

CHAPTER 6

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF THESE FINDINGS



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This Report shows the continuing decline in the use of Aboriginal and Torres Islander languages, a shift which has been identified in a number of reports since 2001, including the National Indigenous Languages Survey series (2005 and 2014).²⁹⁸

It shows that in some, but not all areas, Aboriginal and Torres Islander people are reawakening and learning their heritage languages. It also shows that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are a strength for communities and can enhance resilience and employability.

The links between language and well-being have been explored. The need for further research into the connection between language and well-being was identified in NILS2,²⁹⁹ and even before this NILS1 asserted that to enhance opportunities for employment of Indigenous people as language workers and provide career pathways for Indigenous people with linguistic skills, there is a need for a whole-of-government approach linking language activities and other activities such as education, arts and crafts, media and land management.³⁰⁰ The findings of this Report support these previous recommendations.

Key to ensuring the maintenance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and enhancing the well-being and employability of their speakers is the availability of training.³⁰¹ This is essential for interpreters and translators,³⁰² for teachers,³⁰³ and for learners of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, both in communities where people are learning their heritage languages, and in communities where the language of everyday talk is a traditional or new language.

A consistent issue in this and previous Reports,³⁰⁴ is the limitations of the available data on who speaks particular languages and to what extent. The language repertoires of individuals vary considerably. But it should be possible to provide descriptions of the language ecologies of communities and towns across Australia in order to target the implementation of policy geographically. As part of the NATSISS work, ANU researchers came up with a first pass categorisation of ABS statistical areas as to whether the dominant languages were traditional languages, new languages, or English. This categorisation could be built on as a tool for developing communication strategies.

The approach developed by the ANU for this Report, which provides a way to understand the many language situations in Australia through identifying the diversity of languages, the socio-cultural purposes, language repertoire and language ecology, has some practical elements.

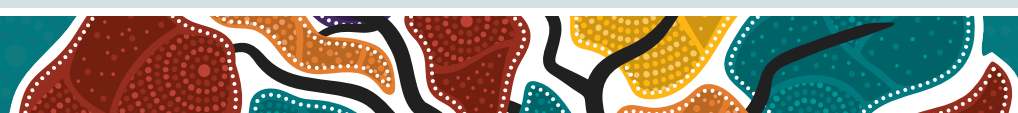
PRACTICAL APPROACHES TO SUPPORT LANGUAGES

1. Recognising that Aboriginal and Torres Islander languages are part of Aboriginal and Torres Islander people's identity, culture and heritage, regardless of the extent to which they speak them.
2. Recognising that Aboriginal and Torres Islander people value their traditional and new languages as part of who they are, their identities.
3. Recognising that Aboriginal and Torres Islander people may:
 - a. learn a traditional and/or new language as their first and main language and use it for everyday communication
 - b. learn a traditional language as a second language, or
 - c. not speak standard English.
4. Recognising that good communication through using people's first and main languages is a powerful way of showing respect for speakers and their languages and identifying their needs and aspirations.
5. Recognising that both good communication and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Islander languages, culture and heritage are essential in the policy cycle.

These approaches point to three areas of focus for future work, as shown in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1: Areas of focus for future work

