

6. Diana Eades

They don't speak an Aboriginal language, or do they?

Growing numbers of people in 'settled' Australia who identify as Aboriginal, speak varieties of English as their first language. The fact that such people speak little or none of their traditional Aboriginal languages is often used by non-Aboriginal people as evidence that these people are 'not really Aboriginal'. Thus the choice of language variety plays an important role in questions of Aboriginal identity, and therefore in issues of needs and rights in areas such as politics, land rights and education.

In this chapter, I draw on my research in southeast Queensland,¹ which sheds new light on the relationship between language and identity. While many Aboriginal people may speak English as their first language, the context of conversation has significant Aboriginal cultural and social aspects which lead to distinctively Aboriginal interpretations and meanings. While the chosen language code is frequently English, there are important continuities in the ways language is used. By focussing on aspects of language use I will illustrate some of these continuities, which are significant both in the issue of Aboriginal identity and also in developing more effective cross-cultural communication.

Discussions of Aboriginal Australia in the discipline of sociolinguistics have mainly worked from the assumption that language reflects or expresses social and cultural realities. Studies have tended to be restricted to isolated topics in language use, most notably the two areas of kinship terminology and special language varieties. While these topics are important, a broader and interactive view of language illuminates new and important dimensions of cultural continuity. Interactional sociolinguistics works from the assumption that language is much more than a reflection or expression of society and culture; it is a dynamic and creative instrument of social action. Such a theoretical framework is a powerful tool in understanding why people interact with each other in the way they do, their intentions and interpretations. Such a theory can also explain aspects of cross-cultural mis-communication in interactions where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal speakers are using varieties of English.

The framework of this chapter is ethnographically-based, interactional sociolinguistics. The ethnographic study of society is a necessary pre-requisite for understanding language. We need to understand the socio-cultural contexts of speakers and situations, and look beyond isolated instances of language use to the use of language within interactions. Language is impossible to separate from context—it is continually both reflecting and creating aspects of context.

Aboriginal people in southeast Queensland

Almost all Aboriginal people in southeast Queensland today are of mixed descent, and there is still much intermarriage with non-Aborigines. Non-Aboriginal people frequently fail to see beyond skin colour and superficial aspects of lifestyle (including choice of language), and hence mistakenly assume that Aboriginal identity in areas like southeast Queensland is largely tokenistic. But the sense of Aboriginal identity remains strong. Although a few people (as elsewhere in Australia) have found it necessary to deny their Aboriginal identity and origins, publicly at least, in order to escape anti-Aboriginal discrimination, it is rare for Aboriginal people to renounce their responsibilities and rights in their Aboriginal society.

Aboriginal people in southeast Queensland belong to over-lapping kin-based networks sharing social life, responsibilities and rights, a common history and culture, an experience of racism, and ethnic consciousness. Social relations are characterised by ongoing family commitments within groups. Barwick's summary of Aboriginal identity (1974, 154 and see Chapter 2) is highly appropriate here: 'To be Aboriginal is to be born to, to belong to, to be loyal to a family.' When people talk about being Aboriginal, they invariably talk about Aboriginal family relationships. Place of residence, travel, social networks, leisure activities and personal loyalties all revolve in some way around one's kin, as other authors in this volume have found. It is significant that Aboriginal kin involves a wide network of people many of whom are related only distantly in non-Aboriginal terms.

One of the most important obligations or expectations of kin is that they maintain contact. Although people participate in mainstream Australian social life in many day-to-day activities, they place the highest priority on seeing relatives. The most serious complaints and accusations about people's behaviour usually concern some aspect of family interaction, such as: 'She never visits her people'; or 'He talks bad to [swears at] his mother when he is drunk.' Such interactional failings generally cause much more concern and bad feeling than incidents such as an illegitimate pregnancy, being sacked from a job, or failing an exam.

While the greatest responsibility is frequently to the nuclear family, family responsibilities are generally applied within a wide range of kin. This applies to the maintaining of social contacts, but also to such areas as the rearing of children, the support of ill or very old people, and the sharing of material resources.

There are many examples of the way in which the wages and benefit payments of Aboriginal individuals are shared between related households. Direct continuity

They don't speak an Aboriginal language, or do they?

can be seen from pre-contact times, when extended families were provided for by the labour of some of their members, and a young man killing a kangaroo, for example, would be obliged to share certain portions with specific kin. What is more significant than the extent to which resources such as money, housing and car, are shared, is the expectation that they will be shared. This is certainly an area in which both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians perceive a great cultural difference. It is impossible adequately to understand Aboriginal values, attitudes, intentions and actions without understanding the fundamental pivot of social relationships, particularly between relatives.

