Indigenous Australian Languages Fact Sheet

Importance of Indigenous languages and placenames

Language is at the core of cultural identity. It links people to their land, it projects history through story and song, it holds the key to kinship systems and to the intricacies of tribal law including spirituality, secret/sacred objects and rites. Language is a major factor in people retaining their cultural identity and many say 'if the Language is strong, then Culture is strong'. (ATSIC 2000)

Language is our soul. (Aunty Rose Fernando, Gamilaroi Elder, 1998)

Indigenous 'multiculturalism' and linguistic diversity

The population of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is extremely diverse in its culture with many different languages spoken. Think of the Kimberly region of Western Australia ... if you travel through the Kimberly with its large Aboriginal population and the diversity of people within this region, it's just like travelling through Europe with its changing cultures and languages.
(Dot West, National Indigenous Media Association of Australia, Boyer Lectures 1993)

Even today, it is all too easy to find highly educated and prominent Australians who speak glibly of 'the Aboriginal language', thereby reducing the indigenous linguistic diversity of this country by a factor of at least 100. And it is all too frequently apparent that lurking behind the linguistic naivete of many other mainstream Australians is the suspicion, staggeringly still abroad after over 200 years of white occupation, that Aboriginal languages must be primitive artefacts, small in vocabulary and extremely limited in expressiveness.
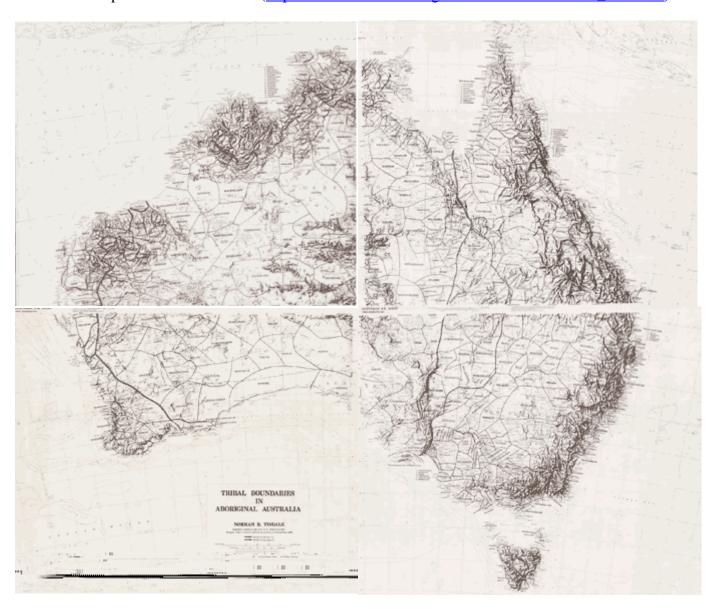(Ian Green, University of Tasmania – Riawunna, Center for Aboriginal Education 1999)

There are many Indigenous cultures in Australia, made up of people from a rich diversity of tribal groups which each speak their own languages and have a variety of cultural beliefs and traditions. Many Australians are unaware of this cultural and linguistic diversity, and often believe that there is simply one Aboriginal culture and language.

It is very difficult to know how many language and traditional social groups existed before European contact, especially in areas affected early on by the forces of colonisation. Many linguists estimate around 250 distinct Indigenous languages were spoken in 1788 (Henderson and Nash 1997; Angelo et al 1998, Walsh 1993); however, it is important to note that views regarding the number of pre-contact languages vary widely. Many of these languages have a number of dialectal variations. A dialect is not

a separate language but it can be very different to other dialects of the same language; for example, Scottish and Jamaican English are vastly different (Walsh 1993).

