

Raising the Bar Sydney 2018

Jakelin Troy – Languages of the land

Welcome to the podcast series of Raising the Bar Sydney. Raising the Bar in 2018 saw 20 University of Sydney academics take their research out of the lecture theatre and into bars across Sydney – all on one night. In this podcast, you'll hear Jakelin Troy's talk, Languages of the Land. Enjoy the talk.

[Applause]

Well didjuringura, I'd like to say. That's thank you in the Gadigal language.

[Speaking Foreign Language]

So we are, today, here meeting on the country of the Gadigal people, who have been not only the traditional owners of this area for tens of thousands of years. I think the latest estimate for how many years Australians – that's us, the Aboriginal Australians, the first people have been in this country, on this continent, is about 65,000 years. I even heard recently that there is another archaeological site that says up to 70,000 years. So that's a hell of a long time to be drinking at a pub. And I'm really glad it's a pub with so much atmosphere. And I think it's great. You know, we like to hang on to our traditions as aboriginal people, and it's wonderful to see a pub that's got that patina of tradition. And that's what this place has. So I think it's a good place to start with the proposition that I put to you, which is that all Australians should learn an Australian language. It does sound a bit obvious, doesn't it? Like, if you're in England, you'd learn English probably. And in France, you'd learn French, and if you didn't, the 27 Immortals in the Palace of the Immortals that looks after the French language on the Seine River would come and get you I think.

So, in this country, we've abandoned our wonderful Australian languages. Why have we done that? So this is my proposition. Let's not abandon these languages. Let's, all of us, embrace our languages and enjoy what you can learn and how you can be in an Australian language. Not just in English, which is actually a language of Australia, but not an Australian language. But I want to begin by suggesting to you what it might be like to be an Aboriginal person who has lost their language.

So, my own language is Ngarigu. We're the Snowy Mountains people. We're the High Country people. Those of you who are snow bunnies come down to my country every year, buy ski passes, and have a fabulous time shredding it on the slopes, along with my daughter. And you'll see me pat, pat, patting down the hill, snow ploughing very slowly. But, you know, do you know anything about the place? Do you know that the mountain is called Goomamamaji? It's not Mount Kosciuszko. It's named after a Polish Count who was probably a fabulous person. But actually, it's Goomama, which is snow, and Namitji, which is my clan name. So we are the people of the High Country. So I want everybody to say Goomamamaji.

Outstanding.

So, next time you're shredding it down the slopes – preferably on skis, forget the snowboard thing, very annoying – and I've got a country woman here who is also Ngarigu. So we're – we are a small group of people, but we had our own language for thousands and thousands of years. And in less than 200 years, our language went out of use, so we've got a bit of a trial back to relearning our language. And I hope that in the future, kids in our region will be able to learn our language.

But I want to say, how would it be if that happened to you? So, I don't know how many of you out there are gamers, but you would – I don't know. Are you – is your preference FPS or are you RPG? Do you like MMO? Have you got an OC? So, half of you won't know what I'm talking about. The other half who do, tragically, it's the last time you ever will. You can't use that language anymore. From now on, as a gamer, you're going to have to learn Warlpiri, which is a language from the middle of Australia – Central Australia. Fantastic language. One of our really strong languages. So you will no longer be able to say RPG – roll player game, for those who don't know. FPS – first person shooter. OC – own creation. Tragically, it will be something in Warlpiri. Now, you'll – you don't have any time to learn Warlpiri. We're just going to put all these gamers together into a place for gamers, which is good. You know, you'll all be happy together. You've got a lot in common. But you just have to use Warlpiri. So it may be a struggle. It might take you the rest of your life to learn that language. You may not be able to speak to each other for a long time. It will be quite culturally difficult, but that's okay. You know? I'm from the government. I'm here to help you. That's what we're going to do.

And for the rest – and for the rest of you, who think you've escaped that because you're not gamers, sadly, there's bad news for English speaking people as well. You can no longer speak English. And anybody else who speaks any other language, who thinks they're going to be able to escape – sorry, Warlpiri is now the language of Australia. I'd love it to be Ngarigu, but until my sister-girl and I get that language going again, that's going to be a challenge. So, basically, this is what happened to Aboriginal people in Australia. This is what happened to us. Literally, people were herded together from all sorts of different language groups who, some of whom could speak to each other, knew each other's languages, but most people didn't. And even if they did, why would they want to stop using their own language. And right here where we stand, the Gadigal mob, this is what happened to them. Eventually, English was the language that overtook their language and they were forced to speak English. And, you know, good though they became at speaking English, it was a terrible loss.

