

# Aboriginal English: A Cultural Study

Aboriginal English has until recently been regarded as an "inferior" or "sub-standard" form of English. It is now more widely recognised that Aboriginal English is a dialect (or a series of dialects) of Australian English. There is evidence of a major divide between northern Australia and southern Australia, and that no doubt has something to do with the history of colonisation.

The use of Aboriginal English varies from community to community. For some it is a second language. For others it is the only language. For some it is the language to be spoken within an Aboriginal community, while standard Australian English is used in non-community contexts. A decade ago it was the usual practice for writings in Aboriginal English to be "sanitised" by white editors to make them conform to the rules of standard Australian English. The increasing acceptance of Aboriginal English as a dialect of Australian English is evident in the fact that many books are being published which use Aboriginal English.

Jay Arthur's book is an important contribution to our understanding of Aboriginal English. It includes almost 1000 words used in Aboriginal English, gleaned from written sources, although many of these are transcripts of orally recorded material.

Each word is treated according to the methods of traditional historical lexicography, with headword, part of speech, definition and historical citations. Wherever possible, headwords and citations are given geographical markers so that the reader can tell if the term is used Australia-wide, or belongs predominantly to the Aboriginal English of northern Australia, of south-west Western Australia, and so on. In addition, there is often discursive commentary on the cultural significance of a term, a feature which will prove especially valuable to readers unfamiliar

with Aboriginal culture, and which will make it a useful book for schools.

While individual words are given standard lexicographic treatment, the structure of the book is thematic. Chapter 1 deals with the way Aboriginal English is used to describe traditional cultural value and practices (*Big Sunday, boolyah man, lawman, mamu, shake a leg*). Chapters 2 to 4 deal with kinship relationships (*boori, cousin, brother, jarjum, kangaroo marriage, poison uncle*), social relationships (*cheeky, gwangy, humbug, shame*), and relationships with the land (*grandpa country, salt-water people, sickness country*).

Chapter 6 includes words used to describe whitefellows and their colonising practices and "legacies" (*balanda, bulliman, dog licence, goom, gubbise, lohan, watjiin, welfare time*). Chapter 7 examines the way the terminology of the cattle industry in northern Australia was transferred to describe human relationships (*break in, poddy, quiet, wild*).

Chapter 8 deals with some of the basic building blocks of the language (often revealing some of the pidgin inheritance of parts of Aboriginal English), structural features which derive from Aboriginal languages, and narrative markers (*allabout, all right, longa*). Chapter 9 deals with some of the terms and concepts which have emerged in Aboriginal culture in more recent times (*home-land centre, Invasion Day, keeping pace, Mardu, two ways*).

The book is sub-titled "A Cultural Study", a phrase with many resonances. The book is about a culture or cultures, and it demonstrates how Aboriginal English plays an important role in carrying and defining culture, and in defining a sense of identity. The book is constructed by an outsider to that culture, and one is always aware of the intellectual and moral activity involved in such a construction.

Perhaps most significantly, the book has an underlying argument

Bruce Moore, director of the Australian National Dictionary Centre, Canberra, reviews Jay Arthur's important new work on Aboriginal English, now recognised as a dialect of Australian English. Published by Oxford University Press, 1996; RRP \$24.95.

that we must get rid of the sentimental and deculturalising colonial myth that the understanding of Aboriginal culture is simply a matter of recovering or restructuring the past. As Jay argues in the Introduction: "This dictionary attempts to provide some understanding of the social organisation, the history, the value system, and the linguistic history of Aboriginal Australia through the ways in which Aboriginal people have extended, altered, and in other ways made a language of Europe their own."

The past is carried in this language, but the language also shows us how the culture is changing, adapting, and, as the final chapter demonstrates, surviving. □

