

# Indigenous Languages are good for your health: Health and wellbeing implications of regaining or retaining Australian Languages

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People. Policy. Place Seminar

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## Some background

The best read for me of c. 1997: Rob Amery 1998 Warrabarna Kaurna: Reclaiming Aboriginal Languages for Written Historical Sources: A Kaurna Case Study. PhD thesis, University of Adelaide

I participated in late 1999 to mid 2000 in a survey of Aboriginal languages in New South Wales with two Aboriginal co-researchers, Tony Lonsdale and Dr Jaky Troy [now Professor Troy]. We criss-crossed the state many times for well over 100 consultative meetings mainly with Aboriginal people. Such meetings raised many issues above and beyond language and this has been my experience in many other contexts like language curriculum development at the state and national level.



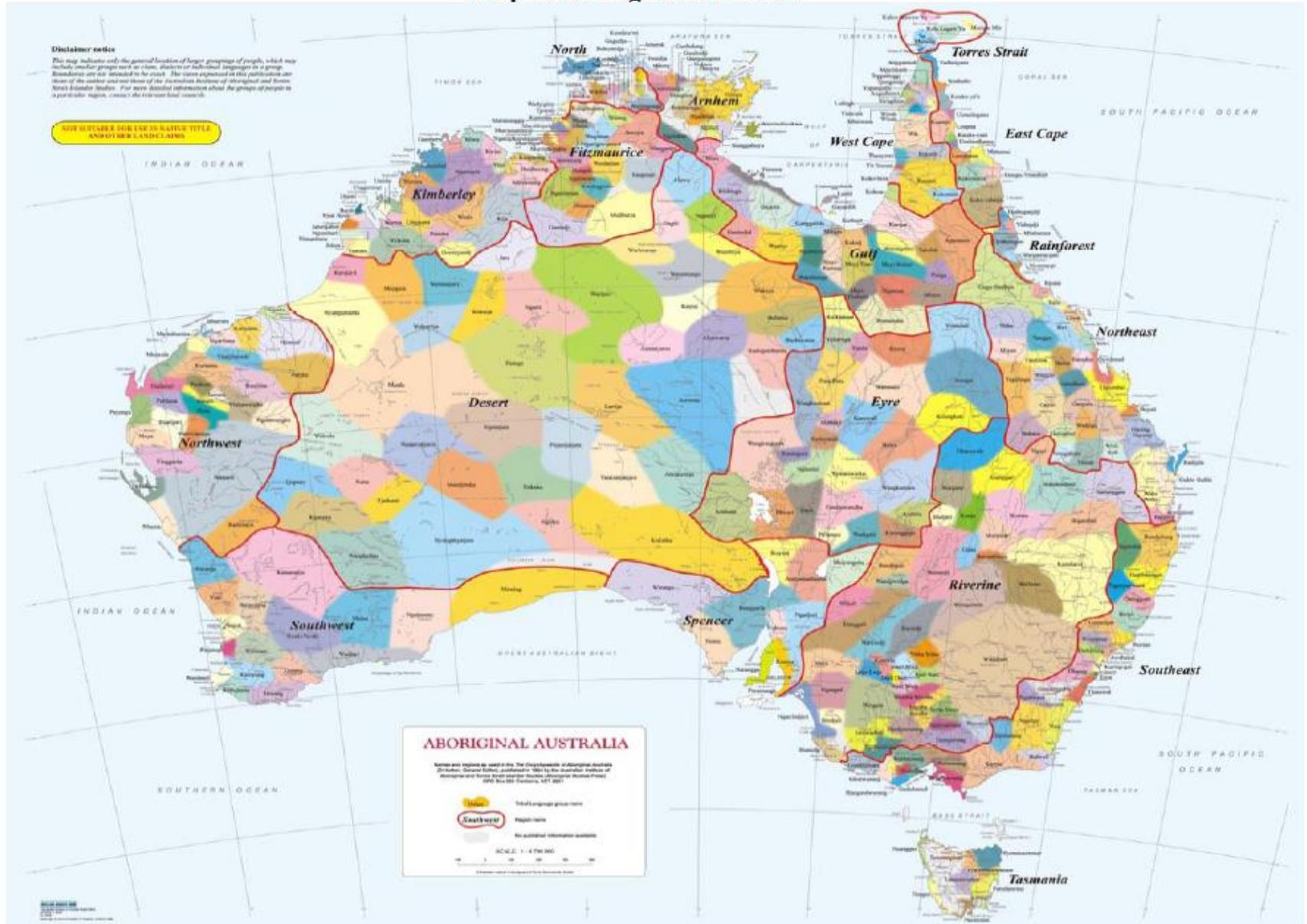
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# Horton 1996 Aboriginal Australia map

