CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

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THE IMPORTANCE OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER LANGUAGES

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages are an important part of Australia's cultural identity, and form part of the diversity of cultures that make up Australia as a whole. These languages are distinctly and exclusively Australian. They contribute to understandings of our shared history and knowledge of the land and seas. They are intricately connected to the survival of some of the world's oldest cultures and as such, they are fundamental to Australia's uniqueness.

Language is central to identity and culture, regardless of the extent to which it is spoken. Australia's diverse languages carry with them unique identities, stories and heritage. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may speak and understand a number of languages at different levels of proficiency, depending on opportunities to learn and use them.[10] All of these languages are highly valued by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and connect them to homelands.[11]

Indigenous languages provide many individual and community benefits. They are integral to people's identity, connection with culture and emotional health. People who are emotionally strong are more likely to participate positively in social and economic activities (this is explored in detail in Chapter 2).

The diversity of Australia's Indigenous languages is a rich resource. Different perspectives and knowledge are highly valued in cutting edge research and policy teams because of their potential to facilitate greater creativity in finding solutions. On the world stage, it is well-known that cultural and linguistic diversity is a powerful promoter of conditions that foster innovation.[12] Australian Indigenous languages have also contributed in important ways to the understanding of the human language faculty,[13] and that in turn has contributed to significant advances in technologies that incorporate and navigate languages.[14]

Beyond the clear economic and social benefits, there is also an imperative to recognise and value the richness of Australia's Indigenous languages. Valuing and respecting language provides a solid platform for reconciliation.[15]

How are 'Indigenous languages' defined and counted in this Report?

In order to count the number of languages spoken by a community, a way of identifying one language as being distinct from another is needed. But there is no single way of doing this. Linguists tend to use linguistic criteria, such as *mutual intelligibility*, whereby people speaking different language varieties can understand each other: if speaker A cannot understand speaker B, then A and B speak different languages. Other approaches will instead emphasise social, political and cultural criteria as the most important. For example, since the Yugoslavian civil wars, Serbian and Croatian are widely considered to be different languages; but Serbians and Croatians can generally understand each other.[9]

Sometimes a speaker of one named Indigenous language can understand a speaker of another differently-named language without any extra effort or knowledge – they are mutually intelligible. In this case, from a linguist's perspective they will be seen as speakers of 'dialects' of a *single* language. However, the differences may be of great significance to the speakers for reasons of identity, culture and Country, and so the community may hold that the speakers speak two *different* languages.

For this reason, linguistic studies of Australian Indigenous languages will tend to identify and count language varieties in one way; while asking speakers to self-identify which language(s) they speak will tend to give different results. The 2019 National Indigenous Languages Survey (NILS3) received responses from communities, language centres and other organisations carrying out language projects, and linguists. This survey identified 141 language varieties. The 2016 Census asked speakers to self-identify which languages they spoke, and reports that approximately 159 Indigenous languages are currently spoken.

This Report uses the term 'language variety' as a cover term for some of these different approaches, recognising that, in some cases, the community of speakers may want to identify and count languages differently from linguists.

THE STATUS OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER LANGUAGES IN AUSTRALIA

It is estimated that at the time of colonisation over 250 languages were spoken in Australia.[13] The AIATSIS Map of Indigenous Australia (Figure 1.1) represents 390 recorded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language, tribal or nation groups.

The findings of this Report demonstrate that all of these traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are currently under threat, including those that are considered strong.[17]

The most important measure of language strength (or vitality) is intergenerational transmission.[18] A strong language is one where the language is used fluently by all age groups, including children. Another measure of language vitality is the number of speakers. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, the total number of speakers is relatively small. According to some measures any language with fewer than 100,000 speakers is at risk.[19] There are currently no Australian Indigenous languages with this number of speakers,[20] which is one clear indication that no Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language is safe. Figure 1.2 provides a picture of the traditional languages still spoken with a recorded number of speakers over 1,000.[21]

MYTH: THERE'S JUST ONE ABORIGINAL LANGUAGE, RIGHT? OR, WHAT'S THE ABORIGINAL WORD FOR THAT?

