

## CHAPTER 5

### OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVED SERVICES AND PROGRAMS



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### KEY FINDINGS:



- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who speak language can experience difficulties with equitable access to services when they are delivered only in English.
- 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.
- There are approaches available to guide how language is considered in the provision of services, designing programs and in supporting the vitality of language.
- 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.

### ADDITIONAL FINDINGS:

#### The NATSISS analysis shows:<sup>260</sup>

Among people diagnosed with long-term health problems, speaking Indigenous languages was associated with a five percentage point increase in the probability of reporting having difficulties accessing healthcare services.

Of those who experienced physical violence in the prior 12 months, the probability of reporting having problems accessing legal services was higher by five percentage points for those who spoke an Indigenous language. The effect was three-fold for those who lived in areas where Indigenous languages were spoken as second or subsequent languages.

In parts of Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience difficulty accessing government and commercial services because these services are only offered in English, and not in the traditional or new languages that they speak. The right to receive information about government services in an appropriate language has some basis in international law.<sup>261</sup> Practically, these needs can be addressed in three ways: by offering services in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages; by employing more interpreters and translators; and by improving the teaching of English in schools and through adult education.

Understanding that there are diverse language landscapes across Australia is fundamental to examining the role of languages in the delivery of services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The use of languages plays a pivotal role in the adequacy of service delivery and so there are many opportunities to improve services for people that speak languages other than Standard Australian English. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people speak Standard Australian English as their first language, so the use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages will not enhance the communication of information, but they might find the use of language and culture a sign of respect for their Indigenous identity and Indigenous people more generally.

## DID YOU KNOW?

There are subtle differences between a distinct form of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander English and Standard Australian English.

This may be different meanings for similar words or similar meanings for different words.

Even these small differences can cause disruptions to effective communication in service delivery.<sup>262</sup>

A strategy for incorporating these local ways of talking is to employ local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people in roles that interact with local Indigenous clients and to support them to speak in culturally appropriate ways.

## HOW LANGUAGES ARE INTEGRAL TO SUCCESSFUL SERVICE DELIVERY

All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people benefit from the recognition of and respect for their cultures, including their languages, and a consistent theme in recent government consultation reports is that culture needs to be embedded in service delivery. In addition, in some areas the language needs of the service recipients should also be recognised, although these are not always included in evaluations of service effectiveness.<sup>263</sup>

The ANU's findings indicate that 'languages' are best included in the design of services, alongside and in addition to culture. This explicit treatment draws attention to the fact that implementation of particular communication needs (such as interpreters and employing people who speak the main local language fluently) should be differentiated from recognition of the importance of culture more generally.

Service providers should be aware of and target the language(s) being used for everyday communication by the majority of speakers in Indigenous communities. This approach would maximise opportunities for effective communication where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people speak their own languages, traditional or new.

## KEY CONSIDERATIONS IN HIGH STAKES INTERACTIONS

There are certain initiatives that play an integral role, not only in the maintenance and revival of languages, but the provision of services and programs in what we can

term 'high stakes interactions' – those where the cost of communication failure is very high. These include:

- interpreter and translation services; and
- education and the curriculum.

### Interpreter and translation services

Interpreters are people trained to take the spoken information or messages from one language and to relay the information in another language. Interpreting services support better communication in interactions such as the delivery of medical and legal services.

This is reflected in the *National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Well-being 2017-2023*, which identifies supporting access to language interpreters as a key strategy in detecting and preventing the progression of mental health issues and related problems, and for effective client transitions.<sup>264</sup>

Currently, there appear to be no tertiary institutions offering accredited courses in interpreting or translating in Indigenous languages. The National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) has been offering short introductions to interpreting in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and has produced short videos illustrating the role of an interpreter in a number of Indigenous languages to encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be interpreters (Yumplatok, Martu Wangka, Pitjantjatjara, Wik Mungkan, Walmajarri, Ngaanyatjarra, Kimberley Kriol, Kala Lagaw Ya).<sup>265</sup>

### How do you know when you need an interpreter?

If your service is delivered in English, consider whether your client:

- understands the full range of the English language, and
- is able to follow the speed and technical terms (eg. in the court, hospital, police interview, etc.).