And it's a, you know, everything you know is in your language. If you think about it, you know, back to the – the gamer languages. Everything – that's a really in-group thing. English is a much broader language. But we have all these other languages we use. There are wonderful languages in this country. Sign languages. People who are hearing impaired or hard of hearing or deaf use sign languages. I don't know that very many people in this country who aren't in that community speak those or, you know, use those languages. But – and I encourage you to do. I've recently become more and more involved in sign languages. But those people are kind of isolated from people who are using oral language, as I am now.

So, language – language gives you access to other people. It gives you access to other cultures. It gives you access. That's amazing. That just gave me access to thinking clearly. So, without the languages that we hold dear – our familiar, comfortable thoughts, ideas, our histories, everything we know about who we are and what we are – disappears out the window.

Many years ago, I went to Japan and I was going to be studying at University there. And originally, I was heading off to England, but the plan changed and I was offered two years in Japan. I thought, "I can do this. Easy. No problem." I thought – I knew nothing about the Japanese language. And I arrived in Japan and I was immediately reduced to, if you like, less intelligent, less capable, less effective than the smallest child in Japan. And I thought "Hi" was the, you know, an American greeting. And I learnt "Hi." And it was, you know, no, yes, yes. Yeah, no, and, you know, I sort of picked up a few bits and pieces, but it took me the whole of the two years that I was there to even really become conversationally fluent. You know? So learning another language is a really big deal, but it's something that, if you've been cut off from your own language and you've got to do, which is what happened to us in Australia, it's

a – it becomes a kind of a lifesaving thing. And not something that we really want to perpetuate.

So this country originally had about 407 languages. And when I say "had", they're still there. No Aboriginal community has ever given up their language, but a lot of these languages have now gone to sleep, as we call it. And these languages are, you know, still exist in our records. They exist in community memory. People know a few words. They might know a song. But almost every single language in Australia now has a community championing the revival of their language. Right now, they're waking these languages up from sleep. So when I spoke to you in the language of this area, Gadigal, it's a language that's in extreme revival mode and the community – the Gadigal community – there's one language for the whole of the Sydney basin and a lot of the clan groups are now starting to identify again. There are about 27 clan groups at least. And the clan here is called Gadigal. That's why we call the language Gadigal here. But anywhere in Sydney, it's the same language.

So out in Western Sydney, it's Dharruk, and you'll hear that word as well. And they now are calling themselves the Eora Nation. And, originally, that word meant Aboriginal people – Eora. So it's, you know, gradually, you are seeing people re-identifying with their language, expressing themselves publically, because it's no longer dangerous or fearful to do that. People are no longer herded into little areas where they can only sort of exist as an Aboriginal person on a mission or in a small community. People are beginning to start to express themselves again. And language is one of the most important ways in which we are doing that. A lot of people have said to me that language is more important than food. More important than housing. More important than anything. So for our health and well-being, speaking our languages again, learning about ourselves again in our languages, is really absolutely vital to reclaiming our identities. Of the 407 languages that are Australian languages, only about 12 or 13 are still really strong languages. So there are languages that are spoken for everyday purposes, all the time, by a whole community, transmitted from the oldest people in the community to the youngest people. So, in a way, that you all grow up speaking – most people grow up speaking English in Australia and there's only about 12 languages that are in that kind of situation now. And most of those languages are in the North of Australia and across the top of Australia, particularly the Northwest, down into Central Australia, and to the top part of South Australia.

But all these other languages that are in a revival are starting to take on this whole new life form. In Western Australia, the language called Noongar, which is around the Perth area, has got a huge speaker community. And some of you would know the wonderful actress called Kylie Farmer, who is in *The Gods of Wheat Street* and *Redfern Now*. If you haven't watched them, Google it. They're fantastic programmes. But she's been doing things like translating Shakespeare into Noongar. So Noongar is a language that really went to the wall and has come right back.

Here, in New South Wales, we've got the wonderful Wiradjuri language. It's a language that, if you look at – there's a fabulous map. Google it. And it's called the AIATSIS languages map. And it's like a big, colourful, patchwork quilt. And there's the big yellow splotch, which is us in the Snowy Mountains. And then, a little bit west of us into Western New South Wales, is this huge area called Wiradjuri. And the Wiradjuri have been very, very good at getting their language going again. And it started with an elder, Stan Grant working with a linguist, with old records, and a little bit of community knowledge. Now, there is something like 5 to 6,000 students every year in schools in New South Wales who are studying Wiradjuri at school.

