The Summer Institute of Linguistics and Aboriginal-Islander research

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Isobel White was passionate in regard to anthropological research among Aboriginal people. Her integrity as a scholar and love for the people made her their champion. This is evident through her work. Her scholarship is undeniable and widely heralded.

Though working primarily in the field of linguistics and Bible translation, the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) in Australia shares much of the same motivation and drive that characterised Sally White's work over the past thirty years, though the emphasis is different.

In a secular academic world, SIL's Bible translation emphasis is not easily understood, particularly as all its linguists are not involved in studying for higher degrees. But SIL shares with other groups and individuals like Sally White common ground in a sense of justice, an identification with minority groups who had been deliberately or unconsciously ignored and a conviction that a person's language and culture should be respected as basic to that individual's identity.

After 35 years in the field, people might ask whether SIL has made a significant contribution to the preservation and knowledge of Aboriginal languages and to the wellbeing of Aboriginal people? This paper is an attempt to answer that question by narrating examples of SIL involvement with Aboriginal and Islander people in relation to language.

Language and cultural research

To assess where matters stand today, it is necessary to outline early beginnings and where SIL has come from. Vast changes have occurred in the field of Aboriginal studies from the conditions that prevailed in the 1950s when Bill and Lynette Oates commenced studying the Gunwinggu language at Oenpelli in 1952. Then, their SIL training and linguistic expertise were tested in unexpected ways. They were barred from visiting the Aboriginal camp to freely collect data, the authorities stating: 'We have our territory and that is theirs.' Lynette, working for a Master's thesis, was allocated two Aboriginal women from whom she could collect data in the mission house. The 'Gunwinggu Grammar', written in 1953, and eventually published in 1964¹, owes much to Bill's

¹. Oates, Lynette Frances, *A Tentative Description of the Gunwinggu Language [of Western Arnhem Land]* Oceania Linguistic Monographs No. 10, University of Sydney, 1964.

greater freedom to collect data orally as he worked with Aboriginal stockmen. This grammar became one of the first reasonably comprehensive 'modern' descriptions of an Aboriginal language.

In October–November 1958, Bill Oates was accompanied by another SIL member, Alan Healey, in a language survey of north Queensland. The purpose was to ascertain whether enough indigenous language remained for SIL to commence a Bible translation program amongst the Australian Aborigines. The survey, using a Land Rover except for plane travel in and out of Aurukun, went as far west as Normanton and Doomagee and as far north as Coen and Aurukun, visiting also Gilbert, Mitchell, Lockhardt and Bloomfield Rivers, Hopevale and some isolated Aboriginal camps. A one hundred word list was partly or fully recorded in eleven languages.² Most of the Aboriginal people were astounded at white men showing an interest in their languages. One old man was so excited that someone could write down and pronounce his language correctly, that he ran after the Land Rover as the linguists were leaving, pleading with them to stay.

The following year the Oates spent two months on the Bloomfield River. There, they encountered no restrictions on gathering data, only apathy, misunderstanding or hostility from fellow Australians. A mission superintendent who had preceded their arrival by only a few months stated, 'When I get these people under my control, my work will begin.' The linguists were expected to ally themselves with fellow whites, but to do so and keep faith with Aboriginal friends who shared with them some of the injustices and discriminations to which they were subjected was like walking a tight rope. At times, endurance was tested to the limit. The publication in 1964 of the fruit of this field work (an analysis of the phonemes of *Kuku-Yalanji*, a one thousand word vocabulary and an analysis of the kinship system) was the first documentation of this then strongly viable language.³

SIL, like many others engaged in Aboriginal research, was given a big boost early in 1961 with the formation of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS). Now at last government funds were to be made available for research into all aspects of Aboriginal culture from prehistory to linguistics. In the latter discipline, there were enormous gaps of knowledge, prompting Dr A. Capell, veteran linguist, to quickly prepare a handbook, 'Linguistic survey of Australia', presenting the known data on Aboriginal languages, numbering and coding them according to eleven geographical areas and assessing their viability status.⁴ Bill Oates served on the linguistics committee of

2. Oates, William J. and A. Healey: Comparative Vocabularies in Kokobera, Kokominjen, Kokotayor, Kokomini, Kokoyalantji; Ganggalita, Kunggara, Kukthant, Karawa, Lamulamu, Type-script and deposited with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1966.