A good starting place to develop an understanding of the rich diversity of Australian Indigenous culture and language is by examining Norman Tindale's (1974a) map of Aboriginal tribal and language territories at the time of European contact. The South Australian Museum holds the original map in their collections, and their website (http://www.samuseum.sa.gov.au/) explains that in the earlier 20th Century when Tindale begun work on this map it was commonly held that Indigenous people roamed across the land with no fixed territories. Tindale's map refuted this widely held view by providing graphic evidence that no part of Australia was empty land. This map is printed on four sheets labelled Southwest, Northwest, Northeast and Southeast, with map title printed on the Southwest sheet. 'Tribal' names and boundaries are printed in dark blue. States, placenames, major cities and geographical features are printed in brown or blue. Other information includes boundaries of subincision and circumcision rites.

Tindale's Map of Tribal Boundaries (http://www.samuseum.sa.gov.au/tindale/boundaries_intro.htm):

Indigenous people had extensive linguistic expertise because they came in contact with so many dialects and languages. Indigenous individuals could and often still do speak a number of dialects from a number of languages (Walsh 1993). They were often able to speak the native dialect of their father, mother and spouse and would often know the languages of other groups whose land bordered their own territory. There were also a number of different registers and languages used within each tribe or clan for different occasions, for example, sign languages, ceremonial languages and gender specific languages (Alpher 1993).

Not only are there a multitude of Indigenous languages, these languages are complex and diverse, with intricate grammars and extensive vocabularies. There is a common and mistaken belief that Australian languages have limited vocabulary but like any other language they have thousands of items. One factor that contributes to this myth is that many vocabulary items in Australian languages do not correspond directly to concepts expressed in English words; rather, they describe items or express concepts of importance to their own culture (Angelo et al 1998).

Relatedness
The relationship between languages spoken in Tasmania and the mainland is unknown. On the mainland languages are classified into two groups: the Pama-Nyungan and the non-Pama-Nyungan. The Pama-Nyungan group is the largest of the two groups, covering much of Australia and including most Australian languages. The sounds, vocabulary and structure of these languges share similarities that suggest a common ancestor language. The non-Pama-Nyungan languages are located in northern Western Australia and the Northern Territory. The relationship between languages in this group and their connection to the Pama-Nyungan group is not clear (Angelo et al 1998).

Language Loss and Language Shift
Like all cultures, the Indigenous Australian culture has changed and developed over time. However, the colonisation of Australia brought rapid changes to Indigenous Australian society and dramatically affected the ways Indigenous people lived and communicated. Indigenous languages have been badly affected by these sudden changes, and only around a third of the languages that were spoken pre-contact still have speakers (Henderson and Nash 1997). All Indigenous languages with living speakers are considered endangered; the strongest of these languages have approximately 3000 speakers with children still learning the traditional language as their native tongue. Most, however, are highly endangered with only a handful of elderly speakers. The displacement and fragmentation of traditional social and language groups, and language policy that actively discouraged the use of traditional languages in missions and government-run settlements, are some of the key reasons why the language loss has been so dramatic (Walsh 1993).

In areas with large long-term settlement, traditional languages are rarely spoken, while in more remote areas some languages remain. In many areas the older inhabitants may be able to speak several traditional languages and will still converse amongst each other when the opportunity arises; the younger people may well understand, or know fragments of their traditional languages but mostly they will converse in modern Indigenous languages, such as Kriol or Aboriginal English. This type of language shift is wide spread and because most of the communities Indigenous people live in are populated with numerous different traditional social groups, there is a trend for one language, usually an English-based form, to emerge as a lingua franca.

Language revitalisation

> *It is a mistake to dismiss our languages as part of history, and long gone. They're not. They are alive and vibrant. They are in a new phase of growth. They're part of us as the Indigenous people of the land. Our languages are the voice of the land, and we are the carriers of the languages.* (Jeanie Bell, Linguist, Boyer Lectures 1993)

Despite the grim details discussed above, many of these languages are not considered 'dead' or 'extinct' languages, even though they have no living speakers. Instead they are referred to as 'sleeping' or 'dormant' languages. Over the past several decades there have been many efforts by linguistic experts and descendents of speakers to revive the linguistic heritage of Indigenous peoples from around Australia. Many languages which have no living speakers at the start of the revitalisation process have been reconstructed using old tape recordings, materials from existing word lists and manuscripts, and fragments of knowledge from elders' childhood memories.

