

When English is not enough: community efforts to maintain other languages in Australia

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Introduction

Australia is a land of extremes: it is old land but a young nation; has a small population but a large area; and is seen as an English speaking country but has thousands of residents who speak another language at home.

In this talk I will give an overview of the communities who speak a language other than English at home, their efforts to pass on their languages to the next generation, and the social, economic and political factors that either support these efforts or make them difficult to achieve.

Looking at the broad picture, one can consider two major groups of people involved in language maintenance in Australia¹: the indigenous people and immigrants from countries who speak a language other than English (LOTE).

What proportion of the population are we talking about?

In 2001, Australia had almost 19 million people. According to the 2001 census, about 16% of Australian residents were using a language other than English at home. Over 240 different languages were spoken. The top 10 languages spoken in 2001 were as follows:

| <u>Language</u> | <u>Number of speakers</u> |
|-----------------|---------------------------|
| Italian | 353,606 |
| Greek | 263,718 |
| Cantonese | 225,307 |
| Arabic | 209,371 |
| Vietnamese | 174,236 |
| Mandarin | 139,288 |
| Spanish | 93,595 |
| Tagalog | 78,879 |
| German | 76,444 |
| Macedonian | 71,994 |

¹ Language maintenance can be defined as the continued use of a language by people in a multilingual situation

If all the varieties of Chinese are added together, Chinese had the largest number of speakers (401,000 people – 2.1% of the Australian population), followed by Italian (352,605; 1.9%) and Greek (263,717; 1.4%).

2.2% of the population (410,000 people) identified themselves as indigenous (either Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders)². In 2002, a survey found that about 21% (94,000) of indigenous Australians spoke some indigenous language, but only 50,000 spoke one as their first language (ABS, 2004).

The pattern of use of languages other than English (LOTE) differs across the states and territories. Melbourne and Sydney, Australia's two largest cities, have the largest proportion of LOTE speakers, while the Northern Territory has the largest proportion of speakers of indigenous languages (I will have a map here).

As regards language maintenance, these two groups, immigrants and indigenous, have some things in common. For example, both recognize the link between language, culture and identity, and the pressure to master and use English. However there are significant differences between (as well as within) these groups due to historical events and current societal conditions and attitudes. I will therefore discuss each group separately.

Immigrants

Since European settlement³ in 1788, there has been massive migration to Australia, particularly after the end of the Second World War (1945).

In 2001, over 4 million Australians (over 20% of the population) were born overseas. Many of these speak English at home (like me for example – I immigrated to Australia in 1974 from England). Those born in countries where languages other than English are spoken, together with their children (and sometimes grandchildren), are the main speakers of LOTES in Australia.

Multiculturalism

Since the 1970s the federal government in Australia⁴ has officially recognized the

² There is no 'objective' measure of indigeness. It is enough to identify oneself as indigenous and be accepted by the community as such. Indigenous people can be divided into 2 main groups: Aboriginals (90%), who traditionally lived on the Australian mainland and Tasmania, and Torres Strait Islanders (10%), who come from the islands between Cape York and Papua New Guinea (PNG) and have traditional ties with the people of PNG and the Pacific.

³ Other words used are colonization and occupation – reflecting different views of the process.

⁴ Also known as the 'Commonwealth Government' since the full name of Australia is the Commonwealth of Australia.

multicultural and multilingual nature of the country and the rights of all residents to maintain their own cultural heritages. A range of services are available for LOTE speakers who are not proficient in English, many of them publicly funded by the federal and/or state or territory governments around the country. Such services include print and media information and access to interpreters and translators. Books and newspapers in LOTE are common in both stores and public libraries. Multilingual broadcasting is quite common in some areas. There is one national TV station, the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), which transmits over half its broadcast hours in languages other than English⁵. Local radio stations, often staffed voluntarily by community organizations, also broadcast many hours in LOTEs.

