

# Introduction

At the time of writing, the media featured intensive discussions of the case of Cornelia Rau, the mentally ill German-born Australian who was imprisoned first in a women's gaol in Brisbane and then in Baxter Detention Centre under abominable conditions and with no medical treatment whatsoever. She had lived in Australia since the age of 18 months, but had spoken German and German-accented English to authorities to create a new identity as a recent unauthorised immigrant, as part of an escape from a Sydney psychiatric hospital. The *Age* editorial of 5 February 2005 (p. 12) comments:

The 10-month incarceration of Cornelia Rau is a sad reflection on the society Australia has become ... Ms Rau's crime was to be found wandering in the bush, speaking a foreign tongue and pretending to be someone else.

In 2003, it was revealed that the Australian Government had enlisted the services of a Swedish company to analyse speech samples of Afghani asylum seekers with the intention of identifying those who were really Pakistanis cheating their way into Australia. A group of Australian linguists reviewing the procedure found it to be a seriously flawed and inappropriate way of determining nationality as it did not take into account such factors as the effects of contact between languages and particular sociolinguistic situations. They asked for the procedure to be stopped.<sup>1</sup> Administrators making a language other than English an instrument of exclusion has an unsavoury earlier history, when 'non-whites' were given a dictation test in a European language to keep them out of the country. Such a test was also administered on 'politically undesirable' Europeans, such as the Czech

journalist and author Egon Erwin Kisch, who failed a dictation test in Gaelic when he wanted to enter Australia to attend a peace conference in Melbourne in 1934. The dictation was administered by a policeman without a knowledge of Gaelic! In each case, we have monolinguals using other people's languages as an instrument of *exclusion*.

This book is about *inclusion* – about legitimating and valuing Australia's multilingualism, about using and sharing our multilingual resources to make it easier and more pleasurable for all of us to become bi- or multilingual. It is about empowering people in this country who have another language in addition to English – a project that Australia embarked on in the last quarter of the 20th century. We are very fortunate that our national language and lingua franca, English, is also the most widespread international lingua franca. However, as I hope to show, we disadvantage ourselves if we believe that one language is sufficient. As General Peter Cosgrove, then Chief of the Australian Defence Forces, expressed it: 'Language skills and cultural sensitivity will be the new currency of this world order'.<sup>2</sup>

In our global situation, we need human resources in as many languages as possible to understand what people really mean, whether they are using English or another language. Because we have English as our national language and lingua franca, we are not committed to one particular 'foreign language' in our educational institutions. We have the opportunity to diversify and utilise language resources from all over the world to build on. Children who develop more than one language early can develop means of thinking that are of advantage to them. We can greatly benefit from the multilingual base that we already have in this country if we build on it so that eventually everyone can participate in our multilingual society. We have languages from all over the world, languages from many different families, with different sociolinguistic histories. According to the 2001 Census, 16 per cent of our population speak a language other than English at home, 29 per cent in Sydney and 27 per cent in Melbourne. But, as we will discuss in chapter 1, these are underestimates.

This book argues that we need to develop our language potential to the fullest – so that young Australians, regardless of their background, can attain a high level of competence in at least one language in addition to English – to benefit them culturally, cognitively, in communicative competence, and in many cases in terms of understanding themselves and their families. At the same time, benefits will accrue to our nation economically and in our communication with other countries. All this is happening to some extent, but not as much as it could. There is a paradox between the

linguistic diversity of our population and our gross under-utilisation of this diversity. For instance, in an international survey mentioned in chapter 1, Australian business leaders were competent in fewer languages than their counterparts in 27 other countries.

