 1996, Goodall 1996, Heitmeyer 2001)

From the early onset of co-existence Aboriginal Communities were pushed to the fringes of this new colonial society and acknowledgment of the Aboriginal Community only occurred when there was a need of support for the colonial society or when their existences become an impediment on the spread of this developing Colonial settlement.

But there were some examples of the inclusion of the Aboriginal Community into colonial society. Generally the motives of these Colonial reformists had the best interest of the Aboriginal Community in mind, but their actions didn’t succeed in benefiting the Aboriginal Community and their culture.

One such example of these misguided humanitarian actions is shown through the development in 1814 of the Parramatta Native Institute by William Shelley, a former London Missionary Society Missionary, with the support of Governor Lachlan Macquarie. Shelley developed a Native school where he felt the best way to educate and Christianise Aboriginal children were to remove them from the negative influences of their parents and the Aboriginal Community. The children were housed in dormitory style accommodation in isolation from their Community. Shelley educated these children in a civilised manner giving them the benefit of his educated and Christian culture. Education was usually in reading, writing and arithmetic with the Bible as a strong motivator towards appropriate content. He had academic success in one of his Aboriginal students topping the Colony in the Sunday School Bible studies exam. But when students were allowed to return to their parents and Community they all did so and left this so called civilised culture behind. (Brook & Kohen, 1991)

This form of schooling practice become a forerunner to residential apprentice institutes for Aboriginal children, which were homes where Aboriginal children were removed to from their families and Community to give them some basic education and skills in either domestic service or manual labour. These institutes
were alien environments where aspects of Aboriginal culture such as language and cultural maintenance were forbidden and foreign educational practices with inappropriate learning styles were enforced upon the children to de-Aboriginalise them in preparation for a better-assimilated existence (Heitmeyer 2001).

With European invasion, Aboriginal languages and cultures suffered enormous erosion. This was partly due to the reduction in Aboriginal first language speakers which occurred through introduced diseases, displacement and in some instances massacres.

As NSW was the first area to be colonised, NSW’s bore the brunt of these impacts. Language groups were fragmented and Aboriginal people were forced to relocate into mixed language groups, reducing the opportunities available to speak their language. As a consequence, many Aboriginal languages in NSW fell into disuse while some have few surviving fluent speakers (Hosking et al 2000, NSW Office of the Board of Studies 1998).

**Why there is a need to find ways to revitalise Aboriginal languages**

With many Australian Aboriginal languages being in dire straits with regard to available speakers there is a need to develop tools to support or revitalise Aboriginal languages. With the increase in accessible technology, multimedia tools can be used to support such developments.

An important benefit of using multimedia tools to revitalise Aboriginal languages is that there are very few language speakers. With some language groups in NSW having no language speakers left speaking their language. Most of these languages could have some form of revitalisation of their language by drawing on archival records and the remaining limited number of speakers of various Aboriginal languages, with these suggestions being noted by a paper from Dr Jackie Troy for the NSW Board of Studies. By using interactive non-static resources, which can be developed from various multimedia formats, some life can be given back to these languages to support the revitalisation of these Aboriginal languages.

**NSW languages and what exists today**

Before European settlement, NSW’s maintained approximately seventy or more Aboriginal languages and dialects, although views regarding this number vary considerably and some estimates are significantly higher (Hosking et al 2000, NSW Office of the Board of Studies 1998, 14).

These languages groups included:

- Muruwari, Ngiyampaa, Paakantji and Yandruwandha in northwest NSW
- Mathi-mathi, Paakantji and Wiradjuri in southwest NSW
- Gamilaraay, Muruwari, Ngiyampaa, Wangkumara, Wiradjuri and Yuwaalaraay in central NSW
- Anewan (Nganyaywana), Birpai, Bundjalung, Dhangadi, Gadhang, Gamilaraay, Gidabul, Gumbaynggir, Ngarrabul, Wonarua, Yaygirr in northeast NSW
- Awabakal, Bidawal, Dharawal, Dharuk, Dhurga, Gundangara, Monero, Ngarigu, Ngunawal, Walbanga, Wandandian and Yorta Yorta in southeast NSW.
All the languages of NSW have a number of dialectical variations. A dialect is not a separate language but it can be very different to other dialects of the same language, such as the Gumbaynggir Language has Northern, Orara, Nana Glen, Middle, Southern and Western or Baanbay dialects (Muurrbay Aboriginal Language and Cultural Cooperative 2001, 8). There were so many languages and dialects Aboriginal people were linguistically adept and were multilingual speakers. Individuals could speak the language of their mother, father and spouse, who were frequently from different language groups through the intricacies of the kinship based marriage systems. They also learnt the languages of other groups they came into contact with through trade, social, ceremonial and reciprocal gatherings. (Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs 1992; Parbury 1986).

