

Aboriginal languages

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Many Aboriginal adults and children in central Australia are speakers of one or more Aboriginal languages as their mother tongue. They may or may not speak Standard Australian English (SAE), that is, the form of English that is taught in schools and used in the media.

Other people speak Aboriginal English as their first language. This is a form of English, although non-Standard, and it adheres to its own set of grammatical conventions, some of which may stem from Aboriginal languages. To an inexperienced listener, Aboriginal English may seem as incomprehensible as an Aboriginal language, despite the fact that many Aboriginal English terms have now become part of the wider lexicon, e.g. myall, deadly, shame, brother, sister (in their Aboriginal English sense).

Kriol is spoken in the Barkly and further north but not generally far south of Tennant Creek. Kriol is a north Australian creole, a 'creole' being a language that arises among children of adults who speak different languages. Speakers often reject the name Kriol because they have often been 'shamed' for speaking 'rubbish language'. They more often refer to what they are speaking as pidgin, camp English or Aboriginal English. Although it contains some English-based words, these words may not have the same meaning in Kriol, and the language structure is like the Aboriginal languages.

In the larger towns like Alice Springs and Tennant Creek, people speak many different Aboriginal languages. High mobility, intermarriage and historical factors have resulted in many Aboriginal people in central Australia being able to speak not only their own vernacular (community language), but one or more other Aboriginal languages as well as English. Sometimes even children speak a number of languages. Conversely, due to certain historical factors, particularly government policies of removal of Aboriginal children from their families, there are also many people who do not speak their Aboriginal language or languages.

LANGUAGE FAMILIES

There are a number of language families that span the desert region of central Australia, extending through the Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia. Like in other parts of the world where arbitrary borders have been drawn such as in Israel and Palestine, language distribution does not adhere to contemporary borders, thus speakers of the same language family may be found in communities in the NT, SA, WA and Qld. There are three main language families in the central Australian region, and Warumungu. Each family comprises a number of mostly mutually intelligible dialects. The language families are known as Arandic, Ngarrkic and Western Desert. Within a language family, overlapping dialects/languages share common vocabulary and grammatical features, and the distinctions between the dialects may be quite minimal.

Western Desert family

Stretches from WA through northern SA into southern NT. Traditional dialectal regional distinctions are less defined these days due to people's movement throughout the region, brought about largely by European contact, particularly through missionary contact, the cattle industry and the building of the railway.

Pitjantjatjara

The main language spoken in the Pitjantjatjara Lands (commonly referred to as the 'Pit Lands') in the north-west of SA in communities including Ernabella (Pukatja), Fregon and Amata in SA, Wingellina (Irrunytju) in WA and around Docker River (Kaṯukatjara), Muṯitjulu and Areyonga (Utju) in the NT.

Yankunytjatjara

The dialect spoken more to the east of Pitjantjatjara. Speakers can also be found in communities in the north of SA at Mimili and Indulkana and the south of the NT in areas around Finke and Muṯitjulu.

Luritja

Spoken to the east of the Pit Lands (see above) from Oodnadatta in SA (in the past) through Finke (Aputula), Maryvale (Titjikala), Kings Canyon area, Areyonga (Utju), Jay Creek, Imanpa and Muṯitjulu in the NT. It has often been used as the lingua franca between Western Desert and Arandic and Warlpiri speakers. There are various ideas about the origin of the term Luritja, one being that it comes from the Arrernte word for non-Arrernte people, Ulerenye. At Hermannsburg Mission all the Western Desert speaking people were called Lurinya/Luritja and this label remains today (Heffernan and Heffernan 1999).

Pintupi Luritja

This is the name given to the Western Desert dialect as spoken from around Papunya to the WA border. It exhibits features of neighbouring languages such as Warlpiri and Arrernte, since once the Pintupi came out of the bush, relatively recently, they have often lived in close proximity at Hermannsburg Mission and Papunya and Haasts Bluff (Ikuntji) ration stations.

Pintupi

Speakers of Pintupi tend to come from across the border in the WA desert region around Kiwirrkura community. People who identify as Pintupi tend to be from the west, whereas Pintupi Luritja speakers tend to have had more contact with the mission at Hermannsburg and the ration stations at Papunya and Haasts Bluff (Ikuntji).

Kukatja

Speakers can be found around Kintore in the NT through to Kiwirrkura in WA and north as far as the Balgo region. This label is confusing as it also refers to the original landowners around Haasts Bluff (Heffernan and Heffernan 1999:5), as well as to dialects that were spoken in SA and Qld.

Ngaatjatjarra

A dialect spoken by only a few families around the WA border communities of Tjukurla, Warakurna, Blackstone (Papulankutja) and Docker River (Kaṯukutjara).

Ngaanyatjarra

The main language of the Ngaanyatjarra Lands communities in WA including Warakurna, Blackstone (Papulankutja), Jameson (Mantamaru), Wanarn, Warburton (Mirlirtjarra) and Tjirrkarli. Speakers can also be found as far west as Kalgoorlie.

