

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities

Submission by the Kurna Warra Pintyandi (KWP) group and Rob Amery, University of Adelaide

1. This submission is made in relation to Kurna, the original language of Adelaide and the Adelaide Plains, South Australia. Speakers of a range of other languages also reside in or visit Adelaide. Pitjantjatjara, Adnyamathanha, Ngarrindjeri and Warlpiri are also taught in Adelaide.
2. The Kurna language is being reintroduced during the last two decades or so after having been sleeping for a considerable period. Until recently, Kurna has probably not been spoken on a daily basis since the early 1860s, though Ivaritji (Amelia Taylor), recognised in some quarters as ‘the last speaker’ of Kurna, died in 1929. See Amery (2000) for a sociolinguistic history of Kurna.

The Kurna language is frequently used to give speeches of welcome and to introduce public performance (there are three Kurna dance troupes with Kurna names: *Paitya*, *Taikurtinna* and *Kuma Karro*). Through the dance troupes Kurna language is reinforced, both within the public performance and the solidarity and social interaction within the group. Through the dance troupes the Kurna language flows through to the peer group, cousins and other relatives. Kurna is also used to name various entities and is also spoken casually to a limited extent. Greeting, welcoming, leave taking, thanking and certain other expressions are now commonplace. SMS messages and e-mails are sent in Kurna amongst a handful of language activists and students. But there is still a long way to go before a Kurna-speaking community is established.

3. The Kurna Warra Pintyandi (KWP) group is a small group of Kurna language activists (Kurna Elders, teachers of Kurna, linguists and researchers). See Amery & Rigney, 2007)
 - a. Many requests for Kurna names and translations were directed to Amery (non-Indigenous linguist) and to others. A group was needed where these requests could be discussed and group decisions made.
 - b. The KWP group formed in 2002 and has met on a regular monthly basis since then. Kurna language reclamation efforts commenced in 1989/90. Key KWP members have been involved in these reclamation efforts continuously since then.
 - c. The KWP group works with all age groups. A particular emphasis is placed in providing the resources to re-establish intergenerational transmission. Our learner’s guide (Amery with KWP, forthcoming) contains a chapter aimed at parents and kin wanting to speak Kurna with babies and young children. The second episode of our Kurna radio shows (in preparation) also has this focus. Most resources are produced with a wide audience in mind. Our songbook, *Kurna Paltinna* is an eclectic collection with some songs written specifically for young children (nursery rhymes), others for older children (rap) whilst others are written for adults. Some projects (for example a

Kaurna language curriculum in preparation) are specifically directed towards children whilst others (*Kaurna Wonga Palti* – Kaurna Funeral Protocols – Amery & Rigney, 2007) are directed towards adults.