Many non-Aboriginal people, for example, find it hard to understand why Aboriginal households invariably have a television set (usually colour), despite serious poverty and extreme lack of material possessions in some instances. But this is an indication of the Aboriginal concern with entertainment not just as a private experience, but as a group activity, rather than, say, with labour saving devices or attractive furniture and furnishings. Perhaps a link could be drawn between contemporary Aboriginal television watching and pre-contact Aboriginal ceremonial life, in which there was generally great passive participation (Christie 1982). Contemporary Aboriginal television watching can also be described as passive participation in that people constantly interject during shows, address actors, and discuss programmes with each other.

Similarly, contemporary Aboriginal attitudes to employment need to be understood in the light of the priority on developing, maintaining and strengthening complex and over-lapping social relationships. Aboriginal unemployment is high. Few Aboriginal people in southeast Queensland subscribe to a work ethic, and although many people are employed at times, their participation is often peripheral. Many place no importance on continual employment, and work is generally regarded as an economic necessity, rather than as part of a life-time plan. Because of the shared financial obligations within family networks, individual unemployment has neither the disastrous financial consequences nor the negative social stigma common to mainstream Australian society. Here again Aboriginal families subordinate financial and employment priorities to the important aspects of social relations.

Non-Aboriginal readers who have dealings with Aboriginal people may be surprised at some of the features discussed in this chapter. It is important to point out that the majority of Aborigines in 'settled' Australia are biculturally competent. Many people choose to operate within white norms in many of their dealings with non-Aborigines, and to use Aboriginal norms, such as those discussed in this chapter,

in their own in-group interactions. However, this choice is by no means universal, and much cross-cultural interaction is affected by different norms of interaction, in areas such as those discussed here.

Aboriginal languages in southeast Queensland

Aboriginal people in southeast Queensland today primarily speak varieties of English. There is probably no-one from this area of Australia who today speaks an Aboriginal language as a first (or primary) language. Many Aboriginal people are competent users of a number of varieties of English, from which they choose according to aspects of the conversational context.

Many people speak Standard English, particularly in their interactions with white Australians in formal settings, such as education, government, health and legal arenas. However, while many Aboriginal people throughout Australia are fluent speakers of Standard English, cultural factors affecting language use can lead to differing interpretations, as I will show below. As well, most Aboriginal people speak different varieties of Aboriginal English in different Aboriginal contexts. But there is considerable variability in the Aboriginal English spoken in southeast Queensland, as throughout Australia.

Aboriginal English reflects grammatically the structure of traditional Aboriginal languages. For example, the plural '-s' marking on nouns in English is frequently absent in Aboriginal English (eg 'one dog', 'two dog'). This is a reflection of the traditional Aboriginal languages in which plural is rarely overtly marked. Such features have led to a widespread tendency among non-Aboriginal Australians to regard Aboriginal English as a deficient variety of English, but it is important to point out that Aboriginal English is in no way an inferior language. It is a perfectly adaptable, rule-governed language. Some grammatical variations are simpler than the corresponding Standard English structures, such as the plural markings on nouns, and the equational sentence structure which differs from Standard English equivalents by the absence of a verb 'to be' (eg 'Where Johnny?'), but other variations are more complex. For example, the second person pronoun in Standard English is 'you', regardless of its reference to singular or non-singular participants. But, in Aboriginal English, there is a distinction between: 'you' (second person singular); 'you two, you-n-(h)im' (second person dual); and 'you mob' (second person plural). These pronouns also reflect the grammatical category distinctions of traditional Aboriginal languages.

They don't speak an Aboriginal language,
or do they?

Many Aboriginal people, speaking varieties of both Standard English and Aboriginal English, use Aboriginal language words, for example:

'Move your big *jingung* [foot].'

'Dog *goonung* [faeces] over there.'

'Look out—*boolimun* [policemen] coming.'

This style of speaking is common throughout Australia and is an important 'badge' of Aboriginal identity (see Chapter 5).

The indigenous Aboriginal languages (such as Gooreng Gooreng, Waka Waka, Woolli Woolli, Kabi Kabi and Batjala) are still spoken in some restricted contexts, mainly by older people. For several generations people were actively discouraged from, and on some government reserves even punished for, using their Aboriginal languages. Today it is quite rare for non-Aborigines to hear Aboriginal languages being spoken in southeast Queensland. However, Lingo (the local Aboriginal name for these languages) is still fulfilling a social function. It is used mainly by older people, either to chastise someone, or else to exclude someone from their conversation—be they a non-Aboriginal researcher, a policeman, or an Aborigine from another part of Queensland. It is also used as a polite, euphemistic form of language to talk about private topics such as pregnancy or urinating. It is not uncommon for older people to switch from speaking English to short but fluent conversations in Lingo and then back into English. These traditional Aboriginal languages in southeast Queensland are thus not dead, even though they may be barely elicitable by linguists. They are fulfilling a social function in some restricted contexts.

