21. Language

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It is well understood that Australia's Indigenous languages are endangered, with even the strongest languages having only some few thousand speakers (McConvell & Thieberger 2003; Schmidt 1990). The NATSISS can provide a process whereby data on language use and rates of language loss are gathered as evidence for the implementation and support of language maintenance programs. In this paper, we discuss the application of NATSISS as such an instrument.

This paper is divided into three main sections. In the first section, the questions on language that were asked in the 2002 NATSISS are discussed. Then the 2002 NATSISS evidence on the status and viability of the Indigenous languages of Australia is reviewed. The final section focuses on the issue of whether Indigenous language speakers differ significantly from other Indigenous people in terms of their education and labour force status.

The language questions in 2002 NATSISS

The 2002 NATSISS questionnaires asked the following language-related questions:

Q01LANG: Which language do you mainly speak at home?

1. English
2. Aboriginal language
3. Torres Strait Islander language
4. Other language

Those who answered 2 or 3 were then sequenced past the next question (presumably on the assumption that the answer was self-evident):

Q02LANG: Do you speak any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander languages?

1. Yes
2. Yes, some words only
3. No

The next question was asked of everyone:

Q03LANG: When you go to a service or office where only English is spoken, do you have problems with:

1. Understanding people there?
2. People there understanding you?
3. Neither

The final question in the language module varied in its form between the 'non-remote' and the 'remote' questionnaires. On the 'non-remote', the question was asked of those who had answered either 1 and/or 2 to the previous question. Its form was:

Q04LANG: Do you ever need someone to go with you to help you understand?

On the remote area questionnaire, the final question was asked of those who had answered 3 to the previous question. Its form was:

Q04LANG: Is that because you take somebody to help you understand?

This difference is interesting: it is assumed that a person in a non-remote area will only answer 'neither' if it is really true that they have no difficulty in being understood or in making themselves understood, whereas in remote areas the assumption is that a 'neither' answer does not necessarily rule out the possibility of communication difficulties.

There is one other question in which language featured:

Q01CULT: Do you identify with a tribal group, a language group, or a clan?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't know

It is notable that many more people, in all areas of Australia, answered yes to this question than claimed to speak an Indigenous language (IL).

In the 2002 NATSISS glossary (ABS 2004c: 73) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are defined as those in the Australian Indigenous languages group of the *Australian Standard Classification of Languages* (ABS 1997). This list includes the Australian creole languages Kriol and Torres Strait Creole. Oceanic pidgins and creoles and 'Aboriginal English' are explicitly excluded in the glossary. Bill Arthur has drawn our attention to language data on Torres Strait Islander language use which calls into question the manner in which this definition was applied in the field. For Torres Strait Islanders who did not speak English at home, particularly those living in Torres Strait, the 'other' category is suspiciously high, and the 'Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Language' category is suspiciously low. It looks very much as if Torres Strait Creole was usually categorised as 'other' rather than as a Torres Strait language. It is not possible to check whether something similar happened with Kriol, because its speakers do not form a distinct sub-set of the population in the way that Torres Strait Islanders do. The suspicion is that Kriol was sometimes classified as 'Aboriginal English' (see discussion in section three of the paper). This is likely, given the difficulty some Indigenous people have with self-definition in terms of language 'mainly' spoken. It might also reflect a lack of sociolinguistic knowledge among interviewers. Since Kriol is an Aboriginal language, distinct

from English, we must conclude that the number of speakers of Indigenous languages in the Northern Territory and Western Australia is underestimated in NATSISS. Ironically, the two creole languages of Australia are probably, in terms of numbers of speakers, the two largest Indigenous languages of the continent.

The first point to be made is that the questions asked do not correlate well with those that were asked about language use in the 2001 Census, making it difficult to compare the two data sets in any meaningful way. We return to this issue below.

The posing of two questions in the 2002 NATSISS—one on language use at home (asked first) and one about speaking an Indigenous language or languages—is a good idea in principle, for reasons that will be discussed at some length below. However, the alternatives allowed for in question 02 do not necessarily allow for accurate responses. There are many degrees of language competence between full, fluent command of a language and knowing only a few words, and many Indigenous people are likely to fall somewhere on the continuum between the two extremes. It would be better to distinguish fluent from partial command of a language, and between the ability to speak and the ability to 'understand' a language, in addition to the final option of knowing only a few words, as the data give no indication of the numbers of people who may understand an Indigenous language well without actually being able to speak it. If the Indigenous language is not used at home, it might also be useful to have a question regarding with whom speakers use the Indigenous language (see McConvell & Thieberger 2001).

