

Turning back the tide of Indigenous language loss: children to the rescue?

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For the majority of the period since white colonisation of Australia, various policies have had the effect of subverting Indigenous Australian languages. Consequently many Indigenous languages have been lost and many others are in danger of being lost.

Although attitudes have changed in the last 50 or 60 years, Australia remains a mono-linguistic country. While speaking an Indigenous language is no longer frowned upon, it is still a struggle for speakers of some languages to use their language and thereby ensure its continuation into the future. The best way to preserve a language is to pass it down to the next generation and encourage communication in that language. The children therefore become an important factor in the continuation of language, and possibly a barometer of the likelihood of language continuation in the future.

Australian Indigenous languages account for 2 per cent of the 7,000 languages spoken throughout the world. Unfortunately they also comprise 9 per cent of the world's critically or severely endangered languages (Forrest 2013). Of the original number of more than 250 known Australian Indigenous languages, only about 145 are still spoken and 110 are critically endangered (<http://arts.gov.au/indigenous/languages>). The children in *Footprints in Time* represent the next generation of Indigenous children to whom the responsibility for the preservation of their languages is being passed.

As such, *Footprints in Time* data may provide an understanding of the context in which Indigenous children across Australia are acquiring Australian Indigenous languages.

This research compares the linguistic abilities of young Indigenous children in *Footprints in Time* with those of their primary carers and describes the linguistic environment in which this generation of Indigenous children are growing up. The data is from Wave 4, a time in the children's lives when all of the older cohort and 60.2 per cent of the younger cohort were in school or an early education program.

In Wave 4 all children are listed as speaking English. For children who use another language at home, some may have been unfamiliar with English until they started school. Others may have heard it more widely used in the community or the media. Some children's knowledge of English may be limited. The majority of interviews with the primary carers from whom the data about languages was collected were conducted in English (1,178), with 24 conducted in an Indigenous language and 81 in a creole.

For this analysis, creoles are dealt with separately from other traditional Indigenous languages. While the creoles are classified as separate languages and are primarily used for communication by and with Indigenous people, they were not in existence as Indigenous languages in Australia prior to white settlement. They are modern Indigenous languages that reflect the contact with the English language (www.ourlanguages.net.au).

Table 42 shows the numbers and types of languages being spoken by both cohorts of *Footprints in Time* children in Wave 4. Of the 320 children (24.9 per cent of the sample) who speak either a traditional Indigenous language or a creole, 53 speak both a traditional Indigenous language and a creole.

Table 42: Language types spoken by the children in Wave 4

Language type	Number
English/Aboriginal English	1,283
Traditional Indigenous language	204
Creole	169
Foreign language	41
Sign language	4
Total children	1,283

Table 43: Numbers of languages spoken by the children in Wave 4

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
925	285	60	10	1	1	1

Table 43 shows the number of languages children speak; 27.9 per cent speak 2 or more languages to some extent. This is a much higher rate of multilingualism than for Australian children in general (McLeod 2011; Verdon, McLeod & Winsler 2014).

Parental input is critical to the language use of children. Intergenerational transmission is the key path to the children learning Indigenous languages. Children are much more likely to speak or learn an Indigenous language if their parent speaks one (Forrest 2013).

Table 44 compares the number and percentage of parents and children speaking each type of language.

Table 44: Parent and child speakers by language type, number and percentage

Language	Primary carer		Study child	
	Number	per cent	Number	per cent
English	1,225	95.8	1,283	100.0
Indigenous language	229	17.9	204	15.9
Creole	174	13.6	169	13.2
Foreign	36	2.8	42	3.3
Sign	1	0.1	4	0.3
Total	1,279		1,283	

Note: As some people speak multiple languages, percentages do not add up to 100. There were four primary carers in Wave 4 for whom there was no language information.

While all children speak English, even if only to a minimal degree, there are at least 54 children who are living in households in which their primary carer does not speak English. There were 105 children (around 8 per cent of the sample) whose primary carers were interviewed in a traditional Indigenous language or creole, suggesting low levels of English proficiency.

