2 Decolonising Linguistic Practice

2.1 Introduction

In this book we are particularly concerned with the practicalities of decolonising linguistic practice. Although there is a growing body of work connected to the broader project of language planning and decolonisation, discussed in more detail below, here we focus on the interpersonal and practical implications of the high-level political processes identified elsewhere. Here, we ask questions about how speakers of Indigenous languages, and revitalisation languages more specifically, can be supported in work they undertake in relation to their languages. We address these questions not only in terms of professional practice, which over the last few decades has become a topic of serious concern and engagement, but also in terms of the content of the discipline itself, its methodology, and the theoretical base of what linguistics is and what linguists do.

Each of the research team has a different perspective to contribute to the notion of decolonising linguistics. We start by considering these individually.

2.1.1 Research Team Responses

Vicki: We need to do more than decolonise linguistics. We have to decolonise the whole space of language work, from ‘both sides’.

What’s important for Aboriginal people is that we need to feel capable of using the linguistic tools. But before that we need to understand them as necessary, even critically central. We need to be capable of accepting help to use those tools. That is why this is a decolonising issue. My hope is that others will be able to embrace this toolbox. To be able to access this knowledge we will have to be able to move past our misapprehensions about linguistics. Right now linguistics is in process, for the ways that we need to use it. Training is beginning, working with linguists is happening—but the goal is to know that the toolbox is much bigger than linguistics. Language revitalisation is culture and language. This is why linguistics also needs to change to meet us. For revitalising language and using these tools, we need a legitimate place for revitalised
languages, validated within academic discourse, for this new type of language, in that linguistic typology sense. Our languages aren’t just back in the 19th century; they are living, breathing languages as they are happening now. This is the catalyst for why we’re doing what we’re doing.

Decolonisation means freeing up people on both sides of the fence. The ‘two sides’ will affect each other. The shift is beginning. Our Meeting Point project is part of this movement that has been emerging. We need the academic linguists also to be able to ‘fully embrace’ what is currently outside of linguistics. We need them to bring in the personal—their philosophies, experience, humanity. If you cut that away in your professional practice, it remains colonising.

People in community must be empowered to be the bosses of their own language revitalisation. It is us who must set the agenda.

**Kris:** I think that in Australia, we have to recognise before anything else that we are in a postcolonial situation. By which I mean: we need to know, to engage with the fact, that things are not healed. Relations between the First Peoples and everyone else are not yet at a place where things can be ok. There is not yet enough recognition, at institutional and individual levels, that the legacies of coloniser and colonised have passed down to us. That relations still in general start from a division between those who know best and those who need training; those whose knowledge is founded in science and those whose knowledge is founded in wishful thinking, or superstition; those who have access to a great tradition of scholarship and those who can join in and acquire that tradition when they are ready; those who we take seriously because they are intelligent, educated, and articulate and those who we take seriously because politics, ethics, and compassion say we must; those who help and those who are helped; those who matter and those for whom we must make a space for mattering; those whose voices have spaces in which they can be heard and those for whom we must make a space for their voices to be heard. We are stuck here. I am stuck here. We/I want to move on. But the path is not clear. We/I have to do the best we can while not really knowing how, to create pathways for the future—pathways of hope for a time when it is possible to practise ourselves as and be treated as, assumed to be, equal.

So, because of who and where we are and the pathways we have travelled in getting here, we are trying to do some of this work within linguistics—specifically, descriptive linguistics. Where I see the need for decolonising within descriptive linguistics is in our continued insistence that the researcher must remain outside of the object of study in order to achieve an analysis of any value. That the academy, the tradition of scientific linguistics, determines what
is of value to study in language. That this determination peels off anything beyond the atoms of language structures.

A decolonised linguistics, in my view, will have the capacity to start from different vantage points. It will include the knowledge that both researchers and communities of practice (where these are separate) are people in contexts, people affecting and affected by what they do and what they study. It will be able to accommodate a range of perspectives on language—what it is, what it is made of, what it is for. It starts by dislodging the right to know, opening it out to the communities of practice, whether or not what is known there is consistent with what is knowable within the academy. I will not pretend this is easy. I am immersed in traditions of skills and knowledge that bring with them an imperative to ensure that others have access to these as well. I do not yet have a way to be comfortable with not prioritising this. Nor do I yet have a way of being equal with my Aboriginal colleagues in those spaces of recognised knowledge colonised by European traditions—except for individuals who have been courageous enough to participate in them, and still more courageously, to challenge them from within as they go. I stumble constantly, humiliatingly, in my/our attempts to actively, self-consciously, seek and create spaces for equality.

This is where we are.

Tonya: Language can be a source of extraordinary power. One of the ways this is evident is the fact that languages are so often the target of oppression in processes of colonisation or displacement. Language is also intensely personal. Not only does language allow us to communicate our internal experiences to the world, it is a key tool in constructing ourselves for others. Language oppression, imposed from the outside but often internalised in response to external pressures, understandably leaves deep wounds. Removing languages from public life makes their speakers invisible. No wonder language shift in the context of colonisation has such detrimental effects. Recognising the losses of language oppression allows me to see why language revitalisation has such healing potential. The fact that communities are gradually being able to re-establish authority over their own languages is a sign that the legacy of colonisation is beginning to shift. Work towards decolonising linguistics is a small but critical part of moving forward.

Linguistics as a discipline provides us with concepts, methods, and resources to support our understanding of what language is, how it works and how people can make it work for themselves. Since my career has focussed mainly on descriptive and documentary work in Indigenous and marginalised communities I have been particularly concerned with how I can make linguistics work for speakers of marginalised languages. This has never been as simple
as I have hoped. I am perpetually an outsider, caught in conundrums about sharing power by sharing knowledge and skills, working against the clock to satisfy the needs of the academy in relation to research productivity at the very same time as recognising that defraying disciplinary power requires other agendas and timescales to lead. Decolonising linguistics changes the relationship I have with my discipline. Rather than somehow bearing responsibility for making linguistics work for others, it becomes a set of resources we can share. I no longer need to promote or defend its assumptions and methods. At different times, responding to different questions or problems, we have made use of many methods and invoked a range of assumptions. As a team, we have recognised that we need all of what linguistics has to offer to do this work.

Decolonising linguistics involves identity work for everyone involved. Putting down the burden of being the expert outsider has also allowed me to accept the generosity of spirit displayed by the people I have worked with. They have tolerated my lack of cultural competency, a much larger liability in the process of language work than is sometimes acknowledged. They have welcomed me and welcomed me back again as I have moved between one version of my life (in the field) and another (at home). They have witnessed my clumsiness and exhaustion and still chosen to take me seriously. Because of this acceptance, I have been able to work closely with some extraordinary people in safe spaces we have made together, for each other. I would not trade my time in these spaces for the world. They have been transformative for me and, I think for others I have shared them with. Through the materials we created together we have also had an impact on the wider world. Decolonising linguistics holds the seeds of these types of relationships for others who might want them. Healing is something we all can use.

