

# **Discussion Paper**

## **Indigenous Language Interpreting Services**

**Kimberley Interpreting Service  
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## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Summary**

### **Introduction**

1. Whilst it is difficult to obtain accurate data, it is estimated that there are 55,000 speakers of Indigenous languages in Australia. The majority of these speakers would have poor, or limited, understanding of English.
2. The right to access an interpreter and the need for a coordinated national Indigenous language interpreter service have been identified in a number of domestic and international documents.

### **Context**

3. The use of interpreters is a cost-effective way of ensuring Indigenous people have full and equal access to government services.
4. The use of interpreters ensures Indigenous people are involved in the development of business and regional economies through community negotiations and the development of partnerships.
5. The use of interpreters contributes to the sustainability of Australia's cultural and natural heritage, through language maintenance and the preservation of ecological knowledge. This in turn assists natural resource managers and ensures Indigenous people remain involved in the management of country.
6. Community based organisations involved in delivering interpreting services have the potential to explore commercial opportunities and offer employment to Indigenous people.
7. Awareness of the Indigenous language situation and the existence of Indigenous language interpreters needs to be raised amongst the non-Indigenous and Indigenous communities.

### **Current services**

8. Formal interpreting services are operating in WA (KIS), NT (ARDS, AIS, IAD), and South Australia (Interpreting and Translating Centre). In order to be effective these services need to maintain close links with community organisations.
9. Current levels of funding for these services are adequate only for day-to-day operations and seem to be on a one year or three year basis. Further development, professional support and expansion are dependent on additional funds being made available.

## **Impact of existing services**

10. Whilst the provision of interpreters is making a difference, their use is still *ad hoc* and needs to become more firmly established in the psyche of all personnel involved in delivering services or negotiating outcomes with Indigenous language speakers.
11. Many non-Indigenous staff are unaware of the language and culture situation in the region in which they are working. They are also unaware, or unsure, of how to access and work with interpreters.

## **Training**

12. National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) is the only accreditation body for interpreting and translating in Australia. They offer four levels of accreditation, but only the lowest level, paraprofessional, is available to Indigenous language speakers. This level of qualification does not adequately prepare interpreters to work in specialised areas such as legal and medical.
13. Interpreting students require access to tutorial support during their training and as an ongoing resource in their professional development. This tutoring system should include English language extension and structured help in finding equivalent words in the Indigenous language.
14. Interpreters work to a Code of Practice covering the general principles and ethics of interpreting. The Code of Practice is an essential part of the training of an interpreter.
15. Kriol language interpreters are still restricted to working with people from a similar region, because of language and cultural differences, and should not be viewed as 'one-size fits all' interpreters.
16. At present there is not enough work or access to professional level training to enable Indigenous language speakers to become full-time, career oriented interpreters.

## **Introduction**

Australia has a rich and diverse linguistic heritage, with almost 250 languages and up to 600 dialects spoken prior to colonisation. Today, more than half of those languages are no longer spoken and the remaining languages are in decline in most areas. However, where traditional languages are spoken, English is rarely used and those Indigenous language speakers may not have sufficient competence in English to fully participate in interactions where English is the primary tool of communication.

It is difficult to accurately state the number of Indigenous language speakers in Australia and how many of those people speak English at some level. This is mainly because of shortcomings in the language questions included in the

Commonwealth Census and the lack of other accurate language surveys. State of Environment Australia Report in 2001 suggests that there may be in the order of 55,000 speakers of Indigenous languages in Australia and Lawrie (1999) states that there are 34,386 Indigenous language speakers in the Northern Territory alone. She goes on to point out that these speakers also have a 'very poor or limited understanding of English' (1999, p.5).

In recent years, there has been a push to establish reliable and effective interpreting services for the remaining speakers of Indigenous languages, resulting in the development of Aboriginal Interpreting Services (AIS) in the Northern Territory, Kimberley Interpreting Service (KIS) in the Kimberley and other regions in Western Australia, and community based services supported by local language centres. This discussion paper will examine the context within which Indigenous language interpreting services are operating and outline the services being offered these services. It will go on to consider the possibility of expanding existing services, in terms of both increasing the number of available interpreters and moving into new geographical areas, and discuss training requirements for interpreters and users of the services. Whilst attempting to provide a comprehensive overview of the current situation, it is worth noting that many reports have been prepared dealing with specific Indigenous language interpreting issues and should also be considered when developing long-term Indigenous language policy.

## **The Importance of Indigenous Interpreting Services**

Until 2000 there were no interpreting services available for Aboriginal Australians who speak an Indigenous language as their first language. As a result, Aboriginal language speakers have been deprived of real access to mainstream services particularly health, justice and education. Serious communication, social justice and legal issues arise when doctors, nurses, policemen, solicitors or judges do not share a common language with their clients.

Low levels of communication between health professionals and their patients leads to inadequate diagnosis and poor treatment. Statistics display that Aboriginal peoples' health is in decline and health related issues are increasingly complex. During an interview a nurse who works in one of the major hospitals in the Kimberley said "Aboriginal people don't care about their health because they don't take their medicine properly and keep being readmitted to hospital". Comments such as this are not uncommon and are a result of ignorance due to poor communication and misunderstanding. The use of Indigenous language interpreters could make a difference to this situation.

Similar problems exist in the justice system. Cases of Aboriginal people being jailed for offences that they have not committed and others let free when offences have been committed are common. The legal system remains a mystery for many Indigenous people. Police, magistrates and lawyers are conducting their business in a foreign language for many of their Aboriginal clients.

