Victorian Aboriginal Languages

History

Over two hundred languages, and even more language varieties, were spoken in Australia prior to colonisation. Many of these languages are no longer in everyday use; some are spoken only for special purposes (such as ceremonies), some languages exist only in manuscripts, some are sleeping, and perhaps some are completely extinct. This loss of Australia's Aboriginal linguistic heritage is a direct result of contact with English.

Language displacement and loss has particularly affected Victoria and Tasmania, where Aboriginal languages are no longer spoken as the primary means of communication. Even so, most Victorian Aboriginal people are aware of their language heritage, although some may recall only fragments of the language passed down over the several generations since English settlement.

In the 19th century, information about the Aboriginal languages of Victoria was recorded by clergymen, squatters, policemen and others who were in contact with Aboriginal people. In the 1960s, Luise Hercus recorded a number of Victorian Aboriginal people talking about their languages on audio tape. These tapes are held at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) in Canberra.

The Aboriginal languages of Victoria are classified as Pama-Nyungan languages, and, as such, share many characteristics with other Australian languages, except for those in the Kimberleys and the Top End. This is important for those who are reconstructing, reclaiming and reviving Victorian languages, because it gives them a framework within which to work.

Within Victoria, some languages have been identified as belonging to particular groups, and these are listed below. The most widespread of these are the Kulin languages, and these languages are all related, to varying degrees. This means that researchers can compare the historical data for a given language with the other languages in the same group, as they often share a lot of vocabulary, and, in some cases, even grammatical markers.

Recently, Victorian Aboriginal people, together with linguists, have looked again at the material surviving for Victorian languages. The following list indicates those languages, and groups of languages, for which language material has been identified.

Language Group

1. Kulin

a)   Western Kulin (Western Victoria)
     Wemba Wemba (Swan Hill and Lake Boga)
     Barababaraba (Gunbower Area)
     Madhi Madhi (Balranald area)
     Ladji Ladji (Mildura area)
     Wadi Wadi (Swan Hill)
     Wadi Wadi (Piangil)
     Wergaia (Wimmera)
     Djab Wurrung (Grampians)
     Dja Dja Wurrung (Loddon Valley)
     Jardwadjali (Upper Glenelg River)

b)   Eastern Kulin (Melbourne and surrounds)
     Taungurung/Thagungwurrung (Goulburn Valley - southern)
     Woiwurrung (Yarra Valley)
     Boon Wurrung (Coastal Melbourne and Westernport)

c)   Wathaurong/ Wathawurrung (Geelong/Barwon Valley area)

d)   Gulidjan (Lake Colac area)

2. Warrnambool (Warrnambool – Portland area)

Dhauwurd Wurrung (Portland)
Keerray Woorroong (Warrnambool)
Tyakoort Woorroong (Camperdown)

3. Buandig (South West Victoria/Mt Gambier area)

4. Yorta Yorta/Bangerang and Yabula Yabula (Murray Goulburn area)

5. Dhudhuroa (High Country area)

6. Pallanganmiddang (Kiewa Valley area)

7. Gippsland area

Gunnai Kurnai
Brataualung (Corner Inlet area)
Krauatungalung (Lake Tyers area)
Brabralung (Mitchell River)
Tatungalung (Gippsland Lakes)
Braiakaulung (Latrobe River)

8. Ngarigu (Monaro-Snowy/Canberra and southwards into Northern Victorial area) is a separate language that extends into Northeastern Gippsland

We cannot be precise about the boundaries of any language, as descriptions of the location for each language can overlap, be incorrectly recorded, or, in some cases, be non-existent. However, the Dreaming Stories belonging to some groups do assist in defining their country.

Relatedness of Languages

Blake and Reid (1998) classified over 200 historical sources into language groups, using a method called lexicostatistics, which compares the words from each group to the words of other groups, to see how similar they are. They used at least 100 words of common vocabulary for each source, with the exception of Yabula Yabula, which has only a small amount of information available. If you look at the table below, you will see that no two language groups share more than 50% of the words used, which means that they can be considered to be separate language groups.

