

The social responsibility and impact of the linguist/applied linguist in Australia¹

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Abstract

Language is crucial in our lives and to all disciplines. It affects our well-being individually and collectively and touches sociopolitical issues such as social justice, peace and harmony. Linguists/applied linguists have exciting opportunities for interdisciplinary research and to work in contexts personally meaningful to them.

While language is the concern of all people, professionals have special responsibilities, such as:

- (a) To provide information about languages and how language works;
- (b) To provide responsible insights into the role of language in society and its possible uses and abuses.

Australian language specialists can offer the rest of the world experience with language policy, typological studies, language contact studies, bilingual language acquisition, and L3 acquisition. Some Australian linguists have advanced the knowledge about language through studies of indigenous languages. Many have worked closely with indigenous, ethnic and other communities and professional groups, providing evidence in courts of law or advice to teachers and families. Some broadcast regularly or occasionally.

But have we succeeded in contesting the monolingual mindset of the mainstream? The Australian authors represented in language sections of most general bookshops are not linguists.

I will suggest that far more collaboration and coordination of initiatives through the professional societies is needed to put languages back on the national agenda and make Australia more language aware. The awareness includes consciousness of the power of language. It should lead to recognizing, valuing, fostering and transmitting, supporting and sharing our linguistic diversity. Australia is a nation whose rich language potential has only been partly realized. Australians have an inherent interest in language. While linguists/applied linguists should not monopolize language issues, they need to provide leadership in understanding them.

Keywords

Language policy, language demography, sociolinguistics, language in Australia, applied linguistics.

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In the following comments I would like to address the public visibility of the linguist/ applied linguist in Australia today and outline some areas where we need to be playing a role in shaping and improving our society. I will argue that we have a social responsibility to extend the linguistic horizons of the wider community to help them understand the power of language and overcome the monolingual mindset.

It is quite well-known that I have difficulties in drawing lines between linguistics and applied linguistics because I see linguistics as a discipline which intersects with many others and should not escape application, and applied linguistics is its application. I hope you will forgive me if I employ 'linguist' in the general sense of someone who engages in scholarship about language, and include under that umbrella both general and applied linguists.

In the era of globalization, terrorism and economic rationalism, academics of many disciplines are still making their presence felt in the community. Political scientists, historians, and economists are examples. What about linguists?

Language is central to every sphere of our lives and to all disciplines. Being the main means of human communication, it pervades our most crucial as well as our most trivial relationships, at home, at work and elsewhere. It is crucial in the very domains that are concerning us such as peace and tolerance, security and diplomacy, education, health, social justice, national cohesion, international trade, and tourism. Through language we identify people as belonging or not belonging, we can represent or misrepresent people and manipulate the opinions of others, as is happening now in Australia. Language is a medium of cognitive and conceptual development. Language is an instrument of action, through which we promise, pass judgment, complain, invite and exclude. The study of language gives us insights into the human mind. It is the deepest manifestation of culture, the key to revealing our cultural values and understanding those of others. Language, used in a particular way, can make us sick; used in another, can heal us. It can empower or disenfranchise others. So linguists have exciting opportunities for interdisciplinary research and to work in contexts personally meaningful to them.

One recent example of an irresponsible use of language is the us-them dichotomy employed in some media and politicians' representations of asylum seekers as 'illegals', 'queue jumpers' and behaving in an undesirable way to support their exclusion and inhuman treatment in the interests of 'border protection' (Clyne 2003). Another is the us-them dichotomy excluding intellectuals as 'elites' from mainstream Australia. A third is the use of the 'war against terror', something totally undefinable, as a means of casting suspicion on anyone different, and therefore undermining multiculturalism. A fourth is the representation of indigenous Australians in the media (Macqueen 2005). More than ever it is essential that school education and the lifelong education process enables all Australians to develop the power to express themselves effectively and honestly in both the written and spoken modes, aware of the possible consequences of the way we talk and write, and the capacity to analyze critically. And we have a role in this by providing the research and sensitizing the future teachers.