Although questions 01 and 02 appear to be quite straightforward, in remote communities it is not unusual to encounter people who would have difficulty identifying whether they speak either English or an Indigenous language. This is particularly true in situations where the language is shifting and people regularly code-switch depending on who they are talking to at home or in the broader community. For example, even at home, people may code-switch between a strongly English-based dialect when talking to some relatives, then change register and use a more complex version of the Indigenous language when talking to someone else. Language status, identity and context are other factors which predetermine how people would answer questions 01 and 02, irrespective of how fully they speak either language. In addition, the answers may differ according to where and with whom the questions are asked.

These comments are predicated on the assumption that the 2002 NATSISS questions about language are designed to gather sociocultural data on language use and rates of language loss or maintenance. However, it could be conjectured that these questions are designed mainly with a different set of issues in mind, and clues to this are the final questions on communication difficulties. There is

an inherent tendency to create problems out of Indigenous language use as a barrier to communication with mainstream agencies, rather than viewing it as a (valuable) component of a person's cultural identity.

Questions 03 and 04 raise further complexities. The underlying assumptions in the questions are too broad. In many service or office contexts, people may have sufficient spoken Standard Australian English (SAE) to comprehend and participate in the everyday 'over the counter' spoken exchanges and would therefore answer 'neither'. The question does not, however, allow for a complex explanation of the range of difficulties that may be encountered when the spoken English becomes more bureaucratic, lexically dense or context-specific, depending on the situation. The questions also do not distinguish between problems with spoken English and problems with literacy. It is quite typical for Aboriginal people from remote communities to have a high level of competence in listening and speaking in English as a second language and be able to participate in complex spoken interactions, yet be unable to read or fill in forms independently. It is more likely that people in this situation would need someone to accompany them to assist with any potential reading and writing difficulties, as much as with understanding spoken English. They may also need help with accessing touch screen information, such as at a Centrelink office.

Is there a future for Indigenous languages?

In his comments on the language questions in the 1994 NATSIS, Nic Peterson considered that the figures 'hold out some hope for the future' of Indigenous languages (Peterson 1996: 153). Since there seems to be no significant difference (see Table 21.1) in the numbers of people reporting that they speak an Indigenous language in the 2002 NATSISS, it is tempting to conclude that this comment still holds. However, the questions asked in both 1994 and 2002 allow for some more detailed scrutiny of people's language use, and lead to a less sanguine conclusion.

Table 21.1. Those who speak an Indigenous language by State, 1994 and 2002

	1994	2002
State/ Territory	%	%
Northern Territory	74	76.6
South Australia	23	31.4
Western Australia	21	27.3
Queensland	15	15.2
Total	21	21.1

Source: The 1994 data are from Peterson (1996: 152) and the 2002 data are from ABS (2004c: Table 2)

A language remains viable in the long term only so long as children continue to learn it as their first language. [1] Children will only learn a language as their first

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[1] The absolute number of speakers is not necessarily significant, provided that other social factors work in favour of a language's continued existence: in pre-colonial times (as in Papua New Guinea, where

language if it is the language mainly used at home by the adults and older children in the household. Both the 1994 NATSIS and the 2002 NATSISS, importantly, asked not only whether people spoke an Indigenous language but also what language was used mainly at home—see the endangerment index proposed in the State of Indigenous Languages (SOIL) report (McConvell & Thieberger 2001). Table 21.2 tabulates the 2002 NATSISS results by State.

Table 21.2. Those whose main language at home is an Indigenous language, by state, 2002

| | State/Territory | | | | | | | | |
| | NT | SA | WA | QLD | ACT | VIC | NSW | TAS | Total |
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Speaks an Indigenous language	76.6	31.4	27.3	15.2	10.7	7.8	3.2 [a]	1.2 [a]	21.1
Aboriginal language is main language spoken at home	63.0	12.1 [b]	11.4	1.7 [a]	1.2 [b]	0.5 [b]	0.1 [b]	c	10.9
TSI language is main language spoken at home	0.2 [b]	0.3 [b]	0.1 [b]	3.8 [a]	c	0.7 [b]	0.1 [b]	c	1.2

a. Estimate has a relative standard error of 25% to 50% and should be used with caution.
b. Estimate has a standard error greater than 50% and is considered too unreliable for general use.
c. Nil or rounded to zero (including null cells).
Source: ABS (2004c: Table 2)

