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Missionary Linguistics in the Goldfields
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Abstract
The arrival and spread of colonists in the country now known as Australia meant the end of self-governance for First Nations' people (Kearney, 2020). Traditional ways of life, culture and language were systematically replaced with European ways of being. In Western Australia, *The Aborigines Protection Act 1886,* and the *Aborigines Act 1905,* enforced by the Chief Protector of Aborigines, controlled every aspect of the lives of First Nations' people. This included their place of habitation, who they could marry, their place and manner of employment and even their right and ability to care for their own children (Australian Human Rights Commission [AHRC] 1997).
This paper discusses the processes and ongoing effects of one such intervention, the Aboriginal Mission. It will show how the removal of First Nations' people from their traditional homelands, and subsequent placement on the missions resulted in the denial of access to Heritage and the benefits that flow from access to that heritage (Nichols & Smith, 2020). For the purpose of this paper, Heritage should be understood to mean language, as it will be argued language is the way in which heritage is passed on to children. It will be shown that linguistic and non-linguistic factors, such as the removal of traditional languages in favour of Standard Australian English, and placement of many language groups on the missions have resulted in language change. The effects of these changes are still evident today.

1.0 Introduction

Historically, Indigenous people have had little to no control over self-governance and access to place and Heritage (Nichols & Smith, 2020). In Goldfields of Western Australia, the spread of settlers and the discovery of gold, prompted a mining boom, which resulted in the loss of place and traditional homelands for First Nations people. Aboriginal groups living in the Eastern Goldfields have suffered severe social and territorial dislocation since mining activity commenced in the area in 1893 (Stanton, 1984). For First Nations' people in the Goldfields, this loss of place was the beginning of the destruction of centuries-old cultural practices and social norms (Kearney, 2020). All of these knowledges: customs, cultural practices, songs, stories, objects and places were transmitted via Language within the traditional family unit. Socio-territorial fragmentation was hastened by the death and disease associated with the relocation of semi-nomadic peoples on missions and fringe settlements (Stanton, 1984). The interruption of transmission and the resulting trauma of this loss was ongoing, and still felt today (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021).

The loss of place, coupled with years of severe drought, meant Aboriginal people in the Goldfields were unable to feed themselves, and were starving (Sue Hanson, personal communication, September 20, 2023). However, the State government was already facing pressure from churches, religious groups and townspeople to solve the aboriginal problem (Choo, 1997). Religious groups were concerned for the welfare of Indigenous children (particularly the half-caste children) while people in the towns and settlements were resentful of First Nations' people gathering in the towns and wanted them removed (Choo, 1997). In the competition for land between settlers and First Nations' people, the settlers were winning (Bringing them home Report, n.d; Stanton, 1984). First Nations' people were outnumbered by the Europeans, whose culture and way of life were completely unfamiliar to them.

Indigenous Australians were no longer able to access traditional hunting grounds, because they had been taken over by settlers and farmers. Sources of water and methods of farming or foraging were no longer available to them and the people were coming to the towns for food and water (West Australian Museum [WAM] 2017). Ration depots were established in more remote locations, including pastoral stations, with the intention of keeping First Nations' people away from the towns ((West Australian Museum [WAM] 2017 :Choo, 1997).

Contrary to the belief that missions acted in response to government policy on the separation of Indigenous families in Western Australia, the State could not have legislated for their removal without the encouragement of church agencies (Choo, 1997). The State was coming under increasing pressure from religious groups such as the Catholic Church in the north west of the state to rescue children from the supposed danger to their welfare due to the primitive lives they were living in the bush with their families. Following their suggestion and offer to care, clothe, house and feed these children, the government's response was to give the responsibility for feeding and housing First Nations' people to missionaries (Find & Connect, n.d.: Choo, 1997). The state recognised that by offering the responsibility for caring for First Nations' children to various religious institutions, they would in fact remove the burden of doing it themselves, and save money in the process (Choo, 1997). For the churches, missions provided a tool of evangelisation (Choo, 1977). The missions, and government legislation such as The *Aborigines Act 1905* continued to impact Indigenous self-governance (West Australian Museum [WAM] 2017). Prior to the *Act,* authorities favoured the removal of children from their parents, but they did not have the legal authority to force parents to give up their children. Following the legislation of the *Act,* the Chief Protector of Aborigines was made the legal guardian of every Indigenous and half-caste child under the age of 16. This effectively gave him the authority to remove children from their families and send them wherever he saw fit (Choo, 1997). Missions of varying denominations were set up to pursue evangelical agendas. As the missions were faith-based, conversion to Christianity and an education in European ways of being also occurred within the mission space (Epps & Ladley, 2009).