- d. There is a relatively small group of core KWP members who attend meetings regularly. However, the KWP group has support from a much wider range of Kaurna people who are unable, for one reason or another, to make the Wednesday evening meetings. The KWP group makes contact with a wide range of clientele ranging from government agencies, schools, environmental groups, reconciliation movement, businesses, researchers and individuals.
4. Amery and the KWP group work to produce a range of resources to support the learning and use of Kaurna.
 - a. A number of schools are involved in teaching Kaurna.
 - b. MILR grants have supported the mentoring of young Kaurna people, the writing of a Kaurna Learner's Guide, the development of a database and website for the use of Kaurna in the public domain, the production of Kaurna radio shows and a Kaurna dictionary. These projects have been undertaken through the University of Adelaide. The University of Adelaide also hosts the KWP website and auspices KWP accounts.
5. Kaurna is taught as a subject in a number of schools in Adelaide (see Amery, 2002c). It has been taught continuously at Kaurna Plains School since 1992. Many schools would wish to teach Kaurna but for want of a teacher. KWP often receives requests for a teacher of Kaurna. Thus there is an acute need to provide training for Kaurna people in a knowledge of their language and the skills to teach it. There are plans afoot to begin to address this through the establishment of TAFE courses.
6. Requests for Kaurna translations are regularly addressed by the KWP group (see Amery, 2010). Many requests ask for the translation of a word or phrase, but sometimes longer texts. Most requests are addressed, but some requests are unrealistic or inappropriate. A few years ago a translation of the Letters Patent, the founding document for the establishment of the colony of South Australia, was requested. This is a difficult document to read and process at the best of times. What does a Kaurna translation of a colonial document achieve? Who will read and understand the Kaurna translation? On another occasion, the script accompanying a film titled 'The Story of Stuff' was requested. This was a lengthy script with many technical terms related to economics and industry. Needless to say, these translations were not undertaken. Our precious time and resources are better spent in other directions.
7. There is a long-standing need for a KWP secretariat. The KWP accounts and webpages are hosted by the University of Adelaide and administration is effected by Amery who is a full-time academic. He is assisted by Taylor Power-Smith, a young Kaurna woman, who is funded one day per week by earnings from small consultancies. Space is a real issue. KWP has a growing archive which is currently housed in Amery's office. A designated KWP office is needed.
8. We are aiming to strengthen a sense of Kaurna identity, thereby increasing self esteem. A knowledge of Kaurna language and culture will increase employment options for Kaurna people. The Kaurna language facilitates mutual understanding and recognition.

There are surprisingly few opportunities for those with a knowledge of Kaurna to meet together and speak the language with each other. The Kaurna community is widely dispersed throughout a large metropolitan city and beyond. There is no Kaurna community centre. There are few opportunities to hear and speak Kaurna and these opportunities need to be created. Jack Kanya Buckskin develops his fluency through his public performances (mentioned earlier) and teaching Kaurna (see Amery & Buckskin, 2009b), but also through joking around with friends and sending SMS and e-mail messages in Kaurna. He now has a young baby daughter and is making every effort to speak to her in Kaurna. Those centrally involved in the Kaurna language movement lead busy lives and there are many demands on their time. They take advantage of opportunities to speak Kaurna when these arise, but these opportunities are limited. The highly successful Master-Apprentice program in California funds master and apprentice to spend four months with each other speaking in the language with absolutely no English for at least six hours every day. Whilst the Master-Apprentice program was devised for quite different circumstances, if we were able spend that amount of time with each other for that express purpose, I feel that we would make much progress. Even a language camp would probably deliver good results at this stage.

Manx is a so-called 'dead' language which is undergoing a remarkable revival on the Isle of Man. One of the factors which makes the Manx language movement so successful is that there are opportunities for people to speak the language socially. The family of two young Manx language enthusiasts own a venue which is frequented by Manx language speakers. There are other opportunities for Manx speakers to meet socially (eg Manx music evenings). The Manx Heritage Foundation employs a full-time Manx Language Officer and a full-time Manx Music Officer whose activities to promote Manx language and music complement each other. The Manx language movement have a pool of people who teach the language in schools and the community through daytime and evening classes. This is an enviable position. A full-time person to work on and promote the Kaurna language would enable many of our dreams to be realised.

Capacity building is the main priority whereby Kaurna people are in a position to take over the running of KWP, the development and production of Kaurna language resources and the teaching of Kaurna. Mentoring of young Kaurna language workers has met with partial success. KWP can only provide limited part-time employment using donations and funds raised through small translation jobs. Efforts have been hampered by the limited capacity, due to other lecturing and administrative commitments, for Amery to find time to be able to work alongside Kaurna language workers.

Addressing the Terms of Reference

The Benefits of Giving Attention and Recognition to Indigenous Languages

Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages shows that we, as a nation, value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures. Knowledge of Aboriginal languages increases our awareness and understanding of our shared history. Aboriginal languages, having evolved in the landscape over a long period of time, reveal much about the place we live in, the landforms, its fauna and flora, climate, seasons and weather.

