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Reading for a Multicultural Society

Derek Whitehead
State Library of Victoria

1 INTRODUCTION

In a paper given to the 1985 Multiculturalism and Libraries Conference, Silva Simsova said:

> When I became a refugee I had to leave everything behind. In my little suitcase I took with me a few personal necessities and a volume of poems. ... It was not until much later that I realised that my decision to include a book in my luggage had not entirely been a personal one. As a child I was taught the following lines about the Czech Protestant exiles:

> Nothing did they carry
everything was lost
save the Holy Bible
and the Labyrinth of the World

At the time of learning these lines I had no idea that one day I, too, would only take a book, and that my culture was in fact offering me advice on how to cope.1

And another statement:

> "When people migrate from one country to another they change in many ways. Cultures which migrate with them change also, and people who have brought their culture from one country to another change with that culture. Patterns of reading change as well. People unaccustomed to public library services in their home country discover them in Australia and become avid users. Others, accustomed to developed library services and cheap and plentiful books find Australia to be a desert, with limited library services in their language, and no books."2

The words are from George Papadopoulos's preface to a book called Not Enough to Read..., the report of a study sponsored by the Victorian Ethnic Affairs Commission and carried out in Melbourne in 1988, and with which I was involved. The study is the major study of the reading interests yet conducted in Australia. It had the distinction of being conducted in the languages of the readers. This paper draws much of its inspiration, and some of its information, from that study. If this paper is oriented a little towards libraries, that represents not only my background, but the source of much of our information about reading in Australia’s multicultural society.

The culture of reading is transplanted with people. Sylva Simsova’s experience, and that of millions of other migrants, is that reading provides an anchor, an assurance that not everything is lost. Not only does book culture, literary culture, transplant to a new country, but it is also possible to say that it can grow and develop too.
Sadly however, the evidence is that reading in Australia has grown and developed only in English: for other languages and cultures Australia has been, with few qualifications, a book desert. Australia has paid little attention to the needs and interests of people who wish to read in a language other than English, instead of or, more often, as well as English. There has been little research into or study of the reading needs and interests of Australians who use other languages. In our treatment of libraries, education, government support for creative writing, publishing, literature, we pay no real attention to the linguistic diversity of the book culture which already exists amongst Australians.

About two million Australians read in languages other than English, despite the fact that their reading is largely ignored officially. This paper is concerned mainly with reading in other languages: the limited amount of research on the subject, the extent and nature of reading in other languages, and some reasons why people don't read. Finally, it suggests why reading in other languages is important, and what might be done.

2 RESEARCH AND INVESTIGATION

A rather curious paper given in Newcastle thirty years ago by Ted Flowers and Leslie Bodi gives the flavour of discussion of the subject then. The paper, given by Mr Flowers, tended to look at the English-language needs of German immigrants but the audience discussion, summarised by Leslie Bodi, was firmly oriented to reading in both German and English. Bodi wrote:

> It was surprising to hear how difficult it is in a great migrant-centre like Newcastle to read German books at all. Even the biggest bookshop has only some University textbooks; the German stock of the Public Library is rather poor. Only a big newsagency sells a small selection of German magazines and paper-backs. The Arts Library of Newcastle University College is practically the only place with a larger stock of German books ...

Why was it surprising? And is Newcastle any different now?

Since the early 1970s, there has been a small stream of studies, mainly by librarians, which have touched on reading in their general explorations of library needs and use patterns. Ellis demonstrated the existence of a complex pattern of library use by four migrant groups, characterised by dual use of English and other language materials by most users. Robertson examined the reading amongst a small sample of TAFE students from Vietnam, and uncovered vigorous reading habits, a strong tendency to borrow books from friends and libraries rather than buy them, and complex reading preferences involving three main languages. Whitehead looked at the extent to which library materials were used, and concluded, roughly summarised, that the larger collections in public libraries have much greater use per item than small collections.

These and other library-based studies have in fact uncovered vigorous first-language reading habits by migrants, provided that they have access to books.

Government reports on multiculturalism in the 1970s and 1980s have demonstrated an awesome neglect of reading in other languages. The two most recent reports
suffice to illustrate this. The National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia (1989)\(^7\) does not deal with reading as such. *Don't settle for less* (1986)\(^8\), the report of the Review of Migrant and Multicultural Programs and Services, dealt with “the ethnic and multicultural media” but seemed to skip the print media. It set out the need to preserve the material and written heritage of immigrant groups, and with the need for education to maintain their languages - but not with reading; it dealt cursorily with libraries\(^9\). In terms of social, leisure and recreation activities, debutante balls were covered, but not reading.