## Map of Aboriginal Australia



# Current situation for Australian Languages

- At first sustained contact, over 250 separate languages and many more dialects
- Now only around 120 still spoken
- Of these only 13 can be considered strong in the sense that they are learned by children as a matter of course

Doug Marmion, Kazuko Obata and Jakelin Troy 2014  
*Community, identity, wellbeing: the report of the Second National Indigenous Languages Survey*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.  
[<http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/research/projectproducts.html>]

# Where does language fit in?

Brief mention of Indigenous languages in  
Chapter 6 of the report: *Overcoming  
Indigenous Disadvantage 2009*

About 4 pages out of 791!

[http://www.pc.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0003/90129/key-indicators-2009.pdf](http://www.pc.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/90129/key-indicators-2009.pdf)

# **“The perilous state of Indigenous languages in Australia”**

This is the main heading of Chapter 3 of the 2009 Social Justice Report by Tom Calma.

[<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/chapter-3-introduction-social-justice-report-2009>]

An important sub-heading poses the question:  
Why preserve Indigenous languages?

# Why preserve Indigenous languages?

- Promotes resilience
- Improved health
- Improved cognitive functioning
- Increased employment options
- Costs and compensation
- Intrinsic value

[Social Justice Report 2009: 60-65]

# Tom Calma?



National Finalist Australian of the Year 2013

## Dr Tom Calma AO

*Social justice campaigner*

Respected for his inspirational and inclusive advocacy for human rights and social justice, Dr Tom Calma has dedicated his life to improving the lives of all Australians and particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. For the past four decades he has championed the importance of empowerment – a passion that runs through his work in education, training, employment, health, justice reinvestment and development. Tom was formerly the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner and Race Discrimination Commissioner and served as a senior Australian diplomat in India and Vietnam. He works to create opportunities for Indigenous voices to be heard and to build partnerships to improve their health, well-being and economic independence. His landmark 2005 report calling for the life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to be closed within a generation laid the groundwork for the *Close the Gap* campaign and COAG's *Closing the Gap* response. As Race Discrimination Commissioner and today, Tom works to advance Australia as an inclusive society including many roles in the community relating to social inclusion, reconciliation, mental health and higher education.

*Date of birth: 27 December 1953*

*State: Australian Capital Territory*

## from *Our Land Our Languages* report 2012

Language work is close to the heart of many Indigenous Australians. The important role that Indigenous languages play in terms of a connection to culture, kinship, land and family was highlighted during the Committee's inquiry, as was the devastation to communities that results when language is lost. Indigenous languages are the foundation upon which the capacity to learn, interact and to shape identity is built.

[Australia. Parliament. House of Representatives. Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs](http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_Representatives_Committees?url=/atsia/languages/report/index.htm) 2012 *Our Land Our Languages: Language Learning in Indigenous Communities*. Canberra: Parliament of the commonwealth of Australia.  
[http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/House\\_of\\_Representatives  
Committees?url=/atsia/languages/report/index.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_Representatives_Committees?url=/atsia/languages/report/index.htm)

## **Why preserve Indigenous languages: 1. Promotes resilience**

Children and young people's ethnicity, religion, culture and language form part of their identity. Preservation of their background and culture helps to create continuity and a secure base...