As this Report shows, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have always spoken lots of languages. Some of these languages are as similar as English and Dutch, some are distantly related, like English and Hindi, and some are as different as English and Chinese. Asking "What's the Aboriginal word for that?" is like asking "What's the European word for that?"

AIATSIS Map of Indigenous Australia

View a close-up version of the AIATSIS Map of Indigenous Australia on the AIATSIS website:
https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/aiatsis-map-indigenous-australia

Figure 1.1: The AIATSIS Map of Indigenous Australia, by David R Horton, 1996.

THREATS TO ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER LANGUAGES

The threats to languages play out in different ways in different situations. For traditional languages, such situations can be one or a mixture of the following:

- situations where there was a break in intergenerational transmission and the language was considered to be sleeping[i]

- situations where there is a decline in the number of speakers and fewer children are speaking the language

- situations where service delivery providers do not use the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language spoken for everyday purpose

- situations where language is not recognised or valued by the broader community.

The last two points also pertain to new languages, which are threatened in other ways. Speakers of new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are less visible in data and discourses about language.[22] This could be due to less recognition or respect for new languages, or due to the fact that some new languages do not have widely used names and consequently cannot be easily identified or recognised.

At times, speakers of new languages have been incorrectly identified as speakers of English, speakers of a traditional language or even of an overseas language.[23]

The consequences of speaking a new language are that there may be barriers to proper access to services, such as interpreting and translation. These issues are explored further in Chapter 5.

Language loss has occurred through many years of policies and actions which have disrupted language continuation. This has included punishing people for speaking their own languages and forcibly breaking up communities and families, resulting in breaking the transmission of languages to children.[24] As recently as 1980, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were punished for speaking language.[25] While this no longer occurs, the impact of these past policies and practices has been devastating, and there is still a limited understanding of the role that traditional language plays in people's lives.

These actions have hastened the shifting and loss of languages.[26] Societal marginalisation, and failure to understand the centrality of language to identity and culture, also contributes to this loss. Further to this, a failure to understand complex language situations and contexts contributes to the loss of languages.[27]
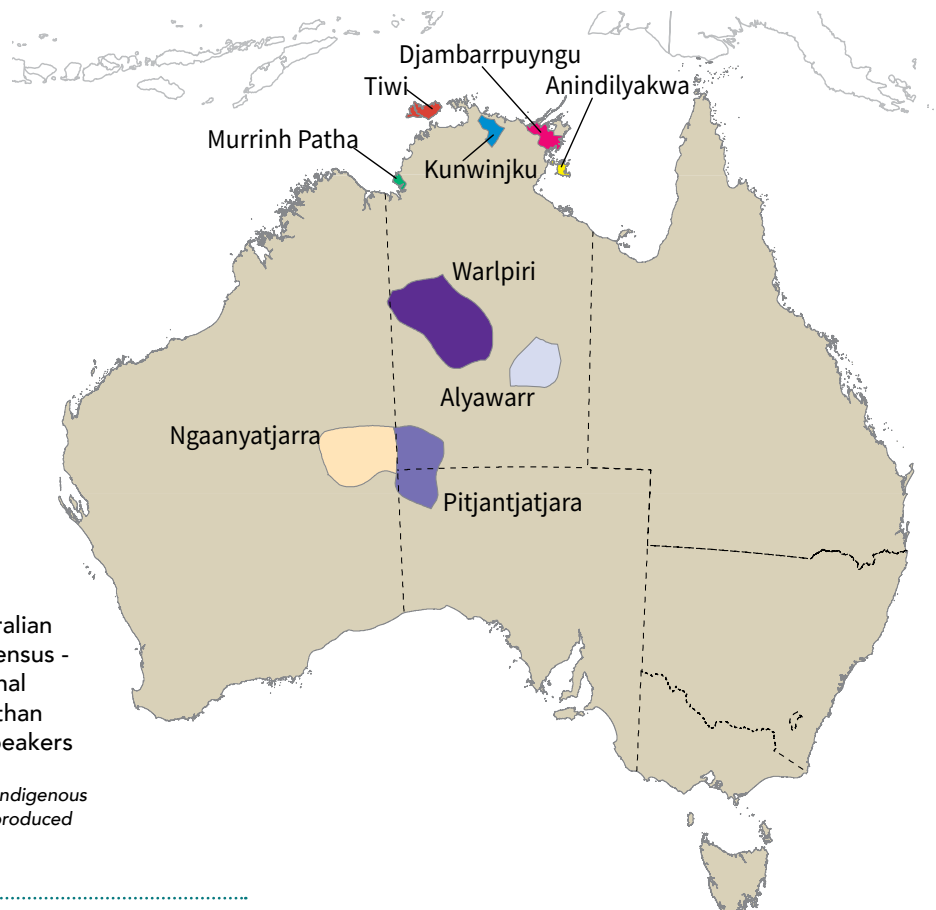

