

The Aboriginal Languages situation of Australia

by Neil Broad

At the time of first European contact there were about **250** (some estimate it could have been as many as 400) distinct languages spoken by the Aboriginal tribes of Australia. Usually each distinct language would have a number of dialects so that the total number of named varieties would have run into many hundreds. These varieties were spoken by a population of around 300,000. While there has been significant language loss over the past two hundred years there are still about **90** distinct languages spoken throughout mainly the Northern part of Australia including the Northern Territory, North Queensland, Northern Western Australia and the Northern part of South Australia. In addition to these 90 or so distinct Aboriginal languages that remain there are two 'new' languages, **Kriol** and **Yumplatok** (Torres Strait Creole). These two Creole languages are distinct languages in their own right. They have their own distinct grammar patterns and sound systems and they are the first language of a large number of people.

Each one of these distinct Aboriginal languages has their own complex grammar patterns and each has a vocabulary of at least 10,000 words - about the same for any other person from any of the world languages. There are some parts of these different languages that have great complexity.

A well known Australian linguist has noted that by and large, the white population of present day Australia has little knowledge of the structure or nature of Australian Aboriginal languages. In fact, it is not uncommon to strike up a conversation with even a well-educated white Australian and hear a comment like: 'there's just one Aboriginal language and it has only a few hundred words', or 'Aboriginal languages don't have any grammars' and other similar comments. The fact is that each of the distinct Aboriginal languages have their own distinct and complex system of grammar and, as already mentioned above, each has at least 10,000 separate words.

There are also many different ways in which Aboriginal languages are written and not all have the same set of letters or **ways of being written** as one another. While nearly every Aboriginal person living in the Northern part of Australia is able to speak at least one Aboriginal language, many are still not able to read even their own language, although they may be able to read some English. However, because a person is not able to read their own language doesn't mean that they are any less proficient in speaking their own language or any less intelligent than someone who can read their own language. As well as this, just because an Aboriginal person speaks their own language proficiently and reads their own language proficiently, doesn't mean to say that they can read other Aboriginal languages. The fact that Aboriginal languages were not originally written languages does not mean that they are any less complex or developed than those of the world's languages that have been written for a long time.

Another misconception about Australian Aboriginal languages is that 'everybody can understand everybody else.' This kind of thinking comes from the mistaken belief that there is only one Aboriginal language - which of course is quite wrong. While many Aboriginal people can speak more than one language and some people can speak as many as five, these same people would know nothing of the languages from a different area. In a community like Alice Springs there are at least **twenty different Aboriginal languages spoken** and many of these languages are at least as dissimilar as English is from French or German or Russian. This means that many Aboriginal people would not be able understand anything of what someone else from a different language group was saying. This is true for Aboriginal people from the Top End and people from the Centre or the West. Most Aboriginal people would not understand anything of what someone from a different part of the country would be saying. The fact that Aboriginal people may be the same

colour as each other doesn't mean that they are all the same. In the same way that because English, German and Russian people are the same colour they are certainly not the same as each other when it comes to their languages and their cultures.

It is also important to remember that there are a number of **sounds** that English speakers distinguish that Aboriginal people find it hard to hear because they do not make the same distinctions. In the same way there are many sounds in Aboriginal languages that English speaking people find it very hard to hear because they do not make the same distinctions. Yet, these distinctions can give a completely different meaning to the words.

Australia has a very rich heritage of language diversity amongst the Aboriginal population of this country and it is important when talking and working with different Aboriginal language groups that the opportunity is taken to try and understand, respect and celebrate these differences.