

CHAPTER

1

**LANGUAGES AND
THEIR STATUS IN
ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA**

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NUMBER OF LANGUAGES

It is thought that around 250 distinct languages were spoken at first (significant) European contact in the late eighteenth century. Most of these languages would have had several dialects, so that the total number of named varieties would have run to many hundreds. This contradicts the still popular view that there is just one Aboriginal language, perhaps with a number of dialects.

It is difficult to be precise about the numbers of dialects and languages because the information available is often poor and terms like 'dialect' and 'language' can shade into each other. For the English language we can recognise dialects like Australian English, Canadian English, New Zealand English, and so on. The differences between these dialects may not be so great as to interfere with communication. But what of Scots English and Jamaican English? Here the differences may be sufficient to create difficulties in communication — at least in the short term — even though we refer to them as kinds of English. On the other hand, we also recognise forms of speech which are clearly separate languages, such as German and Spanish, Irish and Armenian or Hindi and Greek. Despite their current differences these languages all go back to a single ancestral language spoken thousands of years ago. In Aboriginal Australia there are languages which are clearly distinct, like Tiwi (from Bathurst and Melville Islands, off the north coast of Australia) and Pitjantjatjara (from the desert areas of South Australia and Western Australia). There are also forms of speech which share much the same grammar but differ in pronunciation and vocabulary just as various dialects of English do. Examples of such forms of speech are Gugada, Ngaanyatjarra, Luritja, Pintupi and Pitjantjatjara, which linguists have classified as belonging to the 'Western Desert Language'. This was not a term used by the native speakers themselves any more than a cover term like the 'Scandinavian Language' is used by speakers of closely related forms of speech like Danish and Norwegian. Danes and Norwegians feel that they have a separate language with a separate territory and that their language is a reflection of their group identity. The dialects of the Western Desert Language were spoken over a vast area of well over a million square kilometres in the Northern Territory, South Australia and Western Australia. Not surprisingly there would be difficulties in communication between speakers of dialects which were widely separated. Rumsey takes up questions of language, territory and group identity in Aboriginal Australia (in chapter 14).

THE DECLINE OF AUSTRALIAN LANGUAGES

Soon after the arrival of the Europeans, Australian languages began to decline. A recent study of the language situation in Australia indicates that 160 languages are extinct, seventy are under threat and only twenty are likely to survive (at least in the short term).

The question must be asked: why did they die out? The contributions by Crowley (in chapter 4) on Tasmanian and Troy (in chapter 3) on the Sydney area go some way toward answering this question. From the earliest days of European contact there was often an assumption that Aboriginal languages were of less value than English and this view soon hardened into government policy, which was reinforced through education and employment practices. Aboriginal people were positively discouraged from speaking their ancestral languages and made to feel ashamed of using them in public. Eventually the link between generations of speakers was broken, so that young children had little or no knowledge of ancestral languages, their parents were partial speakers of these languages and their grandparents were the only remaining speakers of languages that may have been passed on from generation to generation over hundreds of years.

Once this intergenerational link is broken an unwritten language may disappear very quickly. Evans (forthcoming), for example, reports that varieties of English have taken over within forty years of significant white contact on Mornington Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria. One of the traditional languages, Kaiadilt, now has no fluent speakers under forty-five years of age. Younger speakers retain active command of a small vocabulary, but speak Kaiadilt with varying degrees of fluency.

THE NATURE OF AUSTRALIAN LANGUAGES

People often ask: what are Aboriginal languages like? In a sense this is like asking what European languages are like. In Europe there are languages as diverse as Spanish, German and Russian. So too in Australia there are languages which are very different in nature even though they can be traced back to a common source. Warlpiri, a language spoken to the northwest of Alice Springs, can be likened to Latin in that it has an elaborate array of case suffixes (endings indicating different functions of nouns). Murrinh-Patha, spoken on the coast south of Darwin, can be likened to Turkish in that a single word contains many clearly separable chunks of meaning. For example, the single Murrinh-Patha word *manhipurlnu* translates into English as 'I'm going to wash you/I will wash you' (as might be said by a parent to a child). English spreads the intended meaning across four (or more) separate

words; Murrinh-Patha links the separate pieces of meaning in one word, somewhat like beads on a string:

ma-nhi-purl-nu
I-you-wash-will
'I will wash you'