Figure 1.2: 2016 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census - Heartlands of traditional languages with more than 1,000 self-reported speakers

Source: Macquarie Atlas of Indigenous Australia, 2nd edn, 2019. Reproduced with permission.

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i   'Sleeping' refers to languages no longer spoken.

FRAMING THE DISCUSSION: UNDERSTANDING THE COMPLEX INFLUENCES ON INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES
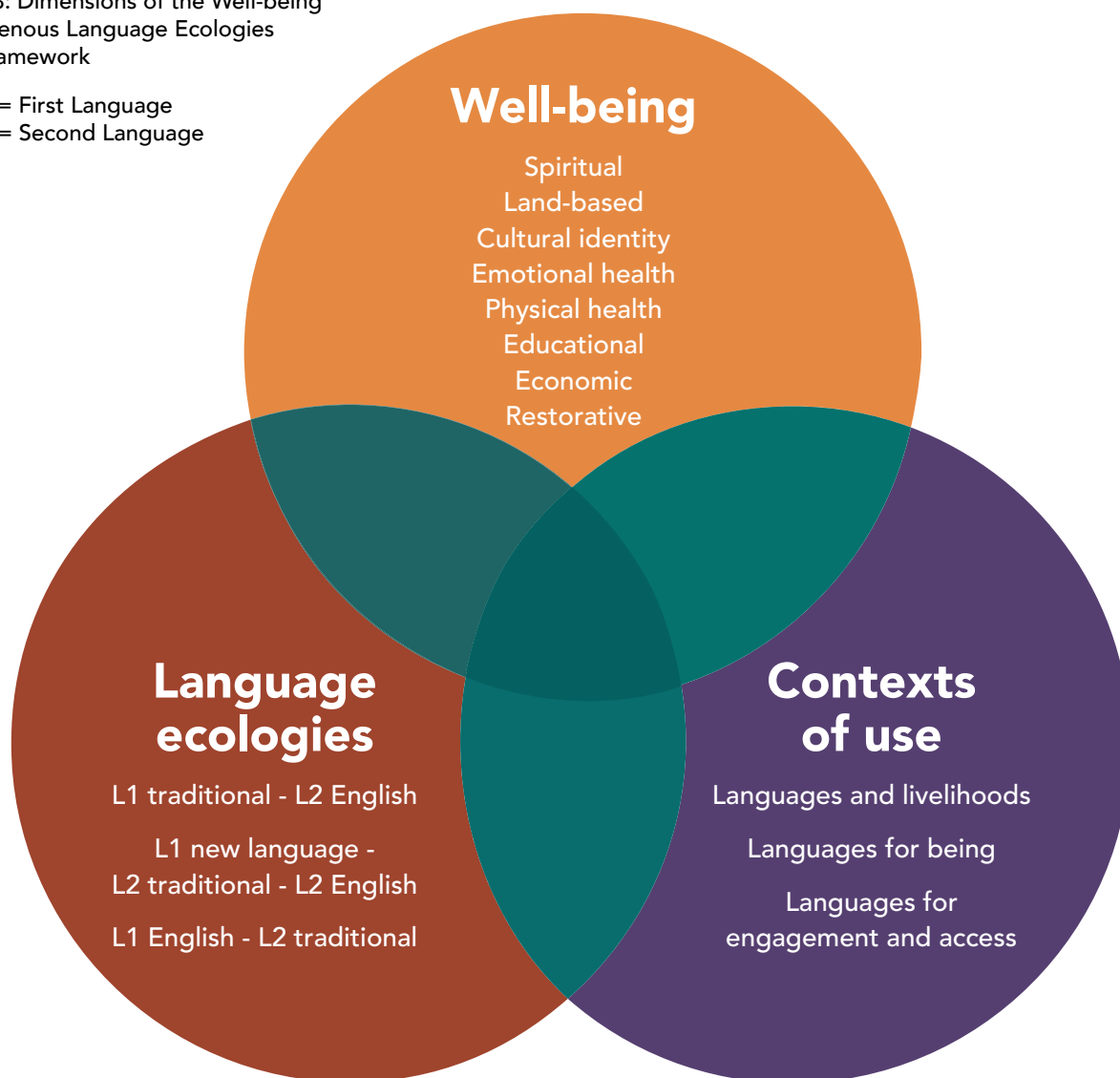
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia speak different languages and many draw on different languages for different purposes. Recognising these language situations and rendering them visible assists in the development of policies and programs that can provide significant benefits for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

