

June 3, 2026

Submission to National Cultural Policy

Language is the fundamental carrier of cultural learning and expression. Language is often subsumed in the more generalised cultural initiatives and policies, but languages also need specific and targeted actions in addition to those addressing culture. The Policy includes 'language' in some places but not in others.

There are three types of First Nations language ecology, or language situation, in Australia today. The three types are the kind of language spoken as the first and primary language(s) of a community, and those being learned as additional languages, represented in Table 1. For example,

- in a traditional language ecology, one or more traditional languages is/are being learned by all generations from birth, and English is added as an additional language.
- in a contact language ecology, a new contact language has arisen since colonisation, e.g. Kriol, Yumplatok, and is the main everyday language of the community. English is added as an additional language at school, and the traditional language is added also.
- in an English language ecology, a variety of English (mainstream English or Aboriginal English) is the main everyday language, and a traditional language is being added.

Table 1. Indigenous language ecologies framework in post-colonial Australia

Vernacular (L1) – used in family/ community interactions	Additional languages (L2) – may be learned in informal or formal settings
A traditional language ecology	– variety/ies of English – (perhaps: regional Indigenous contact lingua franca)
A contact language ecology	– variety/ies of English – traditional language(s)
An English language ecology	– traditional language(s)

(Adapted from Angelo (2021: 54–55), Oliver et al. (2020: 4))

The implications of this for cultural policy are:

- In the traditional language ecology where one or more traditional languages is/are spoken as the main everyday language of a community, support is needed for the continued use of the language(s) in daily life and in cultural continuity. To maintain these languages, support is needed to engage through them in all areas, including in learning to speak, listen, read and write them in education.
- In the English ecology where a variety of English is spoken as the main everyday language of a community, support is needed to revive or revitalise the traditional languages. To recognise this extensive and emotional journey, support is needed to rebuild the languages and create resources, and places and times to speak them.

- In the contact language ecology where a new contact language is spoken as the main everyday language of a community, support is needed to recognise the importance of these speakers' main language and its crucial role in communication, learning, expression and identity. In addition, support is needed for the revival or revitalisation of traditional languages in this ecology. These contact languages are often overlooked in policy, yet they have the largest numbers of speakers in the country.

We call on the National Cultural Policy to include specific language-oriented pathways, to recognise and differentiate each type of language ecology, or situation, in cultural aims and initiatives.

