The phonology of reawakened Aboriginal languages: issues in pronunciation authenticity in language revival in Australia.

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Big Picture

- The influence of literacy and teaching by first language speakers of English, on the pronunciation of Aboriginal languages in the context of language re-awakening in NSW.

- Wherever languages are learned in the absence of a generation first language speakers, we find that the learners’ first language will have a major impact – the linguistic resources that you have build on play a strong role in shaping the new language that you acquire.

- Examine some pronunciation changes currently taking place in NSW in the context of revitalised learning, noting the inevitability of this.

- Raise the need for open discussion about the authenticity of ‘recreated’ languages, and argue that for recreated languages phonemic orthographies might not be the best choice.
What is Being Learned in Revitalisation Programs

- Language re-awakening work undertaken in NSW typically involves learners whose first language is Australian English (from standard to Aboriginal English varieties) engaged in the learning of Aboriginal languages.

- Sources: generally either written language in the form of wordlists, learner guides or other pedagogical materials, or spoken language samples modeled by someone else who also learned pronunciation from written sources. In some lucky cases there are still Elders with enough speaking knowledge to record words as pronunciation guides.

- The usual scenario involves careful decision-making about how words should be pronounced and sentences constructed, under two serious restrictions: the absence of any community of first language speakers of the target language, and the paucity of the materials available.
What is Being Learned in Revitalisation Programs

- Fundamentally different from normal 2\textsuperscript{nd} language learning.
- Learning like this inevitably induces changes in that language. Some deliberate; others, such as changes to pronunciation and grammar, are likely to be less deliberate and may largely result from the inherent difficulties of learning a language in the absence of native speaker models.
- For these reasons, although the goals of revitalisation programs are often worded in terms of ‘getting our old language back’, the outcomes of many are likely to be quite different from the traditional languages that they are based on.
- The ‘same language’ cannot meet the communicative needs of two groups of people separated in time, society and culture. With respect to pronunciation in particular, wherever a generation of learners revitalises a language in the absence of first language speakers, the learners’ first language will have a major impact on the sound system of the target language.
Details of the Changes Taking Place

1 Neutralisation of Rhotic Contrasts

- Most NSW languages have traditional phonemic contrasts between more than one ‘r’ sound - usually a flap or trill written as ‘rr’, contrasting with a continuant (more like the English ‘r’) often written as ‘r’.

- Many early written sources failed to distinguish between these two sounds, so in many cases it is difficult to know which pronunciation is right.

- Many learners have adopted various simplification strategies.
  - some pronounce the continuant ‘r’ in all cases
  - some pronounce the trill ‘rr’ in all cases (‘hyper-correction’)
  - some adopt the strategy of using just one sound mostly, but being careful to distinguish between them for just those important minimal pairs (eg. be careful to pronounce wirri and wiri different but otherwise just use a single ‘r’ sound where it doesn’t really affect the meaning).
Details of the Changes Taking Place

2 Stop Voicing

- Most NSW languages have just a single series of stops.
  In NSW the voiced symbols happen to have predominated, though there are some exceptions (like Paakantji).
- Being phonemes means that these stops function as contrasting sounds in the minds of their first language speakers. But choosing to write them with either ‘b’, ‘dh’, ‘d’, ‘dj’, ‘g’ or with ‘p’, ‘th’, ‘t’, ‘tj’, tells us nothing about how they would have been traditionally pronounced.
- To use a made-up example, a word [pabap] with unvoiced stops initially and finally but voiced stops medially, could be written phonemically as ‘babab’ in one language, but as ‘papap’ in another, even though they are pronounced identically.
Details of the Changes Taking Place

2 Stop Voicing

- In NSW revitalization programs phonemic orthographies have been widely adopted under considered input from linguists who tend to promote them as being the best linguistic practice.
- Phonemic orthographies tempt re-awakeners, falling back on their knowledge of English orthography, to pronounce such words as ‘as they are spelled’. So ‘babab’ tends to be pronounced as [babab] and ‘papap’ tends to be pronounced as [papap].
- Old pattern: pronunciation of stops depended on word position and preceding/following sounds.
- New pattern: all voiced or all voiceless (Paakantji begins with a [p] and Gamilaraay with a [g]).
- Orthography is driving change in pronunciation.
Details of the Changes Taking Place

3 Affricated Realisation of Palatal Stops

- Old pattern: palatal stops were unaffricated stops made with tongue tip down and blade raised.
- New pattern: Increasingly common to hear palatal stops (IPA symbol [ʡ]) realised as palato-alveolar affricates (the ‘j’ of English ‘jam’, IPA symbol [dʒ]), so putative word 'badjanu' is [bʌdʒʌnu] rather than [bʌɟʌnu].
- This is phonetically a fairly natural shift, so a link to English is no necessary, however the influence of English is the likely explanation here.
- A contributing factor here is the many well-intended learner grammar pronunciation guides (see Reid 2008, p5. for an example which casually describe palatal stops as being “like ch in English ‘chew’”).
Details of the Changes Taking Place

4 Neutralisation of Unstressed Vowels

- Old pattern: 3 vowel places and often also a short/long vowel contrast, yielding systems of 6 phonemic vowels typically written ‘a’, ‘aa’, ‘i’, ‘ii’, ‘u’, ‘uu’; minor allophony, but generally vowel phonemes are quite discrete; no centralisation of unstressed vowels (cf. English schwa [ə]).

