



## FAQs: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages

### Introduction

State Library of Queensland invites you to celebrate the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages as we raise awareness of the rich diversity of Queensland's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.

State Library receives many queries and questions about languages and has developed the following **Frequently Asked Questions** in response to those of a generic nature. Specialist linguistic inquiries, including translations, should be directed to Tertiary Institutions or Indigenous Language Centres. State Library can provide general information as well as direct clients to items within the collections or to other sources for further research.

Community members, researchers, schools and other groups are encouraged to work with their local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to discover more about language. Traditional Custodians, Cultural Organisations and other community groups may be able to provide language advice or answer specific queries.

The State Library of Queensland acknowledges that language heritage and knowledge always remains with the Traditional Owners, Elders, language custodians and other community members of the respective language Nation. While there is much language material in the public domain, it is important to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members, language custodians and Elders to find out more about language and culture.

**Note:** State Library does not handle queries relating to Native Title – these should be directed to the respective [Native Title Representative Body](#) or the [National Native Title Tribunal](#).

### Q. Where to start?

Queries should be entered on State Library's [Ask Us](#) form to ensure that it is directed to the section of the library that can best assist with your inquiry, or redirect to the appropriate agency.

State Library has a range of resources and online materials on their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander [webpages](#) as well as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages [Blog](#).

## Q. How do I find out more about the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages?

The **United Nations** has a [website](#) for the International Year of Indigenous Languages which includes information about events, resources and other news.

The **Australian Government Department of Communication and the Arts** is playing a lead role in national activities – there is a designated [website](#) which includes ideas and resources as well as an IYIL2019 Action Plan outlining how community members and organisations can be involved during the year.

**AIATSIS** (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies) has a range of events and activities for IYIL2019 listed on their [webpages](#).

Follow State Library on Social Media to find out more about the International year of Indigenous Languages – use the hashtag **#IYIL2019!**

## Q. What Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language materials are in the State Library Collections?

The State Library collections include a diverse and extensive range of language materials, particularly relating to Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. These include published materials, original materials, audio-visual materials as well as online and digital content. Further reference materials may be found in local/regional collections, including [Public Libraries](#), Indigenous Knowledge Centres ([IKCs](#)), [Indigenous Language Centres](#) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, etc.

Collection items can be found using [One Search](#) or the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages [Map](#) which identifies collections items and other resources via map locations and language names.

Additionally, there are over [2,800 items](#) in the collection 'tagged' for language content within the State Library collections using AIATSIS/[AUSTLANG](#) Language Codes; this represents ~385 languages from across Australia.

## Q: How do I find out what language is spoken in my area?

In the first instance, contact the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisation or Indigenous Language Centre. Be aware there may be areas where Native Title and traditional custodian groups have not been identified.

State Library's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages [Map](#) can provide general advice on identification of language(s) spoken in particular areas or regions.

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies has created the AUSTLANG [database](#) that provides information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages which has been assembled from a number of referenced sources. AUSTLANG can be searched with language names (including a range of spellings); placenames and via the AIATSIS Language Codes if you already know them.

## Q: Is there a map of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages?

In addition to the previous answer, there are several language maps available in print or online formats. These resources should be used as a guide as there is no one definitive primary source and it is advisable to consult several sources, including the following:

- AIATSIS has developed what is known as the [Horton Map](#) which is available for purchase as well as an interactive online version.
- First Languages Australia has recently updated [Gambay](#) their online interactive languages map.
- South Australian Museum – [Tindale Map](#).
- AIATSIS through their [AUSTLANG](#) Database also utilise an interactive languages map of Australia.

## Q. How many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are there?

It is believed there were about 250 distinct languages across Australia; however, considering regional variations and dialects this equates to approximately 750 languages and dialects.

Within Queensland, there are about 125 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and dialects.

The Torres Strait Islands have 2 main languages with 6 distinct regional dialects.

## Q. How many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are still spoken?

According to the [2016 ABS Census](#), one in ten Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people reported speaking an Australian Indigenous language at home. A total of 150 Australian Indigenous languages were spoken in homes in 2016, reflecting the linguistic diversity of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population.

In Queensland about 50% of the 125 languages and dialects are spoken in some form [e.g. words or phrases]; with less than 20 considered strong and only 2 classed as 'thriving' – these two languages are the Wik-Mungkan languages on Western Cape York and Kala Lagaw Ya in the Torres Strait. To be considered a 'thriving' language, a language needs to be spoken by minimum of 750 speakers across all generations and spoken 'right through' as a community language daily.

## Q: Why were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages ‘lost’?

Professor Ghil’ad Zuckerman, Chair of Linguistics and Endangered Languages at the University of Adelaide coined the term ‘linguicide’ to describe the loss of traditional languages in Australia. Language and cultural heritage were also victims of the frontier violence, that unspoken part of our shared history.

Following the massacres, the diseases of the early contact history, the protection era and associated policies removed Aboriginal people from their traditional country to missions where language and other culture practices were forbidden. Entire language groups were shattered, or so depleted they could no longer function as units of communication. Survival was dependent on the ability to language shift to the dominant English.