Language as a part of culture

The Aboriginal priority on developing, maintaining and strengthening social relationships is both reflected in, and created by, the way people speak to each other, whether the language variety is English, Aboriginal English or Lingo.

We saw above that it is important for Aboriginal people to know a wide-ranging group of relatives, to know in detail how they are related, and to maintain contact with many relatives. There are several aspects of language use which indicate the importance of these family obligations. It will be seen from discussion of these aspects that they do more than indicate the importance of these obligations, or reflect an existing reality. It is partly through the use of certain ways of speaking that these family obligations are actually fulfilled and maintained. These ways of speaking are creative

social actions integral to the continuity of Aboriginal society and culture. This creative aspect of language usage is illustrated here with kinship terms of address, and the conversational avoidance of certain relatives.

Use of kin terms

Within the extended family, there is widespread use of English terms of address, such as 'cuz' (cousin), 'aunty' and 'uncle'. Unlike the situation in most non-Aboriginal Australian families, the use of these terms is not restricted to children. 'Aunty' and 'uncle' tend to be used between any Aboriginal adults and their higher generation relatives. Some young Aboriginal adults, particularly those who marry non-Aboriginal spouses, stop using 'aunty' and 'uncle' and this causes considerable concern. Such behaviour indicates not only lack of respect for older relatives, but also cultural breakdown. It is important in Aboriginal culture to acknowledge respect due to older people, even by mature adults. Age brings power and wisdom in Aboriginal culture in 'settled' Australia, just as in traditionally-oriented Australia (Berndt and Berndt 1964).

While it is generally English kin terms which are used, there are some continuities with traditional language kin categories and terms of address, such as the following examples, discussed by Williams (1981), which are English translations of traditional labels: 'cousin brother' is used sometimes by parallel cousins to address their male parallel cousins; and 'daughter' is used to address an old woman by her great-grandchildren.

The use of 'cuz' appears to be frequent between same-generation relatives, no matter how distant. Its use is an important part of ongoing Aboriginal culture in places like southeast Queensland, where Aboriginal people live and work in such a large-scale society. Links with one's own kin are still seen as important and as able to transcend non-Aboriginal social structures into which Aboriginal people are drawn. For example in bureaucratically structured Aboriginal organisations and government departments Aboriginal people work, have meetings, and decide policies with a wide range of other Aboriginal people from all over Australia. But within these bureaucratic structures and ways of operating many elements of Aboriginal culture persist. One such element is the loyalty to kin. Thus the use of the term of address 'cuz' in a meeting or a tutorial in a tertiary institution, for instance, both maintains and reminds Aboriginal participants of a speaker's relationship to another participant and the accompanying rights and responsibilities. Whereas in pre-colonial times this might have encompassed food provision and child-raising, in the 1980s it includes

They don't speak an Aboriginal language,
or do they?

such dimensions as loyalty in voting, and assistance with assignment work, as well as financial and family responsibilities.

Avoidance behaviour

It is not only the actual words people use which reflect and create continuities of Aboriginal culture. In contemporary Aboriginal society, we see continuities of traditional norms concerning who an individual can speak to and in what ways.

Avoidance behaviour between particular in-laws in Aboriginal societies is well documented in the anthropological literature (eg Berndt and Berndt 1964). In many Aboriginal societies special language varieties were used between certain relatives (see Dixon 1974; Harris 1970). Haviland (1979) describes avoidance speech behaviour between certain relatives in Hopevale (a North Queensland community) as part of a range of avoidance behaviour which includes eye contact, posture, and restrictions on physical contact and on the sharing of food and possessions.

Older people in southeast Queensland today remember that there was strict avoidance between a man and his mother-in-law until about the 1950s. They remember that in their childhood a man would never directly address, face toward, or give food to, his mother-in-law. Conversations between a man and his mother-in-law would take place through a third, intermediary person in a stylised way. One woman told me how her mother never ate at the family table when her husband was present. On these occasions she ate at the small table made specially by her husband for his mother-in-law to eat at.

