Intersections: A Paradigm for Languages and Cultures?

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Abstract "Intersections" constitutes the thematic thread to the essays in this volume, whose aim is to depict the multi-facetted yet cohesive nature of Australian scholarship and practice in Language Studies. Running discreetly through all chapters, featuring prominently in some, this thread connects them all to a lived reality: the field of languages and cultures, as it is practised and reflected upon in Australian universities today, is essentially an interdisciplinary and interconnecting space, one in which linguistic and disciplinary diversities meet and gather forces. Although language scholars are well equipped to navigate that space, the issue that currently confronts them is that their universities do not necessarily recognize or reward what is a positive contribution to their institutional mission. In this volume, they collectively make a compelling case for their inclusion.

Keywords Intersections · Language studies · Australian universities · Interdisciplinarity · Interculturality · Collaboration · Community-of-practice · Connectedness · Community engagement

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1 Intersections

Although this book is devoted to exploring issues around languages planning, policy and practice that apply within the tertiary system worldwide, the central focus here is upon the Australian situation—albeit with some strong points of comparison to practices elsewhere. Enjoying a creative resurgence, particularly following the formation of its own Languages and Cultures Network (LCNAU) less than a decade ago,[1] Language Studies in Australia is a scholarly area that is well equipped to play a strong role in debates around the future of higher education. Whilst many of the challenges it reflects upon, the principles it espouses and the practices it develops, mirror those that presently concern colleagues in the United Kingdom and the United States, its situation is sufficiently different in terms of its history, structure and size to warrant examination in its own right, particularly in regard to its experience of Indigenous languages or multicultural education. Yet it remains sufficiently similar to be able to contribute to debates on the big questions in languages scholarship that preoccupy colleagues across the globe: connectedness, interculturality, collaborative practice. And, needless to say, sufficiently pioneering to have made its own distinctive contributions to the global field.[2]

Naturally, the Australian languages sector, as a product of successive periods of social change and shifts in government priorities,[3] has developed its own idiosyncrasies, all of which contribute to its current mood and energies. On the one hand, it is by its very nature an intersection, a place where diversities meet and coalesce. On the other, it is at an intersection in its history, where it can either continue to practise all the forms of professional connectedness that characterize its operations, or yield to pressures to reduce its numbers, scope or function. However, given that it cannot but be the polar opposite of raging political discourses that decry diversity, it remains firmly ensconsed in its cohesive and enabling function of providing a meeting place for voices and cultures.

"Intersections" thus constitutes the fitting thematic thread to the essays in this volume, whose aim is to depict the multi-facetted yet cohesive nature of Australian languages scholarship. Explicitly addressed in a number of chapters, and running discreetly through all, this thread connects them all to a lived reality: the field of languages and cultures, as it is practised and reflected upon in Australian universities today, is essentially an interdisciplinary and interconnecting space, one in which linguistic and disciplinary diversities meet and gather strength, rather than collide or disperse along different pathways. To appreciate this fully we need to remember that this was not always so. In the university system of yore, there existed real and

[1] For the history of LCNAU, the role of its founders (Nettelbeck, Hajek, Lo Bianco) and its mission within the Australian higher education sector, go to https://www.lcnau.org/background/. For further details, see Hajek et al. (2012).

[2] We need only to highlight the influential work of scholars such as Michael Clyne (2005), Joseph Lo Bianco (1987).

[3] For a comprehensive study of this history, see Baldwin (2019).

imagined national language boundaries which once hindered or discouraged those language scholars who sought to exchange their experiences and their expertise with one another and with other disciplines. In the current university context, the release of languages and cultures from these constraints and their move into intersecting spaces—both physically and mentally—has created new opportunities in terms of collaboration and partnerships. It has also enhanced their capacity to engage in the full and frank practice of interdisciplinarity—which happens now to be a proclaimed article of faith in the mission statement of the contemporary Australian university. Should we take this to mean that languages have achieved an unassailable position within Australian academe? Given their history, this would be no doubt a premature conclusion, but reflecting upon today's languages departments as intersectional spaces provides a rich metaphorical seam that will enable us to mine deeper into those spaces.