3. Oates, William & Lynette, Hank & Ruth Hershberger, Barbara Sayers, Marie Godfrey: *Gugu-Yalanji and Wik-Munkan Language Studies*, Occasional Papers in Aboriginal Studies Number Two, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1964. Oates, Lynette: *Distribution of Phonemes and Syllables in Gugu-Yalanji*, Anthropological Linguistics, January 1964.

4. Capell, A: *Linguistic Survey of Australia*, Sydney, 1963. Capell identified 633 language names, designating 23 as being worthy of depth study and 375 labelled 'Basic information needed immediately because of rapid disappearance of the language'; 73 languages were presumed extinct.

the AIAS, and later as research assistant in linguistics. This helped to keep SIL policy congruent with AIAS research policy and attitudes.

SIL's emphasis

The Australian Aborigines Branch of SIL was inaugurated on 19 June 1961.⁵ Doubtless some considered a Bible translation program with the Aborigines misplaced optimism, since a Canberra conference listed just a handful of viable languages, stating non-viable languages were becoming extinct at the rate of ten per year.⁶

SIL sent field teams to Queensland to study Wik-Munkan at Aurukun and to continue Gugu-Yalanji at Bloomfield. In the next two years, others began studies in Kundjen (Queensland), Gidabul (northern New South Wales), Burada and Yanyula (Northern Territory), and Pintupi (central Australia).⁷

Language survey

As suggested by the early history, language survey has been an area where, as an essential part of its own program, SIL has made a significant contribution. In the early days, survey work was primarily concerned with accurate collection and comparison of language data. More latterly, when language death is increasingly apparent, the need has been to take into account attitudes and socio-cultural trends as well as linguistic data. Those who have worked with a language for many years do not easily face the fact of its demise. Because SIL linguists are motivated to spend a long time in the one language group (up to 20 or 30 years), they are able to intimately assess factors related to language death. Jean Kirton's 1988 article, 'Yanyuwa — a dying language' describes the changes that had occurred since she first studied the language at Borroloola in 1963, twenty-five years earlier. She concludes:

Yanyuwa is a dying language. If any factor should contribute to its reviving, the writer will rejoice indeed, as at this time the factors contributing to its loss seem too strong to be overcome (Kirton 1988: 1).⁸

*The last three months of Jean's life (shortened unexpectedly by cancer), were spent working on a volume of Yanyuwa grammar co-authored with the Yanyuwa woman who taught her most about the language. In SIL history, this volume was a significant co-authorship between a linguist and an Aboriginal helper. The volume was, in Jean's words, 'an attempt to preserve a record of the language of the Yanyuwa people and an expression of my thanks to the Yanyuwa who have shared their language and lives with me.'*⁹

5. Quarterly updates in the form of Linguistic Field Reports were sent to linguists in the field. These were in August and October 1966, and January, April, July and November 1967. There are 44 linguists mentioned, only 15 of whom were SIL personnel, researching over 80 languages and dialects/language names.
6. Oates, W.J. and Lynette F.: Revised Linguistic Survey of Australia, Australian Aboriginal Studies, No. 33, Canberra 1970.
7. From early studies in some of these language came: Occasional Papers in Linguistic Studies, Nos 1 and 2; AIAS; W.J. Oates: 'Syllable Patterning and Phonetically Complex Consonants in some Australian Languages' (paper to ANZAAS) (1966); Lynette Oates: 'Distribution of Phonemes and Syllables in Gugu-Yalanji' *Anthropological Linguistics* (1964).
8. Kirton, Jean F, 1988. 'Yanyuwa — A Dying Language', in 'Aboriginal Language Use in the Northern Territory', 5 Reports, Work Papers of SIL-AAIB- 13, pp. 1-18 Darwin, SIL

Kriol — a 'real' language

Even while Jean Kirton lamented the disappearance of Yanyuwa as a primary language of communication, she appreciated that it was largely replaced not by English, but by Kriol. She described the situation in the town of Borroloola thus:

As the proportion of 'outsiders' in Borroloola Aboriginal Community has increased, Kriol has strengthened as the lingua franca of the area. It is the one Aboriginal language that remains to those who have lost their traditional language. Kriol reflects the traditional sound system and grammar, but, more than that, its semantic system facilitates expression of the Aboriginal world view. Although the writer sorrows to see such extensive evidence that Yanyuwa is dying, she is thankful that at least Kriol is alive and well and that this language remains for the Yanyuwa to give expression to their thoughts and feelings.¹⁰

Such a positive attitude towards Kriol has not been shared by the wider public, nor has it always been shared by linguists and Aboriginal people. But SIL faced realistically the fact that in many places in northern Australia this creole language was rapidly taking the place of languages that had died, and they accepted it as an Aboriginal language. Margaret Sharpe, working on Alawa in the Roper River area in 1966 under SIL auspices, became aware of its significance and attempted to gain official recognition for Kriol. She and Mary Harris of the Church Missionary Society developed a 'Roper River Pidgin English primer' and held literacy classes for some Kriol speakers.

In 1972 SIL assigned John Sandefur to survey the 'Roper Pidgin' language situation. Though other people have played important roles in gaining recognition for Kriol, it has largely been the efforts of Sandefur that have put Kriol on the Aboriginal language map for serious linguistic studies and for use in bilingual education. Between 1976 and 1990, Sandefur published 26 articles on Kriol and co-authored others. Also published were a grammatical description, preliminary dictionary and a Kriol language-learning course, the latter two co-authored with Joy Sandefur.

In 1984 a video series of 40 half-hour episodes entitled 'Kriol Kantri' was launched. The programs were of a Sesame Street/Playschool type designed for use in schools with Kriol-speaking children and aimed to 'enhance the self-image and dignity of Kriol speakers, reinforce their literacy skills and help raise the prestige of their language'.¹¹ The serious study of Kriol and its use in literature, including Bible translation, encouraged the kind of pride expressed in the following quotation from a local speaker, Rodney Rivers:

As a Kriol speaker and Kriol being my mother tongue, I would encourage those who read and learn this language to know that they have my compliments as well as that of the 20,000 other people who speak it. Kriol is our language, so don't be turned off by criticism from ignorant people. Criticism isn't our language, but Kriol is and always will be.¹²

⁹ Kirton, Jean and Bella Charlie, *Further Aspects of the Grammar of Yanyuwa*, Northern Territory, Pacific Linguistics C-131, 1966/1988

¹⁰ Kirton, Jean, 1988:16-17

¹¹ Sandefur John. 1986 'Kriol of North Australia: A Language Coming of Age', Work Papers of SIL-AAB A-10, Darwin: SIL. See Appendix 3 in this work for an account of the growing recognition of Kriol.

Literacy and bilingual education

In December 1972 the Whitlam government announced a policy to have Aboriginal children in distinctive Aboriginal communities receive their primary education in Aboriginal languages. As it happened, SIL in Darwin had already arranged for a literacy workshop in March 1973 to be conducted by Dr Sarah Gudschinsky using her *Manual of literacy for preliterate peoples* which was about to be published by SIL-PNG. The newly established Bilingual Education Consultative Committee meeting in Darwin some months later reported favourably on the 'Gudschinsky Reading Scheme' which they observed on Goulburn Island.¹³ The workshop had developed school reading materials in several languages including Maung, Gunwinggu, Pintupi, Walmajarri, Burarra and Tiwi.

Two other important contributions of SIL to bilingual education in the Northern Territory were workshops for training Aboriginal writers, and the initial SIL training course in Victoria where teachers in bilingual schools could receive a basic introduction to linguistics and language learning. The Department of Aboriginal Affairs provided funding to send teachers from the Northern Territory to the course.

In recognition of SIL's contribution, the Northern Territory Department of Education nominated the Australian Aborigines Branch (AAB) for the UNESCO International Literacy Prize in 1979. Though SIL-PNG won the prize, the AAB received special recognition (along with SIL-Philippines).