For its size, the community of linguists in Australia has achieved a lot, having produced high quality research in a wide range of fields and languages. They have described and given status to their own national variety of English, though there is

probably less current research on Australian English than on New Zealand English, and much still needs to be done on regional variation and generational change, for example.

Some Australian linguists have advanced the knowledge on language typology, especially the understanding of ergativity, evidentiality, case-marking, gender, and semantics of event representation, through studies of indigenous languages, though there is still a long way to go in the description of Australian languages, with the clock ticking. According to an excellent overview by Nick Evans (In Press), there are now 'high-quality' grammars of 30 indigenous languages and 'workmanly' ones of another 30. Nick estimates that there are about half as many dictionaries of indigenous languages.

Many linguists have worked closely with indigenous, ethnic and other communities and professional groups, giving evidence in land rights claims in court, expert opinions in social justice issues or advice to families raising their children bilingually. Recently a group representing phonetics, sociolinguistics and language testing have drawn attention to the abuse of human rights in the way in which Australia employs language analysis to exclude some refugee claims (Eades et al 2003). An increasing number are publishing books for the interested general reader. Some linguists broadcast regularly or occasionally on language matters. We now have regular programs conducted by Ruth Wajnryb in Sydney (and she also has a column in the *Sydney Morning Herald*), Pauline Bryant in Canberra, Kate Burridge in Perth (unfortunately having been silenced in Melbourne!), also Anne Pauwels in Perth, and Roly Sussex in Brisbane, Adelaide, Darwin and Hobart with regular programs. But the Australian authors represented in language sections of most general bookshops are not linguists. Don Watson's books, *Death Sentence* and *Weasel Words*, Julyan Burnside's *Word Watching*, and Bill Bryson's *The Mother Tongue* are omnipresent. In one chain bookshop I also found Susan Butler's *The Dinkum Dictionary*, Lenie Johansen's *Penguin Book of Australian Slang*, Jenny Hunter's *True Blue Guide to Australian Slang* and A.W. Reed's *Aboriginal Words*. The other bookshop I visited actually had Kate Burridge's *Weeds in the Garden of Words*, Ruth Wajnryb's *Away with Words* and Tom Burton's *Long Words*. Let me hasten to add that I am not saying that only professional linguists should write books on language. But why have the books by Don Watson and Julyan Burnside been so successful? Would *Word Watching* have been as popular had it been written by a linguist? Does Don Watson represent a different way of thinking from linguists? He has certainly done the nation a service by sounding a public alarm about the dominance of managerial jargon and the effect it is having on communication. He graphically but in my opinion wrongly describes the phenomenon as the 'death of language'. The idea of a word being a 'shell' 'without meaning' does not, in my opinion, adequately capture the many items included in his *Weasel Words*. They often represent semantic change, nominalization, verbalization, or the development of a collocation. They all bear meaning or stylistic function. I don't know if any linguists were asked to review his books for the media and how many of us tried to enter the public discussion, let alone succeeded; but it might have been useful for a less prescriptive discussion consideration to take place on issues such as:

What is jargon? How does it affect language change? Have there been precedents? Is this different? Why? In any case, the phenomenon of the Don Watson books and their

reception is an issue of interest to linguists. So is the status of linguists in the community.

There was a time in living memory when linguists were prominent in Australian public life. It started with the Senate inquiry into National Language Policy in 1982 and ended with the debate on the Green Paper preceding the Australian Language and Literacy Policy in 1991. What did we do right then? Why did the submission from ten professional associations have such an impact in 1982 while a similar new one in 1995 was almost totally ignored. Was the golden age of the 1980s an exception? If so, what is the best strategy for normal times? Australian language specialists can offer the rest of the world experience with language policy, typological studies, language contact studies, bilingual language acquisition, and L3 acquisition. Australia has substantial language potential which is only partly being realized. Does it matter that our capacity to train young scholars in research on community languages, including structural changes in such languages, is ever decreasing? Some subjects in this field have been abandoned; some specialist positions in this field have not been replaced.

