Recording My Mum's Songs

Fiona Brady & Tina Asela

This paper draws on a current project, recording hymns and choruses in the local language, to explore some of the issues with language maintenance and revitalization programs in a remote Indigenous community. I use the work of Walter Ong and David Crystal to underpin the discussion about nature of oral cultures, technology and their implications for language loss and revival. I identify a mosaic of existing initiatives and positive factors for language survival and I outline the new and difficult legal considerations the community must work through as they create language resources with new media.

Introduction

The wealth of a country may be indicated in the richness and diversity of its natural and social environments. Australia has a wealth of Indigenous languages, over 250 with 600 dialects, however, all these languages are under threat (Nathan, 1999).

This paper describes a small language support project in a remote Indigenous community in Far North Queensland, Australia. Using this project as a lens we discuss some of the broader issues of language maintenance, and how technology can support a minority language. We are able to identify both the mosaic of people, skills and initiatives that support language use in this community; and the gaps in our knowledge and procedures, particularly in regard to legal issues.

Project description

My name is Tina Asela. I applied for, and received, a small arts grant to record the hymns and choruses sung in the local language, Kalaw Kawaw Ya (KKY), in the Church of the Holy Cross on my home island, Dauan. Dauan Island is one of the most remote and isolated islands in the Torres Strait, approximately 150 people live here and we are 180km from the regional centre.

I am recording hymns sung on the four special church days on Dauan Island: Easter; Coming of the Light day in July; Church day in September, this celebrates the anniversary of the consecration of our church; and Christmas. My mother, Naina Asela, is an elder of Dauan Island; she leads the singing of the hymns at community events and teaches them to the community. She first learned these songs as a girl of 16; her auntie encouraged her to join the church choir because there were few other activities then. She is a very good singer, she used to work on cruise ships with my father when they were young, she would sing while my father performed traditional dances. This is not the first time she has been recorded, about 20 years ago a visitor to the island took a video of her singing.

My mother has an old handwritten copy of the hymns that was given to her by Mrs Sarbie Mooka. I refer to this copy when I am printing up hymn sheets for church days. In past times the church service was conducted in English and the hymns were in KKY. Priests on Dauan continue to compose new songs in KKY for

the church and recently they have started to translate some of the services into KKY as well.

The burubur [drum] is traditionally used to accompany the hymns, however, sometimes other instruments such as guitar, bass and keyboard are used by the younger men in church services. I am making these recordings so Dauan people can listen to them and become more familiar with the hymns. I am also making hymn books in KKY for the church so we do not have to depend on my mother's very old copy. The hymn recordings, the accompanying interviews, which were conducted in English, Creole and KKY, together with a hymn book with an English translation, will be deposited with the State Library of Queensland so this knowledge will not be lost.

Project need

One of the objectives of this project is to provide a resource that is linguistically accurate. There is a need for this sort of resource because, as language use has declined and people are dispersed, errors are creeping into the language. At the recent Coming of the Light celebration in the regional centre of Cairns, a diverse group of Islanders performed a composite re-enactment that included songs from a number of islands. (Each island has its own particular celebration and hymns). A Dauan Island song was included but it was not sung correctly and this caused pain to the Dauan Island visitors to the event.

Description of the language

These songs are in Kalaw Kawaw Ya (KKY) a dialect of Kalaw Lagaw Ya, (KLY) the language of the Central and Western Islands of the Torres Strait. KKY is spoken on Dauan, Saibai and Boigu Islands; it may also be used to talk on the telephone to family members who have moved away to the mainland or to other islands. Nowadays it is mostly people over 35 years of age who speak KKY. The majority of Islanders are bi or tri-lingual, Torres Strait Creole and English are the other main languages.

Modern Dauan Island culture is predominantly oral. The major source of texts in KKY is the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL). Wikipedia describes the Institute as a "Christian linguistic service organization which studies lesser-known languages primarily to provide the speakers with Bibles in their native language". The other published resources in or about KLY/KKY are either academic or religious, although, a small number of story and song books have been produced by the local primary school.