If not, then you should:

- ask if they want an interpreter
- ask open-ended questions
- assess their comprehension, and
- assess their communication.

[Reference: Aboriginal Interpreter Services NT.GOV.AU, <https://nt.gov.au/community/interpreting-and-translating-services/aboriginal-interpreter-service/when-to-use-an-aboriginal-interpreter>]

Translation (writing a message from one language in another language) is another important consideration for ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have good information for making decisions. The process of taking an English script or recorded message and representing it in another language often involves a draft translation which is checked before proceeding to the final product. An example of translation for health services is *The Take Heart Important Health Message* video on the prevention of rheumatic heart disease which is available in Pitjantjatjara, Burarra, Ndjebbana, Torres Strait Creole, Kunwinjku, Murrinh Patha, Pintupi-Luritja, Tiwi, West Kimberley Kriol, Warlpiri, Anindilyakwa and Yolŋu Matha.<sup>266</sup>

Feedback from some service delivery sectors indicates that family members, or members of the community, are often called on to provide translating and interpreting services, citing an inadequate number of qualified professionals. There are some risks to engaging family or community members to act in the place of a qualified professional, including potential conflicts of interest.<sup>267</sup> Family or community members are also not bound by the confidentiality codes that apply to qualified professionals.<sup>268</sup>

Interpreting services across a range of service delivery sectors are often provided by phone or videoconferencing. Interpreting services that can be accessed remotely may be beneficial in situations where there is inadequate access to local interpreters, although remote interpreting services are not always comparable to face-to-face interpreting services. For example, telephone interpreting services are generally only appropriate for short, non-complex communication, and cannot take into account non-verbal communication.<sup>269</sup>

Access to interpreting services provided remotely is likely to be dependent on appropriate access to telecommunications technology. This is particularly the case for videoconferencing, where a good internet connection is essential to provide the speed and data capacity required.<sup>270</sup>

The provision of culturally appropriate interpreting services is also a consideration in the disability sector. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience higher rates of certain vision and hearing disorders than non-Indigenous Australians, and in 2012-13 were more than twice as likely to have partial or complete blindness.<sup>271</sup> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience higher rates of disability than non-Indigenous Australians across all age groups. In 2012, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0-14 were more than twice as likely than non-Indigenous children to have a disability, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 35-54 years were more than 2.7 times as



### MYTH: PEOPLE CANNOT TALK ABOUT COMPLEX IDEAS IN ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER LANGUAGES

Every community of speakers develops words for things that are important to them. For example, Kunwinjku people of Arnhem Land have five different words to distinguish the ways in which different wallabies and wallaroos hop. English lacks single words for these differences. English speakers can describe the differences in sentences, and can make up new words for these ideas. Similarly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages (whether traditional or new) have rich grammars and ways of making new words which allow them to express ideas like 'mortgage' or 'universal declaration of human rights'. For example, many people in Arnhem Land suffer from a genetically transmitted disease called Machado-Joseph disease (MJD). Gayangwa Lalara, Julie Gungunbuy Wunungmurra, and Bronwyn Daniels wanted their communities to know what scientists had found out about this disease. They worked with the MJD Foundation to prepare videos in the traditional languages Anindilyakwa and Yolŋu Matha, the new language Kriol and in English, to explain concepts such as 'chromosome', 'gene' and 'genetic transfer'. Caroline Wurramare has also translated a booklet into Anindilyakwa about MJD and its genetic transfer.



likely as non-Indigenous adults to have a disability.<sup>272</sup> The prevalence of disability among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must be recognised and provided for when planning service delivery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Organisations such as First Peoples Disability Network Australia can be useful resources in planning for culturally appropriate interpreting services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability, noting that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may not identify as having disability.