Some words and languages were documented by Missionaries and others with an interest in Aboriginal people; however, it wasn’t until the 1950’s before linguistic study commenced in earnest with audio recordings and grammatical analysis.

Despite this history, there is a resilience among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to preserve their language culture and pass this knowledge on for future generations. Since 2006, the State Library of Queensland has actively worked with community groups, language workers, Traditional Custodians and local language champions. The Indigenous Languages Project has partnered with IKCs, Indigenous Language Centres and other community groups to document, preserve and maintain over 105 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. Community has created new knowledge to share their stories and use their language in innovative ways.

There is still much work to be done. In 2019, the International Year of Indigenous Languages will highlight this loss of language and the urgency to revive languages before they are lost. UNESCO states that “languages play a critical role in the daily lives of people” – the IY2019 statement aims to raise awareness and promote Indigenous languages.

## Q. I am doing a school/university assignment on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, where can I find information?

Contact your local Indigenous Community Organisation in the first instance as well as the Indigenous Language Centre for specific details on local /regional languages.

There are also a number of informative [websites](#) which focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages – a good starting point is the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies ([AIATSIS](#)); particularly [AUSTLANG](#) which is a database for Australian Languages.

State Library has a range of general resources and online materials on their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander [webpages](#) as well as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages [Blog](#).

## Q. What are the main Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages still spoken in Queensland?

Drawing upon the [2016 ABS Census](#) and [AUSTLANG](#) data, the following is a list of the main languages spoken in some form. In likely order of vitality / strength of language, these would include:

- Wik-Mungkan and dialects [Western Cape York]
- Kala Lagaw Ya and dialects [Torres Strait]
- Meriam Mir and dialects [Torres Strait]
- Guugu Yimithirr [Hope Vale / Cooktown]
- Kuku Yalanji [Wujal Wujal / Mossman]
- Kuuk Thaayorre [Edward River]
- Yir Yiront [Kowanyama]
- Djabugay [Kuranda]
- Dyirbal [Tully]
- Olkola [Lockhart River]
- LamaLama [Coen / Laura]
- Yugambah [Logan / Gold Coast]
- Gamilaraay / Yuwaalaraay [South-West Queensland]
- Dharumbal [Rockhampton]
- Gunggandji [Yarrabah]
- Butchulla [Fraser Coast]
- Gubbi Gubbi [Sunshine Coast]
- Goreng Goreng, including dialects [Bundaberg-Gladstone]
- Bidjara [Charleville]
- Gunggari [Mitchell / Maranoa]
- Wangkumara [Cooper Creek]
- Kalali [Cunnamulla / Thargomindah]
- Wakka Wakka [South Burnett]

**Note:** Torres Strait Creole, while not a traditional language would be the most spoken Indigenous language in Queensland, being spoken in Torres Strait, Northern Peninsula Area (NPA), Cairns, Townsville and other coastal centres.



## Q. How do I find a speaker of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages?

Contact the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisation as well as the local [Indigenous Languages Centre](#).

There are five Indigenous Languages Centres across Queensland who work with local/regional community languages: these are [Yugambah Museum](#) located in Beenleigh; [Central Queensland Language Centre](#), Bundaberg; [North Queensland Regional Aboriginal Corporation Language Centre](#), Cairns; [Pama Language Centre](#), Cape York; and the [Torres Strait Traditional Languages Centre](#), Thursday Island.

## Q. How can I learn an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language?

Contact the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisation as well as the local Indigenous Languages Centre.

There are currently no formal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language courses available in Queensland – [University of Queensland](#), [James Cook University](#) and [Griffith University](#) offer undergraduate and postgraduate courses in linguistics which include studies of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.

There are also interstate courses of study for academics and community language workers through [University of Sydney](#), [Batchelor Institute](#) and [Charles Darwin University](#) and [RNLD](#) (Resource Network for Linguistic Diversity).

## Q. How can I pronounce Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language words?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are oral languages that have only been written since European settlement; there may be several variations in spelling and pronunciation. In pronunciation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, there are some sounds not present in English – this may require practice. Some reference books such as Dictionaries or Language Surveys may include a pronunciation guide.

The Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages has developed a '[Talking Head](#)' application to help demonstrate how various sounds are made.

Check with local language custodians as to the preferred local word and its' spelling and pronunciation. Alternatively, contact local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations as well as the local Indigenous Languages Centre.

## Q. How can I say ‘hello’ in the local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language?

The State Library has collated over 100 greetings in 91 languages and dialects from across Queensland – these can be found on the [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages webpages](#) as well as on the [Yugambeh Language App](#) [Apple/iOS version only].

Contact the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisation as well as the Indigenous Languages Centre for further information on pronunciation and other language words.

## Q. Our school would like to teach an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language – where do we get further information?

