CHAPTER 9

LANGUAGE PLANNING IN AUSTRALIA

From Indigenous to International Multiculturalism?

1. INTRODUCTION

Australia is an island continent, that includes a number of small off-shore islands, and the very large island of Tasmania, lying between the Indian and South Pacific Oceans and the sixth largest polity in the world with an area of 2,967,893 sq. miles or 7,686,850 sq. km. It is an arid ancient land that is about a third desert with most of the population (18,783,551) living along the coasts, in the south-east corner and in the capital cities. Australia is a federation of six states (New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia), two Territories (Australian Capital Territory, Northern Territory) with a number of overseas territories (Ashmore and Carter Islands, Christmas Island, Cocos (Keeling) Island, Coral Sea Islands, Heard and McDonald Islands, Norfolk Island as well as claims to a large portion of Antarctica), some of which are not permanently inhabited. Indonesia, East Timor and Papua New Guinea lie to the north, other parts of Melanesia lie to the north east, New Zealand lies to the east across the Tasman Sea while Antarctica is to the south. (See Appendix A, Figure 13.) While English is the dominant language, there are more than 200 migrant languages spoken in Australia and perhaps 90 Aboriginal languages remain, although there is ongoing language loss of both languages and registers and only a small number—about 20—are spoken 'right through'.

2. THE LANGUAGE SITUATION IN AUSTRALIA

Australia was settled about 60,000 years ago by the ancestors of the Aboriginal people who came from south-east Asia and who lived as hunters, gatherers and fishers. At the time of first European contact there were perhaps three-quarters of a million people speaking more than 250 languages and many more dialects. Although Aboriginal groups had their own well defined 'countries', the absence of fixed dwellings and physical development led the British during settlement to declare Australia to be terra nullius—'no man's land'. The Dutchman Abel Tasman visited Australia in 1642 and 1644 and the Englishman William Dampier in 1688-89. In 1770 Captain James Cook explored the east coast of Australia and claimed it for Britain. The first settlement was the British penal colony at Sydney, settled in January 1788. Other penal colonies were established in Tasmania, and by the time
transportation was phased out in the 19th century more than 160,000 convicts had been shipped to Australia. Other early colonies were set up in Melbourne and Adelaide and the gold rushes of the 1850s attracted prospectors to Australia from around the world. Clyne (1991) suggests that during the nineteenth century authorities in the various colonies generally had tolerant attitudes toward languages other than English and, with the exception of Aboriginal languages, did not discourage their use or promotion. While English took on a more important role from the 1870s with the introduction of formal schooling, other languages were spoken and taught in many areas in the colonies.

In 1901 the six colonies agreed to form the Commonwealth of Australia, were granted self-rule and gradually a sense of being Australian rather than British began to form. One of the first measures taken by the new country was to pass restrictive immigration laws (the 'White' Australia Policy) to keep out Asians and to repatriate and prevent the further recruitment of Melanesian labourers; strong opposition to the Kaiser's Germany during World War I lead to the conversion of German language schools, which had flourished in South Australia, to English and the renaming of places with German sounding names. These attitudes brought about a restriction in non-English language use and a monolingual orientation.

The war with Japan had a profound effect on broadening Australia's view of the world. Darwin and other regional centres in the north were bombed, Australians fought along the Kokoda Trail in the protectorates of Papua and New Guinea, and significant numbers of troops fought to protect Singapore, were captured and died in POW camps in Sandakan or on the Burma railroad. Initially there was talk of abandoning tropical Australia to the Japanese and falling back behind the Brisbane line. With the British unable to assist, Australia began to look beyond Britain to the United States. The war convinced the government of the need for a new broadly based program of mass migration from Europe to increase the population, to build infrastructure and to change a largely rural economy to a more industrialised one. This immigration program was extended to eastern Europe and the Middle East in the 1960s and 1970s and since the 1980s a significant number of migrants have come from Asia and Central America, creating an Australian population with a diverse range of migrant backgrounds. The 'White Australia' Policy, put in place after federation and not repealed until the 1970s, and the failure to recognise Aboriginal people as citizens until 1967 were part of a continuing English-oriented monocultural world view that was only gradually displaced beginning in the 1970s.

Policy toward migrants and languages other than English (LOTEs) after World War II was inherently assimilationist, the belief being that these languages and cultures would die out and individuals would become English speaking 'Australians'. However, these migrant intakes were substantial and, as the various communities became better established and financially more successful in the 1970s, they began to debate the language issue and lobby government for cultural and linguistic support. As Australia began to recognise its de facto multicultural nature, the Commonwealth and the States, under pressure from ethnic communities and language professionals, began to look at developing language policies to meet community needs. In 1982, the Commonwealth Department of Education produced a document entitled *Towards a National Language Policy*, which set out the