<p style="text-align: center; font-size: 2em; font-weight: bold;">1</p> <p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold;">Respect and recognise individual language situations</p>	<p>For first language speakers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, the highest form of respect is allowing people to choose the language in which they communicate.</p> <p>The majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people speak Standard Australian English as a first language. They may also be reawakening or learning traditional languages. Respecting the significance of traditional languages as part of cultural heritage is important.</p>
<p style="text-align: center; font-size: 2em; font-weight: bold;">2</p> <p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold;">Engage early to design fit-for-purpose services and programs</p>	<p>To achieve inclusion and equity across linguistically diverse situations, policy makers and service deliverers should engage actively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to understand the roles of traditional languages, new languages and Englishes.</p> <p>In all situations respect can be shown by making languages more audible and more visible.</p> <p>Languages can be made more audible through use in schools, in broadcasting, and in public events, such as through acknowledgments of Country. This reflects the findings of the 2014 national survey (NILS2), which recommended wider promotion of the importance of using traditional languages at home, and especially with children.³⁰⁵ The earlier survey in 2005 recommended the use of Indigenous languages in public functions such as government consultations, legal and health activities.³⁰⁶</p> <p>Languages can be made more visible through naming of places (including dual naming), organisations and programs.³⁰⁷ Seeking permission from appropriate people to name something with a word from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language is a way to show respect.³⁰⁸</p> <p>For good communication, policy makers and service providers should find out what languages are spoken in relevant communities, and work with communities to find the best choice of language and best means to design the policy or program. This may include employing interpreters and translators and will include embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages in all levels of education.³⁰⁹</p> <p>For people who are reawakening or learning traditional languages, support for this can be embedded in many ways, from schools, adult education, and universities, to ranger programs, broadcasting and arts projects.</p>
<p style="text-align: center; font-size: 2em; font-weight: bold;">3</p> <p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold;">Embed Indigenous language recognition in policy and evaluation processes</p>	<p>Policy makers ensure equity and justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by actively co-designing policies and programs in which languages, traditional or new, can be used across people’s lifetimes in their communities.</p> <p>This means building in recognition, respect and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages across the policy lifecycle, from design, to implementation, to evaluation. Recognition, respect and support are needed across many sectors: early childhood education, schooling, training, health, aged care services, legal, social and financial services and employment settings.</p>





METHODOLOGY FOR THE REPORT

Australia needs a strong evidence base to support policies on Indigenous languages, and to test and evaluate what has gone before. Much of the data on the state of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages in Australia is based on the National Indigenous Languages Surveys (NILS) of 2005 and 2014.

The Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications, formerly the Department of Communications and the Arts (the Department), the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and the Australian National University (ANU) collaborated on the production of this Report, which builds on and updates the work from the previous two National Indigenous Languages Surveys and contributes to the strengthening of the evidence base.

THE DEPARTMENT

The Department is the Australian Government's lead policy agency for Indigenous languages. In 2019, it led the Government's Action Plan for the International Year of Indigenous Languages. These actions related to:

- support for the revitalisation and maintenance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages
- access to education, information and knowledge in and about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, and
- promotion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and values.

This Report fulfils the Government's commitment to update knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. The Report has been produced in a collaboration between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, academia and the private sector to articulate the current state of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, as well as articulate how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages link to individuals' and communities' social and economic well-being.

AIATSIS

AIATSIS designed and deployed a survey to build on the work of the previous AIATSIS language surveys and capture data that could be used to assess the state of each language. The survey consisted of 19 questions which collected data on:

- distribution of generational use of language (contributing to assessment of Indicator 1 – intergenerational language transmission)
- estimations of speaker numbers: in total, by age, and by proficiency (contributing to assessment of Indicators 1 and 2 – intergenerational language transmission and absolute number of speakers)
- proportion of people in the language group that speak the language (contributing to assessment of Indicator 3 – proportion of speakers)
- how and when the language is used (contributing to assessment of Indicators 4 and 5 – domains and functions of a language, and response to new domains and media)
- gender distribution of speakers
- existence of, and engagement with, language activities, resources and documentation (contributing to assessment of Indicators 6, 9, and 10 – materials for language education and literacy, type and quality of documentation, and language programs), and
- training opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

As there was no way for this project to develop the sample frame to survey individual speakers (as would be required for conventional survey methodologies), AIATSIS targeted respondents who are thought to have sufficient knowledge of language communities in order to collect the data. These respondents were communities, language centres and other organisations carrying out language projects; and linguists who specialise in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. The survey was deployed on 29 November 2018 and closed on 14 April 2019. A total of 171 submissions covering 141^{xxi} language varieties were received and analysed. The data was cross-referenced with other survey data and responses on the same languages were compared.

^{xxi} 171 valid survey responses were received bearing 140 unique AUSTLANG codes and one with no AUSTLANG code.

This research methodology was endorsed by the AIATSIS Research Ethics Committee and the National Indigenous Languages Report Indigenous Advisory Group (established by AIATSIS).

ANU

The ANU conducted a comprehensive literature review and data analysis to produce an evidence base for the Report that articulates the benefits that flow from Indigenous languages, particularly in relation to well-being. This analysis is based on reviewing qualitative studies and case studies, and a multivariate regression analysis of data from the 2014–15 NATSISS.³¹⁰

LIMITATIONS OF THE DATA

The National Indigenous Languages Report presents an overview of the state of Australia's Indigenous languages using the best available data collated by the Department, AIATSIS and the Centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language and Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at the ANU. Despite this, issues exist that need to be considered.

