

# Let's talk...

## Australian voices



*Language identifies who we are and where we come from. We use the languages we speak to express all that we feel and know. When we lose a language, we lose the unique knowledge and perspectives of the people that speak it.*

*For tens of thousands of years, hundreds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages have been spoken across Australia. These languages hold a unique and rich part of our heritage. Let's talk... Australian voices and what we can do to keep them alive and strong today.*

### Listen to language...



[Listen to Reconciliation Australia Board Director and Yolngu elder, Djapirri Mununggirriti, speak in her language, Gumati.](#)

Djapirri talks about the importance of language and law which keeps the Yolngu culture strong. Keeping culture and language strong, helps Yolngu people share their culture with non-Indigenous Australians and develop relationships where we can work together hand in hand.

### Some quick statistics...

Prior to European settlement, it is estimated that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples spoke over **250** distinct languages, including over **600** dialects<sup>1</sup>

Today, **145** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are still spoken in Australia, however only **18** remain strong, meaning they are spoken by people of all ages<sup>2</sup>

In 2008, **11%** of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples spoke an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language as their main language at home<sup>3</sup>.

In 2006, over **80** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages were being taught in **260** schools across Australia<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> National Indigenous Languages Survey, 2005; Social Justice Report 2009, Australian Human Rights Commission

<sup>2</sup> National Indigenous Languages Survey, 2005

<sup>3</sup> National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) 2008, Australian Bureau of Statistics

<sup>4</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1301.0 - Year Book Australia, 2009-10

## Did you know...?

- Australia is one of the most linguistically diverse places on earth<sup>5</sup> but it also has one of the fastest rates of language loss in the world<sup>6</sup>
- It is a common misconception that 'kangaroo' means 'I don't understand you'. In fact, the word 'kangaroo' comes from the Guugu Yimidhirr language, spoken around Cooktown in far north Queensland. 'Kangaroo' comes from the word 'gangurru' which refers to one species of kangaroo in Guugu Yimidhirr<sup>7</sup>.
- Each Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language is associated with an area of land and has a deep spiritual significance to its speakers, their ancestors and descendants<sup>8</sup>.
- For many years Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were physically punished or deprived of food and benefits if they spoke in their own languages<sup>9</sup>.
- One of Australia's most inspiring musicians today, Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu, sang in Yolngu Matha at Queen Elizabeth's Diamond Jubilee Concert and in special performances for Barack Obama and the Crown Prince and Princess of Denmark.

## Meet... Jack Buckskin



Yingkalitidlu ngai nari Vincent Buckskin. Ngaityu taikurtirna Jack ngai tarri ngaityu tamamuku yarrita warta. 'Kanya' ngai nari warraru kuma 'Kudlyuitpirna' ngai kurlana nari ngaityu tukuparrkanungku.

Purlauata marrurlu ngaityu warra Kurna tirrkanthi. Narta ngaityu taikurtirna kuma miyurna purrutyi nguthuatpinthathu.

Ngai Kurna ngaityu kamami-arra. Ngaityu tamamuku yarrita Wirangu miyu. Kuma ngaityu tamamuku ngangkita Narungga ngangki. Namu ngai taingiwirrita Kurna/Narungga/Wirangu miyu. Puru ngai Tarntanyangka tikanthi ngaityu taikurtirna Puki yana yartangka kuma Pari yartangka yarthatpathi.

My name is Vincent Buckskin but my family named me Jack after my grandfather's father, the 'rock' is my Kurna name given to me and newly derived 'father of the black swan' from my daughter.

In 2006 I started learning my language, Kurna, and now I teach to my family and to all other people.

I am Kurna through my grandmother and my grandfather's father was Wirangu and his mother was Narungga so I am a proud Kurna/Narungga and Wirangu man, although I lived in Adelaide my family grew up on Point Pearce mission and in the Riverland.

[Listen to Jack here.](#)

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.aboriginaltourism.australia.com/en-AU/Aboriginal-Culture/Art-Languages-Literature.htm>. Accessed 8 August, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Social Justice Report 2009, Australian Human Rights Commission

<sup>7</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1301.0 - Year Book Australia, 2009-10

<sup>8</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1301.0 - Year Book Australia, 2009-10

<sup>9</sup> National Indigenous Languages Survey, 2005

## **Vincent ‘Jack’ Buckskin**

Vincent ‘Jack’ Buckskin is a 25 year old Kurna/Narrunga and Wirangu man from South Australia who learnt the endangered Kurna language and now teaches it to others.

