

# 4 English Language as Juggernaut – Aboriginal English and Indigenous Languages in Australia

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## Overview

Aboriginal English, as a dialect of English, is now recognised as the first language of many Aboriginal Australians, and it is also used by small numbers of non-Indigenous Australians. This form of communication is rich, highly structured and a complex form of the English language, and it is widely appropriated in the social and cultural domains of Aboriginal people. This chapter will examine the communicative roles of Aboriginal English in Australia and the ongoing efforts of Aboriginal people who are determined to maintain and revitalize many of the 250 traditional languages that were once spoken across this country. It is important that English is not seen as 'merely an instrument for communication'. Robert Phillipson (2008: 5) makes the case that 'it is a value one identifies with for the social functions the language is seen as serving, its utility in the linguistic market'.

One example of how Aboriginal English has evolved over several decades is reflected in the poetry of Lionel Fogarty, a well known radical writer from South East Queensland:

Nature, Jukambe might tell or lend  
Collectively my people now  
I don't see at grassland or hill creek tract  
Where Jukambe worked and played  
Yea my some communication, still many tribespeople  
Dialect young and old not sold.  
Yea, bunya pines brighten old Jukambe members  
Individual, too keep children Yoogum Yoogum...  
Jukambe is my people, cause white mans name taken place  
Relived, I am. In your spirit, Jukambe.

(Fogarty, 1983: 48)

Alongside the widespread use of Aboriginal English, considerable numbers of Aboriginal people in Australia are also endeavouring to reclaim and revive the traditional languages of their ancestors. Some of these languages have been severely weakened and, in other cases, decimated since the arrival of the English language onto our land just over two centuries ago. While a small number of relatively isolated ancestral languages have managed to survive the linguistic (and literal) genocide of early colonisation, the speakers and custodians of all these languages – particularly the weaker ones – now have to educate themselves, their families and their communities about the additional effort needed to ensure the survival of these languages into the future.

Unfortunately, the majority of indigenous children in Australia are now required – both by policy and pressure – to use Standard Australian English (SAE) on entrance to primary school, and they are also expected to improve their competency in this language as they progress through the various government-run education systems in the country. This has not always been an achievable goal for many indigenous people, due to the huge disparities in the social and economic lifestyles of a large proportion of the Australian Aboriginal population. According to Eades (2008), Aboriginal people make up about 2–3% of the Australian population. But 'Australian Aboriginal people share with other Indigenous minorities around the world the legacies of colonial dispossession – with living conditions and indicators typical of people in third world countries... The linguistic impact of colonisation has also been drastic' (Eades, 2008: 1).

The English-language teaching 'juggernaut' has decimated a range of traditional lifestyles as it has moved across the country. In the past, in the days of settlement and land grabbing, this was unrelenting. In present times, a great many Aboriginal people are moving from the more remote communities to seek opportunities in the urban areas through education and employment. Over the past two centuries, many Aboriginal people have been forcibly removed and entangled in waves of urban drift from their traditional homelands. In many places, they continue to struggle for survival, both physically and mentally, on the fringes of emerging growth centres. In 2002, Bell wrote that

...because of the devastating effects of colonization on blackfellas in this Country – through disease, murder and other forms of attempted genocide over the past 200 years – our language and culture has taken on a different shape and form.... While it has not survived intact, but in varying degrees of healthiness, it has survived. Many of us are working with what remains in determined efforts to rebuild ourselves and our families and communities back to a point where we are no longer victims of a system that set out to destroy us as a race. (Bell, 2002: 43)

The language revitalization movement in Australia has grown considerably over the past 20 years. This has been encouraged by limited support from government funding, academic endeavours involving university-based linguists and active community-based language workers who are employed by Aboriginal Language Centres scattered around the country. At the same time, there is a growing awareness in those language communities which are involved in this revival of the realisation that any achievable success with such programmes can only come about with strong commitment and hard work on their part, combined with the mostly positive benefits that can be derived from collaborative partnerships with linguists and educators (Bell, 2010).