In order to contextualize the issues explored in the chapters which follow, it is important to reflect here upon the ways in which language scholars adopt strategies in terms of both policy and practice that bring forth ever stronger forms of connectedness in teaching and research. Commencing with a selective overview of recent policy debates and controversies centred upon languages in higher education, we then examine the place and spaces that languages occupy within universities, and discuss whether, overall, they may be collectively endangered, precariously situated or able to develop and prosper within their current configurations. Next, we look at the selection of research studies that we have chosen for this volume, and interrogate them as strands of our line of enquiry, before finally concluding as to whether languages scholarship in Australian universities may have reached intersections, meeting points or levels of interconnectedness that could facilitate its collective journey along future pathways.

2 Pathways to Policy Renewal

The positive awareness of their interconnectedness to their fellows and to the values that their institutions profess does not mean that language scholars have become exempt from the severe challenges that persist within their daily working lives or naive about the enormity of the task that confronts them. The increasing restrictions placed on university funding in general, and for the humanities in particular, the failure of universities to embrace the centrality of language learning as part of their globalization push, the world-wide resurgence of nationalisms, or the ever-pervasive influence of the "monolingual mindset" in Anglophone countries (Clyne 2008; Hajek and Slaughter 2014), are powerful and corrosive forces to be confronted and contested. In such circumstances, the temptation to adopt a bunker mentality is quite understandable. However, if learning languages has long been recognized as a means of building resilience and developing the capacity for problem solving, it is unsurprising that language teachers should seek to demonstrate these self-same qualities as they contemplate the future of their knowledge base and the consequences for their students of any potential threat to its stability.

Of the many responses possible to the challenge, one has been to raise the alarm.[4] While a recognized political strategy, and a powerful impetus to the creation of LCNAU,[5] this has also led to the development of a "languages in crisis" paradigm whose effects have been amplified in the media (Mason and Hajek 2019, p. 189). On the one hand, it is undeniable that such campaigns have served to create awareness of the low student participation rates in language learning, and punctually incited the political class to introduce measures designed to remedy the situation.[6] On the other, the problem continues to appear intractable, since the varying efforts of governments and educational systems and institutions to bring significant change have been essentially unsuccessful.[7] Indeed, a perverse effect of such alarm-bell campaigns has been their reinforcement of negative public views of language study, and of the bunker mentality amongst language teachers, constantly obliged to defend their status and mission against the perception that the situation they face is warranted or just inevitable. It has been convincingly demonstrated that media interest in tertiary language study, normally slight, is only mobilized if there is the hint of a crisis, which further reinforces the notion that languages are a perpetual source of trouble, rather than a major social asset (Mason and Hajek 2019, p. 192). This is not to say that strategies targeting the political class or the media are futile exercises or that the political adoption of an effective languages policy encompassing all education sectors would ever cease to be the most desired end result for all language educators; merely that the thematics of catastrophe have yielded few positive outcomes and that new modes of engagement and persuasion are required if languages are to re-engage in a battle under terms they can influence, if not dictate.[8]

[4] The *Languages in Crisis* report launched a crucial and influential campaign, highlighting, amongst many other issues, that "the number of languages taught in our universities continues to fall. Of the 29 languages still on offer at tertiary level, nine are offered at only one Australian university and only seven are well represented across the sector" (Group of Eight 2007, p. 4). See also Martín (2005).

[5] See https://www.lcnau.org/background/ for the chronology of the steps that led from the initiatives of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, the Group of Eight Universities and individual researchers to the creation of LCNAU as a professional association and lobby group for languages scholars in the tertiary sector.