Language policy and language education

As far as language education for immigrant communities is concerned, the overwhelming official emphasis has been on teaching immigrants English. This is also the major preoccupation of the immigrants themselves, particularly new arrivals to Australia. Lack of ability in English is seen as a major social and economic disadvantage. In addition, for most of the 19th and 20th centuries, Australia followed a policy of assimilation. Immigrants were expected to abandon their own languages and learn English. Parents were advised not to speak their own language to their children as this would affect their progress in English and disadvantage them in their future lives. While all Australia governments have espoused a multicultural policy since the 1970s, these attitudes die hard.

After the official adoption of a multicultural philosophy, various national languages policies since the 1980s have recognised the need to acknowledge and promote all languages in Australia, not just English. Bilingual ability was seen as a good thing. Both federal and state governments allocated more funds for teaching LOTEs, particularly at the school level. This funding has generally been available to all Australians, not just those from the communities where these LOTEs are spoken.

However, although LOTE is one of the eight key learning areas in elementary schools⁶, it is often not compulsory and not well resourced. The picture is not much better at secondary school. In 2002, only just over 10% of students studied a LOTE at year 12 (the final year of high school). One of the basic problems is the low value that schools and/or the general community put on learning LOTE.

⁵ While SBS tries to provide programs across all languages spoken in the community, some are poorly represented because programs are just not available or are of poor quality. The majority of programs therefore tend to be in major national languages.

⁶ The 8 key areas are English, maths, the arts, health and physical education, science, LOTE, technology, and society and the environment.

Ethnic schools

The one bastion of LOTE teaching and learning for immigrant communities in Australia is found in the after hours and weekend schools known in various parts of the country as 'ethnic schools', Saturday Schools or community schools. It is estimated that over 100,000 children participate in ethnic school programs around Australia. The programs are run outside of mainstream school hours, usually for 2 to 3 hours a week. While most children come from families with a connection to the language being taught, the schools are open to children of any ethnic background.

Programs are run in over 60 different languages, most being the community languages of the surrounding area. The schools are usually established and operated by community organizations. They receive some funding from the federal and state/territory governments, and also charge a small fee to parents. However, without a great deal of voluntary help from the communities, the schools could probably not survive economically.

Most ethnic schools have little contact with Australian mainstream school authorities though this is now changing in some states where authorities are working with ethnic schools to improve teacher professionalism and curriculum. Most Australians know little about ethnic schools and their role in language maintenance. It is only the immigrant parents and communities themselves that keep them going. They obviously fill a need that mainstream education cannot. They bring together students who may live scattered throughout urban areas. They can also cater for different levels of language skills so that students can build on what they have already acquired at home or through formal schooling in another country.

Even if children speak the LOTE fluently, they are unlikely to acquire (or develop) literacy skills without regular formal instruction. I believe that being able to read a community language is very important. It can increase the range of registers and vocabulary children are exposed to as well as passing on cultural knowledge. While my own research shows that second generation children rarely read the language of their parents for pleasure, reading (and being read to) is an important part of language learning.

Language shift

Communities vary to the extent to which they maintain their languages after arriving in Australia. Even some first generation migrants (that is those born overseas) report speaking only in English at home. The shift in second⁷ and later generations is even more marked.

⁷ Second generation is a person born in Australia with one or both parents born overseas.

This is shown in the data below from 1996 census (Clyne and Kipp online⁸).

Table 1 Percentage of immigrants from LOTE countries who speak only English at home (1996 figures)

| County of birth | First generation % | Second generation Parents born in same country % | Second generation One parent born in country % |
|-----------------|--------------------|--|--|
| Netherlands | 61.9 | 91.1 | 96.5 |
| Austria | 48.3 | 80 | 91 |
| Germany | 48.2 | 77.6 | 92 |
| France | 37.2 | 46.5 | 80.4 |
| Malta | 36.5 | 70 | 92.9 |
| Hungary | 31.8 | 64.2 | 89.4 |
| Spain | 22.4 | 38.3 | 75 |
| Poland | 19.6 | 58.4 | 86.9 |
| Japan | 15.4 | 5.4 | 68.9 |
| Italy | 14.7 | 42.6 | 79.1 |
| Korea | 11.6 | 5.4 | 61.5 |
| Chile | 9.8 | 12.7 | 62.3 |
| Hong Kong | 9.0 | 8.7 | 48.7 |
| Greece | 6.4 | 16.1 | 51.9 |
| Turkey | 5.8 | 5 | 46.6 |
| PRC | 4.6 | 17.1 | 52.8 |
| Taiwan | 3.4 | 5 | 29.2 |

