

## BILINGUAL EDUCATION OF ABORIGINES IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY OF AUSTRALIA

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### 1. INTRODUCTORY

In Press Statement No. 16 of 14th December 1972, the Australian Prime Minister announced that the Federal Government would "launch a campaign to have Aboriginal children living in distinctive Aboriginal communities given their primary education in Aboriginal languages". Although there had been considerable interest in vernacular education for almost the entire previous decade, see for example Wurm (1963) and Elkin (1963), official federal support for any type of vernacular education in Australia had not been forthcoming.<sup>1</sup>

The reluctance of previous Federal Governments to embark upon a programme of vernacular/bilingual education in the past is not surprising, considering the complexity of the linguistic situation in the Northern Territory, the only region in Australia whose Aboriginal population is directly administered at the federal level.<sup>2</sup> In taking the initiative, the Federal Government has given the lead to the States, and it is to be hoped that the system of vernacular education which they have initiated will find acceptance and implementation in the States in due course.

Before discussing the linguistically complex situation in the Northern Territory, it should be observed that the present federal programme is not the first vernacular education/literacy programme to be mounted in Australia. In the years preceding 1972, such programmes had been developed in parts of Queensland, the Northern Territory, South Australia and also in the Desert area of Western Australia. These programmes were developed largely by church and mission groups such as the Summer Institute of Linguistics/Wycliffe Bible Translators and the

United Aborigines Mission, not to mention the programmes of smaller mission bodies. To a large extent, the excellence of the work of these groups has been instrumental in the Federal Government's official acceptance and sponsorship of what has become known in the Northern Territory as the Bilingual Education Programme.

## 2. LINGUISTIC SITUATION IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

The Advisory Group set up by the Minister of Education to enquire into the feasibility of a vernacular education system for the Northern Territory estimated that at present there are one hundred and thirty eight Aboriginal languages and dialects spoken within the Territory borders (Watts, McGrath, Tandy 1973:21). This would probably represent around sixty distinct languages judging by the Wurm classification (Wurm 1972).

The Advisory Group surveyed approximately fifty Aboriginal communities, a total of some 6,000 school-age children. All things being equal, this would give a surface figure of one language per hundred school-age children. However, the situation was found to be much more complicated than this simple ratio might suggest.

The major problem encountered was the fact that only a few communities have a single language spoken, that in only a small number of communities is a dominant language spoken, while in many others there are two or more languages of equal significance in terms of numbers of speakers. In numerous other communities, especially on and around pastoral properties, up to twelve equally significant languages may be spoken. Added to this was the problem that in four of the major communities in the Northern Territory very little use of Aboriginal language is made, the language having been supplanted by an English-based Pidgin, which has reached the creolisation stage in some cases.<sup>3</sup>

The Group advising the Minister, then, became quickly aware that the ideal of establishing even basic literacy in an Aboriginal child's first language may not be realisable in many communities. Apart from the great linguistic diversity encountered, three other major impediments to the total introduction of a vernacular education system became apparent, as follows:

1. Many of the languages have never been more than cursorily recorded and even fewer analysed. No literacy materials whatsoever have been developed in such languages.
2. Not all of the language groups have representatives in the Aboriginal teaching force.
3. For administrative reasons, it is not practicable to introduce more than one language per school.

In spite of the difficulties outlined above, it was concluded that a vernacular education in the form of a bilingual education programme could most profitably be implemented in many but certainly not all Aboriginal communities of the Northern Territory. The scheme proposed, details of which will be given below, involves the use of both English and the language of the particular Aboriginal community from the time the child enters Pre-school until the completion of his Post-primary education. Before discussing the results and problems of the Bilingual Programme to date, a brief survey of the basic aims and structure of the programme itself would be useful.

### 3. AIMS/RATIONALE OF THE AUSTRALIAN SYSTEM

The Watts, McGrath and Tandy Report (1973), having examined the linguistic situation and state of analysis of the languages of the Northern Territory, was accepted and implemented by Federal Government agencies, notably the Department of Education.

