WA ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES POLICY

Discussion Paper

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Introduction
Aboriginal languages were spoken across Western Australia before the arrival of the first European settlers. These traditional languages have suffered significant decline as a result of the settlement of their country by Europeans and others. Many of the traditional Aboriginal languages are no longer being used every day by all generations in communities of Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people have, however, developed new forms of language, including creoles and forms of Aboriginal English, to express their cultural distinctiveness and to use each day in their families and communities. Similar situations apply in other states and territories of Australia and in various comparable countries overseas.

Language policy is often not treated as a matter for coordinated development. Languages and language use are, on the other hand, often impacted by many separate policies and decisions of government. It is therefore important to understand the situation of Aboriginal people, the languages they use and the needs they have in relation to language and communication. A better understanding of these things should underpin coordinated policy development encompassing the full range of needs of Aboriginal people within the community and the full range of government service provision.

This paper has been prepared at the request of the Department of Indigenous Affairs to provide background information and to stimulate community discussion on the possible contents of a Western Australian Aboriginal Languages Policy. It provides an overview of the issues and history of Aboriginal languages in Western Australia and policy development in this area. It also draws on experiences elsewhere in Australia and overseas where there are significant Indigenous populations.

The paper addresses key issues and policy options including:
- maintenance and revival of traditional Aboriginal languages
- English language literacy development for Aboriginal children and adults, and
- provision of interpreting and translation services.

It is being distributed to various community organisations, academic institutions and government departments for comment, as well as being the subject of a forum for experts in this area. The feedback from these consultations will be used to inform development of a draft policy paper for consideration by the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, and for further consultation.

The significance of language
The Preamble to the National Policy on Languages (Lo Bianco, 1987 pp. 1–2) points out that language is ‘the most sophisticated and fundamental form of human communication. … Virtually all human endeavour has correlates in language[,] which is the tool humans use to negotiate and create meaning and to articulate their perception of experience.’ The preamble goes on to show that language is a source of individual or personal identity, group and cultural identity, national identity and human identity.

Later we read of Aboriginal languages
In societies with oral language traditions the languages provide an irreplaceable repository of experience, history, mythology, spiritual belief, law and socio-cultural organisation and values. … Being unique to this continent these languages are an important and irreplaceable source of self-knowledge for Australia and of inestimable value to Aborigines and their prospects of cultural survival.

In addition Aboriginal languages, including Creoles and Pidgins used by Aborigines, are important means of communication between individuals and groups, and of education and socialization of children. (Lo Bianco, 1987 pp. 10, 14)

The significance and benefits of Aboriginal language recognition, preservation and maintenance are many but fall into two main groups:
Identity, culture and social justice

- Language is integral to anyone's identity and Aboriginal languages, including Kriol and Aboriginal English, are significant parts of the identity of Aboriginal people. Recognition of these people means recognizing their languages and the cultures that they express. It is therefore an important aspect of the reconciliation agenda.
- Fostering the continuation of traditional language use within Aboriginal communities can help strengthen social cohesion, intergenerational respect, and individual self-esteem among community members.
- Learning Indigenous languages, like learning other languages, leads to cultural and intellectual enrichment and mutual respect, which in turn will lead to greater social justice in the broader Western Australian community.
- Equality does not involve cultural or language uniformity. Multilingualism is a cultural and cognitive advantage.

Communication, education and participation

- For effective communication it is essential to use the language of the person you are trying to communicate with. For this reason individuals and governments need to recognize the use of Aboriginal languages, including Kriol and Aboriginal English, in communicating with Aboriginal people who speak these languages.
- For effective education it is essential to build on the home language rather than rejecting it and trying to replace it with another language.
- Mutual awareness, recognition and respect can grow from learning about and learning to speak Indigenous languages and this can foster reconciliation at individual and neighbourhood levels, and more harmonious participation in society. Respect and learning are not all one-way.

Discussion

Do you agree with the significance and benefits of Aboriginal language recognition, preservation and maintenance, as outlined here?

Which languages are significant enough in the lives of Aboriginal people for inclusion in an Aboriginal Languages Policy for Western Australia?

Recognition of the languages of minority groups, including Indigenous peoples, is undertaken by signatories (including Australia) of the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which states:

... persons belonging to ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities shall not be denied the right 
... to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own 
language ... (Department of Communications Information Technology and the Arts, 2005 p. 33)

Senator Aden Ridgeway suggested in 2001 that recognition of languages could help in some of the areas of so-called 'practical reconciliation'.

I think that languages don't rate as highly [to those providing resources] as some of the more practical issues of health, housing and education. While those things are important, there has to be an underlying 'health of identity' which supersedes all the other issues. There's no doubt in my mind that if language and culture were taught as part of a cultural education curriculum, there would be ongoing improvements to quality of living. (Ridgeway, 2001)
Discussion

Is the recognition and use of Aboriginal languages important for ‘practical reconciliation’ and addressing Indigenous disadvantage?

Aboriginal Languages in WA

Across Australia the use of Aboriginal languages has been declining since the time of European settlement of the country.

Figures from the 1996 Australian Census, however, showed that WA has the second highest proportion of Indigenous people who use an Indigenous language of any state or territory in Australia. WA also has the second highest proportion of Indigenous people within the state who use an Indigenous language at home, as shown in Table 1 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of population and Housing 1996, as reported in Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999 pp. 17-18). The south eastern states, which were the earliest and most intensively settled by European people, have the lowest level of Indigenous language use. Remoteness of Aboriginal settlements seems to be a significant factor giving rise to higher figures for Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

As reported in the influential National Indigenous Languages Survey 2005 compiled by the Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages (FATISIL) and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, the proportion of Indigenous people who report that they use an Indigenous language at home across Australia is getting less from census to census and also down the generations at each census. (See Table 2 (Department of Communications Information Technology and the Arts, 2005 p. 83 drawn from Australian Bureau of Statistics Census of Population and Housing of 1986, 1996 and 2001).

The 2006 Australian Census of Population and Housing gives us a broad picture of the languages Indigenous people across Western Australia say that they use at home. This is summarised in Table 3 (based on a table entitled ‘Language spoken at home by proficiency in spoken English/language’ for the state of Western Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007 Western Australia (STE 3) l06).

These figures show that 79% of Indigenous people in Western Australia speak only English and 85% of those who do speak an Indigenous language also speak English well or very well. In other words, the pressure of English on the Aboriginal languages of the Aboriginal people is extreme. This is because a person or a community who can use both an Aboriginal language and English will continually be making a choice about which language to use in which circumstances. History shows that increasingly that choice is likely to favour English, as the dominant language, unless there are very positive reasons to choose the Aboriginal language.

The census figures also show that Indigenous languages from other parts of Australia (Arnhem Land and Daly River, Yolngu Matha, Torres Strait Island Languages) are also spoken in Western Australia, though in relatively small numbers.

