

LINGUISTIC CIRCLE OF CANBERRA

PUBLICATIONS

SERIES A - OCCASIONAL PAPERS

NO. 1

SOME REMARKS ON THE ROLE OF

LANGUAGE IN

THE ASSIMILATION OF AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES

by

S. A. WURM

CANBERRA, 1963

The publications of the Linguistic Circle of Canberra are issued in four series:

SERIES A - OCCASIONAL PAPERS

SERIES B - MONOGRAPHS

SERIES C - BOOKS

BULLETINS.

All correspondence concerning the Linguistic Circle of Canberra and its publications, including orders and subscriptions, should be addressed to:

*The Secretary,
Department of Linguistics,
School of Pacific Studies,
The Australian National University,
Box 4, G.P.O.,
Canberra, A.C.T.,
Australia.*

The copyright in the material of this publication is vested in the author or co-authors.

The Circle is indebted to the Australian National University for help in the production of this series.

This publication was made possible by a grant from the Hunter Douglas Fund.

SOME REMARKS ON THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN
THE ASSIMILATION OF AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES

NOTE:

This paper is intended primarily for the benefit of missionaries, teachers and other persons directly concerned with the assimilation of aborigines. Most of these persons lack formal linguistic training. The use of technical linguistic and anthropological terminology has, therefore, been avoided as far as possible in the presentation of the subject.

The writer has often had the opportunity to take part in discussions relating to the question of the assimilation of Australian aborigines to the white man's ways. On such occasions the argument is not infrequently put forward that to encourage aborigines whose culture has not yet disintegrated to adhere to their old ways as far as this is practicable, may be retarding and hindering their adjustment to the white man's ways and civilization. However, it is suggested here that the opposite may be true, and that attempts on the part of persons and authorities to give aborigines in their care encouragement on these lines may be of beneficial value in the process of assimilation rather than a retarding and hindering factor. To justify this suggestion, it may be pointed out that aborigines have, as a rule, gone through a period of mental confusion and have suffered great difficulties in orientation and adjustment when their cultures crumbled rapidly under the impact of that of the white man. One important factor in this has been their pronounced feeling of shame at being "only aborigines" which has been instilled into them by the white man's attitude towards them and their cultural background. It is disquieting to see some white people frowning

at the aborigines' pride in their old ways, and to watch them trying to suppress such feelings in the aborigines in the mistaken belief that this may enable the latter to get "assimilated" more rapidly. It appears that, in most instances in which aborigines are actively encouraged to forget about their own ways as soon as possible and to adopt the white man's ways instead, the result is a very rapid breakdown of native society, culture, life and values, and insufficient and unsatisfactory replacement of these by white man's ways and values. The outcome is a highly accelerated loss of native background with only rudimentary elements of a totally alien background taking its place. The deplorable consequences are so well known and can so easily be observed in any aborigine community whose culture has disintegrated that they need not be elaborated on.

It seems that, in cases where aborigines who are in a stage of transition between the old ways and the new, are given encouragement to continue adhering to some features of their old culture as far as this is feasible under the circumstances in which they may live, their transition from the old ways to the new takes a much smoother course with very much more satisfactory results in the end. The reason for this is obviously that, as a result of not being told to regard their own ways as something to be despised, the aborigines have some hold to fall back upon when slowly adapting themselves to the new ideas and new ways which they are - gently or otherwise, either by circumstances or directly - induced to adopt.

It is obvious that the aborigines experience great difficulty in understanding and adapting themselves to the white man's ways which, in many respects, are radically different from theirs. They may, in most instances, learn to superficially imitate white men's customs and habits in a fairly short time, but without understanding the real nature and the complexities of the behavioural structure underlying such customs and habits. As a result, they only succeed in

imitating some customs and habits in certain situations, but are unable to adopt the white man's full behavioural patterns because they are ignorant of the cultural principles on which those particular manifestations of custom and habit are based. In consequence, the imitated manifestations of the white man's customs and habits may be practised by the aborigines in situations where, according to the cultural principles determining the white man's behaviour, they are completely out of place.

