The Journal of Gifu Keizai University, Vol. 44, No. 2 (2011)

Some Perspectives on Australia's 'Asian Languages Debate'

by

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Introduction

In recent decades, a vigorous debate has been in progress within Australia on the appropriate direction for foreign language education in the nation's schools. While this debate has been conducted in a variety of forums and has covered a wide range of issues, it has been characterised by harsh criticism of the status quo. In 2007, three leading academics branded the state of language education in Australia 'a national tragedy and an international embarrassment' (Clyne, Pauwels & Sussex 2007). The same year, a group of eight of Australia's leading universities issued a report entitled 'Languages in Crisis: A Rescue Plan for Australia', in which it advocated 'urgent action' in order for Australia to avoid 'the serious educational, national security and economic consequences of becoming monolingual' (Group of Eight 2007).

Against this background, this study will focus on one prominent strand of the Australian language education debate, namely what one could refer to as 'the Asian languages question'. While the term 'Asian language' could of course refer to any of the hundreds of languages spoken across the continent of Asia, this discussion is concerned with those Asian languages that are studied in Australian schools, but primarily the four languages earmarked for priority funding by governments in the mid-1990s and again in 2008, namely Chinese (Mandarin), Indonesian, Japanese and Korean.

The dynamics of the Asian languages debate cannot be fully appreciated without some understanding of both the broader language learning context in Australia and the politico-economic

environment in which policy decisions are made. Thus, I shall attempt to explain, firstly, why many Australian commentators consider foreign language education to be in crisis, and, secondly, why, in a country whose population is overwhelmingly European in ethnicity, policy-makers have attached such importance in recent years to the study of Asian languages. It is worth pointing out at this juncture that the term 'foreign language' is used throughout this study to refer to any language other than English—with the sole exception of Australia's indigenous languages, i.e. those spoken as mother-tongues by the country's aboriginal inhabitants. Unless specified otherwise, the term 'Language Other Than English' (LOTE) is used to refer exclusively to the school subject of that name.

Given the impossibility of recording here the myriad of opinions expressed thus far on the issue of Asian language study, the study seeks merely to highlight a few of the most salient issues and views in the debate thus far. To this end, the case both for and against the prioritization of Asian languages as foci of study in Australian schools will be discussed. On the basis of this discussion, I shall speculate briefly as to the future direction of the Asian languages debate.

Foreign Language Education in Australia: A Discourse of Crisis

A Multilingual Society with a 'Monolingual Mindset'

Advocates of foreign language education often emphasise the multilingual character of contemporary Australian society. In this connection, a series of nine reports published by the National Language and Literacy Institute of Australia in the 1990s focused on the task of 'unlocking Australia's language potential' (see, among others, Cryle, Freadman & Hanna 1993). According to Mario Daniel Martín (2005: 1), Australia is actually the most multilingual of the 'English-speaking countries', with about 16% of its population (as of 2005) speaking a language other than English at home. In celebration of the Australia's ethnic diversity, the country's politicians now subscribe, to a greater or lesser extent, to the goal of 'multiculturalism'. In 1989, a report entitled 'The National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia' was presented to Parliament with the backing of the country's two main political parties, the Australian Labor Party and the Liberal Party of Australia. A key dimension in the multiculturalism policy outlined in the National Agenda was the principle of 'cultural identity', defined as:

> the right of all Australians, within carefully defined limits, to express and share their individual cultural heritage, including their language and religion. (OMA 1989: xii)

Against this background, it is perhaps interesting to note that the term 'foreign language' has virtually been erased from the contemporary Australian educational lexicon. Instead, the term 'LOTE', which stands for 'Languages Other Than English', is preferred since it suggests that any language, regardless of its origin, is a legitimate part of the national language demography. In the context of an inclusive, multicultural Australia, the case for LOTE was made in the following way by the Australian Education Council (a body comprised of the Commonwealth Minister of Education and Ministers of Education from each State and Territory) and the Curriculum Corporation:

> [LOTE learning] serves to affirm the culturally diverse nature of Australian society and the fact that Australians use languages other than English in a variety of contexts, including community involvement, business, politics and the arts. The sociocultural understandings developed through the study of LOTE also promote positive cross-cultural relationships, thereby contributing to social cohesion. (Australian Education Council & Curriculum Corporation 1994: 5)

In recent years, the teaching of the mother tongues of Australia's immigrant communities—often referred to as 'community languages' (Clyne 1991)—has strengthened considerably. According to the website of *Community Languages Australia*, some 1400 community languages schools had been established nationwide as of 2009, with state support. Further, Australia has established, also with government support, a public broadcasting radio and television network, known as SBS (Special Broadcasting Service) with the declared purpose of providing multilingual and multicultural radio and television services 'that inform, educate and entertain all Australians and, in doing so, reflect Australia's multicultural society' (Jacka 2002: 335). As a statement of the importance government attaches, ostensibly at least, to foreign language education, LOTE has been designated as one of eight 'key learning areas' (KLAs) of the national curriculum (MCEETYA 1997).