2.1.2 The Decolonising Purposes of Language Revitalisation

It is worth briefly reviewing some aspects of why decolonisation is needed in linguistics and language work especially in the context of language revitalisation. The traumatic history of colonisation, or invasion and its aftermath, in Australia is well documented elsewhere (see for example the comparative account in Cassidy [2003], Pascoe [2007] for an account of the war in southwest Victoria, or Reynolds [1998] for an exposure of settler clarity about the atrocities they were engaged in). The decimation of languages is an inextricable part of this, achieved by policy and punitive practices in some of the missions and other institutions that Aboriginal people were forced into, by separating people from their families and Countries and relocating different peoples together in missions, and by massacres and other means of drastically reducing the populations of people from particular language
groups. This is the starting point for language revitalisation. This is why it is far from being purely a linguistic exercise. In order to set up the context of language revitalisation work in the present, we need to look at some of the goals and intentions of this work. This will then provide the ground for understanding its processes, pathways, and content.

One of the challenges of talking about the practice of linguistics as a discipline is the idea that linguistics is a scientific pursuit and therefore free of political values (see for example Ladefoged, 1992). A conceptual framework that positions individual linguists as only being objective observers in our day-to-day professional practice belies the fact that we are also agents in a political context (Hale, 2001). As a consequence, our training rarely prepares us for engagement with political issues in the communities where we later work and often has the effect of making these aspects of language and language work less visible to us than they are to others. Furthermore, when Indigenous people internationally seek to acquire the skills and knowledge held within the discipline, they may challenge the view that only precolonial practices are authentic. As Rosborough puts it:

*Tools from the field of linguistics can support our work; however, some are hesitant to use them. It is not uncommon to hear, for example, ‘Our culture is built on oral traditions, and we did not use reading and writing to learn our language in the past’ to dismiss the use of linguistic tools and support the exclusive use of immersion or other approaches. I liken this to . . . refusing to use a sewing machine to stitch a button blanket. Like the apron made from trade materials that functions effectively as a Kwakwaka‘wakw symbol of rank and status . . . we can construct our language work with a variety of materials that are available to us, and it can still be our work, our way that we use to meet our objective.*

*(Rosborough, 2012, p. 239)*

Through the Meeting Point project, we were able to explore the ways in which language revitalisation practitioners understood their work. In the interviews that we carried out at the start of our project (see Section 1.4.1), one of the things that shone through was the power of language revitalisation work to reconnect people to culture, to family, and to Country. In the context of Aboriginal Australia, these potentials are inevitably also understood to be political in nature. As Jeanie Bell says in the preface to the book published out of that early work:

*The stories contained in these ‘yarning’ conversations demonstrate the strength and resilience of the Land and the spiritual Ancestors, who give us guidance and direction, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, to working on and with the revitalisation and maintenance of our traditional languages. . . . doing Language revival is defending our sovereignty, and as fellow rebels, we are exercising our right to retain*
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and use our traditional custodianship and ownership of our Language, our Culture and our Land.

Jeanie Bell (Couzens et al., 2014, pp. 1–2)

Most of the people we interviewed made explicit statements about the social or political intentions that motivated their work. These statements were consistently focussed on connections between language and identity and between language and healing.

So Language is a very powerful thing. And I think the sooner Aboriginal people across Australia understand the powerfulness of their own language, they'll understand that their life will become better.

David Tournier (Couzens et al., 2014, pp. 69–70)

The significance of these claims is supported by research that shows language knowledge to be protective in relation to a range of indicators for health and well-being. For example, an Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) report noted that:

In 2008, 47% of young people living in remote areas (10,700) spoke an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language and 53% (12,300 people) did not speak an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language (including 20% who only spoke a few words).

According to the 2008 NATSISS [National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (ABS, 2008)], young people living in remote areas who spoke an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language were less likely than those who did not to:

• report binge drinking in the previous fortnight (18% and 34% respectively)
• report that they had used illicit substances in the past 12 months (16% and 26% respectively)
• have been a victim of physical or threatened violence in the last 12 months (25% and 37% respectively).

(ABS, 2011)

Similar results have been found in Canada, where Hallett, Chandler, and Lalonde (2007) demonstrated that language use is a strong predictor of social-psychological well-being, with youth suicide rates drastically reduced in communities where a majority of people are able to conduct a conversation in their traditional language. This ability is relatively rare in language revitalisation situations, so that different measures of the positive effects of access to language are needed: for example, the response to language teaching in schools. But the NATSISS data (ABS, 2008) also noted that there was a bias against access to language learning activities in non-remote areas,
which are more likely to be areas where language is in revitalisation mode: 12% of people in non-remote areas have access to language learning, as opposed to 33% in remote areas.

We consider that it is important not to stray too far from these perspectives as we think, write, and talk about our research. The work of language revitalisation has social and political foundations that emerge from the needs of individuals and families to find healthier and safer ways of living by restoring culture to the community. At the same time, foregrounding the social, political, and spiritual contexts of language revitalisation may be deeply troubling to the goals of descriptive, typological, historical, or theoretical linguistics because concerns relating to the legacy of colonisation fall well outside of the range of relevant data identified in these areas.

Both linguists and language revitalisation practitioners may struggle to find rapprochement between their respective epistemologies (Wilkins, 1992, 2000; Gerdts, 2010). The cost of imposing linguistic disciplinary perspectives on language revitalisation practitioners and the communities in which they work is potentially quite significant. We recognise, for example, the incidence discussed in Rice (2006), of language materials prepared by linguists giving people the impression that the language is ‘very hard, too hard for children to learn’ (p. 149). Rice (2006) also highlights the barrier sometimes posed by the goal of standardised orthography in making dictionaries. At the very least, an assumption of these linguistics-oriented perspectives can be experienced as another enactment of the expression of power by self-defined expert outsiders that has characterised so much of Indigenous-settler relations in the past two centuries (Nakata, 2008). In practice, avoiding this pattern of interaction is difficult. For example, the systems currently in place for assigning funding and the means by which Aboriginal people and others can access education and attain the status of experts are skewed in ways that devalue Indigenous perspectives (Collins, 1992; Rigney, 2001; Smith, 1999; Warner, 2005). The generally agreed goal of documenting endangered languages as thoroughly as possible can and sometimes does cut across language communities’ perspectives of what may be recorded, at particular times, or at all (Rice, 2012; Stebbins & Planigale, 2009).

