

Why Aboriginal People Seem To Have More Difficulty Than Other Australians When It Comes To Speaking English Properly

by Neil Broad

(Note: I am assuming that for the purposes of this discussion ‘*other Australians*’ refers to those for whom English is their mother tongue, that is they are native speakers of English. I am also assuming that speaking English ‘*properly*’ refers to a variety of standard English and as such is different from what may be described as *Aboriginal English*, or a variety of Kriol which is of course an Aboriginal language in its own right. I am also assuming that ‘*properly*’ is not a reflection on a person’s ability to communicate adequately, otherwise it seems like a somewhat ethnocentric comment.)

I agree with the statement that Aboriginal people seem to have more difficulty than other Australians when it comes to speaking English ‘properly’. There are several ways of accounting for why these difficulties are present. The factors which give rise to these difficulties can be divided into two categories which overlap – social and linguistic. Perhaps the most obvious reason is that for many Aboriginal people English is not their first language. In fact, for many Aboriginal people English is one of a number of languages that they speak, particularly in the Central and Northern parts of the continent it is common for Aboriginal people with respect to Aboriginal languages to be at least bilingual, and in many cases, polylingual. For many Aboriginal children the language of first communication is either an Aboriginal language or, it is a variety of non-standard English. It is frequently not English. The contexts in which English is most likely to be needed and therefore used are those associated with the acquisition of technical skills, education, and modernity. However, in the pre-school years of language acquisition the context is quite different and English is only one of the languages children are exposed to. The focus of attention is on the development of culturally appropriate behaviour and ways of talking and the main language of communication and learning is not English, or at least not standard English.

This being the case, it is possible to identify some of the linguistic factors that give rise to the difficulties associated with speaking English ‘properly’. There are a number of significant grammatical and phonological differences between Aboriginal languages and English. These include the differences between varieties of Aboriginal Children’s English, Kriol, and standard English. There are many sounds present in English that have no equivalent in the vast majority of Aboriginal languages. This includes distinctions in sounds that are crucial in English, that is the change in sound indicates a change in meaning, whereas these same distinctions are redundant in many Aboriginal languages. The converse is also true. Therefore when speaking English, Aboriginal people often use a particular set of sounds, say the voicing/voiceless contrast, interchangeably and this can lead to a confusion in meaning and significant differences in the way English words are articulated. In addition to the phonological differences, each of the Aboriginal languages of Australia has a unique and complex grammatical structure and one which is quite different to English. When speaking English some of the structures present in an Aboriginal language both at word and sentence level may be carried over into the way an Aboriginal person speaks English resulting in a non standard use of English grammar.

Another factor that impinges on the way an Aboriginal person speaks English is the way in which some vocab is used distinctively and differently from standard English. Of particular note is the way kin terms are used with different meanings to their English counterparts, other words are extended in meaning. Also of note is the way in which an Aboriginal person may combine words that differ markedly to standard English usage.

Together the above factors contribute to the way in which Aboriginal people seem to have more difficulty than other Australians in speaking English ‘properly’.