

Let's talk...

Languages



RECONCILIATION
AUSTRALIA

“Our language is sacred...Words are given to us by the land and those words are sacred...Words make things happen—make us alive. Words come not only from our land but also from our ancestors.... Language is what we see in people. Language is what we know of people... Language is how people identify themselves. Being you is to know your language. It is rooted in your relationship from creation—in your kinship that cycles from then and there, onwards and onwards...”

– Ms Amelia Turner, Lhere Artepe Aboriginal Corporation.

2019 marked the [International Year of Indigenous Languages](#), which encouraged us to reflect on the importance of language, and the important relationship between First Language revitalisation and [reconciliation](#).

Language is an important vessel for transmitting knowledge, ideas and shared meanings within and across cultures and generations.

According to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, language holds great significance in that it is (connected to)¹:

- > Country/place
- > Identity, self, and self-esteem
- > Culture
- > Kinship and community

For tens of thousands of years, hundreds of [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages](#) have been spoken across Australia. At the time of European colonisation, there were at least 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages spoken across the continent. These were distinct languages (not dialects), each with its own extensive vocabulary and complex grammar. This linguistic diversity reflects the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural identities more generally.

¹ Note that “connected to” is contained in parentheses in that, for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, language is not only understood to be relating to ways of knowing or being such as culture or identity; rather, language is culture, and is identity.

Colonisation and past policies of assimilation—including systemic condemnation of First Language use and the [forced separation of children from their families and speaker communities](#)—have severely affected the practice and continuation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. In 2014, the [National Indigenous Languages Survey](#) report estimated that only 120 of Australia’s First Languages were still being spoken, with just 13 of these being considered ‘strong’. Approximately 100 of those languages still spoken are considered severely or critically endangered, meaning that they are at risk of becoming no longer spoken, or ‘sleeping.’ The damage done to the state of First Languages in Australia is, in many ways, reflective of the damaging, inequitable relationships that have existed between non-Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples throughout history.

First Languages maintenance, revitalisation and revival processes can therefore be recognised as important acts of reconciliation. As well as increasing intercultural awareness and understanding for all involved in language revitalisation initiatives, research emphasises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who speak First Languages are at once more likely to:

- > Attend school
- > Gain a post-school qualification
- > Be employed
- > Have markedly better physical and mental health

First Nations peoples who speak a First Language are also less likely to engage in high risk alcohol consumption/illicit substance use, or to have been a victim of threatened or physical violence.²

In this way, (re)connecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with their languages can help to equitably (re)connect them to their cultures, Country and communities, all the while helping to close the gap between Indigenous educational, socio-cultural, economic and health outcomes or opportunities compared to those of the wider Australian community. Where appropriate, engaging non-Indigenous Australians in language revitalisation processes further promotes access the benefits of bi- or multi-lingual learning, and supports the development of the bi- or multi-culturally aware, understanding and appreciative citizens that are able to drive a strong future of shared pride among all Australians.

² Reference: House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (2012) [Our Land Our Languages: Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous Communities](#), The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

There are, nevertheless, some important considerations to keep in mind when it comes to initiatives that incorporate First Languages into the development and/or implementation of [Reconciliation Action Plans](#) and other reconciliation initiatives. Namely:

- > Given the current endangerment status of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, it is important not to place insensitive expectations on one's local community to have immediate capacity to contribute to a language-related reconciliation initiative.
- > There are often very distinct cultural protocols in regard to who has the appropriate responsibility/authority to use, learn and/or teach language, and with whom, when, where and how.
- > As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are often highly culturally nuanced, it is important not to expect perfect translatability between these languages and English.
- > Languages, like cultures, can be incredibly dynamic. For this reason, as well as acknowledging First Languages in Australia, it is important to acknowledge the emergence of [contemporary dialects such as Aboriginal English, and new languages in their own right, such as Kriol](#). So too is it important to acknowledge and appreciate the continuation and evolution of non-verbal languages, such as distinct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sign languages, and the symbolic languages of visual and performing arts.

Therefore, like all aspects of reconciliation activity, it is vital to consult with one's local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community on the suitability of any language initiative one is considering pursuing.

Looking to learn more?

Access the following resources:

- > [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages resource guide \(via Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education\)](#)
- > [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages RAP Action page](#) for schools and early learning services (via Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education)
- > The latest [language news](#) (via [SBS](#))