Arandic family

This family of closely related languages includes a number of varieties of Arrernte, Anmatyerr and Alyawarr which comprise a network of mutually intelligible dialects, and Kaytetye which is a separate language. There are probably around 4500-6000 speakers in all (Henderson and Dobson 1994).

Eastern and Central Arrernte

These languages are spoken mainly at Harts Range (Artetyere/Atitjere), Bonya (Uthipe Atherre), Santa Teresa (Ltyentye Apurte), Amoonguna (Imengkwerne) and Alice Springs (Mparntwe).

Western Arrernte

This dialect is spoken mainly around Hermannsburg (Ntaria/Nthareye), Wallace Rockhole, Jay Creek (Iwuputaka) and Alice Springs.

Southern Arrernte and Pertame

There are few speakers left. Traditionally these dialects were spoken to the south of Alice Springs.

Central and Eastern Anmatyerr

Anmatyerr is spoken to the north and north-west of Alice Springs around the communities of Mount Allan (Yuelamu) Napperby (Laramba/Alherramp) and Ti Tree (Ilperl Anyent). Eastern Anmatyerr is spoken at Stirling (Ilewerr). It overlaps with Alyawarr to the north.

Alyawarr

Spoken further to the north and includes the communities in the Utopia homelands, Ammaroo (Amperlatwaty), Epenarra (Wetenngerr), Murray Downs, Alekarenge, Canteen Creek, Lake Nash (Ilperrelhelam/Alpurrurulam) and also Tennant Creek.

Kaytetye

Spoken approximately 300 km to the north of Alice Springs. The main communities where Kaytetye is spoken are Neutral Junction (Artarre), Stirling (Ilewerr), Ankweyleyengkwe and Barrow Creek. Kaytetye is spoken to a lesser degree at Murray Downs (Ipmangker) and Ali Curung (Alekarenge). The neighbouring languages are Anmatyerr to the south, Alyawarr to the east and north-east, Warlpiri to the west and north-west and Warumungu to the north (Turpin 2000:1-2).

Ngarrkic family

Warlpiri

The main language group in the Ngarrkic family. Warlpiri covers a relatively extensive area to the north-west of Alice Springs. The main Warlpiri speaking communities are Yuendumu (Yurntumu), Lajamanu, Nyirripi and Willowra (Wirliyajarrayi), with speakers also in Tennant Creek, Katherine, Alekarenge, Ti Tree and Alice Springs. There are around 3000 speakers of Warlpiri as a first language, with many speakers of Warlpiri as a second or third language as well. Within the Warlpiri language group there are a number of mutually intelligible dialects with differences evident in pronunciation and vocabulary (Laughren et al 1996).

Warlmanpa

A small Ngarrkic dialect spoken further east around Banka Banka.

Waramungu

The main language of Tennant Creek and surrounding communities; however there are now more speakers of both Warlpiri and Alyawarr living in Tennant Creek.

Spelling, orthographies, and pronunciation

It is only relatively recently that central Australian Aboriginal languages have been written down, from about 100 years ago for the earliest languages to some languages that are just beginning to be written today.

All languages can be written down if that is what communities want. Even English was spoken for a long time before being written down. Communities are generally very proud to have a dictionary or a bible in their language.

The written form of many Aboriginal languages may look peculiar to an English-speaker especially if, for example, you encounter the Arrernte signs around Alice Springs. That is until you become familiar with the orthography (spelling system). Remember though, that there are good reasons why particular orthographies have been used, and secondly that the English spelling system is very peculiar for a learner also – we are just more used to it. Arrernte and other Aboriginal languages are not easy to read because more than half of the sounds in Arrernte are not found in English, and vice versa, so they have to be represented with different combinations of letters.

If you come into contact with a language that you want to learn about, find out if there is a guide to the orthography so you can work out what sounds the letters represent. In central Australia, some languages have very good dictionaries and learner guides. Although there is still an incredible range of ‘ad hoc spellings’ for words in Aboriginal languages, most languages now have what are called ‘standardised orthographies’, i.e. there is generally a right way to spell words if people just take the time to find out.

The 1970s saw a surge in interest in writing down Aboriginal languages. In Alice Springs Arrernte speakers and linguists began working on a new spelling system that would better render the complex sounds in the various Arrernte dialects. This has become known as the Common Arandic Writing System and is now used widely across all the Arandic speaking communities except at Hermannsburg and the Finke River Mission where a modern adaptation of the old ‘Aranda’ mission spelling system has been retained. This is now quite close to the Common Arandic Writing System, e.g. Arrernte is written Arrarnta.

Pronouncing Aboriginal words

Trying to pronounce Aboriginal words from written sources can lead to interesting results and mispronunciations, especially if you do not consult the orthography guides, which you will often find in the front of the dictionaries, learners guides or other resources. There are two reasons why using your intuitions as an English speaker will often not work. The first is that words have often been written by English speakers who have simply approximated the Aboriginal word as they have heard it.

An example of this is the place name, the accepted spelling of which is Yuendumu. In the Warlpiri spelling system (orthography), the name is written Yurntumu, the ‘rnt’ representing a (retroflex) sound cluster that occurs in Warlpiri but not in English. So to say ‘Yu- en -du-mu’ as so many English speakers tend to do is not quite right.

