

# What is Aboriginal English?

Studies and explorations into this question define Aboriginal English in different ways and they offer us a variety of understandings about what Aboriginal English is. Here are some examples.

- ***Aboriginal English is a dialectal form of English that reflects [Aboriginal] language and culture... The form and structure of this language exhibit some speech patterns of standard English as well as speech characteristics and words originating from Aboriginal languages. Aboriginal English is a very effective medium of communication which has evolved to meet the particular needs and circumstances of its speakers. Aboriginal English also varies across the state due to the people, their culture and community.***

[This extract is taken from Williams, M. (1988). 'Aboriginal English'. In M. Williams (Ed.), *The Nunga Code* (p.10). Adelaide, SA: Education Department of South Australia. Mark Williams is Superintendent of Multicultural Affairs in the Department of Education of South Australia. ]

- ***Aboriginal English is the first language, or home language, of many Aboriginal children... throughout the whole of Australia. In subtle ways this language, a distinctively Aboriginal kind of English, is a powerful vehicle for the expression of Aboriginal identity...***

***In linguistic terms, the differences between Aboriginal English and other kinds of English are dialectal differences. Aboriginal English is, strictly speaking, a dialect of English...***

***Aboriginal English is not a Language Other than English (LOOT)... Although ERE is a distinctive linguistic marker of Aboriginal identity, and in this sense can be called an 'Aboriginal language', children who speak Aboriginal English as their first language are definitely speaking a dialect of English and have a good understanding and use of this dialect.***

[This extract is taken from Eades, D. (1995). *Aboriginal English*. Aboriginal Literacy Resource Kit. North Sydney, NSW: NSW Board of Studies, p.1. Diana Eades is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Linguistics at the University of New England, NSW, specialising in cross-cultural communication and forensic linguistics. She has worked with speakers of Aboriginal English, primarily in Queensland and New South Wales, since 1973.]

- ***Aboriginal English is a non-standard variety of Australian English. It is as rule-governed and linguistically complex as any other non-standard form...***

***Aboriginal English has only recently been recognised as a different lingo or dialect (in Aboriginal English: 'our own language').***

[This extract is taken from Hansen, W. (1998) 'Same language, different lingo'. *EQ Australia*, p. 2. Wendy Hansen is an independent consultant with special interests in literacy, dialectology and Aboriginal languages, culture (traditional and contemporary) and education. She works with the NSW Department of School Education.]

- ***Aboriginal English is one of the many recognised dialects of English. It stands with others as a legitimate communication system for its speakers.***

**Aboriginal English is not an imperfect attempt to learn standard English. It is a complex and coherent language system which is the result of clever use of the resources of English to express Aboriginal conceptual distinctions. (Ides in Hawkins, 1994, p. 176)**

**[Aboriginal English] has its own distinctive grammatical and semantic systems, by which it enables its speakers to express anything that can be expressed in standard English, though in some cases by different means. Its speakers also use it to express ideas that are not often expressed in standard English. Thus it must be seen as different, not deficient. (Hawkins, 1994, p.179)**

**Aboriginal English works in several codes. In its most distinctive form it includes Aboriginal words, and has a 'distinctive voice quality, rhythm and stress' (Sharpe, 1990, p.234). This code is usually only used by Aboriginal people when speaking with each other. In their communication with non-Aborigines, Aboriginal speakers tend to use an inter-language, an English which has on the surface much in common with standard English...**

**On the surface level the English which Aboriginal students use in the classroom may appear very similar to that spoken by rural or working class Australians. However... these students may be operating in a language which has major differences from mainstream English. These differences involve what goes on at the second level. At this level, speakers of Aboriginal English observe conventions and rules which are different to those of standard English.**

**Questions are used differently...**

**It is rare to make direct requests...**

**Language is highly contextualised...**

**Body language is common...**

[This extract is taken from Groome, H. (1995). *Working purposefully with Aboriginal students*. York, UK: Social Science Press, pp. 100-101. Howard Groome lectures in Aboriginal Education in the Faculty of Aboriginal and Islander Studies at the University of South Australia. In his career as an educator he has worked with Aboriginal students, their parents and teachers. ]