For all the above, Australia remains in the eyes of many an archetypal 'English-speaking country'. Braj Kachru, the doyen of 'World Englishes', has categorized Australia as an 'inner circle' country, i.e. one of the 'traditional cultural and linguistic bases of English' (Kachru 1992: 356). With the emergence of English as the *de facto* international business *lingua franca* (see Crystal 1997, 2003), lamentations of societal monolingualism have frequently been voiced in Australia, as elsewhere in the English-speaking world (see Asthana 2007; British Academy 2009; McGroarty 1997; Nuffield Foundation 2000; Simon 1980). Thus, for some, the fundamental malaise pervading language education in Australia is what Michael Clyne (2005) has referred to as its 'monolingual mindset', i.e. a mindset that 'sees everything in terms of monolingualism being the norm', while multilingualism is perceived as 'outside the possible experience of 'real Australians' or 'even in the too-hard basket' (Clyne 2005: xi). In similar vein, the Australian Academy of the Humanities has lamented Australia's 'aggressively monolingual culture' (Lane 2009), while a report from Griffith University has identified Australia as 'the third most monolingual developed nation in the world', where three-quarters of the population are capable of speaking only English (Griffith University Asia Institute 2009). Given the above, it is perhaps no major surprise that Australia's indigenous languages have fared very poorly indeed. In the early 1980s, Colin Yallop (1982) noted that some 50 Aboriginal languages had become extinct since the arrival of European settlers, with a further 100 at risk of extinction. Less than a decade later, Annette Schmidt (1990) put the number of extinct languages at 160 and endangered languages at 70.

Undervaluation of School Foreign Language Education

In the environment described above, academics have long argued that foreign languages occupy a low priority in the Australian education system, especially by comparison with 'core subjects' like English and mathematics. Elaine McKay, for instance, once described second language learning in Australia as a 'marginalized, undervalued and exotic activity' (McKay

1988: 37). For Clyne, the roots of the problem lie in the aforementioned 'monolingual mindset', which has created 'the myth of the overcrowded school curriculum that has no space for any language other than English' and 'presupposes that learning and knowing another language detracts from English literacy' (Clyne 2005: 294).

Official statistics lend justification to concerns that schools devote insufficient time to foreign language study. According to an OECD report, Australian 9- to 11-year-olds spent only 1% of their school time in 2007 on the study of 'modern foreign languages' (OECD 2009: 367). In the same year, Andrew Ferguson reported that primary school teachers were spending 38% of their instructional time teaching English and 18% teaching mathematics, while teaching of LOTE averaged a mere 2% (Ferguson 2007). In Victoria, a significant number of schools do not require their students to study a second language, in apparent contravention of guidelines from the state educational authorities recommending that LOTE classes be offered for the full duration of the compulsory schooling period. Moreover, a large number of schools routinely comply with departmental guidelines only by operating so-called 'language and cultural awareness' programmes, through which children are introduced to 'some vocabulary and aspects of society, language and culture'. In 2007, more than 40% of primary school pupils in Victoria attended such programmes. (Victoria Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2009: 12). In the same year, only 3% of Victorian primary schools succeeded in meeting the minimum weekly target of 150 minutes of contact time for primary-level LOTE programmes (Victoria Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2009: 23–24).

However, an arguably more serious concern for advocates of a multilingual Australia is the fact that all but a small percentage of the nation's schoolchildren 'drop' LOTE before entering the final years of their secondary education, thus limiting their chances of attaining fluency and literacy in a foreign language. In this connection, Robert McClelland observed in 2007 that only 13.4% of Australian Year 12 students were engaged in foreign language study, compared with '99 per cent' of their counterparts in the Netherlands (McClelland 2007). While there may be numerous possible explanations for this situation, there does appear to be a widely-held perception in Australia that a pupil's prospects of attending the university of their choice will be jeopardized by continuing study of a foreign language into the later years of secondary education, on the grounds that it is difficult to attain high grades in university matriculation examinations in LOTE by comparison with other subjects. In an attempt to rectify this situation, state examination boards have introduced a system known as 'scaling', which equalises the results of 'more difficult' subjects (like LOTE) with those of 'easier' ones (see VTAC 2005). Universities have also sought to incentivize foreign language study by offering a bonus to students who take a LOTE subject in Year 11 and/or 12. In Victoria, for instance, the university entrance system provides a 10% bonus on the entry score of any student who successfully completes a LOTE subject at Year 12 level (Group of Eight 2007: 4). Despite such initiatives, Year 12 LOTE enrolment has remained generally low across the country, generating pernicious knock-on effects on the entire language education system. At the tertiary level, the number and variety of language degree programmes has declined quite dramatically. In 1997, 66 languages were offered at Australian universities; by 2007 this had fallen to just 29. In parallel with the diminution in the number of Australian foreign language

graduates, the pool of adequately skilled language teachers has dwindled. Many now believe that the inability of the Australian school system to foster speakers of foreign languages places the country's future international competitiveness at risk.

Behind the 'Asian Languages Debate'

Amid this general discourse of crisis, one of the most salient features of the current Australian foreign language education debate is a division of opinion regarding the importance that should be attached to Asian languages. Some see an expansive programme of Asian language study across the entire Australian school system as essential for the country's continued economic prosperity and security. Against this, there are those who would consider such a programme unfeasible and/or undesirable. Before examining some of the arguments for and against the prioritization of Asian language study in Australian schools, it is worth establishing why such languages should figure so prominently on the educational agenda of a country whose population is overwhelmingly of European origin and which has long been renowned for its cultural identification with Europe (particularly the United Kingdom).

The 'Repositioning' of Australia

The Asian languages question should perhaps be regarded as just one facet of a wider debate within Australia on the country's appropriate position in the world. As will be explained below, the past two to three decades have witnessed a repositioning of Australia in the world, characterised by a more Asia-centric orientation with regard to overseas trade, foreign relations and immigration policy. At the same time, however, public opinion has remained somewhat divided as regards the desirability of this repositioning, suggesting at least a degree of unpredictability as regards the nature of Australia's future relationship with Asian countries, and perhaps by extension with Asian languages.

