State of Indigenous languages related to cultural heritage

> Old people have the stories in their heads;
> they want young people to learn them.
> How are we to work and teach the Tjukurpa?
>
> —Mary Kalu Kalu, in *Uluṟu-Kata Tjuṯa Plan of Management* (2000, p. 23)

Note: Tjukurpa is 'the Law' governing that Indigenous community's actions and culture, and relevant aspects have been incorporated into the plan of management.

Environmental indicators reported on in this section.

Environmental indicator	
NCH IL.1	Number of people who identify as knowing each Indigenous language
NCH IL.2	Number of people in age group who identify as knowing each Indigenous language; proportion of total identifying as Indigenous
NCH IL.3	Number of traditional languages at each recognised stage of inter-generational dislocation
NCH IL.4	The number of Indigenous languages for which (a) documentation is: (i) good (ii) adequate (iii) inadequate (b) documentation is close to complete (given the state of the language)
NCH IL.8	The number of projects which document knowledge of traditional languages, by type of project
NCH IL.9	The number and type of Indigenous language programs undertaken in language centres, schools, and other institutions

Language is the primary tool for connection to country for Indigenous people who have no written tradition. Language is often overlooked because it is an intangible part of culture and something which is used constantly by people, without them reflecting on it or being conscious of it. Nevertheless, language is one of the most significant aspects of the cultural heritage of any group. It is both part of culture and the most important means of expressing culture and communicating culture to others and transmitting it to the next generation. However, oral culture changes and literacy in Indigenous languages is used for heritage recording.

The Australian nation has begun in recent years to recognise the value of the Indigenous cultures and languages, and to support Indigenous Australians in their efforts to maintain them. The level of commitment and resources made available by governments remains low, and there are no guarantees that even this level will be maintained in the future; indeed, there are some ominous signs of major gains being wound back in the period since 1995 (McConvell and Thieberger 2001, p.5).

The role of language in Indigenous knowledge systems, and in particular environmental and ecological knowledge, is rarely recognised by non-Indigenous people. The knowledge which a people possess, which enables them to live fruitfully in a particular ecological niche in the physical and biological environment, is encoded in the language that they use to describe and work with the land, animals and plants.

The Indigenous languages of Australia represent a great storehouse of knowledge and tradition about the environment and ancient culture of Australia, both for the Indigenous people themselves and for all Australians. The Indigenous people of Australia are the owners and custodians of the languages, but in the spirit of 'two-ways' exchange and reconciliation many groups are prepared to share access to this heritage, to preserve a unique national body of knowledge and tradition. Indigenous names dot maps of Australia, giving a unique sense of identity with the landscape. How healthy is the state of Indigenous language in Australia?

Number of Indigenous language speakers

Indigenous Australians are struggling to maintain and revive their languages and associated traditions against great odds, as there has been a decrease of 90% in the number of Indigenous languages spoken fluently and regularly by all age groups in Australia since 1800, and a

