

# National **Indigenous Languages** Report



Australian Government



Australian  
National  
University



AIATSIS  
AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ABORIGINAL  
AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDIES



INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF  
INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES 19

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors show respect by acknowledging the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connections to land, waters and communities. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and Elders past, present and future.

The authors specifically acknowledge our appreciation of those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia who dedicate much of their lives to the maintenance and revival of Indigenous languages.

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## REPORT TERMINOLOGY

In this Report, "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people" and "First Australians" refers to all people of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent. The terms "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages", "Indigenous languages" or "Australian Indigenous languages" are used to refer to languages of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. An extensive Glossary is provided at the end of the Report to provide the meanings of terms used in this Report.

## ARTIST STATEMENT

The artwork by Jordan Lovegrove, a Ngarrindjeri man, of Dreamtime Creative, portrays the vast diversity of different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and the National Indigenous Language Report's goal to maintain, preserve and celebrate the languages. The different patterned sections of leaves represent all the different languages and language groups including sleeping and new languages. The tree provides a visual representation of the flow, connectivity and joy of the languages; the languages branch out like a tree, connecting individuals, families and communities with their culture and identity.

## CONTRIBUTIONS

We thank Susan Poetsch, Michael Jarrett and Muurrbay Aboriginal Language and Culture Centre, Jackie van den Bos, Greg Dickson and Ngukurr Language Centre for their contributions to the case studies. Brenda Thornley for designing the map at Figure 1.4, and Erika Charola, Henry Fraser, Cassy Nancarrow, John Mansfield, Frances Morphy for expert advice on the categorisation of language ecologies. For discussion of the ideas, we thank Katharine Blackwell, Heather Crawford, Elizabeth Marrkilyi Ellis, Stephen Haslett, Danielle Venn, and attendees at discussions in November-December 2018 organised by the former Australian Government Department of Education and Training, and the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.



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# National **Indigenous Languages** Report



## FOREWORD

The 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages has raised awareness of the crucial role that language plays in people's lives.

Languages are much more than a communication tool. They are integral to maintaining the identity, sustainability, vitality and strength of people and cultures across the globe. When a language is no longer spoken it disconnects people from their past, and a wealth of knowledge, tradition and culture becomes harder to express and pass on.

Today, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) estimates that of the 6,700 languages spoken worldwide, at least 40 per cent are in danger of disappearing. Many of these are Indigenous languages.<sup>1</sup>

In Australia, the state of Indigenous languages is considered to be critical. As one of the most culturally rich and innovative countries on earth, we have a responsibility to reverse the decline as our legacy for future generations.

Indigenous cultures are maintained via the spoken word; hence languages are a vital underpinning of all forms of cultural expression, including art, music, and dance. For more than 60,000 years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages have carried dreaming stories, songlines and knowledge from generation to generation. Many of these languages are no longer spoken today.

Addressing the erosion of Indigenous languages will require working together to find and advance solutions.

The National Indigenous Languages Report is a key element of the Australian Government's

ongoing commitment to maintain, preserve and celebrate Indigenous languages. Each year, the Government provides around \$20 million through the Indigenous Languages and Arts program to support the revival and maintenance of languages, as well as the creation of new art. This investment also supports an Australia-wide network of Indigenous Language Centres which provide vital language services to communities.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been saying for a long time that there are many benefits from speaking language – this written Report supports that position.

It includes evidence from a range of studies that show the economic and social benefits of speaking language, and provides information about the current state of language use.

This Report shows the sheer diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, how they are used and their ongoing importance in Australia. It also shows how new languages are evolving and how speaking language is vital for the well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

I would like to thank everyone who contributed to the National Indigenous Languages Report, and acknowledge the invaluable input of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Language Centres and organisations and the language workers who have contributed their expertise.

**The Hon Paul Fletcher MP,  
Minister for Communications,  
Cyber Safety and the Arts**



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Report supports what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have consistently asserted about the importance of language; speaking language provides cultural, social and economic benefits to individuals, communities and the nation.