'Economic Symbiosis with Asia'

Since the end of World War II, the focus of Australian trade has shifted away from its traditional market in the United Kingdom and towards countries in East Asia, particularly Japan and, more recently, the People's Republic of China. In the 1960s and 1970s, as Britain began to seek greater economic integration with its European neighbours, Australia became compelled to find alternative markets for its products. The burgeoning industrial economies of East Asia thus became a logical focus. By 1967, Japan had already overtaken the United Kingdom as Australia's largest export market (Pinkstone 1992). Since that time, Australia has gone on to develop a symbiotic trading relationship with that country, as well as with other major industrial countries in East Asia. In 2008–2009, China was Australia's largest individual two-way goods and services trading partner, with 14.7% of total trade. Over the same period, Japan represented Australia's largest export market, followed by China and then South Korea. China was also Australia's primary source of imports, accounting for 13.8% of the country's total imports, while Japan was the third largest import source (Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade 2009: 5).

'Political Enmeshment'

Although established (and long regarded) as a distant outpost of the British Empire, Australia's geopolitical orientation has gradually shifted away from the 'mother country' and towards its own geographical region, notably the countries of East and South-East Asia. In party political terms, the principal driving-force behind this development has been the Australian Labor Party (ALP). During the prime ministerial tenure of Robert Hawke (1983–1991), the focus of Australian foreign relations was moved firmly in the direction of Asia, in a policy referred to by Hawke himself as 'enmeshment' (Dalrymple 2003a: 87). With the rapid economic rise of countries like Japan and South Korea, Hawke commissioned Ross Garnaut, a leading economist, to examine the relevance for Australia of the so-called 'North East Asian Ascendancy' (Garnaut 1989). In the view of Ross Dalrymple, the Garnaut Report, as it became known, marked a turning point in the shift of Australian policy and set the stage for an unprecedented foreign policy thrust to engage with East Asia. For Dalrymple, the central concept of this policy shift was the perception that Australia's location held out 'not threats and reasons for concern' but 'immense opportunities' (Dalrymple 2003a: 80). In this context, Garnaut advocated that Australia increase its expertise in dealing with the region. The enmeshment policy was continued by Hawke's successor as Labor leader, Paul Keating, who served as Prime Minister from 1991 to 1996. As Richard Higgott (1994) sees it, Keating was determined 'to construct an identity for Australia in the twenty-first century as a nation *in* and *of* its Asia-Pacific region', rather than, as Keating himself once put it, a 'branch office of empire' (Higgott 1994: 41). In Dalrymple's view, however, Keating only brought Australia 'closer to securing acceptance as a member of what was developing into an East Asian solidarity movement'. In this context, enmeshment was presented as 'an enhancement of, not a derogation from, Australian identity' (Dalrymple 2003b).

On the question of political engagement with Asia, there have been discernible differences down the years between Labor and Australia's other main political party, the Liberal Party. In this respect, the latter has generally been regarded as somewhat less enthusiastic than the former, notably during the prime ministership of John Howard. For Bilveer Singh, Howard was 'more comfortable and keen in projecting Australia as a Western, developed, democratic, and OECD country rather than part of the Southwest Pacific and a neighbor of Southeast Asia' (Singh 2002: 107). Mark Beeson has described the approach of the Howard government (which took office in 1996) as 'ad hoc, opportunistic and aimless' and 'a stark contrast to the earlier, proactive Asia-oriented policies of the Hawke-Keating era' (Beeson 2001: 44). Of course, given the diversity that exists among Asian political regimes, it would seem something of a simplification to speak in terms of 'Asia-oriented policies'. Indeed, according to Tony Parkinson (2008: 26), Howard (accused by some of being 'anti-Asian') developed a particularly close relationship with Japan. In Parkinson's view, Howard sought 'to elevate Australia's relationship with Japan from its traditional narrow focus on trade and commerce'. Conversely, Howard's successor as Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, widely lauded as a friend of Asia, has been accused by some of displaying antipathy towards Japan and bias in favour of China.

It is difficult to ascertain to what extent the general public approves of their country's increased political integration with Asia, not least in view of the diverse and changing nature of

Australian society itself. However, to judge from some survey data, there is some apprehension about certain Asian countries and their increasing influence in Australia (see Hanson 2010). According to numerous observers (e.g. Lindsey 2007; McAllister 2005; Slaughter 2007), Indonesia has a particularly negative public image in Australia.

Towards an Asia-centric Immigration Focus

In parallel with shifts in the political and economic spheres, recent decades have also ushered in the beginnings of a demographic shift towards Asia. For the first seven decades of the twentieth century, Asians (indeed, any non-Europeans) were all but prohibited from immigrating to Australia, due to an exclusionist policy commonly referred to as the 'White Australia Policy' (see Clancy 2004; Windschuttle 2004). However, in light of Australia's deepening economic reliance on countries in the East Asian region, the country's leaders realized that such a policy was no longer sustainable and formally abandoned it in 1973. Despite this, Australia, with its white Caucasian majority, has remained a target of criticism from some Asian politicians. Perhaps most notably, the former Malaysian prime minister, Mahathir Mohamed, once described Australians as 'Europeans [who] cannot be Asians' (Byrnes 2006: 4) and threatened to block Australian participation in regional organizations like ASEAN until 'enough Asians had settled in Australia' (Blackburn 1999: 240). In similar vein, the former Singaporean premier, Goh Chok Tong, once suggested that Australia would be regarded as 'Asian' only when its population has tipped over 50 per cent non-whites (Spillius 2003).

