

# Language is power; let us have ours

ADEN RIDGEWAY

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Comments 10

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Once, while travelling through many remote communities on the Tanami Track, an old man said to me, "Come speak my language and I'll speak yours".

It was only then that I completely understood what my own grandmother, who spoke the Gumbaynggirr language of the NSW north coast, had taught me about the importance of language in our lives - it goes to the heart and soul of one's identity and gives connection to family, country and community. It instils a sense of enormous pride and provides the strength from which to see the world beyond the fences of your own community - then everything seems possible.

I look forward to the day when Canberra makes a decision that one verse of our national anthem should be sung in an Aboriginal language.

The way we deal with indigenous language goes to the heart of how we see Aboriginal communities, how we see ourselves and how we deal with the range of problems that exist in these communities as being "in" or "outside" of the national story and, therefore, deserving of proper treatment.

Yet the Northern Territory and Federal governments have mandated a requirement that all Aboriginal children in all Territory schools must learn in English for the first four hours of learning from next year, sidelining education in indigenous languages.

This decision is especially short-sighted, demonstrating a mindset plaguing Aboriginal affairs that devalues and demonises the strength and value of culture and identity within our indigenous communities.

In the ongoing debate about bilingual education, addressing "disadvantage" is used as the mask to hide opposition to our claims for language and identity. Our treatment at the hands of the broader society is presented as lying outside the national story - a story told, for the most part, in English.

If we are ever to hope that things will get better in many of these communities, then change must start with each Australian appreciating the cries for recognising indigenous identity.

How many of us can claim to speak a language other than English? How many of us can speak an Aboriginal language?

Very few, I would imagine. My own language, Gumbaynggirr, is now only spoken by a handful of people but we are determined to reverse that trend.

As such, we need to cast our minds ahead one generation to understand fully the detrimental impact of the Territory decision. If Aboriginal children are not taught in their own language first, then what will become of the identity and culture of the people of the future?

This is not to say that English should not be taught. Of course it should. But the reality in northern Australia is not whether maintaining language hinders a child's future but whether the best of life's opportunities are available to all.

Much of the evidence the world over suggests that bilingual and multilingual language processes accelerate one's capacity to acquire English. So why are Aboriginal children being treated as if this were not so? Why is the role that parents and grandparents play in teaching their children being diminished?

Aboriginal languages, for the most part, are not officially recognised and, therefore, sit outside the nation's formal structures.

If English education is to be seen as a tool for improving access to life's opportunities, then not only does the future depend upon quality education but a capacity to find space for Aboriginal languages within our curriculum.

The school's role, like that of broader society, should be about embracing and validating the first language of children, not assuming without evidence that the first language holds Aboriginal children back.

Surely knowing more is better than knowing less.

Knowing more has certainly not held the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, back in his dealings with China, and knowing more has certainly not held back Noel Pearson, who speaks his own language, and several others including English.

I ask myself, "Why must it be so that the predominant player in the lives of Aboriginal communities must always be government?"

This Federal Government needs to be careful that its current actions do not lead to greater dependency as a direct result of its interventionist policies, particularly in the north and the remote parts of central Australia.

While much needs to be done in these places, the reality is it can't be achieved without the involvement of the people most affected and certainly not through ill-thought out interventions.

### **Ngaawa balmuun baya; ngirrala ngiyambaygu**

Ngayandi gujaa yandaarrang wumaaga marriida nguurabiinda Tanami warluunyja, garlugandu guuyudu ngaanya jurraang, "yilaami gayi nganyundiya ngaawa, ngaya gayi nginundiya".

Malaagirr ngaaja wagin ngarraawang nganyundi gamiiga, ngarri gaying Gumbaynggirr ngaawa N.S.W bimiirr birraw girlanygida (mid north coast), miindalu ngaanya yirraaygam barrway Gumbaynggirr ngiyambandiya guunubiinda - ngilidu bunggiing miinggila gumbuda man.gu man.gu garlugan.gundi bijaarr gani-barrmarrany, jagun.gu girrwaa. Ngilidu muugay barrwayn.gany miidiny ngurraa balmuun nyaagaygu marraal gawaada gulmuguda girrwaagundi - malaa minyambin nyaagu yaawaygu.

Ngaaja nyaagu manggarla gaywagu Canberra-ndi juun.gu jaali Julgaagany daalgiyaygu Girrwaanbila ngaawawa.

Ngirray Girrwaanbigundiya ngaawawa ngilidu nyaagaygurray  
ngiyaanya dawaandi Girrwaanbi nguurabiin, yaari ngiyaala  
nyaaga ngiyaanyaw ngirray ngiyaala minyagirr yarrangbiinda  
nguurabiinda jalaarla waaginyja "jalaarla" "waaginyja"  
Julgaagany gadilabarr jungal-ngirraygam.

Gala, Northern Territory and Federal Government jurraang  
Girrwaanbi gamambi Territory Schools gadila miindalay  
English-a ngayan waaruwaya miindalaygam galaagada,  
waalgayagam Girrwaanbi ngaawa juluwaygu.

Yaam ngirraygam nyaagaygurraygam duluunymarr  
ngarraangiyay bigaagurra Girrwaanbiya Affairs yarrangandi  
jalaany yuungguway balmuun darruy guunu-warluuny  
ngiyambandiya Girrwaanbiya nguurabiinda.

Junyirriligamba bilingual miindalaygam ngirraygam  
"disadvantage" jurrudigu jalaanyju yuunggu ngiyaanya.  
Barrwayn.ganyju nyayagi ngiyaanya waaginyja Julgaaganyja-  
barrway - yidaa jurraang English-a.

Ngiyaandi ngarraynggi minya darruyaygu yarrangbiinda  
nguurabiinda, ngaldayi gadilabarr buugi Julgaaganybari  
muugarri junga-ngarraanga yanggidambay. Warru-warru juun.gu  
garruugu ngaawa darruy English-a? Warru-warru juun.gu  
Girrwaanbi ngaawa? Jaany-wunba ngaaja juun.gu.

Nganyundi gamiiga ngaawa, Gumbaynggirr giiligirr jurraang  
jaany girrwaa gala ngiyaala yarrang ngaldayi.

Girrwaanbiyandi gamambi biyagay miindalay yanggidam  
ngaawanbi, malaa girrwaa yarralaw bijaarr guunu-warluuny.

Girrwaa gaying wumaaga ngaawa garluganda (bularri, guga?)  
miindalambay English: gamambi-gurray, girrwaanbi. Miimiga,  
Baabaga, gamiiga, gaguuga miindal gamambi. Yaam bimiir-  
wunba.

Ngiingga, English mambi miindalay. Gayigam English girraalgaygurray gamambi, gala miindalay-nguura garlangarraanga Girrwaanbi ngaawabiin.

Government biyagay junga-ngarraanga Girrwaanbi ngaawa miindalay-nguraala juuda wumaagabadi miindalaygam ngarrayanggi wumaaga darruyay junuyja.

Wumaaga ngaawa darruyay Mr Ruddgu gulaana junaaygu China, Noel Pearson.gu.

Jawgarr ngaajaw ngiimbay, "Minyaala mambi Government-a barrway-gaali Girrwaanbigu?".

Yaam government gula-warluuny yaawaygu yagayaygam-wunba Australia-la birrawa muluumiya.

Jawgarr Girrwaanbiyu ngirra gadila darrgurraygamgarriya.

**Translation by Dallas Walker, Julie Long, Anna Ash and Gary Willams of the Muurrbay Aboriginal Language and Culture Co-operative, Nambucca Heads.**

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