ANU researchers have developed an approach to describe some of the most prevalent kinds of language situations[28] (see Figure 1.3 below). They have used this system to show how language interacts with the well-being and productivity of people and communities. The approach is based on the idea that in most places there is an arrangement of languages that is typical and expected for that area (the local language ecology) and it is derived from the different languages that people usually speak (individual language repertoires) in different contexts (for socio-cultural purposes, such as attending school, talking with family, visiting a doctor, or for cultural purposes). An individual's ability to interact with others or to access and benefit from services depends on their language matching the language in each interaction.[29] While this may seem self-evident, the fact that it is not reflected in current approaches to policy and program design, and service delivery, indicates that it is not widely understood or appreciated.

Figure 1.3: Dimensions of the Well-being and Indigenous Language Ecologies (WILE) Framework

Note: L1 = First Language
        L2 = Second Language

Well-being

Spiritual
Land-based
Cultural identity
Emotional health
Physical health
Educational
Economic
Restorative

Language ecologies

L1 traditional - L2 English

L1 new language -
L2 traditional - L2 English

L1 English - L2 traditional

Contexts of use

Languages and livelihoods

Languages for being

Languages for engagement and access

TYPES OF LANGUAGES – A WAY OF THINKING ABOUT THE DIVERSE RANGE OF LANGUAGES SPOKEN

Three main types of language are learned and used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people around Australia.

Traditional languages: These are Australian languages spoken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people prior to colonisation, and the directly descended language varieties spoken today. Some are strong languages still spoken by children; others are being learned or renewed.

New languages: These Australian languages have formed since 1788 from language contact between speakers of traditional languages with speakers of English and/or other languages. New languages have historical influences from their source languages, including English, but they are not automatically understood by Standard Australian English speakers.

Englishes: Across Australia there are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of speaking English which differ somewhat from Standard Australian English, but which Standard Australian English speakers can more or less understand. These are varieties of English just as American English is a variety of English.