While Asians do not constitute a majority of the population, Australia has experienced an exponential increase in the number of immigrants from Asian countries. In the 2006 Census, 1,696,568 Australian residents classified themselves as 'Asian', whether exclusively or in combination with one other ethnicity (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006). In the third quarter of 2009, the number of immigrants from China for the first time surpassed that from the United Kingdom and New Zealand (Martin 2009). Given Australia's geographical location and the extent of its economic dependence on Asian countries, there are those, like Glen Norris (below), who call for a much more substantial increase in the country's Asian population:

> Australians have to realise that going on holiday to Bali does not constitute moving closer to Asia. For politicians, the occasional free-trade deal or cultural exchange does not make them Asian. Becoming part of the region—and reaping the enormous benefits—will mean becoming more ethnically part of Asia. So, what could a Eurasian Australia of 50 million people achieve? First, it would mean respect and inclusion. The era of 'neither fish nor fowl'—when Australia was derided as the small, white man of Asia or, worse, a stooge of the British or Americans—would be over. No Asian government could dismiss an Australia with a substantial population of Chinese, Malays and Vietnamese. (Norris 2007: A13)

There is, as yet, little evidence of widespread support for such a transformation. In fact, the question of Asian immigration has been highly contentious since the very birth of the Australian federation in 1901, when politicians instituted an Immigration Restriction Act (in essence, the basis of the earlier-mentioned 'White Australia policy'). In advocating 'unity of race', the chief architect of this exclusivist policy, Attorney-General (later Prime Minister) Alfred Deakin specifically inferred that Japanese and Chinese immigrants represented a threat to the

newly-formed federation (Clancy 2004: 12). Following the abolition of the long-standing White Australia policy in the 1970s, large numbers of Asian immigrants began arriving in the country, generating opposition among some. In 1984, one of Australia's most prominent historians, Geoffrey Blainey, criticised the pace of Asian immigration, warning of Australia's 'Asianisation' (see Windschuttle 2008). While arguing for the maintenance of 'sound relations with Asian nations', Blainey criticised as simplistic the view that admitting more Asian immigrants would automatically result in better relations with Asian countries. Instead, he argued, mass Asian immigration would more likely have the opposite effect, by leading to 'social and ethnic tensions' within Australia and straining its relations with the immigrants' countries of origin (Blainey 1984: 165–166).

To this day, Asian immigration has remained a charged political issue. Whereas Labor is often seen as the champion of a diverse and multicultural Australia, the Liberal party, most notably during the prime ministerial tenure of John Howard, has been regarded as in favour of preserving the country's European identity (see Beeson 2001; Horne 2001; Johnson 2000, 2007; Markus 2001; Wong 2007). As Leader of the Opposition, Howard personally argued in 1988 for a slowing down of Asian immigration in the interests of 'social cohesion' (Markus 2001). For Carol Johnson (2000: 6), Howard's view of the mainstream national identity was that of the 'white, heterosexual, Anglo-Celtic male'. In this connection, Howard once identified 'Anglo-Celtic' as the dominant culture of Australia, arguing that while 'most nations experience some level of cultural diversity' they also have 'a dominant cultural pattern running through them' (reported by Wong 2007). In the 1990s, Asian immigration became the focus of national discussion, with the rise of Pauline Hanson, a far-right politician, whose 'One Nation' party won nearly a quarter of the vote in State elections in Queensland in June 1998 (see Jackman 1998). While radical right-wingers believe elites are intent on transforming Australia into an Asian country, it is difficult to gauge how the population at large perceives the demographic changes that have taken place. According to Murray Goot (1991), past attempts to gauge Australian public opinion on the issue of Asian immigration have often yielded contradictory data, with some opinion polls indicating majority opposition to the rate of immigration and others indicating majority support.

The Language Policy Implications of an Asia-centric Shift

It is perhaps natural that Australia's progressively deepening relationship with Asia should have had a major influence on foreign language-in-education policy. From a situation where the overwhelming majority of schoolchildren studied only European languages, the emphasis has now shifted emphatically towards Asian languages. In the 1987 National Policy on Languages (NPL), the country's first comprehensive national language policy (Lo Bianco 1987), Japanese, Chinese and Indonesian/Malay were specified as 'priority languages' (along with five European languages and Arabic). When the NPL was superseded by the Australian Languages and Literacy Policy (ALLP) in 1991, Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Thai and Vietnamese were among the 14 designated 'priority languages'. In the companion volume to the ALLP policy document, the 'employability' value of 'language knowledge' was explicitly stressed (Department of Employment, Education and Training 1991: 62). In 1994, Asian

languages were, for the first time, placed at the apex of the country's language learning agenda, with the then Labor government's adoption of the so-called NALSAS (National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools) Strategy. NALSAS identified four Asian languages—Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian and Korean—for priority support, earmarking an annual budget of approximately A$30 million for this purpose. The NALSAS initiative was introduced on the recommendations of a committee for the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) under the chairmanship of Kevin Rudd, who, more than a decade later, would go on to assume the office of prime minister.

