

THE FUTURE OF EUROPEAN LANGUAGES IN AUSTRALIA

*Alice Chik, Senior Lecturer, PhD,
Macquarie University, Australia*

Abstract

Australia is a migrant country, with the arrival of Anglo-European migrants dating from the 18th century. Up to the 1980s, Australian migration was Anglo- and Euro-centric. The change in Australia's immigration policy over the last thirty years from a focus on family reunion to skills-based migration has resulted in the intake of a much more diverse migration population. The fastest growing demographic groups are of Asian heritage. Migrants bring languages. Though Australia does not have an official language policy, English is the common language. This paper examines the changes in Australia's immigration policy and population to reflect on the future of European languages. Using Greater Sydney as a case study, this paper discusses how the changes in population have impacted languages education and public language service provision. Also discussed is where European languages are situated in a fast-changing Australia.

Keywords

multilingualism, migration policy, multiculturalism, languages education, Australia

Introduction

Australia is a migrant country. Nationally, only 2.8 per cent of the population is identified as Aboriginal. The most recent 2016 Census data shows that 28.4 per cent of Australia's were first-generation migrants; that is, they were born overseas and migrated to Australia at some points in their lives. Furthermore, 20.9 per cent of Australians were born from at least one overseas-born parent, and 50.7 per cent of Australians were born from at least one overseas-born grandparent. It is accurate to say almost everyone is an

overseas immigrant or a descendant of one (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Migrants bring languages. In the case of Australia, languages arrived at different periods.

Captain Cook's discovery of Australia in 1770 brought with it the English language. At that time, the approximately 400 000 Aborigines inhabiting the continent spoke more than 290 languages. The First Fleet arrived from England in 1788 carrying more than 1300 people from Britain and British colonies (including West Indies, Africa and India), and established a British colonial government in Australia. Early migrants were mainly from Britain and Ireland, and the subsequent gold rush during the 1850s and 1860s brought migrants from Germany, China, the United States, New Zealand and the South Pacific.

When the colonial government was established as the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901, migration was restricted and primarily based on race. British citizens were encouraged to move to Australia, and many received free passage through the assisted migration scheme. Conversely, the immigration of non-British citizens was not encouraged. Population growth was lower than two per cent and the Department of Immigration was established by Prime Minister Ben Chifley in 1945. The aim of the Department was to promote and manage an annual immigration rate of 70 000 people (Migration Heritage Centre, 2010).

The post-war period saw the first relaxation of Australia's race-based migration policy. In 1947, the Australian Government agreed to accept at least an annual intake of 12 000 post-war European refugees from Poland, Yugoslavia, Latvia, Ukraine and Hungary. Over the next two decades, migrants from West Germany, Greece, Spain, the United States, Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland arrived. By 1961, eight per cent of the population was not from Britain, with the migrant population predominantly European. It was only after 1973 that migration was relaxed and made more accessible to people of non-European backgrounds. Refugees from East Timor, Vietnam, China and the Middle East arrived in the late 1970s and 1980s.

The migration policy in Australia changed drastically in the mid-1990s when the John Howard led Coalition Government brought in a "point-based" assessment system that favoured skilled migration. Applicants were subsequently assessed by their skills, education level, employment experience and proficiency in English. There was also a substantial increase in temporary visas for business professionals and overseas students. These visa categories opened the door for migrants from New Zealand, China, South Africa and

India. The Australia Government maintains a small intake of humanitarian migrants for people in conflict zones such as Sudan, Afghanistan, Iran and Syria.

This brief outline of the migration in Australia shows that people of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds arrived in Australia at different times throughout the nation's short history. This temporal dimension is integral to the following discussion on the future of European languages in Australia. In this paper, Sydney is used as the case study, as it has the highest proportion of overseas migrants of all capital cities in Australia.