Language repertoires – language resources individuals can draw upon

Individuals acquire the languages they understand and speak from their life experiences, starting from birth, from what is spoken to them, used around them and learned from school or their own research. Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait people will speak one main language, with some knowledge of an additional language (depending on the opportunities available to them). Others may speak more than one language well, and will select which language to speak depending on who they want to talk to, what about, and in what context.[30] This can be referred to as code-switching (for more information, please see the Glossary). The different languages spoken and the fluency with which they speak them make up a person's language repertoire.

Socio-cultural purposes – different kinds of interactions

People deploy language(s) for different social and cultural purposes. Socio-cultural purposes can include:

- expressing identity or spirituality – for example, in cultural ceremonies or a Welcome to Country

- everyday interactions – for example, at home with family and friends or while shopping

- making a livelihood – for example, teachers, rangers, artists, interpreters and community liaison officers

- accessing services – for example, schooling, a doctor's appointment, financial services.

ANU researchers have identified a number of broad socio-cultural purposes associated with particular kinds of language use. An individual's well-being is likely to be fostered, or not, depending on whether their language repertoire matches the language required for particular interactions.[31] The language(s) involved would be determined by the languages usually spoken locally (language ecology) and the purpose of the interaction (socio-cultural purposes). For example, delivery of government services, by default, typically occurs in English, which might pose a potential barrier if somebody does not speak English proficiently.

People use and need language for communicating and it is also part of identity.

A communication dimension

Everyone benefits from being able to use the language they speak best, whether it is for companionability or for high stakes information transfer (such as gaining health information). But Indigenous Australians have long been prevented from using their own languages, and this has been very damaging.[32] For Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people who speak an Indigenous language (traditional or new) as their main language, English-only interactions may also have a negative impact on well-being.

An identity dimension

Many Indigenous people emphasise the interconnectedness of language, culture and identity.[33] Expressing identity as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person occurs by speaking language, whether it is a few words or speaking it fluently. For people who are engaging in renewing or reawakening a traditional language, this activity itself appears to have positive effects on well-being.[34] Further to this, public respect for languages (through signs, broadcasts and so on) positively affirms cultural and individual identity.

The ANU found that much research has bypassed how languages were used in different places, and this makes it difficult to apply findings from one area to another.

