

**A Visitors Guide To Understanding And  
Appreciating Aboriginal Ways Of Speaking**  
(or, How To Avoid Making A Cross-Cultural *Faux Pas*)

---

*by Neil Broad*

### **Introduction**

Language is not simply a stringing together of different words to form meaningful sentences. Language and the way language is used is a reflection of a vast linguistic and cultural network. Language can not be separated from culture and when entering an Aboriginal community or talking together with Aboriginal people it is important to remember that the language group themselves share a complex system of social relationships in which there are clearly defined rules of not only who you can talk to but what you can and can't talk to them about. The way language is used reflects this complex system of social relationships.

It is also important to remember that there are significant differences between Aboriginal communities and what is true for one may not necessarily be true for another. Also, not all the points mentioned below will be necessarily found in any single community.

### **Meeting and greeting people**

Aboriginal people do not traditionally greet each other every time they meet, as white people tend to do. Frequently, there are no words that correspond to the English 'hello'. So don't think that Aboriginal people are angry with you or don't like you if they don't say anything to you.

In every Aboriginal community there are certain kin relationships that demand special behaviour. When an Aboriginal person visits a different community for the first time the first thing they are usually asked is where they come from and then an attempt is made to find out if there is someone they both know. In this way the relationship between the parties involved is established and with it, the appropriate way of behaving toward each other. Learning about kin terms is an important step in learning how to communicate in appropriate ways.

As a general rule when visiting an Aboriginal community men should be cautious about approaching and talking to women and vice versa. There are also conventions about where to talk and usually it is considered culturally inappropriate to draw aside and talk to people in private.

There are strong taboos in force which relate to people's names and who can talk to whom. In most communities it is not polite to ask a person directly for their name. If you do need to find out someone's name it is better to quietly ask someone else. A person's name is usually something more than simply a term of reference, it is more closely associated with the individual's personality. There are taboos that mean that when somebody dies their name is no longer used. So anybody that shared the same name is referred to by another name or by some general word that indicates that their name can no longer be used. This general word is sometimes translated into English simply as 'no name'. This taboo can also extend to the use of words that sound the same as or are similar to the deceased person's name. The name that you are given for a particular person may be their personal name, or it could be their skin name, or it could be a relationship term, or it could be an age group term, other times it could simply be a nickname. It is sometimes helpful to ask someone, "What should I call this person?"

### **Understanding who talks to whom**

For Aboriginal people to know how to speak in any given circumstance they must have a full understanding of the all the kin relationships that exist between the one speaking and the one being spoken to and in every community that are certain kin relations that demand special behaviour. In most communities this means that two people, for example, in a mother-in-law/son-in-law

relationship, should avoid close contact and sometimes they will not only not address one another directly but they will not be able to talk to one another or be in one another's company. There are other relationships as well where special behaviour and ways of talking are demanded. There exists in probably all Aboriginal language communities a special speech style that is often referred to as an 'avoidance style' and this is the style used between kin who are in an 'avoidance relationship'. It should be noted that groups vary as to how closely they observe this taboo and in how much they expect outsiders to conform. To use the wrong style of speech would bring shame on an Aboriginal person. By way of contrast, within certain types of relationships, say between a person and someone in their grandparent's generation a joking relationship exists and it is appropriate and expected that a great deal of freedom is used in talking with one another. This can include a high degree of swearing and abusive language.

### **Asking and answering questions**

As a general rule it is wise to avoid asking lots of questions, especially direct questions about other people, what they are doing and why they are doing it. Aboriginal people typically learn by observation and through experience.

There are between different kin appropriate ways of asking questions or making requests for something. Sometimes, a particular person may be able to ask for something in a relatively straightforward way. On other occasions, and with different kin, it is important that questions are not asked directly, rather a roundabout way is used to indicate a need, almost in a disinterested fashion, not addressing the other person directly at all. Words are sometimes used that reflect an uncertainty and hesitiveness by the one asking the question. Be aware also that the answer given may not be direct, Aboriginal people generally want to avoid saying 'no'.

### **Listening and learning about Aboriginal languages**

One of the common misconceptions about Aboriginal languages is that there is in fact 'an Aboriginal language' common to all Aboriginal people. In reality, there were at the time of European invasion probably at least 250 different Aboriginal languages, each with its own complex grammatical and sound system. Today there are still at least 90 different languages being spoken and each of these different Aboriginal languages have a vocabulary consisting of at least 10,000 lexical words - nouns, verbs, adjectives and so on. In addition to this, many Aboriginal people are conversant in more than one language. The grammatical patterns and the sound systems of the languages used are quite different to the grammar and sounds of English and this influences both the way that Aboriginal people use English and the way that an English speaker is likely to say Aboriginal words. Aboriginal people often say Europeans 'talk funny' when they say things using an Aboriginal language. Sometimes the way that particular words are used is different to the way an English person might use the same word.

Remember that a person's language and how they use it tells you a lot about the person themselves and their culture. Aim to become a language learner from day one!