It concluded that "the optimal educational, cultural and social development of the Aboriginal people of the Northern Territory can best be fostered through the institution of a program of bilingual education" (Watts, McGrath, Tandy 1973:6).

While a total bilingual programme was proposed, encompassing both primary and high-school education, the introduction of the programme has been concerned initially with pre-school (kindergarten) children and with other Aboriginal children in the first two years of their primary schooling. Following the rationale behind bilingual programmes in other countries, it was felt that the child's first language (i.e. Aboriginal) should be the language in which initial literacy is developed. Once literacy skills have been established in the child's first language, transfer of the skills to the reading and writing of a second language is, according to literacy specialists, less difficult than the child's accomplishment of initial literacy in the second language (see Gudschinsky 1973, Leeding 1973).

The Government agencies considered, further, that once literacy skills have been established in the child's first language it is essential that he become literate in English also. They state that optimal educational development of Aboriginal children cannot be secured through the medium of Aboriginal languages only, since the full range of resource materials cannot be adequately translated. In 5., below, some of the sociolinguistic problems raised by the character of Australian Aboriginal languages will be discussed.

Until the recent implementation of the Bilingual Programme, the

curriculum of early education was communicated in English. Consequently, heavy burdens were placed on many children in their attempts at learning. In fact, the teaching-learning situation, in English, in Australian Aboriginal school communities has proved both inefficient and stress-provoking. Glass (1973:5) describes the situation in an Aboriginal Desert community school thus:

"For most children at Warburton Ranges their first days at school are confusing. Commands given in English are translated by the brightest children and the rest work it out from there. Gradually there develops the realization that their own language is unacceptable at school. The fact that their language cannot be used in the school may finally be verbalised as one ten-year-old boy put it: 'Wangkayi is a rubbish language, isn't it?'"

Such a situation can only be expected to adversely affect the children's concept of their parents, their homes and of themselves. Sommer and Marsh (1970) and Sommer (1974) provide further striking illustration of the psychological damage that an all-English system can provoke.

The Department of Education, then, recognised that an imprecise and imperfect grasp of English is a major inhibiting force in the cognitive development of Aboriginal children. In the first years of schooling, therefore, in the case of schools participating in the Bilingual Programme, the principal language of instruction is the child's first language, and it is in this language that initial literacy is developed. At the same time, English is introduced on a purely oral basis. Once the child is literate in his own language and has achieved a reasonable degree of fluency in English, it is planned that Aboriginal language and English should be used as languages of instruction. The Watts, McGrath, Tandy Report recommends that "there would be a gradual transition, probably beginning in the last year of the Infants' School (ca. 7 years) to English as the (principal) language of instruction." (Watts, McGrath, Tandy 1973:12). It is stressed that the timing of the transition from the child's first language to English as the main language of instruction is flexible and would depend entirely on the child's having achieved the goals set in his mother tongue. (However, see the diagrams below.)

As the children move through primary school and into high-school, the Aboriginal language, in a given community, is seen by the Australian Government policy-makers as the appropriate language for 'Language Arts' and 'Aboriginal Studies', to be conducted sometimes by Aboriginal members of the teaching team and sometimes by Aboriginal adults from the community. This would assist in engendering community involvement in and enthusiasm for the Bilingual Programme, a crucial factor if such a

programme is to succeed. This point will be further discussed below,  
5.

The Watts, McGrath and Tandy Report also recommended two models for structuring the proposed Bilingual Programme, both of which have been implemented. Before attempting to make a preliminary assessment of the programme to date, the two models will be outlined together with the conditions under which each was introduced.

**MODEL A:** A bilingual education programme in schools where there is a single Aboriginal language acceptable to the community and where linguistic analysis and recording of that language have been completed.