Another area of concern regarding Indigenous languages in service delivery is aged care. Research into bilingual situations for the elderly show that language proficiency is affected both by normal ageing and the development of dementia, and that even with normal ageing it can become difficult to maintain more than one language. People can revert to their childhood language even with a lifetime of dual language use.<sup>273</sup> Good communication with people in aged care requires recognition of language needs. This is highlighted in research into improving dementia care in the Kimberley, where both caregivers and service providers commented on the inadequacy of interpreting services.<sup>274</sup>

In 2016, it was estimated that around 22 per cent of the Australian Indigenous population were being considered in planning for aged care services.<sup>275</sup> Indigenous Australians in permanent residential aged care tend to be substantially younger than non-Indigenous Australians, and have a greater incidence of dementia.<sup>276</sup> These higher service demands in both residential and home care environments were noted by the Australian Government Department of Health in 2019, with the *Actions to support older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people*, which identifies the need for action by governments, mainstream aged care providers and specialist providers, to respond to these higher service demands.<sup>277</sup>

These issues are also being experienced overseas. A study in New Zealand on the quality of life of Māori in aged care found that increased Māori language and cultural engagement was associated with higher quality of life for older Māori.<sup>278</sup>

In Australia there are a number of providers of interpreter and translation services. For example, the Northern Territory's Aboriginal Interpreter Service offers video and face to face interpreter services, but in cases of remote communities this can involve delay depending on access and technology availability. Aboriginal Interpreting WA provides interpreters accredited by the NAATI.<sup>279</sup>

## Education and the curriculum: a special case of service delivery

Most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students attend mainstream schools and are taught a curriculum delivered through English, but there is a need for greater recognition of the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children learning English as an additional language or dialect.

In some communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have taken the lead; for example, the Warlpiri controlled Warlpiri Education and Training Trust:

*Supports partnerships for training and education so all Warlpiri people will have better knowledge through Warlpiri culture and two-way learning. Our vision is for future generations to be strong in their knowledge of culture, country and language, to be strong role models and to stand up for our communities.<sup>280</sup>*

In some schools, local staff are employed who can facilitate communication between students and teachers. A small number of remote schools have official bilingual programs, which have been shown to benefit students in numerous ways.<sup>281</sup> All these programs would benefit from having more trained local staff who speak the local languages, as well as having explicit training in English teaching.

Indigenous Australians identify the advantages of teaching children in their own mother tongue:

*"Teaching in our own language, teaching Anangu culture and teaching the children to read and write in Pitjantjatjara / Yankunytjatjara will also open up their spirits (down deep in their roots) because this will give them the courage to try new things for themselves. It will help their confidence also when they have someone close by and continually supporting them."*

(Katrina Tjitayi in a lecture on 'red dirt curriculum')<sup>282</sup>

The ANU found that there were opportunities for the education sector to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

**First step:** recognise and respect Indigenous students' first languages and intentionally use them for learning, at the very least informally through adults who can understand and bridge between students and classroom curriculum learning, but also formally where communities support mother tongue education.

**Second step:** collect data on the English proficiency of Indigenous students who speak an Indigenous language as their mother tongue. Understanding Indigenous children's English proficiency levels is essential both for teaching English purposefully (i.e. not just using the language of English, but teaching it) and for indicating the teaching approaches that will support English language learners to access all the subjects of the curriculum.

**Third step:** ensure students who speak Indigenous languages can gain qualifications as speakers of their own languages.

**Fourth step:** dismantle the barriers for Indigenous language speakers in gaining a tertiary or vocational qualification in teaching, including teaching through their own language(s), and teaching English as an additional language or dialect.

### *Where education meets interpreter/translation training*

A new development which brings together high school education and interpreter/translation training is the Translation Tracks course, a VET pathway in the senior secondary years, piloted in Central Australia with Arrernte and Alyawarr. It provides high school students with the opportunity to enrich their home language, learn more about English through investigating miscommunications, and gain an understanding of the interpreter/translation profession through workplace visits and through developing language resources.<sup>283</sup>

## APPROACHES TO ACCESSING SERVICES

Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people who speak an Indigenous language as their first language are significantly more likely to report having problems in accessing services, even when accounting for the remoteness factor.