A second reason for mispronunciation is that the letters used in writing Aboriginal languages may have a different value in the Aboriginal language than is common in English. A mistake to demonstrate this is the way many English speakers pronounce the word *Anangu* (the word in Western Desert dialects for Aboriginal person). It is often incorrectly pronounced 'Anang-gu' with the 'ng' sounding like the 'ng' in 'finger' instead of like the 'ng' in the English word 'sing'. It should be pronounced with a soft 'ng' sound like in singer.

Thirdly, from dialect to dialect there are some small differences in orthography that can cause confusion. Take Pitjantjatjara and Ngaanyatjarra for example, two related dialects, and the rolled 'r' sound – i.e. in Ngaanyatjarra it is written with a 'double r' and in Pitjantjatjara with a 'single r'. In some Western Desert dialects, the retroflex sounds which are often written with 'r' before another letter, either *rt*, *rn* or *rl*, may be written with an underline instead: eg. *rt* / t, *rn* / n, *rl* / l or *r* / r.

Simple hints for pronouncing words

Here are a few simple hints for pronouncing words that are written in their standard orthography. These should get you close to a reasonable pronunciation of such words; but in the end, there can be no substitute for getting the help of a speaker of the language.

p & b, t & d, k & g: Any difference you might discern between *p* and *b*, or *t* and *d*, or *k* and *g* is not significant. In general the sound is somewhere in between the two.

ng & ngk: As stated, *ng* spells a single sound *ng*, like the *ng* in 'singer', not like the *ng* in 'finger' which would be written *ngk* as in *mingkulpa* (bush tobacco).

Vowels

There are just three significant vowels, written *i*, *a*, *u*, and pronounced with their 'pure' European sound values (*i* as in 'pit', *a* as in 'father', *u* as in 'put'), not the highly ad hoc and variable sound values that the letters *i*, *a*, and *u* can have in English.

Arandic 'e': Arandic languages also use the letter *e*, which takes on the following vowel sounds: after *w* and before a consonant, it has the sound 'u' as in 'put'; after *y*, and before a consonant, it has the vowel sound 'ee' as in 'speed'; otherwise it spells a neutral vowel, not unlike the *e* in 'the', or the *u* in 'but'.

Digraphs and trigraphs

When trying to pronounce words in Aboriginal languages it is important to know that consonant sounds represented by the digraphs (i.e. two letters or pairs of letters like *tj*, *ly*, *ny*, *ng*, *pm*, *ty*) or trigraphs (three letters like *kng*) are pronounced as single sounds.

t /*rt*, *l* /*rl*, *n* /*rn*: These sounds are pronounced with the tip of the tongue curled upward and slightly further back along the roof of the mouth than the English *t*, *l* and *n*.

Stress

Stress falls on the first syllable of words (i.e. the first syllable is the 'heaviest' one), unlike English, where the position of stress varies from word to word, and is often not on the first syllable. In the Arandic languages stress falls on the first syllable that starts with a consonant. So it is Alyawarr, but their non-Arandic neighbours call them Yalyawarri or Alyawarri (Hoogenraad 1997:1-3).

Bilingual education and two way schools

The Northern Territory has a number of schools where students learn in both English and an Aboriginal language, in most cases the students' first language. These schools were originally called bilingual schools and were backed by both Human Rights Declarations as well as educational pedagogical arguments. Parents have the right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 26 (3)

All other Indigenous peoples also have this right and the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.

Draft United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples 1993 Article 15

Bilingual education began in the NT in 1973 under the Whitlam government after Kim Beasley Senior, education minister, made a trip to NT schools and was so impressed to see the enthusiasm and focus of a class of children learning in their own language, Arrernte, at Hermannsburg. He quotes the Lutheran approach that if you establish literacy in the mother tongue, "the language of the heart", it is easier to learn another language from that basis. He also quotes a nun, prominent in education in the Top End, who told him that 'the language (in the school) had transformed the attitude of the children to school to one of pleasure'.

The bilingual issue has nevertheless always been a political football, one which came to a head in 1999 when the NT government made an announcement that bilingual education would be closed.

Due to the considerable community backlash that followed the announcement, the government backpedalled and agreed that a number of schools could retain their system support and continue teaching in two languages under the new name of two-way schools.

All the government two-way schools are in remote Aboriginal communities where literacy is generally less a part of day-to-day life than it is in other parts of Australia, a factor that shouldn't be discounted in assessing educational outcomes. So although at the end of the Whitlam Government there were 22 bilingual schools, there are now only 11 in the whole of the Northern Territory.

Ideally, a two-way program is supported by a teacher linguist whose role it is to oversee and support both the first language and English as a second language (ESL) programs. Ideally, too, a two-way school would have access to a literacy production centre with one or more Indigenous literacy workers who both produce materials and support the teaching program. Programs differ according to the extent to which they aim to teach literacy in the first language and the model of transfer chosen. For a school wishing to support a two-way program there is much literature to draw on from other bilingual schools and from elsewhere. There is also the recent NT DEET curriculum framework (available on the NT DEET website) which includes a section on language and culture.

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