Indigenous Studies and the Politics of Language

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Abstract

Language use changes over time. In Indigenous contexts, language alters to suit the shifting nature of cultural expression as this might fit with Indigenous peoples' preference or as a consequence of changes to outdated and colonial modes of expression. For students studying in the discipline of Indigenous Studies, learning to use appropriate terminology in written and oral expression can be a source of anxiety. In this paper, we consider how providing insight into the political nature of language can help students to be mindful and to understand that systems of naming have a political impact on those being named and those doing the naming. This paper reflects the views and experiences of teaching staff at the Indigenous Studies Unit (ISU) in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Wollongong. It comes from our teaching experience, and from discussions with staff and students over the past few years that have conveyed to us a continuing anxiety about language use.

Keywords

Cover Page Footnote

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"It's really difficult to know if what you are saying is politically correct or not. It seems that the language changes so often and that every different teacher has a different view about it."

"I really love the content, it's so interesting, but I'm always worried I'll say the wrong thing."

"I just want to learn about what happened, all this stuff about language drives me mad."

"I can't understand why everyone is so sensitive about names, it's like that old saying 'sticks and stones ...but names will never hurt me'. Sometimes I think people need to get over it."

Introduction

In June 2011, a decision was made by the City of Sydney Council to change the term 'European arrival' to 'invasion' in all official communication and documents (Priestly 2011; Killilea 2011; Moore 2011). The decision incited debate, disagreement and acrimony, both among council members and in the public sphere, demonstrating that language is never neutral or fixed, but inflected with meanings that shift across contexts. For many Indigenous people, 'settlement' implies a passive act and does not adequately describe the violent dispossession of land and culture and the ongoing effects of colonial policies and practices. For many non-Indigenous Australians, 'invasion' disrupts a sense of identity that has been built on the notion of 'legally acquired lands' under the guise of *Terra Nullius.* It should be noted, however, that the decision to change 'settlement' for 'invasion' was that of one local council, and was not widely taken up by other councils.

Language is a political tool that can be used to make statements about 'others' and ourselves; language can instate an 'us' and 'them' dichotomy by positioning the speaker and the object of speech. Language shapes reality and makes meaning according to cultural consensus; although subject to variation over time, this consensus assumes meaning through a shared understanding constituted in part by the repetition of certain words, phrases, terminology and frames of reference. The terms 'settlement' and 'invasion', for example, in the context of Australia's colonial history, carry respectively connotations of 'peace' and 'violence'. These terms reflect vastly differing perceptions, experiences and narratives for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. The choice of terms to describe the world, therefore, can be a site of struggle where representation alienates by removing from discourse relevant or meaningful frames of reference. Although language shifts and meaning is never stable, terms used to describe Indigenous experience have the power to harm, offend and insult, to affect policy and to affect identity formation. Ultimately, language use can, and does, reinforce colonial discourses. It is with this in mind that we approach the politics of language in Indigenous Studies – and indeed, in all areas of study where we find ourselves speaking about or representing 'others'.

The discipline of Indigenous Studies in Australia is underscored by a focus on anti-racism, and thus is concerned with the use and application of language. Systems of nomenclature in the humanities broadly, and in Indigenous Studies specifically, are encoded by a particularised use of language that seeks to be mindful about and respectful of all forms of difference. Language as a tool of representation is important: in teaching anti-racism or anti-colonialism, it is imperative to understand how language shapes representation, and hence perceptions of otherness. As

terminology and modes of address change over time, students – and staff – often find that what was once an appropriate frame of reference has changed. It is our experience that many students are often befuddled by terminology, keen to 'get it right', and embarrassed or ashamed when they don't. There is sometimes a level of disquiet around language that students find confusing, difficult, 'too hard'; we are accustomed to grumbles about 'political correctness' and assertions of good intent when students, through ignorance or inadvertently, use outmoded or offensive terminology. We are also familiar with apologies, embarrassed looks and occasional expressions of frustration, with students who 'huff and puff', and with those who don't speak at all for fear of getting it 'wrong'. There are also students who, when asked to consider inappropriate language use, display no signs of interest in language use and how it might affect others.