[6] Dunne and Pavlyshyn list the large number of government reports on languages commissioned between 1987 and 2006 (2012, p. 10). Since that period the report *Australia in the Asian Century* is one of the most significant (Australia in the Asian Century Implementation Task Force 2012).

[7] M. Haugh points to the gap between policy and successful implementation, particularly in Queensland (2019, p. 25), while the reasons for the persistence of such a gap at the national level are discussed in J. Lo Bianco and Y. Slaughter (2017, p. 449). See also Mayfield (2017).

[8] There are interesting signs of the development of new approaches to orienting campaigns in favour of languages education. Mason and Hajek conclude that "more attention needs to be given to the multiple ways in which language can be used as a resource not only for utilitarian purposes but also humanistic purposes." (2018, p. 17) While concurring with Mason and Hajek that languages should not be seen as a "problem", Haugh believes that there is a strong "socioeconomic" case to be made in their favour (2019, p. 30). In the United States, a campaign is already being mounted around a "new narrative" for languages that rejects economic rationalism altogether in favour of "solidarity" (Reichman 2019).

In Australia, one of the issues around policy and media attention has also been that many initiatives tend to target the school sector (Mason and Hajek 2018).[9] If the higher education sector does not currently create as much public interest as schools, then predictably political motivation regarding universities will remain low. This is not to deny that the attention paid to schools is a good thing in itself, for the reinvigoration of language learning in the primary and secondary sectors would undeniably translate into better outcomes within the tertiary sector. The fact remains, however, that discrete government funding initiatives in higher education, involving strict control over policy outcomes, are desperately needed if participation rates are to be improved in significant and durable ways. Specifically targeted funding is the essential driver for this increasingly cash strapped and risk averse sector. Of equal importance is that language policy initiatives need to stem from a sustained bipartisan interest in the issue rather than a sporadic and occasional interest dictated by political expediency.[10]

To demonstrate the harm done by the latter form of intervention, we need only point to the three mutually nullifying policy phases originating from within the same political party in relation to the Diploma in Languages. This award has proved to be a particularly useful addition to languages offerings in the higher education sector, enabling students to pursue languages study in addition to their principal degree, when those degree structures were too tightly packed to allow for extra subjects, as in medical or engineering degrees, for example. In November 2013, Federal Education Minister Christopher Pyne announced that 2000 new places in the languages diploma would be made available, even going so far as to suggest that he was considering the merits of granting students unlimited access to such courses (Lane 2014). In 2017, Simon Birmingham, his successor to the portfolio, and member of the same political party, proposed a series of measures that would consign this same diploma to the ranks of fully fee-paying awards, and hence to oblivion (Lane 2017). Even though Birmingham's plan was eventually shelved by his successor (from the same political party), the uncertainty around the diploma's future and the eventual withdrawal of Pyne's extra places produced a drop in numbers of language students in the universities affected by the loss of those extra places, but also in universities not directly affected by these cuts, and in which numbers had until then been steadily increasing. Although the fall-out from a policy initiative that had made such a promising start has yet to be reliably measured and assessed, the outcome is evidence in itself of the difficulties faced by policy specialists in achieving sustained levels of support for language initiatives in higher education, even where, unusually, these have been universally welcomed throughout the

[9] The *Languages in Crisis* report also affirmed that key policy documents, such as the *National Statement for Languages Education in Australian Schools* and the *National Plan for Languages Education in Australian Schools 2005–2008* "represent a good start but they do not cover languages in higher education and they do not include recommendations for compulsory study of languages" (Group of Eight 2007, p. 8).

[10] J. Lo Bianco decries the scant regard shown for languages policy by Australian politicians generally, who tend to treat it as a "political football" (cited in Hyland 2008).

sector. If political support cannot be sustained within a single political party, a bipartisan languages policy would seem a distant perspective.