Tragically, there are no degree programmes anywhere in Australia where you can go and study Australian languages and come out with a Bachelor of Arts, whatever, in Australian languages, as you could in, say, French or Japanese or Arabic – a whole lot of other

languages that are languages of Australia. But there's not one place in Australia where you can actually do a degree course – oh, sorry – around Sydney. We're working on this. So I hope that in the not too distant future, people will be able to come and do a degree in Australian languages.

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So why should you learn an Australian language? Well, right on your doorstep is Wiradjuri. It's easy. You can do Tafe courses in Wiradjuri. Eventually, you'll do Tafe courses and perhaps degree courses in Ngaragu as well. But there's another language called Gamilaraay, which is a bit – it's another – it's probably the second biggest group in New South Wales. A little bit north of and west of Wiradjuri. So if you go up into the Tamworth, New England area and all the way out to, say, Gaduga, that's a really big area that's got this language called Gamilaraay. It's got other namings as well. Gamilaraay. You'll hear of Gamilaraay. You'll hear Yuwaalaraay and Kamilaroi. So there are several dialects of this language. And that's another language where there are thousands of students every year studying this language in school.

So you may think that there aren't any Aboriginal languages spoken in this country, but why wouldn't you go out, go to Tamworth, and speak to people in Gamilaraay? Why wouldn't you go out to Parkes and Forbes and speak to people in Wiradjuri? You can do this now. And in doing that, you actually learn the language of the country. You learn all the kind of history. You get an understanding of what the place is. As I said to you in my language, if you think Goomamamaji, it tells you it's the place of snow, where the Namitj clan was – and still are. We're still there. It's a national park. We're not allowed to live out there, but we go out there. And so, you know, you – by learning one of our languages, you actually become much more a part of the country. Much more a part of Australian society. You become somebody who is able to read the country in the way that we, as Aboriginal people, can.

You already use a whole lot of language that's come from the Sydney area. So every time you go to the zoo and you look at a koala – you call it koala – gulara. That's the word from the Sydney area here, meaning something that doesn't drink much. The word kangaroo is a very interesting one. It was introduced to the Aboriginal people in this area. It's actually a word from Kuku-Yimidhirr, which is a language of far Northern Queensland, the Cooktown area, because the First Fleet, who invaded this area in 1788, arrived with a word list that had been collected by Captain Cook and Sir Joseph Banks. And when they were careening their ship and fixing it up in Northern Queensland, they stopped and talked to local people there and wrote down a list of words and brought this. Because the British thought there was one language in Australia and, jolly good, we've got this list. We'll use it. So the First Fleet pointed at a kangaroo and said, "kangaroo." They knew what a kangaroo looked like. They had photographs, you know, so, pictures. And the local people pointed at a sheep and said, "Kangaroo?" Because obviously, kangaroo meant nothing to them. It was some kind of animal thing. And so the First Fleeters thought not many animals here. They're all called kangaroo. You know, so that went on for about two weeks. You know? So, but you know, in finally working out what was a kangaroo and what wasn't a kangaroo, the First Fleet ended up learning many, many more words for the animals around here. So the battaguran is a small, grey kangaroo. The wallaba – the wallaby – that's another word we use in Australian English is the little – a little macropod. There's all kinds of other macropods. And so if it was okay for the First Fleet to know that, why don't we all know that now? Why is everything a kangaroo or a wallaby?

And all the birds in Sydney. You know, the names for the birds. The First Fleet, again, knew all these names. They could name plants. They discovered that the quandongary or the sweet tree plant, the native sarsaparilla that a lot of you have in your gardens, this beautiful, purple

plant that creeps along the ground, that you could make tea from that. So if you know about the plant, you know its name, you know what it's used for, in the language, then, you can really enjoy this plant. So there is so much knowledge about the environment.

And then there's – and then there's all the wonderful ways in which people interact with each other. Our customs of naming. So, all the First Fleet officers ended up with an Aboriginal name and the Aboriginal people, who swapped their name with the First Fleet officers, ended up with an English name. So that's the beginning of our traditions of calling ourselves by names that have been imported to our country. And why did people do that? Because that's one of the ways in which we incorporate people. We give people a name. You'll often hear about people getting skin names when they travel elsewhere in Australia, which is a name that puts you into a particular social group. So nobody cannot be part of our communities. You all have to be somehow part of our community. And that still happens all the time in Aboriginal families. Whether they speak English or Aboriginal languages, our practices have continued.