In Table 3 there is surprisingly low reported use of Kimberley Indigenous languages in the state as a whole (only 696 people). In Table 4, however, we find over 3000 people in the Kimberley statistical division reporting that they use an Indigenous language at home. This suggests that many of the languages used by Kimberley people may not have been identified or classified as Kimberley languages in the state-wide figures presented in Table 3.
Table 1: Proportion of Indigenous people reporting that they use an Indigenous language at home by state/territory 1996: Australia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State/Territory</th>
<th>State/Territory Indigenous language users as proportion of total national Indigenous population using an Indigenous language at home (%)</th>
<th>Proportion of total state/territory Indigenous population using an Indigenous language at home (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Australia</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Australia*</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New South Wales</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasmania</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Capital Territory</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This is an underestimate for South Australia due to unavailability of census figures for some areas near the Northern Territory border.

Table 2: Proportion of Indigenous people reporting that they use an Indigenous language at home by age group 1986, 1996 and 2001: Australia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>1986 %</th>
<th>1996 %</th>
<th>2001 %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5–14 years</td>
<td>16.00</td>
<td>10.88</td>
<td>5.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15–24 years</td>
<td>16.96</td>
<td>14.46</td>
<td>12.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–44 years</td>
<td>19.70</td>
<td>14.21</td>
<td>11.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45+ years</td>
<td>28.48</td>
<td>16.80</td>
<td>23.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 presents the languages that Indigenous people say they use at home by statistical region in WA.

The statistical divisions are very different in size, and they have vastly different numbers of Indigenous people. We can see from the figures that more than 88% of Indigenous people speak English only in all statistical divisions except for the Kimberley, Pilbara and South Eastern divisions. This last division includes the Goldfields/western desert area. This shows again that it is the more remote areas where people use Indigenous languages more.

This is confirmed by research carried out by a Western Australian Telethon Institute for Child Health Research (TICHR) survey on the health of children and young people. This survey showed that young children and their carers used Indigenous languages more if they lived in more remote communities (Zubrick et al., 2004 p. 33). The report notes that the degree of loss or continuing use of an Aboriginal language is highly dependent on the degree of relative isolation (remoteness) and the extent to which there have been systematic initiatives to preserve and recover traditional languages (e.g. Kimberley Aboriginal Language Resource Centre) or where there are local opportunities for bilingual or traditional first language education(…). (Zubrick et al., 2004 p. 35)
Table 3 Languages spoken at home by Indigenous people: Western Australia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Speaks English only</th>
<th>Speaks other Language and speaks English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very well or well</td>
<td>Not well or not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaks English only</td>
<td>46,469</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaks Australian Indigenous languages:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Indigenous languages nfd</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arnhem Land and Daly</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>River Region Languages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yolngu Matha</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cape York Peninsula</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Languages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torres Strait island Languages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Desert Fringe Area Languages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arandic</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Desert Language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kimberley Area</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Languages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Australian Indigenous Languages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Indigenous Languages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Indigenous Population(^a)</td>
<td>46,469</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Includes a further 4,625 who spoke other languages, including those not identified individually, and also includes those who did not state language spoken at home. Thus the figures in the bottom row of the table in most cases do not represent the sum of the columns above them.

Table 4 Language Use of Indigenous people by statistical division Western Australia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statistical Division</th>
<th>Speaks English only (% of Indig. pop)</th>
<th>Speaks an Indigenous Language and speaks English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very well or Well</td>
<td>Not well or Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perth</td>
<td>18,856 (88.4%)</td>
<td>383</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kimberley</td>
<td>7,906 (64.2%)</td>
<td>2,976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilbara</td>
<td>3,427 (60.9%)</td>
<td>1,530</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>5,118 (88.5%)</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midlands</td>
<td>2,087 (95.4%)</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Great Southern</td>
<td>792 (94.5%)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Great Southern</td>
<td>1,526 (89.1%)</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Eastern</td>
<td>3,082 (62.1%)</td>
<td>1,244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South West</td>
<td>3,495 (94.1%)</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The survey also notes that
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. This suggests that such transitional communities have a priority need for, and potential to benefit from, traditional language promotion and preservation initiatives. (Zubrick et al., 2004 p. 35)

Discussion
Does remoteness guarantee stronger languages?
Would Aboriginal people living in towns and cities prefer greater access to programs in traditional Aboriginal languages?
To what extent do people in remote areas need access to English language and literacy programs? Would they prefer to strengthen the use of Aboriginal languages? Or both?

Traditional Aboriginal Languages in Western Australia
In his *Handbook of Kimberley Languages* McGregor (1988) lists fifty eight traditional languages as being spoken in the Kimberley region. This includes a small number of languages whose speakers have moved into the Kimberley area from the adjacent areas of the Northern Territory or from south of the Kimberley in WA. In addition McGregor notes that various forms of Kriol and Aboriginal English are also spoken in the region. In the remainder of the state, Thieberger (1987) lists seventy traditional languages as being spoken, also mentioning Aboriginal English and Kriol. The overlap between McGregor’s and Thieberger’s lists is only seven languages, giving a total of 121 traditional Aboriginal languages spoken across Western Australia.

Since the information in these listings is based on research up to the mid 1980s, some of the information was, even at that time, true in the past, rather than the present. Some of these languages and dialects are no longer spoken, some are only spoken by very small numbers of speakers, and the census figures quoted elsewhere in this paper also show that some additional Indigenous languages from further afield (e.g. Arnhem Land and Torres Strait) are now also spoken in the state. In developing a Western Australian Aboriginal Languages Policy there is a need to attempt to collect more extensive up to date data on the languages and how many people speak them, as recommended by the *National Indigenous Languages Survey Report 2005* (Department of Communications Information Technology and the Arts, 2005 p. 119 Recommendation 25).

Discussion
Should a Western Australian Aboriginal Languages Policy encompass Indigenous languages from outside Western Australia, if there are speakers living in WA?

While Aboriginal languages are rooted in an ancient tradition, they are also living languages. This means that it is natural for them to develop and change over time as they adapt to changing circumstances. At the simple level of vocabulary, for instance, their traditional origins have left them with a many valuable words for the natural environment and for traditional law and lore, including very distinctive kinship terminology. In the past two hundred years, however, more words have been added, to deal with newly arriving items and concepts such as vehicles, firearms, money, information
technology, and new systems of government, education, law and medicine. Living Aboriginal languages have taken these things in their stride and people have learned to use the new words they need within their languages, just as English, over the centuries, has absorbed new words from dozens of other languages. When this happens, it shows we are dealing with a living language instead of a museum piece.

This is one way in which English, as the introduced language, has put pressure on Aboriginal languages and there is always increasing risk of people just switching to English. But this risk will not necessarily lead to the loss of traditional languages if the speakers value their old languages and keep on using them in a range of functions that are important to them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discussion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What purposes/functions do people still use traditional Aboriginal languages for in their communities?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent does support for Aboriginal languages depend on government and to what extent does it depend on individual and community action and initiative by Aboriginal people?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Aboriginal English and Kriol**

Based on the census figures presented above we might assume that Aboriginal languages are relevant for less than a quarter (21%) of the Indigenous people of Western Australia, while the most Aboriginal people in the state are exclusively users of English.

This would, however, be misleading.

Many or most of the 79% of Indigenous people who reported that they use only English at home are likely to use distinctively Aboriginal forms of language that they may call English but which are very different from the form of English commonly known as Standard Australian English. These forms of language include various varieties of Aboriginal English and Kriol.