Services are often delivered by English-speakers and there may be little consideration of whether the service recipients have acquired English to the level required for the interaction, or of whether they could be helped by having an interpreter or language speaking assistant. Problems accessing services can partly be attributed to the remote locations of the majority of this group, where services are more limited for the entire community.

Across the country, innovative solutions are being developed to enhance access to services in remote locations; for example, the development of the Northern Territory's *Aboriginal Recorded Voice Announcement system*, by NEC Australia and Stratum Information Communications Technology. The system enables Indigenous Australians in the Northern Territory to engage with emergency services in language, ensuring appropriate access to these services and reducing the burden on other emergency service centres typically accessed via Triple Zero.<sup>284</sup>



## CASE STUDY:

### Purple House in Alice Springs<sup>285</sup>

Purple House is an innovative Indigenous-owned and run remote dialysis service, aged-care and social support provider and bush medicine enterprise, which operates in a range of communities across the remote regions of the NT.

Prompted by the question, “Why should it be on just the Aboriginal community to learn English? We should be learning their language too”, the Purple House team is developing Luritja language translation software in cooperation with Luritja people to make communication between language and non-language speakers easier. The funding they have received under the ILA Program has allowed them to employ Luritja people (some board members and dialysis patients they work with) to develop language resources that support doctors and health staff to better communicate with Luritja speaking patients.

A program such as this is valuable to the Luritja community. It focuses on the use of language for practical communication in the workplace such as translating documents and medicine labels, but also exemplifies respect for traditional language and gives language a higher status in the workplace.

It is a practical tool that aims to be implemented within not just the walls of Purple House, but across many businesses. This program creates job opportunities for community members, stimulates and gives purpose to patients who sit within Purple House for dialysis for five-hour periods and ultimately brings the community together.

This project aims to improve the social and emotional well-being of dialysis patients through meaningfully engaging them in the language initiative as well as contributing to the cultural safety of the environment, which for many patients, is away from their Traditional Lands.

It is also hoped that their physical health and receptiveness to treatment will improve as a result of the improved engagement and communication.

At a broader level, the project also aims to contribute to reconciliation and increased cross cultural understanding by employing patients to work directly with medical staff, facilitating a strong cultural knowledge exchange in addition to the capturing, documenting and teaching of the language.

#### Are the right questions being asked before setting up and during the evaluation of programs and services?

What is the traditional Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language of the area?

What are the main languages spoken by people in the area – traditional, new, or both?

Is English spoken as a first or second language?

How will the initiative recognise, respect and respond to people with these language repertoires?

### BARRIERS TO SERVICE DELIVERY

The *My Life My Lead* Report states that despite improvements, poor access to health and effective ‘wrap around’ services contributes to the significant health inequities experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.<sup>xix</sup> Barriers to access include a lack of cultural safety, poor health literacy and the need for interpreting and other language services.<sup>286</sup>

The NILS3 survey raised that one barrier for service providers is that new languages may not have a widely recognised name in the community – so speakers might use various descriptive phrases to indicate their language variety, in lieu of a standardised name.<sup>287</sup>

Such local namings and descriptions do not appear on official language lists and so service providers will not be alerted to speakers’ languages. For example, the creole spoken at Yarrabah is becoming known as Yarrie Lingo because of a community poster project conducted there

<sup>xix</sup> ‘Wrap around’ describes a collaboration or ‘joining up’ of services to provide multi-layered support for children and their families. Reference: Australian Institute of Family Studies, *CFCA Paper No. 9*, 2012.

about a decade ago.<sup>288</sup> This name has not yet appeared as an option on official language lists. Another example of where there are no codes on the ABS list of languages is for new languages spoken by Aboriginal people on Cape York, although these are the dominant languages in the area.<sup>289</sup> When a language is not classified, it becomes invisible for the purpose of service delivery.

New languages might or might not be consistently recognised or named as languages separate from a source language. For example, for a variety of reasons, in responses to language surveys Gurindji Kriol, Light Warlpiri and Modern Tiwi might not be distinguished from their traditional source languages. For new

languages with vocabulary predominantly drawn from English, 'English' might be considered the most accurate response in lieu of anything more appropriate.<sup>290</sup>

While many traditional languages and some new languages are listed in the NAATI online database,<sup>291</sup> only two practitioners are listed for Pitjantjatjara, and none for Murrinh Patha or Aninindilyakwa, or for Kriol (Kimberley, Roper River or Fitzroy Valley). This represents a decline over time, given that Kriol-English interpreters from Ngukurr were part of the first cohort of Diploma of Interpreting graduates from the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (NT) in 1995.



