

“Our language is like a pearl inside a shell. The shell is like the people that carry the language. If our language is taken away, then that would be like a pearl that is gone. We would be like an empty oyster shell.”

Yurranydjil Dhurrkay, Galiwin’ku, North East Arnhem Land

The role of Indigenous languages

- 2.1 The ability to communicate clearly is a key function for all people. Being able to communicate effectively in an individual’s first or home language connects a person to their ethnic group and helps to shape a persons’ identity.
- 2.2 As Australians we are aware of the particularities of our language and culture when we travel to places where language and culture differs from our own. Even when we might understand the language, for example, when travelling to England, America or New Zealand, differences in accents, phrasing and colloquial terms can reaffirm our sense of identity as Australians through the use of unique elements of Australian English and Australian culture. Often we recognise another Australian by the style of English language that is used.
- 2.3 In Australia, most Indigenous people identify strongly with a traditional language identity. The tribe with which they identify is a language group and in the great majority of cases, the tribal name is the language name.¹
- 2.4 Cultural heritage and knowledge is passed on throughout each generation by language. Language is integral in affirming and maintaining wellbeing, self esteem and a strong sense of identity. Languages contain complex understandings of a person’s culture and their connection with their land. There is a wealth of evidence that supports the positive associations of

1 Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and the Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages and Culture (FATSILC) *National Indigenous Languages Survey*, 2005, pp. 20-21.

health, education and employment outcomes as well as general wellbeing with language and culture. Indigenous languages keep people connected to culture and this strengthens feelings of pride and self worth.

- 2.5 It is important to emphasise that Australia is not a monolingual society. Since British settlement English has been the main language in Australia. The importance of learning and speaking English competently for all Australians is not disputed. However it is equally important for all Australians to recognise the several hundred unique Indigenous languages that were spoken for tens of thousands of years in Australia. These languages have not always received due recognition in the past.
- 2.6 This chapter discusses what Indigenous languages mean to Indigenous Australians. It explores the link between language and culture and how that shapes a sense of identity. Cultural knowledge, kinship, songlines and stories are reliant on language in order for these important cultural elements to be passed on from generation to generation.
- 2.7 The value of giving attention to and recognition of Indigenous languages for all Australians is considered. A better understanding and recognition of Indigenous languages will assist in the process of reconciliation between Indigenous and non Indigenous Australians. This chapter discusses the importance of promoting Indigenous languages as a valuable and historical part of Australia's cultural heritage and considers how Indigenous languages can help to Close the Gap on Indigenous disadvantage.
- 2.8 Lastly, this chapter provides an overview of Indigenous languages and the current use of Indigenous Languages in Australia. The Committee understands that the inquiry's findings could play an important role in reducing the loss of Indigenous languages. This report aims to assist the Commonwealth Government in suggesting ways to promote and recognise the value for all Australians in maintaining, revitalising and reviving Indigenous languages throughout Australia.

Language, culture and identity

- 2.9 In 2012, the United Nations held a forum on 'The Study on the role of languages and culture in the promotion and protection of the rights and identity of indigenous peoples'. The importance of language is summed up in the following quote:

Language is an essential part of, and intrinsically linked to, indigenous peoples' ways of life, culture and identities. Languages

embody many indigenous values and concepts and contain indigenous peoples' histories and development. They are fundamental markers of indigenous peoples' distinctiveness and cohesiveness as peoples.²

- 2.10 A large volume of evidence received by the Committee throughout the inquiry reiterated the inextricable link between language, culture and identity. The National Congress of Australia's First Peoples commented in its submission that:

Language is central to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. The two are intertwined. Language describes cultural attachment to place, cultural heritage items, and puts meaning within the many cultural activities that people do. Furthermore, language plays a fundamental part in binding communities together as a culture, and individuals to each other in a society. Wesley Enoch, Director of the Queensland Theatre Company and a Nunukul Nuggi man, has said that "the loss of language is the loss of the ability to describe the landscape... and your place in it."³

- 2.11 As noted by Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR) in its submission 'In the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, traditional languages provide speakers with a connection to their culture and their past, and a sense of identity and belonging.'⁴
- 2.12 The Committee held public hearings in various locations throughout Australia (see Appendix A) and received evidence from many Indigenous people. Indigenous Australians know what their language means to them. However, many non Indigenous Australians may not have considered the critical importance of language to a persons' identity, sense of belonging and cultural connection. The following quotations summarise the many voices the Committee heard about language and Indigenous identity.
- 2.13 In a submission from the Teachers and Students of Cert III in Learning Endangered Aboriginal Language, Murray Bridge TAFE, South Australia, it stated that 'our language helps us with our identity and our culture, and

2 United Nations General Assembly paper, fifth session, *Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: Study on the role of languages and culture in the promotion and protection of the rights and identity of indigenous peoples*, 2012, p. 8.

3 The National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, *Submission 139*, p. 2.

4 ANTaR, *Submission 23*, p. 3.

helps us work out where we fit in society, for example who we are related to.⁵

- 2.14 At a public hearing in Alice Springs, Ms Amelia Turner, speaking on behalf of the Lhere Artepe Aboriginal Corporation, described how languages connected her to the land, her ancestors and her community:

Our language is sacred to us. Every Aboriginal language is sacred for those who speak it. Words are given to us by the land and those words are sacred. What does it mean to an Aboriginal culture? The land needs words, the land speaks for us and we use the language for this. Words make things happen – make us alive. Words come not only from our land but also from our ancestors. Knowledge comes from Akerre, my own language and sacred language.

Language is ownership; language is used to talk about the land. Language is what we see in people. Language is what we know of people – we know of him or her. If they speak my sacred language, I must be related to their kinships. Language is how people identify themselves. Being you is to know your language. It is rooted in your relationship from creation – in your kinship that cycles from then and there, onwards and onwards. It is like that root from the tree.

Language is a community – a group of people. Not only do you speak that language but generations upon generations of your families have also spoken it. The language recognises and identifies you, who you are and what is you. Sacred language does have its own language. You can claim other languages through your four grandparents. Know your own language first before you learn other languages – to know it, to understand it and also to relate to it.⁶

- 2.15 Mr Lance Box from the Yipirinya School Council made the following statement in relation to the interrelated nature of land, law, language, kinship and ceremony:

In the Warlpiri, we have a word called ngurra-kurlu, which is a term that speaks of the interrelatedness of five essential elements: land, law, language, kinship and ceremony. You cannot isolate any

5 Teachers and Students of Cert III in Learning Endangered Aboriginal Language, Murray Bridge TAFE, South Australia, *Submission 18*, p. 2.

6 A Turner, Artepe Aboriginal Corporation, *Committee Hansard*, Alice Springs, 4 April 2012, p. 13.

of these elements. All of those elements hang together. If you take people away from country, they cannot conduct ceremony, and if they do not conduct ceremony, they cannot teach strong language. Ceremony is the cradle to grave, a delivery place for education for Indigenous people. If you do not have ceremony and you do not have language, then your kinship breaks down. Then law breaks down and the whole thing falls apart.⁷

- 2.16 A submission received from people living in the Victoria River District in the Northern Territory described the benefits in passing on knowledge and culture through traditional Gurindji language:

We have been recording old people telling Dreaming stories and stories about the old days, for example when Gurindji people used to work at Jinparrak (Wave Hill station). We have also recorded the Gurindji way of life, for example collecting bush tucker such as kilipi 'bush bananas', kurlartarti 'bush oranges', kurtakarla 'bush coconuts', muying 'black plums' and wayita 'bush yams', and medicine such as kupuwupu 'lemon grass', manyanyi 'medicine plant' and lunyja 'snappy gum'.⁸

- 2.17 Mr Ross Williams, of the Papulu Apparr-Kari Aboriginal Corporation based in Tennant Creek commented 'If you do not know your language, you do not know your country and you do not know your Dreaming. You have got to follow lines and you keep in line with the older people.'⁹

- 2.18 The Walpiri Patu Kurlangu Jaru submission explained the following about the importance of language:

Knowing that our own language and culture play the biggest role in growing our spirit, our connection to our land and the stories of our grandmother and grandfathers. With our language we know where we belong, we know the names from our country and Jukurrpa (Dreaming stories and designs). Young people can't lead a good, healthy and happy life without this. Language and culture come first. When kids feel lost and their spirit is weak then they can't learn well or be healthy. They need to feel pride in their language and culture and know that they are respected. That's the only way to start closing the gap.¹⁰