(International Child and Youth Care Network 2004)

... the rate of traditional language loss is greatest in those larger rural communities (e.g. Kalgoorlie, Broome, Port Hedland, Carnarvon) that are service and educational centres for more remote, outlying traditional Aboriginal communities. Aboriginal children in these communities not surprisingly experience more acculturative stress than those within more traditional communities and those in larger metropolitan centres (Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey 2004-)

## Why preserve Indigenous languages: 2. Improved health

- longitudinal research data which demonstrates a correlation between strong language and culture in Indigenous homeland communities and positive health outcomes.
- a ten year study of Indigenous Australians in Central Australia found that ‘connectedness to culture, family and land, and opportunities for self-determination’ assist in significantly lower morbidity and mortality rates in Homeland residents.
- The study found that residents of these communities were less likely to be obese, less likely to have diabetes and less prone to cardiovascular disease than Indigenous people across the rest of the Northern Territory.
- Interestingly, the study found that **‘conventional measures of employment, income, housing and education did not account for this health differential.** Strong connections to traditional ways of life were the predictors for the better health outcomes. [my emphasis]

# Researching language and Aboriginal health: Michael Chandler et al Canada

This brief report details a preliminary investigation into how community-level variability in knowledge of Aboriginal languages relate to “band”-level measures of youth suicide. In Canada, and, more specifically, in the province of British Columbia (BC), Aboriginal youth suicide rates vary substantially from one community to another. The results reported demonstrate that, not only did this simple language use indicator prove to have predictive power over and above that of six other cultural continuity factors identified in previous research, but showed that youth suicide rates effectively dropped to zero in those few communities in which as little as a third of band members reported a conversational knowledge of their own “Native” language.

Hallett, D., Chandler, M. J., & Lalonde, C. (2007). Aboriginal Language Knowledge and Youth Suicide. *Cognitive Development* 22 (3), pp. 392–399. see also Chandler, M. J. & Lalonde, C. E. (2008). Cultural Continuity as a Protective Factor against Suicide in First Nations Youth. *Horizons --A Special Issue on Aboriginal Youth, Hope or Heartbreak: Aboriginal Youth and Canada's Future*. 10(1), 68-72.

# **An example of a community in northern Australia**

Mornington Island in the remote southern Gulf of Carpentaria, for example, has a population of over 1,100 Aboriginal people (and about 100 Whitefellas). With more than 35% of that total aged under 14 in 2011, there is now more than ever a need to consider what the future looks like for young people living there and a (significant?) part of that future could/will/should include work or career-related activity. Despite the region's exceptional beauty and biodiversity values, the lure of great fishing and a mine located on the adjacent mainland nearby, it is still hard to see how these industries could constitute the entirety of local employment. Observations about the limitations of NRM [natural resource management], tourism and mining are not only fiscal or related to a local population vs size of industry equation. It's also simply the case that not everyone wants to snuggle dugongs, bait hooks for corporate fat cats on fishing jaunts or drive a face-shovel on 12 hours shifts.

## **An example of a community in northern Australia**

Make no mistake, Mornington Islanders are consummate experts in their own social worlds from an early age, but this highly technical and crafted social knowledge doesn't transfer well to 'The Mainland' or 'Australia' and if one does want to pursue another kind of work-life, to become a pilot, flight attendant, whatever, then this can be problematic. Staying is in itself not easy either where the extraordinary boredom, interpersonal violence and suicide (the penultimate act of violence against oneself and others) present in these communities, especially among younger persons, are a product of the despair of feeling as though one does not have a choice in anything, of being stuck in a world where the life trajectory appears set. It's interesting and telling that such young people are now turning to social media in their multitudes to express this despair e.g. 'f\*ck my life', 'maybe I'll go kill myself' etc are all too common Facebook 'Status Updates' from that region ...

posting by Cameo Dalley, 30 November 2012, on AASnet.

# Researching language and Aboriginal health

While Australia lacks research on culture and resilience, we do have longitudinal research data which demonstrates a correlation between strong language and culture in Indigenous homeland communities and positive health outcomes. A ten year study of Indigenous Australians in Central Australia found that ‘connectedness to culture, family and land, and opportunities for self-determination’ assist in significantly lower morbidity and mortality rates in Homeland residents. The study compared the rates of cardiovascular disease in the Alyawarr and Anmatyerr people of the Utopia Homeland communities with the rates amongst the Indigenous population of the Northern Territory. ... the study found that ‘conventional measures of employment, income, housing and education did not account for this differential. **Strong connections to traditional ways of life were the predictors for the better health outcomes.** (Social Justice Report 2009: 61) [my emphasis]