By providing scripture in the heart languages of people and groups that did not have a translation of the bible, missionaries aimed to make disciples of all nations (Epps & Ladley, 2009). Giving the people bibles in their own languages was the first step of linguistic, social and religious conversion. In order to do this, they had to learn the language(s) and then translate the bible and prepare hymnals and other reading materials (Crowley, 2001). The United Aborigines Mission (UAM), formerly the Australian Aborigines Mission, for example, was founded on a 'belief in the superiority of western culture' and this belief influenced how the missionaries interacted with Aboriginal people and caused them to comply with oppressive government policies (Find & Connect, n.d.). In addition to the families and children who were sent to missions, many Indigenous people were attracted to life on the missions as a refuge from problems on the town fringe (Stanton, 2005). Communities, that in the beginning, may not have understood or agreed with the religions offered to them by missionaries were at the same time grateful for the rations, housing and blankets provided to them by these government-sanctioned institutions (Epps & Ladley, 2009). Effectively then, there were two groups of First Nations people who lived at the mission, those who were relocated thanks to legislation and those who chose to go there as a means of survival, or perhaps before they were forcibly relocated under authority provided by the *Act* (Choo, 1997).

2.0 What were the processes?

The practice of studying a people's language in order to facilitate religious conversion is referred to as Missionary Linguistics. It is similar to Colonial Linguistics (CL), except the aim of CL is cultural and political domination (Errington, 2008). Religious conversion through control of language occurred in Australia as well as colonies in South America, Africa and parts of Asia. In the Goldfields Godliness was preached alongside education in a European way of life and the importance of becoming a contributing member of society (Stanton, 2005).

Missionaries typically travelled to far flung places in order to bring Christianity to Indigenous peoples. They did this by establishing missions - reserves of land to which aboriginal people were forcibly relocated. Missions were in the control of churches and missionaries, with little to no government involvement (aiatsis.gov.au). Missionaries appointed themselves the responsibility of bringing God's word to the Indigenous peoples of the colony. This was done by controlling language. At Mt Margaret mission for example, use of traditional language was discouraged (WAM, 2017). In Australia, missions also served as places for bi-racial children to be sent during the stolen generation era. They were actively involved in receiving children who were removed from their parents under the provisions of the *Aborigines Act 1905*, and received funding from the government for housing these children (Find and Connect.gov.au). Under the *Act*, a symbiotic relationship between church and State enabled both to collude in the development of policies and practices which instituted and encouraged the removal of Indigenous children from their families (Choo, 1997). This removal constituted the interruption of intergenerational transmission of knowledges, through language, between children and their parents. Between 1900-1960, there were at least 13 different missions located in the Goldfields: Cosmo Newbery; Cundeelee; Fairhaven Home for Girls; Esperance Mission Home; Kalgoorlie-Boulder Youth Accommodation; Kurrawang; Mount Margaret Mission; Warburton Ranges Mission; Ngannanawili; Norseman Mission; Salvation Army Girls Home; Wiluna Mission, and the Esperance Farm Training Mission. It was in this context that children were removed from their parents by government authorities and taken to missions like Mt Margaret for their upbringing (Stanton, 2005).