What has been outlined in the last paragraph is a normal feature of any situation of contact between widely different cultures, and in itself does not represent a serious problem. It does, however, become a very serious problem if, during the period of the transition from the old ways to the new, and of the gradual adaptation to the white man's ways, the old culture of the aborigines is allowed, or even actively caused, to disintegrate in a very short time. The result of this is the fact that the aborigines affected do not have sufficient time to adapt themselves to the white man's ways in the short period in which they are able to hold on to their own vanishing culture. In consequence, they land in what may be called a cultural vacuum which inevitably leads them to lose their self-respect and interest in most things above day to day existence. It is very much harder to guide aborigines from this state into absorbing the white man's culture than may be the case with an aborigine community which has been encouraged to continue in its old ways while slowly adopting the white man's ways in a controlled manner. The latter could well take place at Mission or Government stations, for instance. With such communities, the transition from old to new will be much smoother than with a community whose old culture disintegrates rapidly in an uncontrolled or almost violent manner, and the new community resulting from such a controlled transition could be regarded as very much more valuable from the

point of view of the white man. When the adaptation to the white man's ways has reached a high degree in such a community, the old ways will gradually fall into disuse as a matter of course without much harm resulting from this to the community. This is in marked contrast to the situation described above for a community which has been encouraged to drop its old ways too soon, i.e. before having adapted itself to the white man's ways.

The aborigine language plays a most important part in what has been described above. Language is one of the highly persistent parts of culture and the native languages may be found to live on in aborigine communities for a very considerable time after the disintegration of most other aspects of their culture. It may be argued that, as long as a native language survives, the aborigines speaking it still have some hold on their own ways, because language is a system of symbols with references to elements and items in the framework of an individual culture. In other words, if the system of symbols referring to an individual culture is still in active use in a community, that particular culture may be said to be at least lingering on. It appears, therefore, to serve no constructive purpose to encourage the loss of an aborigine language in situations in which English has not been adopted in its proper form by the majority of the members of a community on a footing at least equal to that of the aborigine language, and in which the remaining minority of the community is progressing towards the adoption of English as well. Failure to observe this leads, as a rule, to the community forgetting the aborigine language and speaking a broken jargon of corrupt English instead. It is very much more difficult to teach such a community proper English than is the case with a community in which the aborigine language is still flourishing and English is only spoken by a few members of the community.

In this connection, it may be pointed out that it is a very much simpler and quicker task to make aborigines literate in their own languages than to achieve this end in English which they very often do not know well at all. In other words, making them literate in a language they know and for which a simple alphabet and a consistent spelling can be devised by a competent linguist, is very much easier and, as will be shown, of greater benefit to the aborigines in the long run, than trying to make them literate in a language which they know only improperly, or not at all, and whose spelling is amongst the most difficult, complex, and inconsistent in the whole world. Making the aborigines literate in their own language will, at the same time, teach them the principles of the sub-division of utterances into smaller units and the sub-division of these smaller units, i.e. words, into smaller grammatical units and eventually sound units. Thus equipped, they will find it much easier to learn proper English than is otherwise the case. To elaborate on this, it may be noted that, once literate in their own language, they would approach the task of learning English and of becoming literate in it with a full knowledge of writing and reading the letters which make up the English alphabet, and of the principle of automatically analysing utterances into words, and words into syllables and sounds; at the same time they will, if proper guidance has been given, be dimly aware of the principles of language structure or what might be called grammar. That is to say, when the pupils are being taught English, their attention could be drawn to features of their own language when points of English grammar are being explained to them.