Percentages of Common Vocabulary Between Language Groups											
	WK	**BUAN**	**WARR**	**GULI**	**WATH**	**EK**	**YY**	**YAB**	**DHU**	**PALL**	**GIPPS**
Western Kulin	-	31	42	31	44	41	15	23	22	20	16
Buandig	-	-	35	20	17	23	15	11	11	10	10
Warrnam	-	-	-	23	26	30	12	16	10	14	18
Gulidjan	-	-	-	-	34	32	17	11	19	20	19
Wathaurong	-	-	-	-	-	46	15	15	14	16	18
Eastern Kulin	-	-	-	-	-	-	13	15	20	22	27
Yorta Yorta	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	37	18	27	20
Yabula Yabula	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	18	20	14
Dhudhuroa	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	31	13
Pallangan-middang	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	16
Gippsland	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Research on the Reclamation of Victorian Languages

In the last fifteen years, there has been a resurgence of interest by the Victorian Aboriginal people in their language heritage, as they assert their Aboriginal identity as emerging writers, playwrights, educators and scholars. The recent success in 2005 of the land claim negotiated with the Government of Victoria and by the Wotjobulak Barenji Gadjin Land Council in the Western district of Victoria, has also been accompanied by community initiated language reclamation research.

In 1992, the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) responded to an Aboriginal request by the Worawa Aboriginal College to develop an accredited Year 11-12 Study on Aboriginal Languages. The Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) study- *Indigenous Languages of Victoria: Revival and Reclamation,* was fully accredited in 2004 and requires students to learn where to find historical sources for Victorian Aboriginal languages and acquire skills in analysing such materials as part of the language reclamation process. Access to key historical and academic resources for Victorian Aboriginal languages is thus a crucial part of the implementation for this newly accredited VCE study. In addition, individual schools and the VCAA are working on the development of a P-10 curriculum for Aboriginal languages of Victoria, so access to historical and academic resources for teachers and curriculum writers is also crucial. There is also worldwide research interest in the documentation of endangered languages.

Written records of Victorian Aboriginal languages include language resources gathered in the 18th and early 19th centuries by government officials and interested private citizens. Some material was published at the time it was collected, and is available in the reference collections of major libraries. Other material is only available in manuscript sources in research libraries and/or on microfiche. More recently, linguists including Hercus, Dixon, Blake and Reid have worked on the classification of Victorian languages, and some linguists, including Blake, Reid, Clark, Krishna-Pillay, Bowe, Morey, and Fesl, have analysed the available material for particular languages, most of which is now available in published books and journals.

The Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages (VACL) has funded work with several Aboriginal Community Groups, resulting in the publication of works such as Krishna-Pillay, (1996). Bowe, Peeler and Atkinson (1997) is the result of collaborative research between Bowe, a linguist, and two Yorta Yorta women, which connected the contemporary language heritage for Yorta Yorta with historic sources. The resultant publication was funded by ATSIC (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission) Victoria.

Although most of the recently published linguistic descriptions are relatively widely available, those engaged in language research often want to have access to the original source material; the bulk of which is not held in Victoria. However, in the course of this project, several important historical books were found to be available in their entirety on-line, mostly for reading on-line. These books contain not only wordlists, but also valuable historical and cultural information. They can be accessed on the Historical Books page.

Standardised Spelling and Pronunciation Guide

This Web-Portal documents the vocabulary lists contained in the many different historical sources for selected Aboriginal Languages of Victoria.

The Linguists working on this project have also provided a Standardised Spelling for each Aboriginal word, based on linguistic analysis of the spelling in the various sources for that word, and spoken samples where they have been available. The Standardised Spelling incorporates specialist knowledge of the sound systems of Aboriginal languages, and uses a spelling system which is widely used to spell words in Aboriginal languages eg. Uluru, Kakadu, Yothu Yindi, Pitjantjatjara and which is broadly based on the International Phonetic Alphabet. These Standardised Spellings represent the word as closely as possible to what we believe is the way the word was pronounced at the time it was recorded. Where indicated, an entry may also incorporate sound changes noted by a linguist, such as Dr Luise Hercus, who recorded the words of the last speakers of several Languages in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). The use of the Standardised Spelling shows similarities and differences between words clearly, but is easier to read than IPA.

The Sound Systems of Australian Aboriginal Languages

The sound systems of Victorian Aboriginal languages are typically drawn from the following set of sounds. Voicing is not distinctive for stops, that is, the pairs t/d, tj/dj etc. These pairs are heard as one sound, not two. The sound is actually halfway between the pair, so, using t/d as an example, some people will hear [t] and others will hear [d].

Sound Systems of Australian Aboriginal Languages					
LABIAL	**INTER-DENTAL**	**ALVEOLAR**	**PALATAL**	**RETROFLEX**	**VELAR**
p/b	th/dh	t/d	tj/dj	rt/rd	k/g
m	nh	n	ny	rn	ng
	lh	l	ly	rl	
w			y		
		rr		r	

The Sound Systems of Australian Aboriginal Languages Long & Single Vowels

SINGLE VOWELS	LONG VOWELS	
i	pronounced as in p*i*zza	ii
u	pronounced as in bl*u*e	uu
a	pronunced as in f*a*ther	aa
e	pronounced as in b*e*d	ee (rhymes with *air*)
o	pronounced as in h*o*t	oo (*or*)

Interdental consonants such as th, nh, are pronounced with the tongue forward between the teeth.