Given the aforementioned differences between Australia's two main political parties in approach to engagement with Asia, it is perhaps understandable that differences should have emerged also with respect to policy on Asian languages. A very major difference in this regard was the decision of the Howard Liberal-National coalition government to discontinue NALSAS in 2002, four years before the expiry of its scheduled implementation period. The re-election of a Labor government under Kevin Rudd in late 2007 led to the reinstitution of an Asia-centric language policy. In 2008, Labor launched its 'National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program' (NALSSP), which represented a revival of NALSAS, in that the same four Asian languages were designated as languages of special priority (see Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations 2010).

In Pursuit of 'Asia Literacy': Advocacy for a Mass Asian Languages Programme

A key concept in contemporary Australian education is 'Asia literacy' (Fitzgerald 1991; Henderson 2003, 2008; March 1995; Rudd 1995). The term 'Asia literacy', which is thought to have been first coined by the Asian Studies Council (1988), has become almost a ubiquitous buzzword in Australia. Indeed, as Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd personally declared it his government's intention to make Australia 'the most Asia-literate nation in the Western world' (Kirby 2008). Advocacy for the same goal is, understandably, prevalent in institutions dedicated to Asia-related education, such as the Asia Education Foundation (AEF), which in 2008 issued a 'call to action' with the goal of 'Asia literacy for every young Australian' (Asia Education Foundation 2008).

Asia literacy has been the object of discussion in a myriad of publications and defined in a variety of ways. Stephen Fitzgerald has defined an 'Asia-literate person' as someone:

> who at the end of schooling will know sufficient of the history, geography, politics, economics and culture of Asia so that they may: be simply well informed; be confident regional citizens, be 'at ease' in Asia; understand the dynamics of the region and in particular Australia's place in it; make informed decisions on their own behalf and through national decision-making processes to have a productive interaction with Asia. (Fitzgerald 1991: 21–22)

While Fitzgerald places the emphasis here on knowledge of Asia, there are probably many who would regard ability in at least one Asian language as a *sine qua non* of Asia literacy. The centrality of the linguistic element of Asia literacy was apparent in the COAG report, *Asian Languages and Australia's Economic Future,* which formed the basis of the NALSAS initiative. Indeed, even though that report acknowledged the need for 'a parallel investment in Asian

studies', it was second language provision that drove the allocation of resources (Henderson 2003). The primacy of linguistic concerns is reflected also in the programme guidelines for the NALSSP initiative, where the objectives are specified as 'to significantly increase the number of Australian students becoming proficient at learning the languages and understanding the cultures of our Asian neighbours—China, Indonesia, Japan and Korea', 'to increase the number of qualified Asian language teachers' and to 'develop a specialist curriculum for advanced language students'. Moreover, as an aspirational target, NALSSP aims for at least 12% of students to finish Year 12 with fluency in one of the target Asian languages (Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean) 'sufficient for engaging in trade and commerce in Asia and/or university study' (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2010: 1).

Three Rationales for the Learning of Asian Languages

The Economic Rationale

In recent years, Australian language-in-education policy has generally been guided by what Henderson refers to as 'a human capital view of students'. i.e. the view that education 'has a direct relationship to the economy, and that policy prescription can harness this relationship to increase economic goals'. In other words, students are 'co-opted' to learn Asian languages in the national interest (Henderson 2002: 10–11). This view of language study has arguably been reflected in policy since 1994, which is when the then Labor government instituted the 'Australian Language and Literacy Policy' (ALLP), superseding the country's first ever comprehensive language policy, the National Policy on Languages (NPL) (Lo Bianco 1987). For Michael Herriman, the ALLP placed the emphasis on 'clear economic and employment ends rather than ends of social justice, educational access and personal satisfaction' (Herriman 1996: 52). With specific regard to Asian languages, the primacy of economic considerations in the NALSAS initiative was unmistakable:

> Australia requires an export culture which is 'Asia literate' … one which possesses the range of linguistic and cultural competencies required by Australians to operate effectively at different levels in their various dealings with the region—as individuals, organisations and as a nation. (Rudd 1994: 2)

In a 2002 interview, Colin Mackerras, a former chairperson of the NALSAS Taskforce, confirmed that the rationale for choosing the four NALSAS languages was 'primarily economic'. As Mackerras put it, 'the countries where these languages were written and spoken were doing very well economically and were among Australia's major trading partners, as well as being important in themselves' (ABC Radio National 2002). In the years since the introduction of NALSAS, some of the staunchest support for a mass Asian language study programme has come from organizations whose primary interest could be described as 'economic'. In 2009, a number of leading business, union and academic bodies collaborated to form the 'Business Alliance for Asia Literacy' with the declared aim of promoting Asian language and cultural studies in Australian schools and universities. Involved in the formation of this alliance were organizations as diverse as the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Australian

Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Commonwealth Bank, IBM Australia, and the Australian national airline, Qantas (Callick 2009).

Economic arguments for Asian language learning have been stressed frequently also by some Australian academics. Michael Wesley of Griffith University, for instance, advocates the introduction of a nationwide Asian language study programme. In Wesley's view, it is critical for Australia's prosperity that half of the country's citizens become competent in one of the main Asian languages over the next 30 years. As he explains:

> The world of the future is going to be an Asian-centred knowledge economy, and essential to getting ahead in the knowledge economy is getting our human infrastructure right, and essential to that is being able to speak to people in languages other than English (Wesley, cited in Healy 2009)

Wesley was a co-author of a report advocating a quadrupling of the number of Australians studying an Asian language within a generation. This report called upon the government to invest A$11.3 billion in Asian languages (Griffith Asia Institute 2009), a figure which, as Lo Bianco & Slaughter (2009: 58) have pointed out, would be 'far in excess' of any previous language funding. Further, the Griffith report proposed a strategy under which universities and schools would bid for funding from a new national Asian languages institute to ensure a doubling within five years of the number of school pupils studying Chinese, Japanese or Indonesian.