It was also a characteristic of much work on language policy that formal education needs dominated, and aspects of self-education and informal education, like reading, were largely ignored. What happened to people after the end of the (proposed) multilingual formal education process, no-one asked. The only report which has given any attention to reading has been Joseph Lo Bianco’s impressive *National policy on languages* (1987)\(^10\).

### 3 WHO READS?: EVIDENCE OF READING IN OTHER LANGUAGES

What are the characteristics of reading by Australians of non-English speaking background? We now know somewhat more than we did last year as a result of new study. *Books: Who Reads Them?* - has for the first time in such a study addressed the reader in another language.\(^11\) The study, by Hans Guldberg, is the first to provide us with some information about the reading, buying and borrowing of books by Australians of non-English-speaking background (NESB). Its treatment is tantalisingly brief.

The reading cultures of minorities in Australia are expressed in a wide range of ways and we can summarise these as:

1. The flourishing ethnic press in Australia, with a combined circulation of over 500,000. It operates as a vigorous means of language maintenance and a source of reading; there is also a small periodical press, and some circulation of overseas magazines. The press is the main source of reading for most people.

2. The public library network, which has about one million members who use a language other than English at home, and only about 700,000 books to serve them.

3. A very narrow range of bookselling; few language groups support specialised bookshops: in Melbourne they exist for Chinese, Greek and Italian speakers only. Sometimes books are sold by other kinds of shops, and there are also general “foreign language” bookshops. But the retail sector is small.

4. The educational and research library network.

5. A very very limited amount of book publishing.

The great substratum of book culture in all countries with relatively free markets is the popular end of the market: the base of the iceberg. It includes the press, mass
market paperbacks, genre fiction, popular magazines, and so on. It circulates through the community through newstands, newsagents, supermarkets, cafes, public libraries, and other outlets. This is the only sector of non-English language reading in Australia with any commercial viability, and the commercially viable part of this market is limited to the ethnic press and some circulation of overseas magazines.

The importance of this is that, lacking the popular substratum, we will also lack the smaller superstructure - vigorous and living creative literature and non-fiction. No matter how well we fund centres for the study of creative writing, we will never make it live when it lacks its popular context.

In this paper, I have already made the assertion that reading, book culture, literary culture - the concepts are confused, overlapping and unstraightforward - not only arrive in Australia in the luggage of the immigrant, but can flourish and grow here. Do they? How much do we know about reading in other languages, and reading by NESB Australians? Who reads and who doesn't? How much do they read? What do they read, and what needs or demand are not met?

We do know, now, quite a lot about reading in other languages, and this paper summarises some of the things we know - from the Guldberg study, from *Not enough to read* ... and from other sources.

### 3.1 A Lower Rate of Reading

We know from Guldberg that Australians in general buy and borrow their reading material in roughly equal proportions. But it is quite clear that for the NESB reader, both the free market and the public sector have failed.

For example, while under 20% of the population as a whole do not buy or borrow books, the proportion for overseas-born Australians of NESB was over a third. Almost half (49%) never bought books, and 41% admitted to never borrowing (or could not remember). Moreover, only 31% had borrowed books in the past month (compared with 39% of third-generation Australians), and 56% in the past year (63%). A total of 34% never bought or borrowed, compared with 14% of third generation Australians. Another 72% said that they never bought Australian books (or didn't know), and 70% never borrowed Australian books.

A gap in the Guldberg study was that it did not deal specifically with reading in languages other than English: neither borrowing, nor buying, nor with bookshops specialising in languages other than English, nor with the retailing of books in other languages in Australia.

The relatively lower level of reading by immigrants from non-English speaking backgrounds has been widely attested. Clyne suggests that “many migrants of the most diverse backgrounds have found that in Australia they had become alienated from reading books in the first language while not being able to carry on the practice in English.” Manton, McKay and Clyne showed that, of a sample from three suburbs in the western area of Melbourne, 68.8% never read books in English and 56.4% never read books in their first language (L1). Only 16.4% read books in English monthly or more frequently, and only 18.4% read books in L1 monthly or more frequently.
The May 1983 language survey showed widely varying levels of reading amongst Australia's language communities. Overall, while 91% of speakers of first languages other than English still used the language socially, only 64% read in it. The proportion varied widely amongst different language groups.15

It is therefore quite clear that amongst Australians of NESB, fewer read, in either English or another language, than the general community. A third never buy or borrow books, half never buy books, and four out of ten never borrow books. Of people with a first language other than English, under two thirds are able to read in that language.