POST-PRIMARY

Aboriginal Language	Other Aspects of	Y13 (ca.16 yrs)
Arts and Aboriginal Studies	Post-primary Curriculum	

PRIMARY

Aboriginal Language	Other Aspects of Primary Curriculum	
Arts and Aboriginal Studies		
	Language Arts (English)	(1)

INFANTS

Continued Literacy in A.L.	Maths/Literacy (Eng)	(2)
Establishment of Literacy in Aboriginal Language	Oral English	

PRE-SCHOOL

Aboriginal Language	Oral Eng.	Y1 (ca.4 yrs)

- NOTES:
1. Gradual transition to English as language of instruction.
  2. Individual differences in timing of transition from literacy in Aboriginal language to literacy in English.
  3. Each language to be presented only by native speakers.

MODEL B: For schools in which the accepted Aboriginal language has not been analysed and recorded by linguists.

## POST-PRIMARY

Aboriginal	Other Aspects of
Oral Language	Post-primary
Arts and	
Studies	Curriculum

## PRIMARY

Oral	
Aboriginal	Other Aspects of
Language Arts	Primary
and	
Aboriginal	Curriculum
Studies	

## INFANTS

	Instruction in English
Aboriginal Language	Begin Literacy in English
	Oral English

## PRE-SCHOOL

Aboriginal	Oral
Language	English

The major differences between Models A and B lie in the language of initial literacy, with a greater concentration on Oral English in Model B, accompanied by an earlier shift to English as the language of instruction.

Because of the nature of Australian Aboriginal languages, two concessions to English were deemed necessary. First, since Aboriginal languages do not contain a wide vocabulary related to colour, normally having terms only for black, white, red and one other colour, it was decided that colour names be taught in English from the outset. Second, since Aboriginal languages in the great majority of cases have numerals up to five only, mostly on a 1,2,2 + 1,2 + 2, one hand basis, it was decided to introduce numerals in English, and that the introduction of number operations be delayed until English has become the language of instruction, although actual number names are introduced earlier, in

English, in the Infant School. Because of the constraints just referred to, it is proposed that the language of instruction in mathematics be moved from the Aboriginal language to English in the third year of Infants' School. (For a comprehensive survey of the features of Australian Aboriginal languages, see Wurm 1972).

#### 4. BILINGUAL PROGRAMME TO DATE

The Bilingual Programme was first introduced in the Northern Territory in 1973, being introduced initially only to Pre-schools and Infants I. In 1974 the programme was extended to Infants II and the number of schools participating increased to a total of eleven, details of which follow:

SCHOOL	LANGUAGE	CLASS	ENROLMENT
1. Angurugu (Groote Is.)	Anindilyaugwa	Pre-school	37
		Infants I*	21
		Infants II	24
2. Areyonga	Pitjantjatjara	Pre-school	19
		Infants I	12
		Infants II	12
3. Bathurst Is.	Tiwi	Pre-school	55
4. Elcho Is.	Gupapuyngu	Pre-school	69
		Infants I	34
5. Goulburn Is.	Maung	Pre-school	30
		Infants I	4
		Infants II	7
6. Hermannsburg	Aranda	Bilingual Programme began here 1973. Attendance problem raises serious doubts as to whether a successful programme is operating. <sup>4</sup>	
7. Milingimbi	Gupapuyngu	Pre-school	46
		Infants I	26
		Infants II	26
8. Papunya	Pintubi	Pre-school	25
9. Yayayi	Pintubi	There is an enrolment of 60 in the whole school which is following a basically bilingual approach.	
10. Yirrkala	Gumatj	Pre-school	22
		Infants I	13
11. Yuendumu	Walbiri	Infants I	31
Total			573**

\* Following Model B.

\*\* Figures for Hermannsburg not included.

The conditions for the introduction of the Bilingual Programme to the above schools were as follows:

1. That a single language was spoken by or acceptable to the local community.
2. That linguistic analysis of the relevant language had been completed.
3. That a linguist be available for the school/language area, preferably residing on site.
4. That aboriginal teaching staff be part of the already existing school staff.

In the first two years of operation, then, the Bilingual Programme has been introduced to eleven schools in the Northern Territory. In the period 1975-76 it is planned that the programme be extended to include another five or six schools.