Various studies have identified the factors that slow language shift. These include

- Rates of out-marriage
- Cultural difference from mainstream Australians (e.g. due to race or religion)
- Perceived importance of language to cultural and social identity
- The size and concentration of the population of speakers
- Strengths of ethnic social networks
- Length of time in Australia (for individual speakers and/or the LOTE group in general)
- Continued links with original homeland

Of these, length of time in Australia may be a key determinate. The high levels of language

⁸ These figures are estimates based on how many people born overseas in a LOTE speaking country (or who have a parent born in a LOTE speaking country) reported that they speak 'only English' at home.

maintenance among Taiwanese immigrants, for example, can be explained by the recency of their arrival, together with the young age of the second generation and frequent trips back to Taiwan for business and family reasons. Of the long established groups, the Greeks have shown the best language maintenance due to concentrations of population, religion, endogamy and intense maintenance efforts. Even this group is showing considerable shift in the third generation, most of who are now young adults. Without a change of attitude on the part of mainstream Australians towards the usefulness of LOTEs therefore eventual shift to English may be inevitable with time, the multilingual nature of Australia being largely maintained by new immigrants bring their LOTEs with them.

Language shift to English is also occurring within the indigenous population, to whom I will turn to next. However, here language loss is more of a concern. Complete shift to English means language death and extinction, which may be accompanied by loss of vital local knowledge and ways of thinking. Unlike immigrant languages, these indigenous languages are not spoken elsewhere in the world. Once they are lost they are probably lost forever.

Indigenous Australians.

People have lived in Australia for 40,000 to 60,000 years. When the Europeans began arriving in the late 18th century, it is thought that between 300,000 and 1,000,000 indigenous people lived in the country. They lived a hunter gather existence in small communities, each of which moved around their area of traditional land in line with the seasons and the availability of food. It is estimated that they spoke 250 different languages (and at least twice as many if 'dialects' are counted)⁹. Multilingualism was the norm due to marriage and regular contact between groups.

The arrival of the Europeans led to massive disruption of indigenous life, especially those groups living in the southern areas and around the coast, where the majority of the Australian population now live. The majority of indigenous Australians (75% in the 2001 census) now also live in urban and rural Australia. In appearance, they often resemble the majority of the Australian population more than the remaining 25% of Aboriginals who still live in remote areas.

After the Europeans arrived, there was a long history of suppressing and/or disrupting indigenous cultures and languages. In the most extreme cases, Aboriginals were killed. More frequently they were forced to resettle in other areas and had their children taken away from them (particularly those with lighter skin) in line with assimilationist policies. At the very least there was a general denigration of indigenous lifestyles and beliefs. Until the mid

⁹ Many varieties that linguists would call dialects because of their shared characteristics are claimed to be distinct languages by the people themselves, especially those languages that they want to revive

1960s, Aboriginals were not even recognized as citizens of Australia and had few rights and freedoms.

On most economic and social measures indigenous Australians are still the most disadvantaged group in Australian society. They have poor health, lower life expectancies (up to 20 years less than the average), low rates of employment, low incomes, are much less likely to finish high school and go on to further study, are over-represented in the prison system, and in many areas suffer massive social problems such as alcohol and drug abuse, and domestic violence.

Indigenous languages

There has been a huge loss of indigenous languages since 1800. It is estimated that only 90 languages survive and only 17 – 20 of these are ‘strong’, that is they are still being transmitted from one generation to the next and used as first languages of communication (see Appendix 1). In these ‘strong’ languages, there is little variation in fluency and rate of use across the different age groups. However, in some cases the form of the language that the younger generation speaks is significantly different from that of their elders.

