

**Paper delivered at the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) 2017 National Biennial Conference held in Darwin on the 8-10 October 2017 at the Darwin Convention.**

***Importance of Heritage Languages to Australia's Social and Economic Future***

**Dr Sev Ozdowski AM, Chair, Australian Multicultural Council**

**Synopsis**

We need to celebrate the multilingual diversity of Australia, from the vast range of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages to the incredible number of additional languages migration has brought with it, which together total the more than 300 languages spoken in Australian homes identified in the 2016 Census. More than one-fifth (21 per cent) of Australians speak a language other than English at home. Like most other migrants, and indeed, most other Australians, I believe that learning to speak English is a great help when settling and integrating in Australia. Speaking, reading and writing the language of the country you call home is important to every individual's sense of connection to their community, and hence, their wellbeing.

The national conversation at present would benefit from being more focussed on the significance of the *other* languages spoken by migrants and refugees. A key to harnessing the benefits of our diversity is utilising the enormous language diversity that we have in our nation. There are benefits of language education to personal growth, community and family cohesion. Language diversity is also increasing interconnectedness and the economic capital of migration.

The Education sector has made some headway in integrating community (or 'heritage') languages into the national curriculum through the *English as an Additional Language or Dialect* program. However, much more could be done to truly harness the benefits of our national diversity. To capitalise on this potential our existing linguistic capability needs to be put to the forefront of our skill sets in business, in government, and in education. Languages other than English should be taught to all Australian children.

**1.0 Acknowledgements**

Thank you to the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) and the Multicultural Council of the Northern Territory for inviting me to speak on the importance of 'heritage' languages to Australia's social and economic future.

I would like to acknowledge the Larrakia people as the Traditional Owners of the Darwin region and pay my respects to their Elders past and present; as well as to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who are present today.

I am here today as Chair of the Australian Multicultural Council, a ministerially appointed body that provides advice to the Commonwealth Government on multicultural affairs policy and programs.

## **2.0 Introduction**

A focus of the Council is on harnessing the economic and social benefits of Australia's culturally diverse population. This aligns closely with my discussion today on the importance of 'heritage' languages to Australia's social and economic future.

We need to celebrate the multilingual diversity of Australia, from the vast range of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages to the additional languages migration has brought with it.

Like most other migrants, and indeed, most other Australians, I believe that learning to speak English is a great help when settling and integrating in Australia.

My wife Hanna, son Adam and I arrived in Sydney in 1975. We escaped from Poland in 1973 and spent two years as refugees in Hamburg, West Germany awaiting migration.

We chose Australia because we perceived it as a democratic country, with solid economic and social opportunities and English language, and because it was far away from Europe.

We arrived here on one-way German travel documents, with the proverbial one suitcase and almost no English.

Since our arrival, we have never looked back as Australia has extended to us her enormous opportunities.

We started learning some English language in Hamburg in anticipation that Australia will accept us. Then after arriving in Sydney we were taken to the Villawood Migrant Reception Centre (do not confuse this with the current Villawood Detention Centre) and the learning of English become our utmost undertaking; I remember language classes shared with Vietnamese refugees, major difficulties with the pronunciation of English words (as you see there is still room for improvement) and walls of our hostel flat full of stickers with English words we were supposed to memorise.

I took the first job available at a Ralph Symonds Plywood Factory in Homebush to learn more English; it did not work very well because almost all workers were migrants and their language skills were like mine. My reading and writing skills developed when I started to work on my Ph.D.

Since then, in my professional life, I have had the privilege to shape Australian multicultural and human rights policies and practices over the years.

Language is pivotal to the discussion.

Speaking, reading and writing the language of the country you call home is important to everyone's sense of connection to their community, and hence, their wellbeing.

And here I wish to acknowledge that many, many people have migrated to Australia over the past 70 years with limited English language skills, and they have contributed enormously to the building of our nation.

But equally important is the ability to maintain your mother language and to share it with your children. The 2016 Census identified more than 300 languages spoken in Australian homes. More than one-fifth (21 per cent) of Australians spoke a language other than English at home. After English, the next most common languages spoken at home were Mandarin (596,713 speakers), Arabic (321,723 speakers), Cantonese (280,947 speakers), and Vietnamese (277,405 speakers) (ABS 2017).