There are great economic advantages in costs and time in using interpreters early in contact between service providers and clients. For example, although police in the Kimberley have seldom used interpreters, whenever they have done so, the comments received have been highly favourable. Remarks such as, “this has saved us a lot of time” and “we have gained results which would not have been possible without an interpreter” were given. As a result of interpreters being used, in both the production of questions and during the interviews, a survey about dementia being conducted in the Kimberley over the past two years has also produced very positive results. Feedback from doctors, clinicians and their patients has been positive. Clinicians report that interpreters are invaluable while conducting the survey, the people being interviewed can easily understand questions and therefore answer accurately leading to accurate data being gained on the first visit and in a short time rather than further visits to communities being necessary and additional time to collect data. Diagnosis and treatment are also positively affected when interpreters are used as health workers have accurate information to apply. Aboriginal clients speak of the doctors doing this particular survey as being smart because they are asking clear questions and giving comprehensible feedback. Effective therapy is also reported as a result of the use of interpreters.

The efficiency of the court system is adversely affected through the underutilisation of interpreters. There was a recent case in one Kimberley town of a young boy who was repeatedly in trouble and required to appear in the children’s court. His case was not able to be heard repeatedly over a number of months because the court was not able to communicate with him, the boy kept re-offending and kept being remanded, not a positive result for anyone incurring a great cost both to the community and the justice system.

## **Context for Indigenous Language Interpreting Services**

The right to access an interpreter and the need for a coordinated national Indigenous language interpreting service have been identified in a number of domestic and international documents. *The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* 1966, Articles 9 and 14; *The Convention on the Rights of the Child* 1990, Article 40; *Universal Declaration on Linguistic Rights*; and *The Indigenous and Tribal People’s Convention* 1989 acknowledge the right of people to understand the nature of legal proceedings they are involved in, through interpreting and/or translation. Within Australia the report of the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (1990); *Recognition, Rights and Reform: Report to Government on Native Title Social Justice Measures* (1995); and *Bringing them home: National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* (1997) also call for support and funding of Indigenous language interpreting services and the promotion of Indigenous language and culture.

## Government services

The acknowledgement of the importance of access to interpreters is in itself recognition of the rights of individuals to have full and equal participation in society regardless of their linguistic background. This is reflected in the *Charter of Public Service in a Culturally Diverse Society* (1998), which recommends the use of interpreters as a practical strategy for making services accessible and appropriate.

Indigenous people, who experience entrenched levels of disadvantage and would therefore be expected to have high levels of use of government services, were found to access mainstream services at much lower rates than non-Indigenous people (Commonwealth Grants Commission, 2001, p.126). Whilst recognising that lack of available services and the remoteness of many Aboriginal communities contributed to this low participation rate, problems that arise from communication difficulties – at all levels of planning and implementation – must also be considered.

Investigations into the feasibility of introducing Indigenous language interpreting services consistently find that there is a great demand for such a service within all government sectors. Palmer (1999) and Lawrie (1999) specifically identify the legal and medical sectors as key areas where interpreters are required and support this finding with anecdotal evidence of consent difficulties related to medical procedures and impediments to the proper administration of justice. Formal studies (Cunningham, 2002, Cooke 1995) have also concluded that the use of interpreters could significantly improve medical and legal outcomes for Indigenous people.

Improving access to services for Indigenous people is not only a moral issue. As Lawrie (1999, p.62) points out, there is a 'hidden cost' in having to reconvene court sittings while lawyers try to get clear instructions from their clients, or in the readmission to hospital of patients who have not clearly understood instructions relating to medication or health care. There is also a risk of litigation arising from miscarriages of justice or medical bumbles caused by communication difficulties. The report evaluating the 1997 trial of a Northern Territory interpreting service found that 'the potential cost to Government of not providing and accessing interpreters in Aboriginal languages far exceeds the cost of providing them'.

As Australian governments are attempting to find a new approach to the delivery of services to Indigenous people there is real potential for Indigenous language interpreters to play a pivotal role. Mainstream government departments will need to consult extensively with Indigenous community members to ensure services are designed and delivered in an appropriate manner. COAG projects, in particular at the COAG WA Site, Wadeye, Cape York and the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands will be operating in multi-lingual environments and will therefore need to consider effective communication strategies to ensure successful outcomes. Kimberley Interpreting Service is negotiating a proposal with COAG WA to ensure skilled interpreters are available, and an interpreter is currently being used at Wadeye.

When such large investments of money and such vitally important services are at stake, the provision of extra dollars to cover the training and support of interpreters should be considered an integral service delivery cost, applicable to all aspects of government services: legal, medical, community development, welfare, education and training. In addition, there needs to be an ongoing commitment to training staff of government agencies in language and cultural issues to ensure that they understand the context for their consultation and service delivery. As mentioned above, the expenditure on interpreting services will result in an overall cost saving.

### **Regional economies**

Indigenous language interpreters are also playing an important role in the development of business and regional economies by ensuring the full and active participation of the Indigenous population. Kimberley Interpreting Service regularly provides interpreters for community negotiations with mining companies (Argyle Diamonds) and community consultations with government agencies. Consultation with Aboriginal people is essential if regional areas are to develop in a fair and equitable way. Indigenous language interpreting services can ensure that consultations are effective and assist in the development of partnerships between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

The development and support of Indigenous language interpreting services is itself assisting in the economic development of Indigenous people by providing Indigenous language speakers who also have skills in English with a career path and a means to economic independence. Kimberley Interpreting Service, an initiative of Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre and Kimberley Language Resource Centre, is a potential source of income to finance community driven language maintenance projects, and Northern Territory language centres are also becoming aware of the economic, social and linguistic potential of providing interpreting services. It is worth noting that Indigenous language interpreting services are supported and controlled by Indigenous people, developing skills and building the capacity of Indigenous people to manage their own communities. Kimberley Interpreting Service was established in response to requests from accredited interpreters associated with Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre (MDWg) and Kimberley Language Resource Centre (KLRC). KIS is managed by a Steering Committee comprising the Chairpersons of both MDWg and KLRC, Coordinators of those two organisations and two interpreter representatives. Language and Resource centres in Katherine, Tennant Creek, Nhulunbuy and Alice Springs were supporting and providing employment for interpreters prior to the establishment of AIS and are still involved at an operational and strategic level in the development of the service.