7 L Box, Yipirinya School Council, *Committee Hansard*, Alice Springs, 4 April 2012, pp. 24-5.

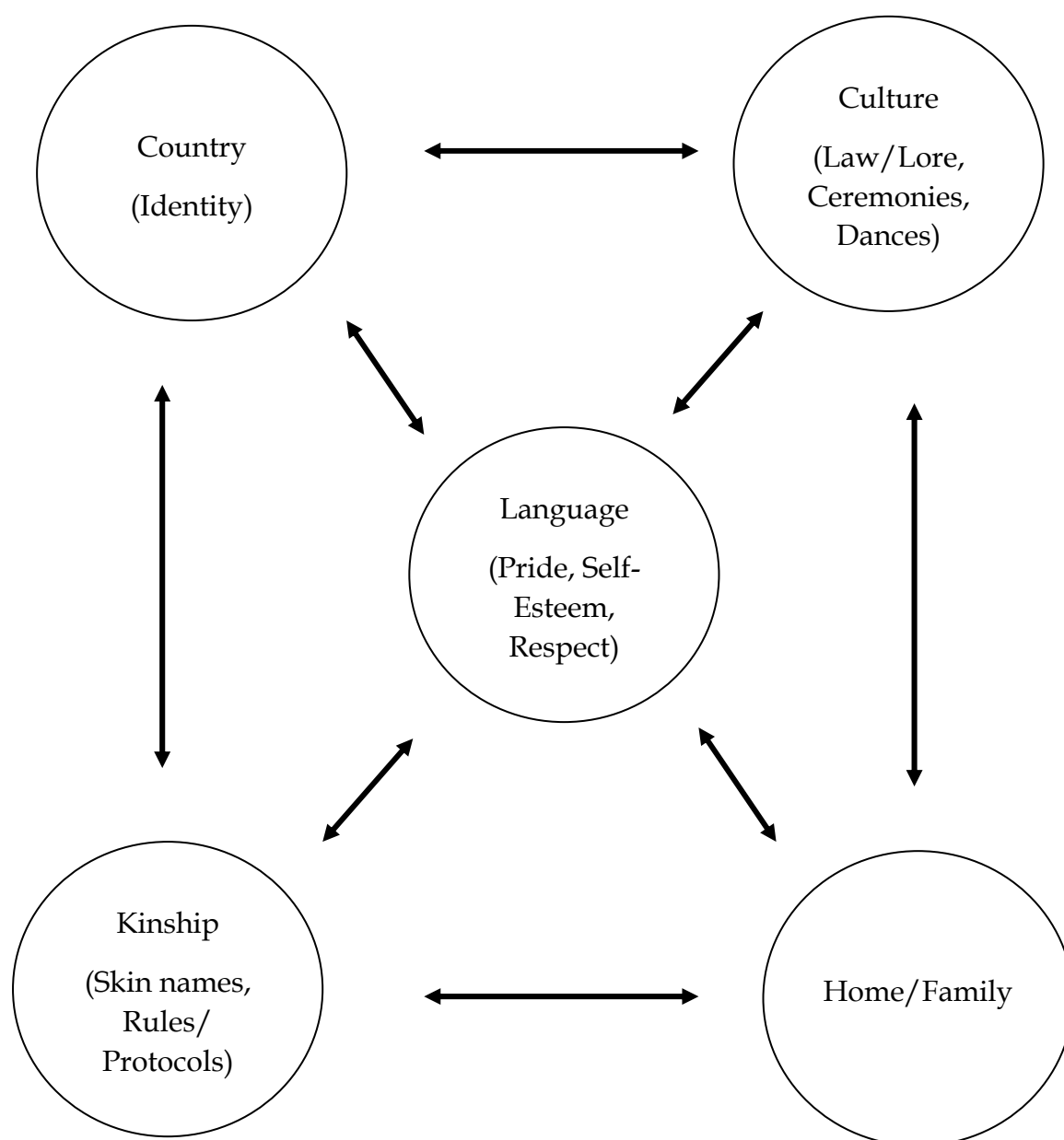
8 C Edwards and F Meakins, *Submission 4a*, p. 2.

9 R Williams, Papulu Apparr-Kari Aboriginal Corporation, *Committee Hansard*, Alice Springs, 4 April 2012, p. 34.

10 Walpiri Patu Kurlangu Jaru, *Submission 121*, p. 6.

2.19 The Indigenous Remote Communications Association (IRCA) viewed maintenance and support for Indigenous languages as fundamental to strengthening Indigenous identity and culture.¹¹ Diagram 1 from the IRCA demonstrates the interconnectedness of language with culture, family, country and kinship for Indigenous Australians.

Diagram 2.1 Diagrammatic Interpretation of the Inter-connectedness of Language (Diagram by Lionel James)



Source Indigenous Remote Communications Association, Submission 68a

¹¹ IRCA, Submission 68, p. 7.

Benefits of giving attention to Indigenous languages

- 2.20 Central to the idea of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages is that it will strengthen Indigenous culture and identity which will lead to improvements in Standard Australian English competency and socio-economic factors including improved measurements of wellbeing.
- 2.21 In its submission, the Commonwealth Office of the Arts commented that:
- although there have been no Australian studies completed to date that could demonstrate causal links between Indigenous language use and other outcomes, and whilst the findings of cross-sectional studies should be interpreted with care, the research ...supports the hypothesis and community view that future generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples could substantially benefit from efforts and policies enacted now to maintain Indigenous languages.¹²
- 2.22 Analysis of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) data shows positive associations between language use, wellbeing and socio-economic variables:
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who speak Indigenous languages have markedly better physical and mental health; are more likely to be employed; and are less likely to abuse alcohol or be charged by the police
 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 13-17 year olds in urban and regional areas are substantially more likely to attend school if they speak an Indigenous language
 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who speak, understand or learn an Indigenous language are more likely to gain a post-school qualification, and
 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in remote areas who speak an Indigenous language are less likely to engage in high risk alcohol consumption and illicit substance use, and to have been a victim of physical or threatened violence.¹³
- 2.23 Trevor Stockley reiterated similar comments at a public hearing by stating:

12 The Office for the Arts, *Submission 127*, p. 2.

13 The Office for the Arts, *Submission 127*, p. 2.

The process of re-awakening and revitalising those languages, which are no longer spoken or remembered, is a strong tool in personal and community development. Language learners have feelings of wellbeing, self-respect, empowerment, identity, self-satisfaction and belonging when hearing and speaking their ancestral language. Showing respect to Indigenous languages and culture, learning about and using your language, will help in understanding your indigenous history and identity. It is a strong tool in that it provides many beneficial social, emotional and educational gains to people.¹⁴

- 2.24 In Adelaide the Committee heard from an ex-principal, Alitya Rigney, of the Kaurna Plains School. She emphasised the importance for Indigenous students to learn their home language in order to develop an enthusiasm for learning. Dr Rigney commented:

Have you ever seen a kid's face when they learn the language of their people and country and see the joy, the pride and the identity that comes from that and the wonder that will take them into the future? It is absolutely magic.¹⁵

- 2.25 In Darwin, Maratja Dhamarrandji commented on the importance of language as a tool for good education:

It is really important and crucial for me as an Indigenous person for not only me and the clan that I represent and my people – the Yolngu people in north-east Arnhem Land – but the old people who want good education in their communities. It is for their cultural identity not only for me but for their Australian identity, because it is really important to see the best outcomes for our people. Education is the key for us to have a good life in our community. We have to have a good education, and language is part of the means, the tools, whereby we can have good access to education.¹⁶

- 2.26 The Committee heard from Patsy Bedford from the Kimberley Language Resource Centre (KLRC) in Halls Creek, who made the following comment about the intangible nature of language and how much it means to Indigenous Australians:

The government does not recognise language because it is invisible. But language makes us strong. It puts something in us.

14 T Stockley, *Submission 62*, p. 2.

15 A Rigney, *Committee Hansard*, Adelaide, 2 April 2012, p. 2.

16 M Dhamarrandji, *Committee Hansard*, Darwin, 2 May 2012, p. 4.

This organisation is struggling. You heard the old people talk about what language means to us. Once the language is taken away then our country and our culture are taken away. We will be nobody.¹⁷

2.27 A submission from the Northern Indigenous School Support Unit, Queensland summed up the benefits of Indigenous students learning their language in schools with the following points:

- strengthening their cultural identity
- including Indigenous aspirations in the school curriculum
- building their cultural and personal resilience
- respecting their distinctive heritage as first peoples
- making meaningful links with community, and
- promoting Reconciliation through redressing past wrongs of suppressing Indigenous languages.¹⁸

Valuing Indigenous languages for all Australians

2.28 The Committee explored the issue of valuing Indigenous languages for all Australians. Although it was understood that Indigenous languages are valuable to those who are descendants of a particular language group the benefits of maintaining and revitalising Indigenous languages to all Australians was a recurrent issue throughout the inquiry.