While many Aboriginal families today no longer observe such strict avoidance, there is still some continuity in that many men avoid direct conversations with their mothers-in-law. The literature would indicate reasons to interpret such avoidance as not simply identical with the frequent mainstream antagonism, but as based on long standing Aboriginal traditions of respect-based avoidance. One such form which I have frequently observed in a particular country town, concerns a man in his sixties with a bad leg who often walks about two kilometres to town. On the way he often passes his mother-in-law's house where he sometimes rests. However, he never enters the house, but rests in the shed out the back. They rarely, if ever, speak to each other.

We have glimpsed the way Aboriginal culture is created and reflected through ways of speaking. To put it another way, the use of language is an integral part of social action which is distinctively Aboriginal. Even though English is the language spoken by Aboriginal people in many parts of Australia, social aspects of the way

it is used reflect and help to maintain and create a culture which is Aboriginal and which shows continuities with traditional Aboriginal cultures.

Further examination of the language–culture relationship

Ethnographically-based interactional sociolinguistics enables us to go beyond the realm of kinship terminology and avoidance languages in the examination of the language–culture relationship and the continuity of Aboriginal culture. In this section I focus on the way Aboriginal people in southeast Queensland use English to achieve certain social ends—namely making and refusing requests, seeking and giving information, seeking and giving reasons for actions. But to understand these inter-related uses of language we first need some insight into aspects of the socio-cultural context of speakers. We will look first at the public nature of Aboriginal social life, and the role of indirectness in social interactions.

The role of indirectness

Aboriginal social life is very public. Traditional Aboriginal society has no walls and, as Hamilton (1981, 97) puts it, 'No particular value [is] placed on privacy in camp'. Although Aboriginal people in 'settled' Australia live in quite different physical settings from those in traditional Australia, their social life is still very public. In the cities, towns and reserves people live very close to one another and their day-to-day activities are public. Small houses accommodate large families, or many members of an extended family, and by non-Aboriginal standards are frequently over-crowded. There is a communal, non-private nature to this style of living. As well, much day-to-day living takes place in open, outside areas, such as the main street of towns, in public places, and (in country towns particularly) on the verandahs of houses. The importance of verandahs in country town and reserve Aboriginal social life cannot be over-emphasised. Here people regularly sit for long periods, observing the comings and goings of others around them and passing on reports of other people's activities. Modes of transport are highly public too. Because people often walk, they are easily observed and they often bear reports between households. Cars frequently travel with full passenger loads, stopping at different houses to exchange passengers and news. The fact that many cars are also noisy enables people's movements to be easily observed. As well as this close lifestyle in physical, spatial terms, Aboriginal people live close lives socially, through complex and wide-ranging kin ties which are constantly maintained and strengthened in social interaction.

They don't speak an Aboriginal language,
or do they?

In such a public society, we can ask whether there is any privacy at all. To answer this question we need to look at norms and expectations of Aboriginal relationships. Here we find a dimension of personal privacy not common in non-Aboriginal Australia. The Aboriginal way of interacting indirectly preserves a considerable degree of personal privacy. In a number of aspects of conversation, Aboriginal people tend to be much more indirect than non-Aboriginal people. Even where the same language variety (eg Standard English) is used, there are cultural differences in usage which both reflect and continually create and maintain indirectness in social interactions.

Several researchers have discussed the norm in traditional Aboriginal societies of avoiding direct confrontation and respecting a greater personal privacy than is usual in non-Aboriginal society. Von Sturmer (1981, 29) says that for whites talking to Aborigines, 'the need for caution and circumspection' is 'the primary consideration'. Similarly, Harris (1977) reports that one of the most significant factors of conversations in Millingimbi (Arnhem Land) is the avoidance of direct verbal confrontation. The work of Liberman (1981; 1982a; 1982b,1) examines the way Western Desert Aborigines structure discussions so that consensus can be preserved:

The preservation of this consensus is achieved by the unassertiveness of participants, avoidance of direct argumentation, a deferral of topics which will produce disharmony, and above all, by an objectification of discourse which is effected by a serial production of summary accounts of the participants' deliberations.

I have observed similar conversational strategies among Aboriginal people in southeast Queensland. In many interactions these people do not express a firm or biased opinion, even if they hold it. They may discuss a topic generally while gauging others' views, before stating their own. If people find their views on a topic to be at odds with others in a conversation, they will tend to understate their own. In minimising confrontation and argument, the speaker leaves open the possibility for further comfortable discussion. What Liberman (1982b, 2) explains as 'a strict refusal to force a way of thinking upon others' can also appear as a refusal to state one's position openly in a particular discussion. Thus, many meetings in which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people discuss contentious issues involve more than the expected cross-cultural tension. Part of the tension is due to the different ways in which different or conflicting viewpoints are presented. It is an appropriate communicative strategy in European-Australian meetings to present clearly a viewpoint which is directly contrary to that of the previous speaker. Aboriginal speakers are more likely to present

some similar viewpoint first, leaving the more significant conflicting viewpoint for a later opportunity. Because of the differences in timing, misunderstanding often occurs. Aboriginal speakers often feel they are not given enough time to speak, and to develop their viewpoint. As well they often feel that non-Aboriginal participants are confrontational in the way they present their ideas. Non-Aboriginal speakers often feel that Aboriginal speakers are not clear in expressing their views—Aboriginal indirectness and circumspection is often interpreted as inarticulateness and the lack of a logical argument.