In English we can change meaning by substituting one word for another and adding others, but in Murrinh-Patha the change may be handled within a single word:

ma-nhi-ma-purl-nu-ngani
I-you-hand-wash-will-I do habitually
'I will keep on washing your hand'

ma-nanku-ma-purl-nu-ngani
I-you two siblings-hand-wash-will-I do habitually
'I will keep on washing the hands of you two sisters'

ma-nanku-ma-purl-nu-ngintha-ngani
I-you two-hand-wash-will-two not being sisters, at least one being female-I do habitually
'I will keep on washing the hands of you two who are not sisters and one or both are female'

Murrinh-Patha grammar is not simple. In fact, no language has a particularly simple grammar, although some aspects of some languages seem less complex than others. The grammar of any language is always shifting. In some respects, for example, the current grammar of English is simpler than it was 800 years ago, but this does not mean that there are no longer any complexities in modern English. Secondly, the grammar is significantly different from that of English — it is neither better nor worse, just different. Thirdly, differences in grammar between languages create difficulties in translation. In the examples above it can be seen that Murrinh-Patha has three ways of expressing 'you-ness': *nhi* 'you singular'; *nanku* 'you two brothers/sisters (siblings)'; *nanku ngintha* 'you two who are not brothers or sisters and one or both are female'. (And there are four other ways of expressing 'you-ness' in this language). By contrast English normally has just one form 'you' whether one is referring to one person or more and regardless of how they might be related to each other or what sex they are. The translation thus becomes awkward. On the other hand, Murrinh-Patha does not usually indicate for nouns whether there is exactly one or more than one, as the grammar of English usually requires. So a stricter translation of the Murrinh-Patha expressions would indicate 'hand/hands'. It is always possible in Murrinh-Patha to specify that just one hand is meant rather than a number of hands but the grammar does not require this

specification as English grammar does. In the same way, English can resort to wording such as 'you two' or 'the two of you' but the grammar does not require these details.

Further details of language structure are outlined by Yallop (in chapter 2), and some of the richness of vocabulary in Australian languages is covered in the contribution by Simpson (in chapter 9).

THE HISTORY OF AUSTRALIAN LANGUAGES

We know that people have been in Australia for at least 40,000 years (and much longer periods have been suggested). Many Aboriginal people believe that their ancestors have always been here. Archaeologists, however, think that there has been more than one influx of people. Until around 7,000 or 8,000 years ago Papua New Guinea was joined by a land bridge to Australia. We can safely assume that there would have been contact between the people of Australia and land to the north.

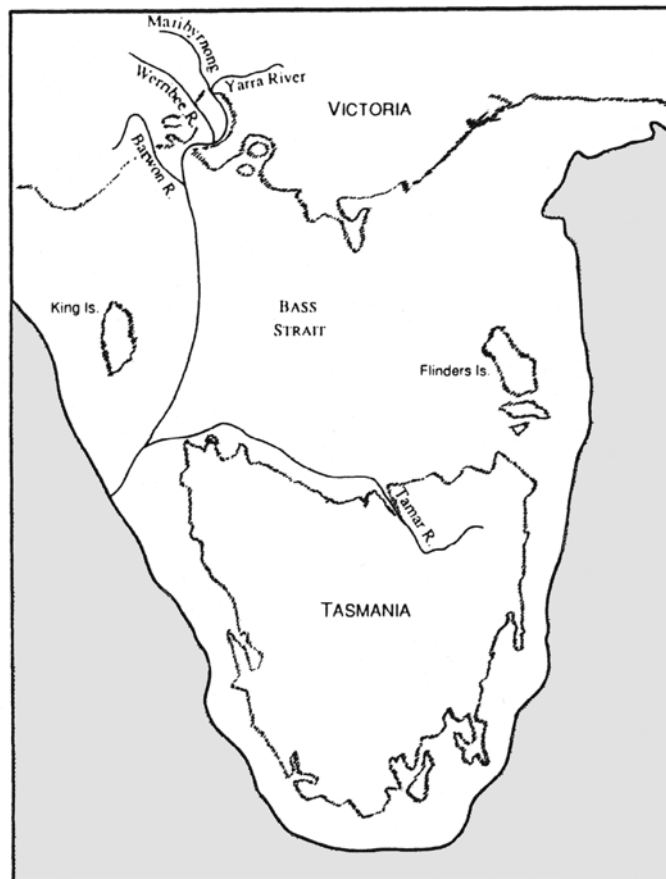
The Torres Straits Islands still form an island link between Queensland and Papua New Guinea, the northernmost islands being in sight of the New Guinea coastline. This raises the question of whether the languages of Australia are related to those of New Guinea. In terms of physical type and culture the people of the Torres Straits Islands are Papuan, but linguistically the islands divide up into two quite distinct types. Miriam, a Papuan language, is spoken in the east and Kala Lagaw Ya, clearly an Australian language, is spoken in the west. Kala Lagaw Ya shows some unusual features for an Australian language but it is clearly of the Australian type in terms of its grammar.