Aboriginal languages are complex and diverse, with intricate grammar and extensive vocabularies that give meanings that encapsulate the Aboriginal cultural bases and an intimate knowledge of the Australian environment. Within these language developments there were different languages for different occasions ranging from everyday conversation to secret sacred rites.

As highlighted earlier the importance of a language to its speakers and descendants is much more significant than simply its linguistic aspects. Language goes to the very core of one's identity and Aboriginal languages contain embedded in them much of the culture, social values and world view of its speakers (Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs 1992).

“Language is our soul”

(Aunty Rose Fernando, Gamilaroi Elder)

(NSW Office of the Board of Studies 1998)

**The importance of language**

Language is one of the key aspects of Aboriginal culture. In many Aboriginal communities across Australia, the same word is used for the language, the people and the country. This indicates the intimate connection between the spoken word and the self-identification of Aboriginal Australians. (Board of Studies, 1998, 5) The empowerment of gaining back your Aboriginal language leads to other associated benefits such as the Aboriginal Communities’ improved identity and a solidifying of their presence within their country and culture. This can be seen through the simple task of greeting others to Country and in language which some Aboriginal Community members are starting to perform. This small task can lift the spirit of any individual, increasing their self-esteem, increasing their identity and placing them concretely within their Country.

'Language is at the core of cultural identity. It links people to their land, it protects history through story and song, it holds the key to kinship systems and to the intricacies of tribal law including spirituality, secret/sacred objects and rites. Language is a major factor in people retaining their cultural identity and many say 'if the Language is strong, then Culture is strong”. (ATSIC 2000, p.4)
For this and other reasons, the teaching of Aboriginal languages in schools has been recognised as one way to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. In addition, the teaching of Aboriginal languages to non-Aboriginal students will improve cross-cultural understanding and further the process of reconciliation. For non-Aboriginal children, the study of Aboriginal languages will signify that these languages have an equivalent status with others learned at school. It will also reinforce contemporary usage of the languages. (NSW Office of the Board of Studies 1998)

There has been growing government and public recognition and support for Aboriginal languages. However, language revival is an extremely complex and resource-intensive process, and increased government commitment is required to assist Aboriginal people in implementing language projects.

The Department of Aboriginal Affairs, in close collaboration with the Department of Education and Training and the Office of the Board of Studies, and in partnership with Aboriginal people in NSW, is coordinating the development of a whole-of-government NSW Aboriginal Languages Policy. (Department of Aboriginal Affairs 2002)

**Gumbaynggir Language project**

Today, language revival is a priority for many Aboriginal people, and several successful language revival projects are now in place. These include the Gumbaynggir language project in northern eastern NSW. The Gumbaynggir language is being taught through the Muurrbay Aboriginal Language Centre in Nambucca Heads, as well as in a number of local High and Primary Schools.

The Gumbaynggir language group area extends from Mt Yarrahappinni in the south to Grafton in the north and west to Guyra. The Gumbaynggir people of Bowraville are very active and they are concerned about the preservation of their culture and identity. There is a strong sense of community.

The public speaking of the Gumbaynggir language had been suppressed throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the language came close to being spoken only by the Elders when children were not present. By the late 1980s only a few speakers remained in the Nambucca Valley. Harry Buchanan (Maruwanba Maruungga) was born in 1898 at Valla. He died in 1980, highly respected by both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people of the Nambucca Valley. He generously shared his stories on tape with many people, including linguist Diana Eades. From his death some Gumbaynggir Elders formed the Gumbaynggir Language and Culture Group in 1986 to share what they knew of their language and culture. Sadly, by 1992 only one of the Elders remained.