That said, the announcement in 2019 from the Australian Government—formed from the party responsible for the diploma debacle, and from a conservative coalition historically less favourable to policy-making in the domains of multiculturalism and languages education than the Labor opposition—that they would be funding a range of new initiatives in the languages sector may yet prove a new dawn for the cause of community and Indigenous languages, and, announced, but not divulged, a new national languages policy (Department of Education 2019).

3 Languages in Universities—Reclaiming a Space of Their Own

If the public space is still to be invested by a new policy model, plans clearly have continued to be developed and promoted by language policy makers, while frontline language teachers have continued to demonstrate their famous resilience and adaptability by integrating their activities into new learning, teaching and research environments that now prevail within universities themselves. Their adaptability has indeed been amply demonstrated; in the period spanning the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, the study of languages and cultures retained its presence in the curricula of universities thanks to the efforts of language scholars who actively sought to entrench their strengths within constantly evolving institutional contexts. Whilst languages academics may not have sought out, nor relished, all of the changes forced upon them, namely their incorporation into ever larger organizational units, they have not necessarily fared badly from their diverse marriages, particularly when these were unforced or eventually, albeit grudgingly, accepted. Mergers may have damaged self-esteem in the short term, but these were not necessarily all disastrous, in that some strong and influential schools of languages have now become part of the tertiary landscape.

Hence, where individual languages were brought together in meaningful ways, "language ecologies" were free to develop; with them came opportunities for common interests to grow, authentic partnerships to develop and alliances to form—within schools of languages or without—through other groupings, particularly within schools of Humanities or Social Sciences. With size and interconnectedness, languages became, at least in principle, and in the eyes of administrators, a more homogenous group. For, following their period of "mergermania", universities had come to target the "silo", or the single discipline, an entity they perceived to be pursuing its own interests rather than prioritizing those of the institution. Rightly or wrongly, language departments once appeared to constitute the very essence of the "silo", locked within an impenetrable space, alien in their difference. As a consequence of mergers, languages no longer quite fitted the "silo" model and "languages", in many universities, had become too large an entity to be dispensed with

entirely. Besides, as collectivities, they were now better placed to demonstrate an interconnectedness within their own space and within the fabric of the institution, especially when some of their keywords and practices had come to have currency: interdisciplinarity, intercultural competency, teaching excellence, community of practice, to name but a few.

The recent initiative which may prove a threat to the status and workloads of languages staff is the creation of "teaching intensive" posts within the tertiary system. University staff deemed to be inactive as researchers are nudged, and increasingly forced, towards this type of employment, which in extreme cases involves the imposition of heavy teaching loads and a form of exile from the mainstream of the university. Some institutions see the creation of such positions as a means of promoting the interests and careers of staff who profess a deep interest in teaching and the scholarship around it; others see it as a means of ghettoizing research-inactive staff or those seen to be otherwise unable to "earn their keep", namely by bringing in external funding to their area. It is yet too early to assess the impact of such moves on languages staff as individuals or groups, but this is the kind of initiative that requires vigilance and that stands, at least for now, in contrast to the destiny of most languages scholars.

We take from this that no single institutional configuration or set of practices brings a guarantee of perennity; no teaching area can be protected from educational fashion, budget restrictions, unsympathetic leadership or overarching political imperatives. Yet where individual scholars and their cohorts have the time and opportunity to interweave their activities tightly within the expectations of their universities in the three areas of teaching, administration and research—expectations which are on the rise, but which are familiar requirements of academic positions, having changed little in essence over the years—, their chances to prosper seem to be on a par with those of other academic groups. In any case, the research output currently emerging from languages areas is a distinct sign of an intact and productive academic culture, its diverse productions contributing to a languages study narrative of connections and convergences. The objective of this volume is precisely to offer a representative sample of this culture and this narrative.