Both the search of the research literature and the data analysis work conducted for this Report emphasised difficulties with the quality of the Indigenous language data collected in large-scale surveys not dedicated to this purpose, and in many research and government reports, because they do not distinguish between types of Indigenous language (traditional or new) or between language contexts (first or second languages, within a specific language ecology). Some major language data issues are listed and briefly explained here. A more in-depth analysis of the issues is contained in the accompanying papers by AIATSIS and the ANU.

AIATSIS identified three issues with the data collected for the third National Indigenous Languages Survey (NILS3). These issues were:

- a. complexity associated with defining a 'language variety' given that respondents to NILS3 may name language varieties as separate languages, rather than using a collective term
- b. complications when assessing proficiency and comparing proficiency across the NILS series (due to different measurements of proficiency being used), and
- c. issues arising when attempting to definitively grade the vitality of a language.

The ANU literature review identified that the usefulness of survey data was limited by the coverage of censuses and other surveys. An inability to reach remote and rural areas,³¹¹ the undercounting of children within data,³¹² and issues with how respondents understand questions and engage in self-reporting reduced the usefulness of surveys.³¹³

The absence of definitions within surveys was also identified as an issue by the ANU. The failure to define well-being, bilingualism and how different languages are named limits the usefulness of some surveys, including the 2016 census.³¹⁴ A failure to disaggregate responses from Indigenous students who speak English as their mother tongue, from those who speak languages other than English and are learners of English also had implications for the validity of data in school domains. This is because data on Indigenous languages, traditional and new, have not been collected in national education data sets, nor has English language learner data.³¹⁵ This lack of visibility is exemplified in the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) reports where a 'category of misdirection'³¹⁶ obscures the common sense notion that the most important factor in a test in English would be whether the student speaks English.³¹⁷

Finally, the ANU also identified limitations in the NATSISS that restrict the capacity of the data to establish a causal relationship between language and well-being. Limitations included a failure to differentiate between traditional and new languages, measurement errors and reporting bias resulting from self-reporting and estimates of the effect of language on well-being being undermined by the small sample of respondents that spoke an Indigenous language as their first language. The well-being measures were determined by the data set and, although not unreasonable, do not necessarily reflect all components selected in other well-being frameworks.





Aboriginal	The original inhabitants of mainland Australia and surrounding islands except the Torres Strait (the area lying between the tip of Cape York and New Guinea). The term 'First Nations' is increasingly used to refer to both Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. 'Indigenous' may be less favoured when the more specific term (i.e. 'Aboriginal' or 'Torres Strait Islander') is appropriate.
Aboriginal English	Aboriginal English refers broadly to varieties of English used by Australian Aboriginal people. Just as there are Australian ways of speaking English that are different from, for example, the English spoken by people in Scotland, there are also Aboriginal ways of speaking English. Aboriginal English varieties are different from new languages like Kriol.
ABS Census	Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census. A national survey conducted every five years by the ABS on behalf of the Australian Government. It collects demographic information about every person in the country and includes questions about languages spoken.
Australian English	A broader term than Standard Australian English and includes the closely related varieties of rural English and urban Englishes spoken by many Australians.
biculturalism	The ability to engage in the practices of two societies.
bilingual education	Teaching that involves two languages. In the context of bilingual programs in Aboriginal languages and English, 'mother tongue medium instruction' is where the children's first language is the initial language of classroom instruction and literacy learning, and the quotient of English is increased annually, by graduated steps.
bilingualism	The ability to use two or more languages to some extent.
biliteracy	The ability to read and write in two or more languages.
clan	An Australian Indigenous territorial descent group, functioning as a basic unit of social organisation.
code-switching (broad)	People switch varieties (or 'codes') when they change from the way they talk at home to a different way of talking or a different language in another situation, e.g. in a law court.
code-switching (narrow)	This occurs when speakers use different languages in the same conversation, for example, where one person asks a question in one language and the answer is given in another.
contact languages	See 'new languages'.