Several points can be made about Table 21.2. The first is that data on language use in those areas where very few people speak an Indigenous language is subject to high standard errors and is essentially unusable. In the rest of this discussion, the less fine-grained division between remote and non-remote will mainly be used as the basis for comparison. However, even bearing in mind this proviso, two things are clear. Firstly, it is only in very remote Australia (predominantly the NT and remote SA, WA and QLD) that a significant number of people speak an Indigenous language. This is a reflection of past colonial circumstances across the country, and is not unexpected. The second and more worrying fact is that levels of Indigenous language use in the home are significantly lower in all cases except in the Northern Territory. Even there, 13 per cent of those who speak an Indigenous language are not using it as the main language in the home, and are therefore not passing on that language as a first language to the younger generations. According to the ABS (2004c: 31), the numbers of people who use an Indigenous language at home has not changed significantly since the 1994

one-quarter of the world's languages are spoken) many Indigenous Australian languages would have had no more than 200 speakers (see e.g. Blake 1981: 43).

NATSIS. However, if these figures—both in 1994 and 2002—are a true reflection of language use at home, we can expect to see the numbers of people who claim to speak an Indigenous language beginning to fall in subsequent surveys, as the cohort now aged below 15 years begins to figure significantly in the data.

The 2002 NATSISS (and its predecessor, the 1994 NATSIS) did not collect data at the level of actual languages used, unlike the 2001 Census. Unfortunately, the census question on language does not produce data that is strictly comparable with the data collected in the 2002 NATSISS. NATSISS asks two main questions: whether a person speaks an Indigenous language, and what the main language is that is spoken at home. The census asks only one question that varies according to whether the Special Indigenous form was used or not, and only asks about language use at home. The word 'main' is missing from the census language questions, so that arguably the responses to this question and the 2002 NATSISS question on language use in the home could elicit different answers from individuals living in households where more than one language is commonly spoken.

The census also asks the respondent to give the name of the language spoken at home. The 2002 NATSISS does not—presumably because this fine-grained level of detail would not produce statistically robust results. Because the census questions differ from those of NATSISS, it is unfortunately not possible to use census data on individual languages to determine whether it is all languages that are undergoing death by slow attrition, or whether some languages are thriving, relatively speaking, while others are on their way out. The latter scenario is the more probable. The NATSISS data, because they are not fine-grained, tend to give a superficial impression of gradual decline overall, whereas in reality selective language death probably continues apace. This has obvious policy implications at a local level, but NATSISS data cannot help to pinpoint the areas of difference at that level.

The NATSISS questions provide two other windows on language use and potential changes in use. One is the possibility of correlating the language data with the age data. The results are given in Table 21.3.

Table 21.3. Knowledge and use of Indigenous language by age group

| | Age | | | | | |
| | 15–24 | 25–34 | 35–54 | 45–54 | 55 + | Total |
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Speaks an Indigenous language	18.2	22.3	21.8	19.5	26.1	21.1
Aboriginal language is main language spoken at home	10.0	12.1	10.0	9.7	13.4	10.9
TSI language is main language spoken at home	1.1[a]	0.8[a]	1.6[a]	1.0[a]	1.3[b]	1.2

a. Estimate has a relative standard error of 25% to 50% and should be used with caution.
b. Estimate has a standard error greater than 50% and is considered too unreliable for general use.
Source: ABS (2004c: Table 3)

This is the national picture, and it would have been desirable to break this table down by remoteness as well. At the national level, it is not possible to conclude much from this Table, except that those aged 55+ are more likely to speak an Indigenous language than those in younger cohorts, and that they are also somewhat more likely to be living in a household where the main language spoken is an Indigenous language. As far as it goes, this seems to fit with the other data on the attrition of Indigenous languages.

The other measure of possible language change is given by the additional question where people could report that they 'speak some Indigenous words only'. As noted above, the bipartite division between 'speaks a language' and 'speaks some words only' is a somewhat crude measure of language capacity—there are many intermediate stages between full fluency and the retention of a few words. Despite that caveat, the comparative results from these two questions are suggestive. Table 21.4 shows this comparison, broken down into remote versus non-remote areas.

