

The article *Pragmatic Meaning in Court Interpreting* also highlighted that court interpreting is mainly concerned with pragmatics, that is, with building a mental model of speaker's meaning and conveying this mental model to end receivers.<sup>4</sup>

However, Hale points out that "several studies have found that interpreters often interpret the semantic, 'fixed context-free meaning' only, and misunderstand or do not convey the pragmatic meaning."<sup>5</sup> It is immediately obvious that a briefing will contribute to accuracy in conveying pragmatic meaning.

The famous case *Stuart vs. the Crown*<sup>6</sup> highlighted problematic aspects of a police statement, the wording of which could not have come from Stuart. (For example there is no word for rape in Arrernte.)<sup>7</sup> This could have been avoided had an interpreter been present for the police interview, and again it could have been highlighted prior to the hearing had an interpreter been present for a briefing, but of course interpreters were rarely used in 1959. They are

however, used today and for the fairest trial to take place a briefing is essential.

A briefing also increases confidence, something that any lay person needs to function well in a court setting. It is almost tautological to point out that being well prepared and fully informed improves the performance of interpreters. It also reduces the risks associated with walking in to perform a key function of the court without any knowledge of what is about to happen.

Finally, it should be stated that the practitioners' obligation under the Law Society Northern Territory rules of conduct and practice is to provide clear instruction and serve his/her clients competently and diligently, which includes informing and advising clients about their matters to permit the client to make decisions about the client's best interests<sup>8</sup>. Fully briefing an interpreter goes a long way towards ensuring those professional obligations are met. ●

## Endnotes

- 1 Requejo 2007 *The Role of Context in Word meaning Construction. International Journal of English Studies*, vol (1), pp 170-172.
- 2 Hayes, 2009 A review of Australian judges' rulings on appeals on the grounds of incompetent interpreting P32 -33
- 3 Hale 2003 *Working with interpreters in the courtroom. Presentation at the National Judicial Orientation Program Sydney*
- 4 Jacobsen 2004 *Pragmatic Meaning in Court Interpreting* Hermes Journal of Linguistics p.239
- 5 Hayes 2009 A review of Australian judges' rulings on appeals on the grounds of incompetent interpreting P32 -33
- 6 Report of the Royal Commission in regard to Rupert Max Stuart. 1959 p31- 33 THE WRITTEN CONFESSION (note especially annotation 15).
- 7 Moore&Swartz 2012 *Meaning based interpreting in the courts. Language and Law Conference Darwin 25-27 May 2012*
- 8 LAW SOCIETY NORTHERN TERRITORY Rules of Professional Conduct and Practice 10A (p12), 17.2 (p15)

# The Australian Aboriginal language family

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS REGARDING AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES ARE: "ARE THEY RELATED?" AND "WHAT ARE THEY LIKE?" IN THIS ARTICLE, PETER DREW AND GARRY JENNINGS SEEK TO ADDRESS THESE QUESTIONS AND AT THE SAME TIME HIGHLIGHT ASPECTS OF ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES THAT PRACTITIONERS NEED TO BE AWARE OF.

There are 29 language families in the world and nearly 7,000 languages. A language family is a group of languages that have descended from a common parent language. Examples of language families are: Indo-European, Malayo-Polynesian (Austronesian) and Australian Aboriginal. Languages within each family will share some grammatical and lexical features,

but will not necessarily be mutually intelligible. For example, English, French, Russian, Greek and Hindi are all members of the Indo-European family, but are certainly completely distinct languages. So it is with languages in the Australian Aboriginal family. We can see that Australian Aboriginal languages constitute one family because of the common features these languages share. These common

features are sounds, grammar and areas of meaning.

When Europeans arrived in Australia there were approximately 250 languages and approximately 500-600 dialects in the Australian Aboriginal Language Family. A dialect is a variation within one language, e.g. Australian English, Scottish English or Caribbean English.