Figure 1.4: Language ecologies
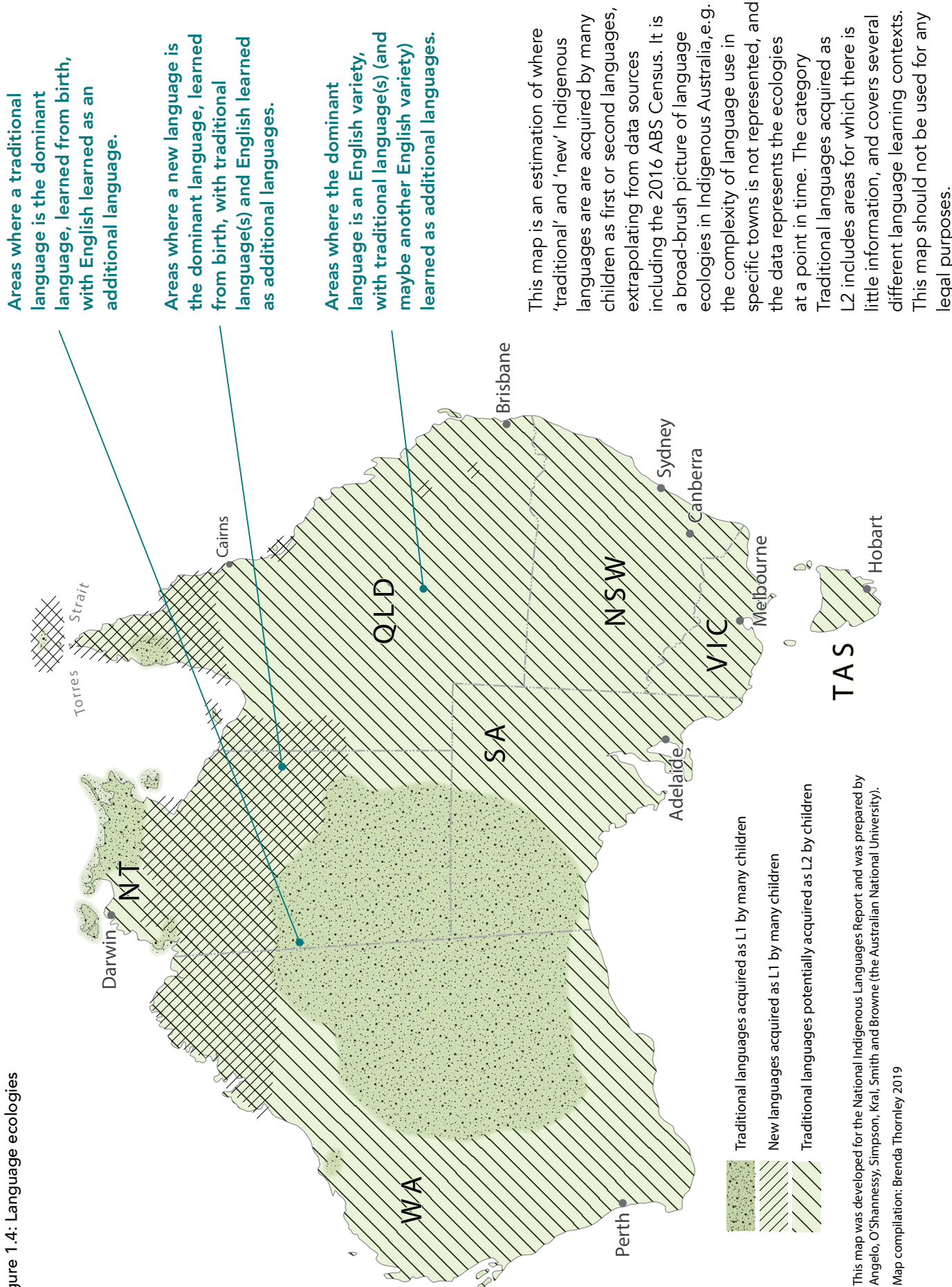
Areas where a traditional language is the dominant language, learned from birth, with English learned as an additional language.

Areas where a new language is the dominant language, learned from birth, with traditional language(s) and English learned as additional languages.

Areas where the dominant language is an English variety, with traditional language(s) (and maybe another English variety) learned as additional languages.

This map is an estimation of where 'traditional' and 'new' Indigenous languages are are acquired by many children as first or second languages, extrapolating from data sources including the 2016 ABS Census. It is a broad-brush picture of language ecologies in Indigenous Australia, e.g. the complexity of language use in specific towns is not represented, and the data represents the ecologies at a point in time. The category Traditional languages acquired as L2 includes areas for which there is little information, and covers several different language learning contexts. This map should not be used for any legal purposes.

Brisbane

Sydney

Canberra

Melbourne

NSW

VIC

TAS

Hobart

QLD

SA

Adelaide

Cairns

Torres Strait

NT

Darwin

WA

Perth

Traditional languages acquired as L1 by many children

New languages acquired as L1 by many children

Traditional languages potentially acquired as L2 by children

This map was developed for the National Indigenous Languages Report and was prepared by Angelo, O'Shannessy, Simpson, Kral, Smith and Browne (the Australian National University).

Map compilation: Brenda Thornley 2019

Language ecology – the languages used in a particular place

There is no single Indigenous language situation throughout the entire Australian continent.[35]

Although Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language situations, taken as a whole, are rich, complex and dynamic, there are a number of common language situations.

This Report refers broadly to three types of language ecologies in Australia, as shown in Figure 1.4.

In some places *traditional languages* are strong, spoken by all age groups and learned by babies, while English is learned as a foreign language, just in classrooms.