2.29 Trevor Stockley emphasised that from an historical perspective, knowledge of Indigenous languages was valuable:

Gaining an awareness of an Indigenous language offers both Indigenous and non Indigenous Australians a good opportunity to better understand our combined history and to gain an understanding of Australia's Indigenous heritage of languages and culture. It is a positive way to help close the gap.¹⁹

2.30 The value of languages was discussed from the perspective of reconciliation numerous times throughout the inquiry. A submission from Reconciliation Australia highlighted this point:

17 P Bedford, *Committee Hansard*, Halls Creek, 1 May 2012, p. 10.

18 D Angelo, *Submission 110*, p. 2.

19 T Stockley, *Submission 62*, p. 2.

Building the recognition and appreciation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages will also contribute to the national pride of all Australians. The concept of shared pride in the histories and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians is a key part of reconciliation in Australia.²⁰

- 2.31 An example of positive steps using language to reduce racism in regional Australia was provided to the Committee by Tonya Stebbins:

Insofar as Closing the Gap involves changing non Aboriginal people's attitudes towards Aboriginal Australians, access to learning an Indigenous language and learning about Indigenous culture is an extremely powerful means of change. Indigenous languages and appropriate aspects of Indigenous culture should gradually be incorporated more deeply into the whole curriculum for all Australian students. This is already happening in some communities (eg. primary schools in Parkes) and has had a very significant impact on levels of racism within these schools. Whenever the opportunity is available, this type of activity should be supported.²¹

- 2.32 Ms Lola Jones, a teacher trainer with the Western Australian Department of Education, reinforced how important introducing Indigenous language into the school setting is for all Australians. She commented 'There are really huge reconciliation benefits for non Aboriginal kids, and also just the understanding about the community and the country where you are living.'²²

- 2.33 At a Brisbane public hearing this point of view was echoed by Nyoka Hatfield, a Dharumbal woman living in Rockhampton, who works in Queensland schools teaching Indigenous language and culture. She discussed the importance of bridging the language barrier between Indigenous and non Indigenous Australians:

I believe that what I am doing is an enormous step towards reconciliation and Closing the Gap for the present time and for the future. I also believe that Indigenous language maintenance and revitalisation programs should be supported where ever possible, without these programs our Indigenous languages will slowly disappear. What is also very important is that Indigenous

20 Reconciliation Australia, *Submission 115*, p. 1.

21 T Stebbins, *Submission 69*, p. 2.

22 L Jones, *Committee Hansard*, Broome, 30 April 2012, p. 10.

languages need to be taught in schools and for it to be done in a culturally appropriate manner.

When white people first came to Australia language was a barrier between Indigenous and non Indigenous people, it was one of the causes of the disastrous relationship that developed from the very beginning, and that continues to this day. We need to turn that barrier into a language bridge by giving all Australians a chance to learn about that which belongs to their country.²³

- 2.34 Incorporating Indigenous culture and language learning in schools teaches all Australians about Indigenous culture and language and develops respect within the school community. This finding was supported in evidence which commented on the reports from teachers as a result of the language and culture classes that were run in particular schools:

A common comment was that all of the children were learning to have respect for Indigenous culture and language. Other comments were that students are learning their country's history and how it has changed over the years and also about its rich Indigenous culture.²⁴

- 2.35 The IRCA suggested that:

more Indigenous language courses would increase community awareness of Indigenous languages and there needs to be more language courses available to the public. This would increase employment (as trainers) and support reconciliation through greater cross-cultural awareness.²⁵

- 2.36 A better understanding of Indigenous languages and culture was suggested as a way to improve the communications between non Indigenous and Indigenous Australians who are working in the area of Indigenous affairs. Trevor Stockley commented:

The communities who speak their Indigenous language as their first language need to expect other Australians to learn to appreciate and respect Aboriginal languages and aspects of history and culture within their school education and in general Australian life. Particularly those non Indigenous people living

23 N Hatfield, *Submission 63*, pp. 5-6.

24 N Hatfield, *Submission 63*, p. 4.

25 IRCA, *Submission 68a*, p. 2.

and working within these remote communities and high status public and political figures in Australian society.²⁶

- 2.37 The Queensland Department of Education and Training submission alerted the Committee to the Department's *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages Statement* which stipulated that 'Reconciliation is a key priority of the Queensland Government.' The Languages Statement continues:

Greater understanding and shared ownership of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages – traditional languages, creoles and related varieties – will contribute to the Australian identity of all students, schools and communities, and will sustain Queensland's unique Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander linguistic and cultural heritage.²⁷

- 2.38 Raising the profile of Indigenous languages through the use of interpreters for government interaction in sectors such as health, legal and education can be beneficial for Indigenous and non Indigenous Australians. The Indigenous languages are given a status through recognition and use of languages other than English.
- 2.39 International research has demonstrated that bilingualism also has cognitive and developmental benefits.²⁸ Internationally, there has been recognition of the value of bilingualism in preserving and valuing traditions, enriching individuals, and in creating modern flexible and tolerant societies.²⁹
- 2.40 Indigenous media organisations such as The Central Australian Indigenous Media Association (CAAMA) promote Indigenous culture, language, dance and music while generating benefits in the form of training, employment and income generation. CAAMA is an excellent example of how Indigenous language and culture can be shared between Indigenous communities in a way that also informs and educates the wider community of the richness and diversity of Indigenous Australia.

26 T Stockley, *Submission 62*, p. 9.

27 Queensland DET, *Submission 109*, pp. 15-16.

28 Studies reported by the United States National Academy of Sciences identified greater brain plasticity in bilingual infants compared with non bilingual infants at the pre-language stage. The studies showed that bilingual infants are far more likely to learn new responses than non bilingual infants. See A Kovacs and J Mehler, 'Cognitive gains in 7 month old bilingual infants', < www.pnas.org/content/106/16/6556.short > accessed 11 February 2012.

29 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 2003, 'Language Vitality and Endangerment: Document submitted to the International Expert Meeting on UNESCO Programme Safeguarding of Endangered Languages' <www.unesco.org/culture/ich/doc/src/00120-EN.pdf> accessed 11 February 2012.

2.41 Dr Nick Thieberger was supportive of this idea in his submission. He stated:

Every language has been built up by its speaker community over time and encapsulates novel ways of thinking of the world. Recording this information gives everyone (speakers and outsiders) insights into Indigenous cultures. The value for the broader Australian society is that we will all be able to appreciate Indigenous societies in greater depth if we are able to understand more of their languages.³⁰

2.42 Greg Dickson provided the Committee with the following examples to demonstrate social, cultural and economic benefits that are gained from recognising and valuing Indigenous languages. These benefits are evidenced at local community levels, regionally, nationally and internationally. The examples provide a window into what is possible when the potential of Indigenous languages is harnessed:

- Australian of the Year recipients who speak an Aboriginal language as a first language: Galarwuy Yunupingu (1978), Mandawuy Yunupingu (1992)
- National TV shows in Indigenous languages e.g. Bush Mechanics (Warlpiri, ABC TV 2001), Women of the Sun (Yolngu Matha/English, ABC/SBS 1981)
- Top-selling, award-winning recording artists who speak and sing in Indigenous language/s (e.g. Yothu Yindi, Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu)
- Indigenous language-speaking AFL stars: e.g. Liam Jurrah, Liam Patrick (both Warlpiri)
- Award-winning feature film Ten Canoes (2006 - Ganabingu and other languages)
- Theatre productions, e.g. Ngapartji Ngapartji (Big hART, 2007 - Pitjantjatjara language)
- National advertising campaign (Qantas 2009 - Kala Lagaw Ya language)
- Award-winning journalism (Sydney Morning Herald, 2009 "Language is Power - Let us have ours", in English and Gumbaynggirr, received UN Media Peace award, 2010)
- Tertiary education courses e.g. Graduate Certificate in Yolngu Studies (Charles Darwin University), Certificate 1, 2 and 3 in Aboriginal Languages e.g. Gamilaraay, Gumbaynggirr (TAFE NSW)

30 N Thieberger, *Submission 106*, p. 1.

- Academic writing in Indigenous languages, e.g. Bani, E. (1987), 'Garka a ipika: masculine and feminine grammatical gender in Kala Lagaw Ya', *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 7(2):189-201.³¹