Aboriginal English appears similar to Standard Australian English but actually has strongly Aboriginal cultural and linguistic characteristics in grammar and vocabulary and in underlying patterns of culture, interaction and thought. These important but often subtle differences easily lead to miscommunication, unless they are recognised and understood by all those involved in interactions between the various varieties of English. This area has been the subject of extensive research and professional development, and educational programs have been developed in Western Australia to address these sorts of miscommunication in the classroom (eg Malcolm et al., 1999; Malcolm & Königsberg, 2007; Malcolm & Koscieleck, 1997; Malcolm & Rochecoute, 2000). Nevertheless, there are many situations where these programs could be useful but where they are not being run.

The name *Kriol* comes from the term *creole* and covers various forms of a language that has elements of both English and Aboriginal languages. Kriol is often difficult or impossible for speakers of Standard English to understand. These forms of language have grown out of the *pidgin* languages that were used in earlier European–Aboriginal interactions for limited purposes such as trade or work on cattle stations. Each group continued to speak its own language in all other contexts, but relied on the pidgin for communication with members of the other group in those limited work (business) contexts.

Pidgins are very limited communication systems used in limited situations. When, however, a generation of children begins to use a pidgin as their first or main language then the language expands.
to be able to handle more functions across the whole of life. An expanded language like this is called a creole and in Western Australia various such creoles go under the name Kriol. Kriol is a genuine language, which draws much of its grammar from Indigenous languages and many of its words from English. Like Aboriginal English, however, similarities between Kriol and Standard Australian English are very superficial and could easily mislead people. Kriol itself has an underlying Aboriginal world view and invests its words and grammar with distinctively Aboriginal meanings.

People who use a pidgin when they need to communicate between groups for some sort of ‘business’ purpose, still have their own languages for most day to day purposes at home and in their community. In most cases the former pidgins used in different parts of the State have developed into Kriol or different forms of Aboriginal English as the traditional Aboriginal languages have gone out of use. Pidgins are not so relevant for a language policy since they are by definition not the main language of the people who use them. The language policy should focus attention on the main languages used by people for day to day communication in their community.

It is very difficult to work out how many people use Aboriginal English and/or Kriol. Aboriginal English and Kriol are two languages specifically listed in the census data, but many speakers of these languages would not necessarily recognise that this is what they speak. Many of them would most likely list themselves as speaking English—because they are contrasting with traditional Aboriginal languages—without even realising that their language is very different from the English spoken by non-Aboriginal people.

An Aboriginal languages policy, however, needs to recognise the widespread use of these two distinctive Aboriginal languages for communication, alongside traditional Aboriginal languages. It is likely that most people who say they speak only English are actually speaking a form of language very different from the Standard Australian English valued and used by the government, education, justice and health systems.

Furthermore, McConvell (1985) and Haviland (1982) have argued that Aboriginal people are traditionally multilingual; that is they traditionally speak more than one language. Speakers switch from language to language to express social meaning such as their relationships with one another and with the land where interaction is taking place. These ‘code-switches’ may also occur using Kriol and Aboriginal English. Thus the addition of Aboriginal English or Kriol or even Standard English to a speaker’s range of languages need not replace traditional languages but can supplement them. For this to happen it is important that the traditional languages are still valued and respected in the wider society. The danger to traditional languages comes if speakers switch from being multilingual in both traditional languages and English to being monolingual in English.

Discussion

Would Aboriginal people prefer to add Standard English to the range of languages they speak rather than switching to English at the expense of their other languages?

What role should Kriol and Aboriginal English have alongside traditional Aboriginal languages in a Western Australian Aboriginal Languages Policy?

The varying status of traditional Aboriginal languages

A language policy also needs to recognise how different the status of Aboriginal languages is in different communities. Each situation calls for a different type of program, so that, for instance, what is required where everyone in the community still uses the language will have no relevance in a community where everyone speaks English and they are trying to reclaim knowledge of the language.
from old sources or possibly from a few very old speakers. Even in a single community there could be two or more different languages, with each very different in the way it is used and in terms of who knows it. This points to the need for local development and control of language programs because there is no general pattern that applies everywhere.

One useful classification of what we might call *language situations*, originally developed for the Australian Indigenous Languages Framework, is presented here (Figure 1) as adapted by McKay in his national review of Indigenous language maintenance needs and activities, *The Land Still Speaks* (McKay, 1996 p. 19). This terminology has also been adopted by the *National Indigenous Languages Survey Report 2005* (Department of Communications Information Technology and the Arts, 2005 p. 25). This classification system helps us to be clear about what applies to each language in a given community or region.

![Figure 1 Language Maintenance Terminology after AILF](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Australian Indigenous Language Framework (AILF) Categories</strong></th>
<th><strong>Defining Characteristics</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language Maintenance (First Language Maintenance)</td>
<td><em>all generations full speakers</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Revival (3 sub-categories—all involve children learning the language of their <strong>own</strong> heritage):</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>generation of (older) speakers left—children likely good passive knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Renewal</td>
<td>oral tradition but no full speakers—children likely little or no passive knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Reclamation</td>
<td>no speakers or partial speakers—relying on historical sources to provide knowledge of the language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Awareness</td>
<td>non-speakers learning about the languages where it is not possible to learn and use the language—vestiges only, documentation poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Learning (Second Language Learning)</td>
<td>non-speakers learning as L2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Indigenous languages and policy in Australia**

The general picture of European–Aboriginal relations across Australia since colonization is described in the overview of the Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in custody as the ‘deliberate and systematic disempowerment of Aboriginal people starting with dispossession from their land and proceeding to almost every aspect of their life’ (Johnston, 1991 p. 8). This report goes on to say that
The consequence of this history is the partial destruction of Aboriginal culture and a large part of the Aboriginal population and also disadvantage and inequality of Aboriginal people in all the areas of social life where comparison is possible between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. (Johnston, 1991 p. 11)

Queensland Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson wrote in 2007 (Pearson, 2007)

Intergenerational transmission of a large number of Australia’s languages is declining or has ceased. This is not the result of Aboriginal Australians’ choice to abandon our culture.

As almost everything else in our communities, it is a result of our desperate disadvantage. Social dysfunction disables cultural and linguistic transmission.

In relation to early positions on education Quentin Beresford writes:

In broad terms, Australian governments up until the 1960s held that Aboriginal children should be offered only minimal schooling consistent with the perceptions about the limitations inherent in their race and their expected station in life at the lowest rungs of white society. In States with large Aboriginal populations, this limited provision was greatly affected by policies which sought to separate Indigenous people from social contact with whites.

In shaping provision for Aboriginal education, governments responded to three forces: theories of racial inferiority, which were widely used to justify limited provision of education; community views on the need for segregation of Aboriginal people away from whites, which underpinned the inadequacy of educational provision; and the official policy of assimilation of Aboriginal people within the broader Australian community, which governed the type of instruction offered to children. (Beresford, 2003a p. 43)

In another chapter Beresford writes of the language of education:

Alienation from school is often a result of a clash of cultures. In traditionally oriented communities, for example, alienation is caused when the language of instruction is foreign to students and when their own language is not valued in the classroom. In other cases, problems of alienation arise when teachers denigrate Indigenous ways of using English. (Beresford, 2003b p. 34)

With specific relation to language, a House of Representatives report on Aboriginal language maintenance summarized the situation across Australia in these terms:

Apart from some very occasional exceptions where Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander [ATSI] languages were recognised, languages recorded or some missions taught in language, official attitudes to ATSI languages since European settlement were those of repression. (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, 1992 p. 75)

A major break with these attitudes was the Australian Government’s introduction of bilingual education programs using Aboriginal languages in schools in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory in 1973, under the leadership of Education Minister Kim Beazley.