In some places *new languages* are spoken by everybody and learned by babies. The traditional language may still be spoken by some older people, so younger people have to learn it in addition to their new language in order to revitalise it. English is learned as a foreign language, mostly just from classrooms.

In some places, *English* is spoken by everybody and learned by babies. The traditional language is heard on special occasions, like during NAIDOC week celebrations or Welcome to Country, and might be taught (through a community, school or adult education setting) as part of reawakening it.

In cities and many large towns, most people will speak English,[36] but as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is so large and diverse, there may be some speakers of new languages and traditional languages, particularly in more remote regions.

These different arrangements of languages in each place are called language ecologies. The ANU framework is a way of recognising these common language ecologies, so policy, programs and services can be differentiated to better suit local, on the ground language situations.

HOW DO THESE ECOLOGIES WORK?

In a city

Much of the contemporary city of Sydney is on the lands of the Aboriginal Dharug Nation. Here, Standard Australian English is the dominant language in the language ecology. Dharug people generally use Standard Australian English for everyday communication and for accessing public services, like education, health, media, etc.[37] For Dharug people, the language ecology also includes the reawakening of the Dharug language, which is classified as a sleeping language.[38] The Dharug people are on an ongoing journey to learn Dharug, which requires active and intentional engagement. Community members are beginning to make it heard again. In this language ecology, the impact of Dharug language on people's lives is likely to revolve around the benefits derived from strengthening community and cultural identity, and recognition and respect from the broader community. This language ecology involves the identity dimension of Indigenous languages and well-being.

In remote Australia

The remote community of Amata in South Australia (SA) has a quite different language ecology. In Amata, the Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara languages feature very strongly. People living in Amata use these languages in everyday life to talk with almost everybody in the community.[39] Most people will also learn some English as a second language due to its use in media, schooling and a number of other services.[40] Using these traditional languages has a positive impact on well-being. It strengthens community and cultural identity and attracts recognition and respect from the broader community. There are other language factors that potentially influence well-being positively or negatively, such as how typically English-based services are made more accessible to Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara speakers, who are learners of English as an additional language. Language accommodations to promote effective communications include more Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara speaking staff and using interpreters. This language ecology has a communication dimension to Indigenous languages and well-being, in addition to an identity dimension.

With a new language

Most people on the island of Badu in the western Torres Strait speak the new language, Yumplatok (also called Torres Strait Creole) as their main language of everyday communication. Yumplatok is the language spoken in the playground, down at the wharf, at the shop and in the clinic. Many of the older generation learned Kala Lagaw Ya, the traditional language, as their first language,[41] but nowadays children are learning it as an additional language from older family members and at school. Learning and using Kala Lagaw Ya is a powerful statement of local community identity and cultural continuity and pride. People on Badu learn English almost exclusively in a classroom setting, but this may be augmented with some media and with further study or through work.[42] Recognition and use of Yumplatok has a positive impact on speakers' well-being as it acknowledges the importance of the language and promotes effective communication.[43] Multilingual people on Badu are respected for their language skills and this enhances well-being and confidence.[44] This language ecology on Badu involves both a communication and an identity dimension to Indigenous languages and well-being.

Off Country

Place is an intrinsic component of a language ecology. For example, there are people who speak Pitjantjatjara as their main language, which they have spoken from birth, in the language ecology of Sydney. In Sydney, maybe just a few people speak Pitjantjatjara, so this creates a different communicative situation from speaking Pitjantjatjara in a place like Amata where most people do. In Sydney's English-dominant language ecology, there is much less opportunity to speak Pitjantjatjara (so opportunities to express identity and engage with community in this language are generally fewer). An individual's level of confidence with English will affect their engagement in English interactions. Even though the most dominant language of the Sydney language ecology is English, a large city like this will always have a number of other languages as part of its language ecology.