Here in the Northern Territory, we find the lowest rate of people speaking only English at home at 58 per cent (compared to 72.7 per cent nationally; Tasmania had the highest rate of people speaking only English at home with 88 per cent).

The most common languages spoken in Northern Territory homes other than English were Indigenous languages Kriol and Djambarrpuyngu.

The launch of the Multicultural statement '*Multicultural Australia – United, Strong, Successful*' (DSS 2017) in March this year was an important milestone in our nation's multicultural journey.

The Multicultural statement acknowledges that English is and will remain our national language and is a critical tool for migrant integration.

Importantly, it also pays attention to languages migrants brought with them to Australia. It recognises that our multilingual workforce is broadening business horizons and boosting Australia's competitive edge in an increasingly globalised economy.

Australian governments, businesses and services are mindful of removing barriers to ensure that services meet the needs of all Australians, whatever their cultural and linguistic background.

### **3.0 Importance of Community Languages**

While English is Australia's national language, and is also growing as an international means of communication, in our increasingly multi-lingual world more people speak two languages than one – and contact with speakers of other languages is rapidly growing.

In this context it is critical that policies and programs exist to ensure Australians from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds can maintain and share their mother language. Furthermore, I think that the national conversation at present would benefit from being more focussed on the significance and benefits of the *other* languages spoken by migrants and refugees.

When approached by conference organisers I was asked to speak about the importance of “heritage” languages. This term was first coined in Canada and

some define it as: *“A heritage language is the language someone learns at home as a child which is a minority language in a society, but because of growing up with a dominant language, the speaker seems more competent in the latter and feels more comfortable communicating in that language.”* (Audiopedia 2017). · There is a range of other definitions expressing a similar core meaning, for example see *“Heritage Briefs”* (Kelleher, Ann 2010).

Or in other words the heritage language is a non-English language of more established, older CALD communities in Australia, like Greek, Italian or Polish. However, this definition has some limitations and inconsistencies. For example, if one child was born in China and one born later in Australia, according to this definition Mandarin will be only a ‘heritage’ language for the first child. The term also excludes students of languages with no cultural background. Furthermore, this word also sounds a bit archaic.

To me, heritage languages are part of a broader spectrum of what we call in Australia ‘community languages’, so I decided to use both the broader term community languages and the narrower term of heritage language, as appropriate.

Let us now focus on the advantages of knowing more languages than only English.

### **3.1 Community Languages and Social Cohesion**

First, it is often acknowledged that policies, laws and services that promote fairness, inclusion and value cultural and linguistic diversity are key to building an inclusive, welcoming and safe community for all Australians (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Unfortunately, at a more practical, implementation level, often government policies tend to equate only English-language proficiency with social inclusion.

In reality, the relationship between knowledge of community languages and social cohesion is much more complex, and research tends to suggest that language maintenance amongst the first generation of settlers plays a positive role and contributes to social cohesion.

The ability to use more languages than English is seen as an advantage and sign of increasing interconnectedness and the social and economic capital of migration. Community languages build transnational networks and ties to one’s local immigrant community also play a highly important role in a person’s sense of belonging, as well as accessing education and employment opportunities and general psychological and social well-being.

The linkage between maintenance of heritage languages and social cohesion outcomes is more difficult to establish and clearly more research is needed in this area. One, however, can easily imagine that maintenance of languages other than English two or three generations after settlement would magnify the benefits shown by the first generation of settlers.

### **3.2 Community Languages and Individual Well-being**

Research suggests that for many people, knowledge of their 'heritage' language and other languages allows them an expanded, more nuanced sense of self, of family and of global citizenship. This has multiple benefits, one of which is enhanced mental health and wellbeing (Cox, Orsborn, & Sisk, 2017)'.

There is an increasing awareness of the benefits of multilingualism and multiculturalism for the individual in terms of cross-generational communication, increased linguistic and cultural capital, and intellectual benefits.

