

Schmidt, Annette, 1990. *The loss of Australia's Aboriginal language heritage*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press. Pp xii+148.

Reviewed by Gerhard Leitner, Berlin <Loss\_ALH.rev>

"Language is a touchy issue" said an Aboriginal representative to the reviewer at a meeting of Victorian Aborigines in Echuca in 1996. It was impossible to get any comment from anybody as participants felt compelled to speak on behalf of their people rather than speak their mind.

Of the 270-odd Aboriginal languages of pre-colonial Australia 160 are extinct. Some are at least 'accessible' through descriptions by missionaries or other interested lay people. Most have disappeared without a trace. But, surprisingly, interest in heritage revitalization has shown that at least a few words are known to older people of languages that were believed to have disappeared. Of the 110 remaining 'living' languages, about 90 are endangered and spoken only by few older people. The middle and younger generations with little or no knowledge are reluctant to 'use language'. Thus, only 20 languages are 'strong' in the sense that they are used for a range of communicative purposes across the generations. While this situation has to do with colonization, one should remember that languages were small even by pre-colonization standards and prone to extinction from wherever change would be initiated.

Annette Schmidt's *The loss of Australia's Aboriginal language heritage* (AALH) is part of the wider picture that started to emerge with Lo Bianco's proposal for a national language policy (1987) and the *National Policy on Languages and Literacy* (1991). Prompted by the lack of political follow-up action it suggests a variety of proposals for action. AALH was a success. The Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs of the House of Representatives issued a report in 1992 that drew heavily on AALH. Baldauf's report for the National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia surveys the efficacy of maintenance measures within the wider political spectrum, drawing on AALH's presentation.

The first of AALH's nine chapters highlights the vitality of indigenous languages and factors that support language loss or survival. Chapters 10 and 11 deal with community attitudes to language maintenance and policies at Federal and State levels. The central chapters of AALH are four to seven. They describe current maintenance strategies (ch. 4), recurrent problems (ch. 5), questions to do with dead and contact languages (ch. 6), and processes of language death (ch. 7). Chapter eight lists policy recommendations and chapter nine is a summary. It is impossible to do justice to the wide scope and the interpretation of the findings. I will mention some findings that seem helpful to the non-specialist to gain a better understanding of the Aboriginal component of Australia's language ecology.

AALH classifies Aboriginal languages (AL) into strong, weak/dying, and dead on the basis of (i) their use in a range of social domains, (ii) intergenerational language transmission, and (iii) other factors. Strong languages have at least 200 speakers and are located in areas that have remained isolated from white society, media, and urbanization. Crucially, speakers "own or have control of their land." (1990:24) there. "[I]and ownership or control", she adds, "fosters the vital link between land, language and identity, and the cohesive community structure enabling flourishing language use." This cluster of factors is crucial to the survival of culture at large. However, while there are no strong and weak/dying languages in the south of the continent (with one exception in South Australia and New South Wales, cf. maps 1 and 2, pp 4 and 6), the majority of threatened languages is also in the north. Schmidt argues that the most potent factor leading to language death is that languages are not transmitted from one generation to the next.

The lack of inter-generational transmission has to do with the fact that ALs "are storehouses of knowledge" (1990:28) and that access should remain restricted. ALs encode knowledge on environmental, historical and migration matters, quite apart from their association with rites and the styles that regulate intricately-structured moieties. Thus, a Koori film-maker may well explain the background of his film but will refer to an elder to explain spiritual aspects. The conception of language differs fundamentally from 'western' ones although one should see the appearance of 'cultural' dictionaries and the inclusion of encyclopedic knowledge in, for instance, the *Dictionary of English language and culture* (Longman) as indications of a significant paradigm shift. Yet, the fact remains that ALs are more intricately interwoven with culture and that maintenance means more than just learning to use language. No wonder that language is, as quoted above, "touchy issue".

The majority though demands language maintenance although there is disagreement on what that means. In the north, this implies the introduction of bilingual schools programs, in the south it typically means revival or heritage ones. In the north success may mean renewal or re-enforcement of the inter-generational transmission, in the south the use of a few items to mark Aboriginal identity.

Bilingual programs are another hot issue that takes up a lot of space in AALH. Such programs can be seen as facilitating transition to English or as putting into practice 'two-way education'. Consensus is hard to achieve and is made more difficult by the existence of Kriol and Torres Strait creole and the presence of Aboriginal English, which is not dealt with in AALH. Should these contact languages be treated on a par with ALs proper?

The crucial chapters are four and five from a political perspective. They deal with strategies of maintenance. There are accounts of self-help, the so-called outstation movement on the one hand and regional language centres on the other, and AALH believes that this is the best strategy for maintenance.

AALH is an excellently produced report, amply illustrated with maps, lists of languages, bilingual language programs, etc. Its language is clear, without jargon, reading is made easier thanks to quotes from community leaders. There are three only critical remarks. Schmidt argues there were 250 languages but figure 1, p 2, has 270. One would wish that maps were done in a way that made them understandable to a foreign reader whose knowledge of the physical and human geography may be weak. Finally, an index might have been helpful.