The National Policy on Languages (Lo Bianco, 1987) was adopted by Federal Cabinet in June 1987 (Lo Bianco & Rhydwen, 2001) and was a significant turning point in attitudes towards Aboriginal languages across Australia because it provided the first explicit national recognition of the importance of Indigenous languages, creoles and Aboriginal English. This policy, in fact, gave rise to some language policy work in various states. Among the General Principles underlying the National Policy on Languages are the following:
• Action taken as a result of the national languages policy will emphasize the need for social and national cohesion in Australia whilst simultaneously recognising the diversity of the society and the inherent benefits of this diversity. Australia has adopted policies of multiculturalism i.e. equity for all community groups and cultural diversity within national cohesion and unity.

• The language pluralism of Australia is regarded as a valuable national resource enhancing and enriching cultural and intellectual life and as a valuable economic resource in its potential for use in international trade.

• Aboriginal languages have an ancient history on this continent. Aboriginal languages are the product of the unique cultural, historical and environmental identification of the Aboriginal people. Aboriginal languages have been used to define and interpret the Australian landscape and environment and many of these languages remain viable forms of communication. In addition, they are repositories of cultural values, information on socio-cultural organisation and law.

As Australia approaches the bicentenary of European settlement, it becomes a national obligation of great importance to recognize, value and take action to enhance the survival of Aboriginal languages and promote an appreciation and an awareness of them among non-Aborigines. Aboriginal languages are also important in strictly linguistic terms in the insight they provide into the nature of human language in general. (Lo Bianco, 1987 pp. 6–7)

The Policy goes on to say:

This policy acknowledges and affirms that Aboriginal languages are the indigenous languages of Australia. The rights to use of these languages and to their acceptance and respect as well as the right of Aboriginal Australians who do not speak English to obtain information about and access to government services in their own languages is explicitly declared. This policy also advocates and declares that extensive and widespread awareness of the uniqueness of Aboriginal languages is warranted. Kriol and Torres Strait Creole, though not indigenous languages, express identity in similar ways and tend to be regarded by their speakers as markers of group membership.

Since schooling is compulsory, children of non-English-speaking Aboriginal background are entitled to expect the positive affirmation of their linguistic and cultural background, and effective education will require this. (Lo Bianco, 1987 p. 73)

And finally in the summary section the Policy states:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island languages, as well as creoles and pidgins used by them, are acknowledged to be legitimate forms of communication, appropriate for communicating information about government services and programs. In addition, the very poor level of awareness of such languages and their stigmatisation and denigration by non-Aborigines is deplored. (Lo Bianco, 1987 p. 193)

We have quoted at some length from the National Policy on Languages because it is the foundation of much of what has followed in terms of language policy around Australia since that time, even though as Commonwealth policy it has been superseded by a number of subsequent developments.

Perhaps the major lasting legacy of the National Policy on Languages is the establishment and funding of Regional Aboriginal Language Centres in various parts of the country, and the continuing funding of language projects, now administered through the Maintenance of Indigenous Languages and Records (MILR) Program. McConvell and Thieberger claim in their State of the Environment report State of Indigenous Languages in Australia 2001:

14. Particularly significant and productive has been the establishment of Regional Aboriginal Language Centres and language management committees under Indigenous control from the
mid-1980s onwards; there are few parallels to this development elsewhere in the world. (McConvell & Thieberger, 2001 §2.2)

The objectives of the MILR Program are to

- Support the maintenance of Indigenous languages
- Increase the use of Indigenous languages in a range of fields and media, including greater Indigenous community engagement
- Increase public appreciation of Indigenous languages
- Support the sustainable development of community organisations (MILR Program Information and Guidelines 2007–2008: 4)

The network of Regional Aboriginal Language Centres affiliated with FATSIL has been a great resource for Aboriginal languages in Western Australia, focusing on traditional languages. These centres provide a means for Aboriginal people in each region to make decisions about and to undertake work in support of the languages of their region. Over the years they have done a great deal of work in research, collecting information, running language programs, publishing materials, all with the aim of strengthening and promoting languages. (For list of language centres see Attachment 3.)

The focus of the National Policy on Languages was to support multilingualism in a ‘two way’ relationship with English and to see languages, including Indigenous languages, as a valuable community resource. Some continuing funding has flowed through for such purposes at local level. The ‘main game’ in language policy, however, narrowed progressively over the years, first to focusing on languages in education and on the economic benefits of learning the languages of Australia’s major Asian trading partners and then to focusing on the English literacy levels of migrant and Indigenous children as a ‘problem’ for their participation in the mainstream society. This English-centred orientation has lost sight to a large degree of the value of language diversity and it has also lost sight of the necessity of building on the first language rather than rejecting the first language, if educational success is to be achieved. Some aspects of the broader policy have continued to be implemented.

Furthermore, there has been continuing funding and support for certain language services such as broadcasting and interpreting services in Indigenous and other languages; but these areas of recognising language have become less important in policy thinking than a focus on English as the national language and as a means of participation in the wider society. This is exemplified in the weight placed on English literacy (under the title ‘literacy’) in education and on the introduction of an English test for citizenship.

The Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision discussed the need for adequate indicators of Indigenous Disadvantage in the area of culture, that would include language. In relation to their 2002, 2003 consultations they stated:

No single indicator could adequately reflect the place of culture in the lives of Indigenous people. Culture was so important that it pervaded every aspect of the lives of Indigenous people, and where there was breakdown in culture, (for example, loss of traditional ways or language) disadvantage was likely to be greater. (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2007 p. 2.14)

In relation to their 2006 consultations they noted why there is as yet no such indicator:

A language indicator attracted widespread support. Indigenous language is fundamentally linked with Indigenous culture and law, and all are intrinsically linked with Indigenous well-being. However, there was no clear consensus about the form of a language indicator. (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2007 p. 2.17)
Discussion
What are the practical implications of a policy emphasis on developing strong English literacy skills? Can we build on the strengths of this focus and avoid the dangers?

Indigenous languages and education
The education of Indigenous people, particularly children, has been a matter of great concern to governments because of the fact that levels of achievement of Indigenous children are not as high as those of non-Indigenous children on standard tests.

A major emphasis of government at all levels is on the level of achievement in English. English literacy is seen as essential for high achievement in education programs and as essential for effective employment.

The role of Aboriginal languages needs to be re-examined in this context, focusing on some key aspects:
- recognising and using the child’s first or home language
- the role of the community in supporting or maintaining traditional languages and culture
- how to develop adequate skills in Standard Australian English

At a broad level, the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) suggests that one problem is that Indigenous education is ‘bolted on’ rather than ‘built in’ to mainstream effort.

