

Racing to record Indigenous languages under attack from 'onslaught of English'

About 10 languages will be painstakingly recorded as part of a major Australian research project but many more are on the brink of extinction, warns academic



Cultural traditions such as weaving are kept alive by Indigenous women, but some Aboriginal languages are at risk of extinction. Photograph: Alamy

[Monica Tan](#)

Thursday 20 August 2015 18.20 AEST Last modified on Thursday 20 August 2015 18.25 AEST

Comprehensive documentation of several Indigenous Australian languages, some of which are highly endangered and at risk of extinction, has begun.

The Australian [Research Council](#) Centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language is building a library of audio and video recordings, grammar lists and dictionaries for at least 10 languages.

Professor Jane Simpson from the Australian National University said Australia's Indigenous languages remain "inherently fragile under the onslaught of English and government policies which make it hard to keep [them] going."

A 2014 [National Indigenous Languages Survey](#) found that of 250 Indigenous languages only 120 are still spoken, with 13 of these considered "strong" – five fewer than when the survey was first conducted in 2005. Around 100 languages are described as "severely or critically endangered".

Some of the highly endangered languages in the project include Dalabon from Arnhem Land, Warumungu from Tennant Creek and Ngarrindjeri from southern South Australia.

The work also examines the impact European settlement had on Aboriginal languages. Simpson said one of the first things to pique her interest in Aboriginal languages was reading

an 1840 dictionary of the Kurna language from Adelaide, and learning the words for glasses, razors and trousers.

“You can see the creativity people had when they came across new things,” she said. “They looked at the horse, for example, and saw a large animal that belongs to white people: a ‘whitefella kangaroo’ (*pindi nantu*).”

In Guugu Yimithirr, from far north Queensland, directions are embedded in language. “You have to say which cardinal point something is,” said Simpson. “You don’t say this or that way. You say, this-south or that-east; you build directions into the language.”

The work, according to Simpson, is not only important for speakers of each language to document their past, but could be used in language revitalisation programs, such as those in schools.

It was also significant for the broader field of linguistics. “In order to understand the human language, we need to know about many different kinds of languages and what the possibilities of language are.”

Simpson said the dictionaries would be “treasure houses of information on language, society, natural history, land and cultural traditions”.

Key to documenting any language is finding a speaker who “really loves language – likes explaining it and thinking about its patterns”, she said. While it was easy to point at objects such as plants, animals or rocks, and ask for the word, gathering translations for more abstract concepts and emotions was trickier.

The project would also support the four-decade-long work being done on the biggest dictionary of any Australian language, the Warlpiri dictionary.

“There was a wonderful bloke, the late P Patrick Jangala, who worked with linguists on words someone like me would never have thought of.”

Such words which do not have a direct English translation include *jamulu-nyany*, which Simpson said roughly translates into “when people just look at someone who is hitting another person and don’t say anything or take part or intervene, or when someone sees a snake and doesn’t kill it”.

Other languages such as Mithaka from south-west Queensland no longer have any living fluent speakers. In this case, linguists rely on recordings, dictionaries of the past and draw inferences from languages of neighbouring regions.

Simpson said many Indigenous language programs struggle because they do not have the same abundance of teaching resources that other more popular languages, such as Chinese and French might have.

Projects such as the [Living Archive of Aboriginal languages](#), developing language apps and “[localisation](#)” of commonly used sites such as Facebook are vital to the preservation and increased accessibility to indigenous languages, she said.

She added that the [new national curriculum for languages](#), while acknowledging the diversity of Indigenous languages and their varying health across the country, would only be effective if properly funded and implemented, including its recommendation to train more Indigenous teachers.