

## PERCEPTIONS OF HISTORICAL LANGUAGE NORMS AND POLICIES: WANGKATHA AND THE MT MARGARET MISSION

Full presentation

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This paper presents a typology of Aboriginal perspectives on language norms at Mt Margaret Mission and their effects on the current sociolinguistic situation, and attempts to account for the variation therein. Schmidt (1990: 12) identifies the dormitory system during the Stolen Generation era, in which Aboriginal children were taken from their parents and were permitted only limited contact with them, as a major contributor to Aboriginal language loss. Aboriginal Kalgoorlie-Boulder, largely comprised of former residents of the Mt Margaret Mission settlement and their descendents, have varied perspectives on the issue.

The Wangkatha consultants interviewed for this research view mission life alternately as detrimental to Aboriginal identity and supportive of social cohesion; as ground zero in an act of outright linguicide and the home of irrepressible retention of Aboriginal language. Similar superficially contradictory views are found in the literature (e.g. Swain 1988; Schmidt 1990; Hill 2002). This typology of perceived and documented sociolinguistic facts reminds us that, as Woolard and Schieffelin (1994: 58) note, "cultural frames have social histories". Language beliefs, attitudes and ideologies as they currently exist have been shaped not only by personal experience, but also by perceptions of the sociolinguistic environment in past and present and individual reactions to those perceptions.

In order to capture this variation in opinion, the data for this paper were collected in semi-structured qualitative interviews with a diverse set of Aboriginal consultants of wide-ranging ages, economic standings, and educational backgrounds. Consultants were asked to discuss their personal histories, their language backgrounds, and their current beliefs and attitudes about language-related phenomena.

Mt Margaret residents hailed from various Goldfields groups, each with its own affiliations and associated speech varieties. Within the polyglossia of Mt Margaret, these distinctions waned - English was the dominant (H) language of the area, while Aboriginal languages, primarily the unifying 'Wangkatha' dialect, were (L) languages. This difference in status is often blamed for contributing to the abandonment of Aboriginal language and culture, but also contributed to the maintenance of the 'covert prestige' variety - Wangkatha.

Language norms and policies in Mt Margaret clearly inhibited the transmission of the diversity of heritage languages to children. This general view, taken up in language revitalisation literature (e.g. McKay, 1996), is also strongly argued by consultants who are more politically active in the Kalgoorlie-Boulder area. Some who grew up in the Mission, however, share a more nuanced view in which the mission settlement constituted a complex sociolinguistic situation where a more unified (albeit western-influenced) pan-Goldfields culture and language was actually strengthened.

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