The Strategic Rationale

In the so-called 'Post-9/11 era', considerable attention has been given to the national security potential of foreign languages (see Edwards 2004; Pratt 2004). Given its geographical location, Australia arguably has a fundamental strategic interest in nurturing speakers of Asian languages. This is perhaps particularly the case with regard to Indonesian, the national language of Australia's closest Asian neighbour. In this connection, Wesley (2009) has urged opponents of an Asian language programme to consider 'where terrorists and drug and people smugglers target us from' and 'where diseases transit through'. However, for some policy-makers at least, Asian languages represent more than mere tools for intelligence-gathering or economic advantage. Rather, as Lo Bianco explains, language education has been one means through which Australian public discourse has tried to 'become Asian'; the idea of 'joining' Asia or 'becoming' an Asian nation being 'discursive manoeuvres that embody will and desire' (Lo Bianco 2004: 23). From this perspective, as Lo Bianco and Slaughter see it, 'the more Australians who are able to participate in cultural debates in Indonesia, China, Japan, Korea, Thailand, Vietnam and elsewhere through the medium of local languages, the less likely it is that Australia will be seen as an outsider in this region' (Lo Bianco & Slaughter 2009: 139).

Against this background, it is envisaged that 'ordinary Australians' will play an active role in their country's engagement with its Asian neighbours by increasing their personal knowledge of Asian languages, cultures and systems; a view articulated here by Colin Mackerras:

> Australia is in the Asian region and it is extremely important for us to understand our neighbours. A very good way of doing that is for our people to learn their languages. All right, it's a globalised world and more people are learning English as a foreign language than have ever learned any foreign language at any time in history. But it's still incumbent on a civilised country to try to understand its neighbours, and that means at least a portion of the young should learn their languages. (ABC Radio National 2002)

The former head of the Australian Defence Force (ADF), General Peter Cosgrove, has voiced similar opinions on the Asian languages question. In his view, 'good neighbours learn to speak each other's languages' (Cosgrove 2000). In this connection, he has stressed the important role of Asian language ability and familiarity with Asian cultures in averting conflict with Asian countries, and argued for the empowerment of Australian children 'for a safer and more prosperous future' (cited in Beaumont & Doherty 2002).

The Social Rationale

As Ien Ang & Jon Stratton (2001: 95) have pointed out, Australia was once characterised by a former Prime Minister, Paul Keating, as 'a multicultural nation in Asia'. Thus, in the context of Australia's official multiculturalism policy and its increased intake of Asian immigrants, knowledge of Asian languages among individuals of non-Asian background represents a potentially important factor in maintaining national cohesion within Australia itself. As Lo Bianco and Slaughter (2009: 139) put it, 'the credibility of Australia as a tolerant, open society is enhanced if Australians know Asian languages and can use them comfortably'.

Opposition to a Mass Asian Language Study Programme

For all the above, there are some Australians who question the wisdom of an expansive programme of Asian language study. In this section of the paper, I shall discuss two common arguments against the widespread teaching of Asian languages.

1) Asian Languages are Too Difficult to be Taught Effectively in Schools

There are some who oppose the idea of a mass Asian language study programme from a purely practical standpoint, namely a belief that, with the possible exception of the Latin-scripted Indonesian, Asian languages are simply too difficult to be taught effectively in schools, especially given the time constraints of the curriculum. Schools would be better advised, they argue, to concentrate on teaching their pupils 'easier' cognate (essentially, European) languages. One person who has frequently articulated this opinion is Luke Slattery, editor of the Higher Education Supplement in the daily newspaper, *The Australian*. In Slattery's view, the emphasis should be on 'those European languages with which English has an affinity: German, French, Spanish and Italian'. For Slattery, these languages are both 'relatively easy to learn' and 'enrich one's knowledge of English'. On account of their complexity, Slattery argues, character-based Asian languages like Chinese and Japanese should be reserved for 'Anglophones who have cut their teeth on a European language' (Slattery 2009a). Slattery's view would be supported by Andy Kirkpatrick, who argues that such languages should not be taught in primary schools

or even at lower secondary school level to non-background speakers of these languages because of their relative difficulty (Kirkpatrick 1995: 6).

Concerns like these have been dismissed as overly simplistic by some Asian language advocates. Roland Sussex (2008), for instance, advises us to 'forget the Asian equals hard, European equals easy' mantra. In similar vein, Jane Orton dismisses as simplistic the blanket assertion that Asian languages are more difficult than European ones for a native English speaker to learn. In the following passage, she appears to suggest that Chinese is inherently less difficult to learn than French:

> Chinese, like Indonesian, is not difficult, with word order very close to English, no inflections or declensions, and just a few aspect markers, which can be used with all verbs. As a result, learners can make terrific communicative progress very quickly. On the other hand, just to make simple utterances French learners must remember an article for every noun, up to 50 forms of every verb and the subjunctive, grapple with a reversed word order, and cope with pronunciation and orthographic systems decidedly foreign to the English speaker's ear and eye. (Orton 2009)

Other academics have taken a different view. With specific regard to Chinese, for instance, David Moser (1991) has estimated that it would take about three times as long for a native English-speaker to reach a level of comfortable fluency in speaking, reading and writing Chinese, as it would take to reach a comparable level in French. In his assessment, 'an average American could probably become reasonably fluent in *two* Romance languages in the time it would take them to reach the same level in Chinese' (Moser 1991: 68). Similarly, the California-based Defense Language Institute has estimated that it takes three times as many hours of instruction for a student of Mandarin, Japanese, Arabic and Korean to reach the same level of proficiency as students of Portuguese, Spanish, Italian and French with the same exposure (cited in Slattery 2009a: 33).