creole	A creole language is a language which has developed, often rapidly, from the contact between speakers of more than two languages and becomes the mother tongue of a speech community. It has properties from contributing languages but is a full and autonomous language. In Australia 'Kriol' is the name of one creole language which emerged from contact between speakers of traditional Aboriginal languages and speakers of English via an earlier bridging stage of 'Pidgin English' (see 'pidgin').
Country	Also called 'traditional Country', or 'homelands'.
demographic	Quantifiable characteristics of populations such as age, gender, language background, level of English proficiency.
dialect	This term, unlike 'language', describes a particular relationship between two language varieties which their speakers think of as belonging to the same language. For example, Scottish English and Australian English are dialects of English. Speakers of different dialects can understand each other, usually fairly easily. There are some data problems that revolve around the concept of dialect. For example, sometimes, a particular dialect holds a lot of significance for its speakers and they prefer to be seen/counted as separate from the other dialects of the same language - this can make speaker numbers of the overall language look much lower. There may be other values attached to the term 'dialect', for instance that the variety is not a 'full' or 'proper language'. It would be incorrect, for example, to refer to all traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages as 'dialects'.
domains of use	In sociolinguistics, domains of use specify places where different languages might be spoken, e.g. at home, the classroom, online, the workplace, etc.
Elders	Elders are those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members in the older generation who are recognised as cultural authorities by their communities and/or respected as rightful owners of their group's complex cultural and linguistic knowledge.
endangered language	As well as considering other indicators of language endangerment such as the absolute number of speakers, an endangered language is primarily a language where intergenerational transmission is broken. That is, the language is used mostly either by the parental generation and older; the grandparental generation and older; or the great-grandparental generation and older. Children are not fluent speakers.
Englishes	This Report recognises that there are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of speaking English, which differ somewhat from Standard Australian English. In this Report, 'Aboriginal Englishes' refers to English varieties spoken by some Aboriginal people; and 'Torres Strait English' refers to an English variety spoken by some Torres Strait Islanders. These Englishes are different from new languages.
English medium classroom	Classrooms which use the English language (which usually means a standard variety of English) as the medium of instruction. This means that all subject areas, such as mathematics, science or music etc., are delivered (i.e. taught, discussed, assessed) via spoken and written English.
First Nations	The original inhabitants and landholders of the Australian continent. The term recognises the different language groups as separate sovereign nations and is increasingly used to refer to both Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Also First Peoples.



first language (or mother tongue)	Refers to the language(s) learned from birth, typically used as an everyday means of communication. A person can have more than one first language. In other contexts, the term 'First Language' parallels the use of the term 'First Nations'. That is, in these contexts, the term is used as a marker of identity. 'First Languages' in these contexts refer to traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages that are intrinsically linked to traditional lands. The two meanings may not overlap.
heritage language	A language that is associated with a person's family, which they may or may not speak, and which is usually distinct from the national language(s).
home variety, home language	A person's first language, spoken in the home.
Indigenous	A term that refers collectively to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Other terms may be preferred when the more specific term (i.e. 'Aboriginal' or 'Torres Strait Islander') is more appropriate. 'First Nations' is increasingly common as a collective reference to both cultural groups, but the longer expression 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' may still be recommended for some contexts.
Kriol	The name of one new language which emerged in northern Australia. It has different varieties often named after the location e.g. Fitzroy Kriol, Ngukurr Kriol.
language	A system of communication involving words and/or signs used by a community.
language ecology	The configuration of languages that are spoken in a particular place.
language maintenance	Continued use of a language, despite competition with the majority language to become the main/sole language.
language revival / revitalisation / renewal / reawakening / reclamation	The process of relearning and reusing a language which had been minimally used or not used. Different programs and groups prefer specific terms. Typically, 'reclaiming', 'reviving' and 'reawakening' are the terms for processes when there are no speakers who learned the language from birth or people who remember the language; 'revitalising' is when there are still some first language speakers. 'Renewal' and 'reawakening' are general terms which also cover revitalisation and revival.
language shift	When a speech community (gradually) comes to speak another language for most, if not all, of its communicative and other cultural and symbolic needs. 'Language shift' is one of the processes involved in the development of a creole which by definition has mother tongue speakers.
language variety	A community's conventional way of talking.
literacy	The ability to encode and comprehend a spoken language through its writing system. (In some research, the term 'literacy' also includes the wider social practices associated with using literacy.)
mixed language	Mixed languages arise in contact situations, with parts from two or more source languages: for example, having the nouns from one language and the verbs from another language. Examples in Australia are Light Warlpiri and Gurindji Kriol. See also 'new languages'.