The Department of Education's policy to place teacher-linguists in bilingual schools lessened direct involvement of SIL personnel, but ongoing support was given by the publication of vernacular literacy materials. The current SIL-AAIB (Australian Aborigines and Islander Branch) bibliography lists 476 entries in the 'vernacular-secular' section.¹⁴

Other significant developments came out of those early days of bilingual education. The August 1973 meeting of the Bilingual Education Consultative Committee considered a proposal for the establishment of a college of Australian linguistics with a three-tiered purpose. The first aim was geared to train Aboriginal people in 'elementary linguistics and so enable them in 'devising an orthography and preparing primers' and supplementary material for bilingual education. The second aim was more ambitious encompassing 'advanced' linguistics to enable Aborigines to produce 'linguistic descriptions of their own languages', and the third was aimed higher still to produce 'linguistic consultants' who would advise their communities and eventually be part of the academic staff of the college. The proposal came from Sarah Gudschinsky, SIL International literacy consultant, Professor R.M.W. Dixon, David Glasgow (then Director of SIL) and Dr Stephen Wurm. It was accepted, and by March 1974 a decision was reached to locate the school at Darwin College and to form an advisory committee. It was from this beginning that the School of Australian Linguistics, now the Centre for Australian Languages and Linguistics, was established at Batchelor, Northern Territory.¹⁵

12. Quoted in Foreword to Sandefur John R. and Joy L. 1981 'An Introduction to Conversational Irish', Work Papers of SIL-AAB B-5, Darwin, SIL.

13. Bilingual Education Consultative Committee. 1973. Report on Meeting 13-17 August.

14. These were written by SIL members or Aboriginal or Islander authors with SIL input.

Translation and training

In spite of the forward move by SIL members who joined in proposing this College, SIL has been slow until recently to take up formal training of Aboriginal and Islander people. This is partly because SIL linguists work informally with their language helpers, often coming to decisions together about language analysis, orthography, first draft translating, revising and editing. It is no accident that those who have been involved in a translation program in their own language have been sought after for other language-related work, especially in schools. Others have seen the importance of these 'off-shoots', as revealed in this quotation:

One of the most significant features of Bible translation work in various languages, particularly in recent years, has been the emphasis on teamwork between non-Aboriginal linguists and one or more speakers of the language concerned. The extensive awareness of each other's language developed by the members of such a team often results in greater involvement in other language projects by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal team members.

Until the mid 1980s, SIL engaged in formal training only sporadically, but the voices of both members and Aboriginal and Islander translators pushed the branch to offer training workshops. From 1986 to 1994 more than 20 were held, using a draft text book by Dr Chris Kilham completed in 1990.¹⁵ In 1992, SIL was registered by the Northern Territory Education and Training Authority (NTETA) and two years later the Certificate in Training (CIT) course was formally approved by NTETA. Twenty-two Aboriginal students had completed over 50% of the course by December 1996. The course has modules on grammar, orthography, culture and research as well as translation principles to equip students for the translation task.

Other workshops on song writing and recording (often including translation tasks) have also significantly affected Aboriginal communities though, unlike the CIT course, they do not carry accreditation. Many participants have been encouraged and trained in musical expression and the tapes that have been produced have been among the most popular items sold by the AAB.

Islander studies

Three of the 27 different languages SIL has studied are in the Torres Strait. Following a language survey there in 1971, a program began in 1976 in Kala Lagaw Ya of the Western Torres Strait. Initially because of distance from SIL's administrative centre in Darwin and the different context from Aboriginal language programs, the Torres Strait work was not as closely identified with the AAB. However, in 1987, the branch recognised the separate identity of Torres Strait peoples and changed its name from the Australian Aborigines Branch to the Australian Aborigines and Islander Branch, anticipating a similar change from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies to incorporate Torres Strait Islander studies.

¹⁵. Bilingual Consultative Committee, 1974. Report on Second Meeting 13–22 March, Alice Springs, pp.3–4 and Appendix E.

¹⁶. Kilham, Christine A. 1996 *Translation Time: An Introductory Course in Translation*, Darwin SIL.

In 1986 SIL fieldworkers Rod and Judy Kennedy co-authored a collection of articles aimed to fill a cultural information gap, providing an introduction to various aspects of Western Torres Strait people and culture. The core of their book entitled *Adha Gar Tidka*, a local idiom meaning 'giving assistance unobtrusively', consists of two substantial articles based on their own research data and written at an anthropology workshop in Papua New Guinea.¹⁷ An expanded edition of this book published in 1990 included articles by three Islanders recorded and transcribed by Rod Kennedy.

