Indigenous and Australian Speech: Oppressed and Developed Through the Ages

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1 Introduction

Language has been used as a tool to control and empower cultural groups throughout the course of history. This essay will determine the uses of spoken and written forms of language to oppress subordinate groups. Language can also empower individuals, especially when used to determine personal identity and reality. To define these terms, 'personal identity' in this context relates to an identity belonging to those part of a particular group. 'Reality' will refer to exposing things as they are, rather than using idealistic notions to refer to them. Finally, 'empowerment' in this context refers to the liberation, unchaining, or freeing of individuals in a community from Western uniformity and its standards.

In the first section, the focus will be on how English has developed in the age of colonial expansion. Specifically, the discussion will cover its uses to control Indigenous and Australian speech, forcefully assimilating them into the dominant culture. The British Empire has been a large proponent of this. The second section will explore how language has the power to express both personal identity and reality. One example of this is the push for distinctly Australian speech, used to define the Australian cultural identity. This section will also analyse Indigenous languages, specifically the way in which multilingualism helps define the Indigenous group identity. What this uncovers is an "essentialist language identity" bias proposed by Friederike Lüpke (2016) — the idea that a single language that holds the greatest significance for an individual defines their personal identity (as cited in Singer, 2018, p. 10). This ill-judged bias — inapplicable for the Indigenous — illustrates the reality that Western ideals cannot realistically transfer across all cultures. These examples highlight how cultural groups can use language to liberate themselves from Western ideals, especially those which regulate language usage, which often comes back to the age of colonial expansion in empire.

2 The Employment of Elocution in Australia

The term 'elocution' refers to part of a mission to standardise speech, and also highlights the power of oration in controlling how diverse cultural groups speak (Damousi, 2010). In *Colonial Voices: A Cultural History of English in Australia,1840-1940*, Damousi (2010, p. 11) describes

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the British as experiencing a "linguistic fever" during the eighteenth century, which saw an obsession to ensure the supremacy of the English language, and, by extension, the British Empire. With the loss of America as a colony in the 1770s dealing a heavy blow to the empire's reputation, Damousi (2010) asserts that Australia served as an alternative to rebuilding its esteem. English was therefore used to control the Australian population and to ensure the British Empire maintained a stronghold over Australia.

3 The Repression of Indigenous Speech

In Australia, the British Empire used elocution to assimilate Indigenous people into a more 'civilised' society, intending to silence them and erase their 'primitive' culture (Damousi, 2010). The British rejected their Indigenous tongues and subjected them to compulsory education in English (Damousi, 2010). Unable to properly express themselves in English, they were robbed of their ability to voice their grievances. This enabled the British to easily control them by transforming Indigenous society to reflect what was valued in Britain at the time. Consequently, Aboriginals were encouraged to forgo their spiritualistic values in favour of Christian ones (Damousi, 2010). This was done by teaching Indigenous children English so they could learn to read the Bible, which was part of the British Empire's 'civilising' and 'Christianising'. Ultimately, enforcing English-language education on Indigenous people was a form of oppressive control employed by the British to strengthen the power of its empire. Distinct cultures were thereby stripped of their identity and forced to assimilate into the dominant 'British' one — a harrowing consequence of using language to control minority groups.

Even today, Indigenous children are expected to speak standard English, which reflects the desire to assimilate them into Australian culture. This can be seen through NAPLAN, a government initiative made to "Close the Gap" between non-Indigenous Australians and Aboriginals as well as Torres Strait Islanders (Macqueen et al., 2018, p. 3). The results show that Indigenous children in remote communities consistently received lower results than non-Indigenous Australians (Macqueen et al., 2018). What these tests failed to consider is that many Indigenous children learn English as a foreign language (Macqueen et al., 2018) and that NAPLAN assumes these children have cultural knowledge generally associated with urban areas (Wigglesworth et al., 2011). For instance, in the first sample passage of a Grade 3 NAPLAN test in 2008, there was a poster of a film that would later be screened at a cinema (Wigglesworth et al., 2011). Indigenous children in rural areas do not have access to cinemas or any associated promotional material (Wigglesworth et al., 2011), so it is not appropriate to expect them to answer this question as well as those who live in urban areas. This highlights how English is still being used today to politically and culturally control Aboriginals, especially since these NAPLAN results were then used to scrap bilingual education in the Northern Territory (Wigglesworth et al., 2011). By rejecting Indigenous languages and forcing them to speak only standard English in schools, language is exposed as having the power to control minority cultural groups in society. This is especially the case for Aboriginals, who are forcefully assimilated into the dominant Australian society, stripped of their language and culture.

4 The Control Over Australian Speech

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Australian speech was also subject to opposition from the British. The Australian accent was regarded as unattractive and inferior to that of their metropole (Bongiorno, 2011). Since the manner with which one spoke was usually thought to mark their character and social standing (Bongiorno, 2011), the British put a great deal of effort into training Australians on how to 'properly' speak through elocution in schools. This was likely in fear that a British subject which was perceived poorly would paint the whole empire in a bad light.

