

MEDIA RELEASE

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Book celebrating First Nations languages launched in Cairns

A non-fiction book celebrating First Nations languages has been launched in Cairns.

I saw the dog: how language works was written by CQUniversity Adjunct Professor and highly-regarded linguist, Alexandra Aikhenvald (also known as Sasha), who is based at CQU's Centre for Indigenous Health Equity Research (CIHER).

The book has been many years in the making and Sasha said she was proud to have it officially launched.

"This book is somewhat of a cumulation of my 30-plus years work in linguistics and especially with minority languages of the tropics," Sasha explained.

"I seriously started writing this text in 2017 and finished it in 2019. I was writing other work on linguistics and languages at the same time, as I normally do - working on numerous topics simultaneously.

"So, you can say that it took me a year and half to write it. Or you can say that it took a year and a half plus all my life," she giggled, in reference to a Jewish joke about a fiddle maker.

The book takes the reader from the remote swamplands of Papua New Guinea to the university campuses of North America to illuminate the vital importance of names, the value of being able to say exactly what you mean, what language can tell us about what it means to be human - and what we lose when they disappear forever.

"For many years, I have been giving general lectures and presentations on indigenous languages," Sasha said.

"I have been focusing on how interesting and important these languages are, and what a tragedy it is when a language is lost. I had a vague intention to write all of it up for general public, but always had too many things to do. Then in April 2016, the late John Davey, then a commissioning editor of Profile books, wrote to me with a contract to write a popular book on linguistics. I had known John for many years, he was a commissioning editor at Oxford University Press, Oxford, and was very helpful in publishing my books on linguistics. His offer came as I was getting frantically

ready for a very tiring fieldtrip to a hard-to-reach place in Papua New Guinea, so I almost said 'no'. But I ended up agreeing. The book is in many ways a homage to John Davey.”

Sasha said she hoped the book would first and foremost teach readers the importance of languages.

“I also want readers to learn some of the interesting facts about languages - for instance, how Dyirbal, a First Nations’ language spoken between Cardwell and Tully here in North Queensland, has four genders: feminine, masculine, neuter and ‘edible’ (covering non-protein foods) - a very useful system if you largely depend on the foods of the forest.

“And I want the reader to see the value of language and of languages, and importantly, the tragedy of language loss.”

Born in Russia, Sasha spent time living in Brazil before moving to Australia. She is an accomplished author, having had more than 20 books published, all dealing with linguistics and endangered languages.

“I saw the dog: how language works was a bit of a challenge because it is intended for everyone who is interested in language, that is, for a more general audience than my other scholarly books.”

Now Adjunct Professor at CIHER in Cairns, Sasha said the Centre resonated with many projects in which she was currently engaged, including one on ‘The language of wellbeing’, with a special focus on tropical societies.

“The scholarly environment in CIHER, under the leadership of Professor Adrian Miller, is particularly conducive to working on projects on language, wellbeing, and communication, to the benefit of the communities of North Queensland and colleagues.

“My role at CIHER entails establishing a Language, Culture, and Social and Emotional Wellbeing Research Hub, jointly with Adjunct Professor R. M.W. Dixon - who has a history of over 50 years’ work with local indigenous communities documenting their languages and cultures, and linguistics in general.

“Working towards the documentation and maintenance of original languages and contemporary communication patterns, we aim at improving health and wellbeing communication, and thus ultimately streamlining social, health and spiritual impacts of First Nations health programs and services.

“I also hope to attract new researchers and perhaps PhD students

to CQU and enhance its already flourishing research profile with real community results, with regard to tropical societies across the world (including Amazonia and New Guinea).”

I saw the dog: how language works is available for purchase from Cairns Books, in The Cairns Central, on the corner of McLeod and Spence Streets and online at

www.allenandunwin.com/browse/books/general-books/writing-language/I-Saw-the-Dog-Alexandra-Aikhenvald-9781781257715

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