The 2001 Census shows over 200 languages other than English spoken in the homes of Australians (Clyne and Kipp 2002). 64 of these are indigenous languages, uniquely linked to the Australian land and each contributing in a special way to the understanding of human language and human cognition. Then there is Australian Sign Language, in a different sense a community language indigenous to Australia. The other community languages have been brought to Australia from all corners of the earth and constitute a rich resource for the nation. Contact between languages from different families and with such varying typological features and sociolinguistic histories offers the opportunity to find out a great deal about contact-induced change and about the factors promoting language shift and maintenance. Because Australia's national language and lingua franca, is English, there is no single second language that needs to be learned by everyone. That gives us the chance to build on the resources we already have and teach a range of languages in our schools. Over the past 30 years we have embraced as our own the collectivity of cultures and languages that Australia encompasses. Australia has introduced initiatives and developed institutions to foster cultural dynamism. This includes the teaching of a number of languages in primary and secondary schools, the accreditation of 45 languages in the final secondary school examination, in four states school of languages to make the teaching of so many languages possible, the funding and support of teacher professional development in ethnic schools, government and public multilingual radio stations, multicultural television, the telephone interpreter service, multilingual public library holdings appropriate to local demography with inter-library loans ensuring wider accessibility. (Unfortunately the number of languages taught in regular schools is declining and last year five languages were suspended as Year 12 subjects because of low enrolments. The suspension of languages with less than 15 candidates for three consecutive years in the cooperating states is, in my opinion, contrary to the notion inherent in Australian multiculturalism that all languages are worthwhile. The practice needs to be stopped.

The early developments within multicultural policy and then the National Policy on Languages were supported by local research and by activist coalitions in which linguists were well represented in providing credible arguments. It was hard work and there were

struggles which were lost before they were won, but in the end there were people listening. Is anyone listening now? Are we trying to win the grassroots support, which was vital last time round? The awareness of our language potential should lead to recognizing, valuing, fostering and transmitting, supporting and sharing linguistic diversity in our nation. Although the harnessing of our language and concomitant cultural resources is in keeping with good social policy, good economic management, and is good for diplomacy, Australia is caught in the grip of the monolingual mindset which promises to make it one of the last bastions of complacent xenophobia. Yet at the economic level, the languages of large and small communities have been of great benefit to Australia. If we consider Australian ventures in Vietnam, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, India, Hungary, Poland, Lithuania and the Ukraine, spearheaded by Australians from bilingual backgrounds, all our languages are of potential economic value. It is because of our language resources that international call centres and Asia-Pacific headquarters of European multinational companies have been established in Australia. Yet five years ago, we already distinguished ourselves by beating the US, the UK and New Zealand to bottom place in a study of CEOs of top companies in 28, mainly OECD countries comparing the number of languages in which they are proficient. Ours averaged 1.4 with the Netherlands topping the list with 3.9, followed by Sweden, Brazil, Germany, and the Philippines (Rosen, Digh, Singer and Phillips 2000). With the number of languages taught in mainstream schools declining and settling on six, the languages offered are not keeping up with either demographic change or with Australia's external needs. By far the most widely used language among the younger generation in Sydney is Arabic in one or other national variety; there were 2 ½ times as many speakers of this language in the 0-14 age group in 2001 than speakers of Greek and Italian combined (Clyne and Kipp 2002). It is not a secret that Arabic is a valuable language for trade, diplomacy and inter-cultural understanding. With the number of L1 speakers of Spanish internationally approaching those of English, it is becoming a popular school language subject in Asia as well as in many European countries, where it is starting to rival French. In the USA it has been the number 1 LOTE in education for some time. Australia never reacted to the recommendations of a 1991 Senate inquiry which found that Australia was wasting millions of dollars by not taking trade with Latin America more seriously and should invest in language resources to do this (Kipp, Clyne and Pauwels 1995: 9). Yet Spanish is very popular in many of the universities where it is offered and it would not be impossible to build up teacher resources. The number of young home speakers of Spanish in Sydney now exceeds those of Italian. The most widely used community language among school and pre-school children in Melbourne, Perth and Brisbane, second in Adelaide, and third in Sydney is Vietnamese, which is taught much less in schools and universities than ten years ago. Our resources in Greek are dwindling as secondary school after secondary school is responding to geographical dispersal patterns and withdrawing the subject. Our policies are not keeping up with demographic change because they are no longer a priority. There is a need for informed collective action in which linguists can make their expertise available.