- 2.43 Another excellent example of achievement is the 2012 Senior Australian of the Year Laurie Baymarrwangga, who was recognised for 'almost single-handedly nurturing the inter-generational transmission of local ecological knowledge through a lifelong commitment to caring for kin, culture and country' in the Crocodile Islands of the Northern Territory.³²
- 2.44 Ms Baymarrwangga initiated the Yan-nhangu Dictionary project in 1994, and continues to pass on her language and culture through the Crocodile Islands Initiative, which includes a ranger program, a language nest and a web-based ecological knowledge base for schools. In Ms Baymarrwangga's words:

Nhangu dhangany yuwalkthana bayngu bulanggitj Yolngu mitji
marnggimana dhana gayangamana mayili mana dhangany
wanggalangabu mana limalama ganatjirri wulumba (maramba)

"We continue to pass on the stories of our land and sea country for
the good of new generations".³³

Dual naming

- 2.45 The benefits of dual naming were raised with the Committee during a public hearing in Adelaide. One of the main benefits was that it raised the awareness of Indigenous people and their language in localised areas in Australia. Dual naming provides recognition to Indigenous Australians as well as helping to preserve the language. Uluru (Ayres Rock) and Kata Juta (the Olgas), are well known Indigenous names for landmarks. The Committee found it was occurring at a more localised level.
- 2.46 Professor Amery commented there had been a lot of naming activity in Adelaide:

In 2001 the River Torrens was officially dual named – Karrawirra Parri – with its original name. There is also, Tarndanyangga, Victoria Square. In the last couple of months the Adelaide City

31 G Dickson, *Submission 125*, p. 2.

32 Australian of the Year Awards 2013, 'Senior Australian of the Year 2012', <www.australianoftheyear.org.au/recipients/?m=laurie-baymarrwangga-2012> accessed 30 August 2012.

33 Yan-nhangu Dictionary Team, *Submission 30*, p. 3.

Council approached Kurna Warra Pintyandi again about dual naming of the squares.³⁴

- 2.47 The NILS report highlighted the importance of dual naming. The fact that language is so important in forming Indigenous identity and people's relationships to areas of land means that there is an intimate relationship between language-related activities and the current emphasis on Native Title claims and determinations. As Native Title rights are asserted and put into practice in land management schemes, it is likely there will be much more emphasis on a 'two-way' approach to landscape involving use of Indigenous placenames, names for landforms, water sources, flora and fauna and local terminology for management practices, such as use of fire and hunting/culling.³⁵

Contribution to Closing the Gap

- 2.48 The Committee received evidence on the contribution of Indigenous languages to Closing the Gap and their interconnectedness with strengthening Indigenous culture and identity. The Closing the Gap strategy identifies the commitment to targets to reduce Indigenous disadvantage and lists the associated building blocks for action.³⁶
- 2.49 The Australian Education Union (AEU) suggested that integrating Indigenous languages policy into Council of Australian Government (COAG) Closing the Gap targets could be a way to ensure that programs are appropriately targeted and funded.³⁷
- 2.50 Ms Jacqueline Phillips from ANTaR referred to a lack of focus on the importance of Indigenous languages as one of the missing pieces in the Closing the Gap puzzle.³⁸
- 2.51 The National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA) acknowledges that culture must be recognised in actions intended to overcome Indigenous disadvantage:

34 R Amery, *Committee Hansard*, Adelaide, 2 April 2012, p. 5.

35 AIATSIS and FATSILC, *National Indigenous Languages Survey*, 2005, p. 21.

36 Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), 'Closing the Gap: The Indigenous Reform Agenda' <www.fahcsia.gov.au/our-responsibilities/indigenous-australians/programs-services/closing-the-gap> accessed 30 August 2012.

37 AEU, *Submission 88*, p. 7.

38 J Phillips, ANTaR, *Committee Hansard*, 18 November 2011, p. 9.

Pride in culture plays a vital role in shaping people's aspirations and choices. Efforts to Close the Gap in Indigenous disadvantage must recognise and build on the strength of Indigenous cultures and identities.³⁹

2.52 The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Mick Gooda commented that 'It is my view that investment in preserving and teaching Indigenous languages will assist in achieving the Closing the Gap targets.'⁴⁰

2.53 The Australian Society for Indigenous Languages (AuSIL) commented:

Decades of research and experience show that meaningful recognition of indigenous languages, along with their deliberate and systematic incorporation into programs in the education, health, justice, and job training sectors, along with reasonable cross-cultural training and orientation of service providers are critical to Closing the Gap. The evidence consistently indicates that doing so gives significantly better outcomes in:

- literacy
- Standard English proficiency
- school retention rates
- learning in all subjects
- reduction in antisocial behaviour, and
- as well as progress towards achieving the Millenium Development Goals.

Not doing so will continue to contribute to low levels of performance in all these sectors, and seriously impede the goals of Closing the Gap.'⁴¹

2.54 Why Warriors Pty Ltd and the Arnhem Human Enterprise Development (AHED) project echoed the above statements:

We see that valuing and supporting the use of Indigenous languages is vital to "closing the gap" – and indeed, that the gap will not otherwise ever be closed. We see the valuing Indigenous languages has enormous impacts on health outcomes – and all areas of life for Aboriginal communities – governance, social cohesion, economics and a sense of empowerment to control their own future.

39 FaHCSIA, *Submission 141*, p. 3.

40 Australian Human Rights Commission, *Submission 31*, p. 1.

41 Australian Society for Indigenous Languages, *Submission 60*, p. 1.

... our practice in the use of these Yolngu languages has shown that there can be effective education and dialogue, a deep sharing of knowledge and intellectual discussion in the areas of governance, land rights, health/chronic diseases and economics.⁴²

- 2.55 The Indigenous Remote Communications Association emphasised the point that Closing the Gap cannot be achieved in isolation of the nominated targets.
- 2.56 They noted that 'these building blocks are linked – achieving the Closing the Gap targets requires progress in each of these areas. Strategies aimed at achieving improvements in any one area will not work in isolation. Language maintenance, language media production and language curriculum development are obvious links across these targets that will result in improvements across these action areas.'⁴³
- 2.57 During a public hearing in Halls Creek, Ms Patsy Bedford, a member from the Kimberley Language Resource Centre (KLRC) told the Committee that the KLRC had included language and culture as an eighth building block in the Closing the Gap strategy for Western Australia.⁴⁴
- 2.58 In Darwin the Committee heard from Minister McCarthy about the work the Northern Territory is doing with COAG. In relation to including language and culture as part of the building blocks in the local implementation plans it was stressed that this was happening. Minister McCarthy commented:
- There are 15 in the Northern Territory and we have added a further five to those, which comes to the 20 growth towns across the Northern Territory. Within those areas, between agencies and the people of the communities, we have established what is called local implementation plans, or LIPs. In those LIPs each of these towns is stressing the importance of language and culture and how they wish to grow those regions.⁴⁵
- 2.59 To assist in reaching Closing the Gap targets the New South Wales (NSW) Government has formed a Ministerial Taskforce for Aboriginal Affairs to advise on the development of an Aboriginal affairs strategy and to refocus efforts to Close the Gap in Aboriginal disadvantage in NSW. The Ministerial Taskforce brings together Aboriginal community experts and

42 Why Warriors Pty Ltd and the Arnhem Human Enterprise Development (AHED) project, *Submission 37*, pp. 1 and 3.

43 IRCA, *Submission 68*, p. 7.

44 P Bedford, *Committee Hansard*, Halls Creek, 1 May 2012, p. 10.

45 M McCarthy, *Committee Hansard*, Darwin, 2 May 2012, p. 8.

organisational representatives to work directly with seven key Ministers to ensure that Aboriginal people and communities are a core priority for NSW Government.⁴⁶

Education targets

- 2.60 The Committee received a large volume of evidence that focused on the benefits of including Indigenous language in education. Many submissions advocated for more Indigenous language and culture to be incorporated into the school curriculum in order to engage Indigenous communities with the local school community including from the beginning of learning.
- 2.61 Numerous academics have spent many years working with Indigenous communities looking at Indigenous language maintenance, revitalisation and revival contributed to this inquiry and emphasised the benefits of including Indigenous language in schools. A submission from Associate Professor Tonya Stebbins, La Trobe University, made the following comment in relation to teaching Indigenous languages in schools:
- Indigenous languages have an enormous potential contribution to make in relation to Closing the Gap. There is no more powerful way to reassert community authority over the schooling of children than to allow community members to teach community business within school spaces. Indigenous language programs can lead the way to changing school culture and students' perceptions about school. These changes are reflected in improved levels of attendance with flow on effects in terms of learning more generally.⁴⁷
- 2.62 The success of including Indigenous languages and culture in schools was highlighted in the following statement:
- The pride in having Pitjantjatjara language and culture explicitly taught and valued in the school is immense. It builds cross generational interaction as well as helping kids master reading and writing in their foreign language, English. While in community these students do not hear, read or need English outside school hours.⁴⁸
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46 NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Department of Education and Community, *Submission 98*, p. 15.