Alveolar consonants, such as t, and n are pronounced similar to English, with the exception of the rr, which is often rolled or trilled.

Retroflex consonants are pronounced with the tip of the tongue curved back, as for Australian English 'r' blended with the sound of the following letter. For example, the sound represented as rd is like the sound 'd' but produced with the tongue in the same position as for 'r'.

Some languages lack either the Inter-Dental set of consonants or the Retroflex set.

The CD Rom that accompanies the book *Australia's Indigenous Languages'* published by the Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia in 1996 contains an explanation of this writing system with many samples to read and listen to.

A sample vocabulary entry from the Wergaia Language

The following example illustrates the wordlist entry for the Wergaia word for 'man' and how the Standardised Spelling *wutyu* has been derived.

This process has been followed for every word in every list to provide users of this site with a standardised spelling for each word. However, individual Communities may use different spellings than those used here.

Sample vocabulary entry from the Wergaia Language

MAN				
Standardised Spelling	*phonemic*	Comment	Audio	(This entry identifies the linguist's Standardised Spelling for the Aboriginal words and the phonemic spelling of the Aboriginal word, indicated by the slashes on either side of the word. This is a linguistic representation of the word using the sounds from the Language's phonemic inventory, an abstract sound system used by linguists to show the relationship between sounds in that Language. It is NOT the equivalent of English spelling.)
guli	/kuli/	*source of the name Kulin*	n/a	
wutyu	/wutyu/		n/a	
	/mityi mamuk/		n/a	
	Source/Reference:			(The words in this list are written exactly as they are in the historical sources. There was no standardised spelling system, so the spellings vary greatly. However, linguists are able to compare them sound by sound, to derive a standardised spelling)
guli	Howitt (1904:54-55) (Wergaia)			
oonity-oo	Barry (1867) Bewa			
wootcha	Curr (1887) No.207a Lake Hindmarsh			
woot-cha	Francis (1878) in Smyth Lake Hindmarsh			
wootye	Hagenauer (1878) in Smyth Pine Plain			
['wutjU]	Hercus (1986) Wergaia (Djadjala) Vocab (phonetic)			
wudju	Hercus (1986) Wergaia (Djadjala) Vocab (phonemic)			

wotjo	Howitt (1904:54-55) (Wergaia)
wootyoo	Mathews (ms8006/3/4/V1:22-29) Jatjalli
wutyu	Mathews (1902) Tyattyala Grammar
wutyu	Mathews (1902) Tyattyala Vocab
wutyu	Mathews (1903) Buibatyalli
wood.tchoo	Robinson Papers (V65/pt4:113-48) Baal
wootcha	Smyth (1878) 10-11 Horsham
wutyo	Smyth (1878) 10-11 Lake Hindmarsh
wutyo	Spieseke (1878) in Smyth 76 Lake Hindmarsh: Kurm-me-lak tribe
wut-yo	Spieseke (1878) in Smyth 55-58 lake Hindmarsh
wudju	Hercus (1986) Wergaia (Djadjala) Grammar
wootcha	Wilson (1878) in Smyth 77 Horsham
watye	Spieseke (1872) in Taplin 84-88 Wimmera
mechermamc	Barry (1867) Maal

Most of the words in this list relate to the word wutyu, but not all. Those that are clearly a different word are given a different standardised spelling in another entry in the wordlist, eg, see guli. However, this list allows you to see that there was more than one word recorded with this meaning.

All of the 17 entries that record *wutyu* begin with [w], so that is the first sound in the standardised spelling.

The second sound is written variously as *u*, *oo* and *a*. The sound represented by both *u* and *oo* in English, the first language of most of the recorders, is the sound represented by *o* in the English word 'who', and this occurs in 16 of the 17 sources, so it is safe to assume that this would be the second sound. This sound is written as [u] in IPA, and in many, if not most, of the languages that use the Roman alphabet. This is not to say that it must be written this way, only that this is the system used by the linguists who worked on these Languages.

