# Aboriginal Community Leaders Interviews - Transcript

Question 1 - Why are Language and culture important?

**Bruce Pascoe:** I think Aboriginal Language, like any Language, is the centre of the culture. So if you don’t have some Language, or you’re not interested in the Language, then your culture is a pretty bland thing. Language gives it life and gives it all the richness that the world provides us.

We’re tempted these days to think of Aboriginal culture as art, dance, music, and theatre but, really, the crux of it is Language, because, if we’re going to revive our culture, we’ve got to revive our Languages. And I’m not pessimistic about it at all, people keep on saying there is a Language dying every day. Well there’s also a Language being revived every day.

Our people were not hapless wanders over the surface of the earth, Aboriginal people were growing crops. They were building damns and irrigating the land and using ingenious methods of catching their food, not just waiting for a kangaroo to go by and bowling it over with a spear. There was a lot more going on, and our people must know that.

**Diane Singh:** Well, Language is important to everybody because it’s a way we communicate our needs. It’s a way that, for Indigenous people, because we are an oral community, it was used, you know, before the written word, and it was a way of communicating everything that, in our culture, and it was, Language in song, Language even in dance. I mean, that’s a Language, through actions. It was sort of a way of handing down our knowledge to the rest of the community. So Language I feel is very, very important.

Language and culture go hand in hand. I mean you can’t, sort of, hand down culture and it is part of culture, so, to maintain your culture, you’ve gotta have a Language. You’ve gotta be able to speak it. You’ve gotta demonstrate it. You’ve got to, and like I said in dance, you know, especially for Indigenous people.

I mean our stories were about our culture was, sort of handed down through the years, through story telling, which was very important, through dancing and all those corroborees you know. They were all stories that were told too, about our communities’ art. Language is in art, it’s just different ways of using Language.

Well, as you know, a lot of our people were forbidden to use Language. We had to use the Language of our, you know, the, well I don’t like to say invaders, I can’t think of another word at the moment. We had to use the Language of the invaders, and which meant that we had to also follow their customs. And then you sort of give up your own.

And, even by following the Language of others, we’re not sort of actually accepted by them necessarily. Just because we can speak English and, just because we can demonstrate, we can do things their way, we’re really not accepted. And I think that, knowing your own Language and knowing your own culture is really powerful because, it helps you to have pride in your community you know. Especially for our young kids today, who’ve, you know, who seem to have lost that pride.

**The Late Tandop David Tournier:** What Language means to me is that it’s. Well it means a lot of things because it’s all about ourselves. Culture, it describes who you are, where you are. It describes the country that you live in and it’s a part of it. So Language is a part of everything we sort of do, I suppose. But with Language it reinforces the culture.

**Dr Esme Bamblett:** The P-10 VELS Aboriginal Languages is really good. I think it’s excellent and it, you know, took a while to develop, but I’m, you know, aware that it’s in now. I think it’s really important that communities do talk about it. I think they should be thinking about what they’d like to see incorporated into it. I think they should promote it widely in the wider communities, so more and more young people are taking up the offer.

Language is important because Language is culture and I think that, as young people learn about the Languages, they’ll learn about the culture. And one of the things lacking in schools now is the knowledge and understanding about Aboriginal history and Aboriginal cultural heritage. There, more and more people are starting to take up the challenge of incorporating Language into the educational kits that they’re doing, so there is more and more of it.

But, there needs to be a lot more emphasis, I think, on reclaiming Languages, reviving Languages, maintenance of the Languages we’ve got.

**Geraldine Atkinson:** Language is important to me because I think, I, I believe it’s a part of our culture. It’s an intrinsic part that culture encompasses. It’s, as well as having your, and belonging to your community, it’s as well as having the same values, the same attitudes, the same, all of those sort of things that belong to, to belonging to a community and having that culture of that community. I think Language reinforces your, your culture, and I think that it’s really important that.

I think that a whole range of people understand just exactly why it is important, and what it does mean to Aboriginal kids. It, it provides them with a, a way of knowing about reinforcing their identity, about, about giving them confidence in who they are. In Victoria, really, we’ve lost our Languages. It was a part of, it’s a part of our history, it’s a part of what happened, it’s a part of, you know, sort of the whole Aboriginal history of Victoria.

Because I know that my mother had told me that they weren’t allowed to speak Language, that they were actually forbidden to speak Language and they were, and they were punished for speaking Language. So what she said was that’s why she didn’t speak Language, that’s why her, her, she didn’t, why she said to us that, you know, that’s why she couldn’t pass it on, because it was, it was lost there on the mission that she grew up with.

A way of controlling Aboriginal people on those, on those missions and reserves so that they didn’t, so that they didn’t practice anything traditional, they certainly didn’t practice you know, other cultural aspects like, probably, initiations and storytelling’s, and all of those sort of things that couldn’t be passed down. Cause they couldn’t. That’s how you would have passed them down through Language. So all of that, all of that cultural, all of that traditional culture was lost, because Language couldn’t be spoken.

Because I think that Language is, is kind of the thing that, that, a kind of a glue that held all cultural aspects of that community where mum was, together. So, if you take Language, and you’re able to, and you disperse people, well, you know, sort of you know, you’re able to break down all those sorts of things that, that, that culture holds, you know, communities together.

So that’s a part of, a part of and I think it’s really important, but what we’re doing and what should be done today is about is teaching Languages to children, to particularly children in our schools. And I think the earlier you teach it, and that’s in our early childhood settings, the, the better. And that’s great. That’s great. That is, that is fantastic. Because now what we can do, and what we intend to do, is in, particularly in early, where we can start in early childhood settings, where we’re able to do things, we can start, you know, teaching kids bits of Language and.

The way, and I’ve been talking to a linguist so he’s coming to work with us, and our intention is that, we’ve got a childcare centre and a kindergarten, and what we intend to do is, just by starting to use phrases about you know, sort of, addressing children how to do this, how to wash your hands, how to whatever you do, you know, get equipment, you know, toys, sit down, you know, all those sorts of things. So what he’s going to do is he’s going to start teaching the staff to use just phrases like that, as a way of starting to introduce Language to the children, but also about starting to get, to teach Language to the staff, so that they’ll be able to then learn the Language for themselves. So it’s kind of, it’s a two prong thing.

**The late John "Uncle Sandy" Atkinson:** To me Language is, is a part of our identity, it’s a part of our being. We often don’t think a lot about Language I, I think, all because it’s much like breathing. Boomerangs and spears and all that, and lap laps is not the only thing in that culture. There’s a whole way of life that’s there. Those, those are only a small part of that thing.

**Richard Kennedy:** Language is tied to culture because it’s all the one thing, the, the. Without the Language, you don’t really understand the culture. Without your Language you really don’t understand the rest of it and, and, amazingly, with the Language, when you learn the Language side of things, you realise that just about everything in regards to nature has actually got a name, rather than a group of names or. For instance, say trees. We don’t have a group name for trees, we actually specifically have a tree name for every tree and the same with the birds, and they all have significance in regards to your culture.

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