Sydney and everyday multilingualism

Sydney is the most culturally and linguistically diverse Australian city. According to the 2016 Census survey, among the population of 4.82 million, 36.7 per cent were born overseas – a figure much higher than the national average of 26 per cent. Among all residents of Sydney, 35.8 per cent speak a language other than English at home; again, much higher than the 20.8 per cent national average (ABS, 2017). The top five languages reported in the Census were Mandarin (4.7 per cent), Arabic (4.0 per cent), Cantonese (2.9 per cent), Vietnamese (2.1 per cent), and Greek (1.6 per cent). Italian (1.3 per cent) was placed seventh (Table 1). The top languages spoken in Sydney reflect the shift in the nation's migration policy. The languages of post-war European migrants, including Greek and Italian, have declining shares among the non-English speaking population in Australia. However, Asian and Middle Eastern languages are increasingly dominant. Another emerging trend is the growth in the number of Spanish and Portuguese speaking migrants who have more likely immigrated from South America than from Europe (Benson & Hatoss, 2019).

Rank Sydney	Language	Speakers Sydney
1	Mandarin Chinese	228 984
2	Arabic	194 051
3	Cantonese	138 817
4	Vietnamese	99 298
5	Greek	76 196
6	Hindi	64 107
7	Italian	62 794
8	Tagalog	62 182
9	Korean	57 790
10	Spanish	56 935

Rank Sydney	Language	Speakers Sydney
...19	Portuguese	20 459
21	French	20 057
...23	North Macedonian	18 959
24	Croatian	18 566
25	Serbian	18 542
...27	Russian	17 499
28	German	15 997
31	Polish	12 066
...34	Maltese	11 116
...42	Dutch	5889
...44	Hungarian	5577
...50	Bosnian	3632
...53	Czech	2970
54	Swedish	2612
...58	Romanian	2171
...60	Slovak	1999
...63	Ukrainian	1819
...71	Danish	1293
...75	Finnish	1052
76	Slovene [Slovenian]	1007
...80	Bulgarian	755
...82	Norwegian	684
83	Latvian	673
...85	Lithuanian	655
...87	Albanian	605
...90	Irish	483
91	Estonian	463
...96	Welsh	311
...103	Gaelic (Scotland)	235
...126	Cypriot	77
...130	Icelandic	66

Table 1. Languages other than English and number of speakers in Sydney ranked

There are two issues to consider when population growth varies among language groups: language maintenance among the younger generations, and language support for the older generations.

Ageing and language support

Recent migrants to Sydney are more likely to be of Asian heritage. Australian migration history shows that European language speakers are more likely to have arrived during the post-war periods (Figure 1). It is then very likely that many of these migrants would be older. However, the figure needs to be interpreted with caution, as 'European-born' also includes those who were born in England and Ireland.

In Sydney, among a total of 636 459 senior citizens aged between 65 and 89, 192 810 self-identified as European language speakers, and 27 676 claimed that they spoke another language and spoke English not well or not at all. This large population number is important to consider, especially given that the Australian Government has to provide language service support for age-relevant services such as retirement and health care. Among the 27 676 people who do not speak English well, the majority were Greek and Italian speakers. This means that the government has to have enough English-Greek and English-Italian bilingual speakers to provide adequate service support (ABS, 2017). The demand for language service support is partly reflected in the official interpretation and translation assignments. In 2017-2018, the need for interpreting was high for Italian (327 assignments), Greek (247 assignments), and Spanish (517 assignments). There was also high demand in other European languages (Table 2).

Age and sex distribution of the Asian-born and European-born populations, 2016

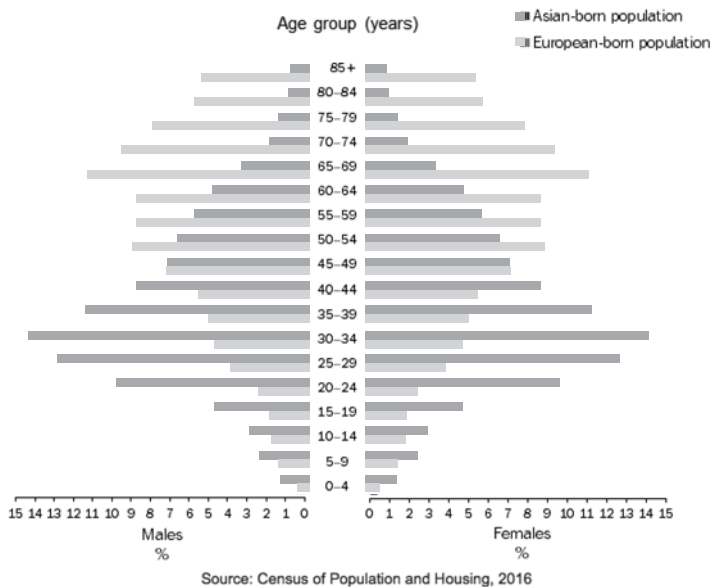


Figure 1. Age and sex distribution of the Asian-born and European-born population, 2016 (Source: ABS, 2017)