Von Sturmer's (1981, 29) discussion of Aboriginal caution and circumspection also points out the strategy of 'not presenting oneself too forcefully and not linking oneself too closely with one's own ideas'. He discusses the use of the expression 'might be' (as a modal qualifier) to distance the speaker from the certainty of the idea he is presenting. Similarly Aboriginal speakers often preface their views with comments such as, 'This is just what I think.' Disclaimers such as these point to a fundamental cultural view that an Aboriginal person can speak only for themselves. Western-style democracy and notions of representation impose many difficulties on Aboriginal ways of expressing opinions.

The importance of indirectness in much daily conversational interaction is shown by examining the way Aboriginal people in southeast Queensland use English for the following communicative functions: to seek and give information; to make and refuse requests; and to seek and give reasons.

Seeking and giving information

I have elsewhere discussed the ways in which Aboriginal people in southeast Queensland obtain information. To summarise briefly, information-seeking is part of a two-way exchange in which people give information in order to get information. A distinction is made between orientation information and substantial information. Orientation information is defined as 'information which clarifies a topic' (often the current topic of conversation). The information sought comprises background details about people especially, but also about the time, place and setting of some situation or narrated event (Eades 1982, 72–73).

Direct questions are used to elicit orientation information, for example: 'Where you from?'; or 'Who's his mother?' However, the form of the question frequently presents certain information, but with question intonation (or a following interrogative tag). This form of question, referred to in some studies of Aboriginal English as 'uninverted question forms' (eg Dwyer 1974, 17), is a linguistic strategy consistent with the

They don't speak an Aboriginal language,
or do they?

indirectness typical of much Aboriginal conversation. Rather than directly ask for information, the questioner presents some proposition for confirmation or correction, for example: 'That's his brother?'; or 'Grandfather used to live at Tirroan?' These orientation questions play an important interactional role in Aboriginal society. They are an essential part of the development and maintenance of social links.

In constantly finding out about another's kin, movements, and country, an Aboriginal person is creating or maintaining closeness. Such a process is common between Aboriginal people all over Australia, whether in English, or English related languages, or traditional Aboriginal languages.

The common Aboriginal question, 'Where are you going?' (or its language equivalent, such as *Woonju ngin yun.gim* in Gooreng Gooreng) is interactionally equivalent to 'Hullo', 'Hi' or 'Giddy' in non-Aboriginal Australia (Eades 1982). It is common for Aboriginal people to greet each other with this question. Orientation questions serve an important role in developing and maintaining social links, in locating participants in a conversation in a socio-spatial relationship, and indeed in finding out information (Eades 1982). We will see further that orientation questions can also be intended and interpreted in other ways, for example, as requests or inquiries after the reasons for actions.

While questions can be used to seek orientation information, they are not used to seek substantial information, such as important personal details, a full account of an event, or the explanation of some event or situation. In these situations indirect strategies are used: the speaker contributes some of their own knowledge on a topic and then leaves a silence, to lead the person with the knowledge to impart information. Important aspects of substantial information-seeking are the two-way exchange of information, the positive, non-awkward use of silence, and often considerable time delays (frequently several days) between the initiation of substantial information-seeking and the imparting of information.

Making and refusing requests

Aboriginal people rarely make direct requests. The most common ways of asking someone either to do something, or to give or loan something, involve indirect, multifunctional forms. That is, a question might serve several of the functions outlined above, including that of a request. For example, the standard Aboriginal way of asking for a ride is to ask a car owner an orientation question, such as 'You going to town?' or 'What time are you leaving?' These questions are multifunctional, structurally ambiguous and, depending on the relationship between speakers, communicatively

ambiguous. That is, these questions can be interpreted as part of the information-seeking involved in socio-spatial orientation, but they can also be interpreted as a request for a ride. Appropriate interpretation cannot be made without an understanding of the relationship between speakers. But even if speakers understand such questions as requests for a ride, the ambiguity enables a person to refuse a request in a similar indirect fashion, for example by saying, 'might be later', or 'not sure'. In this way, Aboriginal people can work out requests and refusals without directly exposing their motives.