Drawing on research and analysis conducted by the Australian National University (ANU), this Report further identifies a wide range of language-based employment opportunities, such as translating and interpreting, teaching, arts and culture, broadcasting, tourism, and land and sea management. Given the demonstrated benefits of speaking language, and the widely acknowledged benefits of employment, capitalising on these opportunities should be a priority for governments at all levels.

While there is such strong evidence demonstrating the benefits of speaking language, the overwhelming majority – around 90 per cent – of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people report that they do not speak their traditional language.<sup>2</sup>

When the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) last conducted a survey of Indigenous languages in Australia (in 2014), it found that 13 traditional languages could be considered relatively strong (in that they are acquired as a first language by most children in the community). In the five years since that survey, this number has dropped to 12, demonstrating the continued threat to languages in Australia.

While there has been a decline in the number of strong traditional languages, there is also positive news; many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are actively seeking ways to reconnect with traditional languages. This is painstaking work, but in parts of the country some languages are being reawakened, demonstrating what is possible with community will and ongoing investment.

There has also been increased interest from non-Indigenous Australians in the country's original languages. Sometimes this is through learning to speak language (including in schools), or through appreciating the expression of traditional language in music or other art forms, or by making it visible, for example through dual naming of places and sites.

This positive news does not afford room for complacency, as the small number of speakers in any language group in Australia means that all Indigenous languages are under threat.

This Report makes clear that there is no single, homogenous experience of Indigenous languages in Australia. In some parts of the country, people speak traditional languages in all facets of their lives, including for cultural and commercial activities. In other areas, it may be only Elders who speak traditional language on a regular basis, while other generations use it primarily for cultural or commercial purposes. In yet other places, there may be no fluent speakers, and perhaps only a few words or phrases are remembered or have been revived and used. In some parts, new languages have emerged from the historical contact between English and traditional languages and are now used every day by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as their main language.

For the most part, the role of language has not been well-considered in the design and delivery of government policies, programs and services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In some sectors, translation and interpreting services are available for people who speak traditional language. What has been largely ignored is the role that traditional language plays in the lives of people who may not speak it. Further, the circumstances through which languages have been lost are still a source of sadness and grief for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Another finding of this Report is that there is no one, clear context in which languages function. This Report outlines an approach which policy makers and service providers can use to understand the regional differences and considerations of language, when planning, implementing and evaluating initiatives.

Given the centrality of language – both its absence and its presence – to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, this Report encourages organisations, including governments at all levels, to use its findings to inform policy, program development and delivery for this country's First Peoples.

## KEY FINDINGS:



### Benefits gained by speaking language (Chapter 2)

1. Language is a fundamental part of Indigenous culture and identity, even for those who do not speak an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language.
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a range of different relationships to language—from those who speak an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language as their first language to those who are learning a language as part of revival efforts.
3. All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, traditional and new, provide significant social and economic benefits to their speakers, including income-generating and employment opportunities.
4. Speaking language has demonstrated benefits for individual well-being and health, particularly mental health. Speaking language is also beneficial in learning contexts.

### The state of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages (Chapter 3)

5. All of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are under threat.
6. Less than 10 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are reported to be speaking language at home.
7. The AIATSIS 2018–19 Survey of 141 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language varieties finds

that at least 123 are in use or being revitalised/revived in Australia today; the 2016 Census results found 159 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages reported to still be in use.

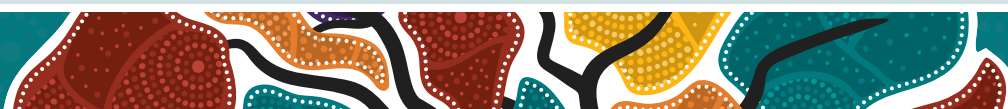
8. Most of these languages are highly endangered. The AIATSIS survey found only 12 relatively strong traditional languages and two strong new languages.
9. New languages – particularly Kriol and Yumplatok/Torres Strait Creole – are some of the strongest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages in Australia, and their use is growing.