An argument often levelled against making aborigines literate in their own languages is the suggestion that literacy is only of value to people who have a literature of their own. This argument rests on two unfortunate misconceptions:

(1) It is assumed that literacy serves the primary purpose of enabling people to read their literature. However, with natives who have had no written language, and who become literate, literacy is primarily of value for their daily life - it enables them to communicate with each other much more easily than is otherwise the case. Anyone who has been in close contact with aborigine communities whose culture has disintegrated, or is in the process of disintegrating, will remember the frequent requests put to him by members of the community that he should write letters on their behalf to their relatives or other persons, or to read out letters received by them from their relatives or others. It would quite obviously be of great use to them if they could write such letters themselves and thereby be able to increase the frequency rate of their inter-communication and step up the exchange of thoughts with each other. The importance of this for the community as a whole need not be stressed. It must be borne in mind that, with most aborigine communities which are in the process of transition from the old ways to the new, a considerable number of the members of the community live scattered over a wide area most of the time, fathers, sons and brothers working at different pastoral stations. etc. If these people were able to write to each other, this would materially contribute to preserving the community as a functioning whole. In this, it should be borne in mind that, for an aborigine in cultural transition being a member of his community is comparable to the white man's concept of having a "home".

Apart from enabling aborigines to write to each other, their being literate is an essential prerequisite to their being in a position to lead a community life comparable to our own. In a literate community all members can easily

obtain lasting records of matters of interest to all - for later reference if necessary - the results of meetings between a few community members can readily be made accessible to all other members, etc.

(2) It is presumed that the aborigines have no literature of their own. In fact, however, they have a very extensive, though oral, literature. It goes without saying that once aborigines have been made literate in their own language, they could, and should, be encouraged to write down the numerous myths, stories and other items of their oral literature. These could then be printed or at least duplicated to provide the aborigines with reading material based on their own background which would constitute an important step in preserving their old ways for as long as they themselves may think this to be necessary.

Experience has shown that, on stations where children tend to use English in preference to the aborigine language and may not even have a fair active command of the latter, their English could still not be described as good standard English. The reason for this is the fact that these children have continuous contact with broken English as spoken by adults, and comparatively little opportunity to hear proper English. In such situations it may be advisable to encourage the children to speak to the adults, especially their parents, in the aborigine language rather than in broken English. This would reduce the frequency of instances in which they are actively participating in conversations in which broken English is used. At the same time it would increase the chances of their correct English which they learn at school - and which they should be encouraged to use when speaking to each other - remaining more or less unadulterated.

What has been said makes it obvious that it would be of great advantage if those in charge of mission stations and of teaching aborigines could familiarize themselves with the languages used by the aborigines under their care. This would enable such white people to make the aborigines literate in their own language in preparation to their learning, and becoming literate in, the English language in its proper form. In addition, two important social consequences would result from the ability of the white men concerned to converse freely with the aborigines, especially with old people, in their own language:

(1) The fact that the white man speaks their language would contribute to counteracting the aborigines' feeling of inferiority and their shame of their cultural background. Their language is very often referred to by ignorant white people as "senseless babble", "gibberish" and so on, which makes the aborigines feel ashamed of their language which is one of the most important elements in their culture. If, however, a white man goes to the trouble of learning that "senseless babble" and talks to them in their own language, this gives the aborigines the feeling that their language is, after all, not regarded by all white people as something to be despised. This in turn will materially contribute to raising their self-esteem.

(2) A white person who has mastered the language of the aborigines in his charge is able to serve as a competent guide in directing them in their efforts to get adapted to, and to adopt, the white man's ways. He can explain the new concepts and ways in the aborigines' own terms of reference, and thereby achieve a much higher degree of understanding than is the case if English is used. It must be stressed in this connection that, in an aborigine community in

cultural transition, a white person unfamiliar with aborigines and ignorant of the aborigine language has little hope of getting much meaning across to them in English however hard he may try, even if the aborigines concerned have some knowledge of English. His efforts can only be described as attempts to explain an alien cultural complex to people in terms of reference alien to them in content, and partly even in form. The often lamented puzzling failures of attempts to teach aborigines even the basic elements of our culture have one of their roots in this inability of the aborigines, and of the white people who try to teach them, to communicate with each other on common grounds. It may be pointed out in this that assimilation is a two-way process:

(a) A conscious adaptation of the aborigines to the white world under the guidance of competent white people, not merely the dropping of the aborigine world, and the aping of facets of the white man's. It may be mentioned in passing that in most areas in which the assimilation of the aborigines is a topical problem, the examples put by the majority of the white people known to the aborigines are not examples whose imitation by the latter may be regarded as desirable anyway.