## How the English Language Changed the Course of History for Aboriginal Australians

Historically, it was the Aboriginal people living close to the eastern coast of Australia who first started hearing and mimicking English in the second half of the 19th century. In coastal Queensland, as in other parts of Australia, such traditional Aboriginal people were commonly multilingual speakers of up to five or six traditional languages or dialects from around their region. However, by the first half of the 20th century, those Aboriginal people who regularly mixed with the colonisers from 'the home country' (England) developed a competence quite close to the more formal variety of English that was often referred to as the 'Queen's English'. It was not long before the government authorities of the time enforced various rules and regulations which prohibited Aboriginal people who were living on government reserves and church-run missions from speaking their traditional languages and practicing their culture.

Those Aboriginal people who had less interaction with the outside world continued to resist using English for as long as possible, even when it meant that they were only able to speak their traditional languages in secret locations. Inevitably though, throughout South-East Queensland and other parts of Australia, increasing exposure to the English language for the majority of Aboriginal people in the more settled parts of the country resulted in the emergence of a reduced form of English, which contained numerous words and grammatical features from the old languages. This early contact language was commonly referred to as 'pidgin English' across many parts of Australia. Mühlhäusler (1996: 7) observed that there was adequate evidence to show the 'underlying linguistic unity of most if not all varieties of Pidgin English spoken in Australia' during the earliest stages of settlement. According to him, this 'English-based stable pidgin' included 'a considerable amount of indigenisation, with Aborigines communicating about new ways of life and new beliefs in Pidgin English'.

In some contact language situations such as the more urbanized centres of South-East Queensland, there was a gradual reversal, or shift away, from Pidgin English – away from creolization – and a move closer to standard English in the form of different varieties of Aboriginal English (Eades, 1991). Mühlhäusler (1996) concluded that this was due to several factors, including (in southern Australia) the widespread death and dispersal of Aboriginal people.

As Aboriginal people, we are often reminded of these events by the older generations who have passed stories down to us through oral history – about the spread of unfamiliar diseases and, in some cases, the deliberate massacre of large numbers of our people. During this earlier period, some other factors which contributed to the emergence of new ways of communication for the Aboriginal population included ‘a long standing program of assimilation... resulting in an increase of standard English and Aboriginal English’, as well as ‘the creolisation of Pidgins in some parts of the Northern Territory, Cape York Peninsula and Torres Straits’ (Mühlhäusler, 1996: 8).

As time passed and more young Aboriginal people entered mainstream education, they developed bi-dialectical English oral language skills, including a form of Standard Australian English, while code-switching in different speech contexts and continuing to use ‘language’ words and phrases from their traditional languages. In parallel to these developments, the traditional languages themselves gradually fell into decline as the older, more fluent speakers died and fewer younger people gained full fluency in their ancestral languages.

In the earlier decades, the emerging varieties of Aboriginal English were often unrecognized or misunderstood by outsiders and were generally considered to be ‘bad English’. In more recent times, Aboriginal people have lobbied, with support from concerned linguists, for the acceptance of Aboriginal English as a primary language or dialect.

## A Stronger Push to have Aboriginal English Accepted in Schools

A former Queensland academic, E.H. Flint, wrote (1973: 4) of ‘the need for bilingual education aiming at solving social and educational problems arising from multilingualism in Australia’, which, if ignored, could ‘lead to role compartmentalization...’. Other researchers, such as Kaldor (1976), strongly advocated that teachers in Western Australian schools recognise Aboriginal English as the first dialect of their Aboriginal students. A year later, Gardiner (1977) reinforced the need to teach Standard Australian English as a *second dialect*. Sharifian (2005: 513) notes that ‘the notion of “standard” in this context is largely constituted with reference to non-linguistic issues such as social and economical power, though the non-standard varieties may be emotionally and ideologically more powerful’.