Song is a major reservoir of KKY language. Song is highly regarded: Torres Strait Islanders have a strong musical tradition, from the song sagas of traditional times to hymns and popular songs. Songs are disseminated orally rather than written down. For example, Father Aragu may compose a new hymn and sing it over the telephone to teach someone on another island, or he may record his service on cassette and mail it to distant singers so they can prepare for an event. There is an active modern music scene and musicians on Dauan, Saibai and Boigu Islands compose songs in KKY and in Creole and produce their own CDs. Younger people may sing in KKY although they do not regularly speak the language. Elsewhere in the region

CDs of secular and religious songs are produced in a combination of languages. Such CDs are widely distributed and sold through the networks of family and friends.

We should not be surprised that religion and song are strong carriers of the language. Walter Ong (1982), one of the foremost scholars in the field of orality and literacy, describes how music may help to "fix" narrative, so it can be recalled verbatim. Religion also has many aspects which can support local language: religion is held in high regard throughout the region; each Island has its own church or churches so there is local ownership; the repetition of hymns and the gravity of ritual help people memorise the words.

Christianity has a strong oral tradition, the bible itself is a written record of oral stories and religious organisations have recognized the value of using the local language and oral learning techniques to introduce Christianity to people in developing areas.

Theoretical framework

The loss of language is a world wide issue. Languages are dynamic and just as species have become extinct in the natural world so languages have died, however, we are now in a situation where the majority of the world's languages are under threat (Crystal, 2000).

David Crystal (2000) identifies two main causes of language loss: physical danger to the speakers through natural disaster, disease, or destruction of habitat, these lead to the death or displacement of people to other language communities; and assimilation into a dominant culture through invasion or colonization. He describes the sequence of assimilation as firstly; pressure to speak the dominant language, followed by a phase of emerging bilingualism that rapidly declines into the final phase where the younger generation becomes more proficient in the dominant language (Crystal, 2000). In this phase language may be lost very quickly. A recent example of this would be where one island in the region lost its three remaining fluent KLY speakers in one year (Edwards, 2006).

Language is intricately connected with culture, it is a means of group identification, and it contains the social values and world view of the speakers (A matter of survival, 1992). The loss of language will affect the culture and it has been argued that the health of a culture is directly linked to a community's economic and social wellbeing (The Crossing Boundaries National Council, 2005). Nickerson (2005) states that if there is a starting point to cultural continuity and community renewal it lies in the preservation and learning of Aboriginal languages.

Crystal (2000) recommends a "healthy bilingualism", he argues that the dominant language is outward looking and necessary as a bridge between the two worlds, whereas, the local language is inward looking and used to express identity, family ties, social relationships and history.

Language revitalization

Languages have been successfully revived, Maori and Welsh are recent examples. A language is living when it is used. Government recognition and support are part of the revitalisation process but there are too few linguists, and funds, available to do all the language work required to develop language programs

for all the endangered languages. However, language groups themselves can take action to facilitate language use. Successful strategies include individuals using the language at home and especially teaching the children; the community can choose to use language in religious and cultural practice, in schools, and in the local media; resources in and about the language can be made, these could include dictionaries, religious materials, academic writings, teaching and entertainment CDs and videos.

Community control and community involvement in language work underpin the long term success of language revival exercises (Crystal, 2000). Through their participation in language projects, local people have an opportunity to develop knowledge and skills, which could enable them to manage their own language programs. Participation also reinforces local ownership of the language and the relationship between language and land (Nathan, 1999).

Technology is identified as an ideal tool for language resource projects (Nathan, 1999) although there is some concern that the very ease of technology can lead to a less than appropriate implementation (Villa, 2002).

Language and technology

Technology has been identified as a factor in the demise of languages: modern transport and communications technology have reduced the isolation of many people exposing them more and more to the dominant language and culture. (Crystal 2000; A matter of survival, 1992). However, technology may also be important in their revival. (Crystal, 2000; Ong, 1982; McHenry, 2002). Modern technological methods of oral and visual communication will transmit any language. In the past, writing was the main means of communicating over a distance, thus profoundly disadvantaging oral communicators and those whose language had not yet been written. Communications technologies are working increasingly like natural language; this makes it a "good fit" for oral language and culture (Ong, 1982). The earliest examples are the telephone and radio, now there is widespread use of mobile phones, TV, video, multimedia computers with internet, audiovisual recorders and players.