The goal of this paper is to explain precisely why what is said and how it is expressed matters in a discipline that teaches students about issues of cultural difference, anti-racism and the value of knowledge outside of their experience and worldview. We do not, however, seek to provide a prescription for speech codes; the aim is to instil insight about the politics of language for all concerned with issues of representation, and to suggest some practical and ethical signposts for language use. In light of the City of Sydney Council's decision, we are hopeful that mindfulness about language use is providing a challenge to the pervasiveness of discourses of political correctness, and to the view that 'free speech' is an inherent right regardless of its content or effects. With this in mind, this paper attends to some of the issues accruing around language use, its application, its changing nature and the political effects of naming on those who name and those who are named: on those who see 'settlement' as harmless and those for whom harm is an ongoing reality. While the focus here is on the use of language in Indigenous Studies, we claim that linguistic competence in broader cultural settings, and indeed, in relation to gender and sexual difference, can be learned through an understanding of the politics of language – that is, of how it works in practice. It is our contention that language has a significant effect on subjectivities, identities, histories and cultures and the ways cultural difference is perceived and articulated in the everyday.

Language and Representation

The politics of language usage, and of representation more generally, has been at the core of many approaches to textual and cultural studies for a number of years now. Marcia Langton's seminal work, *Well I Heard it on the Radio and I Saw it on the Television* (1993), for example, is an exploration of the politics of the representation of Aboriginal people in popular cultural texts. Stuart Hall's work also focuses on representation and cultural difference, and on the capacity of written and visual texts to construct reality; produce ideas, beliefs and stereotypical representations; represent; misrepresent; and imbue viewers and readers with particular views about the world (Hall 1997, pp15-74). Language gives expression to how we see and understand the world. It shapes the way people structure the world into categories of 'this and that', 'them and us' and how we understand ourselves and experiences in contrast to those of other individuals or groups. Many theorists of representation (for example, Barker 2000; Cavallaro 2001; Butler 2006) emphasise the problems of binary systems of representations and their capacity to produce particular kinds of 'truth' that lead us into neat, bifurcated and constricted views about gender, race, culture, sexuality, religious persuasion and so on. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been historically constructed according to a vast array of linguistic representations that posit the opposition of these cultures to white, western cultures. Colonial representations of 'others' are not merely harmful in terms of language; the construction of otherness through language continues to have devastating effects through policies that regulate and dictate the daily

lives of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Language, then, is political: it has *real* effects.

Much of this early work in textual studies has now been incorporated into media studies in high-school curricula. This has brought 'savvy readers' to university, students accustomed to the generic codes of television, digital media, social media and most forms of representation. This knowledge, however, is not always accompanied by an understanding of the effects of language; in fact contemporary neoliberal discourses are inflected with ideas about political correctness and the 'tedium' of attention to language use. The perpetual backlash about language use undermines efforts to impress the importance of language on learners and teachers. It functions to remove language from its connection to discourse, institutionally sanctioned 'knowledge' and the asymmetrical relations of power that produce colonial subjectivities.

Language and Discourse

If we are to understand language as a constitutive element of discourses (sets of statements about objects of knowledge or inquiry), where meaning is made through a particular 'discursive formation' (Foucault 1979, pp31-49), or as a constellation of statements about a particular thing, we can understand that discourses are comprehensible through the social and cultural consensus around language use at particular historical moments. Colonial discourse in Australia, for example, has institutionally organised and regulated the lives of Indigenous people since invasion. Colonial discourse is understood through shared beliefs or assumptions that represents some 'truth' about Indigenous people, 'verified' through the lens of western knowledge; it is only through intervention into these 'ways of knowing', usually through various forms of political activism, that discourses alter. Discursive shifts do not occur spontaneously, but through struggle, or what Martin Nakata (2007) refers to as the Cultural Interface, where intersecting relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous subjects compete for political power as they 'inform, constrain or enable what can be seen or not seen … what can be said or not said, heard or not heard, understood or misunderstood, what knowledges can be accepted, rejected, legitimised or marginalised…' (2007, 199). Knowledge is legitimated through, among other things, modes of representation, linguistic and visual, that describe, depict and represent what and who Indigenous people *are*. Representation through language is of interest because what is said – or not said, or how it is said –shapes thought, practice and discourse itself through systems of knowledge that legitimate both western knowledge and its construction of difference through its own dominance over Indigenous worldviews.

