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## **Minding their own language**

Many Aboriginal languages have been in danger of extinction through lack of use, but now a new dictionary and educational programs should make that impossible, Debra Jopson reports.

A BORiginal actor Ernie Dingo had a routine as a stand-up comic which challenged the audience to shout the word for "No" in other languages. German? "Nein!" they would roar. French? "Non!" Spanish? "No!" Any Aboriginal language? Silence.

The Macquarie Dictionary is about to join the growing band of organisations working to kill off the joke. Next month, it will release Australia's first directory of 17 Aboriginal languages — a move Dingo has hailed as "a white step in the black direction". The new book, *Macquarie Aboriginal Words*, includes a list of words from the Sydney ' language which many Sydneysiders may have long believed dead.

This list was compiled by **linguist Dr Jaki Troy** from the more complete glossary of 1,000 words from the Iyora (or Yura) and Darug dialects she has collected, largely through detective work in the accounts of First Fleeters and 18th-century missionaries. She plans to self-publish the full list in her own book next month. The directory — part of a scurry of activity to rescue and promote threatened Aboriginal languages around Australia. — is expected to tap into a new mood in an Australia which rode as high as the Aboriginal athlete Cathy Freeman when she made her Commonwealth Games victory lap trailing two flags.

The joint general editor, Nick Thieburger, said: "People are now much more aware that Australia has an Aboriginal culture and it is ' part of its essence. It 's what makes us different."

Adrian Tucker, chief education officer with the NSW Board of Studies Aboriginal Curriculum Unit, said: "People think buildings make a society appear sophisticated. But one of the most complex things is Aboriginal languages. If we 'can save buildings, why can 't we save languages? "

There are signs this is beginning to happen:

- Starting next year, the Board of Studies will trial a two-year program in two secondary schools in which students learn a local Aboriginal language in conjunction with their Koori community. The North Coast is the most likely venue.

Mr Tucker and colleagues hope that in 1996, when it becomes mandatory for all secondary pupils to do a language other than English for 100 hours between Years 7 and 10, many will be able to choose an Aboriginal one.

The work on rescuing the Sydney language makes it possible for \_ Sydney schools to be involved in conjunction with local Aboriginal communities, he said.

- The Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies has just released an interactive, multimedia package which allows students to press buttons and hear Aboriginal languages and see where they come from on a screen.

Mr Thieberger, an institute visiting research fellow, said as schools and tertiary institutions introduced it, many young Australians would listen to Aboriginal languages for the first time.

- Aboriginal language bodies coming under the umbrella of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation of Languages have begun to discuss a new map of Australia for the year 2001 featuring known Aboriginal place names.

The corporation's secretary, Ysola Best, and her fellow Yugambah people of the Gold Coast have produced an alternative map of the tourist haven they live in with original Aboriginal names.

The Australian Mining Industry Council (AMIC) has published its own map of Aboriginal groups in Australia in conjunction with Melbourne University's Geography Department. Some Aborigines believe this is a contentious move, given that Aboriginal groups and mining companies are often on opposite sides of the fence in native title and other claims:

AMIC's assistant director, Geoff Ewing, said: "There has always been a difficulty in finding out who are the people and who can speak for the people in connection with a particular area of land." <sup>6</sup> In the Kempsey area, Auntie Maggie Morris, the last fluent speaker of the Gumbaynggirr, is teaching three young adults how to speak it well, according to Emily Walker, chairperson of the NSW Aboriginal Language and Culture Group. Locals have made songs in the language to teach local children and there is a plan to reclaim another local language, Dhunggiguti, from tapes.

- There is even international interest. A language teacher, Elizabeth Marrkilyi Ellis, conducted a three-week course in her own Western Desert language of Ngaanyatjarra at a French university in July.

Dr Troy, who works as a project officer with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission's Native Title Policy Section, said the reclamation and use of Aboriginal languages had become increasingly political as a result of Mabo.

"Language is one of the ways of marking social boundaries and is associated with country and that is why people see it as political," she said.

The president of the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, Linda Burney, said a fundamental plank of policy had to be that work on Aboriginal languages must be indigenous-directed.

"The States and their governments are responsible for the annihilation of our languages and are responsible to do something about it, and I do not think they have faced up to that responsibility," she said.

"There were laws in this State which forbade us from speaking our languages and there is a crisis situation. We are losing one to two languages a year. It's a heartbreak."

Mr Tucker said that where in the past it had been considered all right to teach a desert language like Pitjantjatjara in Sydney, this would not happen in schools unless local communities — and those owning the language — agreed.

"Aboriginal languages are environment-specific, so if you bring one from South Australia to the coast, the Dreaming you would represent in the language would be tied to the Dreaming tracks of that country. You can't just impose it on another place."

Aborigines argue they need to teach children language to hold on to their culture. Linguists argue non-Aborigines need to learn for new ways to understand Australia.

Mr Thieberger said: "Schoolchildren are doing Japanese and Indonesian for commercial reasons and there will never be an economic impetus to learn Aboriginal languages. [But] in the Australian environment, we do not have the names for many of the features."

Dr Tamsin Donaldson, who worked on the Ngiyampaa section of the Macquarie book, said Aboriginal languages had words which would not occur to English-speakers to even ask about

"There is a word — walu — for the strips of eucalyptus bark hanging off and wobbling in the wind," she said.

Dr Troy said many Aborigines once had five or six languages because it was considered respectful to speak the language of the country one was in.

She said she felt sad during her Mitchell library hunts to get the language back, as she reflected not only on culture and people long-gone, but on words lost to express Sydney itself.

Dr Troy said she and the Aboriginal curator at the Sydney Museum, David Prosser, wanted to work with local communities on reclaiming any spoken language that may be secretly lingering.

"I think there is probably more knowledge about the Sydney language than anyone realises, but you have to be invited by a community to do that kind of work."

And what of those words for "No"? The answers are in the Macquarie book for those who do not wish to look foolish at the comedy club with Dingo. No is "Ngaatha " in Paakantyi, "Wangaay" in Ngiyampaa, "Wirraay" in Wiradjuri and "Yugam " in Bundjalung.