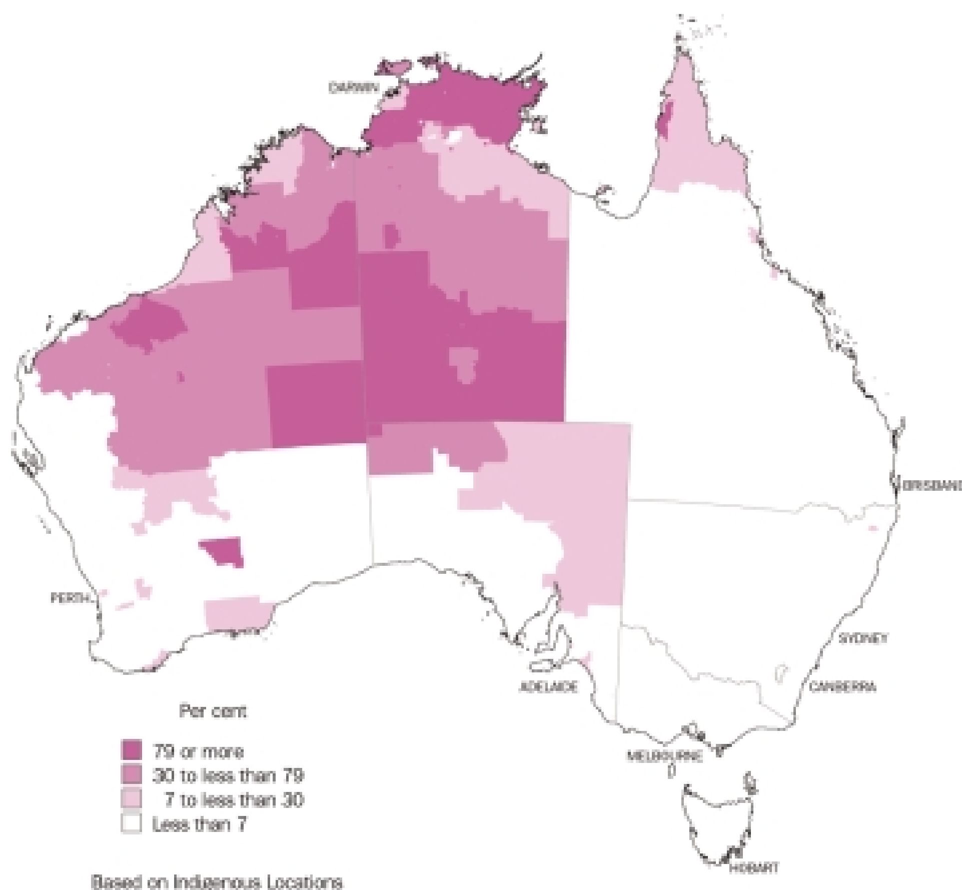


Figure 10: Proportion of Indigenous people who spoke an Indigenous language or creole, 1996.

Source: ABS (1998c).

decrease in the percentage of Indigenous people speaking Indigenous languages from 100% in 1800 to 13% in 1996. Positive steps have been taken in the last decade to recognise Indigenous languages and give them a place in our society instead of destroying them as has happened all too often in our history. Yet the pressures working against the languages at the beginning of the 21st century remain as strong as ever, presenting a bleak picture of language endangerment, which could all too easily lead to the loss of all Indigenous languages in this century.

The greatest concentrations of populations speaking Indigenous languages today are in northern and central Australia, mainly in areas remote from towns (see Figure 10). There are some exceptions to this generalisation, however. Remoteness in itself does not guarantee maintenance of an Indigenous language: for example, the northern Kimberleys are extremely remote and have not been occupied by white settlers to any extent, yet the languages are in a weak condition. In contrast, Alice Springs is a centre of early white settlement yet the Arrernte language is still strongly spoken there (McConvell and Thieberger 2001, p.52).

Every five years the ABS Census asks about language use. The number of speakers of Australian Indigenous languages according to these Censuses is given in Table 39, with the percentage increase in the Indigenous population for comparison. In 1986 the Census asked if an Aboriginal language was spoken at home, but in 1991 it asked if a language other than English was spoken at home, and then lumped all Aboriginal languages together. The 1996 Census was the first to ask about named Indigenous languages. From these figures it is clear that there is an increase in the number of speakers of Indigenous languages in absolute terms, but not in proportion to the general increase in Indigenous population.

The ABS Census of 1996 showed an increase in the population of Indigenous Australians from 1991 of 33%, which is twice what can be explained by demographic reasons. Ross (1999) says the increase is due to fluidity in identity, with a mixed population having the possibility of drawing on its ancestry to identify as Indigenous and choosing to do so more in the last Census than in the preceding one. This has implications for the reporting of the use of Indigenous languages.

Table 39: Numbers of Indigenous language speakers, 1986–1996. [NCH Indicator IL.1]

Census	Indigenous language speakers	% increase	Total Indigenous people	% increase
1986	36 078		195 796	
1991	42 716	18	265 458	15
1996	42 922	0	352 970	34

Source: ABS (1998c).

While an increase in numbers of speakers of Indigenous languages in proportion to this general increase would be expected, it is more likely that the population increase will not be reflected in an increase in numbers of people identifying as speakers of Indigenous languages, as the increase is in areas in which Indigenous languages are no longer spoken. This could account for some of the decrease apparent in the proportion of speakers of Indigenous languages from the 1986 and 1996 Census, as a larger number of people are identifying as Indigenous, and so the proportion of speakers of Indigenous languages decreased even though the number of speakers increased.

