# Aboriginal Community Leaders Interviews - Transcript

Question 4 - What is it like to reclaim a Language?

**Bruce Pascoe:** Well when, when I began reclaiming the Wathaurong Language, you could look at it as being impossible or dead easy. Impossible because there were no speakers left, very, very few Elders who knew any Language at all, but, and that made it difficult of course, but it also made it easy because you just had to go through all the sources that you could find.

So a lot of it was written down. It was trawling through libraries, museums, things like that, which took a long time. The really good part of it, of the reclamation, was talking to the Elders who did know a little bit. And so I really enjoy those times, even I was talking to people who weren’t Wathaurong Language speakers, I was learning little tricks about how to find that Language, and who to go and see so.

Uncle Banjo Clarke was very kind to me. Auntie Zelda Couzens - marvellous woman. All of those people helped me a great deal.

It’s very, very difficult to, for people who haven’t spoken Language to turn around and do it. But I always say to people, when they’re trying to speak Language for the first time, just to be brave and, know that the ancestors are looking down on them and just loving the sound of those words being spoken again.

And I think, when you start speaking Language, you notice the difference in your own soul, and you notice the difference when you are looking at birds and speaking their name. It does my soul good to go back and talk words that my great-grandmother would have spoken. So don’t be shamed about Language. Just be brave and have a go, because the ancestors will be loving you for it. It’s a great thing to do for your people.

**Diane Singh:** It’s, it’s sort of hard because we don’t have anyone to speak with out there you know, I mean it’s not enough to just sort of read it and hear it and you’ve gotta be able to repeat it because quite often you can learn a Language and you might hear it a lot and you know what the speaker is saying, but when you have to answer back you become a little bit shy and reluctant to speak back.

I know I’ve been sort of trying over the years to learn Hindi because my husband is Indian and, but there’s only me you see, I don’t hear the Language speaking, being spoken around. I listen to the tapes and even when I listen to my, the tapes that Luise Hercus did with my grandfather and his sister and other community members on Wemba Wemba, I, they were just odd words. They weren’t sentences or anything, and that’s where it sort of falls down.

And because they’re so old, they’re very distorted so you really have to sit there and listen. And I mean I’ve got the dictionary also, but I mean there are a lot of words and you can’t keep replaying the words and even repeating.

Even though my grandfather learnt Language I would only vaguely hear him speaking it because he and his, they would sort of clam up, because they knew they weren’t allowed to teach us because kids are like copies, you know. We’d go out there and you’d sort of hear words but, they were just part of the conversation and we never sort of considered them to be either Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, you know.

They were just sort of a word that was sort of thrown in here and there. I did use to listen to grandfather singing, but even that was sort of muffled he’d sort of sit down. He was always, he loved to sing. I did learn a couple of Language songs as I was sort of growing up through my grand aunt and, but even then if you walked into the room they would stop speaking. They just wouldn’t speak.

And, I believe that grandfather’s mother was very, very fluent in the Language. She and all those old Wemba Wemba people up Moonahcullah, they were very fluent and. But apart from that I’ve never sort of really, you know, heard anyone speaking and. Therefore a lot us, because of, you know, the past things that had happened to all of us when we were growing up and the removal policy we just never were, we were never with a family where these things could have been handed down.

Aunty Geraldine Briggs is my grand aunt, she’s my grandmother’s sister and, of course, she spoke the Language and she helped Heather Bowe and other members of her family put the YortaYorta dictionary together.

My great grandfather was Stan Day and he and his sister were interviewed over the years by Luise Hercus. And, of course, all those recordings are on, on. Well, you can actually get the recordings, I believe there’s quite a lot of recordings in Canberra where people can go in. And I mean that’s a start, that and the dictionary.

Also, my other great, great grandparents were Taungurung, so they, and Leigh Healy has actually put together with Christina, the Taungurung dictionary. So I’ve got all of them, and I was sort of looking at all the differences and there were words that were similarities.

**The Late Tandop David Tournier:** I wasn’t aware of the Wemba Language as such. And we sort of started using some of the Wiradjuri Language, but then we found that there was Wemba Language, so we got rid of the Wiradjuri, obviously, because it wasn’t the Language of the land, and then we started looking, looking at, you know, the Language from up there, and started using it within the lesson plans.

You know, to learn how the Language works it’s, and it’s, great to be able to get that sequence going. And there’s still a lot of stuff to learn about the Languages, not just actually saying the words, and putting the words together, but putting the words in the right place, right sequence and then having the right word endings and beginnings in the right place and getting that right is great.