Such indirect strategies are of course not restricted to Aboriginal conversations. Non-Aboriginal people use such ways of making requests and refusals in sensitive situations. What is significant about the Aboriginal use of these strategies is that they are not restricted to sensitive situations, but are the usual everyday ways of interaction, in which indirectness is the norm.

Seeking and giving reasons

One of the most striking features of language use by Aboriginal people in southeast Queensland is the virtual absence of the reason-seeking question 'why'. People use 'why' and 'what for' to make complaints, as in: 'What you come to me for? I got no money.' But there is no direct way of questioning a person's reasons. However, this is not to say that Aboriginal people are not curious, as they are constantly using ways of speaking to find out reasons for states of affairs. In seeking reasons, people elicit statements of fact, which they accumulate over time and interpret as reasons. The multifunctional forms discussed above also serve to seek reasons for actions. In seeking information, speakers are also seeking the evidence with which they can assume reasons for the actions of others.

For example, in trying to find out why a teenage girl was late home, her granny would never ask: 'Why were you late home last night?' Instead, she would begin by establishing her granddaughter's whereabouts: 'Where you went last night?' or by assuming her whereabouts and querying this fact: 'You were at the pub last night?' Then to find out why the granddaughter was at the pub, her granny would ask: 'Bill there too?' By using a series of orientation questions, the old woman would establish reasons for the granddaughter arriving home late. There is no obligation on Aboriginal speakers to answer questions such as these, however the granddaughter would be well aware that her granny was trying to establish reasons for her actions and she would usually give some answers to enable her granny to establish some acceptable reasons. But the responsibility is on the person interpreting reasons, and the person

They don't speak an Aboriginal language,
or do they?

being questioned does not have to account directly for their reasons. Again multifunctional forms make the requests for reasons indirect and ambiguous and give people considerable privacy. They are never confronted with an inescapable request for a reason, such as the question 'why'.

It is clear that strategies for seeking reasons for actions are indirect. A further technique which lessens direct verbal contact is the inquiry about reasons by a third person. Again the style of questioning is basically the presenting of an assumed fact or facts to a third person in an interrogative mode. Of course, this third person may then assume this fact to be true, and pass it on to a fourth person and so on. Indeed, because reasons are assumed so regularly, unfounded explanations are frequently circulated. However, because these explanations are expressed as facts or assumed facts, rather than as facts with undeniable reasons, speakers are not held accountable.

In reporting facts learned from another party, Aboriginal speakers have a range of expressions available which indicate the speculative nature of the reporting statement. When the speaker is disclaiming responsibility for the truth of the statement, one of the following is frequently used:

- must have—as in 'He must have been after that woman';
- must be—as in 'They must be still at the pub';
- reckons—as in 'Kit reckons that man's still at the pub'; and
- might be—as in 'They gone fishin?' 'Might be'.

(These qualifying forms are also used to protect one's commitment to future action; see Eades 1983.)

Non-verbal actions, such as observation, are important strategies for finding out reasons for the actions of others. In Aboriginal society, there are no sanctions against direct observation of the observable actions of others, including staring. The situation is rather the reverse in white society where there is a strong prohibition against staring at the observable actions of others. This prohibition is further supported by the privatised nature of white society. Much interaction takes place in enclosed areas and is secluded from public observation, as indicated by the expression concerning 'the four walls'. However, there is a wide range of contexts in which it is quite appropriate to question others' actions and reasons directly. On the other hand, in Aboriginal society people have direct and uninterrupted observational access to many day-to-day interactions, but the direct questioning of reasons is prohibited.

Just as the seeking of reasons uses multifunctional forms, so too does the expression of reasons: While the Standard English reason connectors, such as

'because' and 'to', are sometimes used by Aboriginal speakers, it is much more common to give reasons for actions simply as statements, or by using the multifunctional connector 'and'. For example, a woman advising another woman to be careful on a long trip, and to keep the driver awake, said,

You get too tired, you wanna camp on the road you know. Don't travel, he might go to sleep, he must be knocked up too you know. Camp on the road. I'll give you a stick. You give him a poke in the ribs, keep him awake.

This extract could be translated with Standard English reason connectors as,

If you get too tired, you should camp on the road you know. Don't travel, because he might go to sleep, because he must be knocked up too you know, so camp on the road. I'll give you a stick so you can give him a poke in the ribs to keep him awake.

As there is frequently no unambiguous linguistic marker of reason, Aboriginal speakers depend on aspects of context to interpret statements as reasons. Specifically they rely on that element of context which is derived from their sharing of experiences and knowledge.

