

JALDA's Interview with Peter Mühlhäusler

Interview by Bahram Behin



Peter Mühlhäusler

Peter Mühlhäusler is the Foundation Professor of Linguistics at the University of Adelaide, and Supernumerary Fellow of Linacre College, Oxford. He has taught at the Technical University of Berlin and in the University of Oxford. He is an active researcher in several areas of linguistics, including ecolinguistics, language planning, and language policy and language contact in the Australian-Pacific area. His current research focuses on the Pitkern-Norfolk language of Norfolk Island and Aboriginal languages of the West Coast of South Australia. His recent book publications are *Pidgin and Creole Linguistics*, *Language of Environment-Environment of Language*, *Early Forms of Aboriginal English in South Australia* (with Foster and Monaghan), and *Herrmann Koeler's Adelaide-Observations on Language and Culture of South Australia*. He continues to publish on theoretical and applied ecolinguistics.

B: ----- *Professor Mühlhäusler, I am informed that you are writing a new book on Aboriginal languages. Would you please provide us with some details about your work?*

M: ----- I am actually not writing a book on Australian Aboriginal languages, though I continue helping Aboriginal writers develop their own materials. I am also not of the view that one can simply study, describe or document any language. The boundary between language and other meaningful human activities is not well-defined and both speakers and learners process large amounts of parallel information when producing or perceiving verbal utterances.

My projected book (2/3 finished) deals with the language spoken by the descendants of the Mutineers of the *Bounty* and their Polynesian partners on Pitcairn and Norfolk Island. Pitkern came into being around 1790 and is spoken by about 50 residents of

Pitcairn Island. Subsequent to the relocation of the majority of Pitcairn Islanders to Norfolk Island in 1856, a new variety, referred to as-Norf'k developed. It has about 800 speakers. Over the last 20 years I have visited Norfolk Island 27 times to work with the community on documenting the language, setting up language revival activities and collecting data on the history, use and structural properties of the language.

My book will document the development of Pitkern and Norf'k from its formative years to the present. It is a great example for getting answers to Schuchardt's questions "How do languages come into being, how do they develop and how do they decline." Languages that have a short history, few speakers and are spoken on very small islands are more suited to answering such questions than old, big languages with many speakers. This, incidentally, is why I have spent a lot of my career studying pidgin and creole languages.

I am also interested in the ecolinguistic questions of how languages become tools for the management of their speakers' social and natural ecology, i.e. how lexicon and grammar adapt to changed language-external conditions. An example of grammar adapting is the development of absolute spatial orientation systems on both Pitcairn and Norfolk. Another one is the development of two possessive constructions, one for alienable possession, the other one for inalienable possessions such as items over which one only has custodianship.

Norf'k was recognized as an endangered language by UNESCO in 2007.

B:-----*Your work on Aboriginal languages is an internationally acknowledged enterprise. Known as a linguist with tendency to real life, how would you sketch an academic/linguist's role in connection to endangered languages? What methodologies would you suggest in dealing with such languages?*

M:-----The most important question linguists need to ask is (adapted from Henry Thoreau) 'How does the language community you are engaging with want to live?' It is no good just asking them directly. The answer will become evident very slowly as the researcher lives with the community and learns to understand them. Linguistics has a long tradition of Blitzkrieg fieldwork and the result has been a large number of very dubious and at times totally inadequate accounts. It took me about 15 years to begin to understand how the Norfolk Islanders want to live and the role of their language in this. Ever since the amount of information and the quality of data has increased vastly.

Conventional elicitation and recording leads to representations that selectively focus on the concerns of professional linguists. They do not tell you much about the language. As such they remain strictly etic. To get an emic understanding one has to live with speakers and engage with them in their daily activities.

B:----- *When I hear the word Aboriginal, some “primitiveness” is connoted to me, with which “nature” comes, too. You are well-known as an ecolinguist and a pioneer in the field. I don’t think that ecolinguistics was tailored to study only some Aboriginal languages that showed intimate relations to nature. Without undermining the role of nature in ecolinguistics, it is assumed that ecolinguistics must be a much broader discipline than that. How would you describe ecolinguistics as a discipline that should account for language in the complexities of today’s world?*

M:----- Ecolinguistics from the start has not been concerned only with the relationship speakers have to their natural environment but also to their social ecology. Language is intertwined with both. The complexities of the human-made environment are legitimate matter for ecolinguists.

B:----- *There are attempts to suggest that we should go beyond language if an authentic experiencing of life and the world is intended. What would be an ecolinguist’s reaction to it?*

M:----- Language is an ecological phenomenon. Whilst parts of it may be autonomous, many areas of language can only be analysed if one pays attention to the biocultural prerequisites that make interpretation possible. What a string of sounds actually means can rarely be ascertained without a huge amount of non-verbal information. This, incidentally, is also argued by integrational linguists. During my days in the University of Oxford I taught joint courses in integrational linguistics with Roy Harris who has been influential on my thinking about language. Unlike Roy I do not regard this as a purely philosophical matter but as an empirical one. Ecolinguists would do well to engage more in empirical work.

B:----- *There are also attempts to apply the findings in ecolinguistics to language teaching in general and foreign language teaching in particular. This seems to be a turning point in the field of language teaching. What might be your view of the future of ecolinguistics?*

M:----- For languages to be sustained, acquired or learnt, there must be an ecological support system. In the case of language revival, one needs to ask: What sort of ecological factors can sustain the continued use of a language. Grammars, dictionaries or writing systems may or may not be part of this support system. Traditional wombat hunting turned out to be more important for the revival of Wirangu (Far West Coast of South Australia) than printed materials. Language teaching also needs a sophisticated support system (highly qualified teachers/role models; visits and exchanges, integrative motivation etc. Language laboratories or textbooks are not necessarily required for sustained learning. Language camps on country for urban Aboriginals have been more important in their relearning their language than formal classroom activities. In other words, immersion or part-immersion is a very good way of teaching another language.

B:----- Thank you very much for the time you have given to us and for the insights you have shared with *JALDA*'s readers.

M:----- It has been my pleasure.

Interviewer's Biography



Bahram Behin is Associate Professor of TESOL who received both his BA in English Language and Literature and his MA in English Language Teaching from Tabriz University. He continued his studies towards a PhD degree in Linguistics and Literature in the University of Adelaide, Adelaide, Australia. He has been a full-time academic member of English Department in Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University since he returned from Australia in 1997. He is the founding editor-in-chief of *The Journal of Applied Linguistics and Applied Literature: Dynamics and Advances (JALDA)*.
