



about Australia

indigenous languages

- At the time of European settlement in Australia in the 1700s, Indigenous people across the continent spoke an estimated 250 languages. Some of these are still spoken today, but most have become extinct or are in danger of disappearing.

However, in the past 30 years, Australian governments, educators and researchers have been developing programs and strategies to maintain and preserve Australia's Indigenous linguistic heritage and to support those who continue to speak Indigenous languages or those who wish to revive Indigenous languages.

Indigenous languages today

At the 2006 census, 55 695 people, or about one in eight Indigenous Australians, said that an Indigenous language was their primary household language. The Indigenous languages with the most speakers currently are, Arrernte, Djambarrpuyngu/Dhuwal, Pitjantjatjara and Warlpiri. There are also many speakers of Torres Strait Creole and Kriol.

The National Indigenous Languages Survey found in 2004 that only 145 Indigenous languages were still spoken in Australia and about 110 of these were severely or critically endangered. The survey also found that 18 languages were 'strong' in the sense that they were spoken by all age groups but at least three or four of these showed some signs of endangerment. Many languages are no longer spoken in their entirety by anyone; rather, Indigenous people use words and

phrases from them. There is widespread community support for language projects to assist the revival and maintenance of Australian Indigenous languages. Bilingual education was introduced in some Indigenous communities in the early 1970s and continues today.

In a 2002 survey, 47 per cent of Indigenous young people reported that they identified with a clan, tribal or language group. Indigenous languages were more commonly spoken in remote areas: 50 per cent of Indigenous young people in remote areas spoke an Indigenous language, compared with 6 per cent of those in non-remote areas. Similarly, the proportion of Indigenous young people for whom an Indigenous language was the language spoken at home was 37 per cent in remote areas, compared with 2 per cent in non-remote regions.

History

There is a consensus among linguists that the large group of languages spoken across the southern part of Australia and in north-east Arnhem Land belongs to a single language family known as Pama-Nyungan, named after the word for 'person' in both the north-eastern and south-western areas of its distribution.

There are Pama–Nyungan and many non-Pama–Nyungan languages spoken in the north and north-west of the Northern Territory. Non-Pama–Nyungan languages have probably been influenced by the region's proximity to the islands of Central Indonesia and by Indigenous peoples' dealings with the Macassan peoples of Indonesia.

Torres Strait Islands languages have been influenced by its proximity to Papua New Guinea. These languages are Pama-Nyungan languages, except for one which belongs to the Papuan family.

Since the 1900s, linguists and anthropologists mapped Indigenous tribes and languages. German linguist Wilhelm Schmidt published his *Language Distribution Map* in 1919 and in the 1920s, South Australian anthropologist Norman Tindale began working on a map sketching the tribal Aboriginal boundaries in the Groote Eylandt and Roper River area of the Northern Territory. A revision of the Tindale map, published in 1974, showed that the Indigenous peoples of Australia continued to have distinct and linguistically diverse tribal groupings. Linguists William Oates and Lynette Oates published *A Revised Linguistic Survey of Australia* in 1970 and in 1996, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies published a map of Aboriginal Australia.

These maps attempted to represent language, tribal or nation groups of Australia's Indigenous peoples. Although these maps are useful references for Indigenous Australian languages, they are by no means definitive as many language subsets exist within the larger groupings.

Features of Indigenous languages

Generally, Indigenous languages have complex grammar and syntax and large vocabularies that reflect the cultures, experiences and traditions of Indigenous communities. They contain words and concepts that cannot easily be translated into English and often do not have words for English terms.

Indigenous languages were traditionally spoken and not written, and linguists endeavouring to write them down have faced difficulties with spelling and pronunciation. The majority of languages, for example, contain sounds that do not occur in English.

Indigenous languages continue to change. Speakers may borrow words from other Indigenous languages or coin them in other ways.

Indigenous words in Australian English

Many words from Indigenous languages, especially the names of places and animals, have passed into general Australian English usage and form an important part of contemporary Australian identity. The name of Australia's capital city, Canberra, comes from an Indigenous word meaning 'meeting place'.

Preserving and maintaining Indigenous languages

The Australian Government supports Indigenous languages through the Maintenance of Indigenous Languages and Records program. This program assists the revival and maintenance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages as living systems of knowledge shared by communities and passed down from generation to generation. As a result of the program, the use of Indigenous languages in a range of fields and media has increased.

Program funding supports the recording and transcription of Indigenous languages, the development of language teaching materials such as dictionaries and wordlists, CDs of songs in language and the development of databases and supportive links between language organisations.

The program supports the sustainable development of an active network of community-based Indigenous language centres and language organisations, language projects and policy initiatives such as the National Indigenous Languages Survey carried out in 2004.

The Australian Government's National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy forms the foundation of all Indigenous education programs. It sets out 21 long-term national goals in Indigenous education. One goal is to develop programs to support the maintenance and continued use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.

Many Australian universities offer Indigenous language courses.

Further information

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
www.deewr.gov.au

Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts
www.arts.gov.au/indigenous/Maintenance_of_Indigenous_Languages_and_Records

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
www.aiatsis.gov.au

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Western Australia coastline.