The language that you have that you were given, the language that you know it has to be kept within your families or within your mob. Alright. Your words are easy to identify, and things like we did, and different things that meant this, or that. But that’s only as a common thing spoken. When you go into the deepest Language—nope, it’s not for sale at any price.

Uncle Albert Mullett (Couzens et al., 2014, p. 216)

A useful way of thinking about the potential for linguistics knowledge to be unwittingly combined with power differentials is the work of a number of people on the relationship between description in linguistics, which is
presented as being *norm observing*, and prescription in linguistics, which is treated as *norm enforcing* (see especially Cameron, 2012; also Milroy, 1992; Taylor, 1990; Harris, 1980, 1981).

The fundamental aim of descriptive linguistics is to identify the rules that shape language, as opposed to making them. Descriptive practices within linguistics are associated with the production of *norm observing* statements that perhaps reach their most comprehensive expression in the descriptive grammar—a document that describes observed rules for using a particular language.

Prescription in linguistics, on the other hand, involves *norm enforcing* statements, ideas about what ‘proper’ language ‘should’ be like. In public debates about major standard languages, linguists tend to align themselves against more conservative voices, for example, by arguing that non-standard varieties of English are not lazy or sloppy and should not be criticised as such. Cameron notes that even here, ideologies are at play (2012, p. 4):

*The ‘folk’ version [of prescriptivism] valorises some unspecified quality of ‘perfection’, and advocates to protect it, while the ‘expert’ version valorises what linguists regard as ‘natural’—variability—and therefore advocates leaving languages alone . . . linguists and non-linguists each defend what they consider to be the natural order of things.*

In the context of language revitalisation where the main sources are not speakers but archival records, the inverse positions are sometimes held. Linguists may view a regularised reconstruction as the more valid form of the language, while language revitalisation practitioners may be more comfortable with a wider range of variation. For example, some groups are open to incorporating sources that record speakers from outside their language group. As Cameron shows in this quote, there are norm enforcing statements being made on both sides. Both the promotion of conservatism and the defence of variation are positions founded on social values.

What can then happen is that linguists working to assist a language community to revitalise their language take the norms they have observed, usually in an analysis of historical records of the language, as the form of language to be enforced without recognising or acknowledging that this is what is happening. Here Cameron (2012) identifies a double standard in which linguists allow themselves by virtue of their disciplinary expertise the right (and hence the power) to make choices for language, rather than, for example, providing the results of historical forms of a language to a community in a form that allows for their inclusion in community decision-making processes about their languages.

*[A]pparently it is other people’s ‘prescriptivism’ that linguists find deplorable; their own expert prescriptions should be accorded a different status . . . both prescriptivism and anti-prescriptivism invoke certain*
norms and circulate particular notions about how language should work . . . ‘description’ and ‘prescription’ turn out to be aspects of a single (and normative) activity: a struggle to control language by defining its nature.

(Cameron, 2012, p. 8)

As Vicki discusses in Section 7.2, decisions about language development can include considerably more input than analysis of historical records. The identity of the person who decides how the language is to be developed matters, as do the cultural frameworks that support the implementation of decisions. There can be no more profound a subversion of the decolonising agenda of language revitalisation than the efforts of linguists from outside the community to impose their vision of a revitalised language on people hoping to reclaim lost knowledge and reassert broken authority over their own cultural affairs.

Show me grammatical way, give us those skills—but give us a choice.
I might choose the other way. Whereas some linguists go, ‘Oh no, that’s not grammatically correct. You can’t print that book.’

Lynnette Solomon-Dent (Couzens et al., 2014, pp. 178–179)

Given the history of the discipline and the training we have received and continue to offer, it should be no surprise that these are challenging issues or that we slip very easily from observing norms into enforcing norms.

Concern with a shift towards professional practices that support decolonising work is found in a range of fields connected to improving the well-being of marginalised groups. In Australia, a 1997 report from the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families described the need for a national response to the Stolen Generations that called for Reconciliation based on a process of listening to the stories of Indigenous Australians. Stolen Generations refers to a longstanding practice in Australia of removing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families that has critically damaged the fabrics of these communities. Since the release of the report, thinking and discussion relating to Reconciliation have continued to percolate through a range of disciplines. In the context of primary health, Jackson Pulver and Fitzpatrick (2004) identify four human rights principles of engagement that support reconciliation:

- no discrimination,
- progressive realisation,
- effective participation, and
- effective remedies.

These four points resonate with our own work, in which we can understand no discrimination in terms of the rights to direct one’s own language work...
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regardless of difference from the positions of another paradigm. Progressive realisation supports our view that we are travelling towards a place where collaborative work on an equal basis is possible, rather than trying to behave as if we were there already. We theorise the need for effective participation both on ethical grounds and for purposes of integrity of the research, and we seek effective remedies in terms of a decolonising methodology targeted to recognising and working with paradigms which are situated outside of linguistics but are crucial to Aboriginal people’s views and practices of language revitalisation.

A decolonising linguistics is centred in the aspirations and priorities of specific language communities or their representatives. In the context of language revitalisation, decolonising linguistics requires us to think deeply about the nature of language as it is being constructed by the people of those language communities (see Section 3.3.1). In response to the requirements of participants, it provides access to a range of analytical and theoretical tools developed in the discipline in support of their work, and opens its doors to new developments initiated by their use in language communities. It recognises that the structures and systems around language and related areas, such as education, tend to reinforce and so perpetuate uneven relations of power (Battiste, 2008; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2008; Weenie, 2000), and engages in the reconfiguration of power relations active within its own frameworks (see also hooks, 1994 for an extensive and heartening account of her reversal of this condition in her own classrooms). It assumes that there is value in the many forms of language-in-use and emerging within Aboriginal or minority language communities and looks for and/or builds connections between this activity and possibilities for linguistic research as a means of understanding new or little studied linguistic phenomena.

2.2 Antecedents

To date progress towards decolonising linguistics has coalesced around two streams of thought. One is centred on the how of research: concerned with participatory research, promoted for reasons of ethics, self-determination, on-the-job training of co-researchers, as a way of giving back to the communities being researched, or of handing over some of the control associated with research. The other focusses on the what of research, exploring the contents and methods of research and how they are determined, ensuring that the research is of use to the communities being researched, and that it is centred on what they see as important to study. Both strands are important to our work. Although we feel we have made more contributions to the ‘what’ of research, the principle of participatory research has been crucial to the practical undertaking of this project and to the rigour and validity of the research itself.
2.2.1 Research Processes

While our own research is based in the eastern states of Australia, there are similar research teams in many parts of the world. These research teams are embedded in wider communities of language revitalisation practitioners, and are inherently situated within the legacies of colonisation. Because of this, such teams are at the same time cross-cultural, and inheritors of a common culture. Willing or not, they represent the interface between colonising and colonised peoples (McCaslin & Breton, 2008). One response to this inevitable positioning is to actively participate in building pathways to understanding, and ultimately, recovering from, this legacy.