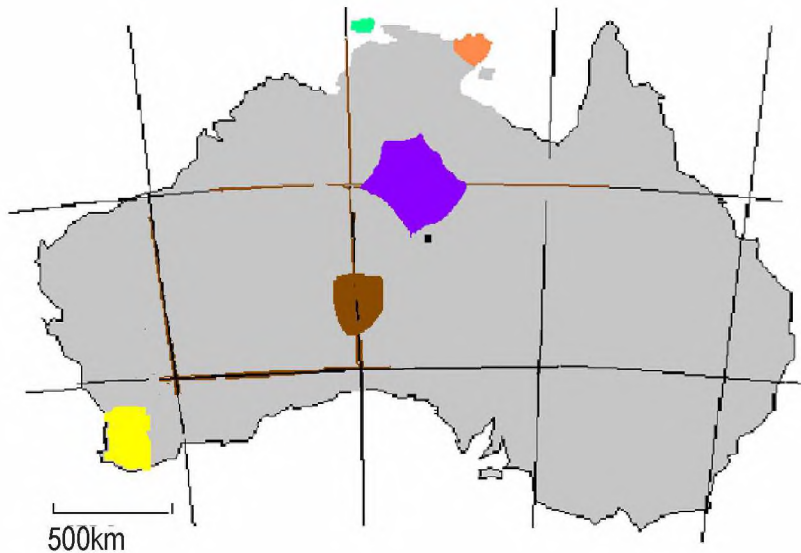


Figure 1 language locations – map by Peter Drew

- Tini pupuni* (Tiwi - green)
- Gurrmal manymak* (Gupapuyngu - orange)
- Wati ngurrju* (Warlpiri - purple)
- Wati palya* (Pitjantjatjara - brown)
- Kwop nyungar* (Nyungar - yellow)

Regarding the sounds, an expert on Aboriginal languages noted the “*Australian languages [have] remarkably similar phonological features*” (sound systems). Most (70%) Aboriginal languages have three vowels:

- a - as in papa,
- i - as in Dili,
- u - as in put.

It seems likely that all Aboriginal languages originally had only three vowels.

Sounds that are not found in English but that are common to Australian Aboriginal languages are sounds represented by:

- r̥ or ɻ,
- m̥ or ɱ,
- r̥t or ɻ̥.

These are called retro-flexes. Some other examples include sounds represented by tj or j, ny, ly (alveo-dentals) and ng at the start of words.

A universal grammatical feature common to all Australian languages is verbless clauses. “The man is good” is represented by two words literally meaning “man good,” with no verb for ‘is,’ or ‘to be’. Figure 1 shows the locations of five distinct Aboriginal languages with a verbless construction for “the man is good”.

There are other common grammatical features such as ergative case marking on nouns, and an extensive system of affixes for nouns and verbs.

The Australian Aboriginal language family has two divisions: Pama Nyungan and Non-Pama Nyungan. Approximately 90% Languages are Pama Nyungan. Pama means man in the North Qld Paman group of languages and Nyunga means man in the Nyunga group of South West WA. Non Pama-Nyungan languages are believed to have been influenced by Papuan and Malayo-Polynesian languages. Of course vocabularies are different. However, there are many common word roots. Looking at four Pama Nyungan languages we can see similarities in these four languages with the words for sit and talk (See map).

One word, although different, often shares the same area of meaning. For example, the word for *sit* in the above four languages has the meaning;

- *sit*,
- *stay*,
- *live*,
- *be*.
- I am **sitting**.
- I am **staying** here.
- I am **living** at Alice Springs.

- I **am** in the tree.

Although at the time of the 2006 Census 147 Aboriginal languages were still spoken, many of these are not used as a person’s primary means of communication. One in eight Aboriginal people (55, 695) said that an “Indigenous language was their primary household language” and over 60% of these are in the Northern Territory.

The main languages in order of greater numbers spoken by Aboriginal people today are: Aboriginal English and English, Creoles, then Indigenous Languages. All of these varieties are equally complex and have standing as full languages in their own right, to the same extent that English or any other language does.

Aboriginal English: The languages of the *populated areas* of Victoria, NSW, SA, Qld and WA are not spoken as first languages and very little remains of the languages of Tasmania. What remains in place of these languages is Aboriginal English (AE) which contains features that are common to Aboriginal languages. AE also has dialects that reflect aspects of the original language of that area. Hence we see Koori English, Murri English and Noongar English etc.

