

**Some Consequences of Attributing “English” (i.e. standard English)
to Aboriginal English Speakers**

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Aboriginal Views of English

The journal *Asian Englishes* published in a special issue a record of a discussion by group of Aboriginal staff members of Curtin University's Centre for Aboriginal Studies about their use of English. One observed, with respect to experience on a field trip with Aboriginal students, "because you are around your own mob, you actually tend to bring forward this thing called Aboriginal English, it just becomes quite natural in terms of the dialogue that you have with your family, with the people whom you're around" (Collard et al 2000:83). Another observed that, in Aboriginal company, she never switched into Standard English because "you don't want to come across as a big head" (Collard et al 2000:84). Another picked this up and commented: "when people talk about proper English or high English, it's different, totally different to what they would speak between themselves" (Collard et al 2000:85). "The main problem with the Aboriginal English," said another, "is that it has always been viewed as lacking something, and it's not that it's lacking anything. What the shame of it is (is) that standard English has too many words in it..." (Collard et al 2000:90). The conversation concluded with one saying of Aboriginal English: "This is who we are. This is our language" (Collard et al 2000:96).

The fact is that Aboriginal people, even when highly educated and proficient in Standard English, still do not see it as representing who they are. Standard English is necessary, but it is a tainted form of English, variously referred to as "proper," "high," "flash" (Eagleson, Kaldor and Malcolm 1982:240) or "gabah" (Arthur, 1996:149). Elsewhere Aboriginal speakers have referred to their use of Standard English as putting on a mask (Eagleson, Kaldor and Malcolm 1982:241), and students in higher education have often expressed discomfort and resentment at having to use Standard English (See, e.g., Malcolm and Rochecouste 1998). As one said, "When you go into the system, you have to conform to pass. But who's to say that our way is wrong and their way is right?" (Malcolm, Rochecouste and Hayes 2002:19).

If Aboriginal people who have succeeded in the education system feel this way, how much more acute must have been the discomfort and pain experienced by the many who have exited it with a sense of non-recognition and exclusion.

Orientations to English in Aboriginal Education

Two basic orientations to standard English and Aboriginal English have been taken by educators in Australia: teaching of Standard Australian English (SAE) without recognition of Aboriginal English (as in traditional assimilatory practice and some direct learning approaches), and teaching of SAE with recognition of Aboriginal English, (as in an accommodatory program or in a two-way program).

Much of the educational discourse on Indigenous education, while giving lip service to Aboriginal culture and language, effectively attributes to Aboriginal students the same English that is used by other students. But to attribute standard English to students whose English is Aboriginal English has consequences. Rather than bridging gaps, it creates them.

The fundamental gap we need to bridge, for many Indigenous students, is that between the English they own and the English they do not own.

What is Aboriginal English?

It is an ethnocentric misconception to regard Aboriginal English as a failed attempt on the part of Aboriginal people to talk the English of another group, yet this is the assumption of remedialist or deficit-based approaches to teaching English and literacy to Aboriginal English speakers.

Aboriginal English is an alternative medium of communication with a different path to development (from initial jargons and through distinctive developmental and restructuring processes), a different history (of domination and dispossession of people and land), different strata of linguistic embedding from the course of that history (and hence many

forms that sound like throwbacks to a different age, like *gammon*, *necktie* and *flog*)¹, different functions, different associated genres, different norms, different respected exponents and different speech communities in which it has been maintained over the generations.

Wallace Chafe (1994:38) has compared linguistic form to “a pane of glass through which ideas are transmitted from speaker to listener. Under ordinary circumstances language users are not conscious of the glass itself but only of the ideas that pass through it.” When dialects come into contact, the glass becomes, to a greater or lesser extent, frosted. What is conceptualized and expressed one way on one side of the glass may be received, if at all, quite differently on the other². The wider the conceptual gap between the dialects, the more impenetrable the frosting on the glass. The more we have researched the conceptual foundations of Aboriginal English the more we have been convinced of the extent of the gap which separates it from Australian English.