Today, language revival is a priority for many Indigenous people, and several successful language revival projects are being implemented. For example, the NSW Board of Studies has developed a new syllabus (*Aboriginal Languages K-10 Syllabus*) that enables students to begin to gain proficiency in a local Aboriginal language, develop and understanding of the similarities and differences in the structure of Aboriginal Languages and the relationship between land, language, culture and identity.

One of the most exciting examples of language revitalisation in Australia is that of Kaurna in Adelaide (Amery 2000). Until around 15 years ago, Kaurna language materials recorded by German missionaries in the 19th Century remained in archives unused, and the language unspoken since the 'last speaker' passed on in the 1840s. However, through linguistic reconstruction that began with the writing of six songs in 1990, the language has been revived considerably; programs have been established for a range of learners and the language is beginning to take root within local Indigenous households. The Kaurna language is also being taught to local Indigenous children with the help of the SA Education Department (see Amery 2000 for further information on this project).

Modern Indigenous languages

Like other places in the world that have experienced similar social disruption and colonisation, forms of speech have quickly developed that reflect this contact. These new forms of speech include Creoles and pidgins as well as forms based closely on English, such as, Aboriginal English. Two of the most wide spread Creoles are Torres Strait Broken and Kriol. Kriol is spoken in the far north of the Northern Territory and Western Australia while Torres Strait Broken is spoken in the Torres Strait Islands and some parts of northern Queensland.

Kriol[1]

Kriol is estimated to have upwards of 20,000 speakers and is mostly spoken in the Katherine region of the Northern Territory and the Kimberly region in Western Australia. This language started developing in the early 20th century in the Roper River Mission in the north-eastern Northern Territory when the only language form available for communication amongst the wide variety of Indigenous peoples and the English speaking missionaries was a pidgin. Children began learning this form as their first

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[1] Much of the information in this section is indebted to the discussion of Kriol in Angelo et al 1998:192-199.

language and thus it developed into a full and rich language in order to fulfill their communicative needs.

Many Northern Territory and Western Australia Aborigines regard their variety of Kriol as very different from, if not mutually unintelligible with, that spoken in the neighbouring state, and reject the suggestion that they are the same language. There are also certain differences in both the Western Australian and Northern Territory dialects from region to region, which many speakers are well aware of. In particular, there is a great deal of variation in the vocabulary used in Kriol because the Kriol spoken in different regions is influenced by different languages.

Kriol is generally classified as an English-based Creole; however, it also borrows much from the phonology, lexicon and syntax of traditional languages. A large number of vocabulary items, especially from domains of traditional knowledge, such as local flora and fauna, kinship terms, body parts and (of course) placenames are often borrowed into Kriol.

The sound system used in Kriol is mostly borrowed from traditional Indigenous languages. For example, traditional languages do not recognise the difference between voiced and voiceless consonants as meaningful. Thus Kriol does not use pairs of voiced and voiceless sounds like b/p, d/t, g/k, v/f to distinguish different words.

Kriol like lots of creole languages does not keep the inconsistencies of its parent languages. For example, Kriol removes the irregularities found in the expression of past time in English and simply uses the marker 'bin' preceding the verb:
> *Minbala bin wok gada ola biliken*.
> 'The two of us walked with the billycans' (Angelo et al 1998:195)
>
> *Melabat bin oldie gu fishing en hanting la Hadsen Riba.*
> 'All of us would go fishing and hunting at the Hodgson River' (Angelo et al 1998:196)

Kriol is still highly stigmatised and many Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians believe it to be a 'corrupt', 'broken' or 'distorted' combination of English and/or various traditional languages. Linguists are working on Kriol dictionaries, producing Kriol literacy materials, running workshops etc., to help promote the importance and value of Kriol.

Aboriginal English
Knowledge of the historical background of Aboriginal English is very sketchy. Different linguists and researchers have quite varying hypotheses about the history of this English-based dialect. For instance, some linguists believe that Aboriginal English is very distinct from the pidgins and creoles of Australia (Brandl and Walsh 1982; Sandefur 1983), while others argue that Cape York Creole, Northern Territory Kriol and Fitzroy Kriol and Aboriginal English are closely related forms (Eades 1991).