The other 70 or so surviving languages have fewer speakers, and there is often a decline in ability to speak in the younger age groups, indicating language shift, either to another indigenous language, to English or to an English based creole¹⁰.

Most speakers of indigenous languages live in northern and central Australia, in inverse proportion to the length of time and size of white settlement in the areas (McConvell and Theiberger 2001 p45). The pattern of distribution is similar whether one looks at raw numbers of speakers or percentage of indigenous people who speak these languages (see Appendix 2).

No one language has huge numbers of speakers, the most widely spoken probably having 2,000-3,000 speakers.

Language policy and education

As with immigrant groups, the overwhelming aim of government educational policies has been to teach indigenous people English so they can participate fully in Australian society. The emphasis has generally been on the education of children and young people, who were thought to have the best chance to assimilate into modern society.

¹⁰ The most widely spoken creoles are Kriol (with over 10,000 fluent first language users and twice as many second language users in 1991) and Torres Strait creole (over 20,000 first language users in 1989).

National and state policies focusing on indigenous language maintenance increased with the acceptance of multiculturalism in the 1970s. Language revival efforts were also explicitly supported. Special funds to implement these policies were allocated in the 1980s and 1990s. These were in addition to those for other LOTEs, this special treatment being linked to moves to compensate for past injustices to the indigenous populations and in recognition of the unique position of indigenous languages; i.e. the marginalized and threatened state of these languages and their cultural importance, not only for indigenous Australians but for Australia as a nation. As the South Australian Department of Education expressed it

“In the spirit of reconciliation, South Australian schools and centres are supporting a reversal of policies and earlier practices, and are accepting the new responsibilities of working with indigenous communities to maintain, revive and promote this country’s precious linguistic heritage” (Australian Indigenous Languages, online)

As in other policy statements, the imperative to fully involve the local communities is emphasised. This is not only because such support is vital for any language maintenance program, but also because many indigenous groups consider that they own, or at least have custody of, their languages and the traditional knowledge they transmit about the land, living things, cultural beliefs and customs.

Language centres were established in various places around the country, largely under indigenous control, which collected recordings of songs and languages, produced grammars, dictionaries, and literature in local languages, and supported the learning of indigenous languages in universities and schools. Government money supported the continued documenting and recording of indigenous languages, both those still being used in communities and languages which have few or no fluent speakers.¹¹ People collecting these languages were not just doing it for academic research but with a view to reviving and teaching the languages.

There has also been an increase in the public use of indigenous languages, such as in the media, electronic and print, the World Wide Web and in public signage, raising the status and visibility of these languages. While not traditionally written languages, most indigenous languages now have a written form, which assists in the efforts to maintain and revive them.

School level programs

A few non-government schools in remote areas have long used local indigenous languages to introduce schooling and literacy to their students, most of who come to school with little or no

¹¹ This built on the materials which had previously been gathered by linguistics and other researchers, largely for academic purposes, and by missionaries who have long worked with indigenous communities.

English. In 1973, the first government bilingual schools started in the Northern Territory (NT). The NT has 59% of Australia's indigenous language speakers. Only 30% of Aboriginal people in the NT use English as a first language, and 35% of all school aged children in the territory are indigenous¹² (*Learning Lessons* 1999 pp127, 129). In other states with relatively large numbers of indigenous language speakers (West Australia, Queensland and South Australia), Catholic and independent (i.e. non-government) schools have been the main schools to use indigenous languages in their teaching.

Nowhere in Australia has taught bilingually as much as the Northern Territory. These schools chose the most commonly spoken language and allocated money and resources to developing materials in these languages so that children could first learn to read and write in their first language. The ultimate aim, however, was to transfer these skills to English to maximize the chances for indigenous students to reach the educational levels of mainstream Australians. By 1990, 21 schools in the Northern Territory had bilingual programs.

A variety of programs to teach indigenous languages in mainstream schools in non-remote areas have been developed by state education departments.¹³ Some of these are aimed at schools with high numbers of indigenous students, but are generally open to all students, regardless of ethnic background. The written curriculum for these programs, and any examinations in them at secondary level, follow the same standards as any other LOTE, emphasizing that these languages as worthy of study as any other.