Due to the social situation and the close ties Aboriginal people have maintained, AE has developed and remains a strong means of communication. It should be no surprise that; due to the similarity of sound systems of Aboriginal languages, that the pronunciation of the varieties of AE is basically



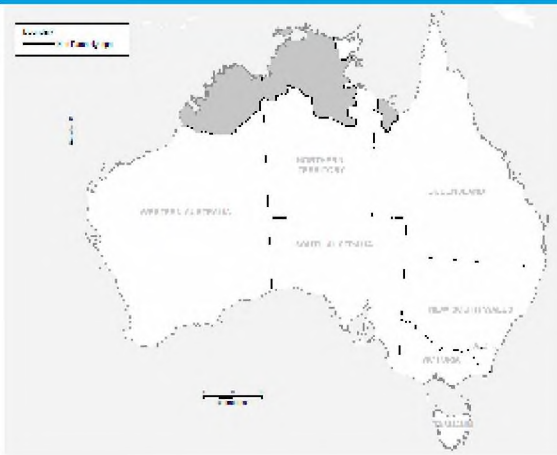


Figure 2 Pama Nyungan/Non Pama Nyungan language areas

Language	“Talk!”	“Sit!”
Pitjantjatjara	wangka	nyina
Warlpiri	wangkaya	nyin
Nyungar	wangk	nhina
Gupapuyngu	wanga	nhina

the same all over Australia and that AE differs from standard Australian English not only in its sounds but also in its grammar and areas meaning of words.

Kriol and Torres Strait Creole are major languages of the Northern Regions of Australia and are spoken, with regional variation, in the northern parts of Western Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland. The 2011 Australian Census suggests there are close to 4000 Kriol speakers in the Northern Territory, although anecdotal evidence suggests there may be more, as Kriol is still viewed by many as a ‘mongrel’ language, and there is a sense of cultural shame associated with identifying as a Kriol speaker among some members of the Indigenous community.

Kriol, although containing many words derived from English, is not a dialect of English. It is a different language. This is easy to see looking at the simple sentence; *yu gin jidan gudbinji langa kantri*, which means; *you can be happy on the land*. The word *jidan* comes from the English word sitting. You could probably guess its meaning;

*be, live, sit, stay.*

Aboriginal English, Kriol and all Aboriginal languages are rule governed just as any other language. In fact, there are no such things as languages without grammatical structure. Also, every language is capable of expressing any concept, even if no such concept is known to the speakers of that language at present. However, where one language may have a single term or succinct phrase associated with a given concept, another language may require several sentences to fully express the whole idea.

A good example of this principle is the Pitjantjatjara word “tjukurpa,” which is usually interpreted in English as “dreaming,” but which requires the explanation of a combination of complex philosophical ideas in order to convey the full meaning as a Pitjantjatjara speaker would understand it.

The number of words in an Aboriginal language would be approximately the same as that known by the average European language speaker. However, there is a difference. Aboriginal people would know nearly all the words in their language, and many Aboriginal language words tend to have larger range of meaning. Take for example the Pitjantjatjara words *kulini* and *pulka*:

**Kulini means;** hear, listen to, heed, think about, consider, decide, know about, understand, remember, feel. **Pulka means;** big, large, a lot of, much, so much, heavy, many, important, very, really.

When Europeans came to Australia they often used Aboriginal words to describe the many new concepts they encountered. They adapted these to conform to English sounds. Boomerang and Koala are from Dharuk in NSW. Mulga is from a number of languages in NSW. Kangaroo is from Guugu Yimidhirr Queensland. The names of trees Jarrah and Karri are from

Nyungar in WA.

When Aboriginal speakers used words from English they also made them conform to the rules of their language:

- English z, s, sh, ch, j, becomes tj.
- English v, f becomes p, b.

P and b are considered the same sound, as are t and d, and k and g. Using these rules we understand the formation of the following Pitjantjatjara words *kapamanta-government, tanki-donkey, tjilpa-silver, tjiji-sheep, raipula-rifle.*

While every language in the world has its own unique identity and grammar, Australian Indigenous languages are linked as one “language family” by the common sound and grammar systems which categorise them. An understanding of these common linguistic features can greatly aid in approaches to local language related issues in any community in Australia.

The two best and most widely available introductions to Australian Aboriginal languages are: *Australian Aboriginal Languages* by Barry Blake and *Language and Culture in Aboriginal Australia* by M. Walsh & C. Yallop. ●

**Endnotes**

1. Language and Culture in Aboriginal Australia, p1 edited by Michael Walsh and Colin Yallop 1993
2. Languages of Australia and Tasmania p. 10 by S.A. Wurm 1972
3. AUSTRALIAN LANGUAGES Their Nature and Development p. 634 by R.M.W. Dixon 2002.
4. Image credit: Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
5. For areas of interest see; A Report on Aboriginal English in the Courts by Fiona Roberts downloadable at; [http://vals.org.au/static/files/assests/cf816f42/4\\_Aboriginal\\_English\\_Report.pdf](http://vals.org.au/static/files/assests/cf816f42/4_Aboriginal_English_Report.pdf)