Two volumes of scripture were publicly presented in the Torres Strait on 1 July 1994. On this date, there is an annual celebration, 'The coming of the Light' festival, when the landing on Darnley Island of the first Christian missionaries from Tonga is re-enacted. The 1994 date was of special significance — a moment in history, so to speak — because the Torres Strait Regional Authority was inaugurated. These three events were celebrated together on Thursday Island, beginning with the re-enactment, followed by an ecumenical service in the Anglican Cathedral in which a collection of Kalaw Kawaw Ya scriptures and the gospel of Mark in Meriam Mir were dedicated, and then proceeding from there for the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding which established the Regional Authority. The confluence of church, scripture, language and political identity was representative of Torres Strait life. George Mye, Chairman of Darnley Island and past Commissioner of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, stated 'We are glad that the church and the government are on the same path. We must always stay together.'

Because the primary motivation of SIL is the translation of at least parts of the Bible into minority languages, by far the greatest translation material has been biblical. Language change and decline in a number of translation programs have sometimes limited the goal from a full to a partial New Testament with some Old Testament portions. In some cases where the younger generation is not speaking the traditional language, portions are seen as a temporary bridge to the use of an easy English version. But more and more in recent years it has been done to show respect for the value of the endangered language. Substantial amounts of scripture have been published in thirteen languages. While some may view such results pejoratively, the remarks of a Gambian scholar and professor at Yale Divinity School are worth noting:

It struck me as fairly obvious that missionary interest, say, in the vernaculars of Africa touched on the affected cultures in a very profound way. In most of these cultures, language is the intimate, articulate expression of culture, and so close are the two that language can be said to be synonymous with culture, which it suffuses and embodies...Missionary adoption of the vernacular, therefore, was tantamount to adopting indigenous cultural criteria for the message, a piece of radical indigenisation far greater than the standard portrayal of mission as Western cultural imperialism.¹⁸

17. Kennedy, Rod and Judy, 1990 'Adha Gar Tidit, Cultural Sensitivity in Western Torres Strait', Work Papers of SIL-AAIB B-14, Darwin SIL.

18. Sanneh, Lamin, 1990. *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Evaluative summary

At times SIL has come under criticism for being slow to publish. Nevertheless, 414 books or articles of published works have been written, with a further total of over 250 unpublished papers deposited with the AIATSIS where they can be accessed. The materials range from descriptive phonology, grammar and discourse write-ups, dictionaries, and data from language surveys covering much of the north of Australia, to language and culture learning courses.

A problem that continues to face SIL in Australia is the lack of Aboriginal and Islander people on staff. This is largely due to SIL's financial structure where members do not receive wages but are dependent on churches and individuals to provide their financial backing. Aborigines and Islanders could not look to be supported by this system. A percentage of monies received by SIL members is given to finance international and branch administrative costs. In a small branch like the AAIB, finances are limited and do not stretch to pay salaried workers. Fortunately, the Bible Society in Australia provides funding to pay the wages of a number of Aboriginal and Islander translators, wages which otherwise the SIL fieldworker would have to provide.

In any self-evaluation, the voice of Aboriginal and Islander people is always important. SIL-AAIB values comments like the following, quoted and translated by Jukuna, a Walmajarri speaker from Fitzroy Crossing, Western Australia:

White people are forward, not ashamed of themselves. They spread their language [English] around everywhere. So, if they can do that, I, without apology will write my language [Walmajarri] in its hard [fullest] form as they do their English.¹⁹

Or this comment from Mike Williams, a Pitjantjatjara speaker:

The Pitjantjatjara language is very important to the Pitjantjatjara people. So we are translating into Pitjantjatjara, so that old people, young people and children all can hear and understand, for they cannot understand a lot of English or other languages. But now they are very happy that the Bible in Pitjantjatjara is becoming a reality.

Lynette Oates, a linguist who has worked on Aboriginal languages for the Summer Institute of Linguistics, is now based at Wodonga, Victoria.

¹⁹. Quoted in the preface to Richards, Eirlys and Joyce Hudson 1990, Walmajarri-English Dictionary: With English Finder List Darwin: SIL.