47 T Stebbins, *Submission 69*, p. 2.

48 C Johnston, *Submission 32*, p. 2.

- 2.63 The Australian Education Union commented in its submission that bilingual programs are effective for children learning two languages:

Studies into bilingual programs in schools, whereby students in the early years of schooling are first taught literacy (reading and writing) in their first language, show the effectiveness of building on the knowledge that children come to school with. By combining this with providing a strong language foundation in English, by about Year 4 students are able to use their knowledge of English as well as understandings of literacy in their first language as a base to master English literacy.⁴⁹

- 2.64 The Why Warriors Pty Ltd and the Arnhem Human Enterprise Development (AHED) project informed the Committee that there was 'strong evidence in working in the communities of north East Arnhem Land, that children engage more thoroughly and genuinely show more interest in any education provided in their own language.'⁵⁰

- 2.65 Similar evidence was received in Alice Springs. The Committee heard about the value of learning in two languages:

Warlpiri is like a vehicle to learn a new language and I think only then if we can work together on that one part of what we are aiming for. I think that the proper recognition of our identity and language makes us strong and grown-up, knowing English and Warlpiri together. I think that the Indigenous language can assist in many ways such as in translation, because that is what I grew up on, especially the experience in the classroom of always having two people, a Kardiya – a European – and a Yapa – an Aboriginal person, a Warlpiri person. They were both there for me to make sure that I got the proper education in both ways. That has been an important thing in my growing up in both worlds, Warlpiri and English.⁵¹

Health advantages

- 2.66 Health advantages including mental and physical health have been linked to learning and retaining one's own language. For example, in terms of improved mental health, a Canadian study demonstrated that 'being able to converse in one's own language helps produce a strong sense of self

49 AEU, *Submission 88*, p. 1.

50 Why Warriors Pty Ltd and the AHED project, *Submission 37*, p. 4.

51 D Rice, Bilingual Resources Development Unit, *Committee Hansard*, Alice Springs, 4 April 2012, p. 38.

and sense of cultural continuity, which have been linked to reduced rates of suicide amongst Indigenous youth.⁵²

- 2.67 The Australian Bureau of Statistics released research highlighting the benefits of maintaining Indigenous languages to enhance young peoples' wellbeing. The research found that young people who spoke an Indigenous language - almost half of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in remote areas between the ages of 15 to 24 were less likely to participate in high-risk drinking and drug abuse than those young people who did not speak a traditional language.⁵³
- 2.68 In the Utopia homelands, high value is placed on the maintenance of strong Indigenous languages and traditional cultural practices. A study found that residents of these communities were less likely to be obese, less likely to have diabetes and less prone to cardiovascular disease than Indigenous people across the rest of the Northern Territory.⁵⁴
- 2.69 At a public hearing in Adelaide the link between health and languages was brought to the Committee's attention again. Rob Amery commented:
- We are seeing again and again very positive health benefits accruing. When people feel proud about themselves as individuals and feel proud about themselves as a group of people then lots of things flow from that. If we only look after people's physical needs – housing, employment, health, or whatever – then a lot of that money will be wasted, I am afraid, unless people are able to build a life for themselves and feel good about themselves as individuals and as a group. Language is one of the means of doing that.⁵⁵

Knowledge and employment

- 2.70 The maintenance and use of Indigenous languages has positive implications for capacity building in Indigenous communities, particularly through community involvement and employment in resource management, art and tourism, broadcasting and interpreting.
- 2.71 Indigenous languages and cultural knowledge have been associated with understanding the patterns of climate change and ways to address its impacts. The 2006 Garnaut Review into climate change reported that the

52 Office for the Arts, *Submission 127*, p. 1.

53 Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning, *Submission 70*, p. 3.

54 Australian Human Rights Commission, *Social Justice Report 2009*, p. 61.

55 R Amery, *Committee Hansard*, Adelaide, 2 April 2012, p. 3.

Torres Strait Islander people had noticed changes in animal and plant behaviour and different patterns in seasonal temperatures.

2.72 Traditional languages have vast vocabularies for naming species and describing their ecology which are little known to Western science. This is an endangered area of knowledge, and the loss of it would disadvantage all Australians. The same deep cultural knowledge that is contained in language has been essential for Indigenous Australians to demonstrate their connection to country when they are making Native Title claims.⁵⁶

2.73 In Darwin, Professor Christie discussed the value of supporting languages for ecological reasons and scientific progress:

The languages not only refer to the world out there but actually take place in particular sorts of knowledge work. Collaborations between Aboriginal people on country and scientists are significantly enhanced by the use of these languages. Those languages therefore need really to be thoroughly supported at all levels. A key example of that, as you know, is probably the fire work that has been done throughout the Northern Territory and the tropical savannahs where Aboriginal knowledge authorities are working with scientists on big carbon abatement projects. Our point was that language plays a key role in embedding the knowledge practices that allow that to happen, and the economic significance of keeping those languages alive and strong.⁵⁷

2.74 Dr William Fogarty, who appeared at a public hearing in Canberra reiterated the importance of Indigenous languages for supporting employment pathways for Indigenous Australians. He commented:

...Indigenous land and sea management and associated employment and development outcomes depend directly on the continued strength and availability of Indigenous language and associated Indigenous knowledge. It is my hope that the new national Indigenous languages policy will explicitly recognise the current and potential benefit and contribution of Indigenous languages to development options, livelihood options and employment pathways for Indigenous people.⁵⁸

2.75 There are strong potential employment outcomes for Aboriginal communities through language acquisition. Professor Muhlhausler et al,

56 Australian Human Rights Commission, *Social Justice Report 2009*, p. 63.

57 M Christie, *Committee Hansard*, Darwin, 2 May 2012, p. 55.

58 W Fogarty, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 3 November 2011, p. 2.

in the 2004 *Economic Costs and Benefits of Australian Indigenous Languages* report highlighted a range of economic and social benefits for Australia from the enhanced knowledge of complex phenomena gained from Indigenous languages. The report acknowledged that Aboriginal languages are repositories of traditional knowledge developed over thousands of years of interacting with their environment, building a detailed knowledge of the ecosystem. Ecological knowledge is invaluable in areas of environmental management, biodiversity, and pharmaceutical development within ecosystems that are generally poorly understood.⁵⁹

- 2.76 Other sectors of the economy that create employment opportunities for Indigenous Australians through language include the art and tourism sector. Indigenous cultural knowledge is the foundation of these industries and benefits from Indigenous cultural industries flow on to other Australians and to the Australian economy.⁶⁰
- 2.77 The Indigenous tourism industry offers Aboriginal language speakers significant opportunities for employment. An increase in tourist numbers may reflect a heightened interest among overseas tourists in Aboriginal culture. Any increase in tourism benefits the whole community.
- 2.78 The Committee received evidence in Broome that demonstrated the value of Indigenous language programs in schools leading to employment in the community that utilised the language skills:
- Anecdotally, we hear evidence of students who have gone through the primary school program and into the high school program who in their employment are able to use their Aboriginal language skills whether they are in a bank, a CES office or working in an old people's home.⁶¹
- 2.79 Radio and television broadcasting provides sizeable employment opportunities through the use of Indigenous languages. The remote Indigenous media sector regularly employs about 300-400 Indigenous media workers as broadcasters, producers, journalists, trainers, translators, cultural officers, archivists and performers.⁶² The Indigenous Remote Communications Association added 'the normalisation of

59 New South Wales Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Department of Education and Communities, *Submission 98*, pp. 11-12.

60 New South Wales Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Department of Education and Communities, *Submission 98*, p. 12.

61 L Jones, *Committee Hansard*, Broome, 30 April 2012, p. 11.

62 IRCA, *Submission 68a*, p. 1.

Indigenous languages through daily broadcasting and communications services is seen as critical to language continuity.’⁶³

- 2.80 The Committee was interested to hear about the number of Indigenous languages being broadcast on the Indigenous Community Television (ICTV) service:

There are 60 hours of programming. There is a video streaming site with over 400 videos available. Broadcast delivers video content in 23 different languages from around Australia. The program in language runs approximately 70 percent of ICTV.⁶⁴

ICTV broadcasts/delivers video content in 23 different languages from around Australia, as follows: Alyawarr, Anmatyerr, Arrarnte, Bardi, Djambarrpuynu, Eastern Anmatyerr, Gija, Karajarri, Kukatja, Luritja, Mangala, Martu, Nga_gikurunggurr, Ngaanyatjarra, Ngarluma, Pintubi, Pitjantjatjara, Tiwi, Umpila, Warlpiri, Worla, Yindjibarndi, Yolngu Matha.⁶⁵

- 2.81 Recently, information technology has been recognised as an avenue of employment. During a public hearing in Canberra, Dr Inge Kral informed the Committee that:

... highlighted last year at the AIATSIS Information Technologies and Indigenous Communities symposium, held in Canberra, was the ability of IT to generate unique opportunities for employment and local enterprise development in this emerging new digital economy. The advent of digital technologies has seen young people developing expertise in filmmaking, music production and digital archiving.⁶⁶

- 2.82 Knowledge of Indigenous languages provides opportunities for Indigenous people to be employed as translators and interpreters. This is an area that has been under review in Australia for some time and is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6.