However, just like other LOTEs in mainstream education the same problems follow (i.e. choosing which language to teach, finding and retaining qualified teachers, insufficient time allocation in the teaching week, and the low value that the general community places on LOTE learning). An additional problem is continued lack of awareness of the nature and role of indigenous languages. A recent decision of the NSW Department of Education to formally introduce Aboriginal languages into the school curriculum, for example, was greeted by public derision and scorn by many people, including some politicians.

Unlike immigrant groups, however, indigenous communities can call on world wide indigenous movements for human rights and land rights, and link these to international moves to save endangered languages. These types of arguments can then be added to those associated with the philosophy underlying multiculturalism.

Recent developments

¹² As far as students are concerned, the next closest state is Western Australia, where 5.1% of school students are Aboriginal. This compares to the national average of 3.2%,

¹³ In particular South Australia, Western Australia and New South Wales.

Despite all the educational and human rights arguments in favour of mother tongue education, recent government policies and funding, especially at the federal level, have downplayed this aspect. The main emphasis is on national benchmarks, particularly literacy (meaning literacy in English), numeracy, and completion of Year 12 (the end of senior high school). This is seen as the way to improve the social and economic position of indigenous Australians.

Implicit in the above policies is a belief that devoting resources to teaching indigenous languages works against students gaining an education which will enable them to participate fully in further study, training and employment. Such a belief underlies the decision of the Northern Territory in 1998 to phase out support for bilingual education in government schools. This was done because of the failure of many bilingual programs to produce graduates with adequate skills in English. Many indigenous parents protested against this decision. While they want their children to be educated in English, they do not want this to be at the expense of their first language. They do not see attaining fluency and literacy in English as incompatible with maintaining and enriching indigenous language and culture. A true bilingual program should work both ways. This view is also supported by many educationalists and linguists around the world¹⁴.

The end of these bilingual programs also endangers other important effects of the use of indigenous languages in formal schooling: the status it gave the languages concerned, and the increased involvement of the local community in teaching in schools. It has been said:

“bilingual schools have acted as the crucible for indigenous teacher training and the increasing success of employing local indigenous people to staff bush schools. This is an enduring legacy of bilingual education and is arguably its greatest achievement”

(Learning Lessons, 1999 p123)

However, when the special funding for bilingual programs dries up, one may wonder how enduring this legacy will really be.

Beyond language education at the school level, a recent report on the state of indigenous languages in Australia (McConvell and Thieberger 2001) has raised other concerns. The authors point out how difficult it is to get an overall picture of what is being done to preserve and maintain these languages because of the range of organisations and projects involved. There is often little sharing of information and experience, leading to duplication of effort and

¹⁴ They also protested against the decision, pointing out that the failure of the bilingual programs was not the time spent on teaching indigenous languages as such but other factors including the high turnover of non-indigenous staff, inadequate training for remote area and ESL teaching, inadequate funding and curriculum development, and the poor health and attendance patterns of the students.

‘reinventing the wheel’. In some cases the objectives of projects are not clear, or the results are not available to those that could use them. In addition, funding comes from a variety of sources and is often project based, meaning that the funding will not continue after the end of the project. There is no legislation, either national or state, which guarantees that funding will continue.

Conclusion

So where does that bring us? We can see that in Australia there is no lack of policy statements or official acknowledgement of the right of minority groups to retain and develop their traditional cultures and languages, and of the importance of this for Australia as a whole, as well as the groups themselves. Many programs and initiatives have been funded to encourage the wider society to value the multicultural and multilingual nature of Australia. There has been particular emphasis on promoting the view that the cultural heritage of indigenous Australia is a key part of Australia’s identity.

On the other hand, the funding for these policies and programs is often not sufficient to really meet their goals. In addition, ongoing funding can never be guaranteed. Many ethnic schools, the main maintainers of immigrant languages, could not have continued for as long as they have without the help of hundreds of volunteers. In mainstream schools, LOTE is rarely adequately funded since, for all the rhetoric of the value of learning a language other than English, the majority of Australians do not see this as a priority. Full competence in English is seen as the main goal of language education¹⁵.