With the disintegration of national language policy, languages-in-education policy is now largely determined by states. Policies range from Victoria's (unfulfilled) expectation that all children take a LOTE from Prep to Year 10 to the NSW requirement

of at least 100 hrs of a language in one year of schooling. Even this was considered undesirable by the former premier of New South Wales, Bob Carr, who felt that language study is not aided by compulsion. I don't know whether a bilingual premier will save at least some core language study. LOTE is a key learning area but it is less key than other areas. Only 37.1 % of Victorian schools require students to take a LOTE in year 9 and 14.8% on Year 10 (Clyne 2005: 24). When I am in schools, I sometimes ask the principal about this. "Oh", they say, "parents ring up and say I don't want my child to take a language. They find it too hard or they find it boring." And I say naively, I imagine there aren't any who find Maths too hard or Science boring. "Oh yes" the principal admits, "but that's different". The monolingual mindset always has some reason for treating other languages differently. While the Australian Languages and Literacy Policy aimed at having 25% of students taking a LOTE in Year 11 and 12 by 2001, this is far from accomplished. Throughout Australia the proportion is only 13.1%. Only Victoria and the ACT exceed the national average with 20.7% and 16% respectively (Clyne 2005: 117). And in Victoria it is largely due to the high continuation rate for languages in independent schools.

Many educationists are actually propagating monolingualism through a number of popular fallacies. The first is the *Crowded Curriculum Fallacy*. The assumption is that there are too many more important things to do so there is really no room for a second language except perhaps as an afterthought. This is characteristic of predominantly monolingual esp Eng-speaking societies. The reason why students particularly in state schools are being denied the opportunity to learn a second language when most of the rest of the world is learning two or more is that many non-core activities have been promoted to core status here. One of the highest achievers in the PISA [Program for International Student Assessment] study comparing the educational achievement of 15 year old secondary school students is Finland, where everyone learns three languages throughout their schooling and about 75% learn at least four. In the Netherlands, students learn English as well as Dutch in Year 12, in 1999 41% also did German and 21% French.

Then there is the *Monoliteracy Fallacy*. This is based on the assumption that all-important English literacy is different to literacies in other languages and can therefore be acquired only through English. It denies that there are people in some parts of the world who are literate even though they have acquired this through a language other than English. It is oblivious of the number of people who achieve biliteracy. It disregards the large literature which demonstrates literacy transfer from one language to another. These points have frequently been made by Lo Bianco and Freebody (2001), people working on multiliteracies and language teachers, many of whom have argued that compulsory primary time allocation to literacy be partly spent on LOTE rather than used as an excuse for not having enough time for a LOTE. It seems to be outside the understanding of many influential people in educational circles that underlying literacy skills are like learning to walk or drive. Once you can walk on the carpet, it only needs some adjustment to walk uphill, on snow or in the water. Once you can drive a car, you can quickly learn to drive a truck or a tram. If you can read and write one language, that skill can be transferred to other languages, as has been shown even by local studies involving English and languages such as Persian and Khmer with different writing

systems (Arefi 1997, Burratt-Pugh and Rohl 2001). But the very components of literacy acquisition are ones that are enhanced by the language awareness that comes from being exposed to more than one language:

- recognition of the structure of a word;
- recognition of the structure of a sentence;
- recognition of sound patterns possible in a language;
- guessing meaning from the context (Baker 2001: 351, Jiménez, Garcia and Pearson 1995, Calero-Breckheimer and Goetz 1993).