3.2 Libraries are the predominant source of books. It is also clear that people who read in languages other than English are much more heavily dependent on libraries than the population at large. The pattern varies greatly, but amongst the Moonee Valley sample of library users, only 16% also use bookshops, 21% also borrow from friends and relatives, and 39% use more than one library. The pattern does vary greatly: over 40% of Greeks and Turks borrowed from friends; well over a third of Greeks and Poles used bookshops; three quarters of Vietnamese used more than one library; 55% of Italians used only the local public library. For migrant readers in general, however, the library is the main source of books.16

Amongst people who do use libraries, many or most travel to a library outside the area where they live in order to use better collections.17

There seems to be a 10-15% gap in library use amongst NESB Australians; that is, while well over half of Australians regularly use public libraries, this is true, over a number of studies, of about 15% fewer Australians of NESB. What is also noteworthy is that in a small handful of very good library services, people from NESBs have the same level of library membership as the community as a whole: Coburg City Library in Melbourne, for example.18

3.3 Most use books in more than one language. Another clear conclusion from existing survey evidence is that most library users of NESB use books in English as well as books in their first languages. Ellis found that 81% of books borrowed by his large sample of NESB users were in English.19 The reasons for this vary: his sample included many Australian-born users, whose use was predominantly of English-language material. The wide variety in range and quality in the bookstock between English and other-language material must also be a factor, while there are also many types of material which are only available in English.

3.4 New patterns of reading. There is strong evidence that people who did not use libraries or read books in their country of origin, did so in Australia. For example, the Moonee Valley survey demonstrated the use of the library by a large group of older, often retired, Italian people of working class background who would not have had much access to books in Italy. The finding is a significant one, and underlines the importance of book provision.
3.5 **Older people read more.** This is true of both English-language and other-language library users. It may simply reflect their greater leisure, but it probably also reflects the widely-noted return to the first language amongst older people.

3.6 **The Second generation read less.** It is also true that second-generation NESB Australians largely confine their reading to English. It is rare that younger NESB people, born in Australia, read fluently in their first language.

3.7 **Patterns of reading vary widely.** The *Not enough to read* ... study demonstrated clearly that no generalisation can be made about the reading interests and preferences of people who read in languages other than English. The study showed a very wide variety between different language groups in their reading interests. While all groups read fiction, fiction did not enjoy the predominance amongst other groups that it has amongst English-reading public library users. On the other hand, the non-fiction subjects of interest to readers varied greatly, as did the fiction interests. Each group is, in itself, potentially as varied in its reading habits and interests as the ethnic majority.

3.8 **Not enough to read ...** The main comment of respondents to the *Not enough to read* ... survey was, of course, that there was not enough to read. Any study of reading in Australia in languages other than English must inevitably come to this conclusion: reading is limited, by more than any other factor, by lack of material to read.

4 **READING IN OTHER LANGUAGES: WHY NOT?**

Why don't people read in other languages? The reading cultures of immigrant peoples arrive, sometimes flourish, but most often languish. Why?

Some of the reasons are probably clear by now. The main reason is simply one of supply: not enough to read. Michael Clyne has suggested that:

"Scarcity and expense of reading material in [community languages other than English] has denied many people these advantages, and this has most probably reduced cultural and language maintenance."  

The private sector - the main source of books for half of the Australian population - does not have the economies which would permit it to supply the market. The large number of language groups in Australia means that individual markets are small - sufficient only to support the ethnic press, popular magazine sales, and sale of a few books to larger groups. Out of Guldberg's whole sample - Australians of all backgrounds - 8% of all people who said that they never bought books gave language as the reason.

The public sector has also failed, with less adequate reasons. The Guldberg survey dealt with library holdings in some detail. The most startling conclusion, set out in the summary at the beginning, was that people who use languages other than English make up 13% of the population, and have 2% of public library bookstocks.  

Remarkably, 48% of those interviewed leaving a public library hadn't borrowed a book: couldn't they find anything in their own language? Clyne went on to suggest
that "the most important development has been the acquisition of large holdings ... by municipal libraries ..."\(^22\) - but the demand is quite clearly not yet met.

Another reason, frequently suggested, is that reading is not a priority for many immigrants. They are too concerned with making their way in Australia, earning a living, too preoccupied with the day to day problems of life. I am not sure of the degree to which this is true: there is little evidence for it.