- **Kriol and Aboriginal English have different grammatical rules from English... in terms of tenses, plurals, prepositions, pronouns, possessions and questions...**

**[Kriol] is recognised by linguists as a language in its own right, defined as a creole like hundreds of others in the world because it is complex with a wide vocabulary and established rules and because people speak it as their first language...Kriol speakers as well as people who speak a traditional language as their first language need to learn English as a second language (ESL).**

**Aboriginal English is closer to Standard Australian English and linguistically is described as a range of dialects of English which are mutually intelligible with English, are governed by rules, and are systematic... Students who speak Aboriginal English need to learn English as a second dialect (ESD).**

[This extract is taken from Wiltshire, C. (???). 'Kriol defined: Do Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students learn English as a second language? GP , 13. Cheryl Wiltshire is Manager of the Derby/West Kimberley Skillshare Project and she has had more than eight years involvement in Aboriginal education in Northern Australia.]

- **Aboriginal English is the name given to dialects of English which are spoken by Aboriginal people and which differ from standard Australian English in systematic ways...**

**The social and linguistic development of early pidgin gave birth to Aboriginal dialects of English all over the country, as well as to two creole languages in some northern areas... A creole language is a type of language which develops when a pidgin language extends its structures and functions to become the language of speakers, not just a language of contact between two people who do not share the same first language. To distinguish the Aboriginal creole from other creoles..., it has been given the distinctive name 'Kriol'.**

**... To people not trained in linguistic and socio-linguistic analysis, it might appear that Aboriginal English is simply an uneducated variety of English. However, this would be an erroneous assumption, for while there are a number of features (particularly grammatical features) which AE shares with other non-standard varieties of English, there are others which are distinctively Aboriginal...**

**There is a continuum of AE dialects, ranging from close to SE at one extreme, to close to Kriol at the other. Increasingly the terms 'light' and 'heavy' are being used to refer to these extremes. Heavy AE is spoken mainly in the more remote areas where it is influenced by Kriol., while light varieties of AE are spoken mainly in metropolitan, urban and rural areas.**

**... AE is really a continuum of dialects. Certain features are distributed very widely through all dialects, while other features are localised within certain regions, or somewhere along the continuum from heavy to light varieties... Interested readers are referred to Malcolm and Kaldor (1991)\* for information about the distribution of AE features.**

\*Malcom, I. and Kaldor, S. (1991). Aboriginal English: An overview. In S. Romaine (Ed.), *Language in Australia*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

[This extract is taken from from Eades, D. (1993). 'Aboriginal English', *Pen* 93. Newtown, NSW: Primary Teaching Association, pp. 2-4. Diana Eades is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Linguistics at the University of New England, NSW, specialising in cross-cultural communication and forensic linguistics. She has worked with speakers of Aboriginal English, primarily in Queensland and New South Wales, since 1973.

- **Aboriginal English exhibits systematic differences from standard Australian English in sounds, vocabulary, extended texts and meanings.**

**Us mob, unna? [aren't we?] Sitting and yarning.  
Sharing is important to us Aboriginal people.**

**All varieties of Aboriginal English share many features with standard Australian English but also include features and social language behaviour that come from Aboriginal languages...[Aboriginal English] is like any other language bound by its own system of rules.**

[This extract is taken from Education Department of South Australia. (1997). *Aboriginal Perspectives Across the Curriculum*. Adelaide, SA

- **[Aboriginal English] is remarkably consistent across the continent... It is the first form of English that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children learn to speak, and it remains for them the preferred form for use when they are in the company of members of their own community... It is a**

*dialect of English which has not been standardised, and which therefore tolerates a good deal of variation. At the same time, it is rule-governed and non-random in its variation.*

***Aboriginal English is part of Australia's linguistic heritage. Despite the fact that it is commonly disparaged by non-Aboriginal Australians, and even by some of its own speakers who have accepted the common estimation of it as "rubbish English", it is a highly complex linguistic phenomenon many of the intricacies of which are still awaiting research-based explanation. .. It is a fully developed English, not a pidgin, yet its distinctive features tend to reflect a past history of pidginisation and creolisation.***

