A Domain-Centred Approach to Language Work

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1. Introduction

On first approaching linguistic revival or survival work, it can often appear that it is a monolithic task or one composed of myriad intimidating segments that each require equal attention. This paper proposes a tool for language work in Australia based on a revised version of Fishman's sociolinguistic domain model (1972). By applying this model in the strategic planning stage, language workers may be able to identify and target areas that can be the most impactful, by categorising language use into specific social areas. Linguists are by nature adept at separating constituent parts of language; from the subfield delineations of phonology, syntax, and pragmatics; to the bread-and-butter segmentation of phones and morphemes. These divisions are of course insightful and useful on the theoretical and analytical level; however this model serves a strategic purpose as well as an academic one.

2. The Language Domain Approach

Domain theory was first described in part in Schmidt-Rohr (1932) and later developed in more depth by Fishman (1972). The domain model proposes a set of broad areas in a society in which one or more languages are the expected, most useful linguistic medium used by those engaged in it. Domain theory was developed in more popular discourse in Scandinavia in the 2000s, focusing on the debate surrounding domain loss (Laurén, Myking, Picht 2002). In the Scandinavian countries, despite each nation having one or more indigenous languages with

official language status, near-native English competence is held within the region of 90% of the population (Skjold Frøshaug and Stende 2021) The concern within Scandinavia is that in certain domains, most notably Business, English may be replacing the indigenous languages over time. Of course the Australian context is radically different to that of the Nordic nations, however the domain model can be applied to assist people working with language in Australia in two ways: it can help us to understand historical and current language replacement with more subtlety, as well as providing a tool to create more targeted strategic language work for the future.

Schmidt-Rohr (1932) described a model comprised of nine domains, focusing specifically on bilingualism in the Alto Adige area of Italy, in which both German and Italian have currency. Schmidt-Rohr's domains are:

- Family
- Playground/Street
- School (with three sub-categories):
    - Language of instruction
    - Subject of instruction
    - Language of breaks and conversation
- Church
- Literature
- Press
- Military
- Court
- Government administration

The updated model which has been used in more subsequent academic discourse was proposed by Fishman (1972) which recognises only five domains:

- Family
- Friendship
- Religion
- Education
- Work

While Schmidt-Rohr's model is perhaps more useful as a purely analytical tool, it has less practicality for those working within the revitalisation field in Australia today, e.g. the inclusion of the Military domain. Fishman's more restricted model is more practical, but importantly eliminates Schmidt-Rohr's Press and Literature domains. In this paper I propose an updated version which better reflects modern domains in the Australian context, recognising the importance of media in the twenty-first century, and the drive towards decolonising models of bilingualism. The revised domains proposed here are:

- Government
- Knowledge
- Business
- Spiritual
- Home
- Media

2.1 Government

Importantly, for the majority of First Nations languages from the 'new world', government of the modern internationally recognised sovereign state model is an introduced idea that did not exist prior to colonisation. Furthermore, where this European/Asian model of statehood has

been imposed, involvement in the colonial government has been out of reach for the colonised First Nations individuals that were governed by them.

The Government domain covers all forms of official power, legislation, and leadership from the Commonwealth and federal levels down to local government and fourth tier regional bodies. The language of the Government domain is the language in which legislation is written, community and parliamentary level discussion is undertaken, and most saliently for the ordinary citizen, the language in which you one is permitted to engage with any government body. Important government publications will be produced as a matter of course in this language and will not be considered a secondary publication additional to the original, as is the case in Australia with leaflets produced by government departments in Mandarin or Arabic in the present day. The domain of Government also involves legal matters and specifies the language in which one may conduct themselves through the legal system as a right. This is importantly distinct from a legal assumption of English competence for example, with the *option* of an interpreter, but rather the automatic assumption that you will be able to conduct your business in a legal setting or even with a police officer in this language.

A case in point can be made from the Canadian context, which has parallels with the langscape in Australian. The overall merits of Canadian languages using a non-Latin syllabary are better debated elsewhere, however the crucial role of orthographic choice has surfaced within this domain. Cheyenne Cunningham, a Katzie woman and Indigenous Languages Program co-ordinator at Simon Fraser University, encountered an example of the 'exceptional' nature of Canadian languages in the Governmental domain when she attempted to register her husband's electrical contracting company as **k̓ʷə́yecən**, the Hən̓q̓əmín̓əm̓ word for 'grizzly bear' in 2021 (Sterritt 2021). Cunningham discovered that the province of British Columbia's business register does not permit characters outside of the standard European Latin alphabet and was offered the truncated anglicisation 'KYECN' in its place. The position of the

responsible Ministry of Citizens' Services was that changes to the system were possible but would take several years of planning and decision making across various departments.