Many words used in the English speech of Aboriginal people are borrowed from traditional Aboriginal Languages, for example, *you know this wati...this guy here* and *my daddy...'e bin chase that karlaya (emu)* (Kaldor and Malcolm 1985:233). English words are often used in combination or in senses that differ from corresponding word or expressions in Standard Australian English. Some linguists believe that all dialects of Aboriginal English have distinctive English vocabulary usages and these distinctive vocabulary items are firmly embedded in Aboriginal life. For instance, in Alice Springs Aboriginal English the meaning of *fire* is extended to include firewood, lit or unlit, firesticks, matches and electric

heaters (Harkins 1994:149). The semantic scope of *fire* in Aboriginal English corresponds to that described by the equivalent term in traditional languages of the area, such as Arrernte and Luritja: *ure* (Harkins 1994:149).

The use of Standard Australian English prepositions *on*, *at*, *in* are not obligatory and are interchangeable in Aboriginal (Harkins 1994; Kaldor and Malcolm 1985, 1991):
> *I live at Anthepe…I go to picnic and dig rabbit at bush*
> *we bin go Melbourne* (Harkins 1994:66-67)

In place of the standard prepositions the word *la* or *longa* is often used in a locative function (Kaldor and Malcolm 1985). The English prepositions *in*, *on* and *at* correspond to a single locative marker in traditional languages of the area, such as, Luritja -*la* and Arrernte –*le (*Harkins 1994). The variable and interchangeable use of these preposition and their replacement by a *la* or *longa* seems to suggest that Aboriginal English forms are being used in accordance with systems of traditional languages.

As demonstrated by this brief sketch, features of Aboriginal English appear in different forms or ways from those regarded as standard. These non-standard forms often occur alongside standard forms. Researchers and linguists working on Aboriginal English often note that many people on hearing these non-standard forms assume they are errors (Harkins 1994; Eades 1988). Thus when, listening to a speaker who uses standard and non-standard forms, the hearer often concludes that the standard forms are what the speaker really wants to say and the non-standard forms are 'slips of the tongue' or 'careless speech' (Harkins 1994:41). These differences between Aboriginal English and Standard Australian English are really a result of the influence of traditional languages and Aboriginal ways of categorising the world. Aboriginal Speakers have simply altered English in ways to make it fit their communicative needs.

Indigenous loan words in English

Many English concepts and words have made their way into modern Indigenous languages, such as Kriol, of course. But the traffic has not been exclusively one-way: there are many words that have been borrowed into Australian English from Indigenous languages (see http://www.anu.edu.au/ANDC/Classroom/aboriginal_borrowings). The word 'kangaroo' is one of the first and most famous borrowings into English. This word comes from Guugu Yimidhirr, the language of the Cooktown region in northern Queensland. *Kangaroo* or *kanguru* was elicited from local Indigenous people in 1770 by James Cook when the 'Endeavour' was forced to stop in the region for repairs (Walsh 1993). The name is actually just that of the large black or grey kangaroo *Macropus robustus* but it was mistaken as a generic term for the whole species. For some reason, Governor Phillip thought this word had been recorded in Botany Bay and so members of the first fleet used this word in conversing with the local Indigenous people in the Sydney region. These Indigenous people were unfamiliar with this word and they thought it was English and so it spread.

Some other well known examples of borrowings into English are bilby, billabong, boomerang, coolibah, dingo, kookaburra, koala, mulga, waratah, witchetty and yabby. Information on borrowings can be discovered in some dictionaries and reference books, such the *Australian Pocket Oxford Dictionary* or the *Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary* or *Australian Aboriginal Words in English*. However, because of the multitude of Indigenous languages the history of borrowings are not always known.

In the same way Aboriginal words, such as kangaroo and yabby, have been borrowed into English so have Indigenous placenames been borrowed into the introduced system of placenames. Parramatta,

Woolloomooloo, Bondi, Coogee are all well-known Sydney examples of Indigenous placenames that have been taken into the introduced system.