One major concern for the British empire was the influence of American media on Australian speech and culture. Rickard (1995, p. 181) introduced the concepts of high and low cultures, and discussed how American English was part of a low culture that seemed to challenge the linguistic hegemony of the British Empire, the high culture. Considering this, the British discouraged the influence of the American "twang", which greatly offended British sendibilities (Damousi, 2007). They feared that the American sound would contaminate the English language (Damousi, 2007), which would thereby weaken the empire's reputation as more 'civilised' than the rest of the world.

The British attempted to rectify this by promoting their 'cultivated' speech through elocution, especially in Australia. Middle class or gentry settlers arriving in Australia strove to re-invent themselves by adopting what they believed was a 'proper' way of speaking. As 'cultivated' speech was thought to improve one's stance in society, the demand for instruction manuals and texts on how to speak well grew exponentially (Damousi, 2010). Indeed, Lynda Mugglestone (1995) estimates that between 1760 and 1800, five times as many works on elocution appeared than the years before 1760 (as cited in Damousi, 2007). Here, it is clear that the growing desire for work on elocution gave the British Empire more power to control how individuals spoke, motivated largely by fear of a weak empire, but providing individuals with a standard on how to speak nonetheless.

5 The Development of Australian Speech

Whilst the power of language is often used to oppress, increased interest in how to speak well exposes how speech can also be used to define personal identity and thus empower individuals. Accents were thought to help define social identity (Damousi, 2007), but this was not limited to the British style. Many cultural groups began to move away from elocution, originally used to define speech and cultural identity (Damousi, 2010). Instead, they fought to define their own distinctive sound, intended to establish their own personal identity, which would thereby unchain them from Western control and its uniformity.

This occurred in Australia, where the question of a distinct cultural identity provoked a debate separating those who wanted to adopt a 'proper' British speech and others who sought to develop a distinct Australian sound. Whilst this debate did not at first make elocution obsolete, a shift in teaching styles did emerge; the focus was not on replicating the British vision of a 'proper' speech but instead determining what was an acceptable Australian 'sound', which would reflect both national and personal identity (Damousi, 2010). This became more preva-

lent from the 1920s onwards, where the formal practice of elocution became outdated, and radios, as well as films, became more popular (Damousi, 2010). Many were imported from overseas, which exposed Australians to a variety of accents (Damousi, 2010). For instance, radio commentators who used Australian pronunciation had a colloquial and emotive appeal to them, which led people to view the British speech as overly mechanical (Damousi, 2010). This contributed to the push for a distinct Australian sound, which helped establish a personal Australian identity (Damousi, 2010). As a result, Australians fought to be free from British control over their speech, no longer merely a colony of Britain but a distinguishable nation with its own culture.

6 The Persistence of Indigenous Linguistic Identity

The Western view on language defining personal identity cannot realistically transfer across all cultures. Lüpke (2016, as cited in Singer, 2018, p. 10) describes this as an "essentialist language identity" bias, where a singular language which holds the greatest symbolic value for people is thought to determine their identity. This is not the case for Aboriginals; research in the Warruwi region helps explain how Indigenous languages are distinctly used to define their personal identity.

In an article in the *Australian Journal of Anthropology*, Singer (2018) describes a performance she saw of a 're-enactment' of the first meeting with missionaries in Warruwi, part of the Centenary celebrations. In this performance, families could wear blue t-shirts, which represents Mawng, or yellow t-shirts, representing Kunwinjku (Singer, 2018). After witnessing this, Singer (2018) describes her confusion on why people would wear these t-shirts, which only represented Mawng or Kunwinjku, when they spoke a diverse range of Indigenous languages not confined to these two.

Singer found a reason for this. In the Warruwi region, the language people identified as meaning the most to them was their grandfather's language, described as their "patrilineal clan language" (Singer, 2018, p. 10). Despite this, the choice between the blue or yellow t-shirts was not solely based on the patrilineal clan to which they belonged. It also tied to Warruwi history and several other factors, such as how Aboriginals used a common rather than singular language to communicate with people from other regions. This means that Aboriginals are part of a diverse community, whose identity is not defined by a single language they all speak but by several of their Indigenous languages. What this illustrates is the "essentialist language identity" bias in action, which demonstrates the reality that the Western vision is not a lens we can use to understand other cultures, as it often leads to forced assimilation to Western ideals and uniformity. By understanding this, Indigenous people can be free of Western homogeneity, especially when determining their relationship towards language and identity.

7 Conclusion

Throughout history, language has had the power to both control and empower cultural groups. The British Empire has used language, especially English, to control their colonial subjects. Australian and Indigenous individuals are targets of this malignant use of power, with their

speech and use of language subject to careful regulation. Despite this, Australians began to push for a distinctive Australian sound during the interwar period. Furthermore, multilingualism commonly found in Indigenous communities has brought attention to the "essentialist language identity" bias inappropriately used to define the relationship between language and identity for Indigenous people. This ultimately demonstrates to Western powers the reality that their standards for speech are not always transferable to varied cultures. Ultimately, language is not an intrinsically malevolent device, but it must be pondered and questioned before its employment to ensure no harm comes from it.

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