The importance of English is not denied by either immigrants or indigenous Australians. However, many do not see learning or maintenance of another language as incompatible with mastering English. One should not have to choose between them. Bilingualism, or even multilingualism, is the norm in many societies, including traditional Australian indigenous societies.

Unfortunately the language of most monolingual Australians is English, currently the language of power in the world, so it not easy to persuade them that knowledge of another language will enrich their lives in some way. In a world awash with English, it is the speakers and custodians of the other languages in Australia who must ultimately be the main champions of language maintenance and the promotion of bilingualism. Fortunately, these groups have some power at the ballot box in Australia, given their numbers (especially in the

¹⁵ There is an ongoing worry in Australia that educational levels are falling, and that even English mother tongue speakers are leaving school without the necessary literacy skills for their adult lives. In many people’s minds, learning LOTE takes away from time to improve English. In vain do educationalists point out that learning another language can actually help develop literacy in English.

case of immigrants) and the unique position of the indigenous people, with their claims for social justice and the right to retain their own identities.

The active participation of the LOTE speaking communities themselves cannot be overemphasized. Government policies and funding, and formal educational programs, are important but can never be enough to maintain a community language. The language involved has to be an ongoing part of everyday life in the community. Only then will the children of current LOTE speakers, and hopefully even their traditionally monolingual English speaking neighbours, see that 'English is not enough'.

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SBS, Australia’s Multicultural Broadcaster (online) <http://www.sbs.com.au/sbscorporate/index.html?id=374> Accessed 22/10/04

Other resources

Aboriginal Languages of Australia, a website on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages edited by David Nathan. <http://www.dnathan.com/VL/austLang.htm>

By working with Aboriginal people to maintain their languages, and providing communities with the resources and support to undertake this work, we are giving back something that was taken from them so long ago
<http://www.fatsil.org/VOTL/Articles/23-1.htm>

[Language revitalization: revival of Warrungu \(Australia\) and maintenance of Maori \(New Zealand\)](#) (Tasaku Tsunoda) A short report of Professor Tsunoda's experience in the preservation and revival of the Warrungu language of the Upper Herbert River area of north Queensland. [24/04/2002] <http://www.sgu.ac.jp/com/ksasaki/kaken/essay/essay-tsn.htm>

Reviving and teaching Aboriginal Languages in schools: Aboriginal languages in the NSW school curriculum <http://www.fatsil.org/VOTL/Articles/25-3.htm>

The Spoken word: Keeping the Aboriginal Language Strong
<http://www.bri.net.au/spokenword.html>

Appendix 1

Estimates of the number of speakers of the remaining ‘strong’ indigenous languages in Australia

(Based on Table 15, McConvell and Thieberger, 2001).

| Language | No. of speakers from 1996 Census | Estimated no. of speakers in 1990 |
|--|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Anindilyakwa | 1224 | 1000+ |
| Arrente (<i>Arrente/Aranda, Anmatyerr/Anmatyirra, Alyawarr/Alyawarra</i>) | 6493 | 3000+ |
| Burarra | 702 | 400 – 600 |
| Central Torres Strait (KKY) | 929 | 3000 - 4000 |
| Dhuwaya / Dhuwala | 3648 | 1700 - 2000 |
| Jaru (Djaru) | 344 | 250 |
| Gugu Yalanji | 256 | 300 |
| Kunwinjku | 1400 | 900 |
| Maung | 234 | 200 |
| Murrinhpatha | 1434 | 900+ |
| Nyangumarta | 263 | 700 – 800 |
| Tiwi | 1822 | 1400 |
| Warlpiri | 2667 | 3000+ |
| Western desert, Eastern total (<i>Pitjantjatjara, Pintupi Yankuntjatjara</i>), | 2584 | 1000+ |
| Western Desert, Western total (<i>Ngaatjatjara, Yulparija, Kukatha (Gugaja)</i>) | 1669 | 3000+ |
| Wik Mungkan | 845 | 900-1000 |
| Yindjibarndi | 324 | 500 – 600 |