- The traditional patterns of word stress also varied, but there is evidence that stress on either the first syllable of a word, or on long vowels, were the most common patterns, as can be seen in the following Gamilaraay examples, where the length contrast between short ‘i’ and long ‘ii’ can be seen to distinguish two words with distinct meanings, and stress (indicated by bolding) is on the first syllable except where a non-first syllable is long.

- eg. Gamilaraay

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>yili</th>
<th>yiili</th>
<th>walaay</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘lip’</td>
<td>‘savage’</td>
<td>‘camp’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Details of the Changes Taking Place

4 Neutralisation of Unstressed Vowels

- New pattern: common to hear schwa-like vowels and English-like stress patterns in the pronunciation of words in the languages of NSW.

- English is the likely source of this; not just a language reawakening phenomena, as all loanwords from Aboriginal languages into Australian English have long been pronounced this way. eg. [pæərəmæətə] ‘Parramatta’, [jəgùnə] ‘Yagoona’, and [wəlærə] ‘Woollahra’.

- It is no surprise then that the pronunciations arising in revitalisation classes have often followed the pattern of loanwords into English dovetailed with learners’ first language patterns, and resulted in new significantly different pronunciations of words where they are used as Aboriginal language words, eg. [ɻəwɻabəgəl] ‘Awabakal’, what was probably once [ɻəwɻəbəgəl].
4 Neutralisation of Unstressed Vowels

- Vowel length contrasts are also changing under interference from English, although the picture here is complex.

- English vowels do not systematically involve length contrasts, but in reality pairs like [i] and [ɪ], [u] and [ʊ], and especially [ʌ] and [ə] do involve quasi-systematic differences in length.

- In language revitalization contexts we can hear the traditional length contrast being reinterpreted in various ways. In some cases it is largely neutralized, in other cases it is being reinterpreted to align with the [i]+[ɪ], [u]+[ʊ], and [ʌ]+[ə] vowel pairs in Australian English.
Why Sound Changes Happen

- All languages change all the time: Dhurga today would sound distinctly different to how Dhurga was in 1788.
- External forces: (eg. Maori the front vowels [ɛ] and [ɛː] are raising, and the back vowels [u] and [uː] are, the same sound changes have been taking place in New Zealand English over the same time period.
- Internal forces: Conversely in contemporary Maori we find the sound [t] becoming palatalised before the vowel [i], so the name Matiu has shifted from [mætiu] to [mætʃiu].
- Substratum influence: Anyone learning a second language struggles with the influence of their first language. If you learn with limited source materials, and no community of first language speakers, it is inevitable under such conditions that the learners’ first language will have a major impact on the sound system of the revitalized language (Flege, Schirru & Mackay, 2003).
Choosing a substratum-friendly system

The explosion in language revitalisation work around the world over the last decade is throwing up increasing numbers of cases where language revitalisers deliberately choose to acquire heavily substratum-influenced varieties, ie. choose to acquire a form of a language which is different from the first language speaker model. Such choices might be dictated by the learners’ desire, in the face of practical constraints like time, to set as their goal something ‘doable’.

Example 1: Kwak’wala

Goodfellow (2003) describes how the youngest generation of Kwak’wala speakers have rephonologised their ancestral language in ways that mostly maintain contrasts found in English, but abandon contrasts not found in English. So their modern Kwak’wala phonology has lost glottalised consonants altogether, neutralised the distinction between velar and uvular consonants, and is further losing the velar fricative.
Example 2: **Esselen** (mid-Californian coast)

- Currently being revitalised by two sisters, who each approach the task in very different ways.

- Deborah Miranda is motivated to revive Esselen in a manner most faithful to its earlier recorded form.

- Louise Miranda Ramirez is less interested in the 'purity' of the form she acquires, and is happy to learn an English-influenced variety on the grounds that it provides her with a realistically achievable goal which satisfies her desire for a language of identity. Louise’s Esselen reinterprets case suffixes as prepositions, and employs largely SVO order. In writing she detaches prefixes and writes them as separate words, where that parallels the English structure. So for example she writes *Nish Welel* ‘my language’, where Deborah writes *Nishwandel* ‘my language’ (Leanne Hinton, pers comm.)
Choosing a substratum-friendly system

- Louise’s thoughts about this deliberately chosen stance are worth quoting here:
- “The structure of our language is subject, object, and verb, but in my own Esselen writing, I also use our words in the typical English structure of subject, verb, and object… After much intensive study of my language, I believe that it might be easier to create new prayers, stories, and other pieces using Esselen words in an English sentence structure… I believe that using the words differently from our ancestors doesn't change the language. Do we choose not to change our own language for the satisfaction of a linguist to return an "extinct" language? Hasn't the English language changed from all the ‘thee-s and thou-s’? All language change throughout the years: new words are created, and definition and usage change”. (Miranda Ramirez 2008/9, p. 11-12).
Choosing a substratum-friendly system