Flint recognised in an earlier study (1968) that the Queensland Education Department's 'attempt to suppress the L(ow) form [of English] caused great unrest in the community, as it did on Norfolk Island between 1912 and 1929' (Flint, 1968: 19). He goes on to say that the attempt was later abandoned, because of 'the simple sociolinguistic reason that the L form is culture-bound and is closely associated with the child's intimate emotional family and home relationships' (Flint, 1973: 11). Eades later comments on Flint's writing:

Unsurprisingly for the 1960s, Flint's article was framed within the assimilationist discourse of the time, and it predicted that "the Aboriginal English dialect will soon disappear".... when the official government policy of social and cultural assimilation of Aboriginals into the Australian community has been completely carried out. (1968: 19, in Eades, 2008: 2)

Flint is considered by some to be one of the first researchers in Australia to refer to the various social dialects spoken by Aboriginal people in Queensland at that time as Aboriginal English. According to Eades, Flint was concerned about the education of the speakers of these new varieties of English, in spite of his 'assimilationist prediction' (2008: 2).

Aboriginal English, as shown by the data gathered from the 30 Queensland communities, is not homogeneous. Five different types of communities, of which the English speech exhibits both similarities and differences, are distinguished. (Flint, 1973: 11)

In 1984, in the fringe camps of Alice Springs, the major large town of Central Australia, a study was carried out by linguist Jean Harkins at the request of the governing Aboriginal council of the then independent, multilingual Yipirinya School. Harkins acknowledged in her book *Bridging Two Worlds* (1984) that 'most Australian Aboriginal people speak English at least some of the time, though many also speak one or more Aboriginal languages... Many Aboriginal people feel their lives would be better if they could improve their command of English' (1984: 1). While it would be more precise to say that Aboriginal people probably felt life would be easier with improved competency in English – both back in the 1980s and even more so in the current climate of economic rationalism – Harkins stated, at that time, that 'perhaps English isn't really a problem for Aboriginal people at all, or at most a very minor problem compared to the impact of racism and economic exploitation' (1984: 1).

While this continues to be the social environment that many Aboriginal people are forced to operate in throughout Australia, life is generally easier for those who do have reasonably high levels of English language competency.

Harkins (1984) conducted a linguistic analysis of the variety of English used by Aboriginal people from the different language groups in the various contexts in which they operated in Alice Springs. At that time, it was a small town, with hostility often being shown to itinerant Aboriginal people from 'out bush' – referring to the more remote communities where their lifestyle was closer to the traditional way. People from these isolated communities would come to town to seek or obtain educational or other government services, medical treatment or to visit sick relatives and/or attend funerals. Many would stay on for an extended time in Alice Springs – which could be several months or longer – resulting in severe overcrowding in the houses of other family members, living, as they were, in one of the many town camps surrounding the township.

Yipirinya School was originally set up in the late 1970s to provide alternative educational services to the children living in these town camps, with a commitment to provide teaching for much of the curriculum in one of the four main Central Australian Aboriginal languages. These were, generally, the first languages for the majority of children who attended the school. The school was also required by government policies to deliver programmes in Standard Australian English.

Harkins points out that there was, at that time, a perception in Australia that Aboriginal people generally spoke a deficit type of English. The purpose of her study was to show how Aboriginal people connected to Yipirinya School were learning and using English in a multilingual environment, while developing a distinct variety of English with its own rules and grammatical structures, in order to meet their communication needs (see Appendix). She writes:

although they have suffered great disadvantage in the non-Aboriginal school system many Aboriginal people have retained a vision... to acquire knowledge and tools to give them more power over their own lives and enable them to better express their own aspirations and identity... Aboriginal languages were highly valued, and maintenance of them is seen as one of the goals of education. English is an important additional language to serve as a bridge between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal realities. (Harkins, 1984: 4–5)

## Responses to this Changing Language Situation

While many Australian indigenous people now recognise that SAE (Standard Australian English) is necessary for survival in the globalised Western world, they continue to resist giving up their right to speak their own form of English. These modern ways of speaking are considered as important markers of our *identity* and the main form of communication within our extended families and community groups. The unique features

associated with our use of language set us apart from the rest of the Australian population.

In many places, young indigenous members of the different communities were not being exposed to sufficient Standard Australian English to develop their oral skills in this dialect, so Aboriginal people involved in the development and delivery of educational programmes – in, at least, Queensland and Western Australia – joined with the linguists, who had an academic interest in Aboriginal English, to lobby schools and government to accept it as the first dialect of many school-aged children.