The Muurrbay Aboriginal Language and Culture Co-operative was then formed. Members of the Muurrbay Co-operative dedicated themselves to transcribing the tapes of Harry Buchanan, compiling a Gumbaynggir dictionary, learning and teaching the language to other Gumbaynggir people.

With the development of a revitalisation of the Gumbaynggir language many Aboriginal Community members were motivated to initiate adult language classes to reclaim aspects of their language back. This was supported through the use of the recordings of Harry ‘Tiger’ Buchanan and listening to them with textual presentation to follow the audiotapes. The Muurrbay Co-operative supplemented
these activities with songs and with other language lessons to support language development and language usage. (NSW Board of Studies 2000)

These activities have had some success over the years with enough Community members to support some local in-school Gumbaynggir language classes. This has culminated in the first student (a young Gumbaynggir lady) to achieve a stage 6 level Aboriginal language program in their Higher School Certificate (HSC) in 2002.

**Why multimedia tools**

This use of multimedia tools has a greater benefit than the use of static text in supporting Aboriginal Peoples and their preferred learning styles.

The essential aspect of using these tools is that not only do you see and hear the text but also you get to see the movement of the face and expression associated with the use of the language to support the context in which the use of this language is presented. In addition the speed and ease of use of many multimedia tools can give the Aboriginal learner the benefit of a continuous repetitious, self-paced and self-directed learning environment that would support some preferred learning experiences of many Aboriginal People.

When considering Aboriginal learning styles one aspect that should be acknowledged immediately is the concept of ‘shame’. Removing an Aboriginal person from the safe group setting and placing them individually at the centre of attention is usually only seen as punishment in Aboriginal homes. This should be considered when introducing new learning tasks to Aboriginal Peoples. Time should be included in any course to enable Aboriginal students to practice and develop these new skills until they feel comfortable enough to present their proficiency in these new skills. This can be supported through the use of multimedia tools in language revitalisation. By giving the learner control that allows them to repeat the word or phrase in a private situation they have time to experiment and imitate the learning task thus allowing them their own learning space where they may achieve at their own pace. (Heitmeyer 2001, NSW Board of Studies 2001)

When considering the use of multimedia tools for language revitalisation CD-rom systems are of greater benefit over using multimedia tools over the internet. With access to a HTML program, a video camera and a CD burner, a whole language can be recorded and placed on a single CD disk. HTML (language used to write web pages) is very supportive of multimedia devices.

Going online includes similar tools but you need to have access to a server and the ability to upload content to the internet and without the speed of a broadband internet connection the system can become a slow process and if participants download large media files on a telephone line it becomes quite a time restraining exercise.

Many Aboriginal Communities can develop such relatively inexpensive and accessible electronic tools or the use of a standard template could be developed and data from different language groups could be adjusted to suit the specific needs of that Community. As Hosking (2000) and Welsh (2002) suggests many of the NSW Aboriginal languages have some substantial material available in audio recordings or linguistic textual references to the languages to support some level of data input into such multimedia tools.
If these tools were developed they would be beneficial for Aboriginal individuals who do not live in their traditional country and have access to other speakers or learners to support their own language development. Thus these tools could support extensive development of Aboriginal languages in small group settings or isolated individuals. With the support of such multimedia tools and some form of online real-time discussion spaces Aboriginal language learners maybe able to develop language communities to strengthen and practice their developing skills.

**Multimedia compared to face to face**

There are various issues to acknowledge in the development of NSW Aboriginal language maintenance. These not only include the limited number of Aboriginal languages that are currently being spoken but also the number of speakers and the diverse spread of Aboriginal Community members inside and outside of their language areas, as well as, the extent development and availability of physical and human resources to support such programs.

Welsh (2002) suggests that there are substantial knowledge bases in NSW Aboriginal languages but the limitations of the language levels and the functionality of speakers and the limited role of Aboriginal literacy in the general Aboriginal Community all hinder the progress of Aboriginal language maintenance.

The most promising approach to the revitalisation of an endangered language appears to be through the use of the Master-Apprentice system where the learners immerse themselves into a total Aboriginal language only environment. But the most difficult features to overcome before this can occur are finding ‘masters’ in the desired language and the ability for the masters and apprentices to survive financially for the period of language immersion. With the number of competent Aboriginal first language speakers and the general economic state of Aboriginal Communities this option is a difficult environment to achieve.