Table 21.4. Language fluency, by remoteness category

| | Remote | Non-remote | Total |
	%	%	%
Speaks an Indigenous language	54.2	8.6	21.1
Speaks some Indigenous words only	17.3	23.8	22.0
Does not speak an Indigenous language	28.5	67.6	56.9

Source: ABS (2004c: Table 12)

The remote and non-remote columns display, essentially, two stages in the process of language loss. In non-remote Australia, Indigenous languages are largely defunct, especially if the numbers of people who speak one as a main language at home is a guide to the long-term viability of a language (see Table

21.2). However, a substantial proportion of people (nearly one-quarter) still know some words from one or more Indigenous languages, and in all probability use them in their variety of 'Aboriginal English' or SAE. These words may remain in use for some time to come as a badge of Indigenous identity. Over two-thirds of Indigenous people in non-remote areas do not even claim to know any words from an Indigenous language (they may know some, but may not be aware of their origin). In remote areas, over half of Indigenous people still claim to speak an Indigenous language, a substantial number (17.3%) say they speak some words only, and a more substantial number (28.5%) claim not to speak an Indigenous language. Had NATSISS questions been asked 100 years ago in non-remote Australia, the results might well have been similar to those for remote areas today, and there is a prospect that in 100 years from now the picture for remote Australia will be similar to that for non-remote Australia today.

Are speakers of Indigenous languages different from other Indigenous people?

We have already seen one way in which Indigenous language speakers differ from other Indigenous Australians: they are concentrated overwhelmingly in remote Australia. Are they indistinguishable from other remote Indigenous people, or do they form a distinctive sub-set of that population? In the following comparisons, we treat all Indigenous language speakers as if they were remote dwellers and compare them to the remote population as a whole.

Level of schooling

To be fully interpretable, the populations shown in Table 21.5 would have to be broken down by age. But if that were done, the raw numbers in each cell would make the data statistically unreliable. It would appear that Indigenous language speakers are significantly less likely than the remote population as a whole to complete high school (or even to attend school, since the first column includes those who never went to school).

Table 21.5. Educational attainment: Indigenous language versus remote areas

	Year 9 or below	Year 10/11	Year 12
	%	%	%
Indigenous language speakers	29.8	17.6	15.5
Remote total	46.1	28.2	8.5

Source: Customised cross-tabulations from the 2002 NATSISS CURF

There is a somewhat unexpected reversal shown in the final column, where Indigenous language speakers appear to be more likely to finish Year 12 than the remote population as a whole. Quantifying educational attainment data in remote and very remote Australia is complex and tells us little, unless it is broken down by age and region and also accompanied by sociocultural information

pertaining to that region. For example, compulsory schooling came relatively late to many remote Aboriginal regions, so there has been minimal transmission of the culture of formal schooling, and in some places there is still little access to secondary education, making comparisons with other data questionable. Experience has shown that some Aboriginal people in remote Australia have difficulty identifying what year level they completed, as completed credentials are rare and the English nomenclatures may be meaningless for a few reasons. Firstly, the use of the terms Year 9, Year 10, etc may not be commonly recognised, particularly by people who went to high school when the descriptors differed (Form 3, Form 4, etc). Secondly, many people who went to school as teenagers may have been to school up to say age 15, but their actual academic level was most likely much lower than their mainstream age counterparts. Also, in many places teenagers are often grouped together in collective 'post-primary' classes and sometimes leave school not knowing what year level they have attained. See Morphy (2002: 47) for comments on difficulties with the 'education' questions in the 2001 Census in an outstation community in the Northern Territory, and Kral (forthcoming) for self-definition of educational attainment in very remote communities.

A final point from our experience in gathering such data in remote communities is that many people have finished school around age 12 and it is not uncommon for people to answer '12' and for interviewers to erroneously interpret this as Year 12. This alerts us to the linguistic and cultural complexities embedded in the survey itself that cannot be ameliorated simply by using interpreters.