## Natural Heritage

There is also an increasing awareness amongst natural resource managers and ecologists that as Indigenous languages die, so does a vast repository of knowledge about Australia's unique and fragile environments. Researchers are increasingly using interpreters to ensure that information is recorded and analysed to assist in improving the way we manage country. This use of Indigenous language interpreters is also contributing to language preservation and increasing awareness amongst the wider community of the importance of maintaining Australia's Indigenous languages and promoting their use.

Recent Ord Bonaparte Projects, such as Kija Plants and Animals, have resulted in a vast database of knowledge, which will be useful for land use planning, as well as being a valuable resource for language teaching in the local area (Blythe & Wightman, 2003). Similarly, local and regional land care projects, such as Kimberley Land Council's 'Healthy Country' and Kununurra's 'Ord Land and Water' are involving Indigenous people in planning and implementing practical strategies for dealing with environmental degradation.

As Pasfield (2004) points out, governments are increasingly looking to regional natural resource management (NRM) groups to identify regional assets, develop a means to prioritise and protect them, and build community capacity and ownership of the regional NRM process. In order to address these criteria NRM groups must access interpreting and translation services to take on the tasks of the accurate translation of the relevant NRM documents into Indigenous languages, for comment by and input from the Indigenous community. In addition, there needs to be a means by which Indigenous values and aspirations can be clearly articulated to the current NRM organisations that determine both policy and NRM priorities.

Community-based organisations are well positioned to recruit and support interpreters as well as promoting their services. There still needs to be a lot of work done to encourage Indigenous language speakers to request an interpreter. Such efforts should be aimed at increasing awareness of interpreter services, overcoming any sense of shame attached to not understanding English, improving the status attached to Indigenous languages and increasing the confidence of Indigenous people within a non-Indigenous environment.

Indigenous language interpreting services are enabling the voice of Indigenous people to be heard in all areas affecting their lives and communities. They also ensure that the messages of the non-Indigenous community are conveyed in a way that Indigenous people can understand. This is empowering Indigenous people and contributing to their full and equal participation in society.

## **Existing Indigenous Language Interpreting Services in Australia**

### **Kimberley Interpreting Service**

Kimberley Interpreting Service (KIS) began operating in 2000 and provides interpreters of Indigenous languages throughout the Kimberley. KIS is run by a Steering Committee consisting of the Chairpersons and Coordinators of the two Kimberley Language Centres, Mirima Dawang Woortlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre (Mirima) and Kimberley Language Resource Centre (KLRC), two interpreter representatives. KIS is administered by Mirima Dawang Woortlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre. One full time coordinator runs the service from an office in Broome.

Initially, funding for KIS came from a one-off grant from the Western Australian Department of Training; subsequent funding came from the Department of Indigenous Affairs, Department of Health, Department of Justice and most recently ATSIIS. In May 2004 eight WA Government Departments committed to funding the operations of KIS for three years.

The annual operational budget is \$120,000. This budget is adequate for basic operations only. Further funding is sought for expansion, particularly professional development and training for interpreters and users of interpreters, publicity and advertising campaigns and, as the KIS grows, to support the administration. Additionally, KIS has a three year grant from the Kimberley Sustainable Regions Program to develop a Strategic Business Plan and obtain business mentoring.

There are 50 interpreters registered with KIS with a further 18 interpreters in training who are enrolled in the Diploma of Interpreting with Bachelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE). The interpreters provide a service in thirteen Kimberley languages. KIS interpreters work as casual employees and are paid an hourly rate for assignments. Interpreters are paid by KIS, which invoices the client who made the booking.

The operations of KIS are highly dependent on its relationship with the two Kimberley language centres, Mirima and KLRC. Due to the remoteness of towns and communities in the region, the mobility and domestic reality of many of the interpreters (e.g. few have telephones in their homes), staff from the language centres are needed to assist with the logistics of setting up assignments.

KIS does not have a budget for professional development for interpreters; funds are sought on a one-off basis for specific training projects.

In 2004 training and professional development was funded by the Kimberley Development Commission, Argyle Diamonds, BIITE and KIS funds set aside from interpreting assignments.

## **Aboriginal Interpreter Service (AIS)**

Aboriginal Interpreter Service was established in 2000 and operates under the Northern Territory Department of Community Development, Sports and Cultural Affairs. AIS has offices in Darwin and Alice Springs and works closely with Papulu Apparr-Kari Language Centre in Tennant Creek NT and Diwurruwurru-jaru Corporation, the language Centre in Katherine NT. AIS employs 8 full time staff members including a manager, business/finance manager, a northern and southern coordinator, training coordinator, booking officers and administration support officer. Two positions, a coordinator and a booking officer, are based in Alice Springs.

AIS is funded jointly by the Northern Territory and Commonwealth Governments and has a budget of \$1.08m per annum, which is guaranteed until August 2005. A part of their budget is notionally allocated to government agencies such as police, health and justice services to pay for interpreters. The current budget has been described as adequate to maintain current operations but not for building the business. Additional funds are needed to run community awareness campaigns recruitment and training of new interpreters

AIS maintains a register of 277 interpreters who cover 104 Northern Territory aboriginal languages. AIS interpreters work as casually employed NT Public Servants. Permanent sessions are booked by the courts and hospitals, giving some interpreters regular work, but there are no full time interpreters working for AIS.

The AIS office in Alice Springs was set up three years ago and employs 10 interpreters working in nine languages. It provides three interpreters three mornings a week in court, and one interpreter two mornings a week in the eye and ear clinic. It also provides interpreters at bush courts in five communities, all other assignments are booked individually.

Since 1995, Diwurruwurru-jaru in Katherine independently have provided Warlpiri and Kriol interpreting. Over the past few years they have been working with AIS. Interpreters are often language workers already employed by the language centre. There are 15 trained and accredited interpreters in Katherine with two or three available for work at any one time. All interpreters already working for the language centre are workers and paid for interpreting assignments in addition to their salaries. AIS directs all work from the Katherine region to Diwurruwurru-jaru who are paid an administration fee per assignment. Standard bookings are held for the court and hospital. They also do a lot of work for the police. AIS provides two two-day professional development workshops a year. New interpreters enrol in the Diploma of Interpreting at BIITE.