Losing the ability to communicate with one's parents in their native tongue has been shown to be a predictor of poor social outcomes among American young adults from migrant backgrounds (Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

On the other hand, it is generally accepted that through learning languages, students and the broader Australian community gain important benefits. A student who emerges from school fluent and literate in his/her home language in addition to English is more educated than a student who loses his/her home language competence in the process of acquiring English. In fact, contrary to what some believe, there is no research evidence that shows that students who enrol in a bi-lingual program involving English and a community language fail to become truly literate in English.

Multilingualism has significant benefits outside the area of language.

People who speak more than one language:

- learn more rapidly in their primary language;
- are consistently shown to be better able to deal with distractions, which may help offset age-related declines in mental dexterity;
- have a better ear for listening and sharper memories;
- parcel up and categorise meanings in different ways;
- display greater cognitive flexibility, better problem solving and higher-order thinking skills;
- can be better problem-solvers gaining multiple perspectives on the issue;
- have improved critical thinking abilities;
- have improved decision making as thinking in a second language reduces deep-seated, misleading biases that unduly influence how risks and benefits are perceived;
- better understand and appreciate people of other countries, thereby lessening racism, xenophobia, and intolerance, as the learning of a new language usually brings with it a revelation of a new culture.

### **3.3 Community Languages and the Economy**

Just as there are benefits for individuals who build their language capabilities, businesses that develop cultural and language skills are better able to collaborate and partner in the region and around the world and will also reap the rewards. The term '*Productive Diversity*' coined by Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis (Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. 1997) well reflects the linkage between community languages and economic advantage.

In the workplace, speaking more than one language has specific benefits according to Priti Ramjee, including:

- attracting new business with clients in a globalised world;
- addressing the unique challenges of businesses operating in a global marketplace. Knowing the language well enough to adjust your communication from professional to sensitive can help develop relationships to increase foreign sales;
- inclusion: When you allow your employees to speak in a language other than English to staff and to customers, they feel valued and respected and it gives them a chance to practice their language skills.

As successive governments have acknowledged, there are benefits for society in terms of international trade, diplomacy and defence, marketing of goods, and cultural experiences. And here retention of heritage languages is of importance.

It is clear, that the capacity for Australians to build deeper ties around the world will be hampered if there is not an increase in proficiency of languages other than English.

### **4. What is the level of heritage language maintenance in Australia?**

So, what is the level of heritage language maintenance in our communities?

On one hand, the 2016 Census showed that the largest pre- and post-war migrant communities, such as Italian, German, Greek, Dutch and Polish communities, continue to exist and that they are well organised and active despite that immigration stopped and most of their members were born in Australia.

On the other hand, however, the 2016 Census indicated that the retention of heritage languages is not that great.

One of the largest and oldest were Australians of German ancestry, numbering almost a million. More than 800,690 were born in Australia, and 1.7 per cent spoke German at home.

The Dutch were mainly post-war migrants and of the almost 230,000 people who were born in Australia, 2.1 per cent spoke Dutch at home.

Similarly, many of the Polish were also post-war migrants, though there were earlier waves and a later one in the 1980s. More than 112,000 were born in Australia and 9.5 per cent spoke Polish at home.

For a long time, the largest non-Anglo-Celtic ancestry group in Australia were people of Italian ancestry, now numbering more than a million. More than 760,000 were born in Australia and 14 per cent of them spoke Italian at home.

However, the relatively high rate of language retention amongst the Greek community sounds like an exception that confirms the rule. Like most of the others, many of the Greek were also post-war migrants. Almost 280,000 were born in Australia and 42 per cent of them spoke Greek at home. This could be perhaps explained by the links between culture and language and reflects the role of the Greek Orthodox Church in everyday life of the community.

## **5.0 Where do we go from here?**

I believe proficiency in more than one language is a basic skill of the 21st century.

I acknowledge the current government's efforts in support of an increase in teaching and learning other languages including priority languages that reflect those nations where many opportunities will be, such as Chinese (Mandarin), Hindi, Indonesian and Japanese.

However, relying on the language capabilities of Asian-Australians and other migrants in the medium to long term for all of Australia's relationships and engagement will not be adequate.

More needs to be done to utilise the enormous language diversity of Australia to harness the benefits of our diversity that we have in our nation. Attention needs to be given to ensure the survival of heritage languages.