(b) The willingness and competence of the white people in charge of the aborigines to direct and guide the latter in their adaptation to the white world. Goodwill and a thorough knowledge of the white man's ways are not enough on the part of these white people, they must have some knowledge of the aborigine world, have a tolerant outlook on it, and, above all, must be able to communicate with the abo-

rigines with the help of the latter's own system of reference, i.e. be able to speak the language of the aborigines in their charge.

The question emerges at this point how such white people can go about the task of familiarizing themselves with aborigine languages. It is essential that anyone intending to study aborigine languages have at least some familiarity with linguistics, especially those facets of it that have a direct bearing on field methods. Of these, phonetics is of the greatest importance; its study will enable such white people to produce correctly, and to recognize, the sounds of aborigine languages. Phonemics is also important: this will give them the capability of determining which of the sounds uttered in the speaking of an aborigine language are significant, i.e. which sound distinctions must be scrupulously observed by the speaker if intelligibility is not to be impaired. The study of morphology and syntax will give such white people insight into the structure of aborigine languages above the sound level, i.e. into what may be termed their grammar. Finally, field methodology will teach them how to study an aborigine language in direct contact with aborigines, i.e. how to collect language materials from native informants, and how to assess and analyze such materials in applying their knowledge of the facets of linguistics mentioned above.

Both short and long courses in linguistics are now being offered by several Australian universities such as the Australian National University, the University of Sydney, and the University of Western Australia, and will shortly be available at other Australian universities as well. In addition, the Summer Institute of Linguistics at Belgrave Heights, Victoria, gives a condensed three months' course in field linguistics every year, especially for missionaries. There are, at the same time, several technical hand

books for the use of home students and field workers on which information can be obtained by application to any of the institutions referred to.

As regards the special field of the Australian aborigine languages themselves, it may be pointed out that a very considerable number of them have been studied in recent years by professional linguists such as A. Capell (University of Sydney), S.A. Wurm (Australian National University), K. Hale (University of Illinois), G. O'Grady (Indiana University), T.G.H. Strehlow (University of Adelaide), and several others such as W.H. Douglas and members of the Australian branch of the Summer Institute of Linguistics. Results of their work are gradually being published largely in the Oceania Linguistic Monograph Series issued by the University of Sydney, but information on languages on which there are no publications as yet can be obtained on application to the linguists mentioned.

A problem arises at government and mission stations where a multiplicity of languages is spoken. In such cases it may not be practicable to use every individual language spoken at a station in the manner outlined above. It may, however, be possible in the majority of cases to adopt one of the languages for this purpose, that is, the one which is numerically, or for other reasons, most important. The argument often levelled against this by non-linguists that this procedure would constitute the learning of another language by a considerable number of the aborigines involved and would, in principle, not differ from their learning English, and that teaching them English instead would be much wiser, is based on a complete misunderstanding of the situation and the incompetence on the part of the critics to judge the factors involved in their proper light. In the first instance, it may be pointed out that the majority of the aborigines at such stations will have at least a passive knowledge of the language chosen so that it would not be a ques-

tion of their learning a totally new language. In addition, in view of the similarity between aborigine languages in sound structure, grammatical structure and otherwise, aborigines experience little difficulty in acquiring a full mastery of another aborigine language in a very short time, whereas it means several years of hard struggle for them to learn English properly. What has been said above about making aborigines literate in English through making them literate in an aborigine language first, remains fully valid irrespective of whether the aborigine language is the native tongue of all the aborigines involved or is only a second aborigine language for some of them. Once they have become literate in an aborigine language which is not their own, they will, almost at the outset, be able to write and read their own language as well, because the sound system, and consequently the system of writing and spelling, is very much the same in most aborigine languages. In other words, only very minor changes, if any at all, have to be made in a system of writing devised for one aborigine language to make it suitable for writing other aborigine languages.

