



FAQs: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages

Introduction

During 2019, State Library of Queensland celebrated the International Year of Indigenous Languages by raising 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 and use in contemporary settings.

A good starting point is State Library's website which has a range of resources and online materials on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander [webpages](#) including the interactive languages [map](#), as well as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages [Blog](#).

The Queensland Government recently launched *Many Voices: Indigenous Languages Policy* to support community activities across Queensland that help preserve, grow and strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditional and contemporary languages. The document outlines commitments and initiatives which will form the basis for a whole-of-government plan of action.

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

Navigation Menu

Some general questions and answers are listed below that can assist your query and direct you to sources for further information.

To check if your question is here or to save scrolling through the pages, use the **Navigation Pane**, press Ctrl+F or click View > Navigation Pane. Clicking on the **Headings** will bring up the list of frequently asked questions.

Q. How do I find out more about the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages and upcoming International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-32)?

State Library is currently planning towards how it will celebrate the International Decade of Indigenous Languages – updated information will be placed on the languages webpages.

The **United Nations** has a [website](#) for the International Year of Indigenous Languages which includes information about events, resources and other news. The International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-32) will build on the [legacy](#) of 2019.

The **Australian Government Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications Office for the Arts** is playing a lead role in national activities – there is a designated [website](#) which included ideas and resources as well as an IYIL2019 Action Plan. Preliminary [planning](#) is occurring for the International Decade.

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

Q. Where do I found out more about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages?

The best starting point is your local community to find out more about local languages.

There are a range of institutions or organisations to explore further or undertake more specific research. State Library of Queensland is only one resource for exploring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. Regional Indigenous Languages Centres, Traditional Owners, Community Organisations, Indigenous Knowledge Centres, Public Libraries, Universities, AIATSIS and other institutions may also hold materials.

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 with ongoing work through the respective organisations.

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 (AIATSIS) 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.

First Languages Australia have recently developed a collections portal known as [Wandan](#).

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.

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

The Torres Strait Islands have two (2) main languages with six (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 group of 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 and 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; much of this was shared through the *Spoken* and *Jarjum Stories* exhibitions.

There is still much work to be done. In 2019, the International Year of Indigenous Languages highlighted 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. The International Decade (2022-2032) will build on this legacy and respond to the critical need for communities to document languages before they are lost.

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 across Queensland. 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 [Yumplatok], 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 (5) 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 regional Indigenous Languages Centre. They may offer short courses for community members, school students, etc.

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 [Living Languages](#).

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 the pronunciation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, there are some sounds not present in English – these 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 or speakers 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 regional Indigenous Languages Centre.

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. 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.

Queensland Education Department 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. 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 Yugambah 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 or phrases that may be used in everyday settings.

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 require the services of a translator / interpreter for an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language?

Formal requests for translation/interpreting services should be directed to the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters ([NAATI](#)). Several accredited Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language translators/interpreters are registered. [2M](#) language services is also undertaking interpreting work on behalf of the Queensland Government in Health and Justice services.

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

Inquiries are 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.

The Queensland Government has developed a [co-naming strategy](#) that sets out processes for the dual-naming or co-naming of public buildings, spaces, rooms, etc. This strategy is aimed at Government Departments and associated agencies, but may also assist corporate sector and community groups.

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 out 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.

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

[Living Languages](#) (formerly 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.

In 2019, the Australian Government commissioned AIATSIS to undertake a National Indigenous Languages Review (NILR) to investigate the use, importance, and state of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. The [NILR Report](#) identifies the strengths and speaker numbers of Australia's Indigenous languages, as well as the many economic and social benefits gained through the recognition, use and reawakening of those 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 / Australian Government: [Second National Indigenous Languages Survey](#) (2014) [Third National Indigenous Languages Report](#) (2020)

Q. My question is NOT listed above?

If you have a question that doesn't appear above please enter your query 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 if appropriate redirect to the relevant agency.

Other Sources

There are several websites with sets of **FAQs** containing 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:

Exhibitions



Old Words, New Ways is a current showcase that continues the language journey that began with *Spoken* and *Jarjum stories*.

Further Details: <https://www.slq.qld.gov.au/oldwords>

State Library of Queensland

For further information on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages at the State Library of Queensland, please contact **kuril dhagun** PO Box 3488, South Brisbane Qld. 4101. Telephone: (07) 3842 9836 Email: kuril.dhagun@slq.qld.gov.au

State Library Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages [Webpages](#)

State Library Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages [Blog](#)

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