

Perspectives on language transmission: A case study of the Wangkatha of Australia

In this paper, I discuss beliefs and attitudes regarding the transmission of Wangkatha language, as articulated by indigenous language consultants in Kalgoorlie-Boulder, Western Australia. The data for this case study were collected through semi-structured interviews and informal observation during four months' combined fieldwork. Despite superficial variation in the dataset, analysis reveals a unifiable outlook that incorporates attested phenomena such as purism (Florey, 2004), identity (LePage and Tabouret-Keller, 1985), and ownership (Walsh, 2002).

Beliefs and attitudes about 'correct' linguistic and cultural maintenance shape perspectives on language transmission. 'Traditional' language is universally preferred over more modern Aboriginal vernaculars, some viewing any deviation from traditional form and practice as an insult to Aboriginal culture. Language is usually seen as improper when used without 'authentic' cultural context, knowledge, or membership.

Consultants largely regard language proficiency as a result of language instruction, preferably accomplished through dedicated trips into traditional lands with elders. Otherwise, home education is often seen as appropriate for maintaining heritage language. Some approve of classroom education for maintaining local language, which sometimes differs from heritage language. Individuals set boundaries for language teaching and learning: dialect group members are permitted to teach and learn language with few, if any, restrictions, while non-group members are restricted from learning by some, and from teaching by many.

Most interviewees value pedagogical materials; few agree upon the most appropriate representation of language. Many think the writing system causes mispronunciations that mar the integrity of the language, and are concerned about 'language pinching' and 'muddling up' dialect boundaries. Linguists regard the Western Desert language as a traditionally complex dialect mesh (Hansen, 1984). Some consultants argue that dialect boundaries were clear during pre-contact times, and have become 'muddled' either because of forced movement of people or as a direct result of linguistic materials that 'mixed them up'.

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