

## GROWING UP ON A MULTILINGUAL CULTURE

It is often not well appreciated, either by academics or lay people, just how gifted Aboriginal people were as linguists. It tends to be commonly assumed that this must be some sort of innate ability, but it was not. It was because their culture brought them up that way.

From the earliest ages, Aboriginal children were trained to listen and to replicate sounds. Not just the sounds of birds and animals, but also of different human accents and mannerisms. One of the first Aboriginal words I learned was 'Binnung' which means 'listen' or 'pay attention'. It was not said sternly, but was nonetheless authoritative, and meant 'Pay attention because I am going to tell you something you need to know'.

So Aboriginal children paid close attention, because they knew that either next day, next week or next month, there would be a test. The Elder would ask "Do you remember what I told you?" and if you couldn't answer correctly, he or she would say 'I'll tell you again'. Children were never told 'No, that's wrong' and were only given positive reinforcement.

But apart from having specific listening and sound replication skills encouraged from the earliest ages, so too was a strong respect for language difference. This meant that you needed to replicate regional accents of the same language. For instance, if you go to England, you can detect different accents in speaking English, between towns that are maybe only twenty miles apart. This is of course on top of the distinct regional accents of say Cornwall, Wales, Yorkshire and Birmingham.

Well, Aboriginal people would be able to fastidiously replicate every one of them without missing a beat, because that is how they are brought up. It even went so far that if you mispronounced a word in their language, you would not be corrected, they would just use your mispronounced word back to you so you wouldn't be embarrassed.

This respect for and protection of language is shown by the custom when for instance, if a man was to marry a woman from another tribe and he could not speak her language. He would have to go and live with her tribe until he spoke her language perfectly. Then, after they were married he would only be allowed to talk with his wife in her language and she to him in his language.

This meant that there was always a bilingual conversation going on, and their children therefore grew up bilingual, talking to their mother in her language and their father in his. Then, if a friend arrived who spoke a different language again, it would end up being a three-way conversation.

This linguistic capability of Aboriginal is sometimes noticed and commented on by Europeans. However, on other occasions it is either not noticed, dismissed as being akin to the copying ability of a cockatoo, or otherwise, just disbelieved. I can give some examples of each of these scenarios.

For instance, when French explorers of the late 1700's landed in Tasmania, Aboriginal people came to find out what was going on. In trying to communicate with them, the explorers noted with some astonishment, that after a few minutes the Aboriginal people started using French words back to them, and clearly showed that they understood what the French were conveying.

However, the response of the British from the First Fleet was a little different. Very early, an Aboriginal named Arabanoo was captured and put in leg-irons. This was so he couldn't run away, and Captain Phillip could befriend him. Nobody saw fit to comment that within a few days Arabanoo was speaking English quite well and told them he was quite enjoying himself and they didn't need the leg irons.

It is noteworthy that after five years in Australia, not one of the colonists was fluent in Aboriginal language, whereas Aboriginal people started communicating in English within a matter of days.

Another example of Aboriginal linguistic ability is when John Batman arrived at Geelong in May 1835. Accompanying him were seven Aboriginal men from Sydney, who were acting as guides and interpreters. When they engaged with some locals, Batman noted in his diary that they seemed to be able to make themselves well understood to the local natives. This ability was no doubt also aided by the fact that Aboriginal tribes share an essentially a universal sign language.

However, I happened not long ago to read an article by an academic historian, who after quoting Batman's diary entry, made the comment to the effect that 'This seems unlikely as the men from Sydney spoke a completely different language.'

No doubt the historian considered that he was making an 'objective' judgement about the situation. However, it only goes to show how much cultural blindness, and indeed unconscious cultural arrogance, can underlie the opinions of many respected academics.