One of the proposals put up to government at this time was to support teachers to use Aboriginal English in the early stages of education as a starting point to acquiring Standard Australian English (SAE). In Western Australia, Jennifer Gardiner (1977) proposed programmes for Teaching Standard English as a Second Dialect to Speakers of Aboriginal English (TSESD). At that time, she suggested that the rationale behind such a programme would be similar to that of bilingual education programs happening at that time in the northern parts of Australia. This model was seen as 'wider than just the need to teach children standard English so that they can succeed in school' (Gardiner, 1977: 166).

Such programmes are also concerned with the totality of the child's experience, that is, with Aboriginal culture, values and aspirations, rather than, as in the past, exclusively aimed at inducting Aboriginal children into the European-Australian society. (Gardiner, 1977: 166)

Gardiner, along with other linguists, called for the *difference theory approach* to TSESD and 'the recognition of the child's own language or dialect to be regarded as resource rather than an obstacle' (1977: 174).

The TSESD programme, to our knowledge, was never officially endorsed by the Western Australian education authority, nor any other government body across Australia, but research and in-service programmes with high standard resources continue to be offered to staff (mainly in primary schools) to inform them of the negative educational implications and effects of de-valuing and ignoring the use of Aboriginal English in the classroom (Sharifian & Malcolm, 2003). This is particularly the case when teachers – even today – place it, from the outset, within a deficit framework.

According to Malcolm and Rochecouste (2001: 273), familiar lexicon from Standard Australian English is contextually different when used by Aboriginal English speakers, because it is 'informed by a semantics deeply rooted in Aboriginal culture'. Increasing numbers of indigenous people now speak a localised form of Aboriginal English as their first or – in some remote communities – their second language or – in many cases – a variety of the rapidly spreading English-based creole widely used by both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people throughout most of northern Australia.

## Bilingual Education in the Northern Territory: The 2009 Four-Hour Challenge

In 2009, in the Northern Territory (NT) of Australia, considerable numbers of Aboriginal people still lived on their traditional land in remote locations and continue to speak their ancestral languages. In late 2009, the NT Government made a policy decision that all Aboriginal children in remote community schools would have English-only teaching for the first four hours of every day, including those schools where previously 'traditional languages... were used systematically alongside English to teach the school curriculum to young students' (Dickson, 2009: 20). Strong concerns were expressed by Aboriginal leaders and language activists from both linguistic and church communities in the Northern Territory about the impact that this policy would have on the remaining, and relatively strong, Aboriginal languages still spoken in the NT.

Supporters of bilingual and multilingual education have unified to try to reverse this policy, which was seen as a knee-jerk reaction to pressure from the Federal Government. Poor literacy and numeracy results in the National Assessment Programme – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) standardised tests were seen as a major contributing factor to the new policy, although Brian Devlin – linguist and leading academic on bilingual education – states that 'the *Data for Bilingual Schools* document tabled in the Legislative Assembly on November 26, 2008 is incomplete, selective, erroneous and biased. It is too insubstantial a basis on which to initiate a major policy shift that imposes compulsory changes on remote rural schools' (Devlin, 2008: 2).

The announcement of a national curriculum by the Federal Government has also supported the move away from a bilingual educational model towards an intensive focus on English literacy and numeracy in the NT's remote community schools. Educational leaders see this as the beginning-of-the-end for bilingual education in the Northern Territory. As an Aboriginal elder and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Tom Calma, in his keynote address to the World Indigenous Peoples' Conference in Melbourne (2008), stated that, if this policy is implemented, the four hours of mandatory English will effectively kill off bilingual education:

The Northern Territory Government claims it is being pushed into dismantling Bilingual education because the Federal Government is standardising school curricula across the nation. I have two responses to that. The first is that there is nothing stopping schools from teaching a national curriculum in Indigenous languages. All of the same content and the same outcomes can be achieved in Indigenous languages. In



addition, we have to remember that right from the beginning of school, English is part of the Bilingual school day, and therefore students are learning English literacy right from the first year of school. (Calma, 2008: excerpt)