2.2 Knowledge

The Knowledge domain encompasses the language of instruction for the transmission of knowledge from early-learning through to tertiary and academic areas. An important distinction must be made between language as a *subject* of instruction and language *of* instruction, as pointed out by Schmidt-Rohr (1932). While efforts are often promoted to introduce Australian languages as subjects within the otherwise Anglophone classroom, and this is often the first idea that comes into people's heads when they think about language revitalisation, it is the experience of many people that language instruction can often turn a language into a *subject* on the level of mathematics or geography which students consider to be more of a chore then a cultural and personal resource to celebrate (Smyth & Darmody 2016).

The domain of Knowledge also extends to the world of research and academia: specifying in which language it is acceptable and expected that one will be able to publish an academic paper or report. This area is one of the least productive in terms of First Nations languages worldwide, with few examples of academic research published in first nations languages at present. One example which made headlines in 2020 was Peruvian academic Roxana Quispe Collantes both writing and defending her PhD thesis in Quechua, however endeavours like this are still rare in Australia and worldwide. Naturally there are many academic and research outputs within the fields of linguistics and anthropology which are *about* Aboriginal people and language, but few if any which are actually written *in* the language itself.

2.3 Business

The Business domain represents the areas of life in which an individual is an employee or employer, and in which they are a consumer. For users of a localised minority language, there may be a dichotomy between the minority language being strong in this domain at the local small business level, e.g., village craftspeople and merchants, while the regional/national and larger business areas may require the dominant majority language: electricity suppliers, banking, public transport, etc. This domain has an imminent impact on individuals in terms of their employment as prospective employers may demand competence in a given language and may even specify this in their advertisements. A (Standard Australian) English-specific Business domain in Australia for example, has enormous impacts on both First Nations communities where an Australian language, Kriol, or strongly distinct Aboriginal English are the norm, and for migrant communities.

2.4 Spiritual

The Spiritual domain is that of all spiritual practices, from formal religious services to individual spiritual traditions and routines. Several famous cases exist throughout the world of a language which is replaced within several domains, leaving only the Spiritual. Hebrew, in its pre-revival forms spent several centuries as a largely liturgical language studied and transmitted primarily for religious and philosophical purposes among the Jewish diaspora (Spolsky 1999). India is the home of several liturgical languages which today exist predominantly only in the Spiritual domain, notably Pāli of significance to Buddhist traditions, the Prākrit collection of liturgical languages significant to Jainism, and Sanskrit which remains the classical language of both of these traditions as well as Hinduism (Norman 1984, p 2; Woolner 1986 p. 3; Flood 2003 p 181;) In Australia, the Spiritual domain is often one of the most hard-working area of language survival, with the deeply culturally significant songs and songlines requiring precise

retention and transmission (Curran, Barwick, Turpin, Walsh, & Laughren (2019). With the loss of the Spiritual domain, a speech community may lose vocabulary surrounding philosophy, more abstract concepts, and the methods of expressing and explaining traditional concepts not readily accessible in the replacement language.

The Spiritual domain differs from some of the other domains in that religious proselytising has been responsible for both damage to First Nations languages and efforts to revitalise them. In some instances, both English and Christianity were jointly presented by missionaries as preferable to First Nations' languages and spiritual practices (Rademaker, Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, & Henderson 2018). At the same time, other missionary programmes were adopting First Nations languages as a medium of proselytising through the method of translating sacred texts; a practice which continues to this day (Carey 2010; Gale 1994, p. 33-35).

2.5 Home

The Home domain represents the areas of private life in which individuals engage with family members, friends, and more broadly members of the same community. The Home domain is also the domain which can persevere despite the language policies of authorities and in jurisdictions in which the government has a deliberately suppressive language policy, as the Home domain is the only one that can really remain unchecked, albeit covertly.

2.6 Media

The Media domain is a prominent an increasingly powerful one, which I propose is the most accessible and immediate area for domain gain for language centres in many regions of Australia. What marks Media as different to the other domains is that for many speech communities such as those of first nations in Australia, mass media was not a domain prior to colonisation. Prior to the introduction of or invention of writing in any speech community,

language is immediate and ephemeral (Elbow 1985, p. 283). After the introduction of writing in any speech community, language is limited to the manuscript pending the introduction of mass communication facilitated through mechanical reproduction in form of the printing press and eventually audio/video recording. For the majority of First Nations people, especially in Australia, the transition from a non-literate society to one with relatively developed mass media was therefore instantaneous.

Today, media are consumed by almost every person on the planet in some form from the newspaper to the TikTok video, and the present state of media accessibility is unprecedented. Modern media production technology has become so user friendly and accessible that anyone in possession of a smartphone and an internet connection can create a film that can be potentially viewed by millions of people (Rice, Haynes, Royce, and Thompson 2016). For these reasons, this paper offers Media as a domain that can be targeted strategically by language workers in Australia and abroad. The language of a Media domain will be the language that is readily accessible as a language within any given medium. When a language is strong in the Media domain, newspapers, websites, magazines, and broadcasts both televisual and radio can be expected regularly and sustainably, while more permanent non-periodical media outputs like films and books can be expected to be produced as a matter of course.