The ‘how’ of research has come under considerable scrutiny in the last 30 years or so—though as Rice (2006) notes, these discussions have been more weighted to ethics in relation to endangered languages than to ‘individuals, communities and knowledge systems’ (p. 123). In Rice’s exploration of fieldwork ethics (e.g. 2006, 2009, 2010, 2012), she focusses specifically on the ways in which power and priorities are balanced. She notes that growing awareness in this area responds to demands from Aboriginal communities, citing Battiste and Henderson (2000) who argue that:

_Ethical research systems and practices should enable Indigenous nations, people, and communities to exercise control over information related to their knowledge and heritage and to themselves. These projects should be managed jointly with Indigenous peoples, and the communities being studied should benefit from training and employment opportunities generated by the research. Above all, it is vital that Indigenous peoples have direct input into developing and defining research practices and projects related to them. To act otherwise is to repeat that familiar pattern of decisions being made for Indigenous people by those who presume to know what is best for them._

_(Battiste & Henderson, 2000, p. 132)_

For a language revitalisation project, the key participants are language revitalisation practitioners and the people connected to their work. This includes Elders from the community, adults and children from the community, other people who live in the area and become participants in or an audience for language activities, and supporters of the process including linguists, and teachers and other school staff, particularly school principals. We recognise that there also continue to be research projects initiated and/or strongly supported from within the academy, especially in relation to major research grants and/or graduate student work, which increasingly address languages undergoing or in need of revitalisation. Nonetheless, in our view, the work of language revitalisation per se for Aboriginal and possibly other minority groups, of necessity belongs to its heritage community. This is because language revitalisation is at
least as much an act of identity as it is a linguistic process. From this perspective, it is literally not possible for a collaborating linguist to be the agent of language revitalisation. As a community linguist, for example, Kris can support people with as high a level of involvement as the community or Kris can tolerate, but it remains their language and Kris’s support can be no more than advice, from whatever paradigms are included in the shaping of that advice.

This raises an important question for the Meeting Point project: since we were looking for ways to support language revitalisation in practice, how can outsiders such as linguists from outside the community help? In some senses our professional training in a specific area (as linguists, teachers, or artists) would seem to clearly indicate the types of expertise that we can offer. However, the question is not so much about the contents of our (potential) contribution but about the ways in which it is conducted. Topics around the negotiation of roles as part of working effectively with communities have been a fertile area in linguistics recently (see Bowern & Warner, 2015; Dobrin, 2008; Dwyer, 2010; Franchetto, 2010; Guérin & Lacrampe, 2010; Hinton, 2010; Rice, 2009, 2010; Speas, 2009; Stebbins, 2012; and Whaley, 2011, among others). Stebbins (2014, p. 296) reflects on the difficulties that arise when linguists continue to maintain established linguistic ideologies while seeking to work in partnership with activist communities and individual language revitalisation practitioners. Conflicting covert goals can result from deciding to work for decolonisation without recognising the need for the assumptions informing the work to also change.

Jackson Pulver and Fitzpatrick (2004) argue that political and human rights are the core of an answer to questions of this sort:

*The ‘how’ involves protocols that are based on fundamental human rights. . . . For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, these basic human rights are indissolubly linked to the right to self-determination and the right to development.*

*(p. 193)*

For Vicki, the answer is: the linguist needs to bring ‘the toolbox’. Outside experts have the responsibility of bringing in different knowledge and making it available to people so that they can make their own informed decisions about whether and how that knowledge may be used. As explained above, the process of decolonisation means we do not know yet how this can happen—in fact, there is not yet a way for it to happen adequately. At the stage of postcolonialism that we are in, there will be many points at which attempts to be ethical or, going further, to decolonise the space, will result in overbalancing in one or another direction. Again, what we are trying to do is get to this crucial place where it is possible for community direction to occur, with knowledge and integrity of process. One thing we do know—and this will be a major theme throughout this book—is that in all of this process relationships are crucial.
Eira (2007) describes how the power structures that created the conditions for language endangerment developed through the process of colonisation. In this article they argue that these structures cannot be used to establish a constructive response to this issue (see also Hill, 2002 and Meek, 2011). Crucial to this argument is the understanding that language revitalisation is very largely a reclamation of the right to knowledge—of a form of sovereignty, in the sense of authority over one’s own business. A practice of linguistics which relies on the linguist to ensure the language is right therefore functions as a maintenance of the power imbalance which resulted in the languages being lost to full community knowledge in the first place.

The languages of Australia have been stolen, in the sense that the right and capacity to maintain the knowledge was removed from the communities. . . . The task of the linguist, then, is to act as a channel for ensuring that this stolen knowledge and authority flows back to the communities. If we continue to maintain ourselves as the authorities, the keepers of knowledge, then we haven’t ‘returned’ anything.

(Eira, 2007, pp. 83–84)

A highly influential contribution to the field of collaborative research in the early 1990s was Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton, and Richardson (1993), who discussed research practice in terms of ‘issues of power and method’. In this work, they identified and interrogated three successive predominant frameworks of positioning for the researcher in relation to the researched, which they labelled Ethics, Advocacy, and Empowerment. Developments in fieldwork practice (see for example Bowern, 2008) and collaborative research as well as a wider range of contributors to the discussion highlight the need for further advancement of these models. As discussed in Eira, 2007, all of these frameworks stop at the point of holding the researcher in the position of power. Even the empowerment model ‘relies on the view that I have both knowledge and power and can therefore elect to give some to someone else’ (p. 83). The essential three-stage history of these frameworks has been discussed at length in Rice (2006), who expands them in reference to related significant contributions, especially Samarin (1967) and Kibrik (1977) (Ethics), Sutton and Walsh (1979) (Advocacy), and American Anthropological Association (1998) (Empowerment) (but see Rice, 2012 for more up-to-date discussion of the AAA’s Code of Ethics statement as at 2009, as well as the still more recent statement AAA, 2012).

In the discussion below we first return briefly to the three frameworks outlined in Cameron et al. (1993), then begin to explore the possibilities for collaborative work beyond this through the addition of two further possible frameworks: Decolonising linguistics and Self-determination.
Cameron et al. (1993) begin by considering the medical model for ethical research, which will be familiar to university-based researchers required to participate in formal reviews of the ethics of their work. Areas of practice which come into focus in this model can include an assessment of the balance of risks and benefits associated with the research, and clarity around processes to establish the informed consent of participants in the research. This science-focused model for ethics has long come under critique for its inapplicability to the very different research models needed in linguistics. Rice (2006) (referring also to Rieschild, 2003 for an Australian perspective) discusses the objections of linguists working in endangered languages particularly, on the grounds that the guidelines restrict linguistic work while nonetheless allowing for unethical practice, and do not recognise the centrality to linguistic fieldwork of relationships and respect.