Jack’s inspiring story of language revival started after the loss of his sister when he decided to drop everything and immerse himself in his language and culture. After 18 months learning the Kurna language Jack was proficient enough to teach it, becoming the only young Aboriginal person to do so. He now teaches more than 100 Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, aged five to 62, through high schools and language schools.

Jack is working with Dr Rob Amery, a linguist from the University of Adelaide to encourage more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to learn their languages. Together they have established the Kurna place names project which aims to identify and map places with Kurna names and to encourage their use. Jack is also sharing his culture and stories through dance. He has given dance lessons at the Kurna Plains School and organised a traditional family dance group, Kuma Karro, meaning ‘One Blood’. Jack is committed to educating the community and sharing Kurna culture and it is these efforts that saw him named South Australia’s Young Australian of the Year in 2011.

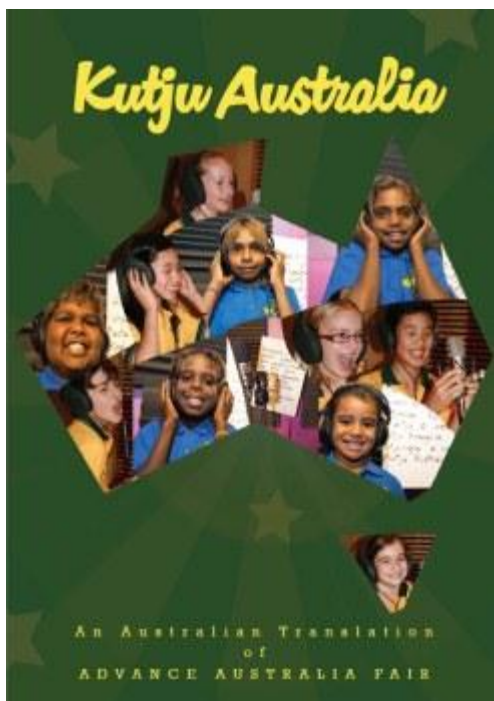
Jack would be the first to admit it hasn’t been easy to learn Kurna, “I remember growing up as a child there was a perception that all Aboriginal students were able to speak fluent Aboriginal language, pronounce any word, even if it wasn’t their language, and that we all knew every Aboriginal person”. Reality was far more complex. “We spoke a mixture of different Aboriginal languages in one sentence, rather than one language, so when I began learning the local Aboriginal language, Kurna, I found it difficult. We didn’t have any fluent speakers left so it made it hard but with the language that I already knew, I found it easier to pronounce any word I came across.”

Jack is also helping to promote the Kurna language across the community. “Since beginning to teach, I have had twice as many non-Aboriginal students—even some adults who go home and teach their families, friends and colleagues, and teachers who use the language with their students.”

Jack’s goal is that everyone who lives on Kurna land in Adelaide and the surrounding regions will one day be able to speak at least a few words of the Kurna language. “Hopefully, by the time I finish my journey, everyone will be able to say hello, goodbye and thank you”. Jack is currently working on a project that will potentially engage younger generations through the use of mobile technology. This project is aimed at the creation of a mobile dictionary of the Kurna language.

Visit the [Kurna Place Names website](#) to find out more about the project.

## Watch... the Australia national anthem in Luritja



[Join Alison Nararula Anderson, Ted Egan, nine year old Carmelina Mulkatana and children from Ntaria School in the Northern Territory and Killara School in New South Wales as they sing Advance Australia Fair in Luritja as part of the Kutju Australia Project.](#)

The Kutju Australia project was developed by Ted Egan to inspire Australians, through song, to be proud of our complex and unique country, traditions and heritage, including some of the oldest languages on earth.

The Kutju Australia Kit, including a teaching resource, is available [here](#).

## Take Action...

- Learn the name of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language in your local area [here](#).
- Find out about some of the great language programs [out there](#).
- Learn about the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages across Australia by getting a copy of the Aboriginal Australia map from [AIATSIS](#).
- Write to your local Member of Parliament about the recommendations in the [Our Land Our Language: Language Learning in Indigenous Communities](#) report.
- Sign up to support [You Me Unity](#)
- Share or tweet this factsheet to let more people know about our first Australian languages.

*Reconciliation Australia would like to thank the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and Jack Buckskin for their assistance in developing this fact sheet.*