Archaeologists have claimed that the most recent influx of people was about 4,000 years ago, probably occurring at the same time as the dingo came into Australia. This raises the question of how the Australian languages developed. Have the languages come from one relatively recent source, have they developed out of earlier migrations, or are there layers reflecting successive migrations of people speaking quite different languages? Questions of this kind are intriguing but for the most part unanswerable. For languages in Europe we sometimes have written records going back thousands of years. For Australian languages the record is much sparser: for many languages our earliest records are measured in decades while the first known recording of an Australian language is 1770. Even if the ancestry of present day Aboriginal languages goes back only 4,000 years, it is unlikely that careful study could establish links with languages outside.

Most of the possible connections between Australian languages and other languages of the world have been considered and rejected. Even the connection with Papua New Guinea, which seems likely given its proximity to the

Australian mainland, is yet to be established: it is not so much ruled out, as unproven. A comparison between Papuan and Australian languages *suggests* that there might have been some connection but there is not sufficient evidence to be sure (Foley 1986, 296–375).

For reasons of this kind the position of Tasmanian is unknown and will probably remain unknown. The Tasmanian people were subjected to horrific treatment from government authorities and their languages suffered an early decline (although the Tasmanian people have survived as Crowley describes in chapter 5). We might expect that Tasmanian languages would have something in common with languages across the Bass Strait. Until about 10,000 years ago Bass Strait was dry land but then the sea level rose, cutting off Tasmania from the mainland (see Map 3).



Map 3: The coastline of southeastern Australia during the height of the iceage. 18,000 years ago Bass Strait was dry land and the mainland took in Tasmania and the area shown in white (from Blake 1991, 32).

Even if the records for languages of Tasmania and southern Victoria were extensive, the connection would be very hard to establish after a separation of 10,000 years. The written records are quite meagre, especially for Tasmanian.

There is evidence of contact between Indonesia and northern Australia in relatively recent times. Towards the end of the seventeenth century traders from around what is today known as southern Sulawesi began to visit the shores of northern Australia to collect and process a much-prized commodity variously known as trepang, *bêche-de-mer* or sea-cucumber. These Macassan traders set up seasonal camps on the northern Australian coast for months at a time, mingling with the local Aboriginal population. Some Aborigines seem to have travelled back to Indonesia with the boat crews, returning to Australia on later trading expeditions. This contact is demonstrated linguistically by a sizeable stock of words in some Aboriginal languages of northeast Arnhem land, such as *rrupiya* 'money' — distantly derived from 'rupee' (Walker and Zorc 1981). In addition, it may be that a Macassan-based pidgin developed for use not only between Aborigines and the boat crews but also for casual contact among Aborigines along the coast who did not have a language in common (Urry and Walsh 1981).