**The late John "Uncle Sandy" Atkinson:** People from New South Wales are coming this week down to Victoria to… look at our methods of how we, we resurrected our Language and started it going again you know. So, there’s a lot of, there’s a lot of work to do. It could easily be lost, that’s the saddest part of our Language, it can easily be lost.

I think, I think one of the things that…about reclaiming our Language wasn’t, it wasn’t hard or difficult, it was because it was a challenge. I mean, it was all in the archives, and you know that becomes a challenge for you. Once you go the archives and pull that bit of paper out and look at it there you know and it becomes fascination and you, all of your emotions are likely to come to you at that stage.

I remember when I worked at the, in Melbourne at the museum you know, and, and, and, later on I went and worked for Aboriginal affairs and the State Library and all of those things. And I did a lot of research and I was in a very powerful place to get it, and you know, and, and, I could remember, you know, lots of times when I’d be angry, cause what I read, you know, it would be horrible you know, and, and negative and all of those things.

And I could remember having a good think about, about myself. And I thought, there’s one thing that I have to come to terms with here and that’s my anger. If I am going to display that and keep doing, being angry, please close the book and walk away, because I ain’t going to learn nothing.

And I learned to control my anger, and I learned to look at it as a challenge, and I learned to think about people and so. Well, even if there were atrocities, it wasn’t this group of people that are here today. These people that are here today I need to help me.

You know, I built Australia’s first Indigenous museum and I, and, and, that was the attitude I had. I went and knocked on their door. And when the guy come out and said ‘yes what can I do for you?’ And I said ‘Hi my name is John Atkinson and I need your help’. And he, I mean, he was fascinated and nearly fainted I’m sure, but you know out of that became this journey of mine where I was, made myself into a bridge builder and relationship builder and all of those things.

I now know that we are on a journey. And, and this journey is probably one of the most exciting journeys out, because this is, there’s a generation now of my people that, that, that needs to have a clear vision of this journey. And the reason for that is why I’ve been so positive, and made myself so positive about this understanding it, is that I want my children to start off at that understanding and their journey will be much less difficult, you know, without that anger.

I’m very excited that we have now reached a point on, in our journey where we. Nothing will ever get lost again. You know, it, even if there’s an archive it will be at such a high quality way of life that’s preserved and recorded that, that generations to come will be able to understand it.

**Richard Kennedy:** *Nyarringek Richard Kennedy. Wotjobaluk Yuman. Larrek Wendoureeata*. My name is Richard Kennedy and I speak Wergaia.

The journey of trying to get Language up and running was started 2005. A few members of the community and education people wanted to get our Language going. They used the process of going through the schooling system to get it running, up and running. It was a hard struggle because quite a few of the people that did the Language really didn’t have a high education standard. And that was really hard, especially when you’re doing a VCE, Year 11/12 subject.

So we basically used the Year 11/12 curriculum basis to do the research and everything to get a Language. The very hard part about that was, while we were studying, we were actually writing and compiling a book, a dictionary, for our, use in the Language. And, also formulating the sound system and the spelling system to be used, because the Language is normally never written.

At the present stage we’ve got the consultation dictionary, and from the classes that we did a lot of us have produced our own little storybooks, and. We’ve got lists of words we use for if we’re doing a telephone conversation between one another, so we try and build up that.

We’ve also utilised the nursery rhymes to try and transplant into Language to help with the babies and young kids to learn and also ourselves. So that’s basically where we’re at, at the moment, and there still needs to be a lot of further development.

And the other thing that we’ve done is that we’ve actually, a lot of our dream stories have been recorded, by Massola, and, in conjunction with my Great Uncle Walter as the informant, and he wrote those down in English and we’ve actually gone and translated them back into Language, particularly the, the creation story of the Wimmera river, and also a story that was my great grandfather wrote, about a dreaming in the Nhill area. And that is, it was rewarding in that you basically then understand more about your culture because you’ve got a story about the Creation, how it was created.

The journey to establish the Language into a dictionary was long, it was hard, it was rewarding. It’s difficult still in that there’s still a lot of research to be done, to properly get the Language and to tie it in with other Victorian Languages.

My granddaughter, who I said is just turning one, her name’s Maiya, which is the word for, for *winter* in our Language. And she is being taught by my daughter, who reads nursery rhymes to her and does *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*. She is recently, in the last couple of weeks, she’s only just started to say, use my name. I’m referred to as her *Ngapa*, which is grandfather. And she’s only just starting to say that sound in the last week or so, and she also says *gungga*, which is the word for love.

It’s just amazing when you sit there and you actually listen to her say things, that you didn’t think that she was being taught anything, and you hear a young, not quite one year old, is actually saying the Language words. And that, you know, you get, you feel a sense of pride from that.

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