Perhaps more important than the technical arguments over the relative complexity of Asian versus European languages is the perception, widely-held in Australia, that Asian languages, particularly those which do not use the Latin alphabet, *are* more difficult than the European languages traditionally studied in Australian schools. This perception surely constitutes a powerful disincentive for students in their latter years of secondary school education, faced with the task of choosing subjects for university matriculation examinations. In this connection, Gerry Groot suggests that adult advisors might also try to discourage such students from continuing their study of an Asian language:

> In high school, when hard choices have to be made about maximising tertiary entrance rankings, teachers, counsellors and parents will more than likely tell students to drop languages. Asian ones, in particular, are too much effort and too high-risk for too little likely reward. (Groot 2010)

The perception of Asian languages as 'too difficult' has arguably been exacerbated by the growing number of children of Asian ethnicity attending Australian schools. In this regard, a distinction should be made between 'L1 speakers'—who, to apply the definition suggested by the Asia Education Foundation, have been 'mainly or completely educated in that language'—and 'heritage speakers' (sometimes referred to as 'background speakers'), who 'in broad terms speak the language but are educated and live in a country where another language

is spoken' (Asia Education Foundation 2010: 1). Certainly in the case of Chinese, there is widespread recognition that L2 classroom learners are unable to compete with pupils who have spoken the language from birth (Orton 2008: 6). In light of the increase in Asian immigration in recent decades, there has been much discussion of how to create a level-playing field for children of non-Asian backgrounds. To this end, state examination boards have introduced separate LOTE examinations for L1 speakers and L2 learners. As yet, however, there are no signs of a significant increase in the uptake of Asian languages among students in Year 11 and 12 (the final two years of secondary school education).

2) Utilitarian Rationales for Asian Language Study are Misguided

As explained above, utilitarian rationales for the study of Asian languages have often been uppermost in the minds of Australian policy-makers, as typified by the NALSAS and NALSSP initiatives with their overt preoccupation with the national economic interest. NALSAS could be regarded as a classic example of utilitarianism, since, as Lo Bianco (2008) has explained, it not only specified a high degree of language selection (just four Asian languages), but also because the languages themselves were chosen not by educators, nor even by education departments, but by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Moreover, in the choice of priority languages, little attention was paid to community or local contexts within Australia.

The utilitarian approach to language policy has been criticised in numerous publications (e.g. Anderson & Lo Bianco 2009; Godwin 2009; Slattery 2009a, 2009b). For Andrew Godwin (2009), a Chinese-speaker and specialist in Asian law, such an approach ignores the two primary factors that motivate individuals to learn a foreign language, namely 'need' and 'intellectual fascination with the language and the culture it represents'. Since few in Australia are driven by an immediate need to learn an Asian language (or any other language for that matter), Godwin believes that most secondary students will be primarily concerned with choosing the subjects 'that will give them the results they need in order to be admitted to the degree course of their choice' rather than investing in their future job prospects.

Another widely discussed rationale for the study of Asian languages is the concern to safeguard national security. Lo Bianco (2005) regards this view of language as particularly pernicious. As he explains:

> Such an approach risks infecting the study of language and culture with a sense of national insecurity, even of personal anxiety. A starting point of deep and even unbreachable cultural differences between Australians and, for example, Asians, is hardly a basis for reaching out and trying to understand others different from ourselves. (Lo Bianco 2005: 11)

Moreover, while it has been suggested that a mass Asian language programme would help foster social cohesion, some advocates of community languages education (like Singh 2001) have long opposed such a programme, on the grounds that it would draw resources away from language education that supports the multicultural, pluralistic nature of Australian society. As Henderson (2003:28) has explained, community language advocates were adamantly against the recommendation in the 1980 Fitzgerald Report that Asian languages be given parity with European languages in school curricula.

For Lo Bianco and Anderson, it is the humanistic rationale for language learning that should always remain paramount. As they explain, 'studying languages allows our students to encounter human differences in their most natural way and thereby to open themselves to an exploring and understanding of the self based on learning about the other' (Anderson & Lo Bianco 2009). It is perhaps the case, amid the clamour to foster Asia-literate 'human capital', that this rationale has been insufficiently appreciated.

There are many who question the wisdom of seeking to address utilitarian goals through a mass, nationwide Asian language education programme like that advocated by Wesley (2009) and the Griffith University Asia Institute (2009). For Slattery (2009a), such a programme may appeal to 'the Australia-is-an-Asian-nation cabal', but would be 'lunacy'. While acknowledging Australia's need for 'elite speakers' of Chinese, Japanese and Korean, Slattery predicts that such individuals will probably be drawn from the country's own immigrant communities. As an alternative to a school-level Asian languages programme, Gerry Groot suggests investing in the large group of Australians who already have experience of living and working in Asia. Such individuals, in Groot's view, have the greatest potential to benefit from full-time intensive language training designed to give them high levels of competence in speaking, listening, reading and writing (Groot 2010). Others, like Lo Bianco & Slaughter (2009), have also suggested that utilitarian goals might be better addressed in post-compulsory education.