However, the decline in numbers of speakers of Indigenous languages is also spread across the urban–rural divide, probably due to the migration to country towns, as shown in Table 40.

Table 40: Indigenous language spoken at home, proportion of Indigenous people.

Location	1986	1996
Rural	42%	35%
Urban[A]	6%	5%

[A] Urban = cities and towns of 1000 people or more.

Sources: ABS (1991, p.42; 1998, p.82).

Ross (1999) discussed issues that need to be taken into account when using Census data related to Indigenous people. She notes the problem of naming one language only, when we know that Aboriginal people are multi-lingual, especially when we consider varieties of English and creole as well as Indigenous languages. The extent to which Indigenous people speak pidgin and/or creole languages has not been adequately surveyed. Apparently the Pitjantjatjara lands did not participate fully in the 1996 Census so there is a gap in the data for that geographic region as well as for the Yam Island(s), Wyndham-Ekimb, Oombulgurri, and Walpiri/Redgum/Wallaby camps Rockhole (Ross 1999, p.63).

Comparison of data over time can give an indication of the speed of language loss. Figure 11 shows a clear decline in the national number of people who claim to speak an Indigenous language at home, for all age groups. It also shows the trend for fewer younger people to be Indigenous language speakers.

Figure 11 also shows the tendency for Indigenous languages to be spoken by older people in both time periods. This is consistent with a shift from Indigenous languages to English. However, any interpretation of Figure 11 should bear in mind the unexpectedly high Indigenous population figures in the 1996 census, especially as the number of speakers rose 30% in absolute terms from 36 078 in 1986 (ABS 1991, p.42), to 46 811 in 1996 (ABS 1998, p.85). There may be a component of the increase in apparent Indigenous language speaker numbers which is related to pride in cultural heritage rather than actual increase in everyday or thorough use of a language. As loss of older language speakers and attrition eats into the speaker numbers as the present generation grows up, and this is magnified as the languages are not transmitted, it is doubtful if the increase in Indigenous language speaker population will keep pace in future with that recorded in 1986–1996.

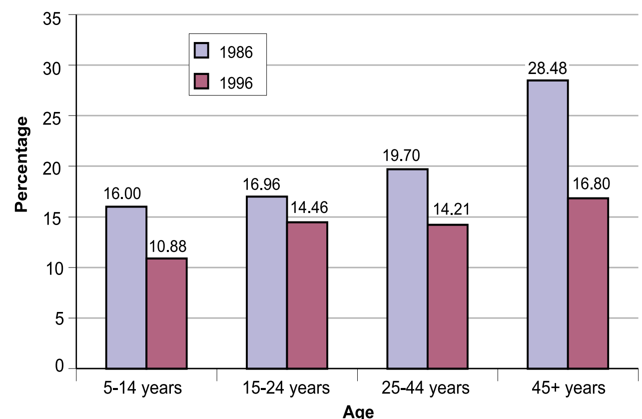


Figure 11: Comparison of 1986–1996 ABS Census data on Indigenous language use in the home.

Note: The data available for this analysis from the 1986 Census only listed speakers of five years and older, so the comparison of 0–14 year olds from the 1996 data is with 5–14 year olds in the 1986 data. As both are given as percentages of the relevant age group, it is felt that the comparison is valid.

Source: ABS (1996a) data, in McConvell and Thieberger (2001).

Although an Indigenous language may be classified by linguists as 'dead' or 'dying' on the basis of linguistic criteria, that language still has meaning to the people of that language, which should be eligible for support, maintenance and sustained management procedures. It still remains of heritage value in some if not all cases.

Are Indigenous languages being passed on?

Census data in Australia at the moment will give only a 'yes' or 'no' answer on whether someone speaks an Indigenous language at home, without any gradations of ability, any distinctions between understanding and speaking, or even a more general category of semi-speaker. Information from regional sources, ethnographic and regional surveys can supplement this information and add considerably more to the picture, at least for some areas, especially if this involves local Indigenous researchers (Dalton et al. 1995). Previous surveys have referred to levels of ability or proficiency in age groups, but used vague criteria like 'speaks well' or 'speaks fluently' which are hard to compare reliably across different surveys (McConvell 1994, p.302).