Papulu Apparr-Kari Language Centre in Tennant Creek is also a CDEP organisation, which works with a wide range of services. They have a staff of 111 (including CDEP participants), 20 of whom are interpreters. Papulu Apparr-Kari also work as an agent for AIS. They also have a list of between

40 and 50 interpreters who work as casual employees. Interpreters have regular bookings at court including bush courts and in hospitals and clinics; they also do a little work for the police. As at Diwurruwurru-jaru they are paid an administration fee for assignments that come through AIS. AIS assist with training for interpreters from that region.

AIS employs a full time coordinator to oversee training for interpreters. In 2004 NAATI accreditation workshops, legal interpreter training workshops, mentoring training in legal and health areas and training workshops for the users of interpreters in both the health and legal areas were conducted in the NT.

### **Institute for Aboriginal Development (IAD)**

The Institute for Aboriginal Development was established in 1969 and is an independent community controlled language resource centre and adult education centre serving the Aboriginal community of Central Australia. Interpreting and translating operate as a programme of the IAD language centre.

Funding for IAD language programme comes mostly from ATSIC. The service offered by IAD involves interpreting and translating in most Aboriginal languages and dialects spoken in and around the Alice Springs region. There is a full-time Pitjantjatjara interpreter available and other interpreters can be booked on request. Interpreters in the region work for both IAD and AIS. Translators and interpreters are paid on a fee for service basis.

Interpreting work is varied, courts and hospitals being the main users. Translation requests vary from translating text for posters and pamphlets to courtroom work. IAD and AIS work cooperatively, with assignments being passed between both organisations.

IAD delivers the Diploma of Interpreting two or three times a year. The course is delivered as an 8 week course (300 hrs) and is recognised by NAATI. It is available for fluent speakers of Aranda, Luritja, Pitjantjatjara and Warlpiri. Areas focused on in the course are legal, medical, land tenure and social.

### **Interpreting and Translating Centre (ITC)– South Australia**

The Interpreting and Translating Centre (ITC) is the South Australian Government Interpreting and Translating agency. It was established in 1975 within the Attorney General's Department. In 1977 it was incorporated into the Ethnic Affairs Branch and in 1980 became a branch of the Ethnic Affairs Commission. ITC provides interpreting and translating in over 80 languages, two of which are Indigenous. The majority of interpreting in Indigenous languages is in Pitjantjatjara and Aranda. Nine fulltime staff, including a manager, a marketing officer, a customer service supervisor and four customer service consultants run ITC.

The Interpreting and Translating Centre charges all users, government and non government. The costs of running the service are fully recovered through its business.

In the Adelaide Metropolitan area three casual employees meet Indigenous interpreting needs. These interpreters work mostly in the courts; they also work at Royal Adelaide and Queen Elizabeth hospitals. Port Augusta has one Indigenous interpreter and Ceduna has four interpreters who cover most assignments.

All of the Indigenous interpreters working with ITC have undergone interpreter training provided by the centre, but none of the Indigenous interpreters is accredited.

### **Aboriginal Resource and Development Service (ARDS)**

Aboriginal Resource and Development Services Inc. (ARDS) is an Aboriginal controlled organisation incorporated under the Northern Territory Associations Act. It is the community development arm of the Northern Regional Council of Congress (NRCC), which is the Aboriginal and Islander Presbytery of the Northern Synod of the Uniting Church in Australia. ARDS delivers community development and community education for Yolngu people who live in Darwin and throughout north-east Arnhem Land. Interpreting and translating in Yolngu Marha (the languages of the Yolngu people) is a part of the work done by ARDS, usually on a contracted project basis. The service is operated from offices in Darwin and Nhulunbuy. There are two fulltime staff in the Darwin office and six staff members and volunteers working at the Nhulunbuy office

As ARDS does most of its work on a project basis, funding for interpreting and translating is included in contracts.

All interpreting and translating work by ARDS is done by a team of people. Currently there are six educator/interpreters working with six Indigenous interpreters on projects. Projects include the development of commerce, legal and health dictionaries. There are two ARDS nurse educators at Royal Darwin Hospital, whose work is to talk through medical procedures and concepts with patients. These nurse educators are called in extreme cases when patients are very sick and possibly not complying with medical staff. They talk through (in Yolngu Matha languages) conditions such as diabetes, heart disease and rheumatic fever. These sessions can take up to an hour and are generally very successful. One of these educators also works with Aboriginal Interpreting Service. ARDS and Aboriginal Interpreting have a cooperative working relationship.

### **Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre**

Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre received funding from the Western Australian Department of Training to conduct a Feasibility Study into the establishment of an Aboriginal Interpreter Service for the Pilbara region.

The study was completed in 2004 and is now in the hands of a number of WA Government agencies who are considering funding the service. Wangka Maya functions as a language centre, which produces literature in local languages, trains Aboriginal language workers, supports school based language programmes, records and archives local Aboriginal history and knowledge and promotes Aboriginal cultures in the local community. Wangka Maya has a core staff of nine: a manager, an administration officer, two Linkup case workers, three linguists and two language workers. They currently manage interpreting assignments on an ad hoc basis for the Department of Justice, Aboriginal Legal Service and the Department of Housing.

At the present time there are five interpreters accredited in Martu Wangka, Nyangumarta and Manyjilyjarra. There is a cohort of 15 other interpreters who could interpret in another seven languages following training. Establishment of this service is dependent on funding.

Wangka Maya has approached the Pilbara College of TAFE and is waiting for the Diploma of Interpreting to be delivered.

### **Individuals Providing Indigenous Interpreting**

Further to the Indigenous interpreting services already described, there are individual non-Indigenous language speakers who are accredited interpreters and work both independently and for Indigenous language services.

Following is a brief description of the work of one of those people:-

Dominic McCormack learnt *Murrinh-patha* as a child living at Wadeye and has maintained his language skills by returning and spending further time with the people of that community. While being an accredited interpreter, he is also a lawyer and is a contracted trainer for the AIS.