There are 322 primary carers who speak a traditional Indigenous language and/or a creole. This is 25.9 per cent of primary carers compared with 24.9 per cent of their children. While slightly more primary carers speak a traditional Indigenous language and/or creole at this stage, it should be noted that these children are still young and there is plenty of time for them to learn new languages especially as language learning becomes more common in school in later years. Some children may also lose the ability to speak one or more of their current languages if they move to different linguistic environments.

Information about the specific languages spoken by the respondents is collected and is used to derive variables for the dataset such as the language type and dominant languages of respondents. Due to the nature of the clustering of languages, the release of language names could potentially result in the identification of respondents. For that reason, individual language names are not made publicly available in the datasets. Language names have been used in this analysis to determine the extent to which endangered languages are being spoken. However, languages are not identified by name and are labelled using a letter of the alphabet.

In total, *Footprints in Time* children speak 52 traditional Indigenous languages and 2 creoles. Linguistic databases—AUSTLANG and Ethnologue

(www.austlang.aiatsis.gov.au, www.ethnologue.com)¹—were used to identify which languages spoken by *Footprints in Time* children are classified as no longer being spoken, critically endangered or having very few speakers. There are 37 languages spoken by the children that fall into this category. These languages are spoken by 106 children, accounting for 8.3 per cent of the total Wave 4 sample. Of these, five children speak two of these languages and one child speaks three.

For each language that the primary carer or child speaks, the primary carers are asked whether they ‘speak it as their main language’, ‘speak alright’ or ‘speak some words only’. This question is used to determine the child’s and primary carer’s dominant language. The dominant language is counted as the language or languages that are spoken to the greatest degree. In the dataset, this is categorised as English, an Indigenous language or equally fluent in both. There are 39 children for whom it was not possible to determine their dominant language. For this analysis, creoles have been separated from traditional Indigenous languages to create two additional categories—creole and equally fluent in English and a creole.

English is most prevalent as the dominant language for both primary carers (74.3 per cent) and children (84.7 per cent). This means that about one-quarter of the primary carers and around 15 per cent of the children are dominant in an Indigenous language (either traditional or creole).² After English, primary carers are most likely to speak both English and an Indigenous language equally fluently (13.8 per cent compared to only 1.5 per cent of children), while children are more likely to speak a creole as their dominant language (5.6 per cent compared with 3.1 per cent of their parents). Just over 3 per cent of both parents and children speak a traditional Indigenous language as their dominant language.

Forrest (2013) found that the probability of children learning or speaking an Indigenous language was highest (0.81) when their parents spoke both English and an Indigenous language equally fluently compared to being dominant in an Indigenous language (0.65) and dominant in English (0.31).

Many of the 52 languages spoken by the children are only spoken by one or two, which makes it difficult to draw any conclusions about patterns of transfer and use within languages. However, there are a few languages that have a large enough number of speakers. Table 45 shows the number of children speaking each of the nine most commonly spoken creoles and traditional Indigenous languages by the dominant language of the child. The remainder of the children who speak those languages did not speak them as a dominant language or there is no information about the level of ability in that language.

¹ Although they use different classifications, both databases were used as neither contained details about all the different languages spoken by the children.

² None were dominant in a foreign or sign language.

Table 45: Children’s dominant language by specific Indigenous language, number

Language	Total number of study children speakers	Dominant in this language	Equally dominant in English	Dominant in English
Creole A	88	64	7	3
Creole B	84	5	55	17
Language C	38	26	9	2
Language D	31	12	2	16
Language E*	23	0	1	1
Language F*	15	0	1	2
Language G*	9	2	4	0
Language H*	8	0	4	4
Language I*	7	0	2	4

*Endangered languages.

Speakers of creole A and language C are most likely to speak that language as their dominant language, suggesting it is most likely the language of the community. Speakers of creole B are most likely to be equally dominant in that language as well as English, suggesting that English is widely used in the community.