The third sound is recorded as *tch*, *ty*, *tj*, and *dj*. The letter sequences *ty*, *tj* and *dj* are used in IPA, and in many languages, to represent the sound most often written as *ch* in English. If you try to pronounce the words spelled this way with the t followed very quickly by the *y*, you will notice that it sounds like *ch*. In the Wergaia wordlist, this sound is represented by *ty*, which is the third sound in the word.

The last sound in the word is written variously as *a*, *e*, *u*, *o*, and *oo*.

As discussed above, *u* and *oo* represent the sound [u], so seven of these spellings indicate that this was the final sound.

We already know that *o* can represent the sound [u], as in the word 'who'.

The sound [u] is produced high in the back of your mouth, and the sound represented by the spelling *o* is also produced in the back of your mouth. It is easy to confuse these two sounds, particularly when they are unstressed or said quickly.

We also know that [o] is not found in very many Australian Languages, so it is more likely to be [u] than [o]. Together with the *u* and *oo* sources, 11 of the 17 sources suggest that this sound is [u].

The sound written as *a* can be pronounced as [a], as in 'father', or as [?], the sound in 'cup', which is a short version of [a]. Try saying 'father' with a short vowel, and 'cup' with a long vowel, and you will hear this for yourself. Both of these sounds are made low in the centre of your mouth. However, only four of the sources suggest this sound.

The two remaining sources have *e*, which, in English, is sometimes pronounced as it is in the word 'peg', where it is stressed. But *e* is also used in English when the sound is indistinct, as in words like 'often', where it is unstressed. We know that in Australian Languages, the stress is generally on the first syllable, so the second vowel is likely to be the same as the *e* in 'often', because it is probably unstressed. Only two sources have recorded this sound.

The evidence indicates that the last sound was probably pronounced as [u].

When you put all of this evidence together, it seems most likely that the word for'man' was said as wutyu, where the [u] represents the vowel sound in 'who', and the [ty] represents the first sound in 'church'.

This process has been followed for every word in every list to provide users of this site with a standardised spelling for each word. However, individual Communities may use different spellings than those used here.

Recycled References

Before the introduction of modern technology, those wishing to research language only had access to hard copy published works and/or someone else's manuscripts. Many of the early authors copied the works of others into their own articles, generally acknowledging the source of their information. However, sometimes these acknowledgements were either obscure or simply missing, or they failed to mention that their source had acknowledged an even earlier source. We are calling these *recycled references.*

We have investigated each of the recycled references as thoroughly as we can, but we have not always been able to identify the original source. For example, you will find the following entry on the site:

> Parker, Edward Stone. 1843. "Burapper". In *NSW Legislative Council Votes and Proceedings* 1843; reprinted in *House of Commons Sessional Papers* (Great Britain) in August 1844 Vol 34; subsequently reported in Eyre 1845 *Journals of expeditions of discovery into Central Australia, and overland from Adelaide to King George's Sound, in the years 1840-1 : sent by the colonists of South Australia, with the sanction and support of the government : including an account of the manners and customs of the aborigines and the state of their relations with Europeans*. Vol 2, p401-2, and also in Smyth, R. Brough 1878 *The Aborigines of Victoria and Other Parts of Australia and Tasmania*. Melbourne:Victorian Government Printer, republished in facsimile 1972 Melbourne: John Currey, O'Neil. Vol 2.p167-9.

As you can see, this list first appeared in 1843 in the *NSW Legislative Council Votes and Proceedings.* It was then reprinted in Britain in 1844, and subsequently by Eyre in 1845. Smyth then used it in his 1878 work, attributing it to Eyre. Finally, the Smyth volume was republished in facsimile in 1972.

Although we have attributed this work to Parker, we cannot be absolutely certain that he was the original source, as the web link to the *NSW Legislative Council Votes and Proceedings 1843* is not electronically searchable. We did

attempt to find the entry manually, but this became too time-consuming. However, we have noted that the original author is uncertain in the *Publication Type* column.

It is important to recognize recycled references, as they can skew the data. If we had treated all of the above sources as separate references, we would have had four different sources confirming the words in the list. Let's say that the word for *man* is X in the recycled references. There may have been other sources with a word for *man*, and they might have said Y, not X. What if there were only three sources with Y? We would think that X was better, because it had four sources, not three. However, this is not the case. The list has not been confirmed by three other sources, it has only been repeated, or recycled, by them. There is really only one source that says that the word for *man* is X, not four. It is more likely that Y is correct, as three different sources said it was the word for *man*. So watch out for recycled references! All you need to do is to compare the spelling of the Language words in the lists. As you will see from the sources, the spellings for one word are not often the same, and you will never see two different wordlists with all of the Language words spelled the same way, unless a linguist has written them phonetically.