Strict Locality in Local Language Media
An Australian Example

KEN HALE

Department of Linguistics and Philosophy
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Chapter 22

We are familiar with the thesis that television can be detrimental to local and endangered languages, where the medium is exclusively or largely in English or Spanish, say, and the local language is given little or no time in the programming. The allure of television implicates more than language, of course, but its power can have serious consequences for the continuation of the linguistic and intellectual heritage of a local community.

To be sure, abstractly speaking, both television and radio are, in and of themselves, neutral in this regard. Their effects, bad or good, depend on many contextual factors. And in principle there are good purposes to which these media can be put in language revitalization and maintenance.

Indigenous peoples in various parts of Australia were remarkably prescient in understanding the implications of the impending media onslaught well before advanced technology was in place to transmit an overwhelming deluge of English-laden image and sound into relatively isolated communities in which local languages still flourished. Recognizing the dangers inherent in this inevitable circumstance, they moved to mitigate it to whatever extent possible, by grabbing the mic and confronting the media on their own terms.

As elsewhere in the world, in Aboriginal Australia it is believed with good reason that television in particular “has imposed greater exposure to non-indigenous languages and, perhaps more importantly, has led to a reduction in more interactive pursuits which involved the traditional languages, such as story-telling, singing and dancing and simple campfire conversation” (McKay 1996, 101).

The rational response to this has been the establishment of local programming in diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities by taking advantage of the full range of broadcasting resources, including the Broadcasting for Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme (BRACS), various regional broadcasting facilities, and both community and commercial broadcasting organizations. Broadcasting in this environment has two major functions, that of securing local control of at least a part of the programming to ensure appropriate cultural and social content and the involvement of people of significance in the communities, and that of providing an opportunity for the use of local languages in broadcasting.

Ironically, it is the very wealth of traditional languages which has hindered full exploitation of this potential. The experience of the Torres Strait Islander Media Association is indicative. Their broadcasts are in Torres Strait Creole, rather than the indigenous languages, for a number of reasons, including the fact that “the broadcast area covers more than one language,” “the Creole itself has developed as a significant language of Torres Strait Islander identity over recent years” and would “reach and appeal to more people,” and, unsurprisingly, “the level of funding available does not permit the employment of broadcast staff for each language group” (McKay 1996, 102).

By comparison with other parts of Australia, Torres Strait is on the face of it relatively uncomplicated as far as linguistic diversity is concerned. There are two indigenous languages. The Western Island language, called Kala Lagaw Ya (spoken in several regional varieties, including Mabuiag and Kalaw Kawaw Ya, among others), belongs to the large Australian language family known as Pama-Nyungan. The Eastern Island language (Meriam Mir) is of Papuan linguistic affiliation. But what is simple in the abstract is typically complex in reality. The dominant language of the region is the English-based Torres Strait Creole, whose origins are to be found in the Pacific Pidgin English brought to Torres
Strait in the mid-19th century by Pacific Islander and European immigrants involved in the commercial exploitation of marine resources such as bêche-de-mer, pearl shell, and trochus. By the end of the 19th century, Pacific Pidgin was no longer a pidgin for many people, being their first language, their native language, and thus an established Creole. Its spread to Torres Strait as a whole advanced rapidly in the first half of the twentieth century.

The Torres Strait Islander Media Association did not have a viable option of simply broadcasting in the two indigenous languages for various reasons. Among these are the fact that Torres Strait Creole is now an important element of pan-island consciousness, replacing the tradition of “separateness-in-contact” which once characterized relations between west and east in Torres Strait. Furthermore, Creole is a legitimate indigenous language, born as such on the Torres Strait Islands. An additional factor in the choice of broadcasting language is the circumstance that for many islanders, the indigenous languages are no longer their first languages.

The reasonable desire to serve the widest possible audience has a natural consequence on the linguistic choices of a broadcasting organization. This, combined with economic limitations, can, and usually does, have a marginalizing effect on local languages. Thus, Torres Strait Islander Media Association personnel recognize “not only the power of broadcasting to provide a vehicle for material in indigenous languages and to give status to indigenous languages, but also the power of broadcasting to provide a means for English and Creole to take the ‘market share’ away from indigenous languages, thus weakening them” (McKay 1996, 81).

In the Torres Strait case, at least, a language seen by Islanders as part of their heritage figures prominently in broadcasting. In other cases, however, the results of this tension have been more serious. The Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association, a pioneer in indigenous language broadcasting, “no longer broadcasts in languages to the extent it once did,” and in the Aboriginal (Imparja) television area, “a high proportion of the programming is simply commercial television — in English,” prompting one to ask “whether this situation — whether by design or by default — is not actually promoting a shift to English” (McKay 1996, 103).

The problems are not trivial, therefore, for a broadcast organization that seeks to represent the linguistic and cultural diversity of its audience. One response, of course, is to adhere to the principle of economy — that of reaching the largest audience at minimal cost. Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait broadcasters generally do not accept this philosophy, though economic realities often force them to something amounting to this position in actual fact. Responses by broadcasters in a recent survey mentioned, “in particular, the difficulty of covering all the languages of their broadcast area because funding was not sufficient to employ broadcasters from each language. For many of them, broadcasting even a little in a restricted range of languages was better than only broadcasting in English” (McKay 1996, 102–3).

Thus, spot programming for individual languages is a partial solution to the problem. And the sharing of program material has been a solution to another problem, that is, the Aboriginal language diaspora — the existence of widely dispersed groups representing the same language, a common condition in contemporary Australia. For example, radio programs in Warlpiri and Arrernte produced by the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association in Alice Springs are used by the broadcaster at Wirramanu (Balgo) in northern Western Australia (McKay 1996, 103).

But this system is fragile. In some instances, spot programming is done on a voluntary and occasional basis, as in the case of the Torres Strait broadcaster Jenny Eno sa, who “uses her language (Kalaw Kawaw Ya) from time to time on her own initiative for important announcements,” a circumstance much appreciated by her audience (McKay 1996, 80). This example illustrates in rather stark relief the very general condition of dependency in which indigenous languages find themselves in the realm of broadcast media. Minor changes in personnel or funding within a broadcasting organization can have rather drastic consequences for indigenous language programming, often in the direction of reducing it or eliminating it altogether.

However, fragile as this may be, it approaches the condition which could well, given contemporary realities, be optimal for Aboriginal and Torres Islander media development and use. This is the condition of “strict locality,” in which media (including printed material, as well as radio and television) are designed and created for dissemination to a particular language audience for the purpose of promoting the use of the language involved and — within reason, of course — without regard to the size of the audience or the economics implicated. As examples of this mode of media creation, I briefly discuss the use of video in the Warlpiri community of Yuendumu, Central Australia (Michaels 1994, 98–124) and the use of newsletters and magazines containing material in Australian Aboriginal languages.

**WARLPIRI TELEVISION**

The story of Warlpiri media at Yuendumu is not a simple or fully positive one. It implicates old and familiar tensions originating in, among other things, the predictable official state interventions which have beset Aboriginal peoples during the past two centuries. The Warlpiri characteristics of stubbornness and commitment to autonomy and survival, characteristics shared by many embattled local language groups, are precisely those that could, in principle, foster an enduring autonomous local media structure.

Warlpiri media ... is the product of a struggle between official and unofficial discourses that seem always stacked in the state's favor. This might suggest a discouraging future for Yuendumu Television. Given the government's present policy of promoting media centralization and homogenization, we would expect that Yuendumu will