Kurna people do not, as a group, own any of their land. Whilst a Native Title land claim has been filed, it is yet to be heard within a court of law. Within this context public recognition of Kurna placenames (see Amery & Williams, 2002) is one small way whereby Kurna ownership of country is given some recognition.

Public performance has served as a springboard for the reclamation and reintroduction of the Kurna language. Language, song and performance reinforce and complement each other.

The Contribution of Indigenous languages to Closing the gap and strengthening Indigenous identity and culture

Maintenance and revival of Aboriginal languages make a strong contribution to health and well-being. Knowledge of language and culture increases self-esteem and has positive flow-on effects through engagement with education and employment. We have seen the lives of some individuals transformed through participation in Aboriginal language revival projects and events. The Kurna language program at Kurna Plains School has had a marked effect on the self-confidence of children and pride they take in themselves, their families and cultures. It has had a marked positive effect on children's behaviour

The Potential Benefits of including Indigenous languages in Early Education

See above. The inclusion of Indigenous languages in early education serves to increase languages awareness, develop lateral thinking and sharpen general cognitive functioning. The inclusion of Kurna language in early education has proved to be a real turn-on to children. It increases their self-confidence (as described above) and has a positive flow-on effect into other areas of learning.

Measures to improve education outcomes in those Indigenous communities where English is a second language.

Whilst not directly relevant to the Kurna language community, the KWP group strongly supports the rights of Aboriginal peoples to bilingual education. Studies both here in Australia, and internationally, have shown that initial acquisition of literacy skills in the mother tongue has positive flow-on effects for the acquisition of English. The learning of initial concepts in one's own language leads to improved results in all areas of the curriculum in later years, including Mathematics and English. English and Aboriginal languages can complement each other. The acquisition of Aboriginal languages does not need to be at the expense of English or vice versa.

The Educational and Vocational Benefits of Ensuring English Language Competency amongst Indigenous Communities

English language competency is important for all Australians but this does not need to be at the expense of Aboriginal languages. Educational and vocational benefits are also to be obtained from a knowledge of Aboriginal languages and cultures.

Measures to Improve Indigenous Language Interpreting and Translating Services

Australia has been a world leader in the establishment of interpreting and translation services, especially through the Telephone Interpreter Service. Significant advances have been made in the training of interpreters and translators for Aboriginal languages. However, there is still need for improvement. It would be of immense benefit if we ensured that the interpreting, translation and cultural brokerage role that is expected of Aboriginal Health Workers, Police Aides, and Teaching Assistants etc. in remote communities is overtly recognised in the duty statements of these workers and that these workers received appropriate training to enable them to carry out this role. That is, medical interpreting needs to be an integral part of the training of Aboriginal Health Workers. Don't expect these Aboriginal Health Workers to interpret in legal contexts, but equip them to work in the health domain.

The Effectiveness of Current Maintenance and Revitalisation programs for Indigenous Languages

Kaurna language revival efforts over the last twenty two years have been highly successful, beyond our expectations. We have embarked on a range of innovative projects (eg Kaurna Funeral Protocols and Kaurna Placenames website) that have gained national and international attention. Funds allocated to Kaurna language initiatives have not been huge, but the benefits have been great (see Amery & Mühlhäusler, 2005).

The Effectiveness of the Commonwealth Government Indigenous Languages Policy in Delivering its Objectives and Relevant Policies of other Australian Governments

Commonwealth government initiatives have made a real difference in providing some support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. MILR grants have enabled the production of quality resources, mentoring and training. MILR grants have also supported the establishment of networks and facilitated communication between language programs through conferences and a web presence.

However, the funding allocated for Aboriginal languages needs to be increased. Even now, demand outstrips supply and we would expect that as capacity is built within Aboriginal communities to manage their own language programs, that this demand will increase and that the payoffs in terms of improved health, well-being, educational outcomes and employment opportunities would also increase. Investing in Aboriginal languages is a good investment, not only for Aboriginal peoples, but for the nation as a whole.

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