

Keynote Address

First hand experiences of a learner from a diverse culture

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INTRODUCTION

Firstly I want to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we have gathered. My appreciation goes also to the Australian Council of TESOL Associations for this much needed and timely subject. Thank you sponsors and organizers.

My life as it has unfolded has revolved around my strong faith in God, my deep interest in education and my being a proud Wongatha woman. I was born in a remote area, about one hundred kilometres north east of Kalgoorlie in Western Australia. I was then known as Loona but others called me Lorna. I am a Wongatha person of the Bibilha Lungutharra Waljen group. My mother was a Tharr-aa-ree-jal woman and my father an Anglo-Australian. He didn't live with us, as we were bush people and, as well, he didn't acknowledge me because he was ashamed of me. In that regard I was the same as hundreds of other Aboriginal children born as a result of the same kind of union, but I didn't know that I was different even though I was regarded as such by the government authorities who had charge of my destiny.



My mother, Dinah and step-dad Tony

At that time the Native Welfare Department used a derogatory term to classify me. They called me a half-caste. Those persons didn't know that Aboriginality and my beliefs about myself and about those Aboriginal people who looked after me had nothing whatsoever to do with skin-tone, but it had everything to do with knowledge of language, knowledge of culture, understanding of kinship structure and belonging in the caring and extended group in which I spent my early years. However, that kind of life, for me and many others like me, was destined to end. What I didn't know then, was that Government policy would determine the rest of my life and indeed the lives of all Aborigines. What was to become apparent, and is now acknowledged, is that my language, the language of my home, my family and the Aboriginal community group to which I belong, carried within it substantial evidence of the values and the beliefs that influence me still.



Uncle Ralph at Zanthus siding WA (1930's)
(Photo courtesy of the Battye Library, WA)

A lot has been said of our experiences of that time - of being shot at and being shot, of being driven from the traditional areas we called home, of hunger and of brutalisation, **but our language survived in us.**

And because of the experiences of violence, health risks, hunger, and disillusionment, I and others were strengthened in our resolve to survive. That resolution was demonstrated even when we became the children of Mount Margaret Mission, or, as we were more commonly known, **the Mission kids**. At the Mission, a new world opened up to us. We were too young to know the reasons why we were there, or all the advantages that our people hoped would be provided to us. All we knew were the heartache of separation, the fear brought about by uncertainty and the strangeness of the world into which we had been thrust.



Aunty Ruby at Cundeelee Mission



Mount Margaret Mission (1938)

We were at that Mission, not only because of what our people sacrificed, but also because of Government policies. The instruments of those policies were the Native Welfare Department and the police. We lived in fear of the police because children had been forcefully taken and we knew the steps Aboriginal families took to avoid those separations. Before our people eventually allowed us to go to the Mission, they sought to darken our skins with crushed charcoal and animal fat, whenever it was known that the police or other official was in the area. We were taught to run away and hide, but such ruses only served to delay what came to be regarded as unavoidable.

At Mount Margaret Mission, we met kindness, we met self-sacrifice and we also met the Government's Assimilation Policy head-on. It was a one-way street in which our traditional lives were considered to be of little value. It was a spartan life, made easier by the compassion of the persons in whose care we had been placed. We will never forget the sincerity and dedication of the Missionaries. They stayed up at nights to nurse children who had typhoid, diphtheria or whooping cough or other illnesses that affected us severely. The risks those kind people took only came to be understood by us in later years. Their efforts also included attendance in courts of law to act in the defence of Aboriginal persons when no-one else would bother to do so.



My sister, Thelma, at Mount Margaret Mission (1954)

So I offer thanks to those missionaries for their efforts, their self-sacrifice and their love. As we now look back on those years of hardship, hounding, hunger and death, we can only regret that more Aboriginal people could not have also gained sanctuary at Mount Margaret Mission and lived. The inspiration of those dedicated missionary people served the Wongatha people well, even though at that time government policy was directed at what today must be seen as cultural genocide.

CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

The 1905 Aborigines Act was racist in the extreme. Nonetheless our culture, firmly embedded in our language, survived. In it was so much that carried our culture and all those elements that made us what we are. It is important for all of us to realize that despite any restrictions in respect to the use of our language at the Mission we still had opportunity and need to use it. The new language, the language of our classroom that is English, could not serve us at those moments of excitement, of grief, or cultural significance. The new language and the new circumstances served us well, but never well enough to compensate for the loss of family, of loss of freedom to roam around the bush, the lack of close links to our traditions and those critical contacts with extended family members.



My step-dad, Tony, with Daisy Bates at Ooldea, SA (second from the right 1944).
(Photo courtesy of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra, ACT.)

Loneliness, deep loneliness, was the experience of many of us isolated from the language environment that was part of our childhood.