When only ethics, in this narrow sense, are in focus, the model is non-participatory, the research being conducted by the researcher on the researched. In language revitalisation, however, all language workers and many language learners are also researchers (see also Section 2.3). The researchers as defined in the ethics model are also assumed to be the authors of any research reports. In many forms of social science research this practice has the effect of making the contribution of ‘those researched’ invisible. It also means that the researchers control how participants are portrayed in their findings, which has implications for decolonising linguistics in the ways in which people are defined in relationship to one another.

In Australia, the limitations of ethical frameworks for work amongst Aboriginal people has resulted in the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) producing the *Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research* (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2003). This document provides a way of expanding the basic ethics concepts in the more general National Statement (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007), seeking to address the reasons why relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations and the wider research community continue to be challenged by a sense of mistrust. The guide identifies values for research in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in six areas:

- Spirit and Integrity,
- Reciprocity,
- Respect,
- Equality,
- Survival and Protection,
- Responsibility.
Advocacy as a Framework for Language Research

The Advocacy framework, characterised by Cameron et al. (1993) as both ‘on’ and ‘for’ the participants, became especially prominent in Australian linguistics from the 1990s, as linguists took on the tasks of providing expert advice to the courts on Native Title. This practice followed the first successful Native Title case, in which the Meriam people, headed by Eddie Mabo, David Passi, and James Rice, won recognised title to their land in 1992.

While the advocacy framework represents a significant shift away from the researcher-focussed model associated with the ethics-based framework, it perpetuates the position of the researcher as the one with voice and authority.

No need to hear your voice, when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk.

(hooks, 1990, p. 343)

Empowerment as a Framework for Language Research

Cameron et al. (1993) outlined an Empowerment framework for research that is ‘on’ and ‘for’ and also ‘with’ participants, in order to address the issues that they identified in relation to the Advocacy framework. It is a testament to the tenacity of the researcher-researched paradigm that this model continues to assume a researcher in a position of power, choosing to allow contributions from the researched. The model does not assume that researchers will of necessity work collaboratively with people who are themselves authorities in their language and culture, or that there will be negotiations among equals, or that communities can initiate and carry out research, possibly choosing to offer a role to a linguist of working for them.

Decolonising Linguistics as a Framework for Language Research

Decolonising linguistics responds specifically to language situations which result from the devastations of colonisation. The concept of a postcolonial context recognises the fact that the legacies of a colonisation era do not simply disappear. They continue to have an impact on how the different groups as defined by colonisation are perceived and treated, and create differentials in the opportunities that are available to each. They become embedded in the ways of being and interacting of an entire society, and they continue to pervade successive generations of descendants of coloniser,
of colonised, and those who descend from both. This last group, which can be a sizeable proportion of the population, may in some ways mirror the postcolonial situation at societal level—it is a combination of different lineages—cultural, genetic, linguistic—of unequal power distribution, unreconciled within itself. In his famous essay, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986) explains how language and culture are products of each other and of the day-to-day history of people interacting continuously over time and repeatedly laying down ways of being and of viewing themselves and the world. He then shows incisively why this means that a colonial language positions a colonised people outside of themselves, looking down on themselves from the self-superior viewpoint of the colonising culture. It is this colonisation of the mind that has seeped into people’s being. While the gaze of Ngũgĩ is turned to those who are colonised, we would argue that the minds of everyone in a postcolonial situation are formed in this colonising framework. Recognising, learning about, and unlearning this framework is the work of decolonisation—as so eloquently phrased by Battiste and Henderson: ‘to create ethical behaviour in a knowledge system contaminated by colonialism and racism’ (Battiste & Henderson, 2000, cited in Rice, 2006, pp. 129–130). In Section 2.2.2, we see explore how a decolonising agenda also transforms the content of research.

In a decolonising linguistics practice, the community must be the driver and driving interest of the research and language projects. Taking this stance positions us very differently from, for example, Crippen and Robinson’s (2013) ‘Lone wolf’ model, in which they argue for the importance of non-collaborative work in the interests of practicality and research goals (see Bowern and Warner (2015) for a comprehensive critique of this article). There is an element of gift on the part of the collaborating researcher, but this is different from altruism, as the giving benefits all. In Couzens and Eira (2014) we discuss the research principle of wangan ngootyoong (in Keerray Woorroong), or ‘respect’, which Vicki draws from the Ngangikurungkurr principle of dadirri, usually translated as ‘deep listening’, and brought to public attention through an essay by MiriamRose Ungunmerr (Ungunmerr-Baumann, n.d.). This principle has drawn considerable attention in research methodologies developed by Aboriginal people, one notable example being Judy Atkinson’s (2002) construction of a psychology research model to address transgenerational trauma in Aboriginal families.

Rosborough (2012) uses the k’angextola ‘button blanket’, an important part of Kwakwaka’wakw regalia, to direct her research methodology and structure the narrative of her doctoral thesis. This has parallels with Vicki’s understanding of the possum skin cloak, described in Chapter 7. Both carry ancient connections with their respective researcher’s heritage, both are rich in metaphor and history, and both tell new stories of colonisation and decolonisation in the present. These deep cultural metaphors relocate the
ground of research, assisting researchers to maintain a decolonising perspec-
tive throughout what they/we do and write.

**Self-Determination as a Framework for Language Research**

As Vicki notes, the goal of language research is to have community people
doing the work, first and foremost. In a Self-determination model, Abor-
ginal people would not need others because we would have all the skills
we need internally; by us and for us. Self-determined research is part and
parcel of the wider self-determination goal, as evidenced for example in a
series of workshops on research ‘in Koori hands’ (VicHealth Koori Health
Research and Community Development Unit, 2000; Onemda VicHealth
Koori Health Unit, 2008). We would still have the option of bringing in
people from outside, when we choose to, facing the world on equal terms
and engaging from a position of equality. But the need to research the other
must be left behind.

The Meeting Point project is a ripple on the way to a fully realised self-
determination, which is meeting on a base of real equality. For that to hap-
pen, both sides have to decolonise themselves. The Meeting Point project
acknowledges the constraints that we are still working with, the colonising
mind which is constraining our capacities. The research team are trying to
bring in a philosophical basis of a decolonised world, but we are still situated
within the practical restrictions of inequity, where Aboriginal communities
are still in need of the other to support their pathways and non-Aboriginal
researchers are still founded on premises of dominant knowledge types and
means of validating research pathways. It is not easy to let this go. A meet-
ing point in a fully decolonised world will have no barriers to collaboration.