It is also true that many people come to Australia from backgrounds where reading is not emphasised, not a part of the culture. Many people are illiterate, or not well educated enough for reading for pleasure or even information is a regular part of their lives. The experience of libraries is that these characteristics are often modified in Australia, and people learn to read regularly. The factor is not an intrinsic one.

It is important to consider the context of writing. Australia provides few opportunities for the publication of creative writing in other languages; few opportunities, even, for translation into other languages or from other languages. Not only is the substratum deficient, but the superstructure is almost entirely missing. Publishing in other languages also lacks the structure of support provided to creative writing in English. I recently checked through a year of the Australian national bibliography for creative writing in other languages, and found only 31 books, fifteen of them in Greek.\(^23\) Ron Harper, in a publisher's contribution to *Writing in multicultural Australia 1984*, said "I believe that people who are writing in languages other than English will have an impossibly small commercial market here for any period that I can forsee."\(^24\)

A final factor is the gradual acculturation of people who come to Australia, the assimilation of their reading to English. Many migrants switch to reading in English as they become more comfortable with it, because books are more widely available.

**5 WHY IS READING IMPORTANT?**

So we are brought in this way to a final question: why bother?

Michael Clyne, speaking at the Directions for Diversity conference, concluded that there was a need to

"...make available CLOTE reading material for all age and social groups for the communication of information, to facilitate cognitive and educational development, and to help readers find their personal and group identity."\(^25\)

In his book, *Multilingual Australia*, he emphasised the advantages of reading in one's first language:\(^26\)

- reinforcement, revitalisation and renewal of the language
- access to structures, vocabulary and concepts not otherwise encountered
- extension of knowledge

Perhaps most important of all, reading is a vehicle for culture and for identity. It is a means of maintaining one's identity in a new place, of coping.

Reading reinforces culture and language, and both multiculturalism and language policy, in the end, will be much poorer without it - if we continue to allow it to atrophy or stunt its development.
6 POLICY DIRECTIONS

Lo Bianco, in his *National policy on languages*, suggested that "The linguistic diversity of Australia has social, cultural and economic potential to offer this country." Much of this diversity is in the variety of the reading culture of Australians.

Governments which are seriously committed to cultural and linguistic pluralism, for all of those social, cultural and economic reasons, must also be as committed to promoting reading in all of the languages of Australians as they are in promoting reading and literacy in English.

Two kinds of policy directions are particularly important, and will contribute most effectively to the enhancement of reading in other languages in Australia. Both address the critical problem: not enough to read.

In the first place, it is essential that existing government policies and programs of all kinds are applied equitably. Such programs include Commonwealth assistance to writers and publishers, which currently provide little or no assistance to people writing in other languages; government funding of school libraries through the state education systems and indirectly through the Commonwealth Government; and the government funding of the public library network. It is critical that these Commonwealth, state and local government programs be administered equitably, and that all languages be funded. At present, the ten or fifteen percent of Australians who wish to read in other languages are not treated equitably at all.

Secondly, there is a clear need for a significant initial boost where services are grossly inequitable. This was recognised by Lo Bianco's National Policy on Languages, which attempted to remedy this situation but was not fully implemented. The Australian Advisory Council on Languages and Multicultural Education (AACLAME) put forward, in its proposals for funding of the National Policy on Languages from 1991-1994, a renewed proposal for Commonwealth funding of multilingual public library services throughout Australia. Such a move would have several valuable outcomes.

1. it would provide a boost to library services which are currently not viable or are unable to retain regular readers because of their small size;

2. it would enhance the equity of public library services;

3. it would provide a basis on which state governments, which are predominantly responsible for public library services, could build in later years; and

4. it would provide a boost to the private sector, and in particular to book supply, its weakest element.

The benefits of implementing the Commonwealth Government's National Policy on Languages as it relates to public libraries are potentially very great. Funding through the Commonwealth's language policy and programs could boost both the inadequate
and inequitable public sector provision of reading in other languages, and at the same time assist the currently unprofitable areas of the private sector.

Anyone with a concern for reading - reading by all Australians - should seek the implementation of this policy.

REFERENCES

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7 Office of Multicultural Affairs, National agenda for a multicultural Australia ... sharing our future. Canberra, AGPS, 1989.

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### Language Use by Age - Persons Aged 15 and Over

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*Statistically not valid.

Table taken from Clyne (1986), p.68.

Ashby and Whitehead, *op.cit.*, p.34.

ibid., pp.27-29.


Ellis, *op.cit.*, p.46.


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Lo Bianco, op.cit., p.15.