Language shift is said to be occurring when a group moves from speaking their old language to speaking a new language. It is a symptom of language endangerment. A further complication is how radical changes in languages are to be assessed in a proficiency framework. A children's language may be so different from the old peoples' as to be hard for each generation to understand the other, and is often condemned by the old people as 'baby talk' or 'rubbish language'. These situations seem common in Australia but can be analysed as language change rather than language shift or even symptoms of language endangerment or impending language shift.

In the regions in which speakers are a majority of Indigenous people, the spread of speakers across the population is fairly even. However for those regions with few speakers, such as Mt. Isa, Kalgoorlie or Geraldton, there are proportionally more older speakers.

With regard to the condition of languages, it appears that there are five patterns displayed in five groupings: three are characteristic age profiles in the data, and two are aberrant patterns:

- *Group 1:* In regions with many speakers and strong languages (Nhulunbuy, Apatula, Jabiru, Warburton) there is relatively little variation in the ability of speakers in various age groups, and language shift to a non-Indigenous language is either absent or just beginning.
- *Group 2:* This is a common pattern of steep and uninterrupted decline from old to young (Kalgoorlie, Broome, Port Augusta, Alice Springs, Torres Strait, Cooktown, Katherine) associated with language shift having taken hold in many groups 20–50 years ago.
- *Group 3:* In these regions (all others except Groups 4 and 5) associated with old white settlement and early language loss over 50 years ago, there is a very low level of speakers in all age groups, usually continuing to decline slightly.
- *Group 4:* In this aberrant group of languages there is a dip in language ability in one or more of the middle age groups and a slight recovery in the younger age groups. Kununurra, has a pronounced dip in the 30–39 group, and Cooktown and South Hedland have much less of a dip. Ceduna and Geraldton show aberrant patterns of swings back and forth in numbers between successive age groups, in the context of overall decline. This may be due to patterns like those of Group 2, but with two or more language groups which experienced drops at different periods interfering with each. This may be due to distinct waves of migration from more outlying areas into areas where language shift sets in, but it requires further research.
- *Group 5:* Adelaide is significant in that it is the only region which shows an increase in the number of younger speakers (from an already low level), most likely attributable to the high level of activity and interest in language and language revival in Adelaide recently (including the revival of Kaurna). Otherwise Adelaide fits into the pattern described for Group 3.

Apart from the early signs of some success in language revival activities in Adelaide, Group 4 in particular appears to show a slightly more positive trend than other declining situations. Generally the patterns can be associated with a dominant type of endangerment category in each region, as follows:

Group 1 — Strong
Group 2 — Endangered
Group 3 — Severely endangered or extinct.

Of the 90 languages described by Schmidt (1990) as 'surviving', 70 were said to be 'threatened' or 'severely endangered' and 20 'strong' i.e. spoken by all age groups regularly. These are the figures that were included in the 1996 State of the Environment Report (see Purdie et al. 1996, p. 9–23). McConvell and Thieberger (2001) conclude that by 1996, seventeen of these strong languages were still strong and three had become endangered.

Documentation of Indigenous languages

There was an unprecedented recognition in Australia of the rights of Indigenous people to maintain languages and the need for support for them in the 1980s and 1990s, in a number of reports, by the Commonwealth Government and also by international bodies. But this has not been reflected in any legislation guaranteeing rights or funding either nationally or in the States and Territories.

There has been an increase in the amount of recording and documentation of Indigenous languages in the past 10 years, and 141 of the 764 named Indigenous Languages have wordlists or dictionaries.

The amount of literature produced in a language each year should also be considered. This could be on the impressionistic basis that several books in one year from a literacy production centre is a 'substantial' amount. This could also extend to audio-visual material, based on the number of video or audio recordings produced in a given time period. Assessing material available on each language is a time-consuming process.

Documentation of Indigenous languages is undertaken in a number of institutions. Language Centres, mainly funded by the ATSILIP program in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, operate around the country, and each generate variable amounts of documentation. This may be because their focus is not on documenting extant languages, but rather is on retrieving documents and making them available for speakers today, as is the case for work with the Kaurna language. Language centres and other funded activities may also be under-resourced, or simply not have the necessary skills to engage in language documentation.