Example 3: Quiluete

- Quileute (west Washington state) has highly complex word morphology with lots of inflections, which make it hard to learn in the absence of a fluent first language speech community.
- The Quileute revivers’ highest priority was to acquire a link with their heritage and a salient badge of their Quileuteness.
- Faced with the complexity of the language, they chose to learn a substrate-influenced form of Quileute and employed the learning strategy of taking an English sentence and by doing a word-for-word substitution, created a sentence using Quileute words but English word order, as in the following example;
  
  Give me half that candy,
  Give me half that lape',
  Hes me half sa' lape',
  Hes me tala'a sa' lape' (Powell 1973: 6)
One Wiradjuri learning group aim to learn a form of Wiradjuri as close as possible to its traditional form, making careful effort to maintain a distinction between ‘r’ and ‘rr’, have just three vowels without neutralised forms, and maintain the noun case system.

A second Wiradjuri learning group aim instead to learn a form of Wiradjuri which employs largely English word order, abandons the case system but keeps the locative case suffix as a general preposition meaning ‘in’ and ‘on’, and conflates ‘r’ and ‘rr’ to just ‘r’. They decide to write the language with an orthography intended best help English-speakers pronounce words.

How to describe these differences? AILF: ‘3.1 Language Renew because they involve the same situational/resource characteristics such as the absence of ‘right through’ speakers, the ‘presence of active language identification’, and the ‘significant amount of linguistic heritage’.
Modernization and induced change give rise to contestation within any revitalising community about issues of authenticity.

Conservative position (only revitalized language closest to the oldest remembered form to be viewed as authentic). Liberal position (a newly emergent variety of a language can be equally legitimate).

Such contestations over authenticity have been discussed in the language revitalization literature with respect to Hawai’ian (Wong, 1999), Californian languages (Hinton, 1999), and Maori (Crombie & Houia-Roberts, 2001), but have received little discussion in Australia to date.

Lack of anchoring to the past forms of the language, licenses the ‘creat-’ in language recreation, and facilitates new hooks on which claims about authenticity might be hung.
Revitalisers are out there doing great things, some aiming for more traditional language goals, others pushing further into recreated language goals. We need ways of understanding that recreated language outcomes are legitimate in their own right. We require vocabulary to make these different types of outcome more discussable. And we need clear identification of goal types in order to make smart choices about orthographies.

A focus on type of outcome holds implications for the way in which we develop curriculum resources. Here I’ll focus on the phonology of the revitalised language, and show how identifying ‘type of outcome’ has major implications for how we pronounce the language we are learning, and how we choose to write it.
Option 1: learn a traditional variety

- Aim to pronounce words as they were spoken by their native speakers, and write words in the way native speakers would have found sensible. The smart writing system will be one that is maximally phonemic.

- In real terms this would involve such things as learning to hear a pronounce;
  - stops and nasals at different places of articulation - so that ‘yadhu’, ‘yadu’ and ‘yardu’ all sound different
  - the difference between ‘rr’ and ‘r’
  - vowel sounds as ‘i’ and ‘a’ and ‘u’ without neutralising them to [ɛ]
  - vowel length contrasts between as ‘i’ and ‘ii’, ‘u’ and ‘uu’, and ‘ɛ’ and ‘aa’
  - words with the stress patterns of the target language, etc.
Option 2: learn a recreated variety

Choose to learn a recreated variety of a language, that is strongly influenced by your actual mother tongue, which is likely to be some part of the range between Standard English and Aboriginal English.

In real terms this would involve such choices as;
- Distinguishing stops and nasals at just bilabial, alveolar, palatal and velar places of articulation, and neutralise the contrast between dental, alveolar and retroflex. So ‘yadhu’, ‘yadu’ and ‘yardu’ so all would be pronounced [yadu].
- Pronouncing all ‘r’ s the same way (which could all be the continuant ‘r’ as in English ‘red’, or all be the trill/flap ‘rr’).
- Pronouncing vowels in unstressed syllables as schwa [ə].
- Stressing words with similar stress patterns as English (as though they were loanwords into English).
If you adopt a rephonologised strategy as your approach, then a smart writing system might well be one that is non-phonemic.

Dharug: the earlier wordlists from Dawes (1790) and King (1790) right through to Ridley (1875) spelled words in non-phonemic ways, using both voiced and voiceless stop symbols (faithfully recording allophonic detail of the pronunciations of Dharug speakers).

So the more ‘phonetic’ writing system for Dharug could now help modern relearners to pronounce these words in a manner even more consistent with old Dharug than a phonemic orthography might.

Models for what non-phonemic writing systems for NSW languages might look like. Walsh & Troy (forthcoming) and Reid (2002).