### Maintaining and bringing Indigenous languages back (Chapter 4)

10. Maintenance, revitalisation, renewal and reawakening activities are vitally important to support the continuation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.
11. Even traditional languages currently considered relatively strong require purposeful and ongoing maintenance actions, so they do not become critically endangered.
12. The AIATSIS 2018–19 Survey finds that there are at least 31 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language varieties being reawakened by communities in Australia.

### Opportunities for improved services and programs (Chapter 5)

13. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who speak language can experience difficulties with equitable access to services when they are delivered only in English.
14. The diversity of language situations and contexts in Australia means it is impossible to have a 'one size fits all' approach to service delivery and program design.
15. There are approaches available to guide how language is considered in the provision of services, designing programs and in supporting the vitality of language.
16. There is a strong need for more extensive and consistent data on the state of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. Existing data collection methods do not, in most cases, recognise the complexity of language contexts in Australia or reflect the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.





## GUIDE TO THIS REPORT

This Report is different from past reports about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.<sup>3</sup> For the first time, research specialists have come together to review the breadth of evidence regarding the benefits of speaking language (which have long been understood by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people). The extent to which these benefits are being realised by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is demonstrated in an analysis of the state of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages in Australia. The analysis of data, research literature and the language survey together recognises the diversity and complexity of Australia's language landscape.

This Report provides a synthesis of an extensive range of data and research: the Report of the Third National Indigenous Languages Survey (NILS) conducted by AIATSIS (publication forthcoming at time of publication);<sup>4</sup> analysis of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) by ANU researchers at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research and the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language (CoEDL);<sup>5</sup> and a literature review exploring available information on well-being and Indigenous language ecologies by CoEDL.<sup>6</sup> Research conducted by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors has been prioritised where possible.

The purpose of combining these various ways of exploring the use, importance and state of Australia's Indigenous languages is to provide a strong evidence base for decision-makers and people working to provide language services to stem and reverse the loss of traditional languages.

The findings in this Report are robust, despite limitations in the data available on the state of Indigenous languages and how they affect people's lives.<sup>7</sup> Current data sources do not, for example, consistently distinguish between the different language situations and contexts across the country, or between types of Indigenous language (traditional or new). All data sources also required participants to self-report, creating varying ranges in what people consider a language and how they judge the proficiency of speakers. Methodologies and limitations to the data are explored in Appendix 1 and in more detail in the supplementary reports by the ANU and AIATSIS.

To date, data collection on Indigenous languages has for the most part had to fit with collection methods that are not designed with or by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (with the exception of the National Indigenous Languages Surveys). Data collection also

### THIS IS THE FIRST IN A SERIES OF REPORTS; OTHER REPORTS IN THE SERIES INCLUDE:

The Third National Indigenous  
Languages Survey (NILS3)

Indigenous language use and well-being:  
Findings from the National Aboriginal  
and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey

Well-being and Indigenous Language  
Ecologies: a strengths-based approach

has not taken into account that languages may still be a strong part of cultural identity, whether or not they are still spoken. The way some data is collected may not reflect the full relationship Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have with language.<sup>8</sup>

The Key Findings are explored in the subsequent six chapters of this Report.

- **Chapter 1** sets the scene and provides context for the terms and approaches taken in the Report to better understand the situation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages in Australia. This includes the different ways that language is used and different types of language ecologies in which they operate.
- **Chapter 2** analyses the NATSISS data and other research to outline the economic and social benefits gained by speaking language.
- **Chapter 3** explores in more depth how languages are being used and the extent to which they are being used. This includes information on the number of languages and speakers.
- **Chapter 4** has two parts: Part One considers the different situations that create an environment where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are maintained; and Part Two explores initiatives for revitalising, renewing and reawakening language.
- **Chapter 5** explores how people are accessing services and programs and what the (language) barriers are that, if removed, could improve access.
- **Chapter 6** describes further opportunities for an enhanced understanding of Australia's Indigenous languages. The concepts raised in this Report are complex and many matters are raised that will require ongoing work and commitment.