Dominic has been engaged as an interpreter by the Thamarrurr Regional Council, Wadeye, to work with the community on the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) project. He also works with private consultants on a range of other projects.

Although his work with COAG is primarily as an interpreter, his role extends to facilitation. His bi-cultural ability, knowledge of the community and familiarity with the workings of government agencies and their personnel enables him to more effectively facilitate communication. At every opportunity he works with presenters prior to meetings, and during meetings he attempts to regulate both the pace and usage of language until understanding is gained by all.

There are Indigenous interpreters at Wadeye, but the rapidity and complex levels of English spoken during these meetings often prohibits the employment of these interpreters for such work. While limited English capacity and reliability often prevents Indigenous interpreters from being able to perform work at this level, Dominic acknowledges that his language ability

and Indigenous contextual understanding is constantly required to increase and improve in order to provide the interpreting levels demanded.

There are no Indigenous interpreting services in Tasmania, Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria or the ACT. The main focus of language and culture organisations in these states is language revival. Generally Indigenous people on the east coast speak English or Aboriginal English as a first language. In Townsville linguists from Magani Malu Kes Resource and Information Centre do interpreting on an ad hoc basis in two traditional Torres Strait languages. These jobs are for Centrelink, the court system or juvenile justice. These interpreters are not trained or accredited.

### **TIS (Translating and Interpreting Service)**

The Australian Government, through the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, provides a Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) for people who do not speak English and for English speakers needing to communicate with them.

TIS is Australia's only national service, and is available to any person or organisation in Australia requiring interpreting services.

TIS does not provide interpreters for Indigenous languages and directs all requests for Indigenous interpreting to Kimberley Interpreting Service or Aboriginal Interpreter Service.

Recent increases in fees, a shift of focus away from on site interpreting to telephone interpreting and centralisation of their organisation to Melbourne has led to the establishment of smaller and more specialised interpreting services. These services meet the needs of Indigenous people and others whose needs aren't being met by TIS.

### **Impact of current level of service**

The often-horrific stories cited in earlier reports advocating the establishment of Indigenous language interpreter services should now be a thing of the past with the establishment of interpreting services in Western Australia, Northern Territory and South Australia. Indeed, significant progress has been made in a number of areas. The use of Indigenous language interpreters is, however, still *ad hoc* and needs to become established in the psyche of all personnel involved in delivering services or negotiating outcomes with Indigenous language speakers. Too often family members or Indigenous staff members are still being asked to act as an interpreter, which is not providing satisfactory outcomes. Comments are made below on a sector-by-sector basis, reflecting general trends across the Kimberley and Top End.

### **Health**

Indigenous health is one of the most pressing problems facing Australia at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, with high infant mortality rates and the average life expectancy of Indigenous males and females some twenty or thirty years

shorter than that of non-Indigenous people. Similarly, incidence of diabetes, heart disease and kidney failure is high amongst Indigenous people, resulting in high health care costs and extended stays away from home in regional or metropolitan hospitals. In recent years the clinic at Fitzroy Crossing and others across the Top End are regularly using Indigenous interpreters, as are hospitals in Darwin, Katherine and Tennant Creek. Aboriginal Resource Development Services in Arnhem Land are also focusing on medical interpreting issues and are attempting to put together a comprehensive medical English – Yolngu-matha dictionary.

Despite these improvements, there are still too many Indigenous people not accessing interpreters, and hospital staff either not fully aware of language and communication difficulties or unable to obtain the services of an interpreter when a patient first presents for treatment. Interpreters can be booked in advance for appointments, particularly with visiting specialists. KIS recently provided an interpreter for a Jaru woman from Ringers Soak during a videoconference with the paediatrician based in Derby. Her small child needed to stay in Kununurra Hospital for a further eight weeks while she was fed through a tube, and the news, when delivered to her by the interpreter, came as a shock as she had not fully understood when told by hospital staff. These instances are examples of how Indigenous interpreters and technology can combine to deliver effective health services and advice to Indigenous people in remote areas.

Awareness of language use in remote areas also needs to be raised amongst hospital staff, and this training must be ongoing as there is a high turnover of staff. Indigenous language speakers should be encouraged to request an interpreter when they feel they need to.

## **Justice**

Aboriginal people are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system in Australia. Problems are further compounded by the well-documented bias against Aboriginal Australians in their dealings with this system (Cooke 1995). The establishment of Indigenous interpreting services has alleviated some of these problems now that interpreters are more likely to be accessed at all stages of the justice process. Indigenous defendants and witnesses are now able to express themselves in their first language rather than struggling to operate in an unfamiliar physical and linguistic environment. In a recent example, a Murrinh-patha woman charged with assault was able to explain that she had been a victim of ongoing violence from the man she attacked. These mitigating circumstances influenced her sentencing. However, many staff in the justice system are not fully aware of the language background of many Indigenous people, particularly those who speak Kriol. Because Kriol has many lexical items derived from English, people often think the speaker is speaking English when this is not the case. Once again there need to be concerted strategies in place to ensure all personnel involved in the justice system are aware of the language background of the defendant and take appropriate steps to ensure their full participation in the judicial process.

## **Centrelink**

Centrelink offices are increasingly employing Indigenous customer services officers and also using them as interpreters. This is a promising development, but Indigenous staff need to undergo appropriate training if interpreting is to be part of their duties. A Murrinh-patha family living in Wyndham was able to provide all necessary information to their Centrelink officer through the services of a KIS interpreter from nearby Kununurra. This ensured the family received all their entitlements and is in keeping with Centrelink's Language Service Policy.

## **Community Development**

Recent initiatives in Western Australia have highlighted the need for Indigenous interpreters in a social welfare context. The Department of Indigenous Affairs and Kimberley Interpreting Service have both expressed the need for a more effective Indigenous interpreting service in order to implement the findings of the Gordon Inquiry in four areas of reform — community engagement; collaboration; inclusiveness and capacity building. Specifically, Indigenous interpreting is required to support the following goals:

1. Ensure effective response to incidents of child abuse and family violence;
2. Strengthen identification of and response to children and families at risk;
3. Contribute to community safety;
4. Strengthen the governance, confidence, economic capacity and sustainability of communities.

