Australia’s Asia Literacy Debate

By Hanna Torsh | October 2, 2012 | Language, migration & social justice

Since starting a PhD in February in a different field to my previous work, I've been running a weekly alert with the words “language” and “Australia” to see what was around. That's when I discovered a key theme in linguistics in public discourse in Australia, and that is the need for “Asia literacy”.

“Australia must boost Asian language learning!”

Almost every week since February there has been an article, mostly in an Australian media source but also, as in the heading above, from the country's Asian neighbours in Indonesia and India, lamenting Australia’s declining enrolments in Asian languages. Other headlines read: “Australia needs to break out of language cocoon”, “Loss of Indonesian expertise poses security risk”, “Australia lagging in learning a second language”, “Foreign Affairs staff have a French accent”, “Australia should send Hindi-speaking diplomats to India: Expert”, “Asian literacy critical to children”, “In the right place but lost for words”. This media attention is the result of the commission and imminent release of the Australian Government’s White Paper on Australia in the Asian Century. Furthermore, significant political figures such as the Opposition Leader Tony Abbott and his deputy Julie Bishop have made their commitment to Asian language learning public in the last twelve months (“Asian Language Should be Mandatory for Australian Schoolchildren Julie Bishop Says”, “Abbott Accuses Government of Playing Class War Card”).

The same old story

But on closer inspection it seems that this theme is not new. In his book The Politics of Language in Australia Ozolins notes that Asian literacy was first considered a problem by the Australian Ambassador to Japan, Alan Watt, in the 1950s. He was clearly before his time as it was not until the 1990s that the then Labour government committed to Asian languages in the form of the NAsian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools (NALSAS) program. This was then discontinued by
(NALSS) from 2008 to 20012. Both programs focused on four ‘strategic’ languages, namely Mandarin, Indonesian, Korean and Japanese, and the rationale for choosing these languages came directly from figures from the Department of Trade, rather than from numbers of speakers in the community.

Who are the Australians who need to learn Asian languages?

So it seems that suggesting Australians learn another language, and particularly an Asian language, in order to increase our job skills (note the continued focus on the diplomatic service in the headlines above) has a lot of currency in our public discourse today and indeed over the last sixty years. But who are the imagined language learners here? When the numbers of students studying Mandarin is referred to in the debate, there is often reference to the fact that many of them come from a Chinese ethnic background, as though this dilutes the strength of the numbers (e.g., “Australians Falling Behind in Asian Language Education”). Can it be that these young people, whose “ethnic” background should in no way lead us to assume any knowledge of Mandarin, given the diversity of languages in China as well as the diversity of language practices in migrant homes, do not “count” as normal Australians in the debate?

“Ethnic” Asians do not count

Indeed, despite the fact that NALSAS and its successor mention drawing on the considerable population of speakers of the four strategic languages as potential language learners, as Susana Eisencllas and others have pointed out here on Language on the Move, often this group is seen as a problem for language learning. When Ms Bishop is quoted as saying “It would be a brilliant form of soft diplomacy if we had a large body of people in Australia who were able to speak an Asian language,” my immediate response is that, “Actually, we do! ... but they are clearly not the Australians you have in mind!”

Rather than acknowledging the linguistic diversity in Australia (as evidenced by the 2011 census results), this imagined group of learners are homogenous in their English-speaking (Anglo-Celtic?) Australianness. Rather than seeing it as a tale of failure to provide bilingual education for a diverse population, the comments on imagined learners in the Asian literacy debate construct a world of learning which is uni-directional; from the Australian classroom outwards to the world of foreign diplomacy. And rather than building on and supporting the use of these four languages (and others) in many thousands of Australian families, this approach values these skills so little they are not even a salient part of the debate. For those who genuinely believe in more language education in Australia, we must start by acknowledging, appreciating and supporting the diversity of potential language learners themselves, rather than harking back to a mythical White monoculture which masks true diversity.
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Roxxan
October 28, 2017 at 5:38 pm

Thanks for such an interesting post. From my own experience, as Australian is a country of immigrants, there are many ‘foreigners’ who speak a different language especially Chinese including Mandarin and Cantonese. In other words, Chinese
Asian shops, restaurants and supermarkets asks employees to be familiar with both English and Chinese. Furthermore, the menu of some Chinese and even Korean and Japanese restaurants are using Chinese characters, which may be convenient for Chinese customers. On the other hand, as many Australians could not speak Chinese, these native residents may lose many job opportunities.

**rajni jaishi**  
October 2, 2017 at 5:32 pm

Apart from the faulty policies in place, the diverse population or immigrants are also to blame for this dominance of English in countries like Australia, US, Canada. My personal experiences of meeting Asian immigrants here is that they try very hard to fit into the system by emulating their (the natives’) way of speaking English. If there was place for bilinguals and if linguistic diversity was appreciated well, probably they too wouldn’t hesitate to use and promote their own languages. It is shocking that a country with such great diversity fails to include such a large part of its population in its education policy.

**Elizabeth Gunn**  
October 17, 2012 at 4:40 pm

I absolutely love your post Hanna.

One of the real challenges of banishing the Australian monolingual mindset to purgatory and celebrating linguistic diversity would be a broad-based realisation that multiliguals possess the skills to help Anglophones overcome their skills shortage – that would be a turning of the tables!

Australian monolinguals have enjoyed a love affair with the notion that English is the only language necessary for global and local communication. Indeed it underwrites our whole international education industry, not to mention all the other economic ‘advantages’. They say that love is blind, but even the most myopic monolinguals are starting to realise that this notion of English domination now looks pretty tawdry and unfaithful. Other languages might be really useful! Multilinguals might have advantages! How could we have let this happen!
is a model that makes the most of, rather than negates, community language diversity. Who knows, one day maybe even Dinka or Amharic might be used as languages of instruction in Australian universities!

Hanna Torsh
October 9, 2012 at 2:36 pm

Lots of interesting points. I agree that without support, second or third generation migrants are unlikely to have the skills set that the government wants. I also agree that Asian Australians are rendered invisible in Bishops statement. And I think Jason you are right when you say that there is an assumption about values linked to migrant background here. What I find intriguing is that all these things reveal a discourse of assimilation rather than co-existence. Migrants are either discounted as not Australian enough for preserving their language as best they can with little social support or they are discounted as not Australian enough even when they do lose their language simply on the basis that they are migrants. They is no way they can ever really count as Australian in this evaluation. It is a lose-lose situation. I find it remarkable that even while seemingly promoting multilingualism, these kind of approaches are in fact quite assimilationist in their approach.

Jason
October 6, 2012 at 1:22 pm

Good points. Could it be that the establishment look to non “ethnic” Australians because it believes these citizens are more likely to subscribe to a set of values and beliefs that the establishment want to project outwards? i.e. they are culturally more in tune with the establishment’s own cultural self image.

Donna Butorac
October 5, 2012 at 1:42 pm

Great blog, Hanna! I wonder if part of the overlooking that is implied in Bishop’s call to language is a (probably) deliberate move to render invisible Asian Australians. In her statement, they become non-people in the Australian context.
Great post. I don’t know much about the situation in Australia, but here in the US heritage language ability generally disappears by the third generation. Among the second generation, abilities are generally weak and limited to certain domestic contexts. What kinds of supports are available in the education system to help immigrant youth and children of immigrants maintain and develop the language skills with which they came? Basic domestic conversation skills aren’t necessarily going to help further Australia’s soft power agenda—you need people who have the linguistic skills to navigate many domains, including professional ones.
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