The Limits of Language Policy

When students enrol in Indigenous Studies courses, we tell them that we welcome 'critical thinkers', outlining the value of critical inquiry as a formidable asset in the vocational stakes. Students' capacity for 'reading' texts, and for critical engagement with subject content through oral and written assessment, is fed into a formula for graduate qualities where we expect them to be – among other things - – 'responsible', to 'appreciate and respect diversity', to 'act with integrity as part of local, national, regional, global and professional communities'[1]. Underscoring these expectations is the requirement to be conversant with the tools of academic literacy. That is,

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1 Faculty of Arts graduate qualities, University of Wollongong, available
athttp://www.uow.edu.au/arts/current/FacultyGraduateQualities/index.html.

we expect students and teaching staff to become familiar with the language of the institution, and its use and application in various academic contexts. To this end, policies produce guidelines that attempt to prescribe modes of speech and behaviour. These are our 'blueprints' for action, and to some degree, they serve a purpose by attempting to document what we do and how we do should do it, and to provide directions that may be useful in a plethora of situations. At best, though, they are guidelines only; policy can never keep pace with practice, nor specifically with the shifting nature of language. As we know, what is deemed appropriate or acceptable in one historical period can be inappropriate or unacceptable as times change. The best that policy can offer, therefore, is a set of guiding principles that reflect recommendations coming out of past practices or ideas. Policy, it can be argued, is shaped by the very discourses that contribute to many ongoing colonial practices within and outside of higher education. At our institution, one of the policy's aims is to 'develop guidelines and regulations for students' use of non-discriminatory language in their written work and oral presentations'[2]. The policy also includes 'Guidelines for Referring to Minority Groups', which outline preferences for the use of capitals and pointing out terminology that might offend. While these documents can provide some general directives about language and mindfulness, we contend it is beyond the scope of policy to provide specific directives for particular cultural groups: guidelines by necessity 'lump together' 'minority' cultures, and prescribe a set of general principles in what LaBonte describes as an '[u]ncritical use of social inclusion', which he claims can 'blind us to the use, abuse and distribution of power' (2004, p118). The example from Sydney Council illustrates precisely that histories matter, and that 'minority groups' cannot simply be collapsed for expedience. It is for this reason, and with a view to the importance of language as a political tool, that Indigenous Studies places emphasis on the pedagogical value of critical thinking.

Indigenous Studies

Indigenous Studies is an inter-disciplinary area of study whose focus is on Indigenous peoples and Indigenous issues. Indigenous Studies addresses colonial histories, Indigenous struggles, Indigenous Knowledge (IK) and Indigenous cultural production (e.g. art, literature, film and so on), among other things. It is a mode of intellectual inquiry that draws from western scholarship, but also specifically examines Indigenous ways of knowing and understanding the world. IK is currently undergoing a radical insertion into many western academic disciplinary fields, particularly in areas of environmental science, geography and some areas of the humanities.[3] Indigenous Studies brings into view some of this specialised knowledge as it is imparted by Indigenous academics, Indigenous Elders and community members, and by those who are receptive to worldviews beyond the spectrum of western science and philosophy.

Many cultural theorists posit the view that to produce democratic citizens, education at all levels demands attendance to the relationship between cultural politics and pedagogy; between the political climate and the practice of pedagogy as an ethical endeavour towards social justice; or as a form of Freirean liberatory pedagogy that sees students recognising the relationship between the

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2 Non-discriminatory language practice and presentation practice and policy guidelines, University of Wollongong, available at http://www.uow.edu.au/about/policy/UOW058706.html.