Languages E to I are all endangered, so it is perhaps not surprising that there are only a few speakers who are dominant in those languages.

Languages spoken by the parents play a particularly important role in determining which languages children learn and the extent to which they speak them. Children are most likely to adopt the language used by their parents. If only one parent speaks a language, children are most likely to use the language used between the parents to communicate (De Houwer 2007). This analysis is limited to language use of the primary carer only and does not include the interplay of languages within the two-parent relationship. Table 46 compares the knowledge of the nine languages from Table 45 by primary carers and their children.

Table 46: Language use common to primary carers and their children

Language	Total number of primary carer speakers	Total number of child speakers	Both primary carer and child speakers
Creole A	80	88	71
Creole B	94	84	63
Language C	31	38	29
Language D	23	31	21
Language E	33	23	12
Language F	6	15	4
Language G	11	9	9
Language H	1	8	0
Language I	9	7	3

The two creoles have a high level of both primary carer and child speaking the language. However, for some of the languages there is a surprisingly low overlap of both primary carers and children speaking it. This may be due to children speaking only a few words of the language, which they have learned outside the home (e.g. such as from school or a friend) or primarily speaking the language with another family member such as their father or grandparents.

Languages C and G have particularly high proportions of primary carers speaking the language with their child. It is interesting to note that languages A, C, D, F and H have more children than primary carers speaking them. This suggests that children speaking these languages are not necessarily reliant on their primary carer for the acquisition of those Indigenous languages.

For each language, primary carers are asked about who the child speaks that language with. In response to this question, respondents either selected 'everyone' or a combination of other people. The totals in Table 47 don't always match previous tables as information about who the child speaks with may be missing. Higher numbers in 'everyone' suggest that the language is more broadly community based.

Table 47: Who children are speaking Indigenous languages with, per cent

Language	Everyone	Parents	Grandparents	Other family	Friends	Teacher	Total Number
A	90.9	6.8	4.5	2.3	1.3	0.0	88
B	22.9	73.5	66.3	69.9	50.6	1.2	83
C	0.0	97.4	97.4	100.0	92.1	5.3	38
D	38.7	41.9	32.3	48.4	9.7	16.1	31
E	14.3	66.7	52.4	9.5	0.0	4.8	21
F	57.1	7.1	28.6	14.3	0.0	7.1	14
G	88.9	0.0	11.1	11.1	0.0	0.0	9
H	37.5	0.0	12.5	0.0	37.5	50.0	8
I	71.4	14.3	28.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	7

Note: A and B are creoles, C–I are traditional Indigenous languages.

Creole A appears to be much more widely spoken throughout the community in contrast to creole B, which seems to be spoken more within the family group. Language C is spoken within the family and friends context but not within the community.

Language D seems to be both family and community based. It also has a relatively high number of children (5) speaking with the teacher. These children are all in the one area. This particular language also has the highest number of children learning it at primary school.

Language E seems to be more family based than community based.

The smaller numbers of speakers make it more difficult to draw conclusions about the other languages. Languages F and G seem to be spoken more widely in the community rather than restricted to the family. Language H is the third most commonly learnt language in school, so it is understandable that half the children speak it with their teacher.

In addition to learning Indigenous languages in the family and community setting, children have increasing opportunities to learn Indigenous languages at school. The majority of children in the *Footprints in Time* sample are as yet in lower primary school, where there is a greater emphasis on learning English than on learning other languages. However, some children are already learning other languages and parents were asked their preferences for the role that Indigenous languages should play in the education of their children.

In Wave 3, parents were asked whether and how they would like their children to learn an Indigenous language at school. Table 48 shows how important primary carers consider Indigenous languages to be for their child's education and shows the difference between attitudes of parents in urban and more remote areas.