Gains in educational outcomes achieved by Indigenous students over recent decades are largely attributed to Indigenous specific intervention programs that supplement mainstream effort … to meet the specific learning needs of students. While some of these programs have been highly successful, only a small proportion of the total population of Indigenous students is able to access them.

... Indigenous education has come to be seen as peripheral rather than integral to core business. … the funding of Indigenous education through special programs has led to dependence on short-term solutions. (MCEETYA, 2006 p. 16)

We could argue, however, that Indigenous specific programs are unavoidable if we are going to adequately address the significant language and culture differences between Indigenous children and their standard-English-speaking peers. The implications of these differences in language and culture encompass not only the forms of language but also patterns of interaction (‘ways of speaking’), learning processes and underlying patterns of thought.

The Ministerial Council highlights the importance of accepting the very different language background of Indigenous students:

The home language, whether an Indigenous language or a contact language like Aboriginal English, not only carries the culture of Indigenous students but also encapsulates their identity. For schools to put standard Australian English in an oppositional relationship to the home language, for example, by making it the only recognised vehicle of oral communication in schools, will be to invite resistance, whether active or passive, on the part of Indigenous students. (MCEETYA, 2006 p. 17)

That said, the only recommendation by the Council (2.2) that explicitly mentions Indigenous languages (including Aboriginal English) is at the early childhood level (for children 0–5 years) and
this recommends only respect for, not teaching of, these languages—in other words symbolic rather than practical respect. Ministers commit to make progress towards:

Developing and fully implementing by 2012 educational programs for Indigenous children that respect and value Indigenous cultures, languages (including Aboriginal English) and contexts, explicitly teach standard Australian English and prepare children for schooling. (MCEETYA, 2006 p. 20)

Respecting and valuing Indigenous cultures and languages has practical implications if it is to be effective. Education of Indigenous children risks being ineffective if it does not start where the child is. In other words the child’s first language—whether a traditional Aboriginal language, Kriol or Aboriginal English—is the best medium for schooling. Standard Australian English should be taught as a second language (for students whose first language is a traditional language or Kriol) or as a second dialect (for students whose first language is Aboriginal English).

Following this principle, the Northern Territory ran bilingual education programs in a number of Aboriginal schools from 1973 to 1998. In these programs children’s early learning was by medium of their first language, they first acquired literacy in their own language and they learned English as a second language. Various program models were followed (Devlin, 2007 pp. 5–13). In 1998 the Territory’s bilingual program was phased out in favour redirecting funding to support English programs, but in 2005 the Northern Territory Government moved to reinstate bilingual or “two-way” education because it recognised that bilingual education using the children’s first language is more effective than monolingual education in a second or foreign language (ie English) for children whose first language is not English.

In fact the Collins review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory had shown in 1999 that evaluation data on outcomes in English in bilingual schools “clearly shows positive outcomes compared with benchmark non-bilingual schools” (Collins, 1999 p. 122). Devlin (2007 pp. 20–26) summarises the limited available research evidence on bilingual education programs in Northern Territory Aboriginal community schools. This research also tends to support the relative success of these programs. The rest of Devlin’s paper also summarises some relevant international research, which further supports the value of having students commence their formal education through the medium of their first language.

MCEETYA Recommendation 2.2 quoted above also commits ministers to educational programs that respect and value Indigenous contexts. This encompasses not just language and culture but also home, family and community and the natural environment that is so important within Aboriginal culture and lifestyle. Significant benefits of the Northern Territory bilingual programs in Aboriginal community schools included the training and employment of a wider range of Aboriginal people in the programs and the establishment of closer links between the school and the community (Collins, 1999 pp. 123–124; Gale, 1990 pp. 34–59; McKay, 1996 pp. 113–117). In other words, using the first language of the children in the school led to a genuine respect and valuing of the wider Aboriginal community context in the form of giving it an important place within the school. Otherwise the risk is that the school is simply an institution that finds it difficult to relate to the community and vice versa.

The challenge of developing stronger skills in Standard English remains. It is important to recognise however, that English can be most successfully developed on a foundation of strong first language skills and a good start to formal education. Both of these will be more successful if the children’s first language or dialect is used. People who speak only English often fear that English learning will be compromised if prior time and attention is devoted to the child’s first language. Research, however, shows exactly the opposite. Giving priority to the development of a child’s first language and then
teaching English as a second language enhances learning of both languages (Department of Communications Information Technology and the Arts, 2005 pp. 36–37).

**Discussion**

Does MCEETYA recommendation 2.2 above committing ministers to ‘educational programs for Indigenous children [ages 0–5] that respect and value Indigenous cultures, languages (including Aboriginal English) and contexts, explicitly teach standard Australian English and prepare children for schooling’ go far enough?

The *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy* was endorsed by Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments with effect from the beginning of 1990 and is published by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. It has twenty-one long-term goals. Two of these deal explicitly with Indigenous languages and two more deal with wider issues of Indigenous culture, which could include language:

2. To increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people employed as educational administrators, teachers, curriculum advisers, teachers assistants, home-school liaison officers and other education workers, including community people engaged in teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, history and contemporary society, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.

17. To develop programs to support the maintenance and continued use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages.

20. To enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at all levels of education to have an appreciation of their history, cultures and identity.

21. To provide all Australians students with an understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditional and contemporary cultures. (http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/indigenous_education/policy_issues_reviews/national_goals_for_indigenous_education.htm)

**Discussion**

How does an Aboriginal languages policy need to relate to education policy—government and non-government?

Does literacy in Aboriginal languages have a role in education for those who speak those languages?

**Aboriginal languages and policy in Western Australia**

General policy provisions and official actions in Western Australia were similar to those applying in other parts of Australia for most of the almost two centuries of European settlement.

Outlines of early Western Australian policy and programs relevant to Aboriginal language maintenance are given by Thieberger (1988; 1991), on which the following is based.

The earliest period, extending well into the twentieth century, was the era of ‘protection’, during which Aboriginal people were subject to the control of the Chief Protector, who was responsible for Aboriginal children.
Thieberger then highlights three major features that have had a negative impact on the ability of Aboriginal people in Western Australia to continue using their languages:

Aboriginal language maintenance is likely to have been affected by Government policy in three areas: the state's removal of Aboriginal children from their families; monolingual schooling; and the continued relocation of Aboriginal people away from their traditional country. (Thieberger, 1991 p. 5)

During the 1970s and 1980s Aboriginal people around Australia, including in Western Australia engaged in what became known as the outstation or homelands movement. This involved people leaving towns and larger settlements and returning to live in smaller extended family groupings on their traditional lands, including some living spaces they were able to have excised from pastoral leases and some stations purchased by Aboriginal communities. Significant in the motivation for the homelands movement was the strong ties that traditionally link people and their languages with their land. One of the effects of this movement was a resurgence of the use of traditional languages and renewed practice of Aboriginal culture. (Thieberger, 1988 pp. 77, 81–82)

At this time a number of homeland centres had independent community schools supported by commonwealth funding because they were not eligible for schools to be established under the criteria applied by the WA Education Department. (Thieberger, 1988 pp. 82–83)

Thieberger goes on to say (Thieberger, 1991 p. 7) that the 1984 Beazley Inquiry into education in Western Australia 'recommended bilingual education for Aboriginal children where it was required, and ESL teaching for students whose first language is Creole'. He also notes that in 1988 a working party developed policy recommendations. This was the report Languages for Western Australians (Kaldor & Malcolm, 1988), which primarily addressed the teaching of languages other than English, including a chapter on Aboriginal languages (pp. 53–66).