3 For explanations of Indigenous Knowledge as a field of intellectual inquiry, see http://nikc.org.au, http://indigenousknowledge.org and http://www.unep.org/ik.

public and political spheres and their own learning.[4] Within these broad frames of reference there is an oeuvre of material devoted to specific educational practices and policies. In Australia, the work of Martin Nakata provides a prolific legacy regarding Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal education at all levels. Nakata's study of the representation of Torres Strait Islander people emphasises the importance of understanding how language works in representation through western education systems, various forms of research and inscription and social institutions (2007, pp32-41). Nakata calls not just for an understanding of how language works structurally to produce meaning; he is interested in the political effects of language and in its capacity to impart an understanding of culture, of people and their relationship to land and sea, and of their political positions and histories (2007, p41).

Nakata's work charts the development of Indigenous Studies as a discipline concerned with self-determination, self-representation, Indigenous intellectual property, Indigenous research, issues of Indigenous sovereignty and the ways in which Indigenous subjects are positioned by western education systems (Nakata 1993, 1998, 2002, 2006, 2007). He notes that Indigenous Studies has emerged as a 'cross-disciplinary specialisation' that 'collects and redistributes knowledge about Indigenous people' (2006, p269). Most universities in Australia offer Indigenous Studies subjects; either embedded into social-science or humanities courses or as distinct degrees taught from within Indigenous Units. Indigenous Studies gives focus to language and terminology as it prepares students to consider anti-colonialism through a critical understanding of how language and representation work as colonial tools, and how they can function to *decolonise* and affirm culture through various forms of Indigenous self-representation. As we have discussed elsewhere, self-representation affirms cultural identity and acts to destabilise preconceived and stereotypical notions of Indigeneity (Lumby/Carlson & McGloin, 2009).

Indigenous Studies at the University of Wollongong is marked by attendance to local, national and international Indigenous histories and cultures. At our institution, Indigenous Studies comprises a formal degree extending to Honours level. The discipline is located in the Faculty of Arts as an integral component of the humanities. Given that our teaching cohorts are overwhelmingly non-Indigenous students (roughly 93-95%), our task as Indigenous Studies practitioners is to teach students to think critically about their own worldview, and to reflect on and learn that other ontologies and *epistemes* constitute valid and time-honoured worldviews. Many of our students have stark knowledge of Indigenous cultures and are often unfamiliar with current trends or changes in language use or preferences for naming that may differ according to place or personal choice. In our attempts to instil critical thought about language and representation, we encourage students, as part of our teaching discussions about issues of identity and self-evaluation, to consider language as a discursive system of naming that produces subjectivity. We invite students to consider the ways Indigenous people have historically been represented within many societal institutions, newspapers, books, film and so on, looking at the types of language used and forms of visual representation, and considering how certain stereotypical images and familiar modes of expression have been so naturalised that they can appear 'harmless' or 'inoffensive'.

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4 We draw here from Freire's concept of liberatory pedagogy, as outlined in *Pedagogy of Hope* (1994), as a practice that emancipates through knowledge of the processes of oppression.   See also the works of Nakata in relation to Islander and Aboriginal Education, and Henry Giroux, Stanley Aronowitz and bell hooks, all of whom in both general and specific contexts speak to ideas of liberatory pedagogy as a force for decolonisation and democratic objectives.

Student Comments and Responses

As stated, an understanding of the politics of language requires knowledge of its discursivity as a system of naming and visual representation. Our work in language usage, for the most part, centres on teaching students what not to say; it is common to hear students referring to 'half-caste', for example, a term offensive to many Indigenous people, who would prefer, *if anything*, 'of dual or mixed heritage'. Some Indigenous people also feel insulted by the term 'part' (as in 'part-Aboriginal') and insist that Aboriginality is not an identity that can be diluted. The following, and examples at the start of this paper, are a smattering of remarks that we have heard from students in recent times, both orally and cited in journal entries:

"We spent ages today just talking about terminology. Why is it so hard?"
"I understand that language and terminology changes, but it's confusing and when I write my essays I get marked down for using the wrong terms like if you don't put capital letters it's really frustrating."
"I got two different answers from two different tutors when I asked about the term "Aborigine" – so what am I supposed to do?"
"I'm always being pulled up for saying the wrong thing but I do feel I'm learning something useful."
"Aboriginals, Aborigines, Indigenous people, capital letters, small letters. I do get the point about language because I wouldn't like it if someone used derogatory words to talk about me, but I just wish it would stay the same. Every class seems to have a different rule about it."

