

INTERPRETATIONS OF "A NATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY FOR AUSTRALIA"

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INTRODUCTION

There was a time in the very recent past in Australia when immigrants were merely 'new Australians,' when the Australian-born themselves looked to England for guidance in many matters, including language matters, and when the Australian Aborigines were largely ignored. These times are now in the past and a new Australia is emerging, reforming her uniqueness and recognizing her component diversity.

In January, 1983, a report appeared in Australia under the title *A National Language Policy for Australia*, prepared by the PLANLangPol Committee made up of representatives from six Australian associations of linguists and language teacher. This report contributes to the process of discovery and legitimization of ethnic and linguistic diversity in official Australian discourse.

The report's FOREWORD opens with a quote from *Language in the USA*. The quote is used to enumerate features that characterize the "particular genius" that is "ours." It laments that "linguistic sophistication, sensitivity or concern" are not among these features. The quote is taken from a paper on 'Language policy: past, present and future' by Joshua Fishman, a well-known sociologist of language, writing about the United States of America. The report purports that this statement "applies equally to Australia" which is "one of the reasons why Australia, too, needs a national language policy." Fishman in fact describes the absence of American language policy. The Australian committee empowers itself by referring to American experience and debate. At the same time, the Australian situation has now by inference been transformed into needing a language policy, on the basis of the rhetorically created parallel of American practice, albeit fictitious.

LANGUAGES AND VARIETIES OF LANGUAGE IN AUSTRALIA

Two main themes trouble the demarcation of an Australian languages system and Australian communications in the latter half of the 20th century, namely, (1) the incorporation of migrants and Aborigines into the nation (state); and (2) adjusting to the realities of Australia's geopolitical position. The former rests on consolidating English; the latter questions Australia's power to consolidate English and the use of only English in the political-economic region of primary

dependency. Both raise questions of legitimacy of norm(s), thus, of the boundaries of and influences on these norm(s).

The TABLE OF CONTENTS expresses a hierarchy of the relative importance of languages known to be used within the boundaries of the Australian states: the first Section deals with ENGLISH, the second Section with LANGUAGES OTHER THAN ENGLISH and the third Section with GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS. The OTHER LANGUAGES are split into three types, namely, (1) Aboriginal languages, (2) Non-Aboriginal Community Languages [other than English], and (3) Second Languages in the educational system.

While the "Non-Aboriginal Languages" are labeled as "Community Languages," English is called a "Mother Tongue" and a "National," "Second," and "Foreign Language." Interestingly, the expression "Australian English" is used to head Section 1.3 on "Standardization." Presumably, it would not have done to have spoken of a unilateral Australian standardization of English, entire. Could it be that "English," if relativized into "Australian," would become vulnerable to questioning? An Australian alliance with other Englishes helps cement it in place to overwhelm claims that may be made on behalf of other languages: only after English. The fact of an alliance also predicts concern by politicians and linguists with the teaching of "English" overseas - the extension of "national" into "second" and "foreign language" rhetoric, budgeting and image of dominant and first use.

The INTRODUCTION to Section 1 opens with an affirmation that "English ... is in fact our national language." Thus, the committee has pulled together to define its membership and its readership. This makes the opening line of the second paragraph automatic, namely, the placing of Australia among "other major English-speaking nations." It is said to be different from the United Kingdom and the United States in that there are no "marked differences in regional dialects of English." Migrants' Englishes, whether British, Welsh, Irish, Scottish, Ukrainian, Italian, Greek, or what not, whether proficient, arrested, native or learnt, simply do not register as determinants of the content of the label "English." Neither are the facts of very major linguistic differentiation and socially systematic propagation and meaning of sociolinguistic cleavages permitted to upset the myth of the oneness of English among Australians.

The facts are that these cleavages are reflected in the existence and characteristics of Aborigines' English varieties (regionally and discursively) by migrant status, and by social class among Australian-born native speakers, whether in the countryside or in towns. Language differences merely rate a marginal mention in the following sentence after an initial "Nevertheless," namely that "some dialect differences do exist. The fact of the matter is that stable Aboriginal varieties of English are unintelligible to most other speakers of English varieties in Australia. Further, the so-called "broad" variety of Australian English differs from "cultivated" English both in discourse and in sound, the latter by virtue of a Second Great Vowel Shift, so great as to practically render it unintelligible to the non-initiated.

The partition into "English," "Aboriginal" and "other" is then repeated, but in this context with a twist, (1) that English is in fact "our" national language, (2) that there are "various forms of nonstandard Aboriginal English," and (3) that there are "the urban social dialects."