Labour force status

In this section we make a distinction between very remote areas where CDEP is the main employer and remote areas where non-CDEP mainstream employment is available (see Table 21.6). In both remote and very remote areas, Indigenous language speakers are more likely to be on CDEP than those who do not speak an Indigenous language. In remote areas, those who speak only some Indigenous words are intermediate between the other two categories, but in very remote areas they are even more likely to be on CDEP than those who speak an Indigenous language. We return to that slight puzzle below. Overall, people in remote Australia are much less likely to be on CDEP (16.9%) than they are in very remote Australia (42.2%). In both areas, speakers of Indigenous languages are less likely to have a non-CDEP job than are their counterparts who speak only some words or who do not speak an Indigenous language. Rates of official unemployment are generally lower in very remote Australia than in remote Australia, and the lowest rate of unemployment is among Indigenous language speakers in very remote areas. Finally, relatively more Indigenous language speakers in both types of area are 'not in the labour force' compared to their counterparts in the other two categories.

This somewhat complex picture probably results from the interaction of several factors. CDEP clearly has a more prominent role in very remote Australia than in remote Australia, and this is almost certainly partly due to the dearth of non-CDEP jobs. It also seems to take up more of the unemployment 'slack' in very remote areas. Altman, Gray and Levitus (2005: 9), in their discussion of the profile of CDEP participants, note that 'CDEP participants are more likely to speak an Indigenous language than the mainstream employed', and that this holds in all areas, not just in remote and very remote areas. They equate Indigenous language speakers with the category 'more traditionally-oriented' people who have 'strong maintenance of customary practices', and note that CDEP seems to be popular with this category of people. Elsewhere, Altman (2005a) and Arthur (2002) both attribute this to the flexibility of CDEP, which allows people to continue to maintain non-work related aspects of their lives, particularly their ceremonial obligations and their subsistence hunting and gathering activities.

Table 21.6. Whether speaks an Indigenous language (remote versus very remote areas), by labour force status

	Remote			**Very remote**		
	Speaks an Indigenous language	Speaks only some Indigenous words	Not an Indigenous language speaker	Speaks an Indigenous language	Speaks only some Indigenous words	Not an Indigenous language speaker
Employed: CDEP (%)	25.5	18.4	10.9	41.9	48.6	38.0
Employed: non-CDEP (%)	17.0	36.2	39.0	10.7	20.2*	24.2**
Total employed (%)	42.5	54.6	49.9	52.6	68.8	62.1
Unemployed (%)	10.2	13.6*	8.5	3.8	4.4	6.0**
Total in the labour force (%)	52.7	68.2	58.4	56.4	73.3	68.1
Not in the labour force (%)	47.3	31.8	41.6	43.6	26.7	31.9

Source: Customised cross-tabulations from the 2002 NATSISS CURF

The category 'not an Indigenous language speaker' in very remote areas shows a somewhat unexpectedly large proportion of people on CDEP. We suspect that this is because of the failure to distinguish Kriol speakers consistently as speakers of an Indigenous language. As a result, in very remote areas, the category 'not an Indigenous language speaker' may in fact conceal two very distinct sub-populations. These are local Kriol or Aboriginal English speakers who are on CDEP and speakers of more SAE, some of whom may well be from interstate or have returned to traditional homelands after growing up elsewhere. In some very remote communities CDEP is virtually the only employment option, so the CDEP category embraces all 'workers' irrespective of language spoken or prior educational qualifications.

Conclusion

The Indigenous Australian population is, statistically speaking, quite small. It is characterised by its diversity, which has multiple origins. Firstly, it was always diverse. Secondly, it experienced the colonisation of the continent in very different ways and at different times. Thirdly, the variable effects of social engineering (by missionaries, government officials, industry, successive changes in state policy, and so on) have had significant and sometimes different local impacts. What we have, in effect, is multiple sub-populations. The data on language, at least, suggest that treating the current Indigenous population as a homogeneous entity that is amenable to standard sampling techniques—particularly when the sample chosen is rather small—is perhaps an intrinsically flawed endeavour. This is particularly so when the methodological requirements for sensitivity to the linguistic and cultural complexities may be unattainable. This paper seeks also to show that much of the decontextualised information attained using a survey such as NATSISS is only minimally useful when disassociated from the particular social, cultural and historical factors of each context. A sample survey like NATSISS can throw up questions for further detailed research, but it cannot of itself produce data that is meaningful at a level where it could be the basis for the coherent development of policy. More in-depth and comprehensive information about the status of Indigenous languages should therefore be sought in the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS)/Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages (FATSIL) National Indigenous Language Survey (AIATSIS/FATSIL 2005).