Carrington and Triffitt (1999) provide a fairly comprehensive bibliography of work relevant to Australian Indigenous languages conducted up to 1999 (see Figure 12). The average number of publications per year during this time period was 144.

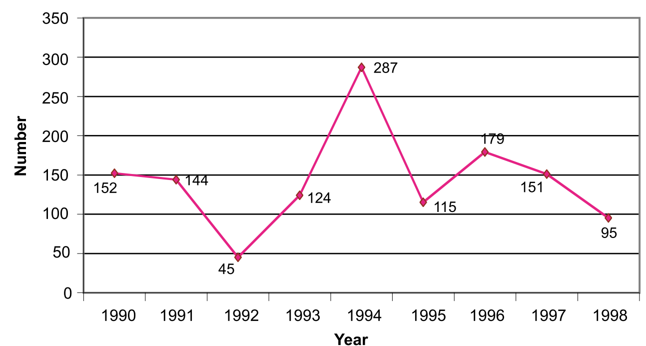


Figure 12: Number of references dealing with Indigenous languages per year.

Source: Carrington and Triffitt (1999).

Indigenous language programs in schools and education institutions

Language programs operate at various levels. There are projects aimed primarily at recording Indigenous languages and traditional knowledge in Indigenous languages. This sort of work is often the result of funding from AIATSIS and the ARC. In practice such documentation work may be, and many would argue should be, closely tied to training and language maintenance activities for local Indigenous communities through language centres and schools. However, documentation research, education and materials or media production usually have quite distinct funding sources. Similarly, Regional Language Centres and schools are quite distinct in funding and control, but under favourable circumstances work closely together at a local and regional level on Indigenous languages programs.

ATSIC Annual reports give the number of projects resulting from ATSILIP funds. This has ranged from a high of 90 in 1995–96 to less than that ever since. Overall estimates for number of language programs by State and Territory are given in Table 41.

The ATSIC Needs Survey would provide detailed information about programs for Indigenous languages as it is the only national study to evaluate the programs operating at a local level, but it is unavailable. The Maningrida response to the Needs Survey outlines the activities conducted in the mid-1990s (see 'Maningrida language activities' box on page 129).

School lesson in an Indigenous language being held at the Halls Creek District High School in the Kimberley region, WA.

Source: Volodymyr Malanczak (2001).

Table 41: Number of Indigenous language programs (total) in States and Territories from 1995 to 2000.

State or Territory	Number of programs
NSW and ACT	26
NT	65
Qld	25
SA	71
Tas.	1
Vic.	4
WA	64

Regional Aboriginal Language Centres began to be set up mainly in Western Australia and the Northern Territory in the 1980s as Indigenous-controlled bodies. They were charged with assisting in the running of local community language programs in their regions, including language documentation, education and training, materials and multimedia production, and interpreting/translation. They have been funded mainly through ATSIC programs but also receive other grants and portions of mining royalties in some cases. Generally they have continued to deliver language services successfully through the 1990s in areas where they have been established.

In other States, regional language centres were not established, or established only patchily, and were based on different models; for example, covering a whole State like Yaitya Warra Wadli in South Australia or catering for a single community or small area as in parts of New South Wales and Queensland. In some quarters, other bodies such as 'language committees' came into being as channels for ATSIC funding. The national peak body, FATSIL, also did not adopt the structure of a federation of language centres, but an association of individual Indigenous people.

The activities of the Kimberley Language Resource Centre, which was established in 1985 (drawn from their 2000 Newletter), give some insight into the range of programs undertaken: publication of a dictionary, CD-ROM, phrase book, word books, life stories, and high school language lessons and art workshop.

Table 42 gives figures for Indigenous language programs run outside schools, for each State and Territory.