Students studying in Indigenous Studies commonly use the terms 'aborigine(s)' or 'the Aboriginals' in their written work and oral presentations. The term 'Aborigine', although grammatically correct and used by some Aboriginal scholars, has negative connotations for many Aboriginal people. And yet, some Indigenous scholars use this term. Mindfulness about usage, therefore, requires the user to select terminology that takes a general approach to naming; for example, 'Aboriginal people', 'Indigenous people', or in local contexts, 'Koori' or 'Murri'[5] people, constitute a form of address that appears general and respectful; but again, it must be noted that some see these terms as homogenising and others see them as inclusive.

So herein lies the dilemma for students who come to see this as just a form of language regulation for the sake of it – a 'pc' imposition that they see as irksome or just too difficult. As stated, we do not resile from the complexity of the issue, nor do we offer a prescription for correctness; our goal is to introduce a practice of mindfulness – or critical thinking – that will give confidence and a level of competency over time. The point of teaching linguistic competence is not to regulate; as stated, it is to reinforce the view that language is never neutral. We do, however, offer some practical guidelines that are not prescriptions so much as suggestions for taking charge of one's own responsibility to consider the political ramifications of language use. These guidelines come from our own teaching practice and from our theoretical understanding about language, context and speaking positions. They have been developed over a period of years teaching in this discipline:

1. Always note that who is speaking, or naming, matters: where it is appropriate for an Indigenous person to use certain terms, it may not be the case for non-Indigenous people.

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5 These terms, used by Indigenous people, indicate geographical connections; for example, "Koori" refers to Aboriginal people from New South Wales and Victoria, and "Murri" refers to Aboriginal people from Queensland.

This dictum should extend across all cultural spheres and can also be considered when using terms that address gender or sexual difference.

2. Consider the history of language and its application to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people since invasion.

3. Consider the ways that language can position all 'others'. Also reflect on how it positions the one doing the naming.

4. When and where possible, *ask* about appropriate usage and don't expect consensus!

Although we offer a guide to appropriate usage, and direct students to both this guide and the University's policy on language, the shifting nature of usage can mean that students may not always 'get it right'. Indeed, we focus far less on the prospect of 'getting it right' than on the ability to be mindful and to engage critically with the politics of language use. We instruct students to ask if they aren't sure. 'What's so hard about that?', we say! We also direct students to *Communicating positively: A guide to appropriate Aboriginal terminology*[6], while alerting them that this is not definitive. In effect, we sometimes muddy the already complex terrain by continually refuting any prescribed methodology so we can train critical thinkers who will, over time, naturally and thoughtfully consider the use of language and its effects. Indigenous people are referred to in a variety of ways across the world and a significant number of our first-year cohort are international students; our task is to give them confidence while studying Indigenous Studies here, but also, equally importantly, to provide them with some tools they can apply in their homelands.

Critical Thinking and Cultural Competence

At the core of this paper is the intent to instil critical thinking about the use of language. But what do we mean by this in Indigenous Studies? The discipline is modelled on teaching students various aspects of Indigenous culture and Indigenous philosophy, critical thinking in this context; for most non-Indigenous students, this means the ability to conceive of that which is outside oneself and to think about the truth claims of representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This is sometimes also the case for Indigenous students, many of whom have also been imbued with dominant discourses of white Australian-ness. Indigenous students also come to this discipline to learn; Indigenous history, while often complemented by experience, community connections and some knowledge of colonial history, does not always or necessarily guarantee knowledge of all things Indigenous. Critical thinking in Indigenous Studies, then, is specific to its disciplinary aims and course objectives. It is not necessarily about critiquing all that is white or non-Indigenous; nor is intended to produce the view that all things Indigenous are beyond critique. Critical thinking in Indigenous Studies is about developing the capacity to nuance information, to ask questions about where it comes from, who produces it and where it circulates and why it circulates at particular times and places, and to be reflective about one's understanding of texts and practices. We are of the view that critical thinking is a crucial element in the acquisition of cultural competence.

