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Languages of the land - Sydney Morning Herald, The (Australia) - November 28, 2020 - page 8

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The broader use of Indigenous words and place names is part of a recovery process.

Dharug* woman Jacinta Tobin is Buruberongal (belonging to the kangaroo, the people **from** around Richmond) and Canamadagal (belonging to the possum, the people **from** near Prospect).

But growing up dyslexic in Emu Plains in the 1970s, she didn't know the names of the western Sydney clan groups of her ancestors, or know they were "Dharug dhalang" - Dharug speaking.

"Before I knew I was **Aboriginal**, I thought I was **from** outer space," says the 51-year-old, whose fair skin hails **from** her Tobin father's Irish roots. Her mother's Indigenous heritage dates to both Yarramundi, chief of the Richmond tribe, and Bennelong, who served as an interlocutor between the Indigenous people of Port Jackson and the British settlers.

It's a role she continues in a way today, as a teacher of Dharug, the Indigenous language spoken in the Sydney Basin and one of more than 700 spoken before 1788. She was a teen when she discovered her mother's Indigenous background. Since then, as a musician gifted with a good ear, she has learnt and now teaches the Sydney language largely through song.

"Kids pick it up straight away - singing is the quickest form of remembering new words. Like studying French, you start by singing Frere Jacques.

"Most people are surprised they already know some Dharug words: wallaby, wombat, woomera, boomerang, bunyip and coo-ee, which means 'I am here' and even boogie - to bathe or swim - as in boogie board."

But Tobin wanted to know more about the language her grandparents and great aunts and uncles were forbidden to speak for fear they'd be taken away by "whitefellas".

She began learning her mother tongue by visiting an elder, aunty Edna Watson in western Sydney, who taught her the best way to start was with **Aboriginal** place names. As they made their way through the list of Sydney suburbs with Indigenous names - Bondi, the sound of a hard crashing wave; Coogee, meaning stinky seaweed/smelly place; Parramatta, where the eels lie down; Cronulla, place of pink shells - Tobin soon heard the lyricism of the language.

"A lot of our wording is onomatopoeic, like mimicking the sound of birds or an animal found on that country. The Dharug word for kangaroo, buru, is the sound the kangaroo makes when it jumps, so my mob the Buruberongal, were the gal (people) belonging to (beron) the kangaroo (buru)."

Tobin, who now lives in Mount Victoria in the Blue Mountains, studied social ecology at the University of Western Sydney's Hawkesbury campus. She loved the ebb and flow of the sound of the area's Indigenous language, although it was almost extinct.

She began to crave a more detailed study of the language's structure, which lead her to Professor Jakelin Troy's seminal book, The Sydney Language, first published in 1993. Troy, a Ngarigu woman and linguistic anthropologist, wanted to reconstruct the more than 200 Indigenous languages of **south**-eastern **Australia**.

"I was shocked to discover there weren't any records of the grammar or vocabulary the people of my region spoke. There was just a raggedy old collection of 18th century manuscript material **from** the Sydney region," says Troy, now director of Indigenous research at the University of Sydney.

The manuscript she refers to is the work of Patyegarang, a young Indigenous woman who, when aged about 15, appears to have taught local words to First Fleet Lieutenant William Dawes. Dawes, a student of ancient Greek, recorded her words in his diaries, which are now the major source of information about the original language of Sydney. Patyegarang would visit Dawes' hut in the evenings to explain words **from** body parts to relationships. There were words that had no equivalent in English, like putuwa - to warm one's hand by the fire and then gently squeeze the fingers of another **person** to pass on the warmth.

There was no name given for the language spoken throughout Sydney's sandstone basin, Troy explains. Eora/Iyora, which means "people", was used by British settlers to describe the language but not by Indigenous people. Their language became known as Dharug in western Sydney, and various families or mobs spoke different dialects including Gadigal in the Sydney city area, Cameraygal north of the harbour, and Wallumedegal around Ryde, and so forth.

In linguistic terms, most Indigenous languages are polysynthetic with prefixes and suffixes - like the -tta in Parramatta and Cabramatta, which denote locations, where eels and edible freshwater grubs were found respectively.

"The languages are tied to the land - the Gadigal people have a lot of words for shellfish and tidal rivers, while the Dharug people have a lot of words for river fish, animals and birds," she says.

All Australian Indigenous languages always had a deep connection to country, explains **Aboriginal** cultural heritage officer at the Royal Botanic Gardens and Wiradjuri artist Darren Charlwood (whose language map of NSW appears above).

"At the beginning, the country gave us language to describe the country. And through that language to describe the country, it gave us identity."

It's an intuitive feel for the rhythm of the land and language, called a "vibration" by Tobin, who is enrolled in a PhD in linguistics next year to deepen her understanding of Dharug. Troy, her long-time mentor at the University of Sydney, is thrilled. She says Tobin has "what you need to learn an Indigenous language. To feel it."

Since **Bruce Pascoe**'s book Dark Emu: Black seeds: agriculture or accident? was published in 2014, there has been a growing interest in **Australia**'s First Nations languages. Pascoe's book, published by Broome-based **Aboriginal** owned and led Magabala Books, challenged some of the

most deeply rooted preconceptions held by white **Australia**, and has sold more than 300,000 copies.

The author, who traces his ancestry to the Yuin people **from** the NSW **South** Coast and the Boonwurrung people, lives at Gipsy Point, upstream **from** Mallacoota (place of sacred white pipe clay), in Victoria.

"I know how to order a beer in three or four languages but realised I needed to study the local Yuin language more," Pascoe, now 73, says. During lockdown, his grandchildren came to live with him and they greeted him each morning with "dyibilagambu" — good morning in Yuin. His coffee table is plastered with around 400 Yuin words, to remind him to recite some new ones every time he sits down for a cup.