Indigenous Placenames [2]

In Australia there are two systems of placenames; there is the introduced system of placenames that Europeans developed to refer to places, and the network of Indigenous placenames that Indigenous people use.

Colonists, explorers, settlers and surveyors through their renaming of the Australian landscape have often consulted Indigenous people and adopted Indigenous names. Indeed it has been estimated (albeit rather unreliably) in New South Wales that over 75% of the current names of settlements and geographical features, such as creeks and hills, are of Aboriginal origin (Kennedy and Kennedy 1989).

Throughout Australian history, there have been times where at an official level the use of Indigenous names and the acquisition of local Aboriginal knowledge had been promoted. In 1884 the International Provincial Geographical Conference in Melbourne advocated the preference for Indigenous placenames (Henderson and Nash 1997). And a little earlier in the mid 19th Century the South Australia Governor, George Gawler, sent out a decree to colonists to record carefully and precisely names that the Indigenous peoples had given to features of the landscape (Amery and Williams 2002). These records were to be sent to the Surveyor-General and when proved to be accurate were to be included on public maps. This type of policy resulted in many names of Indigenous origin being inserted into the new introduced system of Australian names.

The explorers, landowners and surveyors who delved into the rich world of Indigenous names, whether as a result of official policy or individual fascination, were prone to misunderstanding due to their lack of familiarity with Indigenous language and culture. For example, when the landowners or surveyors adopted Indigenous placenames they frequently applied them to features different from that originally designated. For example, the town of Lameroo in South Australia and Lameroo Beach in Darwin apparently get their names from each other (Simpson 2003).

The sound systems of Indigenous languages are quite different from English and those individuals learning and applying names had difficultly capturing Australian Aboriginal speech sounds. As a result many of these transcriptions are very unreliable records of the original pronunciation in the relevant Indigenous language; many names would be unrecognisable to a speaker of a source language. Thus, names of Indigenous origin have become distorted and anglicised, and are considered part of the introduced system of names rather than the Indigenous system proper.

As previously noted, before the colonisation of Australia it has been approximated that there were around 250 Indigenous groups speaking distinct languages. Each of these languages had its own toponymic rules and its own set of names for places that were important to them. These sets of placenames often included names of places located in the territory of neighbouring groups, thus many portions of the landscape have been named several times over by different Indigenous groups. A map made in the 19th century of the Diyari people's territory in South Australia contains 2,500 placenames (Simpson 2003). This concurs with linguist, Peter Sutton's calculation that the Wik People of Cape York know several thousand placenames (Hercus and Simpson 2002; Sutton 2002). These figures are quite a lot more than Hunn estimates in the 1994 paper 'Place names, population density and the magic

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[2] Much of the information in this section is indebted to Hercus and Simpson 2002.

number 500' (quoted in Henderson and Nash 1997). He postulated that Indigenous language groups around the world have around 500 placenames for their territory. Assuming this is a correct and reasonable figure and that there were 300 language groups prior to European settlement it would follow that Australia had around 150,000 Indigenous placenames. While Kennedy and Kennedy in their 1989 publication *Australian Place Names* have ventured a rough estimation that Australia has over four million placenames with approximately three-quarters of them being Indigenous.

An Indigenous person has no difficulty remembering hundreds of placenames even though they are not recorded with gazetteers or on maps. Indigenous names given to the land relate to the journeys of ancestral beings, and thus feature heavily in traditional stories, song and dance. So people remember the placenames as part of the narration of stories and the singing of songs.