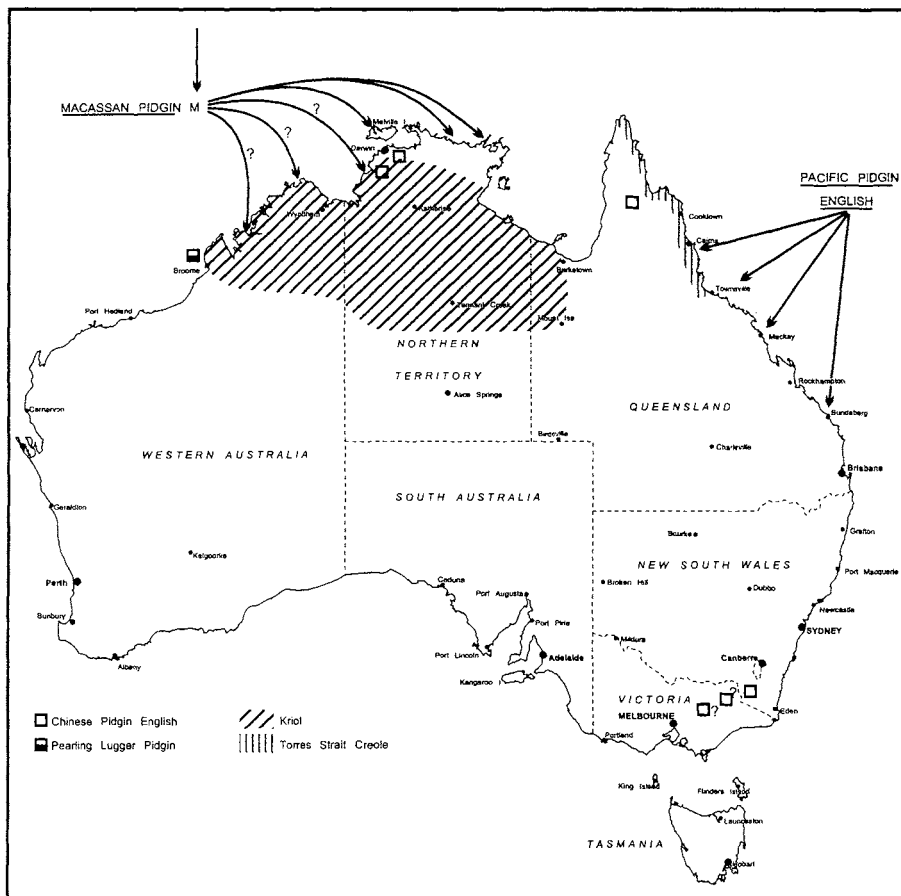
Although our understanding of outside connections is limited, most linguists now believe that the 250 Australian languages are genetically related and can be traced back to a common source called proto-Australian. For further comments, see the opening section of Yallop's chapter 2.

THE EFFECTS OF CONTACT ON AUSTRALIAN LANGUAGES

European contact has had a profound impact on Australian languages. We have already seen (in the second section of this chapter) that the languages have declined. In this section we consider the rise of pidgins, creoles and lingua francas, as well as the influence of English.

From earliest European contact pidgins developed when the settlers and the local people tried to communicate with each other. A pidgin is born out of the needs of this contact where neither people has learnt the language of the other fully and might not need to. If its purposes are limited, the pidgin itself will remain limited. It will be a simplified form of speech employing some of the features of both languages with a predominance from the dominant language, in this case English. If there are greater needs for the pidgin, it will become more complex. With extended contact, a creole may arise which is still English-based but has a much wider application, being used to meet all the communicative requirements of its speakers.

Troy (chapter 3) describes early contact in the Sydney area while Harris and Rhydwen (chapters 10 and 11) outline the rise of the widespread English-based creole called Kriol in northern Australia. Kriol varies over the vast area in which it is used by having an input from the local Aboriginal language in a particular area. Nevertheless, Kriol is largely intelligible over this whole area. Some of the English-based pidgins contributed to the development and spread of creoles and some have now died out, but there were also pidgins which arose from contact between Aboriginal people and non-Europeans. The following map (Map 4) gives an idea of the spread of contact varieties:



Map 4: Pidgins and creoles in Australia (adapted with permission from Wurm and Hattori 1981, Map 24).

Another effect of European contact is the emergence of indigenous *lingua francas*. These are traditional Aboriginal languages which have emerged as a common means of communication for a community or region. For example, at Wadeye (on the west coast of the Northern Territory) from 1935 missionaries brought together speakers of a number of mutually unintelligible languages. Over the past fifty years one of these, Murrinh-Patha, emerged as the *lingua franca* for the area and is now used as the medium for the local bilingual education program.

English has had a linguistic effect through its contribution to pidgins and creoles, but it has also had important consequences in its own right. English has been adopted by many Aboriginal Australians but may differ in subtle ways from English as used by other Australians (see Eades in chapter 13). And, of course, English words have been taken into Aboriginal languages to meet new needs (see the contributions by Black and Simpson in chapters 15 and 9).

One important feature of the English used by Aboriginal Australians is the use of terms to describe groups of people, especially Aborigines and non-Aborigines. Elsewhere in this volume you will find terms such as Koori and Murri, which are used by some Aborigines to refer to themselves. This reflects a dissatisfaction with the identifier labels which have been imposed upon them from outside their culture:

The word 'Aborigine' comes from the Latin word *ab origine* meaning 'from the beginning'. It should be a proud word, because our peoples have occupied this land since the Dreamtime began, not merely for 150 years. But for many people it has become debased, part of the negative perception of us and our heritage. (Mattingley and Hampton 1988, xv)

Most of the terms are based on Aboriginal words for 'person' or 'man'. The fact that there are several is a reminder that Aboriginal languages differ across the continent. The most common words are:

Koori	New South Wales and Victoria
Murri	Queensland
Nyoongah	southwestern Western Australia
Yammagee	Western Australia, around the Murchison River

A LINGUISTIC CONTRIBUTION TO AUSTRALIAN ENGLISH

Australian languages have also contributed to English. Perhaps the best known loan word from an Australian language into English is 'kangaroo', used to refer

to a creature that was quite unfamiliar to Europeans. The word is derived from Guugu Yimidhirr, a language spoken around Cooktown in northern Queensland. Many well-known loan words come from the Aboriginal people of the Sydney area: billabong, dingo, koala, kookaburra, nulla nulla (a kind of wooden club) and woomera (spear-thrower). Others, understandably, come from a region where the things the words refer to occur: so words like 'jarra' and 'quokka' come from languages of Western Australia. For many non-Aboriginal Australians their most frequent encounter with Australian languages is with placenames like Canberra, Coolangatta, Kununurra, Mallacoota, Parramatta and Uluru. In some instances the sources for these place names are not clear: Canberra, for example, is said to have meanings as different as 'breasts' and 'meeting place'. Sometimes connections between words sharing a common source are not obvious. The first part of the place name Gulargambone is the same as the word for the distinctively Australian bird, the galah. These related terms, Gulargambone and galah, are found in Ngiyambaa, a language traditionally spoken in western New South Wales.

In recent years there have been moves to reinstate Aboriginal placenames. In the Northern Territory, Ayer's Rock is also referred to as Uluru, Roper River has become Ngukurr, Delissaville has become Belyuen and Port Keats is now Wadeye. This process is not without problems. Ngukurr is difficult for many non-Aboriginal Australians, starting with a sound which can only occur at the *end* of a syllable in English and finishing with a trilled 'r' sound. Wadeye is problematic because there is a tendency to interpret the word from the perspective of English spelling: wad-eye. In fact, it is a three syllable word with the last two vowels pronounced like the 'e' in 'egg'. This can result in two pronunciations: one as the local Aboriginal people say it; the other transformed by the spelling of the word and by the lack of fit between the sound system of English and the local Aboriginal language.

RECORDING AUSTRALIAN LANGUAGES

The recording of Australian languages began with white contact but the results have been very uneven. In 1770 Captain Cook and Joseph Banks took down word lists from people living in Cape York in the area that has come to be called Cooktown. It was from this source that 'kangaroo' passed into English. In the early days of settlement some of the more detailed recordings of Australian languages were carried out by missionaries who eventually hoped to produce translations of the Bible. Unfortunately some languages were not recorded in any detail. Thawa, the language of Twofold Bay in the southeastern corner of New South Wales, is known only from a few word lists while Yeeman, formerly spoken near Brisbane,

is known only by its name. Valuable work was carried out by people from varied backgrounds: policemen, surveyors, farmers and clergymen. One of the most significant contributions was made by a Victorian sheep farmer, Edward Micklethwaite Curr. In the latter part of the nineteenth century Curr widely distributed a questionnaire seeking information on local languages. His four-volume work, *The Australian Race* (1886–87), was the most comprehensive compilation of knowledge on Australian languages in its day. In some instances most of what we now know about a particular language is to be found in Curr's collection.

It is only quite recently that the systematic study of Australian languages has become more widespread. Separate departments of linguistics only came into being in Australian universities in the mid-1960s. The establishment of the Summer Institute of Linguistics in Australia in the late 1950s was an important development for a fuller knowledge of Australian languages. This organisation is devoted to the translation of the Bible into local languages but also has contributed strongly to indigenous (secular) literacy and to the description of Aboriginal languages. Perhaps the most exciting initiative in recent times has been the setting up of the School of Australian Linguistics in 1974. This institution provided training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in techniques of linguistic analysis as well as skills for literacy work and translating and interpreting. Apart from the assistance such skills could provide in applied linguistic work in Aboriginal communities, there is tremendous potential for a more detailed understanding of Australian languages. No matter how talented, a linguistic researcher cannot compete with native-speaker knowledge.

The scope of investigation for any given Australian language varies considerably. For the bulk of Australia's ancestral languages one must rely on early written records, there being no surviving fluent speakers. This can amount to detective work of a linguistic kind. The records will always be incomplete, often difficult to interpret because of the recording techniques of non-specialists in linguistics, and frequently conflicting. Some of the difficulties involved in coming to understand these early records are brought out in the chapters by Crowley on Tasmanian (chapter 4) and by Sharpe on Bundjalung (chapter 5).