In the discussion in this section we have focussed on the process of
research, on how it is done. As Rice (2006, p. 150) notes, a redistribution
of power will also affect the ‘what’ of research—its content. Priorities for
research content in a self-determined, decolonising methodology are dis-
cussed thoroughly in Smith (1999) (see also Section 2.2.2). In our search
for a decolonising linguistics, we have begun to a build an agenda for the
content of research which respects and foregrounds Aboriginal people’s
views of and priorities for language, as told to us as a team, and as pushed
further ahead by Vicki. This is not fully self-determined research controlled
from within communities. Only one of the research team is Aboriginal, the
other two being academically trained and respectively an immigrant and
a descendant of immigrants. It is this team who interpret what Aboriginal
people have said to us, convert it into research topics and methods, apply
these methods to the topics, and offer it back to Aboriginal communities, to
linguists, and others. We hope, however, that we have made some headway
to a decolonising research—in the responsiveness of its content, and in a
research process built on relationships and reflection.
2.2.2 Research Content

Linda Tuhiwai Smith, in her groundbreaking book *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999), sets out a five-part agenda for Indigenous research (p. 117), in brief:

- Self-determination, which sits at the centre of Smith’s framework;
- Healing, at all levels including physical, spiritual, psychological and collective healing, and restoration;
- Mobilisation, from local to global. In Smith’s model, this is linked to Healing by *survival, recovery, and development*;
- Transformation, mirroring Healing in many levels of operation;

and finally

- Decolonization—again, at multiple levels of the psychological, political, social, and spiritual.

Smith’s comprehensive work is centred primarily in a premise of self-determined research, and is not focussed on a particular discipline. It offers much for a collaborative linguistics research agenda moving towards decolonisation. We discussed Self-determination in research as a primary goal above. The motivation of Healing is prominent in the conversation of many Aboriginal people we have talked with about Language. We have not addressed Mobilisation directly in our project, though this is certainly consistent with the recognition of revitalising language as a political act. In Chapter 8 we return to Transformation as an intrinsic element of much language revitalisation work, which is mirrored in the possibilities for a decolonised linguistics.

In relation to the broader goals of decolonisation, a field of work associated with language planning in postcolonial contexts has emerged. Jaffe (2006) provides an overview of the work and key issues in this area, which focuses on ‘redressing linguistic inequality and cultural oppression in the public sphere . . . by replacing all or part of the colonial language’s public functions with one or more local, Indigenous, or minority languages’ (Jaffe, 2006, p. 185–186).

Our own work has strong implications for language planning, in that two of the key defining characteristics we identify for languages of revitalisation—that the languages are emergent and understood holistically—have substantial effects on how language planning needs to be approached. We discuss this further in Chapters 6 and 8. The primary focus of our research, however, relates to including within the linguistic research the ‘radical forms of resistance’ described by Jaffe:

*Truly radical linguistic decolonization projects would thus have to challenge the fundamental premises of dominant linguistic and cultural ideologies and practices. These radical forms of resistance involve the legitimation of plural or hybrid linguistic forms, practices, and identities, including the appropriation and reworking of colonial languages.*

( Jaffe, 2006, p. 186)
We have attempted to develop a new methodology for describing languages which legitimises ‘hybrid linguistic forms, practices, and identities’ and ‘the appropriation and reworking of colonial languages’ (Jaffe, 2006, p. 186). The principle of participatory research is an essential component of how this can be done, making three core principles in all (see Section 4.1).

In Rice’s (2006) discussion of ‘responsibility to intellectual traditions’ (p. 145ff), she concludes that

field linguists have ethical responsibilities not only to individuals and communities, but also to knowledge systems. Collaborative working arrangements are not truly collaborative if the linguist still controls the content and framework of the research, and the form in which it appears. A reexamination of what the study of linguistics is all about is not necessarily easy, but under the best of circumstances it will ultimately lead to deeper insights into language, combining different intellectual traditions. It is this opening of the mind that, in the end, makes this type of research truly exciting and empowering for all.

(Rice, 2006, pp. 149–150)

The reasons why transformation of linguistic research models is a necessary start from ethics, and continue through practical concerns to the need for research rigour. As Meek (2014) explains, not only are the methods and the goals transformed by decolonisation but also measures of success. The definition of and criteria for success in language revitalisation is a much-discussed topic (see for example Walsh, 2010; Stiles, 1997; Grenoble & Whaley, 2006; Hinton, 2015; Bentahila & Davies, 1993). Tsunoda (2006) indicates broadly that whether a program

is considered a success or not depends on the definition of language revitalization and the aim of that particular program. Also, a given program may be considered a success if it brings concomitant benefits to the community, e.g. enhancement of the sense of self-esteem and identity, and the community members’ involvement in the education process.

(Tsunoda, 2006, p. 214)

While we do not attempt a detailed discussion of this question in this book (but see also Section 3.5.1), we can appreciate and support the relativism of Tsunoda’s considerations.

Language revitalisation research demands that the existing tools or methods of linguistics, which describe and categorise language and linguistic behaviours, are repurposed for new goals. The reclamation of ancient languages in the present-day requires researchers to use linguistic tools developed for models of language that assume stability at some level (synchronic perspectives) in the context of long-term change (diachronic perspectives) to describe languages which are inherently in-process, and so inaccessible outside of the creative reclamation and redevelopment which is necessary
in the immediate for each and every language output. For this reason, also, language revitalisation research requires relationships in which the researchers are followers rather than leaders.

2.3 Decolonising Writing: Visibility and Voice in the Meeting Point Project

The work discussed in Section 2.2 gives an indication of the level of awareness and interest in furthering the development of pathways to decolonise linguistics as well as associated disciplines. By way of a case study, we now turn to a reflective discussion of research writing, which we have identified experientially as key site for decolonising research.

The learning in our research has been made possible by a series of relationships—a fundamental condition of community research. Our task in turning to writing was to attempt to represent this learning in ways which would honour these many contributors, and reflect the depth of conceptual development we have achieved through relationships and talk, especially within the core research team. In turning to write about our research, we have repeatedly confronted the restrictions imposed on us as researchers from outside. We have been particularly concerned with the issue of voice in the collaborative research space, becoming aware of how a genre-specific academic, authorial voice is called upon to represent ideas which have emerged from the thoughts, pathways, research, and creative work of not only the three of us, but also many others. Multiple authorship is also explored in interesting ways in Jones with Jenkins (2008) and McCaslin and Breton (2008). The data appearing throughout this book was collected and authorised from within six Aboriginal communities and the project was supported by a reference group of senior Aboriginal people and/or by the VACL Board of Management throughout. The findings of the project, particularly the model, developed from the interviews. As described in Chapter 1 (especially Section 1.5), many people have been involved overall, to different extents and with different roles in the project. Their voices were heard through many hours of interviews which, once thematised by Vicki, became the foundation of our theory and methodology. In the remainder of this section we reflect on the challenges we met in attempting to embody these relationships in the writing up. The deeply collaborative and cross-cultural nature of our research is not easy to reflect in a writing context that primarily values academic voices and academic ways of being and knowing.

