

RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

A historical role for grammar

Dr Robert Mailhammer, of the School of Humanities and Communication Arts, has been awarded funding to investigate how Indigenous languages have shaped Aboriginal English. The project, which is supported by the Australian Research Council's Discovery Projects Scheme, has a particular sense of urgency because only a small number of older speakers who exhibit Indigenous language influences are still alive and healthy enough for the stresses of linguistic work.

'The social stigma of Aboriginal English and the disadvantaged position of its speakers are nowhere more apparent than in the education system,' says Dr Mailhammer. 'Research shows that the primacy of Standard Australian English and lack of respect for Aboriginal English cause alienation of Indigenous children from school and ensuing low attendance rates.'

Most Indigenous Australians speak Aboriginal English as their mother tongue and view it as a key part of their identity. This is also fuelled by linguistic continuities between Indigenous languages and Aboriginal English. By detecting these continuities, Dr Mailhammer's project will reveal more of the Indigenous identity of Aboriginal English. The wider impact of the project lies in working towards narrowing the gap that has disadvantaged speakers of Aboriginal English. A clearer sense of the Indigenous roots of Aboriginal English will help boost its status as a recognised variety of English and give educators a better understanding of the similarities and differences between Aboriginal English and Standard Australian English.

The project will take the form of a linguistic case study. Most Indigenous people today are already monolingual speakers of English and have little active Indigenous language knowledge. That means older speakers without formal schooling in English and little mobility in their histories are likely to show



Dr Mailhammer and Bruce Birch interviewing a speaker on Croker Island, Northern Territory, September 2013.

the influence from Indigenous languages most clearly, such as those on Minjilang (Croker Island) where the majority of the data will be collected. The results of this project will enhance understanding of language contact and enrich the documentation of Aboriginal English as an established variety of English and Australian Indigenous languages.

The benefits will be felt beyond education into areas ranging from healthcare and improved communication between healthcare workers and patients in remote communities, to urban life and politics. A better understanding of Aboriginal English as the continuation of Indigenous culture, and with its own place in society, will add to Australia's linguistic and cultural richness.

Project Title: The Indigenous grammar of Aboriginal English: implications for contact linguistics.

Funding has been set at: \$280,000

Contact Details: r.mailhammer@uws.edu.au

URL - <http://www.uws.edu.au/hca>

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