Committee comment

- 2.83 A child learns their first language not at school but in the home and community in which they reside. Similarly teaching a child their language and a sense of identity must come from a family and community. The Committee notes the vast diversity of Indigenous communities and the

63 IRCA, *Submission 68a*, p. 2.

64 L Cavanagh, *Committee Hansard*, Alice Springs, 4 April 2012, p. 18.

65 IRCA, *Supplementary Submission 68a*, p. 7.

66 I Kral, *Committee Hansard*, 3 November 2011, p. 2.

capacity of different communities and families to provide children with a positive and strong sense of culture and wellbeing. Sadly there are communities where the level of social dysfunction is such that the children lack positive role models, a sense of belonging and in some instances they lack a firm grounding in one language.

- 2.84 The Committee does not see it as the role of the government to teach a child their culture or their first language. However, there is a role for governments to assist communities to take on this responsibility when a history of social problems has diminished the current capacity of a community to be able to do so for itself. The Committee argues that governments must continue the early education of language and culture but it is families and communities that raise a child with the language and values that are important to that child.
- 2.85 There is a critical role for governments to ensure that the services delivered, such as health and education, are accessible to any child in Australia and to value that child's heritage and culture. For Indigenous Australians, valuing and incorporating culture and language should be a core element of all schooling across Australia for the benefit of Indigenous and non Indigenous Australians.
- 2.86 Indigenous language learning must proceed as a partnership where different parties bear the responsibility for the nurturing and learning of a child and collaboratively raise them to live both ways – strong in their language and culture, skilled to make choices for their future and proud in who they are and the contribution they make towards growing a strong Australia as a nation.
- 2.87 The evidence collected during the inquiry was supportive of languages fostering higher levels of self esteem, developing an enthusiasm for learning and a better understanding of cultural identity for Indigenous Australians. Therefore the Committee believes that it is essential for language learning, revitalisation and revival to be well supported by Commonwealth and state funding.
- 2.88 Past policies of Australian governments have contributed to the loss of language and culture in many Indigenous communities. The Committee acknowledges that many of the same themes that are covered in this report have been addressed over several reports spanning more than two decades. The Committee believes successive governments have failed to prevent the continued decline of Indigenous languages.
- 2.89 There has been considerable funding and effort by all governments and community groups in assisting with the Closing the Gap strategy. The

Committee views the link between Indigenous languages and improvements to overall wellbeing as an essential element that will continue to help meet governments' targets of Closing the Gap.

- 2.90 The Committee believes that a lack of focus on Indigenous languages is one of the missing pieces in the Closing the Gap framework. The Committee considers that the incorporation of the National Indigenous Language Policy into the Closing the Gap framework would bring to the forefront the importance of preserving language and culture in meeting Closing the Gap targets.
- 2.91 The Committee sees the inclusion of Indigenous languages in the Closing the Gap targets as an essential acknowledgement of the collaborative approach that must take place between governments and Indigenous communities. The role of governments is to assist Indigenous communities to achieve the same opportunities and wellbeing outcomes as non Indigenous Australians. Indigenous Australians must continue to demonstrate a commitment to develop partnerships with governments to preserve and maintain languages within communities.

Recommendation 1 - Closing the Gap framework

- 2.92 **The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government include in the Closing the Gap framework acknowledgement of the fundamental role and importance of Indigenous languages in preserving heritage and improving outcomes for Indigenous peoples.**
- 2.93 The Committee believes there are substantial benefits to be gained for all Australians in raising the awareness and profile of Indigenous languages throughout Australia. Non Indigenous Australians being made aware of Indigenous languages and culture clearly has reconciliation benefits. The fact that many Australians are unaware of the rich diversity of Indigenous languages that have existed in Australia is an area that should be improved.

Recommendation 2 - Signage in Indigenous languages

- 2.94 **The Committee recommends the Commonwealth Government include in the National Indigenous Languages Policy 2009 a commitment to support and progress signage of place names and landmarks in local Indigenous languages.**

- 2.95 While dual naming or Indigenous naming may be viewed by some as merely symbolic the Committee is convinced of the value and place of symbolism in changing attitudes, healing scars and forging new futures.
- 2.96 The Committee thought the example of dual naming had great potential for many local and national sites throughout Australia. The Committee views this as a way of reaching out to many Australians and increasing awareness of Indigenous language and cultural throughout Australia. The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government give full support to projects that fund dual naming of places throughout Australia.
- 2.97 The Committee considers that Parliamentarians are in unique positions to demonstrate leadership in promoting the benefits of strengthening and recognising the languages and culture local to their electorate, and therefore build on the reconciliation path between Indigenous Australians and non Indigenous Australians.

Recommendation 3 – Parliamentary recognition of Indigenous languages

- 2.98 **The Committee recommends the Commonwealth Parliament demonstrate leadership in the recognition and valuing of Indigenous languages by:**
- **considering how to incorporate Indigenous languages in the Parliament House building and in the operations of the Parliament, and**
 - **encouraging all Members of Parliament to:**
 - ⇒ **be aware of and recognise the Indigenous language groups local to their electorate**
 - ⇒ **where, possible and appropriate, acknowledge traditional owners and utilise language names for places and landmarks, and**
 - ⇒ **support schools and community groups in their area to recognise, value and where possible utilise Indigenous language names.**
- 2.99 The Committee notes that in the airline industry QANTAS has made significant contributions towards reconciliation by committing to a Reconciliation Action Plan which sets out key strategies to create meaningful relationships and sustainable job opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. QANTAS uses symbolic

representations of Indigenous culture such as the exterior painting of aircrafts in Indigenous artwork and creating Indigenous art inspired uniforms for flight attendants, which has great value in reaching out to all Australians and overseas visitors travelling by air in Australia.

- 2.100 The Committee suggests that airlines could help raise the awareness of Indigenous languages throughout Australia, by announcing to all passengers the name of the traditional lands the aircraft has landed on. Further, a greeting could be announced in the local Indigenous language if available. For example, in Broome, the Committee learned how to say a greeting (Ngaji mingan?) and thank you (Galiya) in the local Yawuru language. Indigenous communities should look for opportunities to develop partnerships with the business and non government sector to facilitate a greater understanding of the significance of Indigenous languages in Australia.
- 2.101 The Committee views this recognition of Indigenous languages would benefit Indigenous Australians, non Indigenous Australians and foreign visitors. Indigenous languages are unknown to the majority of Australians and by encouraging the use of Indigenous language in every day settings would raise the awareness and understanding of Australia's valuable Indigenous culture.
- 2.102 Just as all Australians appreciate the art, dance and music of Indigenous Australians, so languages should be taking their place as part of the rich cultural diversity and heritage of this country.
- 2.103 The Committee encourages all Australians to take pride in the Indigenous languages that surround us and to value our rich heritage. We should all have an interest in and where possible learn about and incorporate local Indigenous languages into our workplaces, our communities and our everyday lives. Each and every one of us has a role to play in progressing us along the path of reconciliation and in defining what it means to be Australian.

