

Leitner, Gerhard, Ian G. Malcolm, eds, 2007. *The Habitat of Australia's Aboriginal Languages. Past, Present and Future*. Viii + 389pp. ISBN 978-3-11-019079-3, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, € 98.-. Reviewed by Allan James, University of Klagenfurt

This volume offers 'the broad picture' of the language heritage and practices of Australia's Aboriginal population from an overall 'habitat' perspective, as developed especially by the first editor in substantial previous research (e.g. Leitner 2004a, 2004b). In a complementary fashion, the extensive research of the second editor has covered linguistic, sociolinguistic and educational aspects of Aboriginal English (e.g. Malcolm 2000). With this pooled expertise then, it is the intention of the editorial team to elucidate linguistic, educational, socio-cultural, legal – and political – issues in the language use of Aboriginal Australians to "help overcome the shortage in accessible information", while aiming for "a comprehensiveness in coverage that is academically founded, yet accessible to the non-specialist" (1). As such, the volume has a more exclusive focus than previous comparable volumes such as Romaine (1991), who covers also non-anglophone immigrant languages as well as mainstream Australian English as indeed Leitner himself does in (2004b) and (2004a), respectively (reviewed by Arthur Delbridge in no. 19 of this journal).

The 'habitat' framework is of course particularly appropriate for the interpretation of Aboriginal languages and cultures, since as Graham McKay makes explicit "languages have a foundational relationship with the land and a derivative relationship with the people who are linked to that tract of land" (121). When another language intrudes to disturb the habitat, then that language (here English) is restructured for the Indigenous habitat, being modified to meet its needs and thereby creating a distinct group of speakers (Malcolm and Grote, 101). In turn, the Aboriginal habitat impacts on English, and with it helps shape postcolonial Australian society as a whole. Such points are already introduced in the general Introduction,

which gives an outline sociolinguistic history of language contact in the Aboriginal habitat, summarising past research and introducing the papers to come.

While there is a thematic progression of sorts from a focus on Aboriginal languages to pidgins and creoles to Aboriginal English (and Aboriginal influence on mainstream Australian English), other topics such as languages policy, languages in the educational system and the legal system as well as case studies are more scattered through the book. A tighter ordering and grouping of articles, as well as more cross-referencing, would have undoubtedly augmented the cohesiveness of the volume and focussed more sharply the central issues treated.

The first of the thirteen articles, appropriately, offers a linguistic overview of Australia's traditional languages by Harold Koch, covering typological reconstruction and historical comparison (as pioneered by the Viennese scholar Pater Wilhelm Schmidt in *Die Gliederung der australischen Sprachen: geographische, bibliographische, linguistische Grundzüge zur Erforschung der australischen Sprachen* of 1919), and a succinct, but nonetheless sufficiently detailed structural sketch of Aboriginal languages (phonological, grammatical, lexical, semantic, toponymic characteristics). This is followed by a case study of the Yolngu language habitat by Michael Christie, sensitively depicted in terms of local metaphors for meaningful social processes and structures in the community (e.g. 'bread' as metaphor for 'due process, right place'; 'hunting' for education; 'lagoons' or "ganma" for the meeting of Yolngu and Balanda (Europeans), etc.).

In the next article, Michael Walsh traces the development of Aboriginal languages over time, highlighting not so much their demise and loss but rather the ways in which those which have survived have changed under contact conditions in their own habitats. As a case study he takes the position of Murrinhpatha in the Port Keats (Wadeye) area of the Northern Territory. Questioning more traditional measures of language vitality, he shows how 'new languages' are emerging for new times and new uses (e.g. Areyonga

Teenage Pitjantjatjara, Children's Tiwi, neo-Dyirbal, light Warlpiri, etc.) and sees the future of Aboriginal languages more confidently now than, say, ten years ago. Complementary to this, Graham McKay's following article on "Language maintenance, shift and planning" outlines institutional language policies historically (or the lack thereof) in the light of decline, discussing the Census-derived findings of 2001 (e.g. alarmingly, seven times as many people speak Italian at home than speakers of all Indigenous languages together!) and the National Indigenous Languages Survey Report on vitality of 2005. While acknowledging the various initiatives taken in recent decades (e.g. the Senate National Language Policy of 1984, the National Policy on Languages of LoBianco (1987), the 2004 Maintenance of Indigenous Languages and Records), McKay concludes nonetheless that planning and policies have ultimately been too 'scattered' for full effectiveness and that important issues such as ownership and copyright for Aboriginal people in language maintenance still have to be properly addressed.

The next two papers naturally fit together, examining 'restructured' Englishes emerging from contact. John Harris treats Australian pidgins and creoles and Ian Malcolm and Ellen Grote Aboriginal English. Macassan Pidgin, a Portuguese-Arabic-Malay-derived South-East Asian trade lingua franca may be regarded as the first external contact language of the Aboriginals of northern Australia, also being used among Aboriginals themselves, as well as being initially employed with the Balanda too. However, the prime disturbed language ecology was of course brought about by Anglophone colonisation leading to the establishment of New South Wales English Pidgin and its spread via the pastoral frontiers (as cattle station pidgin) to the Northern Territory and subsequent creolisation to Kriol. A good overview is given of both varieties. Subsequently a detailed structural sketch of Aboriginal English - as the product and symbol of maintenance of Indigenous identity in the face of linguistic and cultural domination by immigrant Australians - is provided by Malcolm and Grote. They also discuss discourse level and pragmatic characteristics of the language which draw on linguistic conceptualisations of Indigenous communities (e.g. those present in oral narratives), where English is modified to meet the

needs of a particular habitat and, within that habitat, a distinct group of speakers. Finally, the authors point out ways in which new (post-)modern spaces are being created for anglophone Aboriginal discourse, e.g. via literary expression, hip-hop sub-culture, teenage emailing, as a means of challenging European representations of aboriginality in the post-colonial era, thereby linking in to Walsh's previous discussion.