Figure 1. Spread of Speakers of Indigenous Languages by Absolute Numbers*

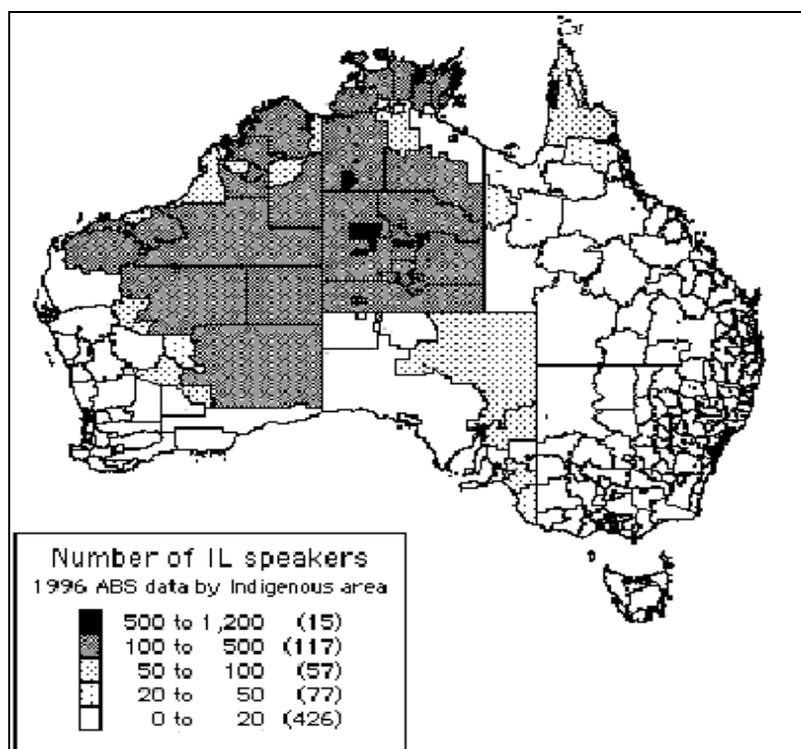
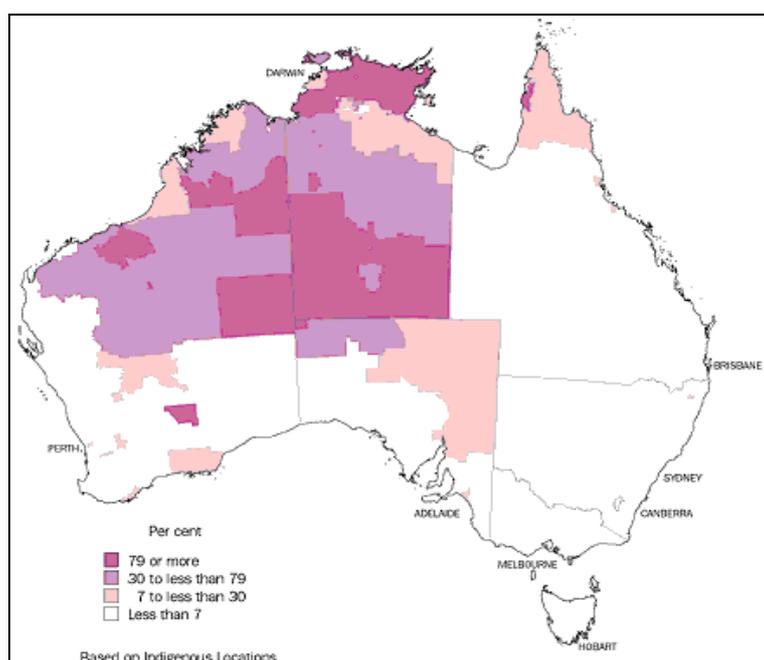


Figure2: Proportion of Indigenous people who spoke an Indigenous Language or Creole*



NOTE: Based on 1996 figures (McConvell and Thieberger, 2001).