It is recommended that schools work in partnership with their local language community to develop and implement language programs in schools. Also consult your regional Indigenous Languages Centre as they may be undertaking work in this area. There are also National and State education and curriculum authorities that have developed curriculum and support materials to assist school-communities.

**The Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA)** have developed an [Australian Curriculum: Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages](#) which outlines the different pathways and curriculum resources for teaching languages in Australian schools.

The **Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA)** have developed a [P-10 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages Syllabus](#) – it is also based on a curriculum framework approach and closely aligns with the Australian Curriculum.

**Education Queensland** has an [Indigenous Languages Perspectives team](#) to support the teaching and learning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Queensland state schools.

**Queensland Catholic Education Commission** has an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander [Network](#) that provides support to Catholic Schools across Queensland in embedding Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum.

**Independent Schools Queensland** provides support to member schools in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, including curriculum.

## Q. I would like a translation of a word, phrase or sentence into an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language?

It should be acknowledged that many ‘Western’ concepts are not present in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and there may not be a specific word that matches in meaning. Specialist linguistic inquiries, including translations, should be directed to Tertiary Institutions or Indigenous Language Centres.

## Q: I want to name a room, building, house, etc. in an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander name?

Inquiries may be best directed to local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, Indigenous Language Centres, etc. Establishing a relationship with local community members can result in a negotiated word that also has meaning for the community and the space in which the site is located.

## Q. I would like to know the meaning of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander placename?

There is a range of materials in the State Library collections on [placenames](#); on the State Library website, there is a [Resource Guide](#) for South-East Queensland Placenames. In addition, many local history publications as well as Indigenous Languages Centres and community organisations may be able to provide details on local placenames.

The Australian National Placenames Survey has a helpful Indigenous Australians Languages [Fact Sheet](#) that provides general information on languages as well as details on placenames.

The Queensland Government Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Energy has an online placenames search: <https://www.dnrm.qld.gov.au/qld/environment/land/place-names/search>

Local enquiries may be best directed to local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, Indigenous Language Centres, etc.

## Q: I want to find about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander names and meanings?

Enquiries may be best directed to local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, Indigenous Language Centres, etc.

A good reference is *Macquarie Aboriginal Words*, edited by Nicholas Thieberger & William McGregor, Macquarie Library. (1994) State Library call number **J 499.15 M'QU**

Avoid generic, non-specific texts that collate list of words from across Australia with no reference to location and/or language group.

For example, the following texts are **not** recommended:

- Cooper, H.M. (1952) *Australian Aboriginal words and their meanings*.
- Kenyon, J. (1982) *Aboriginal word book*.
- Reed, A.H. and A.W. (1965) *Aboriginal words of Australia*.



## Q: I want to find out about Aboriginal words that are used in English?

There are many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander words that have been incorporated into everyday use in English. There is an enlightening [post](#) on this topic at the State Library's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages blog. A useful reference is *Australian Aboriginal words in English: their origin and meaning*, by R. Dixon, W. Ramson & M. Thomas. (1992) State Library call number **J 499.15 AUS**

## Q: I want to know more about endangered Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages?

There are some very informative [websites](#) relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.

[AIATSIS](#) (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies) in Canberra is the peak collecting body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage. They hold a significant collection of language materials, including sound recordings – the collections can be searched via [Mura](#).

The [WWW Virtual Library](#) on Indigenous Languages was established by David Nathan and is searchable by language, State and Category.

[Our Languages](#) website is another good place to start and serves as a portal for Indigenous Languages, providing information on community programs, news articles, contacts and other resources.

[First Languages Australia](#) aims to promote and advocate for community language revival of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. They have also developed [Gambay](#) interactive languages map which provides links to video/audio recordings as well as resources and other content.

[RNLD](#) (Resource Network for Linguistic Diversity) is based in Melbourne; however, they work Australia-wide in supporting community language revival.

The **Australian Bureau of Statistics** has a [webpage](#) devoted to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, their nature and diversity.

The **Queensland Government** has [webpages](#) devoted to the preservation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.

## Q: I need some background information on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and/or language revival for a university/school assignment?

As well as the above websites, there have been several reports into the state of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.

- Department of Environment and Heritage: [State of Indigenous Languages in Australia](#) (2001)
- AIATSIS: [National Indigenous Languages Survey](#) (2005)
- Parliament of Australia – House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs: [Our Land Our Language Report](#) (2012).
- AIATSIS: [Second National Indigenous Languages Survey](#) (2014)

## Other Sources

There are several websites with sets of **FAQs** with rich information around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and cultures, including the following:

- Australian National University (ANU) – The AustKin Project [FAQs](#)
- PARADISEC Endangered Languages Blog – [FAQs](#)
- University of Sydney: [FAQs](#) – Australian Indigenous Languages:

## State Library of Queensland

For further information on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages at the State Library of Queensland, please contact:

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### **State Library Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages Webpages:**

[www.slq.qld.gov.au/resources/atsi/languages](http://www.slq.qld.gov.au/resources/atsi/languages)

### **State Library Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages Blog:**

<http://blogs.slq.qld.gov.au/ilq/>

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