Table 48: Preferred method of delivery by level of relative isolation, per cent

Preferred delivery method	Urban/low	Moderate/high/extreme	Total
As a main language	0.6	2.5	1.0
In a bilingual program	21.5	62.2	31.2
As a compulsory second language	9.8	11.4	10.2
Available as a second language	58.6	17.9	49.0
No	9.4	6.2	8.7

In most Australian schools the main language of instruction is English, with other languages playing a lesser role. Overall most parents (91.3 per cent) support having Indigenous languages in the curriculum but very few want it as the main language of instruction (1.0 per cent), which suggests Indigenous primary carers in *Footprints in Time* consider English to be important for children’s outcomes. However, the preferred method of delivery varies considerably depending on the level of isolation. Primary carers in communities in areas of lower relative isolation (which also have a lower incidence of Indigenous language speakers) are more likely to prefer languages offered as a second language compared with primary carers from areas of high isolation, who prefer to have languages delivered through a bilingual program. Primary carers in areas of higher isolation were also more likely to support having Indigenous languages included in the curriculum (97.5 per cent compared with 90.6 per cent). When asked about their top five cultural priorities to pass on to their children, 30.1 per cent of parents nominated speaking an Indigenous language (27.3 per cent in areas of lower isolation and 38.9 per cent of parents in areas of higher isolation). *Footprints in Time* primary carers are much more likely to support more intensive language programs if the child or parent speaks an Indigenous language.

In Wave 5, primary carers were asked whether the child is learning an Indigenous language at school and if so, which one. A total of 106 responded that the child is learning an Indigenous language but some went on to name ‘Aboriginal English’ or ‘local Aboriginal language’. Of the children who were attending school and whose parent knew whether they were learning an Indigenous language, 9.3 per cent were learning one or more Indigenous language. Parents listed about 30 different languages that children were learning at school. This compares to 6.4 per cent learning a foreign language. Not surprisingly, these numbers are clustered within communities and may therefore not be representative of Indigenous language learning in schools across Australia. Of the top nine most spoken languages discussed previously, 19 children were learning language D, 16 were learning language F and 10 were learning language H in school.

In the past traditional Indigenous languages relied on verbal communication rather than written communication. However, ways of expressing some of these languages in written form have developed over time and some of the children in *Footprints in Time* are learning not only to speak but also to write in their Indigenous languages. The questions about whether the child is learning to write in an Indigenous language were only asked about children in the older cohort. Unfortunately, this only gives us information about small groups of children and there are only sufficient numbers of children to look at the patterns in the two creoles and language C (see Table 49). Overall 52 children were learning to read and write in an Indigenous language.

Table 49: Number of children learning to write in an Indigenous language

Language	Yes	Not yet	No—not going to learn	Total
Creole A	7	25	6	38
Creole B	7	22	14	43
Language C	22	2	0	24
Language D	2	2	5	9
Language E	0	10	1	11
Language F	2	3	1	6
Language G	3	0	1	4
Language H	3	0	0	3
Language I	1	0	1	2

Note: Total numbers include only those children for whom there is data about whether they read and write.

Many of the children had not started to learn to read or write in their language but the intention of the parents at least is that they will at some stage in the future. The exception is language C, which most of the children had already started learning to read and write.

Conclusion

After the losses of the previous two centuries, the process of re-establishing Indigenous languages has a long way to go, and for some languages, it is already too late. However, the old adage ‘better late than never’ is fitting here and the *Footprints in Time* data suggests that Indigenous languages do not appear to be dying with this generation. The data shows that more than 8 per cent of the children in the sample speak an Indigenous language considered to be critically endangered. The best scenario now and into the future is that the children will help to reinvigorate some languages. We will be able to examine this with later waves of data.

Overall, nearly a quarter of the children in the sample speak an Indigenous language (traditional or creole) to a greater or lesser extent. While children continue to learn languages from their parents they also have other opportunities to learn from other community members and at school. Even at the early stage of schooling for the *Footprints in Time* children in Wave 5, more children are learning Indigenous languages than foreign languages. Primary carer support for learning Indigenous languages is also strong and children have opportunities to learn Indigenous languages.

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