## CASE STUDY:

### Ngukurr – where community is revitalising traditional languages and services in Kriol are needed

In the community of Ngukurr in eastern Arnhem Land the first language of children is Kriol. Community members are affiliated with a number of traditional languages from the region, including Alawa, Mangarrayi, Marra, Ngalakgan, Ngandi, Wubuy, Rembarrnga, Ritharrngu/Wägilak and Warndarrang.

Most Ngukurr residents have family connections to many of these traditional languages, and possibly to others further afield. In Ngukurr, traditional languages are usually learned as 'additional' languages, by people who gradually and continually add knowledge of these traditional languages over their lifetime.

Kriol is the everyday language for Ngukurr residents. It has a long history with children recorded using Kriol since 1918. Kriol is largely accepted as a language in its own right in Ngukurr and Kriol resonates positively and proudly within the community as the local way of talking.

The Ngukurr Language Centre includes Kriol as one of the local Aboriginal languages it serves,

although it is not specifically funded for this. As the primary, everyday medium of communication in this community, Kriol is the language spoken in family and community circles, as well as the language through which children learn about their world and are taught their culture and their traditional languages. As with any language spoken from birth with family and community, speaking Kriol also reflects a person's sense of identity: there is a recognisable Ngukurr/Roper way of speaking Kriol.

Despite Kriol being spoken community-wide, and Kriol being contemporary Australia's largest new language, residents at Ngukurr cannot rely on accessing services in Kriol, their first language, even in high stakes interactions. Typically, Kriol speakers who wish to discuss matters in Kriol rely on informal arrangements with family and community members rather than the purposefully appointed Kriol-speaking staff who are responsible for ensuring the clear communication of vital information to the community.



There are growing calls for increased access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interpreters, particularly in the health industry. This was seen in the review of the accessibility of Indigenous language interpreters conducted by the Commonwealth Ombudsman, which found that unique challenges in the Indigenous language interpreter area mean that government agencies and individuals are frequently unable to access interpreters.<sup>292</sup>

In the justice and health areas, interpreters require extensive training on specialist terminology and relating these to Indigenous language and concepts. Jobs in these sectors are complex and require ongoing training.<sup>293</sup> The absence of qualified interpreters can increase the risk of litigation arising from miscarriages of justice.<sup>294</sup> In the course of its inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs received evidence around the poor Indigenous interpreting support in the justice system. Some Aboriginal people do not fully understand either the court processes or the outcomes of those processes, and interpreters are often unavailable or underused. Difficulties in arranging interpreters to be available for court proceedings within a short time sometimes result in clients remaining in custody.<sup>295</sup>

In the education area, there is also a shortage of teachers who speak Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander languages.<sup>296</sup> Like interpreters, they need to work to develop specialist terminology and explanations of curriculum that relate to concepts in local languages and society. They need to develop particular skills in team-teaching and managing a bilingual bicultural classroom, and in working with language teaching resources that are more limited than those available to teachers of English.

There are limited opportunities to study Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander languages at university.<sup>xx</sup> Additionally, some teacher programs have been closed down which in the past created a generation of trained Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers. The benefits of having local teachers who speak Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are clear: children will engage more, and learn more, when they understand what is happening in the classroom; when they have teachers who can act as role-models; and when they have teachers who stay in the communities.<sup>297</sup>

Providing services in the languages which best suit the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is essential. However, recognising the importance of language, even when it may not be spoken, is equally essential. The following chapter provides some guidance to governments and other organisations on how to incorporate language into their work.

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<sup>xx</sup> In 2019 the University Languages Portal of Australia <https://www.ulpa.edu.au/where-can-study-indigenous-languages/> listed only one language in which students could take a major, Yolŋu Matha.



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