The interactions and development of our core research team have reflected and been crucial to the collaborative conceptual development of the research. Reciprocity through sharing knowledge has been a key value and action throughout, requiring a foundation of mutual respect, so that from each perspective, we can see the other. We might see, for example, that a typical academic approach suffers from an excess of compartmentalisation, and might wish it to be more open to knowledge in other forms—but it is also vital to recognise the ways of knowing represented by the very specific linguistic tools
developed in this environment, which can be taken on board by Aboriginal people for language revitalisation. As we began to exchange conversation together for outwardly focussed academic writing, we were brought to a new level of understanding language, research, relationships and personal pathways, and their inseparability. How could we integrate these understandings into the voicing of our research writing? How could we respond to the lessons themselves in our own journeys as researchers? Who could have voice, and in what forms? Which aspects of a research journey would be given voice? Are there default answers for these questions, and if so, do we need to interrupt them?

For each of us, learning has been supported by the safe space we have created with and for each other. The personal, spiritual, and intellectual travelling that we have witnessed for each other in the research journey is an immensely valuable and productive component of the work, while at the same time wonderfully ordinary. Within our circle, it is not only permissible, but honoured, to be travelling rather than arrived, to be emotional and spiritual as well as intellectual, to display areas of ignorance and unreconstructed assumptions, as well as moments of insight and ground-breaking innovation. It has been possible within the safety of this space to discuss things which in many contexts may not be raised. For Tonya, this has included pushing the boundaries of the ways we think about the relationship between people and their languages. For Vicki, it has included being able to ask linguistic questions without fearing loss of authority in her language. For Kris, it has included being able to debrief about frustration, loneliness, and uncertainty in the community linguist role. Our prioritisation of relationships has given us the time and space to allow new things to come into view. It allows us to discover and create new conceptual places we could not have foreseen. Within this process, we have been happy with the balance of voicing. The intensive theoretical development we have undertaken, built on trust from experience with each other as we travel, strongly represents all three of us. We find, however, that the momentum of quality, productive research relationships is not enough to ensure that our writing will reflect these foundations.

At the point of writing, we encountered intense difficulties with the norms and expectations of academic writing, and the ways they have been internalised in various ways for each of us. Our difficulties reflect the traditional relationship in linguistics (as in parallel disciplines) between the researcher and the researched. Linguistic research has been in some sense collaborative since fieldwork was invented. Linguistic fieldwork is centrally dependent on, at worst, the compliance of speakers. The typical model of social science research, distinguishing between a discursively central person as researcher, and an Indigenous, marginalised, person as the one researched (Fine, 1994; Jones with Jenkins, 2008; Smith, 1999), reflects the relationships between coloniser and colonised: a legacy also buried deep within the psyches of each of us. Positioning participants cleanly on opposite sides of the research relationship is a norm in linguistics that is proving hard to shift (Himmelmann,
2008; Rice, 2009). When the three of us present at a conference, for example, responses indicate that we appear as two academic researchers and one language consultant.

To be clear, however, Vicki doesn’t want to come across as an academic, even as an equal Black academic. Her identity in this space is Senior Knowledge Holder of Language, and of Possum Cloak Story. We acknowledge that these differences may be read as inequity in the voice. We choose to view our differences through a different lens. The depth of the project is possible because of the differences the three of us bring to it, in a relationship and a team that work. We learn from each other. Vicki has integrated substantial linguistic learning into her thinking and practice through the project; Kris and Tonya find that Vicki’s perspectives perpetually dislodge many uninterrogated assumptions and offer us ways to go much further with an idea than could otherwise have been made.

We have struggled with the requirement of absence in the written text. In the genre of academic writing, the research team are expected to be evident in the text only as recorders and analysers of ‘the (language) data’, while other participants in the research are expected to be present only as a channel for accessing that data (McLaughlin & Sall, 2001). The ideal of the objective, distanced, neutral researcher requires that we make our knowledge contribution without feeling it or living it. But our research is personal, involved, inseparable from who we are and who we are being in the research context.

In our struggle with voice in this research model, we find ourselves entangled in the threads of an incremental discursive shift, with which other researchers have also been struggling (Cannella & Manuelito, 2008; Czaykowska-Higgins, 2009; Wilkins, 2000). Initially, we characterised this shift in terms of addressing the lack of voice for people such as Vicki, as the researcher ‘othered’ in the academy by virtue of being Indigenous, and because of the proudly chosen ways of being, expressing, and understanding the world which Vicki derives from her heritage. Vicki has succeeded in maintaining—and strengthening—the individuality of this voice through the rigours of a Masters degree (Couzens, 2009) and is now completing a PhD with just as much integrity. Even so, our concern was that if we did not actively create a space for Vicki’s writing, we would risk losing this voice in our joint writing. The traditions of academic writing tend to characterise Vicki’s writing as ‘quotes’ from ‘the researched’—especially in sections where Vicki is sole writer. We decided not to homogenise our writing styles, and so edit Vicki’s into a more standard academic mould, ill-developed to express the holism, individuality, and often poetic expression of Vicki’s contribution (see also the discussion in Jones with Jenkins [2008] for exploration of these issues in another research team).

The vital flaw in this approach to the writing was that focussing on ‘making a space for Vicki’s voice’ in fact simply perpetuates a world in which she is the Other—the one who is outside of the norm; the embodiment of the
problem that must be overcome (Probyn & Somerville, 2004). It moves her from invisibility to hypervisibility without unearthing the means to decolonise our writing.

So we came back to the core of our research relationships: to recognise the human and holistic involvement of each one of us, to understand the contribution that all of our life learning allows us to bring, and to learn to write high quality theoretical, emotional, intellectual, personal, analytical, connected material, from this foundation. This required writing development for all of us. It is very different from the compartmentalised, absent part-selves of standard academic writing (Stebbins, 2012), but it is also different from more socially engaged options within linguistics which stand to one side of its technical content. We need it all. Language revitalisation, collaborative relationships, and decolonisation demand the vulnerability of whole people.