Linguistic forms which express reasons, then, also serve other communicative functions at the same time. In particular, while giving information, speakers are also expressing reasons for action. Being structurally (but not usually pragmatically) ambiguous, this way of expressing reasons leaves speakers not directly accountable for their motives. In Aboriginal conversations the responsibility for the interpretation of an utterance as a reason rests with the hearer. The speaker has no responsibility to encode an utterance as a reason. The hearer must interpret structurally ambiguous utterances in the light of knowledge shared with the speaker, but the speaker is free to keep utterances pragmatically ambiguous and leave the hearer with insufficient knowledge to disambiguate.

Thus in the expression of motives and reasons, speakers have a great personal freedom and privacy. It is the responsibility of hearers to infer causal links between statements. If hearers do not share enough knowledge with the speaker to do so, they need to initiate investigations, in the indirect ways discussed above.

An example To illustrate the seeking and giving of reasons, let me quote at some length an interaction which I witnessed and taped in a country town in southeast Queensland. It is a good example of Aboriginal indirectness in the giving and seeking of reasons. Central to the Aboriginal style of seeking reasons are:

They don't speak an Aboriginal language,
or do they?

1. observations of movements, preferably from some public position—in this example, the verandah;
2. the gathering of evidence over time;
3. indirect questioning which overtly does not query anything more than the orientation of participants to events;
4. the norm that a person being questioned has no obligation to provide information, and can subvert the questioning with non-cooperative replies, such as untruths and, in this example, vague replies or silence; and
5. the repetition of assumed and observed facts to a third person.

Features 1 and 5 above are part of the public nature of Aboriginal life, while features 3 and 4 contribute to the privacy of Aboriginal individuals.

In a house where I frequently stayed in a small country town, Janey (an elderly woman) had been keenly observing the movements of Sally (her teenage granddaughter). In gathering evidence and making assumptions, Janey had made at least a few factual errors of which I was aware. For example, one day Sally was in town for quite a longer period of time than usual. Janey remarked to me, 'She must have met Tom.' Now Janey was encouraging Sally to marry Tom, so she was pleased with any evidence of their being together. However when Sally came home she told me she had had lunch with a girl friend. It seemed she had not seen Tom at all. A few days later Janey and I went out early in the morning. When we returned in the mid afternoon, no-one was home. Janey told me, 'Sally must have gone out with Tom.' We resumed our positions on the front verandah and observed the comings and goings in the town. After some time we saw Molly's (Sally's sister's) car coming up the road. Janey was surprised because Molly's car usually came to bring Sally home. Janey said to me, 'There Molly. Where Sally? Sally sitting there? Have a look.' I confirmed that Sally was there. When the car pulled up, Sally came up to the verandah and immediately told us, 'I won on the races today.' This was followed by a short conversation on Sally's winnings in which the first person singular pronoun was used several times, indicating that her actions were not with Tom. In fact, Tom was not mentioned at all.

In the next exchange, which is quoted below, Janey tried to establish the reason why Sally didn't go with Tom. Janey's linguistic strategy was that of orientation questioning. In lines A and C she queries assumed information; in line E she repeats information given by Sally; and in line G she uses a standard form of question (discussed in Eades 1982). Janey begins,

A. 'Oh yourself, yourself went there?'

- B. 'Yeah.'
- C. 'Didn't you go with Tom out there?'
- D. 'No, he went fishin with Mick.'
- E. 'Tom did?'
- F. 'Yeah.'
- G. 'Where they went?'
- H. 'I dunno—somewhere.'
- I. 'Oh.'

Janey was successful in finding out a reason why Sally and Tom did not go out together, but she was not successful in finding out why Tom went fishing. Sally successfully avoided giving any further information with her non-committal answer H. (Note that while the relationship between grandmother and granddaughter in Aboriginal society places the granddaughter under certain obligations, such as cooking for her grandmother, they do not extend to giving information. The right to deny information appears to cut across all kin obligations.)

The conversation turned to Janey telling Sally about our day and then the three of us played with Sally's baby. But the reason for Sally and Tom not going out together was still a concern to Janey. After some time, when Sally took her baby inside to bath her, Janey said to me in a surprised tone, 'Wonder she didn't go with Tom.'

