

Lesson 10 – Resource Sheet 5

Indigenous languages

Preserving indigenous languages

Why should we care about preserving indigenous languages?

Indigenous languages need to be preserved for both heritage and scientific reasons.

Languages are an important part of our cultural heritage. Every language provides important insights into the history and worldview of a people.

Documenting a language considered endangered is important because it saves it for future study. If a language is lost, it can't be revived without a documented record of the language. It is, however, also important to ensure that some speakers are left to provide an insight into the language's social and cultural context.

From a scientific point of view it is important to document a threatened language while they are still alive. Languages provide an insight into the identity of a people. Languages provide important clues about ways people communicate, the nature of their thinking and the different ways people see their collective life experience.

Preserving languages

An organisation established to record the disappearing languages around the world and perhaps to help revitalise those on the brink of extinction is the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages.

Living Tongues has worked with the National Geographic Society to develop the Enduring Voices Project (EVP). EVP seeks to preserve endangered languages by identifying language hotspots – those places with the most unique, poorly understood and or threatened indigenous languages – and documenting the languages and cultures of which they are part.

The EVP involves linguists seeking out the last speakers of a language. They listen to their stories and document their languages with film, pictures and audio to help communities preserve their knowledge of species, landscapes and traditions before they vanish.

The Enduring Voices Project also assists indigenous communities to revitalise and maintain threatened languages. By using appropriate written materials, audio recorders, still photography and language software the Enduring Voices Project works with communities and modern technologies to preserve ancient traditions using modern technologies.

Australia has as many as 250 original Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, and over 600 dialects. The Australian Government helps to protect, preserve and celebrate this rich linguistic diversity as part of the country's living story and shared history.

The Government works with Indigenous organisations and groups to digitally capture languages. They also work to promote the recognition and appreciation of ancient Indigenous languages by the wider Australian community and ensure that Indigenous language organisations can teach the languages to future generations. The Government also promotes the appreciation of local languages through the adoption of Indigenous place names and landmarks.

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) is the body that works to ensure that Australia's Indigenous languages are preserved for future generations.

In NSW, the State Government has appointed a panel of Aboriginal language experts and established a languages centre. About 1,800 people continue to speak Aboriginal languages as their principal means of communication despite being discouraged to do so in the past. Today, an estimated 35 original languages are spoken across the state, with dozens of different dialects and varying levels of fluency.

Other strategies for protecting and preserving languages

Strategies include:

- Including the study of indigenous languages in the school curriculum
- Encouraging young indigenous people to learn and use their traditional language
- Encourage elders to pass on their language knowledge to younger generations
- Promoting greater appreciation of indigenous cultures in the wider community