mutual intelligibility	Two dialects or varieties are mutually intelligible if the speakers of the two can understand each other.
NAPLAN	The Australian Government's National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy.
NATSISS	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey. The NATSISS is a six-yearly social survey with a sample of over 11,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in private dwellings across Australia.
new languages	These are Australian languages that have formed historically from two or more other languages, often in a context of sudden and sustained contact between speakers of a number of languages. It is a very broad term, including creoles, mixed languages and historical pidgins. Present day Australian new languages include Kriol, Yumplatok/Torres Strait Creole (also called 'Broken'), and Light Warlpiri.
proficiency	Proficiency (sometimes also called 'fluency') refers to the general underlying ability of people to speak a language. Mother-tongue speakers are typically fully proficient in their language. When applied to 'second/additional language proficiency' this term describes the general level of ability that the learner has acquired at that particular point in their learning trajectory.
reawakening	Reawakening a language that has passed out of active use usually involves research of historical records and archives in order to rebuild the resources of the language, as well as learners committed to building their language repertoire and re-introducing their language into aspects of their lives. It is sometimes called 'revival' or 'renewal'.
renewal	Refers to a situation where there is still an oral tradition for a language variety, but there are no fluent speakers, and children are likely to have little or no passive knowledge of the language.
revitalisation	Refers to situations in which a language variety has a generation of older speakers left and children are likely to have a good passive knowledge of the language. Revitalisation typically involves building younger people's proficiency.
reawakening/revival/reclamation	Refers to a situation where there are no speakers or partial speakers and reliance is on historical sources to provide knowledge.
second language	Refers to any language(s) that a person is learning or has learned in addition to their first language. Second languages can be learned to different levels of proficiency.
socialisation	The process of acquiring the language(s), practices, values and beliefs of a society.
Standard Australian English	The range of formal varieties of English spoken in Australia, used by governments, universities, schools, etc. in most published documents and formal speech.
Standard English	A cover-term which includes the standard languages of the United Kingdom, America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and so on, all of which derive from British English dialects.



(relatively) strong language

As well as considering other indicators of language endangerment such as the absolute number of speakers (a stronger language usually has more speakers), a relatively strong language is primarily a language where intergenerational transmission is maintained. That is, the language is used by all age groups.

Torres Strait Creole

See Yumplatok.

Torres Strait English

The variety of English that is spoken by Torres Strait Islanders, particularly on Thursday Island, the administrative centre of the Torres Strait. It is different from the new language Yumplatok/Torres Strait Creole. Just as there are ways of speaking English that identify speakers as coming from New Zealand or Ireland, so Torres Strait English is a way of speaking English in the Torres Strait.

Torres Strait Islander

Torres Strait Islanders live on the islands of the Torres Strait, the expanse of water separating the north-eastern tip of the Australian mainland from the island of New Guinea. Approximately 20 of these islands are inhabited and over the past 50 years or so, many Torres Strait Islanders have migrated to the mainland, creating large diaspora communities especially in Queensland. Nowadays, an English-lexified creole, Yumplatok, is the most common language of Torres Strait Islanders.

traditional languages

These are Australian languages spoken by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people prior to colonisation, or the directly descended varieties spoken today. Also called heritage languages, First Nations Languages, and other terms. The term is used only to describe a type of language; individual languages have specific names.

Yumplatok, also known as Torres Strait Creole

The name of the new contact language that is spoken by Torres Strait Islanders living on the islands of the Torres Strait and in diaspora communities on the Northern Peninsula Area of Cape York and elsewhere the mainland, particularly coastal towns and cities of Queensland. The name, 'Yumplatok', created by its speakers, literally means 'our language' and is gradually ousting the most widely known term 'Broken', while 'Torres Strait Creole' is a more academic name. Closely related varieties to Yumplatok are spoken by Aboriginal people on the top third of Cape York: Cape York Creole, Lockhart River Creole and Napranum Creole. These along with Yumplatok have been collectively termed the 'north-eastern affiliates'. They are related to new contact languages spoken in Melanesia, including Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea, Bislama in Vanuatu and Solomon Islands Pijin.

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