Later that afternoon Tom arrived and Janey was able to continue her indirect investigations. Again she used orientation questioning, filling in background details in A and using the audience participation strategy of repetition in C and E. Again the person being questioned (Tom) was under no obligation to provide factual information. Janey asks,

- A. 'Catch any fish, Tom?'
- B. 'No, I didn't get there.'
- C. 'Eh?'
- D. 'I didn't get there.'
- E. 'You didn't go there?'
- F. 'No.'
- G. 'Oh, I thought you went with Mick and Anne.'
- H. (Silence)

Tom made no further comment and then had a very quiet conversation with Sally on the steps of the verandah, which Janey observed. Later Janey joked with me about 'them two fighting'. Her comments to me about the situation were not made in an ambiguous causal manner, but knowing the southeast Queensland Aboriginal mode

They don't speak an Aboriginal language,
or do they?

of giving reasons, I understood that Janey had determined the reason Sally and Tom had not gone out together was because they were having a disagreement.

Conclusion

Many non-Aboriginal people feel that people like Janey and her family are 'not really Aboriginal', because of their relatively light skin colour and superficial similarity to many non-Aboriginal Australians in such aspects as language, dress, housing and employment. A traditional linguistic or static sociolinguistic analysis would do little to demonstrate continuities in Aboriginal ways of believing and acting in places like southeast Queensland. But, ironically, while many people in 'settled' Australia deny any real or distinctive Aboriginality, many people, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, perceive communication differences and difficulties (Eades 1984). For example, Aboriginal people often complain that whites are rude, nose-y, impatient and ask too many questions. And whites often complain that Aboriginal people are shy, ignorant, slow and uncooperative.

In this chapter, I have used ethnographic interactional sociolinguistics to explain some of these differences, thus providing evidence of continuing Aboriginality in southeast Queensland. Furthermore, I have shown that it is impossible to understand language without understanding its social and cultural context. This chapter has examined some significant aspects of the social and cultural context of Aboriginal people in southeast Queensland today, which reflect continuities from traditional Aboriginal cultures. These aspects, such as the importance of responsibilities to kin, the priority of social relationships, and the need for indirectness in interactions, are both reflected in, and continually created by the ways in which people interact. Speaking is an important part of such interaction. It is in everyday conversational interaction, such as the giving and seeking of reasons for actions, that we can see significant evidence of Aboriginal cultural continuity. Understanding such cultural continuity is essential to any effective communication between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in 'settled' Australia.

Notes

1. This chapter is based on the research for my PhD thesis (Eades 1983) which was carried out between 1978 and 1983 with a number of Aboriginal families in southeast Queensland. I am indebted to the people who shared their culture and lives with me. In particular, my thanks go to Michael Williams

and his relatives for enabling me to be involved in the family research and for teaching me so much about Aboriginality. Many colleagues provided comments on my writings, and in particular I am grateful to Ian Keen for his encouragement and helpful criticism on both the thesis and this chapter.

References

Barwick, D.

1974 *The Aboriginal Family in South-Eastern Australia*. In J. Krupinski and A. Stoller (eds), *The Family in Australia*, Pergamon, Sydney.

Berndt, R.M. and C.H. Berndt

1964 *The World of the First Australians*, Ure Smith, Sydney.

Christie, M.

1982 Teaching Purposeful Reading to Aboriginal Children, *The Aboriginal Child at School* 10(2), 11–26.

Dixon, R.M.W.

1971 A Method of Semantic Description. In D. Steinberg and L. Jakobovits (eds), *Semantics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Dwyer, J.

1974 The School and the Aboriginal Child, *The Aboriginal Child at School* 2(1), 3–19.

Eades, D.

1982 You Gotta Know How to Talk...Information Seeking in South-East Queensland Aboriginal Society, *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 2(1), 61–82. Reprinted in J. Pride (ed), *Cross Cultural Encounters: Communication and Miscommunication*, River Seine Publications, Melbourne.

1983 *English as an Aboriginal Language in Southeast Queensland*, PhD thesis, University of Queensland.

1984 Misunderstanding Aboriginal English: The Role of Socio-cultural Context. In G. McKay and B. Sommer (eds), *Applications of Linguistics to Australian Aboriginal Contexts*, Applied Linguistics Association of Australia, Occasional Papers No 8, 24–33.

Hamilton, A.

1981 *Nature and Nurture: Aboriginal Child-rearing in North-Central Arnhem Land*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra.

Harris, J.

1970 Gunkurrng, a Mother-in-law Language. In S.A. Wurm and D.C. Laycock (eds), *Pacific Linguistic Studies in Honour of Arthur Capell*, Pacific Linguistics C13, Canberra.

Harris, S.

1977 Millingimbi Aboriginal Learning Contexts, PhD thesis, University of New Mexico.

Haviland, J.B.

1979 Guugu Yimidhirr Brother-in-law Language, *Language in Society* 8, 365–93.