For languages still in everyday use the challenges for adequate documentation are rather daunting. In chapter 2 Yallop briefly indicates some of the details of language structure that can be investigated. In chapter 9 Simpson explores some of the possibilities for modern dictionaries, while in chapter 15 Black looks at some of the needs encountered by Australian languages as they accommodate to the introduced culture of the Europeans. Increasingly there are collections of text material appearing in Australian languages. These range from transcriptions of traditional stories and life histories to announcements about

forthcoming events such as elections, and instructions on how to repair a gearbox. In the development of this new literature there is increasing Aboriginal involvement, some of it focused in regionally based language resource centres. Such centres provide a venue for language policy including the control by Aborigines of linguistic research in their area.

RESPONDING TO NEW CHALLENGES

In chapter 15 Black concentrates on some of the new uses for Australian languages. Writing and literacy are not yet universal in the English-speaking community in Australia and were much less widespread even a few generations ago. For many Aboriginal Australians these skills have only appeared in the last fifty years or less. But there is the dual challenge of taking on these new skills in their own languages as well as English. Some of the problems involved are discussed by Rhydwen (in chapter 11). Aboriginal people have also had to accommodate to new forms of communication of technology: cameras, radio, television and telephones. They have also had to respond to new communication situations, including Western-style education, the law, land rights and negotiations. These latter areas are considered by Christie, Eades and Rumsey (in chapters 12,13,14) while a more general account is given by Walsh (1991).

LANGUAGE AND ABORIGINALITY

What effect has the decline of Australian languages had on Aborigines today? One European commentator has claimed (Dixon 1980, 79):

If a minority group is to maintain its ethnic identity and social cohesion it must retain its language (the Basques and the Jews provide two quite diverse examples). Once a group has lost its language, it will generally lose its separate identity and will, within a few generations, be indistinguishably assimilated into another, more dominant political group.

At first glance this statement may seem reasonable but it requires some interpretation. It is true that Hebrew has played an important role in Jewish ethnic identity, but there are many Jews who do not speak Hebrew with any fluency and this does not detract from their Jewishness. Of course they may regret their lack of knowledge of the language and strongly favour its maintenance but the loss of language does not automatically signal a loss of identity.

Language in Aboriginal Australia continues to play an important role in Aboriginal identity despite the decline of many ancestral languages. Asked how important language was in preserving culture one Aborigine has said:

Oh, it's our lifeblood. This is what we tell the young people. You have to know your language because you'll never be able to learn your Dreaming and if you don't know your Dreaming you can't identify where you belong. If you don't identify where you belong you may as well say you're dead. As an Aboriginal person you have to know your language to be able to learn your Dreamings. (Bowden and Bunbury 1990, 32–33).

Black (chapter 15) points out that Aboriginal culture is not static and varies across the continent. Aboriginal people who have grown up and lived their whole lives in the towns and cities of 'settled' Australia can still retain an Aboriginal identity. Eades (in chapter 13) shows that such people may have a quite distinctive form of English which at once sets them apart from other Australians and at the same time marks them as members of one group. Crowley (in chapter 4) points out that Aboriginality can survive the loss of traditional languages. Rumsey (in chapter 14) demonstrates that language can play a crucial role in group and territorial identity whether one knows that language or not. In chapter 5, Sharpe describes the efforts made by Aboriginal people to maintain their linguistic heritage. In these and other chapters it should become clear that Aboriginality is not reliant merely on knowledge of an ancestral language but may involve the use of a creole or of a distinctive form of English.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why are there now so few Aboriginal languages? Is this recent decline in linguistic diversity unusual in other areas in the region around Australia? Or the world?
2. Many ethnic groups are recognised in multicultural Australia. To what extent is knowledge of language associated with ethnicity? Consider various groups such as Dutch, Greek, Italian, Scots and Vietnamese. How do some of these groups differ from each other?
3. Which of the following words have been borrowed from Aboriginal languages? — boomerang, cockatoo, dinkum, humpy, jacaranda, wattle, woomera. (If you don't know, consult a good dictionary such as the *Macquarie*.) Try to identify more borrowings from Australian Aboriginal languages into English.
4. Imagine that you are one of a few hundred speakers of English living on a small island. English is spoken nowhere else in the world. Suppose now that speakers of a totally different language come and visit and settle your island. How might you try to communicate? How could you go about learning the newcomers' language? How might you try to teach or explain English to the newcomers?

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