To date, Department of Community Development in WA has booked an interpreter on one occasion over the past three years— a situation that raises many questions about the effectiveness of welfare services in remote Indigenous communities. It is hoped that some of the funding attached to the Gordon Inquiry initiatives is directed towards training, using and supporting Indigenous interpreters in this important area.

## **Land Claims / Community consultations / Economic Negotiations**

In the Kimberley, this is the sector where Indigenous interpreters are being used consistently and successfully. Kimberley Land Council regularly books interpreters, as does Argyle Diamonds, which has also provided funding to train interpreters in the specific skills they require at their community meetings. These partnerships are a model for future development of interpreter services as they may allow interpreters to specialise and will ensure ongoing professional development (see below).

There is a growing recognition that interpreting at a large meeting requires different skills from interpreting for one person in an interview type. The interpreter is more likely to act as a communication facilitator, interpreting key

concepts and ideas rather than word for word. In the Argyle Diamonds negotiations, interpreters have previewed video material and computer-simulated images to be used to explain proposed works to traditional owners, assessing its suitability and recommending changes. This is clearly broadening the scope of an interpreter's role and needs to be taken into account when assessing interpreting requirements.

## **Expansion of Current Levels of Service**

The large distances involved in delivering a service to remote areas of the Northern Territory, Western Australia, and South Australia will inevitably limit the amount of coverage achieved. For example, a senior Balgo man was being cared for in the Aged Care Facility at Derby but financial and logistical constraints made it impossible to arrange for a Kukatja interpreter to be sent to assist him. His hearing impairment also meant a videoconference was unlikely to be successful. Similarly, requests are occasionally received from Perth hospitals for interpreters to work with Kimberley residents being treated there. Technology could provide the answer to some of these problems (video conferencing, web cam, etc) but interpreters need to be properly trained to work in these circumstances.

KIS has also provided interpreters to assignments in the Pilbara and Goldfields area. Wangka-Maya Aboriginal Language Centre are currently exploring the possibility of establishing an interpreter service to work in the Pilbara region which would increase the potential service area and benefit Indigenous language speakers and service providers there. Interpreting services across the country should look at creating a network to ensure they can work together if required.

Whilst work needs to be undertaken raising awareness of the existence of interpreting services and the need to use interpreters, care needs to be taken to ensure there are sufficient interpreters to meet the expected demand. Strategies need to be implemented identifying potential new interpreters and providing appropriate and ongoing training.

## **Training Requirements**

### **NAATI**

Before discussing existing training opportunities for Aboriginal language interpreters, it is necessary to explain what NAATI (National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters) is. NAATI was first established in 1977, stating as its principal objectives (taken from [http://www.naati.com.au/fact\\_sheets.htm](http://www.naati.com.au/fact_sheets.htm)):

- a) To establish the standards and conditions leading to professional status, and in so doing develop translating and interpreting in Australia to meet community needs;  
and
- b) To develop the basic infrastructure for the emergence of a national self-regulatory professional body in the expectation that

this body would, within five years, assume responsibility for the profession including accreditation.

## **NAATI Accreditation**

NAATI is the only accreditation body for interpreting and translating in Australia. It offers four levels of accreditation in both disciplines (paraprofessional, professional, advanced and conference).

NAATI accreditation may be obtained in three ways:

- a) by passing a NAATI test
- b) by completing successfully a course of studies at an Australian tertiary institution approved by NAATI
- c) by providing evidence of specialised qualifications in interpreting/translating obtained from a recognised training institution overseas.

There are four levels of accreditation available. At present NAATI will only accredit in Aboriginal languages to the paraprofessional level (the lowest level). The accreditation is available in only 34 Indigenous languages nationally. If the language of the Aboriginal person is not from one of these 34 language groups, NAATI offers a 'recognition' status of the language, rather than accrediting the interpreter in that language. There is a trend, therefore, for Creoles to become the languages of accreditation, and the traditional languages to be 'recognised'. In practice, of course, the interpreter will use both languages.

This level of qualification is intended to provide skills for 'community interpreters' – that is, interpreters who are able to do dialogue interpreting in general situations. This represents a level of competence in interpreting at a non-specialised level. As will be discussed below, Aboriginal language interpreters are thrown almost immediately into situations where they have to interpret at a much higher level. Refresher courses, intensive study of the English language and the creole/traditional language equivalents, and a professional development structure become necessary immediately after training.

NAATI also accredits courses. It 'approves' a syllabus outline which can be developed by an institution offering courses in interpreting to its own academic standards. To get NAATI accreditation, however, the candidate must also pass the NAATI test. If they pass the course requirements, it is assumed that they are qualified to take the NAATI test. However, the issue of competency in a traditional language sometimes only appears at the assessment stage. Therefore, a person with a Diploma in Interpreting at the Paraprofessional Level may be competent in all areas of interpreting – apart from the traditional language.

An interpreter does not have to attend an accredited course. There are hundreds of diplomas and degrees and short courses available nationally that are not 'approved' by NAATI. Of course, anyone holding a qualification from

these courses may take the NAATI test and become accredited. An interpreter does not even have to attend a course at all. If an Aboriginal language speaker passes the NAATI test in one of the 34 languages, they can get accreditation in that language. The concern about this method of accreditation for Aboriginal language speakers is that they may not acquire the depth of knowledge necessary of interpreting techniques and ethics (see below).

The NAATI test for the paraprofessional level is approximately 40 minutes in length. There are three parts to the test (abridged from [http://www.naati.com.au/test\\_formats.htm](http://www.naati.com.au/test_formats.htm)):

Section One: four oral questions are put to the candidate based on the social and cultural aspects of interpreting, two in English to be answered in English, and two in the other language to be answered in that language.