This demand shows:

Rank Sydney	Language	Interpreting	Translation
5	Greek	247	205/ 51 889
7	Italian	327	240/ 43 275
10	Spanish	517	647/ 102 715
19	Portuguese	287	231/ 33 023
21	French	193	258/ 37 588
23	North Macedonian	126	68/ 18 804
24	Croatian	63	55/ 8538
25	Serbian	215	48/ 8224
27	Russian	268	120/ 26 047
28	German	52	117/ 20 577
31	Polish	60	50/ 13 200
34	Maltese	9	1/ 50
42	Dutch	-	29/ 3150
44	Hungarian	26	14/ 1531
50	Bosnian	39	11 / 1100
53	Czech	57	19 / 4478
54	Swedish	-	-
58	Romanian	11	16/1,917
60	Slovak	8	10/ 1000
63	Ukrainian	6	19/ 2575
71	Danish	-	-
75	Finnish	-	8/ 3476
76	Slovene [Slovenian]	1	1/ 100
80	Bulgarian	4	6 / 600
82	Norwegian	-	4/ 416
83	Latvian	-	-
85	Lithuanian	-	-
87	Albanian	3	2 / 200
90	Irish	-	-
91	Estonian	3	1/ 100
96	Welsh	-	-
103	Gaelic (Scotland)	-	-
126	Cypriot	-	-
130	Icelandic	-	-

*Table 2. Interpreting and translation
(assignments/words) provided by Multicultural NSW.*

The demand for language-specific information is so extensive that the Australian Government introduced ‘Speak My Language’ in 2018, a digital

radio station that provides information about healthy ageing to culturally and linguistically diverse seniors. At present, radio programs are available in Serbian, Portuguese, Spanish, Russian, North Macedonian, and Greek (Speak My Language, 2018). Although Italian has yet to be rolled out, the Italian-speaking community has strong support from the Italian Association of Assistance (Co.As.It), a voluntary ethnic agency set up in 1968.

The pressing issue among ageing European-language speaking communities is the requirement for language support. This support, in turn, hinges upon language maintenance – if bi- or multi-lingual workforce is required, languages education is essential.

Language maintenance and languages education

The linguistic diversity of Sydney's general population is mirrored by the diversity of languages in schools. In New South Wales (NSW) in 2018, 35.1 per cent of all students attending government schools lived in homes where a language other than English was spoken. In the same year, the top five languages in NSW were: Indian Languages (18.1%), Chinese (15.8%), Arabic (13.7%), Vietnamese (5.9%), and Filipino/Tagalog (3.5%). Hence, the language backgrounds of the younger generation Australians are now predominantly Asian and Middle Eastern (NSW Department of Education, 2018).

When younger generations have diverse language backgrounds, the vital question to consider relates to language maintenance, namely 'How well are the languages maintained?' Some of the answers to this question can be found in Table 3.

	Own language + English well	Own language + English well		Own language + English well	Own language + English well
Ancestry Group	2nd generation	3rd generation	Ancestry Group	2nd generation	3rd generation
Bosnian	68.13	10.45	Italian	39.05	5.65
Chinese	68.62	4.4	Japanese	60.88	5.05
Croatian	48.93	13.47	Lebanese	71.1	18.58
Dutch	7.45	1.46	Macedonian	69.97	38.13
Filipino	19.2	2.36	Polish	26.21	2.73
German	16.62	1.53	Russian	38.50	6.72
Greek	69.05	29.6	Serbian	66.52	21.01
Indonesian	49.13	2.52	Turkish	75.68	30.43
Iranian	62.23	15.15	Vietnamese	81.7	46.67

Table 3. Intergenerational linguistic shift and proficiency with English in the Greater Sydney urban region among ancestry groups (aged 10-79). All figures are percentages of relevant populations (adapted from Chik et al., 2019).

