NORTH AUSTRALIA RESEARCH UNIT

Australian National University

2012 PUBLIC SEMINAR SERIES

"Re-discovering Australian Languages: the Rio Tinto/Mitchell Library Project"

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Since the earliest recordings of Australian Languages in 1770, a range of people have left documents which include significant material on these languages: clergymen; government officials; graziers; policemen, amongst others. After settlement began in the Sydney area in 1788 many of Australia's original 250 separate languages fell into disuse. However, particularly in the last 20 years, attempts have been made to revitalize such languages. Remarkable progress has been made - often drawing on early written sources held in specialist research libraries and archives in Australia and around the world. One important result of this process of regaining languages has been the regaining of identity by Aboriginal people.

Since mid-2011 I have been engaged by Mitchell Library (which houses most of the manuscript collection within the State Library of New South Wales) to locate and identify any resources relevant to Australian languages within the collections. This 3-year project is being funded by Rio Tinto and this paper will focus on the first (research) phase.

My objective in this paper is to present a preliminary account of the research phase of the project. We now know that over a hundred languages from right around Australia are held in the manuscript collections. In deference to the venue for this paper I will mainly focus on languages of northern Australia. For example, there is a brief recording of a Yolngu-matha variety in 1803 by Robert Brown. Brown also recorded some language material from Murray Island (Torres Strait) in 1802. Herbert Basedow has recordings from around Darwin and Forrest River (eastern Kimberley) in the early 20th century. Charles Tyers was already known to have taken down a brief wordlist from the Cobourg Peninsula area but a hitherto undiscovered wordlist from 1837-38 has turned up in the Mitchell manuscript collections.

Results to date reveal that often enough resources under one person's name may in fact have come from a variety of sources. Such resources can raise issues not only in attribution but also in establishing genealogies of manuscripts. In some instances locating a manuscript with Australian Languages material is the easy part: what is difficult is identifying the material - language(s), date of recording, location of recording etc.

Key conclusions include: archival repositories like the Mitchell Library hold a wealth of previously undiscovered resources on Australian languages; targeted research on other repositories is likely to produce comparable results; the results of such research will bolster efforts to revitalize many of the languages which have fallen into disuse and have been sparsely documented to date.

Thursday 24 May 3.30pm

The Seminar Room, NARU, 23 Ellengowan Drive, Brinkin
This seminar is free and open to the public.

The views expressed in this lecture are those of the presenter and do not necessarily represent the view of ANU.