#### 5. SOCIOLINGUISTIC AND SOCIOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

While no formal evaluative studies of the Northern Territory programme have been undertaken to date, and while the programme itself is still regarded as experimental and flexible in character, several problems of a largely sociolinguistic nature have emerged, noted not only by the writer in his visits to the schools<sup>5</sup>, but also by the governmental agencies directing the project.

Perhaps the central problem is that of involving the Aboriginal community as a whole in the Bilingual Programme as it applies to any single area. While there has been an enthusiastic participation in the programme by some communities, more often than not community involvement has been largely lacking, for a number of reasons and with a number of direct consequences. It appears likely that the initial enthusiasm of several communities for the Bilingual Programme has not been translated into practical involvement largely because other issues such as land and mining rights have occupied most of the deliberations of the tribal elders, whose council replaces the absolute chieftainship of many South Pacific areas. This, together with the relatively new Federal Governmental policy of 'self-determination', rather than 'assimilation' or 'integration', has placed heavy burdens on the tribal councils, and left little time for a detailed consideration of educational matters.

The consequences of a lack of community involvement are several. The most obvious resource need in all schools into which the Bilingual Programme has been introduced is for a large body of reading material in the Aboriginal languages. While some schools have prepared a small number of texts, in all cases the resource material is inadequate at



present. Linguists are available, on site in most cases, and government support is conspicuous in all areas. In spite of these favourable conditions, if community involvement is lacking then literacy materials will fall well behind the expanding Programme requirements, since the stories which constitute the bulk of the literacy resource material must come from members of the community. More important, the narratives must normally be approved by the tribal elders, since according to Australian Aboriginal custom women and uninitiated males are not privy to certain information of what is deemed a 'sacred' nature. Severe social disturbance may result if such information should be communicated to unauthorised members of the community.

Lack of community involvement and perhaps understanding has a direct bearing, also, on school attendance, for under the policy of 'self-determination' school attendance is no longer compulsory. As a result, attendance figures have dropped considerably in many cases, the children either playing in the camp or accompanying parents on food-gathering or ceremonial excursions. Continuity of schooling is obviously vital if the Bilingual Programme in its present form is to succeed.

While the schools into which the programme has been introduced so far have a single language acceptable to the community, the composition of the majority of the remaining Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory is multilingual, see 2. above. As previously suggested, this will effectively preclude the possibility of introducing a bilingual programme in many areas. While Mission linguists (mainly Summer Institute of Linguistics and United Church) have provided the programme with an excellent foundation, and while the Australian Federal Government has made funds available for the appointment of several locally-based linguists, the embryonic state of research into and analysis of many languages (see Oates and Oates 1970) and the multilingual nature of numerous communities must mean that the Federal Government's most laudable initial aim of a Territory-wide bilingual education will at best reach only half of the school-age children in the foreseeable future. This result is a direct product of the linguistic situation in Australia as a whole, not simply in the Northern Territory, where most languages have fewer than one hundred speakers, while the 'largest' language would not exceed approximately four thousand speakers, this being the multi-dialectal Western Desert language (Wurm 1972:12).

The next problem, too, springs directly from the limited number of speakers of individual Aboriginal languages, namely difficulties in staffing. Because of the nature of the Bilingual Programme, all Aboriginal staff must be recruited from the local language area, and, with minor exceptions, are not transferable to other areas. This fact,

together with the singular lack of interest in teaching on the part of male members of the community, means that in a community of only a few hundred speakers of a single language the number of potential Aboriginal teachers would be extremely low. This of course poses serious teacher training problems if an existing Aboriginal staff-member is to be replaced. Government agencies indicate (Department of Education Report December 1973) that staff retention, both Aboriginal and European, is one of the major problems encountered. Naturally, in the many small linguistic communities, the problems of staff selection, training and retention are accentuated. At the same time, the European staff retention problem is related directly to the Bilingual Programme, since the role of the European in the teaching team (ideally one Aboriginal and one European teacher per class) has changed dramatically to a team effort orientation rather than the traditional role of the sole class teacher. To be fair, however, it must be stressed that the Aboriginal member of the teaching team has adaptation problems which differ little in extent from those experienced by the European member. Reports from Bilingual Programmes in other countries indicate that similar problems have been encountered there. Cottrell (1972) reports that:

"Team efforts between co-teachers are much improved over last year, when there were some conflicts between team members ... the problems between co-teachers have been reduced and are not viewed as a serious problem". (1972:4)

This account of progress suggests that the staff adaptation problems will diminish as the programme becomes more established.

The remarks above will serve to give an indication of some of the sociolinguistic and concomitant sociological problems posed by the introduction of the Bilingual Programme in selected schools of the Northern Territory. As suggested above, the main problem appears to centre around Aboriginal community involvement in the programme, especially when one considers that the programme to date involves only the first four years of schooling, two of which are at the Pre-school level, since the sections of the Primary and Post-primary curriculum labelled 'Aboriginal Language Arts and Aboriginal Studies' have yet to be formally devised. This section of the school curriculum must be largely determined by the local Aboriginal community, since the teachers/instructors will of necessity be drawn from it. Without community involvement at a fairly intensive level, the Aboriginal component of the Bilingual Programme, at this level, is in possible danger of collapse.

## 6. ACHIEVEMENTS AND PROSPECTS

The Bilingual Programme in the Northern Territory is in its infancy. Its directors and administrators are well aware of the experimental nature of the programme to date and of the extensive, but not insurmountable, sociolinguistic and sociological problems involved. Their courage in proceeding, in spite of these difficulties, has been rewarded, for in several centres of the Territory the programme has already proved a resounding success.

While the Bilingual Programme has been concerned, to date, with only the first few years of schooling, initial literacy in Aboriginal languages has most certainly been achieved, accompanied by a notable increase in self-confidence on the part of pupils. As noted above, 3., the hesitancy of students under the previous all-English approach is well attested. The change in self-concept and the sense of achievement noted among pupils in schools in which the Bilingual programme has been in operation, even for a single year, augurs extremely well for the future.

The transition from literacy in the vernacular to literacy in English has yet to come, since it is programmed to begin in the fifth year of schooling. From the experience of literacy specialists in other countries, the transition should pose few problems. The phonologies of Australian Aboriginal languages and English are rather different; the voiced/voiceless distinctions of English plosives are almost never maintained in Aboriginal languages, for example, while several English vowel phonemes occur simply as allophones in the Aboriginal languages. Again, the programme developers are aware of such differences and are well equipped to handle such problems.

The details of the Aboriginal language component of the upper Primary and Post-primary courses remain to be finalised. As suggested throughout this paper, local community involvement is seen as a pre-requisite for the successful implementation of the programme at this level, and indeed for the programme as a whole.

The Bilingual Programme in the Northern Territory, then, appears to be achieving its aims. The success recorded in several areas may be expected to fire the enthusiasm and ensure the involvement of Aboriginal communities in other parts of the Territory. Amongst educators, interest in the programme is growing in all States of Australia and the possibility of its introduction in areas outside the Northern Territory, on a governmental basis, is increasing as the scheme becomes more widely appreciated. As stated above, the Bilingual Programme is in its infancy. Accordingly, detailed evaluative studies cannot be undertaken profitably at this initial stage. All would agree, however, that the Programme represents a great step forward in Aboriginal education in Australia.

N O T E S

1. See also Kaldor, in this volume, section 2. The two papers were written simultaneously.
2. Within each of the States the administration of the Aboriginal populations residing within the State boundaries is controlled by each State Government.
3. The use of Pidgin as the first language of instruction in these areas is currently under consideration by the Department of Education. Cf. Sharpe and Sandefur, in this volume.
4. According to Department of Education report, March 1974.
5. The writer is a member of the Consultative Committee on Bilingual Education in the Northern Territory.

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