Overview on Indigenous languages

- 2.104 The challenges to preserve and revitalise Indigenous languages are considerable. Indigenous languages are critically endangered in Australia and they continue to die out at a rapid rate. Prior to colonisation, Australia had 250 distinct languages that subdivided into 600 dialects.⁶⁷

67 A dialect is a variety of a language spoken in a particular area by a particular group.

- 2.105 Of an original number of over 250 known Australian Indigenous languages, only about 145 Indigenous languages are still spoken and the vast majority of these, about 110, are in the severely and critically endangered categories. This critically endangered category indicates languages that are spoken only by small groups of people mostly over 40 years old.
- 2.106 Eighteen languages are strong in the sense of being spoken by all age groups, but three or four of these are showing some signs of moving into endangerment. There are many other languages where only a few words and phrases are used, and there is great community support in many parts of the country for reclamation and heritage learning programs for such languages.⁶⁸
- 2.107 In November 2005, the *National Indigenous Languages Survey Report 2005 (NILS report 2005)* was prepared by AIATSIS and the Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages Corporation (FATSILC) for the then Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts.
- 2.108 The *NILS report 2005* is the most recent assessment on the state of Indigenous languages in Australia. At a public hearing Doug Marmion informed the Committee that an updated version of the NILS report is due to be released at the end of 2012.
- 2.109 Classifying Indigenous languages is not a straight forward task. The *NILS report 2005* detailed the challenges that are presented when carrying out such a task. The *NILS report 2005* discussed the ways languages can be classified as language vitality and language endangerment. This included the subjective nature of collecting language data on speaking, using and identifying with a language.⁶⁹
- 2.110 The *NILS report 2005* made the following comment on the three main categories of language:
- It has been widely understood and accepted that there are three basic types of language situations:
- Strong– all age groups including children are speaking the traditional Indigenous language;
 - Endangered– the children are not learning to speak the language (although they may understand it a little); and

68 AIATSIS and FATSILC, *National Indigenous Languages Survey Report 2005*, p. 3.

69 AIATSIS and FATSILC, *National Indigenous Languages Survey Report 2005*, p. 27.

- No longer spoken or ‘sleeping’ – nobody speaks the language except for a few words and phrases.⁷⁰

2.111 The *NILS report 2005* concluded that the situation of Australia’s languages is grave and requires urgent action. Without intervention the language knowledge will cease to exist in the next 10 to 30 years.⁷¹

Evolving languages

2.112 Traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages refer to all the languages spoken within Australia prior to colonisation. These languages inform a holistic worldview of land, culture and identity, and are linguistically very different to English.⁷²

2.113 Traditional languages are recognised and named as languages of country. They are acknowledged as having cultural and heritage significance. In some remote local community contexts they are the everyday languages of communication.⁷³

2.114 Contact languages are spoken across many regions as first languages. Contact languages have evolved from traditional languages as a result of several different language groups coming together. English has been incorporated into traditional Indigenous languages and as a result creoles have developed in particular areas in Australia. Contact languages can be called home language, first language or a named creole.

2.115 Creole was described to the Committee as being a full language which develops from a pidgin because people start to use the pidgin as a general means of communication and children then grow up learning it as their first language. Australian creoles combine characteristics of English, Indigenous languages and other languages.⁷⁴

2.116 The Committee was informed that creoles were full linguistic languages:

There has been widespread misunderstanding about contact language varieties in Australia. They are often referred to as being a bad form of the dominant language, which is English. People might refer to them as 'broken English' or 'bad English' and other

70 AIATSIS and FATSILC, *National Indigenous Languages Survey Report 2005*, p. 24.

71 Australian Human Rights Commission, *Social Justice Report 2009*, p. 58.

72 Queensland DET, *Submission 109*, p. 7.

73 D Angelo, *Submission 153*, p. 1.

74 D Marmion, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 7 July 2011, p. 7.

terms like that. Creoles and related varieties are actually full linguistic languages.⁷⁵

- 2.117 The Committee was informed about several creoles that are currently in use in Australia. The most widely spoken creole is 'Top End Kriol' which is spoken throughout the Northern Territory, across to the Kimberley region and even extends into some regions of the Cape York. This creole is sometimes called Broome English, Broome Kriol, Kimberley Kriol or Aboriginal English. 'Yumpla Tok' is spoken in the Torres Strait and several other creoles exist in Queensland. Ms Claire Gorman made the following comment at a public hearing in Brisbane:

There are a number of creole varieties that are spoken throughout Queensland. These creoles may not be officially recognised but they may be referred to in their communities by a range of names such as Murri broken slang, 'lingo' and 'Aboriginal English'. Many Torres Strait Islander students speak Torres Strait creoles, which is now known in the Torres Strait as Yumpla Tok. In some places there is strong recognition and ownership of these language varieties such as Yumpla Tok in the Torres Strait. At Yarrabah in Far North Queensland they are now referring to their everyday vernacular as Yarrie lingo, and the community has quite a lot of ownership around that.⁷⁶

- 2.118 The Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) informed the Committee of the languages being spoken in the Torres Strait. They stated:

There are two traditional languages in the Torres Strait region. Meriam Mir, spoken in the Eastern Islands, has two distinct dialect groups, and Kala Lagaw Ya has four distinct dialect groups. A lingua franca known as Torres Strait Creole is also spoken as a common language shared between all the different languages and dialect groups.⁷⁷

- 2.119 The Committee was provided with an example of what was called Broome English during a public hearing. Ms Yu explained the following to the Committee:

I think Broome English is an amalgamation of Asian languages, English and all the different Aboriginal languages around the place. It is also English words which could have a completely

75 C Gorman, *Committee Hansard*, Brisbane, 6 October 2012, p. 2.

76 C Gorman, *Committee Hansard*, Brisbane, 6 October 2011, p. 2.

77 TSRA, *Submission 146*, p. 2. A table outlining languages spoken in the Torres Strait can be found in the submission on pp. 2-3.

different meaning. I will give you an example. I do not know if they still use it in football, but one of the terms in football was he "upstairs 'em" – meaning he took a screamer over somebody else. So that is an example of Broome English.⁷⁸

- 2.120 In many areas of Australia, the traditional/heritage languages of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are no longer in everyday use, so they are no longer spoken as the home language (sometimes also referred to as the 'first language' or 'mother tongue') of the young people within the community. These young people may speak a variety of Aboriginal English and/or an Aboriginal or Torres Strait creole and/or Standard Australian English as their home language.
- 2.121 Varieties of Aboriginal English and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander creoles have distinct and systematic differences from Standard Australian English, both linguistically and conceptually. These languages are sometimes referred to as 'contact languages' or 'mixed languages'; they will be the only language spoken by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students beginning school, and thus these students strongest language for learning.⁷⁹
- 2.122 At the public hearing in Brisbane the Committee was interested to hear more about the term contact languages. Miss Gorman explained:
- The term 'contact language' has been used because there is a spectrum. Not only can creole move along a spectrum from more like standard Australian English to more like the traditional language, but there is also confusion. The distinction between creole and a dialect is a very grey area. That is why that term has been used.⁸⁰
- 2.123 The Queensland DET summarised the different Indigenous languages in use in Queensland. In Queensland most students in Indigenous communities speak a contact language (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander creole or related variety) as their vernacular or everyday language. Contact languages, such as creoles and related varieties, are languages that have evolved through contact between people who speak different languages. A number of different creole varieties are spoken throughout Queensland.

78 C Yu, *Committee Hansard*, Broome, 30 April 2012, p. 8.

79 The Australian Council of TESOL Associations, ACTA, *Submission 72*, p. 8.

80 C Gorman, *Committee Hansard*, Brisbane, 6 October 2011, p. 3.

- 2.124 In a few areas in Queensland, students may speak a traditional language as their strongest variety. These areas include:
- Aurukun where students may speak a Wik variety as their first language
 - on Saibai, Dauan and Boigu Islands in the top west of the Torres Strait, where they may speak Kawa Kawaw Ya as their first language or as a strong second, and
 - far west Queensland from Camooweal to Urandangi where some children whose families have links to places to the west (such as Lake Nash in the Northern Territory) may speak Alyawarre.⁸¹

Number of speakers

- 2.125 Languages or dialects can be maintained by very small groups of people. The small number of speakers of some Indigenous languages is not necessarily a result of declining use. Indigenous people who speak Indigenous languages now have increased contact with speakers of other Indigenous languages, English and creoles. They are exposed to English through the education system and the media. In this context, the maintenance of Indigenous languages with small numbers of speakers is more difficult.⁸²
- 2.126 In 2010, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reported that:
- 33% of Indigenous children in remote areas spoke an Indigenous language as their main language at home.
 - For Indigenous people aged 15 years and over:
 - ⇒ 42% in remote areas spoke an Indigenous language at home;
 - ⇒ 73% in remote areas spoke, or spoke some words of, an Indigenous language in comparison to 32% of those living in major cities and 28% of people in regional areas;
 - ⇒ 15% had difficulty in both communicating in English and being understood by English speakers.⁸³
- 2.127 The difficulty in categorising Indigenous languages was brought to the Committee's attention. For example, the data collected by the ABS may have asked if an Indigenous language was spoken however it does not

81 Queensland DET, *Submission 109*, pp. 6-7.

82 ABS, 'Population composition: Indigenous languages' <www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/2f762f95845417aeca25706c00834efa/aadb12e0bbec2820ca2570ec001117a5!OpenDocument> accessed 16 July 2012.