***...Aboriginal English must be maintained. It is a culture-carrier and a vehicle of thought for which Standard Australian English cannot be substituted... It needs to be given equal status with any other dialect of English as a vehicle of learning and expression.***

[This extract is taken from Malcolm, I. (1994). 'Issues in the maintenance of Aboriginal languages and Aboriginal English'. Keynote address to the 10th National Conference of the Modern Language Teachers' Association. Perth, WA: Edith Cowan University, pp. 13-14. Ian Malcolm is Professor of Applied Linguistics at Edith Cowan University. He leads an Aboriginal English research team, comprising Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers, which has investigated many aspects of the grammar, semantics and pragmatics of Aboriginal English and has extended knowledge of the ways in which Aboriginal English and Australian English draw on different conceptualizations. His work has been applied in the development of two-way bidialectal approaches to Aboriginal education.]

- ***...Sometimes it isn't merely a matter of a one-on-one correspondence between the Aboriginal English and the Standard English word or concept - the Aboriginal English word may incorporate a range of different English meanings... Aboriginal English is NOT simply uneducated English but constitutes a genuine dialect of English which needs to be respected and affirmed.***

[This extract is taken from Nicholas, C. (1994). 'Watch your language, eh?'. Paper presented to the Teacher Education Staff of Edith Cowan University while a Visiting Fellow in Aboriginal Education. Dr Christine Nicholls is an educator, writer, curator and Senior Lecturer in Australian Studies at Flinders University in Adelaide, South Australia. From 1982-1992 she worked at Lajamanu, a remote Aboriginal settlement in the Tanami Desert of the Northern Territory of Australia, first as a linguist and then as the Principal of the local Warlpiri Lajamanu School, which caters for all levels from Preschool through to Adult Education. Christine Nicholls has published more than 100 articles about Indigenous Australian education, art and languages, and has recently published a biography of Eastern Anmatyerr artist Kathleen Petyarre, in a book entitled Kathleen Petyarre: Genius of Place, co-authored by Professor Ian North.]

- ***Aboriginal English is the home language used by many of the children, parents and caregivers of the local Aboriginal community. Each community has its own dialect, which may differ from other communities due to the richness of their first language and environment.***

***Since Aboriginal English varies from community to community, opinions as to what Aboriginal English should be called also vary.***

[This extract is taken from NSW Board of Studies (1995). *The way we speak*. Aboriginal Literacy Resource Kit. North Sydney, NSW: NSW Board of Studies, p.1.]

- *Aboriginal English is a dialect of English which is widely spoken by Indigenous Australians, and which differs from Australian English in pronunciation, vocabulary, idiom and in the ways in which it is used. To most Indigenous Australians, Aboriginal English provides a link geographically with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the continent, as well as a link historically with Indigenous people of former generations. Unlike Indigenous languages, Aboriginal English is strongly present among urban and metropolitan Indigenous people as well as among those living in more remote areas.*

*Until recently, it has been common for people to refer to Aboriginal English in a derogatory way, whether as a “broken” or “distorted” form of the kind of English people regard as standard, or as a pidgin which does not have the status of a full language. Since the 1960s a series of linguistic studies in all states of Australia have confirmed that Aboriginal English (with certain local variations) is a consistent dialect spoken across the nation. It is different from Australian English, but it is an equally rich linguistic variety.*

[This extract is taken from Malcolm I. (10. October 2000). Report to the Inquiry into the Needs of Urban Dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples conducted by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs. Ian Malcolm is Professor of Applied Linguistics at Edith Cowan University. He leads an Aboriginal English research team, comprising Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers, which has investigated many aspects of the grammar, semantics and pragmatics of Aboriginal English and has extended knowledge of the ways in which Aboriginal English and Australian English draw on different conceptualizations. His work has been applied in the development of two-way bidialectal approaches to Aboriginal education.]