

# Rich expression: bringing together Indigenous languages and Standard Australian English

**Warning** – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and students are advised that this curriculum resource may contain images, voices or names of deceased people.

## GLOSSARY

**colonisers:** invading forces that take control of a populated country; the invaded country is called a 'colony'. The British began the colonisation of Australia in 1788.

**common:** shared.

**Country:** the lands where Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities have always lived.

**deny; be denied:** to not allow someone to have something; to not be allowed to have something.

**First Nations people:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

**missions:** places where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were forced to live to learn European culture, religion and the English language.

**orthography:** the art of writing words with the proper letters, according to accepted usage; correct spelling.

**revitalise:** to introduce new vigour, life and strength into something.

**syntax:** the patterns for arranging words and phrases into sentences.

## Variety within the English language

The English language has developed over many thousands of years and in many places around the world. Languages change and develop according to the context: who you are, where you are, and what's happened or is happening there.

The words we use (vocabulary), the order we put those words in (grammar and **syntax**) and how we say those words (accent) help us to know who we are and where we are.

## Variety of Indigenous languages

For thousands of years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations have spoken more than 250 different languages throughout the land we now call Australia. These Indigenous languages have been passed from generation to generation. Bruce Pascoe (2014) estimates these languages to be 40 000 to 60 000 years old, but even at 10 000 years old they would be older than most other world languages.

There are many variations of both English and Indigenous languages in Australia. When Australia was colonised, just a couple of hundred years ago, on top of the many languages spoken, there were also 600 dialects (Bradley 2018). Dialects are different versions of a language. In general, people speaking different dialects can be understood by one another (AIATSIS 2020b). An example is Yanyuwa, one of the only Indigenous languages we know that has separate dialects for men and women (Bradley 2018).

Creole languages are a special type of language that develops as a result of two peoples with different languages needing a **common** language to communicate, for example when trading. In Australia, they are the merging of the Indigenous languages of the area with English. Kriol is found in the Northern Territory and Creole is found in the Torres Strait Islands.

Aboriginal English is another variety of English in Australia that is different to Standard English because it contains words from local ancestral languages and may have different grammatical features (AIATSIS 2020a).

## A variety of words

Words are created everyday as new ideas are discovered that need naming. Different cultures have different knowledge and ideas, so sometimes when translating there's not an exact match between two languages. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures have a special connection to the land, that is, both spiritual and for living. Immense detail about land can be found in Indigenous languages. For example, the seafaring Yanyuwa people from the Gulf of Carpentaria, Northern Territory, have a word for sunbeams shining through the water, a word for the shadows of clouds passing over the water's surface and 27 different words for 'dugong'; a marine animal that's an Indigenous food source (Bradley 2018). Dr John Bradley, a non-Indigenous man who's learnt Yanyuwa, describes learning the language as learning "a different way of seeing the world" (Bradley 2018).

## Denied the right to speak

Many **First Nations people** were removed from **Country** and forced to live on **missions**. Many children were taken from their families and have become known as 'the Stolen Generations'. The stories from people that lived in the missions show us the way the authorities would forcefully control the lives of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Languages, cultures and visits with family were often forbidden because the government were teaching the children European ways. Speaking only English was a big part of breaking connection to Indigenous knowledge, cultures and way of life. Jeanie Bell, a Jagera and Dulingbara woman, explains in an excerpt from the National Museum Australia's interview, *Language and identity* (2010):

*John Harms:* And were there penalties for speaking (Indigenous) language?

*Jeanie Bell:* Well, that's what we were told. I guess the one that I've heard people mainly say is that they would have their mouth washed out with soap or they were sent to the dormitories or they were locked up in darkrooms and punished. They were punished for a lot of things. And quite often they were also punished by older Aboriginal people who had taken on the roles of helping to grow these children up. My mother always talked about a boiling

pot on a fire outside the dormitory where an old lady who didn't have any legs sat, and she was always threatening to throw them in the pot – like those kinds of stories. Oral history is wonderful in many ways, but quite often it does get changed along the way, so we have to be careful with that.

### Impact of colonisation

When **colonisers** came to Australia, 275 languages and 600 dialects were spoken. Now, only 20 languages are considered strong (Bradley 2018). This has happened for many, many indigenous peoples around the world. In 2019, the United Nations (UN) found that 40 percent of the world's estimated 6700 languages were in danger of disappearing – the majority belonging to indigenous people (Department of Economic and Social Affairs and Social Inclusion 2019). The UN believes all languages are of value and so declared 2019 the International Year of Indigenous Languages to raise awareness and promote action to preserve, support and promote Indigenous languages.

### Letters and letter patterns to represent sounds

There are some distinctive sounds in many Indigenous languages that are unusual or used differently in the English language. For example, *ng* is a common sound at the end of Standard Australian English words. It's also common at the start of many words in many Indigenous languages. Think about the position of the tongue when saying it in the word 'sing'; that's the position of the tongue for this sound when used at the start of words like Ngarrindjeri, a First Nation and Indigenous language in South Australia (Raven 2018).

Across Australia, there are many initiatives that are taking place to record Indigenous languages that have been passed on by word-of-mouth for thousands of generations. One example of this is the Yolŋu languages from north-east Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. The words in Yolŋu languages include immense, rich knowledge of shellfish because it is such an important part of the people's livelihood. Dr Bentley James (2016), and his team, have collaborated with seven language groups across the region to produce a book called *Maypal, mayali' ga wän̄a: shellfish, meaning & place, a Yolŋu bilingual identification guide to shellfish of North East Arnhem Land*. The team used the accepted **orthography** of the area and a bilingual alphabet based on the English alphabet order, while keeping the distinctive sounds of Yolŋu languages grouped together (James 2018). Can you spot the letter patterns for the distinctive sounds of the Yolŋu languages?

Bilingual alphabetical order: **a ä b d ð dh dj e g l k ll m n ñ nh ny ŋ o p r rr t ṭ th tj u wy**

### Personal response

Indigenous languages are rich in meaning of Country and give different ways of seeing the world. Let's value and **revitalise** Indigenous languages by taking some of these actions:

- Add some words from a local language to your vocabulary.
- Watch NITV and listen to the use of the many languages of this land we call Australia.
- When on holiday, find out how to say the name of the land you're staying on and how to say hello in the local language.
- Listen to *Little yarns* by ABC Indigenous with a younger sibling or friend to hear stories from first languages all over Australia.
- Find out the meanings of the placenames in your area and see if they are from Indigenous languages.

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## References

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