It is again essential here to highlight the distinction between media which are *in* First Nations languages, rather than which are *about* indigenous languages. It is not uncommon to see news articles *about* first nations language topics, yet rare to see them presented *in* these languages. Indeed, within the Australian context there are Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio broadcasts/podcasts such as ‘Word up!’ which introduce a word from one of Australia's languages every week, however programmes such as these are conducted in English rather than in the language in question (Bremer 2023).

3. Domain Loss

With the theoretical and abstract categorisation of language use domains in mind, the important question is what practical real-world outcomes can be better understood through its adoption as a model. The common pattern of language endangerment is of the endangered language being replaced by another at different speeds in different domains, a process referred to simply as 'domain loss' (Haberland 2005). The key issue in domain loss is the eventual loss of vocabulary and related linguistic encodings related to that domain. For example, loss in the Spiritual domain may result in loss of vocabulary surrounding thought, philosophy, and emotions, while loss in the Government domain may result in loss of vocabulary surrounding leadership, traditional law, and lore. In the case of domain loss, one domain may experience the gradual or sometimes even immediate shift from one language to another, for example where a colonial language is mandated as the sole language of instruction rather than the native languages of the children. Naturally the outcome of the partial or complete replacement in one domain can create a domino effect with other domains and both facilitate and be itself exacerbated by the other domain loss (Haberland 2005). If for example the education system does not permit First Nations language literacy, the Knowledge domain is targeted. This will have the impact of making connecting with the Government domain and Business domains more difficult. With less literacy in the L1, businesses will be more motivated to advertise and conduct themselves in the colonial language, which will further decrease the prestige of the language, influencing the Media domain to focus more on the colonial language. In a domain in which the L1 of a community has been replaced by another, that language becomes exceptionalised, and the replacement language becomes the assumed default. Once exceptionalised, an individual who seeks to engage in that domain must either have competence in the replacement language or be positioned as an outsider without complete access to the domain (Beriso Genemo 2022).

4. Media as an Example of a Domain-Centred Approach

For linguists and language workers in the revitalisation field, a domain-centred approach can be a practical tool to strategically target areas that may benefit the most from revitalisation efforts and may feed into other domains as an outcome. For many language centres in Australia, the Media domain is a readily accessible domain to target and has a variety of benefits.

Firstly, modern media technologies facilitate media creation to an unprecedented degree. A variety of either free or low-cost media creation tools and platforms exist, which provide opportunities to both create, distribute, and maintain First Nations language media (Rice et al., 2016).

Secondly, the Media domain provides an opportunity for a sustainable, regular output in the form of social media, with platforms available in which short and regular text statements and recordings can be produced in any given language.

Thirdly, media provides an opportunity to create permanent examples of a language in use, which can, if preserved adequately, be drawn from for generations to come.

Fourthly, the Media domain provides an opportunity to re-normalise a language as an everyday means of communication. The opportunity to read the news, hear a radio broadcast, or read a novel in your first language can have profoundly positive outcomes on an individual's self-esteem and wellbeing, which may have the deeper impact of encouraging the use of the language in the home environment (Cassels 2019). The accessibility of further knowledge written in language also facilitates literacy and competence in that language, and platforms already exist which have embraced endangered languages for online knowledge bases. For example, the Wikipedia crowd-sourced encyclopaedia platform embodies a growing number of parallel language versions and has been adopted by diverse language groups from around the world including Cree, Nahuatl, Romani, and Seediq, however as of 2023, no Australian

languages are available on the Wikipedia platform (Wikipedia n.d.). Facebook has followed suit with a more limited number of more prominent endangered language options such as Welsh and Basque.

With the multiple benefits of a targeted Media domain approach to language work, there are several small-scale activities that can be designed in order to achieve a deeper media presence in a language. A selection of practices drawn from the experience of the Goldfields Aboriginal Language Centre Aboriginal Corporation is provided here:

- Electronic and hard-copy newsletter produced at regular intervals with a target ratio of English-to-language content. This target ratio can be adjusted to increase over time.
- Regular social media presence with strong emphasis on Goldfields First Nations language content
- Regular YouTube videos with strong emphasis on Goldfields First Nations language content and outreach
- Collaborative media projects with government departments and private organisations in Goldfields First Nations languages

5. Conclusion

Approaching language work with a perspective that a language may have key social area in which it may grow in use can be a useful insight into linguistic endangerment and replacement. In the case that a speech community has seen significant loss in one or more domain resulting in replacement, revitalisation efforts may be required to involve the reclamation of individual or all domains as a space in which the endangered language is normalised. In the twenty-first century Australian context, the domain of Media is a useful area to target, with increasingly user-friendly production and distribution tools at language workers' disposal. With strategically

planned targeting of the Media domain and/or other language domains that are salient to the speech community, the imposing task of language work may seem just that little bit less imposing, and the opportunities that arise from it may be broader and more impactful than thought previously possible.

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