That loneliness was made even deeper during those summer months when the mission went into a kind of recess. During that time many of the missionaries went their various ways, no doubt to recharge their own cultural and belief system batteries. However, I and other part-Aboriginal girls were required to stay on at the mission. It was government policy that we were isolated, even from members of our own families. On the other hand the boys, no matter whether they were part-Aboriginal or not, were allowed to go bush with their respective families along with other Aboriginal children.



Mount Margaret Missions girl's dormitory (1920's)



Mount Margaret Mission School (1954)

During those months the mission was silent. The activities such as school, Christian Endeavour meetings and the daily routines associated with the care of those 40 or 50 others were curtailed. For me, the memories of that time are still with me today. They are of the few of us sitting on the dining-room steps or on the huge tank stands while we mourned the absence of our friends, the kindness of the missionaries and the routines that would fill our days.

We would sit, unable to understand the emptiness, often singing hymns, like "What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and grief to bare" in childlike fashion to fill the aching emptiness. Our hearts were broken, not only because of the separateness that we experienced but the unfairness of a system thrust upon us and which we could not understand. That loneliness, even deep despair, seemed only to be made worse by the mournful cries of the crows and the plaintive bleats of the goats that seemed always to accompany our own tears. Even today I can't hear the caw-caw cawing of the crows without recalling those lonely summer months at the mission.



Mount Margaret Mission junior school class room (1920's)



Mount Margaret Mission School, junior girls (1930's)

Of course we were not left to our own devices or neglected. Two persons, Mr and Mrs Jackson, God bless them, looked after us and tried to make happy what they must have realized were empty, lonely times for us. Well I remember the picnics and the rides to the nearby salt lake where there was a part shallow enough for swimming.



Mr and Mrs Jackson (1930's), house parents to girls and smaller children



Spiky hair after swimming in Lake Carey (1930's)

They were happy times, that is while you were in the water, but then, out of the water we soon dried to become white because of the high salt content. In later times I jokingly thought that those swimming episodes could be regarded as occasions when assimilation really worked! We were certainly white. Even our hair set in salt, spiked and fixed and in that place where fresh water was so precious, it was not always easy to get ourselves back to being the Aboriginal girls we are.

But even on those occasions, arranged by the missionaries, we had our own words, expressions of delight, of excitements and ways to describe what we had experienced. Our language was the one that we called upon and the one we used naturally and which fulfilled all that was needed. Even when a totally mission activity was introduced into our lives, we often had our own language words that we adapted to the new purpose.

So, Aboriginal language was not merely a passive receiver of culture but reacted to it in various ways.



Miss Jones, Missionary teacher (1939)

WORD USES

Aboriginal words could take on new meanings in the new contexts.

For example:

- | | | |
|--------|-----------|--|
| 1. (a) | English: | <i>"Pick up the pencil and write on the paper."</i> |
| | Wongatha: | <i>"Burner balanha marra - ma goonmanu wagala"</i> |
| | English: | <i>"Stick that one get and on paper poke."</i> |
| | | |
| 1. (b) | English: | <i>"Take your dirty clothes off and put these on."</i> |
| | Wongatha: | <i>"Warndu mijirr yarrala ma nanganha Tharrbathurra"</i> |
| | English: | <i>"Clothes dirty ones take off and these put on."</i> |

2. As well, English words were introduced into our language and were pronounced according to our own sound system.

For example:

Motor car (mudugar) town (tawurn) walk-away (woogay) stockings – jukin

white-fellow (walhbala) bicycle (bijigul) station - dirjin

3. Even new words were invented for new circumstances and the dynamic nature of our language was clearly demonstrated. When it was appropriate, new words became part of our language.

For example:

Car – yurldu skirt – yarih trousers – dawithi

wire leads - milbirndi (which we twisted and straightened to form story pictures in the sand.)

mug - jidarl camel - wanji Doctor - nangari

The language experience of those times of my childhood did not prepare me for any belief other than that each language had its place in my new life. Both had beauty, purpose, relevance and value. The unfortunate thing is that my first language, which is Wongatha, was not written and did not enjoy the status often accorded a language that is written, even if it is dead such as *Latin*. No one should believe that the learning of my second language was easy. The Aboriginal grammar, (though I didn't know the meaning of that word at that time) got in the way of my English conversation. For example, in my language for *I saw two kangaroos* I would say "*marlu gutharra. nhang-ngu-gnu*" ("*kangaroos two I saw*"). For *I saw lots of birds*, I would say "*jirda thudded nhang-ngu-ngu*" ("*Birds many I saw*").