# Land, language, wellbeing

... outstations are seen as an important intervention tool for grog, gunga and gambling. They are situated out on the land, away from violence, noise pollution and the sedentism of the community. Culturally, it is perceived that being on the land provides physical, emotional, spiritual and mental sustenance: one young man told me about his grandfather: ‘... as soon as he goes bush, he talk/ language, chuck that walking stick away, can walk good again, he that happy for that land. When he come back here, leg swell up again, knee no good, he get low then’. Thus connection to land is seen as a primary tool for intervention and wellbeing, and outstations are the natural expression of such a belief system. (Phillips 2003: 102-3)

# Correlations?! tantalising but not quite there yet

A positive relationship was found between the sustainability of Indigenous land, language and culture and an Indigenous person's subjective emotional wellbeing. p. 215

While the relationship between land, language and culture on the one hand and Indigenous wellbeing on the other has been suggested in the literature, the empirical evidence is somewhat lacking. p. 226

Nicholas Biddle and Hannah Swee 2012 The relationship between wellbeing and Indigenous land, language and culture in Australia. *Australian Geographer* 43(3): 215-232.

see also Biddle, Nicholas 2011 Physical and mental health, Lecture 3, *Measures of Indigenous Wellbeing and Their Determinants Across the Lifecourse*, 2011 CAEPR Lecture Series, CAEPR, ANU, Canberra. <http://caepr.anu.edu.au/Physical-and-mental-health.php>

# **Advantages of learning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages**

- Improved health for the Indigenous community: mental; physical and social
- Reduced levels of Indigenous youth suicide
- Decreased levels of racism towards the Indigenous community

# Summary of benefits of language revival

- improved health and wellbeing:  
emotional, mental, physical and social
- learning an Aboriginal language leads to enhanced academic performance
- a possible relationship between learning an Aboriginal language and students' reading (and writing) in English
- some improvement in employment opportunities
- reduction in racism

# Longitudinal studies

This 'shortfall' in empirical evidence is currently being addressed.

NSW Aboriginal researcher, Dr Ray Lovett, is engaged in an Australia wide study - *Mayi kuwayu: The longitudinal study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing*. Ray (Ngiyambaa-Wangaaybuwan) [<https://researchers.anu.edu.au/researchers/lovett-rw>] is a highly qualified quantitative epidemiologist who has built questions concerning Indigenous Languages into his study.



Dr Ray Lovett

RN, BN, BHSc, MAE, PhD

NHMRC Research Fellow and Program Leader  
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health  
Epidemiology for Policy and Practice

ANU College of Medicine, Biology and Environment

# Longitudinal studies

Ghil'ad Zuckermann in collaboration with Indigenous researcher, Professor Alex Brown, has just begun a project which will add to the evidence base: 2017-2021 National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Project Grant APP1129796 (with Alex Brown): *Examining the impact of language reclamation on social and emotional well being among the Barngarla* (\$1,111,633).



# The costs of racism?

A recent study

(<http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2016/04/06/research-suggests-racism-costs-australia-45-billion-year>) demonstrates the very considerable costs of racism to the community. “Professor Paradies says racism can cost Australia's health system as much as \$44.9 billion a year.” however “University of Queensland health economics professor Paul Frijters says the numbers in the study could be larger than they are in actuality.” See also <http://www.deakin.edu.au/about-deakin/media-releases/articles/counting-the-billion-dollar-cost-of-racism-in-australia>.

## **The costs of racism?**

Of course racism is not restricted just to Indigenous Australians but even if we were to suppose that racism towards Indigenous Australians operated on a strictly proportional basis according to the Indigenous population then its mere 3% would amount to A\$1.347 billion per year. Clearly this would be well below the actual savings per year. On the one hand the actual proportion of racism directed towards Indigenous Australians would be much higher than 3% and on the other hand it seems likely that the overall savings of A\$44.9 billion a year could be larger.

# The costs of racism?

US Population c. 320 million

Let's assume similar cost of racism on a strictly proportional basis

then cost to US = just under A\$600 billion  
i.e. c. US\$460 billion

# A language that's transforming a town



## **Parkes, Wiradjuri and the transformation of Geoff Anderson**

The small New South Wales town of Parkes is famous for their annual Elvis Festival and for their role in helping to beam astronauts onto the moon (as seen in 'The Dish'). But there's something else that's very special about this place.