Experienced indigenous educators have protested strongly against the four-hour policy, and many letters supporting the retention of bilingual education were sent to the Minister of Education in an attempt to reverse the decision. These indigenous voices echoed the cries from teacher, Yalmay Yunupingu (2009), a senior Yolŋu (Aboriginal) educator, who quoted from her own letter to the Minister in an online discussion group, as follows:

Yolŋu language is our Power, our Foundation, our Root and everything that holds us together. Yolŋu language gives us strength, language is our identity, who we are. Yolŋu language gives us pride. Language is our Law and Justice. The importance of teaching our Indigenous language is to keep it alive and to nurture it, to preserve and to sustain our language.

Yunupingu's letter expressed her dismay at the introduction of this new policy and also predicted the reaction of young Yolŋu children to her use of English language in the first four hours of teaching time:

I have been told that I am not allowed to use the children's language anymore. We have been told we are not to use our students' first language, only English. Well, I already know that the children won't understand what I'm saying, they will laugh at me, and they may even misbehave because they'll be bored and won't know what the lessons are about. So perhaps I will cheat and use some *Yolŋu matha* – what will happen then? Will I have my mouth washed out with soap like in the mission times? Or will I have to stand on one leg outside the classroom? Or perhaps I will lose my job?

The debate is still continuing. No resolution has been reached in addressing the concerns and issues raised by supporters of bilingual education. It seems that English is viewed as the superior language, and no amount of evidence-based research will change the minds of the policy-makers. Intensive English teaching is seen as the key to solving all educational problems, relating to indigenous children who speak English as a second or third language. On the positive side, there is an increasing amount of support from the international arena. In particular, the United Nations, where Australia is required to regularly report to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD). In 2010, in response to Australia's report, it stated that:

The Committee welcomes the new national approach to preserve Indigenous languages but is concerned that no additional financial resources have been committed by the State party nor received by the Maintenance of Indigenous Languages and Records program for this new approach.

The Committee is also highly concerned by the recent abolition of bilingual education funding by the Northern Territory Government in light of the precarious condition of many Indigenous languages, and the lack of adequate opportunities for children to receive instruction in or of their language. (CERD, 2010: Section 21, Articles 2 and 5)

The committee went on to encourage Australia to allocate adequate resources for the new national approach to preserve Indigenous languages and to work in consultation with indigenous communities to hold a national inquiry into the issue of bilingual education for indigenous peoples. It was recommended that Australia adopt all necessary measures to preserve native languages and develop and carry out programmes to revitalize indigenous languages and bilingual and intercultural education for indigenous peoples, respecting cultural identity and history. As Australia is a party to the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education, it was also strongly encouraged to consider providing adequate opportunities for national minorities to both use and teach their own languages (CERD, 2010: 7).

At the time of writing, nothing has been forthcoming from either the Northern Territory or the Australian Commonwealth governments, in relation to the reversal of this controversial policy, however, the supporters of bilingual education continue to fight to maintain, strengthen and support bilingual programs for indigenous children in remote Northern Territory communities.

## Indigenous Language Revival and Reclamation

Traditional languages for indigenous people in Australia are regarded as an integral part of our identity, as the First People of this land. Many indigenous people today still feel pain and resentment at the widespread loss of ancestral languages in our country, and while many language revival projects are now under way in Australia, providing indigenous people with an opportunity to regain and re-learn parts of their traditional languages, the number of fluent speakers of many of the surviving languages continues to decline. While some revival programs have been more successful than others, there still exists an ongoing firm commitment among community groups, linguists and language workers, including non-indigenous linguists employed by language centres and universities, to continue this work.

Unfortunately, a strong emotional connection to the past does not always manifest into active participation in language revival programmes, which consequently means fewer people are becoming semi- or fluent speakers of these languages. There also exists a large group of Aboriginal people who were separated from their families and communities at an early age (the 'Stolen Generations', Australian Human Rights Commission, 1997). In some cases, they may not feel a strong connection to their traditional home areas and languages. For this group, there is often a strong sense of loss which runs deeper, and they may find it difficult to become involved in language revival programmes, without first participating in some kind of healing process.