83 ABS, *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey 2008*, www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/mf/4714.0/ accessed 12 September 2012.

analyse the proficiency of the language spoken nor the type of Indigenous language, such as whether it is a traditional or contact language.

2.128 The *NILS report 2005* used the UNESCO indicators to assess the state of languages. Indicator one focused on intergenerational language transmission, Indicator two focused on the absolute number of speakers and Indicator three focused on the proportion of speakers. Results from the *NILS report 2005* highlight the dramatic decline in the number of language speakers:

Using the NILS Indicator One – Intergenerational Language Transmission data of proficiency/use by age group it is evident that:

- Between 3 and 6 languages are 'safe/strong' (Grade 5)
- 2 languages are 'definitely endangered' (Grade 3)
- 9 languages are 'severely endangered' (Grade 2)
- 14 languages are 'critically endangered' (Grade 1).⁸⁴

2.129 Table 2.1 shows the Grading system that was used in the NILS report.

Table 2.1 Grading System

Degree of endangerment	Grade	Speaker population	Age Groups
Safe	5	Language is used by all age groups including children.	All
Unsafe	4	The language is used by some children in all domains; it is used by all children in limited domains.	Used by between 30% and 70% of the <20 age group
Definitely endangered	3	The language is used mostly by the parental generation and upwards.	Used only by >20 years old
Severely endangered	2	The language is used mostly by the grandparental generation and upwards.	>40 years old
Critically endangered	1	The language is known to very few speakers of great - grandparental generation.	>60 years old
Extinct	0	There is no speaker left.	None

Source: *National Indigenous Languages Survey Report 2005*, p. 31

84 AIATSIS and FATSILC, *National Indigenous Languages Survey Report 2005*, p. 11.

At risk languages

- 2.130 The *NILS report 2005* emphasised the urgency of the problem facing all Australians to keep many of the endangered Indigenous languages alive. The NILS report stated:

Australia has been singled out as the country that has witnessed the largest and most rapid loss of languages of anywhere in the world, over the last century. The overall decline and current situation in Australia is similar to North America – in both cases Indigenous groups are similarly relatively small and powerless inside states dominated by settler groups mainly of European origin.⁸⁵

- 2.131 An interesting point was made by Lola Jones where she discussed the urgency to revitalise traditional languages but noted two main difficulties traditional languages faced. One was due to the fragility of the elders who know the language and secondly, the influence of and prevalence of English:

We need our old people, and our old people are the ones that we need to keep going back to. It might be three or four old people you have to go to. But it is very hard, because our old people are getting frail. In some communities people do not see the urgency because they say, 'Plenty of people talk language.' But the reality is for all of our languages that they really are endangered by English, Kriol and Aboriginal English.⁸⁶

- 2.132 This finding was noted in the *NILS Report 2005* in discussions about intergenerational language transmission and endangerment:

At Lajamanu in the NT, a similar first phase of shift could also be occurring, in the Warlpiri language, since although the children there still understand the old language and can speak it under certain circumstances, they mostly choose not to and instead speak a mixed code of 'Light Warlpiri'.⁸⁷

Current languages in use

- 2.133 The 2011 Census data showed that more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are speaking an Indigenous language at home in comparison with the data from the 2006 Census. This increase could be
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85 AIATSIS and FATSILC, *National Indigenous Languages Survey Report 2005*, p. 24.

86 L Jones, *Committee Hansard*, Broome, 30 April 2012, p. 11.

87 AIATSIS and FATSILC, *National Indigenous Languages Survey Report 2005*, p. 68.

attributed to either an increase in work being carried out in this area having positive impact on the number of Indigenous speakers or possibly an improvement to the way the data is collected more accurately.

- 2.134 For example, the Census head of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander statistics commented on the improvements in the way the data was collected:

[The ABS] ... employed people who know everyone in every house, speak the local languages, so that people could have some ownership of the process. In urban communities people provided support for Indigenous people and also tried to break down barriers by explaining that the information is kept private and what it is used for.⁸⁸

- 2.135 In Australia about 61 800 people speak an Indigenous language up from 56 000 in 2006 census data. Of these, about 21 percent speak an Australian creole.

- 2.136 In 2011 the ABS calculated that 56 681 Northern Territory residents had a language background other than English, equivalent to around 27 percent of the population. The 2011 census found that, of the total Northern Territory population, 16.3 percent (34 438 people) speak an Indigenous language⁸⁹:

The largest group of Indigenous language users (5 417) identified as speakers of Arandic language varieties; 77 percent (4 173) claimed to speak it well or very well. The second largest group are the 5 097 who identify as Yolngu speakers; 68.7 percent (3 501) claimed to be proficient; that is, to speak it well or very well. What these figures could be taken to indicate is that intergenerational language shift is more evident in the northeast of the Territory than it is in the Centre.⁹⁰

- 2.137 AIATSIS has been managing a database for Indigenous languages called AUSTLANG. The core of AUSTLANG is a database which assembles information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages from a number of sources. The database contains the following information about each Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language: alternative/variant names and spellings, history of the number of speakers, geographical

88 The Koori Mail, *Indigenous Population is 548 370 – a 20 percent jump!*, 27 June 2012, p. 5.

89 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census of Population and Housing*, 2011, <[www.agencysearch.australia.gov.au/search/search.cgi?collection=agencies&form=simple&profile=abs&query=census of population and housing 2011](http://www.agencysearch.australia.gov.au/search/search.cgi?collection=agencies&form=simple&profile=abs&query=census%20of%20population%20and%20housing%202011)> accessed 12 September 2012.

90 B Devlin, *Submission 81*, p. 2.

distribution, classifications from various sources, resources, documentation, programs and researchers.⁹¹

- 2.138 During the inquiry the Committee noted the significant momentum on language projects and research being carried out throughout Australia in relation to Indigenous languages. It was evident by the number of submissions received for the inquiry as well as the number of projects on the ground either maintaining or reviving Indigenous languages. The Indigenous Languages Support program, administered by the Commonwealth Office for the Arts stressed the point that each year, funding requests far exceed the total amount of funding available. In 2011-12, the program received 90 applications seeking approximately \$14.5 million against the 2011-12 budget of \$9.6 million.⁹²
- 2.139 Using estimated numbers of speakers of languages, based on several available sources including NILS, there are 145 languages still being spoken, of which:
- 19 languages have more than 500 speakers
 - 45 languages have between 10 and 50 speakers, and
 - 67 languages have less than 10 speakers.
- 2.140 It should be noted that language shift and endangerment are the critical factors in languages having less than 50 speakers. The NILS report predicted that based on current trends, by 2050, if allowed to remain unchecked, the situation of Australia's Indigenous languages would be such that there was unlikely to be any significant numbers of Indigenous languages spoken in Australia. It may be that of the current 18, only a small number of strong languages would be left by 2050.⁹³

Committee comment

- 2.141 The Committee notes the evolving nature of languages and understands that research and data collection is challenging given the sparse geographical spread of Indigenous languages throughout Australia. The Committee commends the significant work that was carried out for the National Indigenous Languages Survey and published in 2005 (*NILS 2005*)

91 AIATSIS, *Australian Indigenous Languages Database*, <<http://austlang.aiatsis.gov.au/disclaimer.php>> accessed 2 August 2012.

92 Office for the Arts, *Submission 127*, pp. 6-7.

93 Details on specific languages and the number of speakers in Australia can be referenced in chapter 6 of the NILS 2005 report. AIATSIS and FATSILC, *National Indigenous Languages Survey Report 2005*, p. 68.

Report) and keenly awaits the updated report due to be published in the latter part of 2012.

- 2.142 The Committee considers that the status attributed to traditional languages should be the same for all creole languages, also called contact languages. In the past, creoles have not been classified as languages in their own right however a majority of witnesses who spoke with the Committee deemed creoles to be distinct languages. The Committee believes there will be important benefits for Indigenous children in schools where the contact language or creole is recognised as their first language and ESL teaching is used accordingly. This is discussed further in Chapters 4 and 5.
- 2.143 The Committee notes that through processes of colonisation, changed settlement patterns and dispersed kinship connections, creoles have become the identified home language for some communities. These languages must be recognised for the value and meaning they hold for the communities that speak them.
- 2.144 The Committee was disturbed to realise the dramatic decline in Indigenous languages that is continuing within each generation. The Committee recognises the significant role that languages play in assisting to improve health, education, employment and general wellbeing indicators within Indigenous communities.
- 2.145 The Committee is aware of the significant Indigenous cultural heritage that is stored with Indigenous languages. Therefore the Committee strongly encourages the Commonwealth Government to increase the prominence and understanding of Indigenous languages for all Australians through a variety of measures that are discussed in the following chapters.