CURRENT APPROACHES AND SUPPORTS FOR LANGUAGES

Maintaining, revitalising, renewing or reawakening traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are important activities for the safeguarding of these languages, and they require different approaches. These varying approaches are set out in Chapter 4.

The different functions of languages are all part of a speaker's identity and a fundamental part of daily interactions.[45] This has impacts for service delivery and the successful implementation of programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. There are various ways to better understand language contexts and relate them back to different policy, program and service design and delivery considerations. The approach summarised earlier in this chapter (and explored in more detail in the Report *Well-being and Indigenous Language Ecologies (WILE): a strengths-based approach*) provides one such way to guide discussions.

Without a strong understanding of different language situations, the different priorities that communities have for their languages will also remain poorly understood. When service providers and governments do not understand the roles of all the different languages in people's lives they cannot work effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to provide targeted services and means of support.[46]

Further to this, new languages in the repertoire of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are generally under-recognised.[47] This means the loss of opportunities for language skills and knowledge to improve employment options in service industries and language-based ventures, and for building stronger local communities.

Generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have language skills that are not properly valued, honoured and used.[48] Their role in the survival, maintenance and revitalisation of their ancient language(s) is vital, but in order to fulfil their role as language 'teachers' in their family and community, their role needs to be legitimised and supported.

WORKING TO SUPPORT THE PRESERVATION, USE AND PROMOTION OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities: Communities and community-led organisations are at the centre of language work. Across Australia, these speech communities are diverse, as are their visions and directions for the development of their work with their languages.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander speakers, learners and/or workers: People who speak languages (to the extent that their language context allows it), actively find ways to continue to do so, including through researching and strengthening.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language teachers: Teachers ensure languages are learned and passed along, in informal or more formal settings, like early childhood, school or adult education, in community organisations and on social media.

Australian Government funded Indigenous Language Centres: There are 20 mostly community-led Indigenous Language Centres across the country. The scope, size and infrastructure of these language centres is diverse. They are primarily funded by the Australian Government Indigenous Languages and Arts (ILA) program, although some may also receive funding from other government sectors, academia, education or private industry. There are also numerous other ILA funded community-driven language projects that exist outside the Language Centres.

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies: AIATSIS maintains the largest collection of written and audio-visual language resources, supports language revitalisation/renewal/reawakening programs, assists with language maintenance and documentation, and aims to raise the profile of Indigenous languages in the wider community.

Collecting institutions: Libraries and archives also have interest in this area, as they often have significant holdings of resource material about languages. They also have public programs that aim to increase access to the information they hold. The National Archives of Australia has prioritised the preservation of identified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander audio-visual records in its collection, due to known degradation and loss in this format.

Education institutions: Schools have a unique role in supporting Indigenous languages, by linking communities, language centres, local, state and federal governments. Different schools will make different efforts to preserve, support and promote languages, depending on a multitude of factors determined by the context in which they are situated. State and territory jurisdictions and the school sectors (public, Catholic and independent) are responsible for policies, programs, curricula and strategies that enable Indigenous languages teaching.

Governments: All levels of government in Australia support Indigenous languages in various capacities. The way they provide this support differs greatly across departments, jurisdictions, and levels of government. A key function is service provision, which includes supporting interpreting and translation services.

Linguists: Linguists play an important role in working with communities. Linguists may be based in academic institutions, archival or documentation organisations, or located directly within organisations seeking to preserve languages, such as language centres and Living Languages (formerly known as the Resource Network for Linguistic Diversity).

Representative language organisations: First Languages Australia (FLA) is the peak body representing community language preservation and revival efforts. FLA's role is to communicate between members of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander networks, communities, governments, partner organisations and the public. Education and awareness raising is a large part of FLA's role; it works with language communities to understand the possibilities and opportunities for language use, and with broader Australian and international audiences to communicate the importance and urgency of strengthening language, and the benefits of language use for all Australians.