Maningrida language activities

- Literature production in local languages.
- Extensive comparative databases of plant and animal names for a wide range of Top End languages, especially Ndjébbana, Kunbarlang, Kuninjku, Rembarrnga, Burarra, Gun-nartpa, Maung, Djinang, Wurlaki.
- Batchelor College runs annual Aboriginal Languages Fortnights (mainly) for students from Batchelor College. Workshop activities include bookmaking, posters with pictures and short texts, and flashcards. Further activities focus on spelling systems and dictionary construction.
- Translations and interpretation of art and craft documentations for artwork by speakers of many different languages. This is carried out by Maningrida Arts and Culture.
- Music recordings and transcription (non-professional). Maningrida Arts and Culture has made recordings of a number of local traditional song styles such as Bongolinbongolin, Wurrurrumi and sections of the Marayarr Murrukundja ceremony. These tapes are made available for sale through the Arts and Culture Centre and have proven extremely popular.
- Professional music recordings. Local Maningrida bands such as Sunrize and Letterstick have recorded CDs and tapes which are marketed nationally and internationally. Many songs are recorded in local languages.
- Land and Learning: Funded under the Commonwealth Government's Disadvantaged Schools Program, the Land and Learning project involved the documentation of flora and fauna, including the collection of plant and animal names in a number of local languages.
- Dictionaries of Burarra, Djinang.
- Weaving process documentation and lexicography project. This on-going project has a strong linguistic bent and is documenting Burarra names for weaving materials, plants used, the names of woven items and the words that people use to talk about the processes and styles involved in producing weavings.
- Djinang dictionary desktop-published by Bruce Waters.
- Grammar of Djinang and Djinba published by Bruce Waters.
- Language workshop in 1994 at Gamerdi outstation school (Homeland Centre teacher and NT Education Department linguist Carolyn Coleman). Wordlists and three texts were produced.
- Support for independent schools' language programs: e.g. Gochan Jiny-jirra independent school.
- Support for University linguistics students and researchers working on Gun-nartpa, Gurrgoni, Kunbarlang, Kuninjku, Kunwinjku, Kune, Gun-djeihmi, Mayali, Dalabon, Dangbon, Kundedjnjenghmi, Rembarrnga and Nakkára.
- Eastern Kuninjku rock art sites recording including recording and translation of oral culture related to rock art sites and extensive recording, transcription and translation of Eastern Kunwinjku texts.
- Talking Ndjébbana books on Hypercard.
- Recording of some Ndjébbana place names in the Maningrida region was carried out in 1996 and was used for the new displays in Maningrida's recently renovated Djómi Museum. The Ndjébbana-English bilingual education program is run by the Maningrida Community Education Centre.

Source: McConvell and Thieberger (2001).

Table 42: Numbers of non-education Indigenous language programs and centres, 2000.
[NCH Indicator IL.9 (Non-education)]

	NSW & ACT	NT	Qld	SA	Tas.	Vic.	WA
Languages[A]	(?)8	(15)[E]	(?)19	6	(?)1	(?)3	(14)[F]
Programs[B]	8	(15)[E]	19	6	1	3	(14)[F]
Sites[C]	8	(18)[E]	18	15	1	6	(7)[F]
Centres[D]	6	4	7	1	1	1	6

[A] Languages: the number of languages for which non-education Indigenous language programs exist (excluding post-school education programs — TAFE and University courses).
[B] Programs: a program is a named set of activities which are run together in a coordinated manner by the same managing group for the same target or client group. The number would normally be the same as the number of languages where there is a single program for each language group. However there can be variation where a program takes in more than one language in a region, or two distinct programs are run for one language. There may be distinct projects within one program: for example, in the Kimberley Language Resource Centre study above, the Bunuba CD-ROM, the Bunuba Art Workshop, and the Bunuba Language Nest are distinct projects with a Bunuba program.
[C] Sites: the number of sites (locations) at which non-education programs operate. A single language program for instance may be run at a main centre and in an annex or outstation, for instance. As long as activities are carried out in more than one place regularly, these count as multi-site programs.
[D] Centres: the number of language centres in the state, according to FATSIL (1999).
[E] Information from only 3 language centres: probably around 25 languages/programs in total.
[F] Information from only 4 language centres: probably around 20 languages/programs in total.

Source: McConvell and Thieberger (2001).