Universities Australia-wide have participated in *The Indigenous Cultural Competency (ICC) in Australian Universities Project*, which ran from 2009 to 2011 and included numerous pilot

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6 Communicating positively: A guide to appropriate Aboriginal terminology, NSW Health, accessed 23 February 2012 from www.health.nsw.gov.au/pubs/2004/pdf/aboriginal_terms.pdf.

projects in various locations, including our institution[7]. Cultural competence in relation to the higher-education sector was defined by this project as meaning:

> Student and staff knowledge and understanding of Indigenous Australian cultures, histories and contemporary realities and awareness of Indigenous protocols, combined with the proficiency to engage and work effectively in Indigenous contexts congruent to the expectations of Indigenous Australian peoples (Universities Australia 2011, p3).

This project saw the development of a set of guiding principles, which included a recommendation that Indigenous Cultural Competency be a formal Graduate Attribution or Quality (Australian Universities 2011, p9). The use of appropriate terminology is certainly a feature of cultural competence, one that needs to be taught systematically, with a view to history, and not cursorily as a box-ticking exercise that assures competence on the basis of attendance at a course or lecture. Approaches to teaching cultural competence vary, and as has been suggested (Farrelly & Lumby/Carlson 2009; McGloin & Stirling 2011), this is an important issue and should be approached thoroughly and ethically. Carlson has for some years been involved in cultural-competence training, including the delivery of training and the evaluation of training programs across various sectors such as health and justice (see Lumby/Carlson & Farrelly 2009; Farrelly & Carlson 2011). While there are many examples of cultural-competence or cultural-awareness training across the country, there is very little consistency in terms of content or outcomes. Cultural-competence training is not generally competency-based even though the title implies that it is. This means that there is no standard for determining if a level of competence is reached. There is also no regulation about the content of training and exactly what is needed to ensure cultural competence. Further, there is no agreement on who should deliver such training and no regulation or consensus about the skill set that the training provider would need (Farrelly & Carlson 2011). This has led to a spectrum of training experiences including half-hour cultural-awareness sessions; sessions where an Indigenous community member speaks about their life experience; and bushwalks and group sessions lasting from two hours to half a day. While all forms of learning are valuable, not all forms provide the competence or confidence required.

Conclusion

Our paper forms the basis of work that will continue around the use of language in Indigenous Studies. The theoretical approach towards language and discourse takes into consideration the specificities of language use as this applies in Indigenous contexts, while also seeking to embed critical thinking about language more generally. Examples of student responses are provided; these are fairly typical reactions to our attempts to emphasise the politics of language use in our discipline. However, we have also noted positive responses when students learn over time that thinking critically about language is a process, rather than something that can simply be learned and stored away.

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7 Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian University Project, accessed 1 March 2012 from http://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/page/policy---advocacy/indigenous-issues/cultural-competency.

The nature of change in terminology is a reflection of discursive shifts in Australian culture brought about largely, we'd argue, by the activism and agitation of those Indigenous people working at the Cultural Interface. Sydney Council did not just elect to change 'settlement' to 'invasion'; this action is the result of political struggle for recognition by Aboriginal people. Although this is not an exhaustive discussion about the politics of language, we see it as a foundation for further research and as an adjunct to guidelines regarding cultural-competence initiatives and policies as these develop over time. Cultural competence, we believe, comes from knowledge of histories and worldviews beyond our own, and from the capacity to stop and think about how we describe those whose cultures, histories and identities are outside of our own spheres of experience or knowledge. Responses to the paper have reflected a wider consternation about the politics of language in relation to Indigenous issues and, in some cases, invitations for ISU staff to guest-lecture on issues of language use and cultural competence. This paper argues, in part, that linguistic competency can be (and indeed, ought to be) practiced with an understanding that language is never fixed. It is an invitation to staff and students alike to join us in considering the issues raised here and in engaging with them as a form of political activism that undermines simplistic ideas about 'political correctness'. We use this opportunity, therefore, as, members of the ISU to begin developing ideas that will be productive for staff and students within *and outside of* the field of Indigenous Studies. This paper also affirms our own views as Indigenous Studies practitioners that language is a primary element in the continuity of colonial discourse, but that mindfulness about language use can and does effect discursive change.

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