Aboriginal English is not helpfully viewed as a variety of Australian English. It developed independently of Australian English, drawing on some common sources and some distinctive sources, always carrying its own group identification by contrast with the group identification represented by Australian English and, in particular, Standard Australian English. It now has its own distinctive and growing literature, which has been described as a “counterdiscourse” (Ariss 1988:132).

The Effect of Excluding Aboriginal English in Education

To assume that Aboriginal English speakers will learn Standard Australian English on the basis of ignoring, or even repudiating, the English they already have is to assume they will

¹ See Figure 1, Appendix.

² This can be demonstrated at every level of linguistic analysis. Figure 2, Appendix, illustrates this just at the lexico-semantic level.

embrace the alien in favour of the familiar, the unknown in favour of the known, the mysterious and threatening in favour of the intimate and homely.

To assume that Aboriginal English speakers will see the need for a literacy which denies expression of their own meanings in favour of the meanings of people they can only hesitantly trust and understand is to overestimate their credulity.

The demand made on teachers to teach standard English, and standard English literacy, to Aboriginal English speakers without reference to their linguistic and cultural background is like telling them to stand on one side of a precipitous gap and say to the people on the other side, "Come on, come to me and do what I do." When nothing happens, the people on the other side of the cliff get compared with the successful ones on the teacher's side and told they have a gap in achievement.

This is not good enough. The gap in achievement is no more than a reflection of the reality gap that is overlooked in the demands made by the educational system. The gap lies in the task that is being set. It *can* be bridged, and it must be bridged.

The Effect of Including Aboriginal English in Education

Sometimes the call to recognise the linguistic and cultural realities is misinterpreted as an excuse for accepting lower standards from Indigenous learners, and some programs, like the Accelerated Literacy Program in the Northern Territory, have even made it an operational principle to teach "literacy in standard Australian English with minimal reference to cultural context" (Robinson et al 2009:16). In defence of this position, the promoters of this program refer to the writings of the Torres Strait Islander academic Martin Nakata who has warned of the danger of using cultural difference as a reason for evading the responsibility to teach explicit standard English language skills to Indigenous students. I must say I agree with Nakata, and with his expressed aspiration: "There is nothing wrong with wanting an English education that will deliver us the knowledge and material standards of other Australians"

(Nakata 1999:12). But I think his comments have been gravely misused to promote a standard-English-only form of education. Indeed, Nakata himself has recommended “harnessing the Torres Strait Creole in the teaching process” (Nakata1999:15) and has argued that “the cultural agenda ...would work more powerfully alongside a more focused approach to English language teaching” (Nakata 1999:6).

What we need is an education for Aboriginal English speakers which can deliver standard English outcomes alongside proper recognition of pre-existing Aboriginal English inputs. Such is what I would call “two-way bidialectal education” delivered in collaboration by properly trained bicultural teams.

The Practicability of Bidialectal Education

Is this too great an ask? Aboriginal students are scattered unevenly throughout our schools. Some *do* have a command of standard Australian English and not all are users – or, at least, conscious users – of Aboriginal English, though others are consciously bidialectal. How can we distinguish the students who need a bidialectal approach from those who do not? The problem is not insurmountable. When teachers in remote parts of Western Australia were not sure as to whether their students spoke Aboriginal English or an interlanguage, I produced a simple checklist of 100 linguistic and pragmatic features for their guidance (Malcolm 2007). If we wanted to produce a more sophisticated instrument it would be possible. Of course, it would need to look beyond linguistic to conceptual features, since, as Farzad Sharifian’s doctoral work (2002) demonstrated, even metropolitan students whose surface linguistic features are virtually indistinguishable from those of Australian English speakers may be working from a distinctively Aboriginal conceptual framework. We know enough about Aboriginal English to be able readily to determine who uses it. But do we want to?

The alternative is to remain in dependence on language tests normed on standard English speakers which, may result, as ACTA, ALAA and ALS have recently protested, in “distorted

and largely worthless data – whether diagnostic or formative” (ACTA/ALAA/ALS 2010:12) and, as speech pathologist Judy Gould has shown, lead to the misrepresentation of language difference as language deficit and the relegation of normal Aboriginal students to the category of “at risk” or even “language disordered” (Gould 2008).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people rightly demand universal access to SAE literacy without culturally effacing linguistic homogenization. This is an attainable objective, but only on the basis of bridging, rather than denying, the gap between the language they own and the language they do not own.