The greatest impediment to recognising, valuing and utilising our language potential is a persistent monolingual mindset. Such a mindset sees everything in terms of monolingualism being the norm, even though there are more bi- and multilinguals in the world than monolinguals and in spite of our own linguistic diversity. It views multilingualism as outside the possible experience of 'real Australians' or even in the too-hard basket. It is the monolingual mindset that does not understand that developing an individual's language skills in any language benefits their skills in another language. The monolingual mindset has, however, succeeded in creating the myth of the overcrowded school curriculum that has no space for any language other than English and the one that presupposes that learning and knowing another language detracts from English literacy. The monolingual mindset finds it hard to distinguish between 'bilingualism' and 'monolingualism in a language other than the national language' (in this case English) and sometimes believes that using another language is an indication of inability or unwillingness to speak English at all. In chapter 2, we will advance evidence that all this is diametrically the opposite to the real situation.

If the Cornelia Rau case is really symptomatic in the age of insecurity and counterterrorist paranoia of a change in Australian attitudes regarding language other than English as something to exclude, it is the latest in a cyclical series spanning the past two centuries. Within the past two decades, leading international scholars on bilingualism have acclaimed the achievements of Australia as a predominantly English-speaking nation that has developed an exemplary language policy recognising both English and all other languages used within the nation (see chapter 5). While language policy is no longer high on the public agenda, overseas visitors are still impressed by some of the icons of multilingualism in Australia, which provide for a flexible system to which new languages can be added (and from which languages no longer deemed to be needed can be removed) – SBS Television, ethnic and multilingual radio, languages accredited for the Year 12 examination, the Telephone Interpreter Service, and the multilingual holdings of local public libraries.

This book is written for the general reader interested in exploring some issues of multilingualism in Australian society. It attempts to contribute

towards placing these issues back on the Australian agenda. It provides material to help understand Australia's language potential and how it can be better realised. The issues are seen from the perspective of a professional linguist who was himself born and raised bilingually in Australia and who is the father of an Australian-born bilingual. The general reader is invited to gloss over any section they may find too technical.

The first part of the agenda is to recognise our multilingualism. Chapter 1 sketches the demography of community languages, providing statistics on how they are distributed. Chapter 2 presents evidence and arguments for valuing our multilingualism, in the interests of the individual, the family, the community and the nation. Chapter 3, on fostering and transmitting multilingualism, examines language maintenance and shift patterns across ethnolinguistic communities in Australia, considering factors in the process of shift to English. It also offers advice to families raising, or wishing to raise, their children in more than one language. Chapter 4 is concerned with spreading multilingualism from the ethnic communities to the wider population, the role of the education system, and the current controversies surrounding 'background' and 'non-background' learners. Chapter 5 examines the changing fortunes of language policy in Australia, while chapter 6 summarises a collaborative strategy for managing linguistic diversity in which different institutions are able to play a role.

# Recognising Australia's multilingualism

## Australia's multilingual past

A few decades ago, I was in Lobethal (South Australia) tape-recording bilinguals whose ancestors had arrived there in 1841. One of the leading questions I would ask was: 'How has this place changed since you were a child?' 'Oh,' said the elderly man in the museum in fluent German, 'it really has changed. The New Australians have come from England and they make such a noise on their motorbikes'. It brought home to me the fact that in some parts of Australia, the Germans were the old Australians and the English were the new Australians. Multilingualism was a fact of life in Australia long before the post-Second World War immigration scheme.<sup>1</sup>

The new British settlement in New South Wales in 1788 was basically monolingual, but it shared a continent with old communities of multilinguals, speaking a total of over 250 Aboriginal languages. The uniqueness of indigenous cultures and the structural complexity of the languages were not understood by the new occupants, many of whom were eager to see them disappear. However, immigration soon brought to Australia many other languages in addition to English. Multilingualism in the newly emerging society began to be valued. The household of Victoria's first governor, Charles La Trobe, was bilingual – French and English. By the 1860s, the most widely used languages other than English on the Australian continent were Chinese, German, Irish, (Scottish) Gaelic, Welsh, the Scandinavian languages, and French. At the time, almost all business transactions in Melbourne and Adelaide could be undertaken in German, and as many as eight newspapers were published in that language