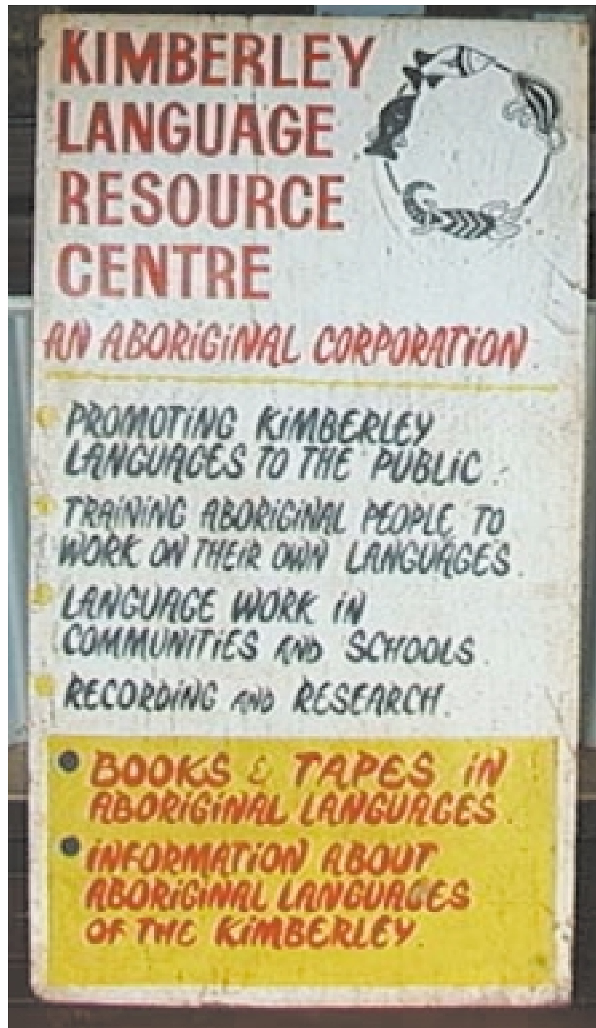
Kimberley Language Resource Centre

Kimberley Language Resource Centre, WA.

Source: Cas Pearson/Kimberley Language Resource Centre (2001).

Bonnie Deegan, chairperson of the Kimberley Language Resource Centre, wrote:

> 'The year I turned five years old I was taken away from my mother, a full-blood Aboriginal woman and my father, a white man…by Native Welfare. I spoke in language (Jaru) and Kriol...Nobody ever spoke their language in school. That's how I lost my language. It was one of my dreams to learn to speak my language again…I love the Language Centre. I am proud to have been the chairperson for this many years. I am happy to see lots of dictionaries and books produced by the language centre in different languages. The idea of the language centre is to preserve and revive all languages. We are proud to help all surrounding communities with language projects...Old people should be talking to the young ones in Language all the time. We shouldn't be ashamed but be proud to speak our Language.'



Services provided by the Kimberley Language Resource Centre WA.

Source: Cas Pearson/Kimberley Language Resource Centre (2001).

In the Northern Territory some 20 languages have been used in bilingual school programs, although it appears there is an effort on the part of the Territory government to reduce the level of commitment to Indigenous language education. There are also Indigenous language programs in South Australia (in government schools) and in Western Australia (non-government schools). Table 43 reports the number of Indigenous Language education programs around Australia.

Table 43: Summary of Indigenous language education programs (approximate numbers only), 2000. [NCH Indicator IL.9 (Education)]

State or Territory	School	Post-school
NSW and ACT	13	5
Northern Territory	37	3
Queensland	5	1(?)[A]
South Australia	62	3
Tasmania	0	0
Victoria	1	0
Western Australia	40+	4(?)

A James Cook University course seems to be discontinued.

Source: McConvell and Thieberger (2001).

Language and ecological knowledge—Wet Tropics World Heritage property

The huge biological diversity found in the North Queensland rainforests is reflected in the detailed vocabulary of the languages of the region, but these languages are at least as severely endangered as the biological species in the region. The young people know only a few of the names of species in the traditional language, and they do not compensate for that with English names. Dyirbal young people use only one term for 'eel' (*jaban*) in contrast to the several names for different species known by the handful of remaining full speakers. Even grammatical categories embody ecological knowledge: the feminine gender in traditional Dyirbal includes dangerous species as well as females. Young people use the feminine only to refer to females, thus losing a way of classifying species behaviour which is inherent in the way the language was organised (Schmidt 1985, cited in Nettle and Romaine 2000, pp.66–68).

