



## **Indigenous languages in some Australian picture books**

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**Abstract:** This paper examines some books produced in Indigenous languages in Australia, dividing them into categories: simple learning-to-read books in the language only; bilingual books (Indigenous language and English); books in English with some Indigenous words; and to more general commercial books. Although difficult to achieve, a few books succeed in having both specific language and cultural content and wider market appeal.

**Key words:** indigenous, language, picture, books, Australian

### **Introduction: Languages in Australia**

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child includes the right to “the development of respect for (...) his or her own cultural identity, language and values” (1990, Article 29); and the right “to enjoy his or her own culture (...) to use his or her own language” (1990, Article 30). When it comes to literacy learning and access to books, it cannot be assumed that all children in Australia are encouraged to learn to read in their mother tongue.

It is paradoxical that Australia is such a monolingual country now. When the first Europeans arrived, there were about 250 languages and perhaps another 250 dialects spoken across the continent. For Aboriginal people speaking a particular language is part of belonging to a specific homeland, and the language-name is still the way of identifying an ancestral homeland even if the language is no longer spoken. With the removal of Aboriginal families to missions and government reserves, Indigenous languages were discouraged or even forbidden. Some words were kept as secrets, others such as 'kangaroo' and 'Canberra' became part of the general Australian vocabulary. (Wheatley, not yet pub'd). Most Indigenous people today speak as their first language English or a form of Aboriginal English called Kriol. In remote communities traditional language is often still spoken, and in some of these places, schoolchildren are taught literacy bilingually (eg Luritja and English); however, government policy is moving increasingly towards English-only literacy. In some communities, where the traditional language is no longer spoken in daily life, Aboriginal people have begun reclaiming it and teaching some of the local vocabulary to Indigenous and non-Indigenous children.

Following are some of the ways in which these languages have been presented in picture books.



### **Indigenous language only**

These books are usually intended for a small local readership. The assumed reader is a child speaker of Luritja (or Tetun etc) who is beginning literacy. The texts typically are accounts of familiar real-life events, but some are retellings of traditional tales. Modest production is usual, although colour illustrations are now generally included.

a) Mary Malbunka *Smoking the Baby*. This small book (eight pages of A4 size) is solely in Luritja. These books are typical of book-resources produced by the Northern Territory bilingual schools, written and photocopied on site for first-language users, and not published commercially; if there is a English translation at the back, it is solely for the information of non-Indigenous teachers. They are stories of real life and contemporary experience, including practical matters such as how to get bush plums and how to track echidna.

b) Maria Imaculada dos Reis Piedade and Bibi Langkar Ahmed *Lafaek Toba*. This non-Australian example is from our near neighbour and appears an exemplary book for encouraging literacy. This one retells a story of the origin of the shape of Timor Leste. These little books have been produced specifically for use in schools. The language Tetun is not universal but is spoken and understood by many more people than Portuguese, the official language of education. Note that the English translation is on a separate sheet of paper and provided solely for the convenience of people like me.

c) Aunty Esme Timbery and Mervyn Davison *Djallanga*. This is one of a series of booklets being developed by the Dharawal people at La Perouse, an urban area. This book is about the old cultural practice of gathering shells for decorative uses. In the acknowledgements, Ray Ingrey writes that reclaiming of the language is based both on archival materials and on the speech of community members, and ‘our language journey is young and we are learning all the time.’

### **Bilingual (Indigenous Language and English)**

The incorporation of English implies a wider readership. The larger format of the books in this group helps to appeal to the more general market, and it is also more likely to be affordable if a wider distribution is envisaged (eg to tourists).



a) Nancy Kanytjurri Fox et al, *Tjuma: Stories from the Western Desert*. Seven Dreaming Stories in Ngaanyatjarra, language of the Warburton Ranges area. The Ngaanyatjarra versions have been written from oral retellings, and an English translation follows each story.

b) Reys, Karen *Gandjau Wangai*. A story in Badjala, the language of Fraser Island, Queensland, with a translation into English below each paragraph. Included are a brief guide to pronunciation and glossary. The author/illustrator has been involved in research to revive the Badjala language. This is an original story, a cumulative tale parallel in structure to ‘The Three Billygoats Gruff’. Each creature persuades the snake not to eat him, as something more substantial will be along soon; and the snake has its come-uppance when an eagle takes *him* on.

c) Ross and Olive Boddington *The Budara Story*; this acknowledges the work of Yamaji Language Centre in Geraldton. Brief texts in Wajarri and English appear on each spread, and the artwork has pride of place. This is a retelling of a traditional story. There are a word list and pronunciation guide at the end.

d) Greene, Gracie, Tramacchi, Joe and Gill, Lucille *Tjarany Roughtail*. This book contains eight Dreamtime stories from the Kukatja people of Western Australia's Kimberley Region. Each story is told in both Kukatja and English; the Kukatja versions have been written down from oral tellings, and then translated into English. Lucille Gill's paintings are accompanied by a ‘key’ to the main elements. The book includes maps, kinship diagrams, exercises and language notes: it is a truly encyclopedic production. This beautiful and ambitious book was a CBCA award winner, and copies were bought by schools throughout Australia.

### **Aboriginal English (Kriol), with some Indigenous words**

a) Edwards, Yvonne and Day, Brenda *Going for Kalta: hunting for sleepy lizards at Yalata*. From the start it is clear this is a multi-faceted text. There is a map, then a succession of photos that tell the story along with a text in Aboriginal English (‘in that blue bush country’). Words in Pitjantjatjara are interspersed with the English, and appear in a different coloured typeface. At the back are a word list, some hints on pronunciation, and a life cycle of the *kalta*, and acknowledgement of the teamwork that went into the book. This book has not been surpassed for design and child-appeal. Like



*Tjarany Roughtail* it won an award and was widely distributed. Urban white children who would not otherwise come across any Pitjantjatjara language have met this book in their school libraries.

b) Barlow, Maisie (Yarrcali) and Anning, Michael (Boiyool) *Jirrbal: Rainforest Dreamtime Stories*. Four stories told in English but with individual words of Jirrbal, a name derived from the Djirbalngan coastal and rainforest people south of Cairns in north eastern Australia. As well as the stories, the book contains a glossary of the Jirrbal words used, and autobiographical and cultural material.

Both these books demonstrate the deep entwining of language and culture: becoming familiar with a few words of the language, Pitjantjatjara or Jirrbal, also provides (a little) insight into the culture of that people.

### **English with some assorted Indigenous words**

Bronwyn Bancroft *Possum and Wattle: my big book of Australian words*.

The author/illustrator was born in Tenterfield and is of Bundjalung, Djanbun clan descent. She is successful both in gallery art and in children's books. This book, in alphabet form, has wide appeal to Australian children and tourists. It includes general English words and also words, especially names of creatures, that have entered Australian English from a variety of Indigenous languages (the reality is that the origin of many of these words is uncertain). There is no claim that the illustrations or text refer to any particular language group, nor any attempt at cultural specificity.

### **Some concluding comments**

Books that are most suitable for Aboriginal children to enjoy, to recognise and that will enable them to become literate in their own language are likely to have very small print runs. Despite their cheap production, they require a financial commitment from government or NGO, as they will not be saleable in the general market.

The addition of English broadens the market. As a former bookseller and publisher, I am entirely sympathetic to the push for commercial appeal. But I also see that appeal to a wider market can result in a diminution of specific linguistic and cultural content. A few outstanding books (*Tjarany Roughtail*; *Going for Kalta*) have succeeded on both fronts.



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