4 Intersecting Teaching and Research Pathways

The different parts of this volume all draw, in diverse teaching and research settings across a variety of languages, a picture of unity spun from diversity, of differing perspectives brought to bear upon policy, research and teaching agendas in languages. Many of the individual chapters are based wholly on the Australian experience, others take a comparative stance and embed their own local enquiries into an international context, and some are the work of international scholars which have a direct bearing on the local scene, particularly in regard to Indigenous languages education and languages policy. But all combine to highlight the preoccupations of the Australian tertiary languages sector.

Each part of this volume is preceded by a summary aimed at demonstrating the intersections between the chapters it contains, in terms of commonalities of discourse, objectives, methodologies, results and vision. These commonalities within the texts provide, overall, tangible evidence of a shared perspective within the languages community, rich with new possibilities for collaborative futures.

Part II is a case in point: three chapters on languages and cultures research use highly specialized areas of investigation as a means of bringing language scholars onto shared ground; one melds research on a particular national culture into a strategy for ushering languages into the fold of collaborative research grant funding, from which it has been virtually excluded; a second delves into a specific cultural history to cast a light on the specificity of another; a third investigates the history of teaching translation, which it reshapes as a communicative activity, in defiance of all that it had come to represent. All exploit the techniques of traditional scholarship to break down boundaries and explore interdisciplinary spaces.

The history of languages within the Australian tertiary sector is the subject of Part III. Critical rather than nostalgic, this backward glance yields insights into the factors that influence language survival in universities today: not only the existence of "language ecologies" but also the combination of innovative teaching, community engagement, and research excellence. In contrast, Part IV, which examines current planning and policy issues, reveals disturbing inconsistencies in the way universities can tackle, or rather shy from, language planning. Departments caught in such a context of ad hoc decision making have no options for survival, despite their best efforts to engage their managers in rational discourse around policy and student wellbeing (Kinoshita 2018). In other examples, where departments do have a say in their destiny, policy directions on vexed issues such as retention or provision of postgraduate training can be developed to advantage, demonstrating the capacity of language scholars for adapting their activities to the changing priorities of their institutions.

The chapters in Part V provide further examples of languages transforming an initiative that was not necessarily designed to include them, or was conceived for other purposes, into a program that works directly to their strengths. By developing courses involving Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) and linking them to cultural institutions or community language groups, the program leaders have been able to show their students' ability to perform in socially and culturally diverse contexts and demonstrate their intercultural competence at work. Similarly, a trial program including languages in business studies was able to demonstrate successfully the advantage that intercultural competence can bring to students aiming to work in a global business environment. All three chapters affirm the value of connectedness between languages, their institutional mission, and the local and global communities in which they operate.

In literal ways, in Parts VI and VII, which are devoted to the uses of new technologies in the language teaching classroom, languages are seen to benefit from connectedness—between teacher and student, student and student, and from country to country. The linguistic benefits of telecollaborative exchanges, in particular, are well known, but the expanded range of purposes to which they are being

put—notably in the teaching of cultures, or in multi-country exchanges—is an encouraging development. While the substitution of online learning for classroom teaching is not seen as an entirely positive development, having been introduced for cost-cutting purposes in a multi-campus situation in a popular language, nevertheless a rigorous trial is introduced in order to derive maximum benefits for students from the exercise. On the other hand, when online learning is introduced to overcome a problem, as in the case of languages with low enrolments, this can be a valid option. If the outcome is positive in this case, it is that a sustained effort has been made to reproduce the benefits of classroom study by developing an online learning community. Other uses of technology, to enhance student practice activities in between classroom sessions, open up possibilities of improving student outcomes in an area over which there has previously been little opportunity for intervention. In all cases, language teachers have expanded their range of skills to produce innovative programs of benefit to the student community and to take the lead in collective planning for the learning environment of the future.