People who are predominantly oral can acquire information technology skills using a range of strategies when they have a specific purpose for so doing (Brady, 2005), and it has been suggested that there is a congruence between IT and Indigenous learning styles.

Furthermore, technology offers the opportunity to create and control representations of self and culture. Self publishing could enable Indigenous people to define themselves and in some way balance historical, written, anthropological definitions of their culture. Marcia Langton states that Indigenous self publishing demonstrates a "cultural identity rooted in tradition yet open to modernity" (UNESCO, 2001). It may start to redress situations such as the under-representation of Indigenous Australians in conventional media. (Nathan, 1997). This lack of representation has hampered the legitimation of cultural knowledge and recognition of Indigenous people as experts on their own environment (UNESCO, 2001).

IT is a modern, relevant and highly valued area (Nathan, 1999) so it can enhance the status and motivation of language work. The very existence of materials

sends a message that the language is important (Nathan, 2005).

Audio visual resources can be very rich; video may record the surroundings, the events, the facial expressions and gestures of participants as well as the song or story. This makes them important learning tools particularly for dispersed communities. Working with IT can also generate cross generational, cross cultural and collaborative links amongst peers. (Auld, 2002; UNESCO, 2001). These activities themselves strengthen networks and communities.

We should not restrict our interest to traditional culture materials, multimedia is being used for creative works that have strong economic potential and may engage more of the community, and enhance their self image.

ICT offers opportunity for cultural renewal but also threat of cultural hybridisation or homogenisation (Nickerson, 2005) and loss of linguistic diversity (Auld, 2002). Dauan, in part because of its remoteness, has its own distinct lifestyle, a visitor from neighbouring Badu Island referred to Dauan as being "more cultural" than her Island. It will be a challenge to retain this given the ease of production and the much greater market for resources in Creole.

Legal issues

One of the difficulties with any recording or oral culture/history is that the act of recording fixes something that is "very changeable" (Ong 1982). In lived culture the event is: singing at the church. It is conducted in accordance with the local protocols and adapted to the audience. These protocols are dynamic reflecting the people and circumstances of this particular event. A recording idealises this version, separating the singing from the context which governs it, so new types of protocols are needed. Rules for appropriate access, attribution and use of recorded material are needed urgently. Technology has de-professionalized media production and materials can be distributed virtually without cost across the globe via the Internet, this is increasing the potential for abuse by others and for the distribution of inaccurate or sensitive material (Australia Council, 2002).

There is currently no legislation in Australia that specifically protects Indigenous cultural heritage. The Federation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages (FATSIL) has produced a set of protocols for Indigenous communities and their consultants who are jointly producing language materials at local level. These protocols are designed to give a general guide to the types of issues involved in publishing language materials and are aligned with the *Our Culture: Our future* report by Terri Janke (1998) and the AIATSIS (2000) *Guidelines for Ethical Research.* It includes a model agreement, as they state formal written agreements are important for all parties. The agreement defines the rights and roles of communities as owners and custodians of their languages and cultures based on the linguistic rights of ATSI described by Australian Linguistic Society.

In this project verbal agreements and permissions have been sought from performers and community. The performers would like to be acknowledged as performers with the right to sing the hymns. Royalties on any sales will be paid to performers. Tina would like to make money from the sale of the CD. The IP and Copyright has been given to the Holy Cross Church of Dauan. This was the first time any of the participants had had to think about these concepts and try to synthesize with

their own cultural practice.