So, but back to the naming and the First Fleet time. A man called Governor Phillip became biyanga or father to Bennelong. Have you all heard of Bennelong? So, down where the Opera House is, there was a little hut that was built for a man who became a very famous identity in Sydney. An interlocutor, a translator. Very, very good languages man. And he was called Dore by Phillip. So they're the only two that we have in the record who had what we call kinship names or proper family namings. But everybody else, Colbee, very famous man also who was captured by Arthur Phillip to teach him English. He became Captain Collins. And Captain Collins, one of the First Fleet officers was Colbee. So, you know, why would – why would you want to miss out on all this amazing information? All this knowledge about how we interact with each other. How we actually look after each other. The British were very, very lucky when they came to Australia because we're social, hospitable people. We shared not only our language knowledge, we shared our country. We showed people where water – where they could find fresh water, what things were good to eat, what were not good to eat. You know? You can make tea out of the wadahgaree, but if you're going to eat those nuts out of those, you know, those things, you've got to cure them. You've got to, like, you know, leech all the poison out of them. So we taught people how to live in this country. We socialised people. We made friends with people. And we did this through our languages. And we continue to do this.

So, I think, you know, into the future, if this country is really going to understand itself properly and all of you, as Australians, are going to understand this country properly, you're going to need to know our languages. You're going to need to know how to talk to the people. And the people who are getting their languages going again as well, you're part of that process. It's really important. Every school child that's learning an Aboriginal language at school is part of the process of our country speaking again, of the knowledge, the history, the geography, you know, the science. Everything about this country is held within our languages. And, who knows, we may even find a way to save the planet through understanding indigenous languages like ours in Australia. Because we – our own people, my people, the Ngarigu, survived ice ages. We lived up in the High Country and we've always been ice mob, as we get called. In Australia, you get categorised as fresh water, salt water, and we're ice mob. Fresh water, salt water, and desert mob is the other one. And so we've got this knowledge of how to live. So as the climate the changes, the knowledge that we have and the knowledge that is also held in the records of our languages may just help us think about how to survive into the future.

And I'm not talking about this in a sort of, I guess, airy-fairy kind of a way. It's like, how, you know, why – why is Australia now damning the Snowy River yet again? To create Snowy number two. The next hydroelectric scheme. In a country that's got almost no fresh water, why do you have a hydroelectric scheme? I do a lot of research in the North of Pakistan, which is at the foothills of the Himalayas. Makes really good sense to have hydroelectric plants there. But

in a country like this, why would you do that? It's pointless. We've got other renewable sources of energy. And our people know that if you don't let the rivers flow and flow right down into the whole Murray-Darling system, you destroy the entire waterway. So there's all this wonderful knowledge that's, you know, of course it's held in our language, but it's also still held in our communities.

There's a man called Bruce Pascoe who recently wrote a book called Dark Emu. And I recommend that you all read that book. It talks about our environmental management of this country. He's written it to prove that we are actually farming people, agriculturalists. And, on the one hand, I'm delighted to know that we are like the English and we're agriculturalists, but on the other hand, what comes through loud and clear is that we were people who managed the land in a way that was sustainable agriculture. So we didn't damn the Snowy River. We didn't pull all the water out of our water systems. We allowed the flood plains to flood. We kept the marshes as marshes. We let places like the Koorong breathe, so that – and the swampy areas around Sydney, the lungs of Sydney, you know, it's now all clogged up with development around the edges of the water. In the end, you destroy the environment. You destroy your capacity to live into the future.

So, I guess what I would like to say, and I'll probably close at this point, and say that I think there is so much that is locked up in our language knowledge. Just as there is so much knowledge locked up in your own language knowledge. And if you had to stop, as I said at the beginning, speaking your languages, whatever your languages are. And those of you who have got more than one, you're lucky. But if you were told you could never speak those languages again, just pause for a minute and think what that would mean. You suddenly become not only voiceless, but you lose everything that makes you who you are. You lose your history, your culture, your knowledge of how to survive, how to live, and it would be an absolute tragedy. Because every language that ceases to be used is like a huge encyclopaedia that is never ending. That is now destroyed. I mean, it's like the destruction – absolute destruction – of knowledge. So let's see everybody in Australia participate in the great language revival movement and also participate in maintaining the languages that we still have. Encourage universities like mine to teach our languages. Those of you who have got children at school or who have influence over people going to school, please encourage them to take up an Australian language. More and more schools are doing this. I can't believe that in Australia I have to be advocating for people learning Australian languages. So thank you all.

[Applause]

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