

***Aboriginal English*, by J. M. Arthur. 1996. Melbourne: Oxford University Press**

Reviewed by David Nathan, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies
December 1997

Interest in Aboriginal English as a distinct variety of English has grown steadily since the seminal collection *English and the Aboriginal Child* (Eagleson *et al* 1982). This progression has been accompanied by an increasing number of published books, plays and music by Aboriginal authors that use features of their Aboriginal speech, and the appearance of further work relating to educational and linguistic aspects of Aboriginal English.

Now, following the publication of Arthur's book, we finally have a wide-ranging description of Aboriginal English that is likely to please both Aboriginal readers and wider audiences with a general interest in Australian Indigenous languages.

The basic format resembles a dictionary, organised, however, in a "cultural rather than linguistic" fashion, since Arthur's aim is to reflect the meanings associated with Aboriginal English as "accumulations of words about ... experiences" (p. 7). While this organisational strategy is unusual, the overall result is a rich selection of vignettes that do successfully capture aspects of Aboriginal history, world view and society, often in the language which best expresses them.

The book's major strength is the accessibility of many linguistic, cultural, historical and philosophical snapshots that will enlighten the average reader. In fact, this book could profitably be used as a first excursion for a non-Aboriginal Australian into Aboriginal experience. Its semi-lexicographical structure provides easy access to short, concise explanations and examples.

The book consists of eight chapters, each with an informative introduction to the chapter's theme; for example Chapter 2 "Kin" introduces the reader to the importance of kinship for Aboriginal societies before presenting the entries for that theme. Later, the introduction to Chapter 5 "Living with whitefellas" summarises the larger themes of the colonising process, such as the collectivisation of disparate Indigenous societies, the creation of distinctions of colour, and the exploitation and oppression that followed. In this way, the short explanations and citations given in the bodies of the entries serve as both evidence and amplification for the chapter summaries.

The book makes extensive use of citations. Most words' entries contain several quotes from key or indicative sources, arranged in chronological order. While restricting citations to written sources does create limitations (especially, as the author points out, for such oral-oriented languages such as Aboriginal English), the range of citations also fulfils other functions. For example, the general pattern of citations provides a kind of map of the state of writing about and by Aboriginal people. While it is painfully obvious that the earlier-dated citations are nearly all from non-Aboriginal sources (and often strongly colonial in flavour), the recent surge in

published Aboriginal writing is reflected in the later-dated citations. Perhaps the chronological order of the citations could have been reversed to good effect.

All readers will find something of interest amongst the book's approximately 1,000 entries. Many words that seem superficially the same as standard Australian English¹ are shown to have distinctive meanings; for example, *dangerous* is commonly used to refer to the "effects of spiritual powers" (p. 24). *Law* typically means something closer to spirituality and continuity with the past than its standard English counterpart (p. 40). *Story* conveys a sense of truth and history, without the standard connotation of fiction (p. 59).

Some words of Aboriginal English carry more-or-less opposite meanings to their standard counterparts; for example *protect* means "harass, hound" after the practices of governments' so-called "Protectors" of Aborigines (p. 164). *Clean* means to burn a stretch of country to perform its regular maintenance (p. 119), while the frequently heard *deadly* means "great, fantastic, terrific" (p. 94).

Other examples show English words used for experiences beyond the experience of most non-Aboriginal people, such as *poison* "a person in an avoidance relationship" (p. 83) ; and *hairy man* "a smaller spirit being ... no bigger than a year-old baby ... [that] sometimes killed people by frightening them and scaring them to death" (p. 36).

Readers will appreciate the lyrical nature of entries such as *mix blankets* "live in a de facto relationship" (p. 82). Some entries, such as *big smoke* (p. 91), illustrate a wider influence of Indigenous languages on Australian English (and on global English) than is widely recognised.

Perhaps the most important entries are those which are evidence of the humiliation, struggle and stoicism that marks Aboriginal survival. *Blackfeller seats*, for example, are the front (ie bad) seats in the picture theatre roped off (or, I have been told, fenced off with barbed wire) where Aboriginal people were forced to sit (p. 137). Words like *home* ("institution for children removed from families", p. 154) record Australian governments' practice over most of this century of taking children from their Aboriginal parents. Others are even more macabre, such as *Mackenzie sit down* "poisoned flour", after one of the "squatters" who found poison a useful "weapon used by the British side in the colonial wars" (p. 130; see also Fesl 1993). Nevertheless, even today, *country* continues to mean the land where a person or community belongs (p. 119). How many times have radio and television audiences listened to Aboriginal people saying 'my country' without realising that the speakers mean the relationship with land to be taken literally?