LINGUISTIC CIRCLE OF CANBERRA PUBLICATIONS:

SERIES A - OCCASIONAL PAPERS

- | | | | | |
|-------|---|-------|------------|----------------------|
| NO. 1 | S. A. Wurm, <i>Some Remarks on the Role of Language in the Assimilation of Australian Aborigines</i> ; 1963; 12pp. | Price | Australian | \$0.20
(US\$0.25) |
| NO. 2 | Alan Healey, <i>Handling Unsophisticated Linguistic Informants</i> ; 1964; 111 + 30pp. | Price | Australian | \$0.55
(US\$0.65) |
| NO. 3 | Alan Pence, Ellis Deibler, Jr., Phyllis M. Healey, Bruce A. Hooley, <i>Papers in New Guinea Linguistics No.1</i> ; 1964; 1v + 42pp. | Price | Australian | \$0.75
(US\$0.85) |
| NO. 4 | S. A. Wurm, <i>Papers in New Guinea Linguistics No.2</i> ; 1964; 1v + 41pp.; 1 map | Price | Australian | \$0.75
(US\$0.85) |
| NO. 5 | Phyllis M. Healey, <i>Papers in New Guinea Linguistics No.3</i> ; 1965; 1v + 53pp.; 3 tables | Price | Australian | \$0.95
(US\$1.20) |
| NO. 6 | Darlene Bee, <i>Papers in New Guinea Linguistics No.4</i> ; 1965; 1v + 68pp.; 4 diagrams | Price | Australian | \$1.20
(US\$1.50) |

SERIES B - MONOGRAPHS

- | | | | | |
|-------|--|-------|------------|----------------------|
| NO. 1 | S. A. Wurm and J. B. Harris, <i>POLICE MOTU, An introduction to the Trade Language of Papua (New Guinea) for Anthropologists and other fieldworkers</i> ; 1963; v1 + 81pp. | Price | Australian | \$1.50
(US\$1.85) |
| NO. 2 | S. A. Wurm, <i>Phonological Diversification in Australian New Guinea Highlands Languages</i> ; 1964; 111 + 87pp.; 1 map | Price | Australian | \$1.50
(US\$1.85) |
| NO. 3 | Alan Healey, <i>Telefol Phonology</i> ; 1964; 111 + 1 fig. + 53pp. + 5 tables | Price | Australian | \$1.00
(US\$1.25) |
| NO. 4 | Phyllis M. Healey, <i>Telefol Noun Phrases</i> ; 1965; 111 + 51pp.; 3 tables | Price | Australian | \$0.95
(US\$1.20) |

SERIES C - BOOKS

- | | | | | |
|-------|---|-------|------------|----------------------|
| NO. 1 | D. C. Laycock, <i>The Ndu Language Family (Sepik District, New Guinea)</i> ; 1965; x1 + 224pp.; 1 map | Price | Australian | \$4.00
(US\$4.80) |
| NO. 2 | S. A. Wurm, <i>Handbook of New Guinea Pidgin</i> (in preparation) | | | |
| NO. 3 | Nguyen Dang Liem, <i>English Grammar (A Contrastive Analysis of English and Vietnamese Vol. I)</i> ; 1966; x1iv + 177pp.; 16 tables | Price | Australian | \$4.00
(US\$4.80) |

BULLETINS

- | | | | |
|-----------------------------|-------|------------|----------------------|
| Bulletin No. 1, 1964; 9pp. | Price | Australian | \$0.15
(US\$0.20) |
| Bulletin No. 2, 1965; 84pp. | Price | Australian | \$1.20
(US\$1.50) |