In order to be able to convert mission residents and comply with government policy, missionaries had to first learn the language(s) of the people. Therefore Europeans committed to learning languages so as to translate bibles and other religious material into Indigenous languages, in order to begin instruction in the language of the colonisers (Errington, 2008). In Australia, that was Standard Australian English (SAE), however; in other parts of the colonised world, this meant Spanish or French. The missionary practices are one of the reasons why languages such as English, Spanish and French are so wide-spread today. Typically, once their command of language was strong, missionaries began the process of replacing language used in the mission in favour of SAE. Alongside linguistic and religious conversion, missions stressed the importance of literacy and education (Epps & Ladley, 2009). That is, literacy in the language of the colonisers and education in the ways of the colonisers' culture. Missions effectively had three functions: community development; evangelism and linguistic research, in this instance linguistic conversion. (Epps & Ladley, 2009).

The interruption of language transmission, meant babies and children were no longer learning heritage languages, or traditional ways of knowing and learning. Children and babies who

were removed from their families and sent to live in missions were cut off from the traditional family unit and their ability to acquire cultural knowledge as well as language (Find & Connect n.d.). In some places, the children lived inside the mission complex in dormitories while their parents camped outside (Stanton, 2005). Missions placed controls on children to prevent them from running away (WAM, 2017). Places, and the world of meaning through which First Nations' people move are expressions of cultural integrity and autonomy. In removing cultural and linguistic integrity, missions effectively disordered centuries-old traditions (Kearney, 2020). This disorder resulted in the loss of First Nations' spirituality, learnt by retelling the Tjukurrpa, societal norms, traditional roles of men and women and the Indigenous family unit. The old ways were replaced with those of Christian cultural practices. Removal of language was part of a process in which the politically-dominant group overwhelmed Indigenous language and culture (Hale, in Epps & Ladley, 2009). In this way, missions assisted governments to reach targets of assimilation – through the prevention of transmission of traditional knowledges (Epps & Ladley, 2009). The familial link, and the tradition of learning through that link, once broken is hard to regenerate. In this way the trauma of loss becomes intergenerational – disorder and instability is passed down the generations. Destruction of culture and disordering of traditional ways of knowing, precipitated by ontologies of harm or ambivalence is an ongoing reality for Indigenous people (Kearney, 2020).

3.0 In what ways did these processes effect language ?

Australian languages are among the most critically-endangered in the world. At the time of European invasion there were an estimated 250 languages spoken across the continent. Today, linguists believe less than 20 are taught as a first language (Coffin & Hanson, 2022). In the Goldfields region of Western Australia, the status of languages is defined as sleeping, critically endangered, endangered or living (Austin, 1986). Contact between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in a mission sphere and the prevention of transmission of knowledge changed heritage language and culture in two ways. The first being the insertion of Christianity at the cost of traditional spirituality, as evidenced by semantic change in the language domain of ceremony and dreaming. The second being the creation and adoption of Indigenous creoles, or mission languages.

In some missions the use of traditional and heritage languages was discouraged or forbidden, this practice effectually hastened the decline and loss of traditionally used languages. In the Goldfields this is evidenced by the existence of sleeping and remembered languages such as Ngadju, Mirniny, Kaalamaya and Tjupan. In other missions, use of language was permitted. Within the missions, government policy of relocating Indigenous Australians meant First Nations' people of differing codes lived in the same places. This mingling of people, culture and languages resulted in the emergence of creoles, sometimes known as Mission Languages.

Missionary linguistics occurs as a two-step process. The first step is to learn the language of the colonised group. The second step is to replace it with the language of the colonisers, in this case, SAE. In the first step, learning the language of the colonised group, Christianity is inserted into Indigenous language and culture through translated bibles (Errington, 2008). Here, the heritage language domain of ceremony, or Tjukurrpa is replaced with Christianity by semantic extension, further achieved through immersion in Christianity and Christian ways of living. (Epps & Ladley, 2009). Once the dominant, or colonising group, have sufficient control of the language, instruction is begun in the language of the dominant group. Because Christianity is already known to the colonised, or minority group, its hold only

becomes stronger (Errington, 2008). Being that the minority group have been instructed in religion during the first step, they are familiar with the concepts of the new religion now being preached to them in the new code, SAE.