Section Two: four oral questions are put to the candidate based on NAATI's published collection of codes of ethics of the profession for translators and interpreters (see below), two in English, and two in the other language. The questions are designed to assess the candidate's awareness of the ethics of the profession.

Section Three: there are two dialogues of 250-300 words each between an English speaker and a speaker of the language other than English. The dialogues are divided into suitable segments, each of which will not normally exceed 35 words.

To achieve a pass in this test candidates must score 70% overall.

This is the standard test for all languages – Indigenous and immigrant.

However, there have been some difficulties with the testing procedure in some of the languages – in particular questioning the examinee on social and cultural issues, or the code of practice, in the Aboriginal language. This is because the person who can 'assess' the Aboriginal language of the examinee is quite likely to be an older person who does not have literacy in their traditional language and/or has not been involved in interpreter training.

One of the reasons why NAATI does not provide accreditation at the professional level is that the professional level test requires much deeper linguistic knowledge and understanding of the social, cultural and ethical aspects of interpreting, as well as the ability to interpret consecutively. NAATI therefore has difficulty finding examiners at that level for Aboriginal languages. The reason for only 34 Indigenous languages being available for accreditation at the paraprofessional level has the same problem at its core – identifying examiners fluent in the Aboriginal languages.

See <http://www.naati.com.au/accreditation.htm#as> for further details about accreditation by NAATI.

## **Training Courses**

The issue of training Aboriginal language interpreters was brought to the fore by Recommendations 99 and 100 of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, that Aboriginal language interpreters be provided in the court system (Johnston, 1991).

As of 2004 there are only 10 institutions (for all languages) that offer NAATI approved courses. Only two of these, Batchelor College and the Institute of Aboriginal Development (both in the NT), run paraprofessional courses for Aboriginal languages. In fact, these are the only two institutions offering training in Aboriginal language interpreting. There are no courses for professional level Aboriginal language interpreters. A court interpreter would normally be a professional level interpreter – or at the very least an interpreter who had done extensive professional development in court language. There needs to be dramatic progress in regard to training Aboriginal language interpreters for the court system and other technically difficult specialist areas (such as the medical field or conference/meetings interpreting).

Batchelor delivers its course out of Diwurruwurru-jaru Aboriginal Corporation (the language centre in Katherine, NT) and, for the first time this year, out of the Karrayili Adult Education Centre in Fitzroy Crossing, WA. Pundulmurra College in the Pilbara used to run Aboriginal language interpreting courses, but stopped a few years ago.

Some of the existing WA interpreters were trained through a course developed for the Perth Metropolitan College of TAFE in the early 1990s, initially delivered as pilot courses in a number of locations in the Kimberley. The materials were collated into a course published in 1996 (Dixon *et al.*). This course has NAATI approval, but it is no longer delivered in WA.

### **Short courses**

During the 1990s there were several refresher and specialist courses run in both WA and the NT. These courses are a type of 'professional development'. They do not take place as often as they should, due to lack of funding. The NT Aboriginal Interpreting Service (AIS) has a different funding structure from the KIS, and is provided with funds especially for professional development and other training, including training of the users of interpreters and specialist input

Dr Michael Cooke provides intensive short course interpreter training for proficient speakers of both English and an Indigenous language to prepare them as candidates for NAATI accreditation at the paraprofessional interpreter level. He also conducts intensive short courses to assist experienced interpreters who are working in, or wishing to move to work in, the legal and medical areas, with the added outcome of preparing any unaccredited participants for the NAATI test.

### **Support during and after training**

Aboriginal language interpreters need to be tutored during their course, but also to have access to ongoing tutoring or mentoring as part of their professional development. One factor that has to be strongly considered is the location of many Aboriginal language interpreters – in remote areas. Tutoring and professional development must include community-based training. The advantage of short courses, as discussed above, is that they can be localised.

Part of the tutoring system for training interpreters needs to be English language extension, as well as structured help with finding equivalents in the Aboriginal language. One way of doing this effectively is role playing in real contexts. When it started delivering the Batchelor College diploma in 1994, DAC developed a relationship with the court, lawyers, social security and other agencies in town and established interpreting practice sessions. These sessions help both the trainee interpreters and the non-Aboriginal users.

This type of relationship between interpreters and users can also be developed in smaller towns such as Fitzroy Crossing and Halls Creek in WA or Tennant Creek in the NT. These smaller locations are administrative centres for remote communities. As such it should be fairly easy to set up partnerships between the community interpreters and the agencies because people are usually better known to each other. Thus the agencies are able to provide interpreters for their clients while at the same time providing English language and specialist field support to the interpreters.

Another possibility for providing ongoing professional development support is through a mentoring system. KIS interpreters have shown interest in setting up such system. Anecdotally, some of the newly qualified KIS interpreters do not feel ready to tackle interpreting jobs solo immediately. The more experienced interpreters suggest sending two people to a job together – mentor and inexperienced interpreter. In more difficult cases, the mentor will do the job, as a role model. In more straight forward cases, the less experienced interpreters will do the job, and have feedback provided by the mentor and the non-Aboriginal user.

This kind of external tutoring support and mentoring needs to be properly structured, and of course properly (and continuously) funded.

The NAATI discussion paper provided for the Proper True Talk forum on Indigenous language interpreting in 1996 (Attorney-General's Department, pp159-73) covers all the issues to do with training and community development. 8 years on the recommendations of that report are still valid (pp159-61) and support the discussion above.

## **The Code of Practice**

Interpreters worldwide work to a Code of Practice. In Australia the Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators, a professional body for interpreters nationally, summarise the code as follows: ([www.ausit.org](http://www.ausit.org) follow link to <http://server.dream-fusion.net/ausit2/pics/ethics.pdf>).

### **General Principles**

#### **1. Professional Conduct**

Interpreters and translators shall at all times act in accordance with the standards of conduct and decorum appropriate to the aims of AUSIT, the national professional association of interpreting and translation practitioners.

## **2. Confidentiality**

Interpreters and translators shall not disclose information acquired during the course of their assignments.