Conclusion

This project shows part of a large network of individuals and organizations who have contributed to KKY language over a long period of time in a variety of ways. This study indicates the range of positive factors already in place but not necessarily directed at language revitalization such as: local initiation of projects; participation in the project by elders; the existence of a small pool of local people who have undertaken linguistic studies; the local music production; the increasing support of the church for language use; the young people's involvement in the church; that there is existing interest in and support for products in KKY language; the collaborative arrangements to structure and acquit projects; existing local technology skills; and availability of technology privately and in the council and school.

We have used this study to reflect on our current position, to recognize and value work that is already being done, to fit our project into an overall picture of language revitalisation and to identify gaps to be addressed. Language is an important aspect of the unique culture of Dauan Island and as individuals and community we have the responsibility to keep it strong.

References

"A matter of survival". (1992). Report of the Inquiry into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Language Maintenance. Retrieved June 5 2006 from http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/reproject/rsjlibrary/

AIATSIS. (2000). Guidelines for ethical research in Indigenous studies. Retrieved August 16, 2004 from http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/corp/docs/ethicsguidea4.pdf

Auld, Glenn. (2002). "The role of the computer in learning Ndjebbana" *Language Learning & Technology*. ISSN 1094-3501. Vol 6 No. 2 May 2002, pp41-58.

Brady, F. (2005). "Learning to Internet Bank". Chapter in Dyson, E., Hendriks, M., and Grant, S. (Eds.), *Information Technology and Indigenous people.* Idea Group Reference. ISBN 1-59904-298-3.

Crystal, D. (2000). *Language Death.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP. ISBN -13; 9780521653213.

Edwards, Ron. (2006). Personal comment. Cairns QLD July 2006.

FATSIL. (2004). *Guide to community protocols for Indigenous language projects*. Retrieved December 10 2005 from http://www.fatsil.org.au

Janke, T. (2002). *New media culture: protocols for producing Indigenous Australian new media*. Aboriginal &Torres Strait Islander Arts Board, Australia Council. ISBN 0 642 47242 4. Retrieved December 2 2005 from http://www.ozco.gov.au

Mc Convell, P. & Thieberger, N. (2001). *State of Indigenous languages in Australia – 2001.* Australia State of the Environment Technical Paper Series (Natural and Cultural Heritage), Series 2. Canberra: *Department of the Environment and Heritage*. ISBN 0 642 54871 4.

McHenry, T. (2002). "Words as big as the screen: native American languages and the internet." *Language Learning & Technology.* ISSN 1094-3501. Vol 6 No. 2 May 2002. pp102-115.

Nathan, D. (1997). "Plugging in Indigenous knowledge: connections and innovations." Paper read at the 1997 Fullbright symposium: Indigenous people in an interconnected world. Retrieved December 10 2005 from http://www.uiowa.edu/-anthro/fulbright/abstracts.nathanful.htm

Nathan, D. (2005). "The spoken Karaim CD: Sound, text, lexicon and "Active morphology"

for language learning multimedia." Paper. Retrieved December 10 2005 from http://www.dnathan.com/papers/karaimcd2.pdf

Nathan, D. (1999). "Language support with IT: not a high wire act". Paper presented at Learning IT Together, Brisbane April 1999. Retrieved December 10 2005 from http://www.it.usyd.edu.au/~djn/papers/NotHighWire.htm

Nickerson, M and Kaufman, J. (2005). "Aboriginal culture in the digital age". *Policy, Politics and Governance.* Vol 10 July 2005. Retrieved December 10 2005 from http://www.crossingboundaries.ca/aboriginalvoice

Ong, W.J. *(1982). Orality and literacy: The technologizing of the word.* Methuen: London. ISBN 0415281294 (2002).

The crossing boundaries national council. (2005). *Volume 5 Aboriginal voice national recommendations: from digital divide to digital opportunity.* ISBN 0 9738193-4-0. Retrieved December 10 2005 from http://www.crossingboundaries.ca

UNESCO. (2001). "Indigenous identities: Oral, written expressions and new technologies". Symposium at UNESCO (Paris):15 to 18 May 2001.

Villa, D. "Integrating technology into minority language preservation and teaching efforts: an inside job." *Language Learning & Technology,* ISSN 1094-3501. Vol 6 No. 2 May 2002, pp92-101.