For example, when Europeans arrived in Australia, First Nations people were exposed to a vast array of objects, ideas and concepts completely unfamiliar to them. This necessitated the creation of new words for labelling these things. Often, this was done by borrowing the SAE word and reforming it into one that fit into the sound rules of Australian languages. However, existing words were also semantically extended so as to be able to refer to the new concepts (Hanson and Coffin, 2022). First Nations' people adopted definitions for new foods, items and concepts into their languages. In the missions, the emergence of lexemes for Christian concepts of God, Jesus, Gospel, sin, prayer and forgiveness were extended from First Languages and moulded into a lexicon of faith and religion.

For example:

Tjukurrpa, the First Nations' creation story was extended to mean gospel (Hadfield, 2020).
Mama Kuurrnga becomes Father God (Glass & Hackett, 2003).
Inma, traditionally meaning song or ceremony becomes church service (Hadfield, 2020).
Marlki- to clean, becomes 'cleanse' (Hadfield, 2020).
Yaka-yaka command or law becomes 'commandments' (Hadfield, 2020).
Miirl-miirlpa, taboo becomes 'consecrated' (Hadfield, 2020).
Nintipayi, someone who is learned becomes 'disciple' (Hadfield, 2020).
Katanya, God (Coffin, 2023).

Remembering traditional methods of learning and knowing through the family unit had already been broken by the mission, children and those members of the community living on the mission who would have learnt language, culture and Indigenous spirituality from their elders, were instead educated in Christianity and European ways of life (Choo, 1997).
By semantically-extending definitions of traditional spirituality towards a Christian framework, disorder of culture was achieved through language (Epps & Ladley, 2009). For example, Tjukurrpa, the creation story, a story with deep spiritual meaning for First Nations' people, was extended to mean a person with a religious story, such as an angel or minister. Association has been drawn here, between the idea of Indigenous spirituality and a Christian spirituality, that is; a person sharing an important story (Hanson & Coffin, 2022). The effect of semantically-extending the traditional meaning of this lexeme removed the cultural importance of the original definition, and the culture associated with it (Errington, 2008). The same can be said for the other examples listed here. Today, these words, and their new meanings have become firmly cemented into the lexicons of First Nations people who had experience of missions and Christianity and the original complex cultural meaning has been simplified and lost.

Missionary linguistics operates with the aim of gaining command over language for creating languages of command (Brutt-Griffler, 2006). In addition to providing food, shelter and education in a European way of life, missions were places where speakers of language were shamed and encouraged, often forcibly, to use SAE in place of traditional languages. In this way, missions were places where language was first controlled, then removed. But what of those missions whose non-Indigenous leaders actively encouraged and promoted the use of heritage languages alongside SAE? Right or wrong in the eyes of the church, and publicly or privately, these places did exist. In these missions, language

persisted, and pressures of linguistic and non-linguistic influences resulted in the creation of new codes (Hanson & Coffin, 2022). Non-linguistic factors of change such as government policies of relocation meant people of different language groups converged and interacted in one place. This resulted in the creation of Indigenous 'creoles', also known as mission languages. A mission language is a lingua franca comprised of the languages spoken on the mission. This interaction has resulted in contemporary dialects of Ngaanyatjarra and Pitjantjatjarra like Wangkatja and Cundeelee Wangka. At places like Mt Margaret and the Cundeelee Mission, these creoles came to replace the heritage languages of residents. Over time they became so embedded in the mission, that children learnt the codes as a mother tongue. In the Goldfields, Wangkatja and Cundeelee Wangka are still being used today. First Nations people living in Tjuntjuntjarra are the descendants of residents from Cundeelee Mission. People living in Tjuntjuntjarra speak Cundeelee Wangka and it is known as a dialect of Pitjantjatjarra by users of the original code (Norma Bryant, personal communication, 2022). Residents of Cundeelee Mission continued to use this code in addition to SAE, and Aboriginal English, and today the language is classed as a living language. Cundeelee Wangka has been studied over many years, analysed and shown to be a language in its own right. In 2022 a dictionary of this language was published, and presented to the speakers. In the Goldfields, and other parts of Australia where missions existed, new languages and codes have emerged where they otherwise may not have. This is one of the effects of missionary linguistics.