> *…during a land claim hearing, Warumungu people of the Tennant Creek area told the court how ancestral women go to the place Witiin and leave a coolamon, a container for carrying water. That coolamon is visible now as a waterhole. Witiin means 'coolamon' in Warumungu. The ancestral beings go east to another place, Manaji, where they dig bush potatoes. Manaji means 'bush potato' in Warumungu, and there are bush potatoes growing there now. And so on. Now Witiin and Manaji are short names which refer directly to features of the place as well as to actions of the ancestors. Many Aboriginal placenames describe the actions of the ancestor at a place but only indirectly describe the place. Luise Hercus has recorded many such names among the Arabana of the Lake Eyre region. For example, Rockwater Hill's Arabana name is Kudna-tyura-apukanha 'they (that is ancestral Emus) had diarrhoea long ago'. You have to know the story and the place to know how the name fits the place. What has diarrhoea got to do with the hill? Well, it's represented by lots of green stones on the hill.* (Simpson 2003)

Indigenous placenames have developed as an essential aspect in traditional stories and a key tool for moving through and surviving in the Australian landscape. The content of the story the names feature in and the often highly descriptive name of a place (for example, *Manaji* being the Warumungu name for a site where a group of ancestral beings dig bush potatoes and *Manaji* also being the Warumungu word for bush potatoes) are extremely useful aides to knowing the value of various sites as good water and food sources. And the sequencing of placenames according to the journey of an ancestral being in these stories is a crucial way to locate these sites. All the places in the stories are interconnected with locational information, and thus, the location of a place within the story can be determined through its relationship to other places.

So we can see that the principles of the Indigenous naming system differ greatly from the toponymic practices in the introduced European system. For example, there is a vast difference between what is regarded as a feature that need to be named in the Indigenous and a features that requires a name in the introduced system. Indigenous people often have several names for different stretches of a watercourse, whereas the whole river or creek would only bear one introduced name. Or a hill may have a name in the introduced system while the Indigenous system doesn't have a name just for that hill but a name that refers to the whole surrounding region as well as the hill. Another example: one feature may have several Indigenous names known by different groups of people. Indeed, Indigenous placenames are often owned, secret or sacred, and only one clan may have the rights to impart this knowledge. In contrast, the introduced system strives to maintain a single network of placenames that are accessible to all.

Dual naming:

There has been a move in recent years to recognise the validity of Indigenous names and to promote the investigation and official use of these names. In NSW the Geographical Names Board (http://www.gnb.nsw.gov.au) has established a dual naming sub-committee and dual naming guidelines. These guidelines recognise the significance of Aboriginal culture by giving dual names to already named geographical features, such as, rivers, creeks and mountains. An example of dual naming is Dawes Point Reserve situated under the southern end of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. The Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority proposed a dual name be considered for the Reserve. Local Indigenous communities and historical sources were consulted to ensure cultural accuracy; a dual name can be assigned only where there is strong evidence of a pre-existing Indigenous placename, and the proposal must have the support of the local community. The Sydney Harbour pilot project has resulted in the Cadigal name *Tar-ra*, as well as Dawes Point, being adopted and displayed prominently at the Reserve.

Resources

Australian Indigenous languages websites:
The following websites are a good starting point for anyone interested further information on Indigenous languages and placenames.

Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/

Aboriginal Languages of Australia
http://www.dnathan.com/VL/austLang.htm

Aboriginal placenames around Sydney Harbour
http://www.livingharbour.net/aboriginal/place_names.htm

Languages of the World Ethnologue
http://www.sil.org/ethnologue/search

Victorian Aboriginal Place Names
http://www.vaclang.ozhosting.com/

FATSIL Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation of Languages
http://www.fatsil.org/

Further Reading:
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Languages serials and series:
Australian Journal of Linguistics
Australian Linguistic Society. Twice yearly. Business Manager Department of Linguistics, La Trobe University, Bundoora, Vic 3083
The journal publishes an annual bibliography of academic publications in Australian languages

Australian Review of Applied Linguistics
Applied Linguistics Association of Australia. Twice yearly. Editor, Department of Linguistics, The Faculties, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 0200

Pacific Linguistics
Department of Linguistics, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 0200
This is published irregularly in 4 series:
Series A: Occasional papers
Series B: Monographs
Series C: Books
Series D: Special publications

Also try other references in the AIATSIS Indigenous Languages Bibliography
(http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/lbry/fct_shts/lib_rsc2.htm)

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