Just a decade or two earlier, Parkes was described as 'very racist' and 'divided'. Now, in 2012, 1,000 people per week learn the Wiradjuri language and culture. It's taught in primary schools, high schools and TAFE. Anecdotally, the Wiradjuri teachers have told me that the racism they experienced as kids at school, has completely vanished. The last NAIDOC march attracted 400 people, more than half of whom were non-Indigenous. And this is in a town of just 10,000 people.

# Language in the public domain

Olawsky (2010b: 82-83) provides some examples:

For communities that wish to implement the language publicity approach into their existing strategies the following options may be considered:

- newspaper articles reporting about language work
- newspaper or magazine contributions with instructive language content
  - language guides
  - short radio spots
    - signage
    - interviews
      - maps
    - working with partners
    - welcome speeches at events
- crash course for outsiders and community members (even mixed classes)
  - website with language content.

# Language in the public domain

The reach of Australian Languages into the public domain in recent times has been nothing short of amazing. By 2010 Australia's National Anthem, Advance Australia Fair, had been translated into the Aboriginal language of Sydney, [http://dharug.dalang.com.au/Dharug/plugin\\_wiki/page/advance-australia-fair](http://dharug.dalang.com.au/Dharug/plugin_wiki/page/advance-australia-fair) [accessed 6 February 2017]. This was performed before the 3<sup>rd</sup> State of Origin Rugby League Football match in Sydney, 7 July 2010, before over 60, 000 spectators

[[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/State\\_of\\_Origin\\_results\\_and\\_statistics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/State_of_Origin_results_and_statistics)] but with much greater reach through television broadcasts involving millions of viewers

[<http://www.foxsports.com.au/nrl/state-of-origin-rules-tv-ratings/story-e6frf3ou-1227403996062>].

# Language in the public domain

1<sup>st</sup> speech in an Aboriginal language in the Federal Parliament: Rob Oakeshott 26/6/13 in NSW language, Dhanggati <http://thebigsmoke.com.au/2014/05/26/rob-oakeshott-independent-member-lynne/>

1<sup>st</sup> speech in an Aboriginal language in the NSW Parliament: Troy Grant in NSW language, Wiradjuri 2014 <http://theconversation.com/wiradjuri-words-show-the-power-of-learning-australias-first-languages-38848>

1<sup>st</sup> speech in an Aboriginal language in the Federal Parliament by the Prime Minister 10/2/16:  
<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/turnbulls-address-to-parliament-mark-of-respect-for-ngunawals-rediscovery-of-collective-soul-20160212-gmsanf.html>

# Language in the public domain

Another way that Aboriginal languages are getting into the public domain is through music and song. An example is Jacinta Tobin's performance on 27/6/16

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDudazEAZqM>; also on Dharuk songs on 26/1/17. A more general account of music and song in relation to Australian Languages is provided by Troy & Walsh (2015).

Aboriginal names in public places have a significant impact. Members of the Dhanggati Language Group came up with the name “Yapang gurraarbang gayandugayigu” during a discussion at their TAFE class. It means “Very long track to the other side” <http://www.macleayargus.com.au/story/1140947/dhangatti-elders-reveal-bridge-name-proposal-in-song/?cs=1904> (see also Lissarrague 2013). A number of places around Sydney Harbour have had their original Aboriginal name reinstated (Troy & Walsh 2009; see also Amery 1995, 2010, 2014).

# Language in the public domain

Some highlights for me [Wesley Enoch, Sydney Festival Director, 2017-2019] include the huge Indigenous Program which saw booked out language classes throughout the city and the amazing online and broadcast audience for ‘word of the day’. The newly commissioned song *Bayala: Baraya Sing Up Country* for the WugulOra Ceremony on January 26 was an emotional high ... 2018 will see an expansion of the Language classes.

<http://blog.sydneyfestival.org.au/2017/01/30/thats-wrap-thank-wesley-enoch/>

<https://open.abc.net.au/explore/22207>

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-12-15/learning-wiradjuri-overcome-agoraphobia-language-revolution/8118758>