In a report of recent work concerned with developing a 'Typology of Revival Languages in Australia', Eira and Couzens (2010) conducted a series of interviews with community people, including linguists and language workers, which revealed that a number of questions need to be considered in the analysis of traditional languages including:

- (1) What are the points of meeting and/or tension between cultural and linguistic criteria for decision-making in this language? And,
- (2) In what ways does the link between language and identity affect decisions and processes as evidenced in language use?

The results of this ongoing study, along with other relevant emerging discussions around issues such as beliefs and attitudes toward language-revival work, are becoming critical in determining the future direction of this work across Australia and globally. While this is a relatively new dimension of the language revival debate in our country, a lot more discussion needs to happen. Only minimal government funding is available in Australia for indigenous communities to carry out language revival and maintenance activities, with more project applications being made than there are funds to support them.

In a discussion of the language revival work that is happening in the traditional Tlingit lands in south-eastern Alaska, Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer (1998) focused on a region where English has rapidly become the language of choice for many indigenous people. They refer to the 'intergenerational dislocation' in this region as extreme, and they detail the emotional and psychological factors involved in efforts to achieve ideological clarification. Much of this is in relation to the negative images which still remain in some people's minds about the use of language in earlier days and how this was strongly discouraged and degraded.

Certainly in Alaska, ... Native American individuals and communities are plagued and haunted with anxieties, insecurities, and hesitations about the value of their indigenous language and culture. These

insecurities must be addressed and resolved as an initial step before any meaningful action can be taken on a personal, family, or community level. (Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer, 1998: 61)

The situation in Australia is very similar to North America and many other parts of the world, and we believe there needs to be more informed discussion around what is realistically achievable when we attempt language revival. This is particularly relevant in communities where the languages have been severely diminished with few or even no fluent speakers and with the existence of only small amounts of documentation on the language. A realistic assessment of the language situation in each region is required before the development of appropriate strategies are designed for success in the planned programme. What may work in one language community will not always be appropriate in another language community.

As language revival and revitalisation rapidly become primary modes of community-based work in Aboriginal Australia, the need for a theoretical foundation for the linguistic scenarios which emerge is becoming increasingly evident. While linguists and communities have been developing approaches and solutions for commonly encountered issues, the various outcomes and stages for the languages themselves are as yet insufficiently understood in the wider academic arena as well as by communities starting out. (Eira & Couzens, 2010: n.p.)

One example of such a programme which has managed to survive and grow, despite the lack of a theoretical foundation, is the one in which Bell was involved with her own language community located in Hervey Bay in Queensland. This is a coastal area where many Aboriginal people continue to live on the land of their ancestors – the Butchulla people who originally inhabited a section of the largest sand island in Australia. Prior to the commencement of the language revival programme over a decade ago, and as a trained linguist, Bell compiled a dictionary of the Butchulla language from historical sources recorded with our elders by earlier linguists who had a scientific interest in the indigenous languages of Australia.

Bell assisted with the basic linguistic training of indigenous language workers, including Joy Bonner, a close cousin and other members of the Butchulla language community, which provided them with enough skills to get the language programme off the ground. In those early days, the language workers taught words, phrases and simple songs from the Butchulla language to a group of Aboriginal children in Hervey Bay. These children continue to be the core of the revival programme, which is taught on a regular weekly basis. Joy is still the coordinator and teacher of this programme, and assistance is provided by younger people in the community, who are helping to develop new teaching materials for the programme. This allows the

children to extend their speaking knowledge, as well as their reading and writing competencies, in this language.

In 2009, the Education Department within the Queensland State Government began negotiations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people involved in the revival of languages to set up a curriculum framework in anticipation of taking their languages into selected mainstream schools within the region. While this move is generally seen as positive by the people involved, the downside is that the government is likely to only provide the community linguists and teachers with limited resources to go into the schools and teach the language. They will need increasing amounts of support to be able to develop the teaching materials that are essential if this type of programme is to be successful in the eyes of the government authorities and the community.