Minor problems, such as this reviewer's doubts about some of the author's judgements about standard Australian English, and the odd missing bibliographic reference, will not detract from the book's value. Neither will the occasional error of fact, such as claims that *goorie* is a pronunciation of *koori* (p. 232), or that *goonya*, a South

¹ While "standard Australian English" might seem a provocative terms, it is used here as a label for the shared and semi-formal language style that is heard, for example, on the mainstream media. There is no value judgement associated with the use of the term.

Australian word for "white person" derives from the Kaurua word for "excrement" (p. 151).²

There do remain three areas of criticism. The first is that the volume remains a little detached from its communities of speakers. For example, the words *elder* (p. 30) and *brother* (p. 72), currently important in the socio-political dynamics of some Indigenous communities, do not receive much contemporary treatment. The many current usages (and pronunciations) of *brother* reflect a younger generation's set of meanings that are as much about politics as about kinship.

Secondly, the book suffers from some loose linguistics. It is hard to keep track of what Arthur believes Aboriginal English to be. The body of the book is replete with words that remain - according to some Aboriginal communities - words of their Indigenous languages. Therefore, some people involved in community language revival activities (who often make the point that their languages are still living even if severely damaged) may find the presence of such entries less than helpful (but see also Arthur's disclaimer on p. 4). More generally, while some regional differentiations are made, they are not sufficient to establish regional varieties, but yet leave the reader wondering whether there really is one thing that is "Aboriginal English" at all.

The most significant linguistic weakness is a relentless determination to attribute features of Aboriginal English to "structural characteristics of Aboriginal languages" (p. 7). While it is clear that Indigenous languages account for many features of the current languages of Aboriginal people, the book author veers between on the one hand attributing words to Aboriginal English that are better described as words of Indigenous languages (see above), and on the other hand presenting tentative, and occasionally contradictory accounts of how Indigenous languages have permeated Aboriginal English. While this book is not offered as a theoretical work, it might have benefited from adopting a theoretical framework for language contact. For example, the "feature copying" framework of Johanson (1992), applied to the Australian situation, could help give a feel for language change as an occasionally subversive strategy for survival in an often intense cultural contact situation. Similarly, a clear statement about the relationship between language and culture might have removed the feeling that the author is too ready to equate language with thought, values and world view.

Thirdly, there is an overall dissonance between the contemporary political world-view expressed in Arthur's chapter introductions, and the broad-brush picture painted by the juxtaposition of words from colonial and stereotypical sources, Kriol, Indigenous language speakers using English as second/foreign language, words used in rural communities both black and white, and fragments of urban Koori talk. It should at least distinguish between English words used by English-as-foreign-language speaking people (either mother tongue speakers of Indigenous languages or of Kriol) and the fluent and full-on language(s) of people such as urban Murris. Further examples such as *cold country* (cf p. 115) could have been drawn from accessible contemporary sources like the songs of Archie Roach or Kev Carmody.

² Rob Amery, pc; see also Teichelman and Schurmann, 1840: 12, and Nathan, D. 1996:xx

Most non-Aboriginal Australians are startlingly unaware of the linguistic diversity amongst Indigenous Australians. This book provides a digestible, informative and non-technical window into that diverse situation, and the history that underlies it. In addition, many Aboriginal people will find the book a useful reference and a source of pride, recognition, or provocation. Therefore, none of the reservations expressed above will diminish the value of this book for its wider readership.

Arthur's book is a highly accessible treasure-trove of valuable information about Australian Aboriginal peoples' languages, history, and culture.

References

- Eagleson, R. Kaldor S. and Malcolm, I. 1982. *English and the Aboriginal Child*. Canberra: Curriculum Development Centre
- Fesl, E. 1993. *Conned*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press
- Johanson, L. 1992. *Structural factors in Turkic language contacts*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag
- Nathan D. (ed.) 1996. *Australia's Indigenous Languages*. Adelaide: SSABSA
- Teichelman, C. and Schürmann, C. 1840. *Outlines of a Grammar, Vocabulary and Phraseology of the Aboriginal Language of South Australia, as Spoken by the Natives in and for some Distance around Adelaide*. Largs Bay: Tjintu Books (Facsimile Edition 1982)