Aboriginal English is split into "various forms" and these are "nonstandard." How marginal these are seen to be is brought out on page 79, where they are defined under the heading "Dialect." The term 'dialect' "may be applied to either Aboriginal forms of English or dialectal forms of Aboriginal languages." Aboriginal Kriol, formed in large part with English language material, is here "Included in Aboriginal languages" as "Creoles..." Excuses have to be made for "Such dialects..." which reflect

"social and cultural diversity" and thus "deserve respect as legitimate means of communication and expression." Someone clearly thinks they do not. The mythical oneness of "English" in Australia continues the practice of control of acquisition of (certain) speech as a necessary skill to enter a (certain) social class in Australia, the one customarily in control of civic life.

How wide the tolerance of inclusion in the "Australian English" norm shall be is indicated by the character of the bestowers of recognition by their mention in the report: "the Macquarie Australian English Dictionary" and the "broadcasting media." A norm is indeed being formed, and it shall be a "standard" norm which is based on a particular selection of features of Australian lexicon, phraseology and pronunciation. This new standard signals "Australian" as distinct from other Englishes, but carefully maintains alliance with the other "major" English-speaking nations.

The following text places "such dialects" at a counterpoint to this emerging Australian norm: "Children of migrants" are joined with "Aboriginal children" as deserving of education in English. Lest the "urban social dialects" be mistakenly recognized, another paragraph extends assistance to "many adults" who are subject to interaction with "employers and trade union groups, social welfare agencies and others [sic!]." Classificatory statements and claims such as these effectively subordinate the handicapped [3.1.1], deaf [3.1.2], illiterate [3.1.3], Aborigines and immigrants [3.1.4], and "members of particular groups" [3.2] to the criterion of a now historically established inevitability of needed competency in a particular kind of English norm in order to participate in national affairs.

AUSTRALIAN HERITAGE AND IDENTITY

Close reading shall now seek to identify how the language "heritage" is established in the report and by what means recognition (also the word used in the report) is given to the distinctiveness of an "Australian identity" of language.

The report makes a historical claim and a majority claim, both on behalf of English. "Since the foundation of the Commonwealth of Australia, English has been the national language" (23). "English is in fact though not in law the national language of Australia..." (7) "It is inevitable and desirable that Standard Australian English will remain the national language of Australia, and in the foreseeable future some variety of English will be the mother tongue of the majority. ... The present situation in which the majority of Australians have a variety of English as their mother tongue has existed since before Federation" (23 cont., Section 3 of 1.2).

Specific observations on the process whereby the distinctiveness of an Australian English is made to appear are matter-of-factly made in 1.3, STANDARDIZATION OF AUSTRALIAN ENGLISH: "Dependence upon Southern British norms of correctness has only gradually been eroded, and the establishment of Australian norms to replace them has been equally gradual" (29).

The committee's conclusion to the standardization section strikes a disturbing and at the same time very relevant note, in view of the problems of deliberate control of opening and closure of an Australian English norm, one that serves to highlight the difficulties with both the historical and the majority claims on behalf of English in Australia: "Australia today is not an unequivocally English-speaking community, even though English is the major and official language" (42). Australia never was unequivocally English-using. The report makes some concessions to the possible opening of Australian English to influence from other languages: "Provision could well be made for names and

other items of vocabulary deriving from the linguistically varied population. Further, Australia is a neighbour and trading partner with countries of Asia and the Pacific region; present practice does not allow for systematic influence from or adaptation to linguistic material from these sources."

SECTION 1.4 "presents a brief discussion of the concept of Australian English" (45). The "European (predominantly British)" settlers constituted "the form of English written and spoken by native-born Australians" which is "the national language of Australia [which] is Australian English" (46). Historicity in this section is traced to the now "almost two hundred years" of settlement. A call is made (47) no longer to "defer[red] to British practice" but to "acknowledge the reality of its own language," thus legitimating the historical source of linguistic nationhood and in relation thereto signaling Australian divergence towards her own closure of language norm.

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding a degree of uncertainty in the report concerning the "definition of the concept of national language, for "Australia, the term could apply only to English, which is and has always been the language of government, of law, of education and public instruction (with a few recent exceptions), of entertainment and broadcasting (predominantly), of literature, and of everyday social and business contact in the community." Such is the propagation of ethnocentric power, once the battle for hegemony of English has been won. Adjustments remain. The notion of an Australian historical community is closely interdependent with the notion of continuity of use of English into what has become the present social² structure.

NOTE:

1. Revised from a paper first presented and discussed at a workshop on "The politics of language purity", held at the East-West Center, September 1985.
2. In October 1984, the Australian Senate Standing Committee on Education and the Arts published a Report on a national language policy, with 117 recommendations, and on April 26, 1987, the Prime Minister announced Cabinet endorsement of a draft National Policy on Languages. Subsequently, a sum of money (A\$15 million) was allocated.

In June, 1988, the year of the bicentennial celebration of British settlement on the Australian continent, the Prime Minister was reported to have expressed his readiness to discuss recognition of the Australian Aborigines as the original settlers of Australia's lands and to regulate their rights, vis-a-vis later settlers.

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