This is where multimedia options can be used to encourage some possible limited immersion developments. When learners have some limited control over their learning environment they can develop some use of grammar and place the learning into some context. If the multimedia tools also have some interactive options where learners can respond to direct questions or conversational scenarios generally they can use text modes to respond to the multimedia tools.

General opinion on the use of multimedia tools to revitalise Aboriginal languages appear to be that they have a place within this evolving environment and may support the revitalisation of some endangered Aboriginal languages if used effectively. This would also support Aboriginal Communities’ desire to maintain some consistency with the development of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) and not to be relegated to the ‘digitally disadvantaged’.

**Community ownership and consultation**

Most of this discussion is directed at giving Aboriginal Communities the time and access to develop or revitalise their language skills allowing them to gain back their own Indigenous languages. This is not suggesting using these tools as segregatory mechanisms but to allow Aboriginal Communities to be self-
empowered and self-determining of their own needs and allow them their own time to gain back an important feature of their own Aboriginality. This mechanism would be developed, as an Aboriginal tool is to support Aboriginal Communities and design to suit their learning styles.

Some limitations should also be placed on the type of multimedia tools developed in order to allow the Aboriginal Community to maintain control of access and use of their newfound and developing language tools. A CD-rom would be the better delivery system compared to presenting material over the Internet, as examined earlier. This does not just involve control of access but also the current speed of video over the Internet and Aboriginal Communities access to current broadband high-speed ISP connections.

The use of the internet should not be ignored because when the number of users of multimedia language tools increases links between isolated learners could be organised so that learners could access some ‘off the shelf’ internet cameras so they could speak to each other in immersion like environments in relatively face to face situations to practice and develop some of their language skills in real-time using real issues in some form of real context.

When going into the reclamation of Aboriginal languages the process needs to be Community lead and supported and not presented as a quick fix or spin-off from unexpended funds, because as Ellis suggests,

“A language cannot be saved by singing a few songs or having a word printed on a postage stamp. It cannot even be saved by getting ‘official status’ for it, or getting it taught in schools. It is saved by its use (no matter how imperfect) by its introduction into every walk of life and at every conceivable opportunity until it becomes a natural thing, no longer laboured or false. It means in short a period of struggle and hardship. There is no easy route to the restoration of a language.”

(Nettle and Romaine 2000: 176)

Conclusion

The development of multimedia tools to support the ongoing reclamation of endangered Aboriginal languages can only benefit the current process that NSW institutions such as the NSW Board of Studies, Department of Aboriginal Affairs, ATSIC and NSW Department of Education and Training are trying to develop. These bodies are becoming very proactive in the establishment of NSW Aboriginal language programs. Tools such as presented within the multimedia field can start to give life back to some of these archival-based Aboriginal languages and support Aboriginal Community members to reclaim an aspect of their culture that may have been forcibly removed from their lives. But language development is not just for linguistic benefits but it has many other facets to support Aboriginal societies.

Bibliography


NSW Office of the Board of Studies, (2000) *Teaching Aboriginal Languages, case studies*, NSW Board of Studies, Sydney

NSW Office of the Board of Studies (2001). *We learn what we need to know*. A selection of literacy and numeracy case studies for NSW Primary schools that have achieved enhanced outcomes for Aboriginal students. Sydney: Board of Studies NSW.


---

**About the Author**

**Michael Donovan:** Professionally I have had a diverse background with many experiences. Some highlights being my alternative medical achievements and medical training. I have had four years experience within the school education system as an Aboriginal Education Assistant (AEA) working co-operatively with the local Aboriginal Community, Aboriginal students and the Primary School. I have been a Lecturer in Aboriginal education and Aboriginal studies at the University of Newcastle since 1996 from Traditional Aboriginal society through to contemporary Aboriginal society and comparative Indigenous cultures. With my current focus on the use of online technologies as teaching and educational tools.
that can support the maintenance of aspects of Aboriginal culture, including re-vitalisation of Aboriginal languages. My involvement with the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) at all levels from State Executive to local AECG involvement is another professional strength. The AECG is the primary advisory organisation on Aboriginal education from early childhood through to higher education and I have been involved in many educational forums from discussing Aboriginal education issues in meetings with NSW Minister for Education, dealing with Government funding bodies and developing directions with the NSW Board of Studies on Aboriginal education initiatives.