Conclusion: The Continuing Asian Languages Debate

Given the various trends and developments outlined above, Asian language education looks set to remain the subject of polemical debate for the foreseeable future. What is clear thus far, however, is that despite the widespread and ardent advocacy for Asian language education, the current (2010) Labor government's evident commitment to an Asia-centric language-in-education policy, and the hundreds of millions of dollars already invested, outcomes have been largely disappointing, whether in terms of generating public interest or fostering fluency and literacy among students.

The dire state of education in the four NALSSP priority languages was revealed in 2010 in four reports authored by prominent Australian academics (Asia Education Foundation 2010). These reports, based on the first large-scale research studies for 15 years, showed that the overall percentage of Australian schoolchildren studying these languages had fallen from 24% in 2000 to 18% in 2008. Of most concern perhaps was the finding that fewer than 6% of Australian students had continued their language studies into Year 12, with a dropout rate exceeding 90% among students of non-Asian background. Understandably perhaps, the reports re-ignited the debate among politicians and educators, and also sparked considerable media attention (e.g. Lane 2010b; McDonald 2010; Topsfield 2010).

Asian LOTEs all have their own specific obstacles to overcome in the battle to enhance their appeal among students, particularly at the upper secondary level, and to improve the quality of teaching/learning. Thus, internal debates are likely to continue within the individual teaching communities (e.g. in the language teachers' associations) and the academics/faculties that

support them, as regards how best to address these issues. The wider debate on the overarching problems of Asian language education will also certainly continue.

In seeking to address the shortcomings in Asian language education, government policy will, as ever, be the object of scrutiny. Through its NALSSP initiative, the current (2010) Labor government has mandated that the four NALSAS languages should again take precedence over all others; while the drive for 'Asia Literacy' remains its primary language-in-education policy priority. However, given past differences in priorities among Australia's two main political parties, there is every possibility that a change of government will again result in a shift away from an Asia-centric policy, as of course occurred when the Howard Liberal-National government scrapped Labor's NALSAS initative (see Henderson 2008).

Ultimately, however, the future success or failure of Asian language education will not be determined by policy-makers alone: societal attitudes will also play a key role. Despite the high level of advocacy for and investment in certain Asian languages, it is clear that many Australians—whether secondary school students themselves, their parents, or indeed school officials—are still unconvinced of the benefits. That said, Asian languages are by no means the only ones to have suffered from a lack of public interest. Numerous European languages, including the mother languages of immigrant communities, have also suffered a decline in student uptake.

To a degree, societal attitudes towards Asian languages may be linked to the all-important question of the Australian identity. For some, ambivalence or antipathy towards Asian languages may derive from a desire to preserve Australia's prominently European orientation. Such attitudes were observed back in 1991 by John Ingleson, who commented thus:

> We should not underestimate the strength of opposition in Australia to the concept that our future lies in Asia. For example, the Australian government's commendable efforts to promote Asian language learning in schools and universities have met with strong opposition from significant quarters. When stripped of the power play, these people are asserting the Europeaness of Australian culture and their determination to keep it that way. (Ingleson 1991: 215–216)

On the extreme fringes of Australian public opinion, some vehement opponents of Asian immigration have also waded into the language education debate. A far-right organization known as Australians Against Further Immigration (AAFI) has criticised what it sees as the preferential admission of children of migrants to universities under the 'unfair' LOTE bonus, which, in its view, 'ensures Australian children will be disadvantaged and the government will create an educated ethnic elite to take over positions of power and control in Australia'. It should be remembered, however, that even among supporters of multiculturalism, some oppose a mass Asian language programme on the grounds that it detracts from investment in community languages.

Another potentially powerful influence on societal attitudes to Asian languages is the Australian public's view of the countries where those languages are spoken. As Kaplan and Baldauf (1997: 134–135) put it, 'language education does not occur in a vacuum' ... 'if attitudes are negative, there will be few candidates for language education'. In this connection, negative

public perceptions of Indonesia (precipitated by events involving Australians in that country) appear to have been a key factor in the relative decline of Indonesian LOTE in recent years. As an extreme example of this phenomenon, Yvette Slaughter (2007) reported how, at the height of public antipathy towards Indonesia, some parents went as far as to contact their local education department to demand that Indonesian LOTE be withdrawn from their children's school curriculum. Given this precedent, it is certainly conceivable that public attitudes towards certain Asian languages will again be determined by political events and developments.

Given the shifting geopolitical realities and the fluid demographic situation within Australia itself, it cannot be assumed that the priority Asian languages in 2010 will continue to attract the same level of interest in decades to come. With the recent increase in immigrants from India and the increasing global politico-economic importance of that country, it has been suggested by some (e.g. Lo Bianco & Slaughter 2009) that Indian languages, particularly Hindi, might be elevated to a more prominent position in the Australian language learning agenda. Another potentially important language is Vietnamese, which is already spoken widely throughout Australia and has been identified as a language of importance in national- and state-level language policy documents.

Ultimately, for any Asian languages programme to begin to fulfil the expectations of its architects and advocates, Australians of all ethnic backgrounds will need to be convinced that their personal interests, whether in instrumental or humanistic terms, are served by achieving fluency and literacy in such languages. For a variety of reasons, this clearly has not happened thus far. Nonetheless, even though many in the educational/academic community routinely describe the situation as a national crisis, recent immigration trends would suggest that Australia will still produce sufficient people capable of satisfying the country's immediate linguistic needs with regard to Asian languages. Indeed, in all likelihood, Australia will fare much better than other Western countries in this regard.

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