A study by Yelland, Mercuri and Pollard (1993) showed that participation in a limited Italian or Greek program increased the reading readiness of monolingual English speakers in Prep and Grade 1.

The challenge is to ensure that primary LOTE programs do those kinds of things. A better knowledge of precisely what cognitive skills a child acquires after a certain exposure to a LOTE could make it possible to cater for the majority of primary school children who change schools and thereby usually move into a different LOTE program.

The monolingual mindset has also given us the *Global-English-is-Enough Fallacy*. There are several reasons why this is dangerously wrong. As there are now five times as many people using English as a second language and lingua franca by five times as employing it in a first language context, the way in which cultural values underpin pragmatic rules and discourse norms is influencing variation in the language. The minority of English users from what Kachru (1982) calls the inner circle (US, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand) will not be able to keep control of English norms for much longer, for instance in academic discourse and international meetings. Users of English, including 'inner circle' speakers will need to learn to understand this variation. For this they, like the rest of the world, will need to have had the experience of acquiring at least one other language to a high level of proficiency. As many Asian and European countries are adopting a policy of three languages in the curriculum, the L1, English and at least one other, monolingual English speakers will be disadvantaged, being able to see everything from only a monolithic viewpoint in a global situation where multilingualism is part of globalization. Yet Australia has the potential advantage of daily grassroots experience in inter-cultural communication in urban workplaces, housing estates, schools and shopping centres, something that could be utilized far more in our commercial, educational and other international dealings.

The *Two Languages Maximum Fallacy*, like other monolingual misconceptions, erroneously claims that each item in each language is stored separately in the brain, which is a container with limited capacity. It appears to be behind the resistance in some schools to letting bilingual students take a LOTE and ironically in some schools with much linguistic diversity to offering a LOTE to anyone. Local research (Clyne et al 2004) has shown how monolingual children learning Greek or Spanish as a third language at secondary school make use of their other languages and the resulting understanding of how language works, and how learning a community language as a third language encourages students to use and value their home language more and stimulates interest in languages in general. This is also reflected in Postmus's (2005) paper on differences between monolingual and bilingual learners of Mandarin.

The *Unfair Advantage Fallacy* is perhaps the one most likely to detract from the harnessing and sharing of our language resources. It is a throwback to the 1950s, when students with a background in German, Italian and Russian were discriminated against. Now that languages are valued instrumentally through differential scaling and in Victoria through a 10% bonus for university entry, it is some speakers of Asian languages that are targeted, as are those 'suspected' of speaking such languages at home. In the quest for statistical perfection that bears little relationship to proficiency in the language, the previous process of adjusting the proportion of high scores in some languages to ensure that they can be attained by students who began the language at secondary school has been abandoned. There is a fear of people with a home background in a LOTE, which has led to discrimination in assessment, scapegoating, dual (and in one case triple) level examinations. In Western Australia, it is the first five years of a person's life rather than the medium of secondary education in the target language that is the main criterion for eligibility for the second language examination in four Asian languages. This results from advice in a commissioned report by an academic from outside languages and linguistics based on his overreading of the critical age hypothesis. No linguist in WA seemed to be aware of the changes to the eligibility rules and no relevant Australian research was consulted (Clyne 2005: 123-24). Research in the field has identified not two or three categories but a continuum in which, wherever you draw lines, you discriminate, with the possible exception of students who have had a substantial part of their secondary education overseas in the target language. (Clyne et al 2004). It has also been shown by Cathie Elder (1997) that students with and without a home background in the language they are studying have different strengths in learning a language and can benefit from one another. Discriminating against those with a home background demotivates language maintenance and development of formal skills through schooling in some of the people who could become important bilingual resources for Australia, including in teaching, and alienates the communities who can be mobilized to provide a better basis for maintenance and second language acquisition. In our society, no one has an 'unfair advantage'; the Australian nation is advantaged because of the community resources it provides teachers and students for the development of skills in English and other languages. What collaboration has been attempted between the teaching, research and language communities has tended to be successful and needs to be developed further.