## **3. Competence**

Interpreters and translators shall undertake only work which they are competent to perform in the language areas for which they are “accredited” or “recognised” by NAATI.

## **4. Impartiality**

Interpreters and translators shall observe impartiality in all professional contracts.

## **5. Accuracy**

Interpreters and translators shall take all reasonable care to be accurate.

## **6. Employment**

Interpreters and translators shall be responsible for the quality of their work, whether as freelance practitioners or employed practitioners of interpreting and translation agencies and other employers.

## **7. Professional Development**

Interpreters and translators shall continue to develop their professional knowledge and skills.

## **8. Professional Solidarity**

Interpreters and translators shall respect and support their fellow professionals.

A Code of Practice is an essential part of the training of an interpreter. The most recent refresher course run by the KIS in Broome (7-10 June) emphasised the Code of Practice as an essential area of knowledge because it sets out the techniques and ethics of the profession. It was clear that those interpreters who had not had access to training previously found even the concept of a set of ‘rules’ for their profession very daunting.

There are also special difficulties for Aboriginal language interpreters with a code of practice structured in this way. Accuracy, Confidentiality and Impartiality are common problems for Aboriginal language interpreters (Cooke 2004). However, this Code cannot be summarily dismissed. Both language speakers and agency users should receive a high level of professionalism, and need to know what to expect during an interpreting session. Interpreters need to be able to explain their role clearly. A code of practice such as the one outlined above allows for that. An important aspect of training, therefore, is to ensure that Aboriginal language interpreters understand their code of practice, but also learn how not to compromise either the code or their cultural values. At an AUSIT conference in 2003 this issue of cultural values was brought up by immigrant language interpreters too.

## Issues/Recommendations

From the discussion above, some issues can be raised:

### 1. English language skills

While all Aboriginal interpreters are required to be bilingual in English and their Aboriginal language in order to pass a course or become accredited by NAATI at the paraprofessional level, many interpreters require extensive work on their use and understanding of specialist English terminology and finding equivalents in their language(s). Although a Diploma of Interpreting provides basic training in specialist areas (such as legal, medical and social) this training is not adequate for the complexity of jobs that require interpreters. Continuous professional development is required.

A possible solution is to develop partnerships that allow an agency, hospital, lawyer and so on to work regularly with a certain group of interpreters. Through this relationship language skills can be developed by the interpreter, whilst the non-Aboriginal person has access to cultural advice. However, regular professional development workshops are also required.

### 2. Kriol

Kriol is widely spoken across the north of Australia, and there are various dialects, even in one region such as the Kimberley. The dialects are based on the languages and culture of smaller areas. There is an even more dramatic difference between the Kriol of the NT and that of WA. Eades (1992) also highlights the need for interpreting in Aboriginal English in parts of Queensland. There is no doubt that Kriol and Aboriginal English interpreters are needed for first language speakers. However, it is necessary to avoid regarding Kriol or Aboriginal English as a 'one size fits all' medium of interpreting. Some interpreters do not feel comfortable interpreting 'off country' (Cooke 2004). The perception that a Kriol interpreter is more useful to more people than a traditional language interpreter is not one to be encouraged.

### 3. Traditional languages

It is essential that during training and during professional development speakers of traditional languages have opportunities to develop concepts and language translations in these languages. As noted in point 2, Kriol is not a substitute for traditional languages. One of the important factors to consider is that speakers whose traditional language is their first language will have learned Kriol as a second (plus) language. For all people, the language of thought is their first language. In order to truly understand meanings in English, speakers of traditional Aboriginal languages need to have access to the messages in their own languages. They may have just as much difficulty fully comprehending the message in Kriol as they would in English.

One important outcome of training traditional language interpreters is that it will contribute directly to language maintenance. The status of the traditional languages will be raised, particularly in the eyes of the younger generations.

#### 4. Learning language

Someone being trained to be an interpreter needs to be bilingual. An interpreting course is not a place to *learn* a traditional language. It is not possible to learn concepts and language meanings in the traditional language at the same time as trying to interpret those concepts in that language and English.

#### **Career paths and remuneration**

At present, a career as an interpreter is not a viable option for many Aboriginal language interpreters

- a) the use of interpreters is not high enough in regional areas to provide full-time employment
- b) there is no access to professional level training

#### **Recommendations**

##### **Needs analysis and review**

- Accurate language surveys should be commissioned and updated regularly to determine the precise communicative requirements of Indigenous people.
- Comprehensive data should be collected on the need for Indigenous language interpreters across all sectors both government and non-government.
- Regular reviews should be undertaken to determine if interpreters are being accessed in accordance with the need for interpreters, and to gauge the effectiveness of the interpreting service being delivered.

##### **Interpreting services**

- A comprehensive network of Indigenous language interpreting services comprising of regional providers with close links to community-based organisations should be established following a national forum of all interested parties. This network and its individual services should be adequately funded on a recurrent basis by state and commonwealth governments.
- Strategic and business planning should be undertaken to identify areas where interpreting services can generate income to fund additional training, language and culture related projects.

## **Interpreters**

- Interpreters should receive accredited training and ongoing professional development and support. They should be remunerated at professional rates of pay and offered full-time employment where practicable.

## **Training**

- NAATI should investigate the introduction of an accreditation system that allows Indigenous language interpreters to achieve accreditation in a specialised field, such as legal interpreting or medical interpreting. This would be in addition to their accreditation as paraprofessional interpreters and could be delivered as 'elective' units.
- Training in English as a Second Language classes need to be developed, funded and delivered to enable Indigenous interpreters to be skilled at a Professional level.

## **Professionals and other users of interpreting services**

- Non-Indigenous staff need ongoing language and culture awareness training. Their organisations need to ensure there is a commitment to using interpreters and have policies, procedures, and induction programs that reflect this commitment.
- Organisations need to ensure there is provision for the cost of using interpreters in their annual budgets.

## **Indigenous language speakers**

- Indigenous language speakers need to be informed of their right to an interpreter and given every opportunity to access interpreting assistance.

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