In addition to such developments, the linguists and the government will also need to continue to support the language revival efforts being made at the community level, in order to ensure that the language stays in the hands of the custodians and that they are given the power and responsibility to make any future decisions about what direction these efforts will take. This will further develop the custodians' own aspirations for language retention. Traditional language knowledge and use remains a core part of their other efforts to maintain and revive cultural practices associated with their ancestral lands.

Aboriginal people have survived the white-man's world by being strong-willed and by being determined to stay true to who they are. Even though many of the traditional Aboriginal languages have been wiped out, Aboriginal people have kept their cultural identity by shaping, moulding and manipulating the English language into something of their own. Whether we like it or not, Aboriginal English is the first language for the majority of Aboriginal Australians, and it is here to stay. At the same time, we indigenous Australians are determined to reclaim and retain as much as possible of our own traditional languages.

The juggernaut that is Standard Australian English will need to be confronted, hobbled and disempowered.

## Appendix: Some Features of Australian Aboriginal English

To be truly competent in Aboriginal English, one has to know and understand the many linguistic and communicative rules and processes that come into play once a speech event begins. When these are not properly adhered to, the verbal interaction between speakers can become distorted and incomprehensible.

This is evident when a non-Aboriginal person, who may appear competent in speaking Aboriginal English in social interactions, can often be

caught out when the invisible language and cultural rules are overstepped. This can cause offence, embarrassment and confusion to all who may be involved in the verbal interaction. There are underlying currents of linguistic and cultural rules, protocols and processes at play which apply when Aboriginal English is spoken just between Aboriginal people. We do not profess to state that all Aboriginal people behave, act and talk in this certain way, on the contrary, we believe that every person – black or white – possesses an individual personality, regardless of their upbringing. However, we do believe that our underlying values, beliefs and knowledge do influence, guide and direct the way that Aboriginal people communicate with others, both in their own socio-cultural context and in mainstream society.

To be truly communicatively competent in Aboriginal English, one must grow up learning the cultural and linguistic rules and protocols of the specific Aboriginal social group to which one is connected. These rules and protocols guide individuals into using appropriate actions, behaviours and aspects of language, depending on the situational context. Aboriginal people have cleverly taken the English language and shaped, manipulated and moulded it to make it their own. They have resisted the dominant linguistic forms of speaking, by staying true to their values, beliefs and ways of doing and being – incorporating and embedding this into their speech. This has resulted in English dialects that are distinctly Aboriginal.

The key features of this English dialect that make it distinctly Aboriginal include the central importance of relationship and respect.

## Relationship

Important relationship values that are incorporated into Aboriginal English include using kinship terms to show respect or a connection to other Aboriginal people, regardless of direct family ties or not. Many younger members know they should address older men and women as Aunty or Uncle and not by their first name. This is part of correct social protocol. It is quite acceptable for younger members to address each other as brother, sister or cousin, even though they are not related.

## Indirectness

Indirectness in language is also a sign of respect. It is important to be careful not to ask direct personal questions to a person that one has only just met. This type of behaviour would be viewed as rude and disrespectful of the other person's privacy. When the time is right, the appropriate questions can be asked. An aspect of indirectness is a gentle approach, not being forward and pushy, but actually waiting for an appropriate time to ask certain questions.

Although English forms the basis of the grammatical structure and organisation of Aboriginal English, there is also room for certain words and

phrases from both Aboriginal languages and English to be embedded into the spoken language.

## Words/Phrases

Words, phrases and terms from traditional Aboriginal languages are used in many Aboriginal English(es) to ensure that one's cultural identity is kept intact. Certain words from heritage languages identify the connection of the group of speakers to their particular cultural heritage. Aboriginal people can often identify where people are from just from the way they speak or pronounce a certain word or phrase.

Likewise, some words and phrases from English are deliberately manipulated to completely change the meaning to the opposite of the English meaning. A common word that all Aboriginal people know and use is the word 'deadly'. To Aboriginal people, this means excellent and good, but for mainstream Australia, it means 'dangerous and bad'. There are many other examples in which Aboriginal people have taken an English word and changed the meaning to make it their own.

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