There is evidence that language shift is very high in many Chinese communities. In 1996, the last census that enables us to estimate second generation shift, 37% of Australian-born children of PRC parents and 35% of Hong Kong parents spoke only English at home. This was far higher than for those of Greek and Arabic background and more than twice as high as those of Macedonian or Turkish language background (Clyne and Kipp 1997). It is crucial that students with as well as without a home background in Chinese languages be enabled and motivated to learn and enjoy learning the language. This brings me to two more general monolingual fallacies:

The *Language Maintenance by Osmosis Fallacy* – that children automatically speak the language of their parents – and the *Language Shift Fallacy* – that children will shift to English when they start school so bilingualism is wasted. Both fallacies are contrary to facts from both macrodata from censuses and smaller depth studies in Australia. The

shift rate varies vastly in both the first and second generations and there is an increased effort to transmit a community language spoken by only one of the parents in which linguists have acted as facilitators.

Each state could be reflecting on how to build on their linguistic resources and for that they would need research on multilingualism. The Northern Territory clearly should present a multilingual profile in that it is the home of most of our indigenous languages, with 41% of the population outside Darwin using a language other than English at home. Darwin's close proximity to Indonesia and East Timor accentuates the need to consider the importance of languages other than English. Western Australia is an Indian Ocean state, with four of the five top community languages originating in Asia, and can also claim its own brand of multilingualism. As I speak to teachers and those representing community and indigenous languages in other states, there is a great deal of common disenchantment with declining resources and commitment. I would suggest that far more collaboration and coordination of initiatives through the professional societies is needed to put languages back on the national agenda and make Australia more language aware. It is important for linguists to address as many 'ordinary people' as possible so that they are not infected by the monolingual mindset.

While language is the concern of all people, professionals have special responsibilities, such as:

- (a) To provide information about languages and how language works;
- (b) To provide responsible insights into the role of language in society and its possible uses and abuses and present responsible attitudes to language.

Linguists have had a long history of collaboration and cooperation with 'amateurs'. Lexicographers and dialectologists have leant on language users to help them collect data. Sociolinguists have increasingly employed focus groups to help them understand the language issues and communities they are dealing with. We should not monopolize the discussion on language, but need to offer leadership to language users to help communities manage their own language issues. Linguists will often have to make their expertise available to communities with whom they are working to advise them on their language needs. Sometimes it will mean helping them make political representations. Newer ethnic communities and younger members of older ones lack the experience that had been acquired over longer periods by the earlier generation or vintage or don't realize the constant efforts that are needed to protect what was achieved in the 1970s and 80s. Young community members researching their own languages are in a good position to do this. The energy that comes out of studying a language situation often provides the basis for activism. That is another reason why specialist courses in bilingualism are important like those on indigenous languages. The same applies to teachers researching in the classroom.

Our university linguistics courses could benefit from more community and workplace components. This could give students practice at applying their skills, enhance more general understanding of what linguists do and put students and potential employers in touch with each other.

As there is still little knowledge in the wider community about what linguists do, it is important for us all to work more closely with the media. It would be good to have an ALAA/ALS joint media/PR committee to encourage this. It would be advantageous for museums to have a section on languages in Australia. The European Year of Languages generated a great deal of interest, sensitization, and discussion, and this year was declared the Year of Foreign Language Study by the US Senate in an attempt to bring the value of language learning to the public attention. In both cases, linguists were able to play an important role in the dialogue. How about an Australian Year of Languages? As a longterm strategy I suggest we form expert groups to develop segments of language policy for when things change for the better as we did before 1984. Helping to make Australia a more language-aware society freed of a complacently monolingual mindset is one of the many exciting tasks confronting Australian linguists today.

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