Here I have indicated the number by adding another word - but in English all I have to do is add the plural 'S' to the noun, though not always. In my language there is consistency, first the noun, then the number, but in English we don't always add an 'S', such as in sheep, cattle etc. In these instances, you can have any number without doing anything. As well we have those irregular nouns which have to be changed to indicate more than one, for example, *One mouse/two mice, one man/two men, one woman/two women..* Or sometimes we can ignore changes entirely, it being a matter of choice, as in the word *fish - two fish or two fishes*.

Is it any wonder then that even after years of second language use, people still experience interference from their first. Believe me, I know.

CULTURAL INTERFERENCE AND VALUES/CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS.

Interference does not only work in terms of language though. There were many times as I was growing up that I found the values and expectations of the people in my two cultures were very different, and I experienced interference from my first culture in trying to understand the second.

One time after I had worked so hard on my spelling, I won a class prize. The teacher Miss Jones, asked me to go after school to collect my prize. She went to the cupboard and opened the door and got out a beautiful wooden pencil case, but when I put out my hand to take it, she hung on to it and wouldn't let it go. I tried again to take it off her but she hung on again – we had a struggle. I thought Miss Jones was playing a game with me but she kept on and then she said, "What do you say?" I didn't know what she was talking about. "What do you say when someone gives you a present? You're supposed to say thank you." I was so stubborn even then that I wouldn't do that. I put one foot forward and I put my head down. And so I never got my pencil case - she put it back in her cupboard.

Here was a clear example of cultural interference and values because Miss Jones expected me to acknowledge something, but in my culture my attitude was that if someone wanted to give you something, then their reward was in the giving. As well, there was conflict in regard to values, for it seemed that it was more important for Miss Jones to receive my thanks than for me to receive the reward which she had promised and which she said I had earned. Now I understand the cultural rules that apply, but at that time the adult seemed not to understand the rules that applied in my world and to help me to see the sense in hers.

PRONUNCIATION OF WORDS

Pronunciation of words is another issue entirely. Here I must offer some cautionary note in regard to worthwhile attempts being made to save our language. My particular concern is in regard to the pronunciation of Aboriginal words. The phonetic elements of our language only sometimes coincide with English and the differences must be recognised as being critical to meaning. For example in my language, the Wongatha language, there are also many sounds that confuse non-Aboriginals because they do not coincide with English language sounds. The subtle differences in those sounds convey different meanings.

Those subtle differences in pronunciation will be picked up by the Aboriginal speakers because they are familiar with them, but may not be by others. For example, when a linguist uses phonetic symbols to describe words in language, those symbols must truly represent how an Aboriginal speaker pronounces the word. For example:

thithi (child) tjitji gala (head) kata binda-binda (butterfly) pinta-pinta

Then there are the sounds in my language that have subtle differences in sounds and they are the ones that confuse many non-speakers. For example:

warnga (warnka) - hairy processionary caterpillar
wanga (wanka) – talk
wanga (wanka) – alive

Missionaries to our mob often made mistakes in the usage of those words and wondered why the people had grins on their faces. Instead of saying, "*Munga gadu wanga*" ("*God is alive*"), they said, "*Munga gadu warnga*" ("*God is a hairy caterpillar*"). Then there are others such as:

<i>Gada (kada) - head</i>	<i>gatha (katha) - son</i>
<i>marra - get</i>	<i>mara - hand</i>
<i>yunhthu - throat</i>	<i>ngunhthu – mother</i>
<i>Nhurra - you</i>	<i>ngurra - home</i>

CONCLUSION

In conclusion I make two recommendations. Firstly we must seek always to understand what occurs when a second language confronts the first. I say confronts because of what occurs in the process of learning that second language and I have provided some examples. Additional to this, however, is the fact that the child's first or home language is part of his/her world, his/her relationships, his/her beliefs and values and is the means whereby his/her world is explained and can be manipulated. It is in every respect appropriate, needed and never to be devalued.

All languages are precious and important. My plea is, be careful and respectful of those Aboriginal languages that have survived. Our children must pronounce Aboriginal language words correctly or we will end up with an Anglicised version of the original Aboriginal language that is not true to its tradition. In my opinion, language inaccuracy can be an additional tool used to destroy another one of the few Aboriginal languages we have left. We, the speakers of our languages, who are the teachers and the custodians of the languages, must never let our languages be corrupted or silenced again.

In closing I pay tribute to those linguists of by-gone times who went out on a limb, spending their valuable time in recording the many languages and dialects we have left today. We

honour and thank them because they believed in our languages and valued them. To linguists and supporters of today, working with Aboriginal language speakers and elders, I also extend my sincere thanks. And a special thank you to the Aboriginal language groups who so willingly have shared their languages so that Aboriginal children today, and those who will follow, will have languages that are correct and which they will be proud to own and speak.

But may we always remember, and in my Wongatha language...

Ngalibagu wanga gamu ganmarrthingala

OUR LANGUAGE MUST NEVER, EVER, BE SILENCED AGAIN.

Thank you all.