In those missions where use of Language weas permitted, these contemporary dialects were used alongside SAE and were added to speakers' repertoires. Other missions prevented heritage languages from being used altogether. Residents were not allowed to speak language, only SAE (Find and Connect, n.d.).

In some cases, the efforts of missionaries provided the first and only description of a language (Crowley, 2001). Because the missionaries had varying degrees of linguistic knowledge and training, some of these descriptions were correct, and sometimes they were very wrong. There are in fact several examples of where languages, misunderstood by missionary linguists, were sanitised or simplified towards an English grammar (Crowley, 2001). Examples of this simplification of heritage languages towards English can be found in the Goldfields. In these codes, the traditional, cultural meanings and the unique syntactic and grammatical complexities of heritage languages have been lost, or whitewashed from the language. Not unlike the simplification of Indigenous concepts that were the result of extending lexemes like tjukurrpa and miirl-miirlpa towards Christian definitions.

4.0 What is the way forward, what happens from here ?

Much of the material collected on Australian languages is thanks to the work of missionary linguists. The Ngaanyatjarra and Ngaatjatjarra to English Dictionary used by many linguists today, is thanks to the work of missionary linguists. The Cundeelee Wangka dictionary and some of the originally recorded material on Wangkatja is thanks to missionaries like Dawn and Brian Hadfield, and Wilf Douglas and Noel Blythe. Without the work of these people, the knowledge and understanding of language would not be strong today.

In the case of Cundeelee Wangka and Wangkatja, missions resulted in the creation of new speech codes. Without intervention from government relocation policy and missions, linguists and historians can only suppose that speakers of heritage languages would have

continued using their codes without interruption. Mission languages like Wangkatja and Cundeelee Wangka may not have come to exist. For speakers of these codes, their identity and history is held and encoded in the lexemes. For linguists, the creation of these codes, the situation and factors that led to their creation and the processes used by the speakers to populate and use these codes contains a wealth of knowledge and invaluable data.

5.0 Conclusion

Evangelical success typically entails the displacement or transformation of the beliefs that preceded it, rather than simply adding to the existing cultural palette. In many cases the practice and beliefs of elders are not just lost, but actively repudiated (Epps & Ladley, 2009). Such is the case with the loss of knowledge and ways of being endured by First Nations' people of the Goldfields following the loss of the traditional family unit, a loss sanctioned by the *Aborigines Act 1905* and upheld in the mission. The removal of Indigenous children from their families and homelands, disordered traditional ways of life. Ordered states allow for the integrity of heritage and ensure ongoing relationships with that heritage. The disordering of heritage in physical forms, like those caused by relocation and removal from the family unit, results in the erosion of culture and language (Epps & Ladley, 2009). The practice of removing Indigenous children from the family unit, has resulted in generations of First Nations' people traumatized by loss of their culture and identity (Choo, 1997). The disruption to intergenerational transmission of knowledges has had a two-fold effect on language in the Goldfields. The first being loss of culture through loss of traditional languages. The second was the creation of Indigenous creoles or mission languages such as Wangkatja, from the Mt Margaret Mission and Cundeelee Wangka, from the Cundeelee Mission.
Life on the mission afforded Indigenous residents access to education and 'life skills' that they would not have otherwise had access to. For this reason, there are many Indigenous Australians who see their success as thanks to the mission. However, others illustrate very clearly the disastrous impact of removal from their parents (Stanton, 2005).

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