And the responsibility for harnessing language diversity stays with all of us. It starts at home with parents passing the knowledge of their mother language to their children, at the NGO level with awareness raising and advocacy and at all levels of government – federal, state and local.

Over many decades and various Commonwealth, state and territory government ministers of education have made commitments to the vision of quality languages education for all students across the country. I also appreciate that the education sector has made some headway in integrating 'heritage' languages into the national curriculum.

### **5.1 At National Level**

Additional languages brought into Australia by migrants form a valuable base from which to forge the linguistic capabilities necessary for Australia to succeed in the 21st century.

The Australian federal government is well placed to provide clear national direction and leadership to build further on diverse linguistic and cultural environment.

Currently in the Australian Curriculum, the English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) program recognises the maintenance of the home language of EAL/D students is important for their English language learning as well as for the preservation and development of their cultural identities and family relationships.

Even better, EAL/D students are an important resource in developing the language awareness of all students in the classroom.

In addition, the Languages Program in the Australian Curriculum is designed to enable all students in Australia to learn a language in addition to English.

Importantly, the Languages program recognises the unique status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages as the languages of the first peoples of Australia. It also discusses the benefits of the study of classical languages and Auslan.

However, I am very concerned that Australian students and undergraduates have lower participation rates in second language learning than any other OECD country, (Djite 2011) perhaps resting on assurances of English as a global commodity.

Furthermore, research indicates that language education in the 21st century is central to the assistance of students in their efforts to become successful learners, confident and creative individuals as well as active and informed citizens in a knowledge society (Kalantzis and Cope 2012).

To arrest the decline in language education, according to Lo Bianco (2009) a holistic and more comprehensive approach to language learning demands a new strategy with new arguments that extend beyond elitist notions or the economic rationale of language study, to meet broader and realistic cultural, intellectual and humanistic communications.

Quality language teaching has the potential to deepen intercultural understanding and awareness, stimulate reflexivity and communicative skills, and 'foster more reflective and imaginative dispositions in citizens, as well as the principles of democratic discourse, participation and opportunity (Lo Bianco 2009, p 64).

The recent Select Committee on Strengthening Multiculturalism Report headed by Richard Di Natale suggested the curriculum could include compulsory language education for students at both the primary and secondary school level, delivered through the Australian Curriculum.

Recognising the breadth of languages now spoken across Australia, several witnesses to the recent Senate inquiry suggested the development of a national policy on languages.

In their report, the committee recognised the social and economic value of a multilingual Australia, noting that embracing the diversity of languages already present in Australian society provides a tangible opportunity to not simply tolerate other cultures, but to recognise the inherent skills they contribute to Australia.



The committee encouraged the Australian Government to consider developing a national policy on language education.

I strongly agree with FECCA's view to the Senate inquiry committee that a national language policy encompassing language rights, language maintenance and language study has the potential to enrich Australia's economic, social and intellectual dividends.

## **5.2 At State and Territory Level**

It is accepted that language education requires pro-active support within schools to enable students to maintain and take pride in their languages, and firmly believe it needs to take place as much more than a transitional strategy.

In Australia, State and Territory governments have the prime responsibility for the delivery of language education at primary and secondary level and for decision making about the way languages are taught in schools.

I am aware of several schools around the country that facilitate a bilingual education program in languages such as French, Italian and Chinese. In schools that actively support language teaching, students' experience is an outcome of well-designed and supported language programs and they are taught by well trained and supported language teachers.

However, the overall share of Australian students studying languages in well-resourced facilities is small and has fallen in recent times. Regretfully, the number of Australian language students does not approach the numbers of second language students being achieved in most highly developed education systems around the world. As a result, non-Australian students are proficient in more than one language by the time they finish school, and many are proficient in three.

Some current state government education policies aim to address this language learning failure, although there may be a lag between planning and implementation.

For example, the Victorian Government's Vision for Languages Education 2013–2025 states that it is time to give all Victorian young people a real chance to learn an additional language and become genuine citizens of the world.

The Victorian Vision for Languages Education sets ambitious goals, such as:

- by the time they turn 15 in 2025, young people will have received 11 years of high quality, continuous languages education; and
- that one in four will continue studying languages at senior secondary level.

I am delighted to see such goals emerging in education policies and will watch the progress to achieve them with interest.