In the education arena the next major step was the Education Department's LOTE 2000 Strategy, which was designed to make a language other than English available to all students in years 3 to 10 in Western Australian Schools. Aboriginal languages were included in the list of Languages Other Than English to be made available under this Strategy and in fact a significant number of Aboriginal language programs have been developed and offered in a wide range of schools since that time.

The WA Department of Education and Training's Aboriginal Education and Training Operational Plan 2005–2008 includes programs to learn and learn about Indigenous languages in Schools Sector Priority 8 'Expanding culturally inclusive curriculum', though, in line with national emphases, Priority 1 is 'Improving Indigenous literacy' [in English not in Indigenous languages]. Other important priority areas which should apply to a languages policy are Priority 6 'Increasing the involvement of Indigenous parent/community members in educational decision making' and Priority 7 'Increasing professional development for staff involved in Indigenous education'. (Department of Education and Training, nd)

Post-compulsory or senior secondary schooling has also embraced Aboriginal languages. The WA Curriculum Council has developed an Aboriginal Languages of Western Australia course of studies in the Western Australian Certificate of Education for years 11 and 12 and this is being implemented for the first time in Geraldton Senior High School in 2008 (Aileen Hawkes p.c. 25 February 2008). The challenge for the designers (and for the implementors) of this course of study was to accommodate the huge range of different language situations around the state. These range from situations where a community still uses a traditional Aboriginal language for day to day communication, through communities where some of the older people regularly use the language but the younger generations do not, to communities where no-one still uses the language, though they might still feel a strong
traditional link with it (as ‘owners’). Furthermore there are many communities where many different languages are represented in one or more of these forms.

A further significant policy decision is the Department of Education and Training’s adoption of the *ABC of Two-Way Literacy Program* in 1998. ABC is intended to stand for: A—Acceptance of Aboriginal English; B—Bridging to Standard Australian English; C—Cultivating Aboriginal ways of approaching experience and knowledge (Malcolm & Königsberg, 2007 p. 284). In other words the foundation of this program is that it takes the Aboriginal students’ own language backgrounds as a starting point and it explicitly investigates their language and conceptual frameworks and helps members of both cultures/languages to learn from comparison with Standard English.

**Discussion**

Does bilingual education using a traditional Aboriginal language have a role in any communities in Western Australia?

Should bilingual education using Kriol and bi-dialectal education using Aboriginal English be considered for further implementation in relevant communities?

How should the training and professional development of teachers address issues of Aboriginal languages, including Kriol and Aboriginal English?

**Language services and other language policy issues in Western Australia**

The WA Government in 2001 adopted a *Statement of Commitment to a New and Just Relationship between the Government of Western Australia and Aboriginal Western Australians*, which recognizes ‘the need to address issues arising from past acts of displacement’ and commits to a whole-of-government approach to doing this in partnership with Aboriginal people.

Out of this Statement of Commitment grew the document *Engaging with Aboriginal Western Australians* which recognises the needs of Indigenous language speakers arising from the large number of languages, and the extensive movements of speakers, often forced (p. 15). The document goes on to recognize the validity of Kriol and Aboriginal English.

Kimberley Kriol is a well-known example of a common language used by many people in the Kimberley region. In addition to northern Kriols, Aboriginal English is the most significant dialect of Australian English. ‘Aboriginal English’ is a complete language, incorporating elements of Standard Australian English and many Aboriginal languages spoken all over Western Australia, including in the Perth metropolitan area.

The document further outlines some of the history of discrimination and the relatively late realization that the issues arising from this can only be addressed if Aboriginal people themselves are consulted and involved (pp. 17 ff) leading to a series of principles including the principle that ‘Aboriginal people have the right to access services in a way that does not diminish or threaten their cultural rights, expectations or norms’ (p.21). The document also recognizes that ‘In some settings, use of Aboriginal languages including interpreters may be required to adequately define terms, particularly if the terminology used is of a technical or complex nature’ (p. 29) and it further seems to recognize that there may be some difference in the cultural, interactional expectations or conventions of Aboriginal people (‘ways of speaking’), when it advises ‘Don’t expect an immediate answer to questions’ (p. 29).

**Discussion**

What are the settings where Aboriginal languages are likely to be required?

Are these the same settings for traditional Aboriginal languages, Kriol and Aboriginal English?
The Western Australian Government Language Services Policy was launched in July 2000. It includes the following statements designed to commit agencies to effective communication practices with clients, including speakers of Indigenous languages. Later sections of the document give more detailed guidelines on how to implement these strategies, including by providing advice through the Department of Indigenous Affairs regarding the availability of qualified Interpreters and Translators in Indigenous languages. Individual departments have adopted their own specific Language Services Policies in response to this general policy (e.g., Department of the Attorney General and Department of Corrective Services Language Services Policy and Practical Guidelines 2002).

Policy Statement
The Western Australian Government recognises that there are a significant number of people whose level of English is a barrier to accessing government services and communicating with agency officers.

This policy is designed to enable clients to access services fairly and equitably and to ensure that service delivery is responsive to clients' needs and of a high quality.

Western Australian Government agencies throughout the State will wherever possible:

- work with qualified interpreters and translators to facilitate communication with persons unable to satisfactorily communicate in English;
- consult with client groups and adopt a planned approach to the production and dissemination of information regarding services and policies in English and other languages, including indigenous languages and Australian Sign Language (Auslan);
- plan for language services by incorporating interpreting, translating and multilingual information needs into agency budgeting, human resources and client service program management; and
- make maximum use of the cultural and linguistic knowledge and skills of employees in the development and implementation of language services planning.

Policy Aim
Western Australian Government agencies will wherever possible:

- establish coordinated measures that address the communication difficulties of clients and facilitate equitable access to programs, services and information;
- introduce strategies such as working with qualified interpreters and translators to maximise the social and economic benefits of Western Australia’s cultural diversity;
- ensure the efficient provision of adequate language services to assist people who require assistance in English including speakers of indigenous languages and people who are deaf, to access the services provided by the public sector; and
- plan their language services in consultation with the appropriate target groups. (Office of Multicultural Interests, nd p. 6)

In line with these policy aims, the Kimberley Interpreting Service commenced in 2000 with funding from the Western Australian Department of Training. Later the Department of Indigenous Affairs, Department of Health and Department of Justice also provided funding and, in 2004, eight WA Government departments committed to funding the service for three years (Kimberley Interpreting Service, 2004 p. 10). The Kimberley Interpreting Service provides accredited interpreters to help in situations where speakers of Aboriginal languages need to communicate with others who don't speak their language, especially in times of stress such as in the court or hospital situation.
Discussion
Do Regional Indigenous Language Centres have a role in a Western Australian Aboriginal Languages Policy?

Are there other important bodies to be considered here?

Is the current interpreting service provided by Kimberley Interpreting Service and other language centres sufficient to meet existing need and demand across Western Australia?