On his property, there's a sea of mandadyan nalluk, which translated **from** Yuin means "dancing grass". He's learnt so much about the landscape **from** Indigenous words.

"**Aboriginal** people didn't have a word for drought. If we paid more attention to the local languages, we could learn so much more about how they adapted to the country. In this area, there are elders working hard on recovering the language ... it's not going to be too long before people are conversing in Yuin and we can talk together to understand how **Aboriginal** communities did not separate their spirituality **from** their economy."

Pascoe is heartened by the advocacy of young Wiradjuri woman Rachael McPhail, who campaigned to convince **Australia** Post to change its guidelines, announced in NAIDOC week this month, to support use of **Aboriginal** place names on mail addresses.

"This is an indication of the changing mood, an opening of the heart both white **Australia** and **Australia** Post are embracing," he says.

This move, those of ABC TV shows such as Gardening **Australia** and The Sounds, declaring the Indigenous area on which they were filmed, and Pascoe's new book, Loving Country: A guide to Sacred **Australia**, published next week by Hardie Grant - a companion volume to Marcia Langton's 2018 Welcome to Country - help increase language understanding for mainstream audiences.

As does the literature of Indigenous Australians, says Magabala author and Gunai woman Kirli Saunders, who was named 2020 NSW **Aboriginal** woman of the year for her work in the preservation of First Nations languages, predominantly via poetry. Saunders, 29, has a junior fiction book Bindi, out this month, featuring words in Gundungurra, the Indigenous language spoken around the Southern Highlands, where she grew up in Bowral.

The verse book, was centred around her experience caring for the glossy black cockatoo and learning Gundungurra language with the local community .

Bindi is one of many Magabala titles published in English with an Indigenous language, to introduce non-English words to young readers. Saunders, who now lives on Dharawal country (Wollongong), says as a judge on this year's Prime Minister's Literary Awards for children's literature, she was heartened by the record number of entrants **from** Indigenous authors.

"It was such a joy to see the decolonisation of our literary landscape; when you learn Indigenous language, you understand it is a blessing to have words to describe things the Western world doesn't seem to have."

Such a word is ngununggula, which in Gundungurra means to walk and work together, a word Saunders didn't know until she attempted to learn her Indigenous language at 27.

"I had heard a few songs sung in language but I was working and walking along the Shoalhaven River around Bundanon, and I felt I could hear the sound of my ancestors' voices ... I felt they were telling me it was time to go and learn language."

This spiritual connection to land via language was denied to many Indigenous people, who were raised without any knowledge of it.

This is why Tara June Winch, a Wiradjuri author raised on Dharawal country and winner of this year's Miles Franklin award for her book The Yield, says state and federal governments need to make first language learning a priority in the school curriculum. The 36-year-old didn't have the opportunity to learn Wiradjuri, the language of her father's people, until she went to rural NSW to research a book in her 20s.

"I remember how, in the absences of connection to an intact cultural link, learning the language felt like solace, a great consolation prize in the game we, our Wiradjuri family, had lost," Winch says.

Fellow Wiradjuri author and University of **Queensland** Professor of Communications Anita Heiss felt the same. Raised in Matraville, she became the first in her family to study her father's tongue when she enrolled in Charles Sturt University's graduate certificate in Wiradjuri Language, Culture and Heritage in 2018 at Wagga Wagga (place of many crows).

"I was 50 years old, the author of 16 books and so many other words, a commentator, a professional speaker, a runner of marathons. But no amount of academic achievement, creative output or life in community had prepared me for learning my Wiradjuri language ... On the verge of yung (tears) of disappointment and failure, I looked at the many resources lying next to me on my bed and said aloud, 'I am never going to get this'," she wrote in an article earlier this year.

She persisted. In class, she studied A New Wiradjuri Dictionary, compiled by Stan Grant Senior and Dr John Rudder, and on ngurambang (country) where she walked and talked "like our ancestors did".

Her breakthrough came when one of her teachers explained it would come when her ancestors knew she was ready, and when she accepted that this was going to be a long journey.

"We need to look at the map of Indigenous **Australia** just as we would look at a map of Europe, with many different languages and dialects, traditional songs and dances and ways of being. But our languages are at risk of extinction and we need to act fast to conserve them."

She's hoping the United Nations decade of Indigenous languages, **from** 2022 to 2032, will shine

the spotlight on them.

Heiss' latest novel, Bila Yarrudhang-galang-dhuray (River of Dreams in Wiradjuri) will be published next May by Simon & Schuster, in what's believed to be the first time the title of any commercial Australian novel has appeared on its front cover solely in an **Aboriginal** language.

"Kids in school can tell you who the traditional owners of the land they are on are - what about signs welcoming people say to Gadigal country or Wiradjuri country to help cement in people's minds an understanding and appreciation for Indigenous language?" says Heiss.

Exposure via the likes of the Warumpi Band, Yothu Yindi and Dr G. Yunupingu can help Indigenous words become part of pop music culture, says Gadigal poet Joel Davison, a collaborator on Midnight Oil's latest album, The Makarrata Project.

On the track Welcome to Gadigal Land, he speaks his poem Mudjaru ngaya wunyang, which translates roughly to "take pity on my bad pronunciation" which he wrote after years of work on the revival of Gadigal.

"It's kind of like me saying to my ancestors, 'look, this is the best that I can do with where I'm at in my revitalisation journey.' I wish there was a whole lot of us that were ready to take up the challenge, but I'm glad that I was able make sure that the language of my Gadigal ancestors was heard on this track.'"

* Note: there are alternate spellings of many Indigenous words.

Jacinta Tobin and Joel Davison will teach Learn your local language in two workshops tomorrow at the Sydney Opera House's Antidote festival.

CITATION (AGLC STYLE)

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