## **4.3 Local Government and Community Level**

Finally, I wish to acknowledge the growing role of local government in facilitating language education. Here I need to mention that I have been recently invited to

assist with the development of the 'Welcoming Cities' program that aims to open regional Australia to new settlers.

Many regional leaders have already shown strong leadership as one way to build community support and welcome newcomers.

Many of you will be familiar with the success story of the Karen-Burmese resettlement in Nhill, Victoria, due in large part to employment opportunities for Karen-Burmese refugees at Luv-a-Duck, a factory that supplies duck meat to the Australian market. The mayor spent time learning the Karen language, and he has spoken at events where he spoke first in Karen and then in English. He dressed up in traditional Karen clothing, as well.

That leadership was vital to getting the community behind the idea that they have new migrants coming in and that this is something to be celebrated.

It is a continually evolving story, and the Shire has now issued a Karen Community plan in two languages and employed a Karen man as liaison officer. These days, the shire office staff wear name tags in both English and Karen. These actions must be so empowering for the Karen speaking community members and useful for the whole community.

But leadership and goodwill alone may not be enough to secure long-term success. Some additional government resources may be needed.

## **6.0 Conclusion**

Australia's diversity is continually evolving with new waves of migration and settlement. FECCA's recent consultation on new and emerging languages found that, with the diversity of Australia's population only increasing, a solution to address language services needs for emerging languages must be sustainable, flexible and forward looking.

We should embrace the non-English languages migrants brought to Australia and we should teach the languages to all Australian children. Only in this way, can we truly harness the benefits of our national diversity.

A National Policy on Languages would assist with the implementation of the Government's productivity agenda, by not only encouraging second and third generation migrants to maintain their language skill base but also introducing native English speakers to the transformative power associated with learning another language.

This would be particularly welcomed by community language schools, especially those run by the more established migrant communities.

There are benefits of language education to personal growth, community and family cohesion and to our economy. It is time for Australia to embrace our existing and future language diversity to reach our full potential.

## Bibliography

Audiopedia, *What is HERITAGE LANGUAGE?* Video. (4min 18sec). Accessed 10 October 2017. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDLi8rAhWks>

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2017. *Census reveals a fast changing, culturally diverse nation*. Accessed 10 October 2017. Available from: <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/lookup/Media%20Release3>

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017. *2016 Census reveals the changing face of the Northern Territory*. Accessed 10 October 2017. Available from: <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs%40.nsf/mediareleasesbyCatalogue/C73D7CC81CA1FD2FCA258148000A4067?OpenDocument>

Australian Government Department of Social Security (DSS) 2017, *Multicultural Australia – United, Strong, Successful*, viewed 10 October 2017  
[https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/03\\_2017/multicultural\\_policy\\_2017.pdf](https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/03_2017/multicultural_policy_2017.pdf)

Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. (1997). *Productive diversity: a new, Australian model for work and management*. Sydney: Pluto Press.

Cox, Fletcher D & Sisk, Timothy D. (2017). *Peacebuilding in Deeply Divided Societies*. Melbourne Australia

Djité, P.G. 2011. *Language policy in Australia: What goes up must come down?. In Uniformity and diversity in language policy: Global perspectives*. Bristol

Kalantzis, Mary & Cope, Bill, (2012). *Literacies*. Port Melbourne, Vic.

Kelleher, Ann. (2010) *What is a Heritage Language?* Heritage Briefs, Centre for Applied Linguistics. Washington DC, USA. <http://www.cal.org/heritage/pdfs/briefs/What-is-a-Heritage-Language.pdf>; accessed on 10 October 2017

Lo Bianco, Joseph (2009). *Second Languages and Australian Schooling*. Melbourne Vic.

Portes, Alejandro, and Rubén G. Rumbaut (2001). *Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS)*, 1991-2006. ICPSR20520-v2. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research

Ramjee, Priti *What Are the Benefits of Multilingualism in the Workplace?*, The Nest, <http://woman.thenest.com/benefits-multilingualism-workplace-18282.html>, accessed 27 September 2017

Tajfel, H & Turner, Jonathan. (1979). *An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict. The social psychology of intergroup relations*. University of Bristol, England