How should government and non-government service providers, including translating and interpreting services, deal effectively with Kriol and Aboriginal English?

What role does professional development of service providers play in raising awareness of Aboriginal language and communication issues and of their social justice implications?

Placenameing
Western Australia decided early on to use names of Aboriginal origin where possible to avoid duplication with names used elsewhere in Australia, following a 1904 agreement between the states and the commonwealth to avoid such duplication. The practice of ‘dual naming’ (where an Indigenous name is paired with a non-Indigenous name eg Uluru/Ayers Rock) was pioneered in the Northern Territory and has already been adopted in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia (Hodges, 2007 pp. 386, 393–397) The use of Aboriginal names is recommended by the WA Aboriginal Tourism Strategy (p. 11) as a ‘means of conveying awareness of Aboriginal culture to the public’. The importance of this awareness raising function of using Aboriginal placenames should not be underestimated in the reconciliation agenda.

An Aboriginal Languages Policy for Western Australia
In Appendix 1 we provide a description of Indigenous languages policies and provisions in various states and territories of Australia as well as in some relatively comparable overseas countries. We will refer to relevant points in the discussion that follows.

Different language settings
In developing a proposal for an Aboriginal Languages Policy for Western Australia, we can draw on many of the suggestions of other areas both in Australia and overseas. Nevertheless the situation in Western Australia is different from a number of these other settings, not least in the diversity of language situations that are applicable. See the classification of language situations set out in Figure 1 above (page 9).

For instance a number of the Aboriginal languages in Western Australia are much stronger than any New South Wales Aboriginal language, while other WA languages are endangered or no longer used, just like those in NSW, so there will need to be a broader focus to an Aboriginal languages policy for WA than for NSW.

Western Australia also has a situation that is very different from New Zealand in a number of ways. For instance New Zealand is dealing with just one indigenous language, Maori (admittedly with a number of regional dialects), while WA has a large number of distinct Aboriginal languages. Maori thus has a much larger number of speakers than any WA Aboriginal language. Recognition for the Maori language was also included in the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840 and this gives it a legal status that has no parallel anywhere in Australia.

In both New Zealand and Canada indigenous languages have been designated as official languages. In New Zealand this follows from the Treaty of Waitangi and in Canada it is in line with the fact that the
country as a whole has two official languages, French and English. Furthermore in each jurisdiction (New Zealand and the three relevant provinces in Canada) the number of indigenous languages is relatively limited and the languages are, in the main, still in regular use. It would probably be meaningless to make all Aboriginal languages of Western Australia official languages and it would not be appropriate to single out a small number for special treatment as official languages. Recognition and respect for the languages does not depend on their being designated official languages. (See Appendix 1.) A danger of the ‘official language’ approach could be that the focus might move from effective community language programs to rights, official documents and complaints (compare McKay, 1996 p. 184 in relation to the Yukon and the Northwest Territories).

Both language recognition and communication needs—language and life
An Aboriginal languages policy that really deals with the interests of all Aboriginal people in Western Australia would have to pay attention not only to the recognition, maintenance and revival of traditional Aboriginal languages but also to recognition and use of more recent Aboriginal languages such as Kriol and Aboriginal English, since these are the main languages of more than three quarters of the state’s Indigenous population. At the same time the policy would need to be able to cater for the very different linguistic circumstances of different people and different communities.

Aboriginal languages, including Kriol and Aboriginal English, are integral to the life and culture of the people who speak them and therefore an Aboriginal Languages Policy will have to encompass the whole of life in some way. This also means that the whole of government is involved, as well as other agencies and institutions in the community. The whole of government approach was emphasised in the New South Wales Aboriginal Language Policy. Furthermore McKay reported (McKay, 1996 p. 179) that in the Yukon in the 1990s the Aboriginal Languages Services Branch was strategically placed within the Executive Council Office, thus providing a high priority for aboriginal languages and the ability to influence other government departments while retaining its autonomy.

This ‘whole of life’ approach to language policy, which focuses on communication needs as well as on recognition and identity is characteristic of the Australian Government’s 1987 National Policy on Languages (Lo Bianco, 1987), which did not just focus on the need to recognise immigrant and Indigenous languages but addressed the communication and education needs of the various language speaking groups in Australian society.

‘Two way’ approach
A ‘two way’ approach to an Aboriginal Languages Policy is essential for the policy to achieve its goals. Recognition, respect, learning and accommodation will be required from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal members of the community towards each other’s languages and cultures. Those in the more powerful position will need to accommodate more. The importance of a ‘two-way’ approach is emphasised by the findings of Nancy Hornberger when she compared indigenous languages programs in Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia (See Appendix 1). A local ‘grass-roots’ approach was important.

No Aboriginal Languages Policy can be effective if it is not drawn up and implemented with the close involvement of the Aboriginal people and Aboriginal communities themselves.

Language and land
One of the distinctive aspects of Aboriginal languages is their links with the land in Aboriginal culture (Rumsey, 1993). This means that links with land can sometimes be more important than numbers of speakers for Aboriginal people, when choosing which languages to use or promote (McKay, 2007 p. 174). This is recognised in the New South Wales Aboriginal Language Policy in a number of objectives where the rights of traditional owners of the country where particular language activities are being carried out are recognised (NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs, 2004 pp. 7–9).
Proposed goals
The proposed principal goals of an Aboriginal Languages Policy for Western Australia could be as follows, adapting the five goals of the New Zealand Maori Language Strategy (Te Puni Kokiri & Te Taura Whiri i Te Reo Maori, 2003 p. 7) in the light of the priorities recommended by the 2002 review of the status of Indigenous languages in South Australia and the goals in the four focus areas of the New South Wales Aboriginal Languages Policy (NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs, 2004 pp. 5–6):

- Strengthening recognition of and respect for Aboriginal languages—traditional languages and Kriol and Aboriginal English;
- Strengthening and reviving language skills and language use where traditional languages are still available to the community;
- Strengthening the education of Aboriginal students of all ages through the recognition and use of the home Aboriginal language—traditional Aboriginal languages, Kriol or Aboriginal English;
- Strengthening the role of members of Aboriginal communities in providing leadership in matters concerning their languages and their interaction with other sections of the community; and
- Strengthening the effectiveness of government service provision—particularly in education, health, justice and social services by understanding and using the relevant Aboriginal languages—traditional Aboriginal languages, Kriol or Aboriginal English—as and when required to ensure that clients can achieve ‘substantive equality’ of access to services that they are entitled as citizens to receive.

These goals would need to be achieved through local and regional programs in a range of settings including in:

- Aboriginal communities
- the education system
- the justice system, including correctional services, courts and the police
- the health system
- the social service system, and
- the broader community.

Objectives under each of the proposed goals are outlined below, with some overlap between the goals.

Strengthening recognition of and respect for Aboriginal languages—traditional languages and Kriol and Aboriginal English.
This goal includes a wide range of possible policy objectives that involve both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and organizations and it encompasses traditional Aboriginal languages, Kriol and Aboriginal English.