Classroom experiments are detailed in Parts VIII and IX, firstly in language-learning situations and, secondly, in the context of exploring the languages-cultures nexus. All approaches in the first group are deeply anchored in theory and designed to improve learner motivation, as well as to impact positively upon learners' future selves, their capacity for future learning or their ability to engage in collaborative learning. The chapters in the second group, no less grounded in theory, all describe the efforts deployed in creating collegial learning spaces which facilitate the entry of students into new cultural contexts, while minimizing their anxieties and maximizing their linguistic gains. Food studies and theatre performance offer pathways into cultural understandings through forms of "real world learning", while a translation experiment focuses on reframing assessment practices with a view to promoting learner agency and building a capacity for critical analysis and self-reflection.

Part X offers examples from Australia and other parts of the world in the planning and delivery of Indigenous languages programs. The first chapter focuses on Hawai'i and its Indigenous languages revival program. This program is constructed around language-based identity expressed in *honua,* that is, contexts where the use of Hawaiian language is dominant. The university program that was developed using this model is closely integrated with school programs and a learning network is now well established over a number of island communities. The chapter on China focuses on Yúnnán Minzú University, a university dedicated to enabling ethnic minority students to study their native languages. Although its programs generally have successful learning outcomes, the prospects for employment of its graduates are bleak and teachers remain in short supply. It is suggested that stronger government action is required on these fronts and particularly in regard to endangered southwest minority languages. In South Australia, an innovative training package was developed through the technical education sector to impart the knowledge and skills for speakers of endangered Indigenous languages to teach their own languages and engage in the preparation of resource materials. Although not without encountering severe challenges, this program has survived and has seen its first graduates enter the education system. Although the history and educational contexts of each

of these three language learning programs are vastly different, what they have in common, beyond the expertise and energy of their planners, is the vast amount of community knowledge and good will that supports them and enables them to overcome the myriad difficulties they face in coming to fruition.

Part XI focuses on Australian university courses in Indigenous languages, and four different examples of such courses are offered, ranging from "strong" to revival languages. The resources devoted to the teaching of these languages vary greatly, as does the space they occupy in university programs. Pitjantjatjara from the northwest of South Australia is taught at the University of South Australia in an intensive summer school, while Yolŋu Matha from northeast Arnhem Land is taught within a degree structure at Charles Darwin University. The pedagogy which is used in these programs draws upon the teaching and learning practices used in their respective language communities and the Indigenous educators or advisers who participate in the collaborative teaching models espoused in each program are reflections of the intent of the program planners to create knowledge collaboratively. Both teams report on the success of these programs and the understandings they brought to students of a different way of being and knowing. In the other two chapters, the authors use their extensive knowledge of Kaurna and Gamilaraay languages and their revival programs, to mount the case for an even greater investment by universities and governments in Aboriginal language programs, either through the cooperative model of an Australian Indigenous Languages Institute, or through a simpler model, by the offering of new language courses at tertiary level. Following this logic, Indigenous languages would immediately gain in status from being offered at this level and more interest in the maintenance and revival of these community assets would naturally flow. In both scenarios, time is seen to be running out, as the current practice of a single dedicated researcher, aided by a small community of language speakers/custodians, is intrinsically unviable, in that this combination would in itself be endangered by the permanent loss of any one of these parties.

5 Conclusion

Throughout the volume, universities are taken to task for their minimal involvement in languages planning and policy, whilst language teachers themselves feature as actively generating the overall sense of direction for languages that their institutions have failed to provide. Whether in the teaching and learning programs which they have devised to train students in collaborative projects, and to enable them to reach deeper local and global understandings with their fellows, or in their research-based efforts to engage with Indigenous communities in the reclamation of their most prized community assets, their language and identity, individual language scholars have demonstrated all of the qualities of commitment to community engagement and every success in motivating students to participate fully in, or "co-create" their own learning, outcomes that universities proclaim as central to their mission. If the common interests of two parties, currently divided by mutual distrust, so clearly

intersect, surely there must now be an opportunity to elaborate on the intersections paradigm, with its intrinsic promise of collaborative engagement and its foundation in a long history of cooperative endeavour.

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