Also the next two articles are thematically linked, focussing on traditional Aboriginal languages and i) their position within their own historical habitats (Farzah Sharifian) and ii) their contribution to Australia's language habitat at large (Gerhard Leitner). On the assumption that "human languages are largely a witness to the ways in which their speakers have conceptualized experience throughout the history of their existence" (181) and taking kinship relations as an example, Sharifian examines the ways such cultural conceptualizations as constantly (re-)negotiated schemas and categories are realised in linguistic structure – lexically, morphologically, syntactically – with reference to various Aboriginal languages. He further shows how such conceptualisations are also carried over into Pidgin. After briefly tracing the social history of language contact in Australia, Leitner considers the lexical impact of Aboriginal languages on mainstream Australian English – directly and via contact languages – in particular with reference to the onomasiological domains of *inter alia* social units, land and ownership, kinship and religious beliefs.

In conclusion he demonstrates convincingly via sample data analysis that the Aboriginal impact on the Australian linguistic habitat may be effected via Aboriginal languages, Kriol, a range of Aboriginal English(es) or indeed mainstream Australian English itself, singly, or more usually, in combination.

The focus of the following two articles is on the education system. Gary Partington and Ann Galloway, in a brief survey history of education practices in Australia, highlight clearly the fundamental differences between Aboriginal and Western concepts of education and then concentrate on policy, social and school factors which have

influenced the pattern of Indigenous education. Here issues such as the chequered history of policy initiatives, poverty and deprivation, health and linguistic factors are seen as co-determining educational failure. In conclusion the authors review more recent measures taken to ameliorate this depressing picture with special reference to the professional development of Indigenous teachers. In a related vein, Ian Malcolm and Patricia Königsberg address the language gap in education where Indigenous school students are thrust into clothes....designed for different bodies. They critically evaluate the effect of past well-intended but ultimately unidirectional government bilingual/bicultural initiatives to increase literacy levels, and view positively more recent initiatives such as the Western Australian *ABC of Two Way Literacy and Learning*, which also change teacher perceptions of Aboriginal English itself. As a paradigm example of an educational project which aims to combine 'global' and 'local', conforming and diversified bilingual/bidialectal schooling on the basis of Aboriginal self-determination, the authors cite the integrative Yirrkala school initiative in Arnhem Land.

Diana Eades' article on Aboriginal English in the criminal justice system shows how insensitive (non-)appreciation and (non-)interpretation of Indigenous language use has led to gross misrepresentation of suspects' positions (and rights), including downright fabricated confessions in two much publicised cases historically. Highlighting three specific linguistic sources of misunderstanding, the author does, however, signal some more recent improvement in intercultural communication awareness by professionals, not least promoted by the widescale adoption of her own *Handbook for Legal Practitioners* of 1992. Nonetheless there remain severe travesties of justice involving the Aboriginal English practice of legal suspects such as evidenced in the striking Pinkenba case of 1995 in which the gratuitous concurrence and silence of suspected young male offenders was manipulated to dismiss the case against the police which they had initiated.

Rob Amery's paper traces the position of the Aboriginal language habitat in research and tertiary education, noting that historically more attention has been paid to the linguistic description of

Aboriginal languages themselves rather than to matters of their learning and teaching. However, a certain shift in focus towards more sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic sensitivity can now be seen evident in current projects such as those on e.g. child language acquisition, code-switching and language mixing, language and cognition, language and the law, language and health, etc. Issues of research ethics and ownership of materials are shown to be significant in this context and examples of best practice pedagogical projects are given.

The final article by Terry Ngarritjan-Kessarlis and Linda Ford takes the form of a very appropriate extended statement on epistemological, ontological, ideological and political aspects of research into the Aboriginal (preferably, *Tyikim* - the Mak Mak term for ourselves - or *Blekbala* - Northern Territory creole) language habitat. Employing a *Tyikim* mode of discourse, Ford critically addresses via her Indigenous knowledge system *wuwa ngung* various shortcomings of *Padakoot*, i.e. "non-Indigenous", research with regard to these issues. For example, she stresses the necessity of contesting 'the ideological force of Western research as a field of imperialistic knowledge-creation' by the adoption of corrective *Tyikim*-based practices in research activity, by drawing on Indigenous conceptual frameworks of interpretation e.g. reference to Entities, their relations and the practice of these relations after Booran Mirraboopa (2001), and by employing metaphors from oral traditions to reinforce the idea that *Tyikim* ontologies can help in theorising Indigenous research. Ngarritjan-Kessarlis in his own statement highlights the central position that Aboriginal English has as the voice of the *Tyikim/Blekbala*, debunks the Western scientific myth of objectivity and criticises Western research practices that can still be colonizing and disempowering for Indigenous people. Finally, he reviews the contributions in the present volume and concludes positively that they serve to create a healthier equilibrium, while reminding us that "[a]ddressing imbalances and creating structures and processes that maintain balance in *Blekbala/Mununga* [i.e. "white people", Aboriginal English] interactions are ongoing challenges and goals for language researchers in *Blekbala* contexts in Australia" (367).

This is a very successful volume, promoting in a culturally sensitive way a balanced picture of educational, language support and legal practices in the Aboriginal language habitat and elucidating the complex (socio-)linguistic realities of the habitat in a more comprehensive way than has previously been attempted. In highlighting the proprietorial, locational/areal and historical/mythical properties of Aboriginal cultural contexts, the authors amply demonstrate the appropriateness of the 'language habitat' concept itself as a productive interpretive framework.

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