- Within Aboriginal communities a major focus should be on increasing the use of traditional languages, whether through bilingual education or language maintenance or appropriate language revival programs, depending on the language situation of the community.
- Where Aboriginal English and/or Kriol are used in an Aboriginal community or group, everyone should be encouraged to recognise these as valid forms of communication with their own patterns and their own legitimacy. Service providers need to provide for delivery of services in these languages in such situations.
- Throughout the State it is important to educate non-Aboriginal people about Aboriginal languages—including traditional languages, Kriol and Aboriginal English—in such a way as to help them develop respect for these languages and to help them recognise in practical ways that these languages are valid when they deal with Aboriginal people. This education will need to be included in education programs at all levels. Professional development about
Aboriginal languages should be developed and provided for service providers and other relevant workers across the State.

- The various naming authorities at state and local government levels should encourage the use of appropriate Aboriginal place names for local geographic features in consultation with the relevant traditional land-owning Aboriginal group. This will give distinctive character to place names in Western Australia as well as recognising the status of Aboriginal people as the original land owners.
- Tourist information could include material on local language and culture.

**Strengthening and reviving language skills and language use where traditional languages are still available to the community.**

This goal focuses on the traditional Aboriginal languages. How this objective is met will vary from community to community depending on the type of language situation in the community.

- Where traditional languages are used by all generations the focus should be on bilingual education, on encouraging the use of language in a range of circumstances in the community and the home. It is important to help the different generations to spend a lot of time together using language and this may involve such things as bringing elders and adult speakers into the school for language activities, as well as mounting other language activities in the community. Language broadcasting can be useful in a language maintenance situation.
- In a language revitalization or language renewal situation, when there is an older generation of language speakers but the children do not actively use the language a major focus should be on language nests and similar activities designed to help the younger children to develop language skills by interacting in the languages with the people who do speak the language.
- Where there are no speakers of the traditional Aboriginal language in the community but where historical sources provide some knowledge of the language, reclamation programs should be undertaken to the extent possible to give the community access to this part of its heritage.
- It is important that language maintenance and revival activities be carried out not only in the school but also in the community and the family.
- Regional Language Centres should be catalysts and centres for language maintenance, revitalization and renewal activities.
- In all cases programs to document and record language and language use should be developed and the resulting documentation should be archived effectively in more than one location, in consultation with the relevant Aboriginal community. All language documentation should be lodged with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra, as well as locally.

**Strengthening the education of Aboriginal students of all ages through the recognition and use of the home Aboriginal language—traditional Aboriginal languages, Kriol or Aboriginal English**

A significant goal of education for all Aboriginal students is mastery of Standard Australian English to the degree necessary to participate in education effectively. This will be most successful when the education system recognises, appreciates and builds on the student’s first language—whether a traditional Aboriginal language, Kriol or Aboriginal English. Moving directly to a Standard-English-only education program will limit the effectiveness of the program for any student whose first language is not Standard English. In addition a child’s education in a second language or dialect is more effective if they are confident in their first language and feel that it is valued. Standard Australian English must be treated as an additional language or dialect that the student is learning, not as a replacement language or dialect.

In the light of this it is important to offer appropriate language programs in schools depending on the language situation of the community.
• Where traditional Aboriginal languages or Kriol are spoken by school age children Aboriginal language programs and bilingual education programs should be offered, with English as a second language made available for adult speakers of Aboriginal languages.
• Where Aboriginal English is spoken, English as a Second Dialect (ESD) programs should be offered.
• Initial literacy should be taught in the first language of the child.

Strengthening the role of members of Aboriginal communities in providing leadership in matters concerning their languages and their interaction with other sections of the community. Aboriginal people are the owners of their languages and these languages will only have status in the eyes of Aboriginal communities and the wider non-Aboriginal community if the elders and the wider adult population are permitted to take leadership of language programs in the community.
• Aboriginal elders and other Aboriginal adults should be fully involved in providing language input to teaching programs—where necessary assisted by people with other necessary expertise such as trained teachers and linguists.
• Aboriginal elders and other Aboriginal adults should be trained for language work including teaching or interpreting and translating.
• All language programs in Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal languages should result from full consultation with and involvement of the relevant Aboriginal community.

Strengthening the effectiveness of government service provision—particularly in education, health, justice and social services by understanding and using the relevant Aboriginal languages—traditional Aboriginal languages, Kriol or Aboriginal English—as and when required to ensure that clients can achieve ‘substantive equality’ of access to services that they are entitled as citizens to receive.
Effective service provision can only be delivered if the recipients of the service understand what is going on and are able to make their wishes known effectively. All Aboriginal people who do not speak Standard Australian English are most likely at a significant disadvantage as users of services because of lack of effective understanding and communication. The most effective way to overcome this problem will be for the service providers to understand the needs of Aboriginal clients and to take steps to meet those needs.
• Interpreters and translators should be provided in service encounters where an Aboriginal client does not speak adequate Standard Australian English. These interpreting and translating services may be needed in traditional Aboriginal languages, in Kriol and, possibly, in Aboriginal English.
• Professional development about Aboriginal languages and culture should be provided for public officers and others in health, justice, police, courts, education and social services. This professional development needs to enable such officers to appreciate the difficulties faced by Aboriginal people who do not speak Standard Australian English and to improve the effectiveness of their communication with such Aboriginal people.

Discussion
How appropriate are the proposed goals for a Western Australian Aboriginal Languages Policy?
How appropriate are the proposed objectives under each goal? How practical?
Should additional objectives be included?

Policy Implementation
Since the situations of Aboriginal people are so different in different communities and different parts of the state, one important enabling objective will be to establish the needs of the different Aboriginal
communities in different parts of the State by conducting regular, detailed surveys of language use and language needs, covering traditional Aboriginal languages, Kriol and Aboriginal English.

In the light of the great diversity between regions, the Regional Aboriginal Language Centres in the various regions should be strengthened so that they can function as centres of designing and implementing language activity in each region, due to their local knowledge and their direct connections with the local communities.

The Department of Indigenous Affairs intends to consult widely on the Discussion Paper and then to proceed to drafting a policy, which will be submitted for further consultation prior to adoption.

The Department of Indigenous Affairs will need to set up an appropriate consultation mechanism or group (including Aboriginal community members and relevant experts) to:

- advise on development of the Language Policy document for further consultation and for adoption by key Aboriginal and government stakeholders;
- coordinate regional language use surveys to update awareness of current patterns of language use among Indigenous people in Western Australia and to form the basis of regional language planning;
- develop a Western Australian Aboriginal Languages Strategic Plan;
- coordinate, monitor and oversee the evaluation of subsequent implementation of the Western Australian Aboriginal Languages Strategic Plan;
- provide advice to government on the implementation and further development of the WA Aboriginal languages policy;
- ensure coordination of language activities and the work of the language centres and government and other agencies; and
- present an annual report of activities and developments under the policy.

The ongoing consultation group could include members from FATSIL, the Regional Aboriginal Language Centres, the key government departments Indigenous Affairs, Justice, Health, Education, Local Government, from business, and relevant experts in linguistics and Indigenous language education.

**Discussion**

How appropriate and practical are the proposed steps for drawing up the Western Australian Aboriginal Languages Policy?

Can you suggest any improvements or alternatives?

How can we ensure that all government and other agencies pay proper attention to the Aboriginal languages policy?
References


Office of Multicultural Interests. (nd). Western Australian Government Language Services Policy.