It is evident that young people of North Macedonian and Greek origin are more likely to maintain their language heritage. For those with German and Dutch heritage, the language shifts completely by the third generation. There are several factors contributing to the language shift, but we will examine the language education provision in NSW as a starting point.

In NSW, government school students are required to take only 100 hours of languages education at the secondary level, preferably during Year 7 and/or Year 8 (Secondary One or Two). This is a very low requirement compared to the other States in Australia. At the early childhood and primary levels, students are not required to study a language. At the kindergarten level, the Australian Government has rolled out the Early Learning Languages Australia (ELLA) application (app). The program is funded by the Department of Education and Training and managed by Education Services Australia. The official website claims that ELLA is a “digital, play-based program that makes language learning engaging and interesting to preschoolers” (ELLA, 2019). The program offers eleven languages, including Arabic, Chinese (Mandarin), French, German, Hindi, Indonesian, Italian, Modern Greek, Japanese, Spanish and Vietnamese. The app is designed to be used by teachers who may have limited knowledge and training in language teaching or for a specific language. Hence, a teacher who is trained to teach Italian only can use the app to teach Arabic to the students. Similarly, a teacher who has no training in language teaching can use the app with the students for any of the eleven languages. It is assumed that the students will learn the language directly from using the app.

Support for language learning is not apparent at the primary level, as there is no mandatory curricular requirement. Language participation among primary level public-school students was at 38.6 per cent in 1998, 19 per cent in 2008, and only 16.5 per cent in 2018. The European languages most likely to be offered officially at school are French, Italian, Spanish, German and Greek. The provision of languages is frequently supported by community language schools (or heritage language schools) during weekends and after-school hours. Students who want to learn Bulgarian, Welsh or Polish have to attend community language schools.

The drop in the level of language participation by students continues at the secondary level. There is no language requirement for entrance to tertiary education and students therefore do not have the incentive to take a language subject for their exit examination, the Higher School Certificate (HSC). Subsequently, the student participation rate in language classes has

dropped from 45.5 per cent in the 1960s to 9.1 per cent in 2018. Among those students who choose to enrol in a language subject, about one-third attend the Beginners courses where they develop basic linguistic and intercultural knowledge and understanding of a language and its speech communities.

	1968	1978	1988	1998	2008	2018
Stage 5 (Year 10)	50.2%	22.0%	18.1%	21.0%	14.6%	12.6%
HSC	45.5%	14.8%	16.6%	15.4%	12.1%	9.1%

Table 4. Students taking languages in Year 10 and for the HSC (Year 12) in NSW

The provision of languages education is also segmented beyond mainstream schooling. The NSW School of Languages offers 12 language courses to students in years 9 to 12: Chinese, Italian, Modern Greek, French, Japanese, Portuguese, German, Korean, Russian, Indonesian, Latin and Spanish. The language courses are typically offered at school as foreign languages, but at some schools there may not be a large enough student enrolment to run a language course. For students with an interest in studying their home language from Year 7 onwards, they can attend the Saturday School of Community Languages. The school offers 24 language courses, but students can only choose to study the language of their heritage. In addition to the foreign language courses offered by NSW School of Languages, the Saturday School of Community Languages offers courses in Arabic, Armenian, Bengali, Croatian, Filipino, Hindi, Hungarian, Khmer, North Macedonian, Maltese, Persian, Polish, Punjabi, Serbian, Turkish, Ukrainian and Vietnamese. However, because the school operates only on Saturdays, many students are discouraged from attending.

At school level, there has not been enough effort put into encouraging students to study a language. As a result, the responsibility for language maintenance is left to the communities.

Conclusion

In Sydney, there are two challenges associated with the maintenance of European languages: an ageing population that requires strong language service support; and the fact that students are not willing or are not encouraged to study language at school. The language deficit that is hidden in the education

system will not be rectified through immigration because current migrants are more likely to be of Asian cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Domestically, language competence is essential for society to function adequately, fairly and justly. Internationally, language competence is necessary for Australia to be competitive and a global world player. To achieve the level of language competence needed, Australia must address the language deficit urgently.

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