We do not claim to have worked through to a solution. It continues to be very difficult to write the partnership we have experienced within our circle of practice (see Probyn and Somerville [2004] for an exploration of some of the discursive challenges). But our writing process is evolving. Rather than starting with the writing, we now start around the lunch table. For this section, Tonya and Vicki talked through what was important to present, and scribbled notes suffused with words chosen by Vicki. Kris wrote the notes up into a paper. We then moved back into lunch table mode—discussing, modifying and adding to each idea over several weeks, until all of us were happy that it said what each of us wants to say. In later writing periods, Kris and Vicki spent days at a time together at Vicki’s place in the country, immersed deeply in talking and writing amidst a hubbub of grandchildren, visitors, dogs, incidents with spiders, and rolling mealtimes.

These writing models are not radical. They are very ordinary, simple—human. So far they have been working for us.

2.4 Conclusions

We close by offering observations about a number of significant components of decolonising linguistics.

We found the relationships within the collaborative research team to be crucial for the integrity, validation, and possibilities of the research, for furthering our progress down pathways of decolonisation, and for actively recognising the value of all aspects of human ways of knowing—intellectual, emotional, spiritual. It is necessary to feel safe in a team relationship to be able to discuss fraught topics honestly. In this context, the deep and broad meanings and processes of language and language revitalisation in communities could be brought back into and enacted within the research team, completing a cycle of deep-level learning and respect for what has been shared with us. We could not do this work without being, in ourselves and in our research, inseparable from history, family, land, spirituality,
sociopolitics, relationships. This then spirals back into a deeper understanding of how these meanings and processes are integral to the language data itself. To research in this way is to operate out of the holism that permeates Aboriginal language revitalisation. It requires a core of intent, purpose and action, at material and metaphysical levels (Dillard, 2008). From this perspective, every thought, spoken word and action has an effect. Holding relationships at the core of the research process is a part of working in wangan ngootyoong ‘respect’, and engenders this principle in other areas of the work.

It is clear that for many different Indigenous groups, the ultimate goal is self-determination. Some groups prefer to work independently even while it is still a struggle to find enough people with enough skills, energy, and time. For others, participatory research is a step along the way. Participatory research is based on the principle of recognising the different skills that people bring and the roles they play in research. It is not driven by the agenda and paradigms of one group or one way of thinking about the topics or about research itself, but creates space for diversity and involvement within the methodological structure of the research.

Going further, participatory research for decolonisation and ultimately self-determination is directed by the goals of Indigenous participants for their language. It responds to community views of authenticity and community processes of validation. In this mode of research, researchers from outside of the community are contributing their skills and energies to recovery from colonisation. Overtly, this is targeted to recovery within the Aboriginal community; in fact, colonisation imprisons everybody.

The legacies of colonisation impact on present-day research relationships (and therefore also the research), whether we pay attention to them or not. The ways that colonisation has determined how people are viewed, valued, and positioned in relation to one another permeates our thinking and our being. Postcolonial people are all on a journey within and through, and hopefully out of these legacies. We hope a pathway of decolonisation will allow us to hear each other. That it will allow Aboriginal people to ‘pick up the steel axe’ without losing their purpose and centre. That it will allow the tools of linguistics to become useable in Aboriginal communities, and allow the holism of Aboriginal language journeys to pervade linguistic research.

Decolonisation inevitably dislodges the norms of who has the right to knowledge, or to claim knowledge. A postcolonial situation is characterised by often invisible maintenance of unbalanced power structures. Those with the power to know have the role of recognising the ways in which we hold this power, and learning to let go.

Aboriginal people have long engaged with the dominant system, reaching out to build understanding in order to be listened to, valued, respected. Conversely, many people are also coming out from the dominant system to ‘sit down with’ Aboriginal communities, on Aboriginal terms and in Aboriginal contexts, such as on Country in meetings with Elders. The problem arises
when this work then has to be translated back into the language and ways of the Western system. Just as with literal translation, this is not always possible, especially where concepts are fundamentally different in a spiritual and philosophical sense. At one end of the spectrum, the focus is on the written mode, and evidence that is factual, concrete, measurable, repeatable. At the other end, the emphasis is on the metaphoric, the intangible, the ephemeral, through modes that include art, dance, song, story. Both content and the means of understanding and expressing it are valued differently from different perspectives. A decolonising research paradigm requires that all involved remain engaged with their humanity. This is where the transformative power of language revitalisation can occur.

Not only the ‘how’ but the ‘what’ of research comes under scrutiny in a linguistics of decolonisation. For language revitalisation, this means appreciating the current forms of language as valid regardless of the adjustments to assumptions about ‘real language’ this may entail. It means embracing fluidity and hybridity in language structures, multiple authenticity systems, holism in the definitions of language. In the community linguist role, every now and then I (Kris) am shocked back into being able to do this by being confronted with the immeasurable importance of language for yet another person. Each time I see it, it allows me to let go of my concerns for my view of ‘authentic’ language. There’s far more here than grammar and phonology.

The writing phase confronts us with the status of collaborative writing in research. The pathway of our thinking about voice and writing signals the (post)colonial context in which we and comparable research teams are situated. We feel that people of our time and place are necessarily, perhaps always, on a journey through unacknowledged and/or internalised racism (Ahmed, 2004; Dreher, 2009). The non-Aboriginal members of this team feel that it is not useful to tell ourselves that ‘we are not racist’ simply because we are opposed to racism, or because we have had access to experiences which have raised our awareness. These have become part of what forms us. At the same time, we recognise Ahmed’s (2004) telling point that such declarations can allow us to exempt ourselves from the charge of racism simply by having recognised it. But we breathe in the invisible discourses of racism every day. This is precisely why the collaborative process is so crucial to unlearning racism—it allows us to deliberately choose to rebalance the formative conceptual environment we are breathing in (McCaslin & Breton, 2008). We cannot do this alone. The legacies of colonisation have two sides. Finding decolonising pathways for one feeds into and supports the decolonising pathways of the other; both pathways build up the spaces of being and working together in equality and appreciation, knowing that we are different, and knowing that we are the same.

As collaborative relationships continue to be a hot topic on the research table, we can only assess where we are in the discussion and what we hope to contribute to its flow. Anything we say now will become simply part of a history of this time of change. In the spirit of this hope, we have aimed
for some transparency in this part of our journey, to support other research teams in their own pathways of collaborative writing and research.

Note

1 We use Reconciliation with a capital R to refer to a specific, long-term movement initiated by the Australian government beginning in 1993 and connected originally with the beginning of formal handing back of portions of Country through Native Title. The foremost idea of the movement was to enter into a period of listening to Aboriginal Australians by immigrant Australians and their descendants, associated with a variety of outcomes including the National Apology by the government in 2008. While the movement has come under criticism by many Aboriginal people, it remains reasonably well known in Australian culture, and many people continue to belong to active Reconciliation working groups.