There is an opportunity for language professionals to take up the cause and insist on this right being met and I hope we will do so.

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Appendices:

Appendix 1: Strata of Aboriginal English

Appendix 2: The Dialect Filter: The Lexico-Semantic System

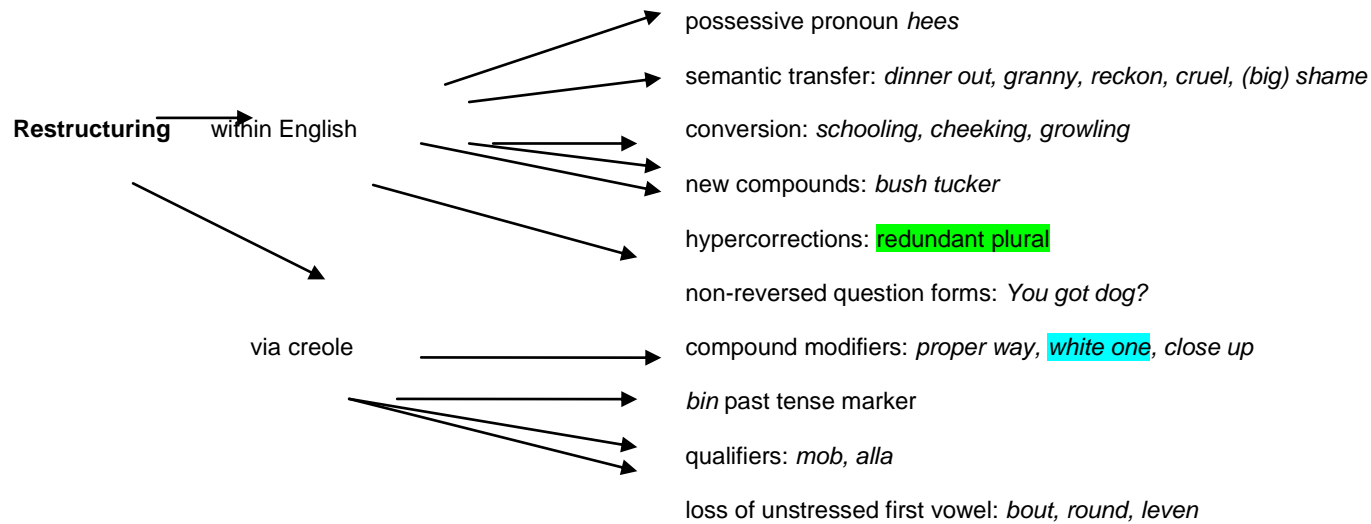
Appendix 1:

Strata of Aboriginal English

2010

“We get five sheeps, fat one.”

Transfer	from Aboriginal language	→	Nyungar	<i>yorga, monach</i> (black cockatoo = policeman)
		→	Western Desert	<i>wongi</i>
	from English varieties	→	AAVE	' <i>man</i> ' tag
		→	Non-standard Australian English:	double subject; <i>nothink</i>



Early Pidginization

NSW Pidgin	}	consonant cluster simplification <i>wen'</i> = went th→t th → d
Melanesian Pidgin		<i>dreckly, blackfellow, plenty, sit down</i> (live), <i>no good</i> (bad), <i>all time</i>
South Sea Jargon		<i>stop</i> (stay), <i>too much</i> (a lot)
Local Pidgins		<i>gubbas</i> (whites) [from <i>gubment</i>]

Late 18th Century English varieties

Regional dialects	→	Irish, <i>youse</i>
Temporal dialect	→	old English, <i>aks</i>
Registers	→	<i>drop, gammon</i>

1788

	Dharuk, the Sydney Language the semantic base	
	flexible word order	<i>bogie</i> (swim)
dual pronoun	no he/she	zero or optional noun plural zero 'th'

Appendix 2: The Dialect Filter: The Lexico-semantic System

