

Seminar series: Linguistics, Languages and Cultures

Friday 03 April

Time and place:

3pm to 4.30pm followed by drinks, in The McDonald Room, Menzies Library.

Global English, bilingualism and identity dilemmas

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ABSTRACT

On a visit to the Ministry of Education in Beijing two years ago an official showed me the organisational map related to languages. A friendly and helpful man he took care to make sure I understood how language support was organised in China, given the 2001 law to require 5-10% percent of instructional time in universities be done in a foreign language. *"Here we have Spanish, Japanese, Arabic, French..."* he said. *"See the line, they work to the Director.....over here national minority languages and here...."*. We stopped talking and sipped tea for a moment. *"Thank you that is very interesting"* I said, impressed at the scale and evidence of planning. *"Perhaps I didn't see it but where is English?"* I asked. *"Oh, English. Not foreign language. English for everybody, like a basic skill"* he said.

In his 2006 assessment that approximately ½ of the world's population, some 3 billion people, might soon know or be learning English David Graddol makes a similar observation, that in many societies English has entered this zone of being considered a 'basic skill'. All this represents a profound sociological change in the world. Never in human history has there been a phenomenon like today's English, transcending place and association with an identifiable body of speakers. And yet, as Anna Wierzbicka's *English Meaning and Culture* amply demonstrates, deep inside the grammatical heart beats an 'ethnosyntax' which links epistemic adverbs, phrases and lexical items to culture, place and philosophy and particular people. If English is placeless on Chinese organisation charts it has history, it might no longer reside in one place but that doesn't mean that it is equal, or equally present, in all its places. Whatever semantic predisposing English affords it is put to use in the mouths and writing instruments of many millions of people who have no connection nor any need of any connection with its ethnosyntax.

In this talk I will discuss some issues related to English in the world, with specific reference to identity research we have conducted with Peking University Department of English to explore dilemmas and perhaps propose some new ways to think about languages, place and identity.

Graddol, D. (2006), *English Next*. London: British Council
Wierzbicka, A.(2006), *English, Meaning and Culture*. Oxford University Press.

BIO

Joseph Lo Bianco holds the Chair of Language and Literacy Education at The University of Melbourne and is also Associate Dean (International) Graduate School of Education. He is Honorary Professor in Language Education at the University of Hong Kong.

He wrote Australia's first National Policy on Languages in 1987, the first multilingual national language policy in an English speaking country. He was Director of the National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia between 1989 and 2001. He has been an invited consultant advising on language and literacy planning, bilingualism, integration of indigenous and immigrant children into mainstream schools, anti-racist and multicultural education in many countries including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Ireland, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Thailand, Italy, Vietnam, several Pacific Island nations and Scotland. His recent books include: *Australian Literacies: Informing National Policy on Literacy Education* (with P. Freebody, 2001); *Australian Policy Activism in Language and Literacy* (with R. Wickert, 2001); *Voices from Phnom Penh, Development and Language*, 2002; *Teaching Invisible Culture: Classroom Practice and Theory* (with C. Crozet 2003); and *Language Policy in Australia*, (Council of Europe, 2004) and a Special Issue of the *International Journal Language Policy* entitled *The Emergence of Chinese* (2007). In press are *China and English: Globalisation and Dilemmas of Identity and Language Learning from the Inside*, a volume on Italian and Japanese in Australian schools.