If this linguistic knowledge could be passed on to the younger generation it would also enable them to be more sensitive to biodiversity and conservation in their own country, where they live, and to continue their traditional role as caretakers of the land and sea in the most effective way. This knowledge and linguistic expertise could realise its potential if combined with greater involvement of these Indigenous people in major conservation projects in the region, such as the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area, which includes the traditional country of the Dyirbal and their neighbours. Some elders of the region are making determined efforts to do this by mentoring young people. The training not only involves learning the names of species and places, but how to use the traditional language to perform ritual obligations while guiding people through the rainforest, such as addressing invocations to the ancestors to ensure the safety of the visitors.

Source: McConvell and Thieberger (2001).

Language, education and transmission of traditional knowledge all combine to be essential in protecting the outstanding values of significant places in Australia as the example in the 'Language and ecological knowledge' box above illustrates.

Conclusion and implications regarding Indigenous languages and cultural heritage

- The number of Indigenous languages and the percentage of people speaking these languages has continued to fall in the period 1986–1996, accelerating over the 10 years. If these trends continue unchecked, by 2050 there will no longer be any Indigenous languages spoken in Australia. It is unlikely that this prediction will be borne out in exactly this way, since the trend will probably level out eventually, leaving a handful of strong languages still spoken for another generation or two, but the overall scenario is nevertheless bleak. Language revival has had an appreciable affect on increasing the number of people identifying as speakers of an Indigenous language in at least one region.
- Undercounting of Indigenous people in the 1996 Census, together with an 8% greater number of respondents saying they know an Indigenous language than saying they speak it at home, suggests that there may actually be in the order of 55 000 speakers of Indigenous languages in Australia.
- By 1996, seventeen of the previous twenty strong languages were still strong and three had become endangered.
- The decline in numbers of speakers of Indigenous languages is also spread across the urban–rural divide.
- In some regions there is a decrease in speaker numbers in the 30–39 age group, but more people under 30 are now identifying as speakers, possibly heralding a revitalisation of the language. At the same time as there has been a large increase in the number of people identifying as Indigenous in the 1986–1996 period, there has also been an increase in the absolute numbers of Indigenous language speakers, but not proportional to the increase in total Indigenous population. There is a trend in most Indigenous languages for knowledge of language to be inversely proportional to age, i.e. the younger people are, the less likely they are to speak an Indigenous language. This is considered to be a symptom of language shift, and of the language being endangered.

- There has been an increase in the amount of recording and documentation of Indigenous languages in the past 10 years, and 141 of the 764 named Indigenous languages have wordlists or dictionaries.
- Much of the increased activity in recording and documentation followed the establishment of Commonwealth funding programs specifically supporting Indigenous languages. Particularly significant and productive has been the establishment of Regional Aboriginal Language Centres and language management committees under Indigenous control from the mid-1980s onwards; there are few parallels to this development elsewhere in the world.
- There have been significant initiatives developing curriculum and programs related to Indigenous languages in the last ten years for primary and high schools. Major new networks of Indigenous language programs have been set up in South Australia and Western Australia, although the reversion from Bilingual to English-only education in the Anangu lands in South Australia in the 1980s must be weighed on the other side of the balance. There is some evidence of a tailing off of support for Indigenous languages in other parts of Australia in the late 1990s. Particularly detrimental has been the dismantling of the Bilingual Education programs in Aboriginal schools in the Northern Territory, where Indigenous people make up 29% of the population. The establishment of this program in 1974 was the single most important move in support of Indigenous languages that has ever occurred in Australia and its loss is a severe blow.
- Overall the trend is still a decline, and if this decline is not halted or reversed there will be an eventual loss of perhaps all Indigenous languages, a tragic result for Indigenous people and the heritage of Australia. However there are some bright spots, where the efforts of Indigenous people to turn the situation around seem to be paying off in mitigating the downward trend. The building of strong Indigenous-controlled language centres and programs, backed by Commonwealth funding schemes and, more recently, strong support for Indigenous languages in education in some States are assisting in this rescue operation. But this support remains uncertain, and in some places (notably the Northern Territory) is faltering. Schemes and programs must be continued for a generation to have effect.