

Chapter 4

They don't speak an Aboriginal language, or do they?

This chapter was first published in 1988 in a book focused on Aboriginal identity in 'settled Australia' (edited by Ian Keen). Keen used the term 'settled Australia' to refer to the 'closely settled regions of Australia' in which Aboriginal life has been 'most radically transformed by people of European origin' (p. 1), following Rowley (1971). Focusing on people living in Southeast Queensland, this chapter provides sociolinguistic evidence of Aboriginal social life and culture. It highlights the importance of indirectness in many daily interactions, looking specifically at how people use English for these communicative functions: seeking and giving information; making and refusing requests; and seeking and giving reasons for actions. This chapter largely ignores the ways in which bicultural Aboriginal people may interact with non-Aboriginal people, and it should not be read as describing the language and culture of all Aboriginal people in all parts of Australia.

4.1 Introduction¹

Growing numbers of people in 'settled' Australia who identify as Aboriginal speak varieties of English as their first language. The fact that such people speak little or none of their traditional Aboriginal languages is often used by non-Aboriginal people as evidence that these people are 'not really Aboriginal'. Thus the choice of language variety plays an important role in questions of Aboriginal identity, and therefore in issues of needs and rights in areas such as politics, land rights and education.

First published as Eades, D 1988, 'They don't speak an Aboriginal language, or do they?', in *Being black: Aboriginal cultures in 'settled' Australia*, ed. I Keen, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, pp. 97–115.

In this chapter, I draw on my research in Southeast Queensland, which sheds new light on the relationship between language and identity. While many Aboriginal people may speak English as their first language, the context of conversation has significant Aboriginal cultural and social aspects which lead to distinctively Aboriginal interpretations and meanings. While the chosen language code is frequently English, there are important continuities in the ways language is used. By focussing on aspects of language use I will illustrate some of these continuities, which are significant both in the issue of Aboriginal identity and also in developing more effective crosscultural communication.

Discussions of Aboriginal Australia in the discipline of sociolinguistics have mainly worked from the assumption that language reflects or expresses social and cultural realities. Studies have tended to be restricted to isolated topics in language use, most notably the two areas of kinship terminology and special language varieties. While these topics are important, a broader and interactive view of language illuminates new and important dimensions of cultural continuity. Interactional sociolinguistics works from the assumption that language is much more than a reflection or expression of society and culture; it is a dynamic and creative instrument of social action. Such a theoretical framework is a powerful tool in understanding why people interact with each other in the way they do, their intentions and interpretations. Such a theory can also explain aspects of crosscultural miscommunication in interactions where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal speakers are using varieties of English.

The framework of this chapter is ethnographically based interactional sociolinguistics. The ethnographic study of society is a necessary pre-requisite for understanding language. We need to understand the sociocultural contexts of speakers and situations, and look beyond isolated instances of language use to the use of language within interactions. Language is impossible to separate from context – it is continually both reflecting and creating aspects of context.

4.2 Aboriginal people in Southeast Queensland

Almost all Aboriginal people in Southeast Queensland today are of mixed descent, and there is still much intermarriage with non-Aborigines. Non-Aboriginal people frequently fail to see beyond skin colour and superficial aspects of lifestyle (including choice of language), and hence mistakenly assume that Aboriginal identity in areas like Southeast Queensland is largely tokenistic.

But the sense of Aboriginal identity remains strong. Although a few people (as elsewhere in Australia) have found it necessary to deny their Aboriginal identity and origins, publicly at least, in order to escape anti-Aboriginal discrimination, it is rare for Aboriginal people to renounce their responsibilities and rights in their Aboriginal society.

Aboriginal people in Southeast Queensland belong to overlapping kin-based networks sharing social life, responsibilities and rights, a common history and culture, an experience of racism, and ethnic consciousness. Social relations are characterised by ongoing family commitments within groups. Barwick's summary of Aboriginal identity (1974, p. 154; 1988) is highly appropriate here: 'To be Aboriginal is to be born to, to belong to, to be loyal to a family.' When people talk about being Aboriginal, they invariably talk about Aboriginal family relationships. Place of residence, travel, social networks, leisure activities and personal loyalties all revolve in some way around one's kin, as other authors in Keen (1988) have found. It is significant that Aboriginal kin involves a wide network of people, many of whom are related only distantly in non-Aboriginal terms.

One of the most important obligations or expectations of kin is that they maintain contact. Although people participate in mainstream Australian social life in many day-to-day activities, they place the highest priority on seeing relatives. The most serious complaints and accusations about people's behaviour usually concern some aspect of family interaction, such as: *She never visits her people*; or *He talks bad to [swears at] his mother when he is drunk*. Such interactional failings generally cause much more concern and bad feeling than incidents such as an illegitimate pregnancy, being sacked from a job, or failing an exam.

While the greatest responsibility is frequently to the nuclear family, family responsibilities are generally applied within a wide range of kin. This applies to the maintaining of social contacts, but also to such areas as the rearing of children, the support of ill or very old people, and the sharing of material resources.

There are many examples of the way in which the wages and benefit payments of Aboriginal individuals are shared between related households. Direct continuity can be seen from pre-contact times, when extended families were provided for by the labour of some of their members, and a young man killing a kangaroo, for example, would be obliged to share certain portions with specific kin. What is more significant than the extent to which resources such as money, housing and car are shared, is the expectation that they will be shared.

This is certainly an area in which both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians perceive a great cultural difference. It is impossible adequately to understand Aboriginal values, attitudes, intentions and actions without understanding the fundamental pivot of social relationships, particularly between relatives.

Many non-Aboriginal people, for example, find it hard to understand why Aboriginal households invariably have a television set (usually colour), despite serious poverty and extreme lack of material possessions in some instances. But this is an indication of the Aboriginal concern with entertainment not just as a private experience, but as a group activity, rather than, say, with labour saving devices or attractive furniture and furnishings. Perhaps a link could be drawn between contemporary Aboriginal television watching and pre-contact Aboriginal ceremonial life, in which there was generally great passive participation (Christie 1982). Contemporary Aboriginal television watching can also be described as passive participation in that people constantly interject during shows, address actors, and discuss programmes with each other.

Similarly, contemporary Aboriginal attitudes to employment need to be understood in the light of the priority on developing, maintaining and strengthening complex and overlapping social relationships. Aboriginal unemployment is high. Few Aboriginal people in Southeast Queensland subscribe to [the stereotypical Protestant] work ethic, and although many people are employed at times, their participation is often peripheral. Many place no importance on continual

When this chapter was first published (1988), many Australians could not afford a television, and many others could only afford a black-and-white set.

Aboriginal unemployment – while much worse than that of the general population – is not nearly as high in 2013 as it was twenty-five years ago when this chapter was first published, with the claim that ‘few Aboriginal people in Southeast Queensland subscribe to a work ethic’, meaning the stereotypical Protestant work ethic. Further, there have been, and continue to be, many sociopolitical factors involved in Aboriginal unemployment, as highlighted in Marcia Langton’s 2012 Boyer Lectures. While it is no longer accurate to say that ‘few Aboriginal people in Southeast Queensland subscribe to the stereotypical Protestant work ethic’, the generalisations about Aboriginal families subordinating financial and employment priorities to social relations remain relevant to many.
