

**There are many different varieties of English around the world. Some are treated as 'more correct' than others, based on the varieties spoken by the more powerful classes of people at different times. So other varieties are often thought of as just 'bad English'. But in fact, each one is a fully developed language, which reflects the history and culture of its speakers.**

Many children who speak Aboriginal English have been affected by this mistake. Although they come to school as fluent communicators, schools have often not recognised their language abilities, and assigned them to remedial classes. Sometimes their language is 'corrected' in front of the rest of the class, causing 'shame' to the child and putting their peer group relationships at risk. Eventually they can be perceived as poor students in general. All of this can hold back their education, reduce their confidence, and dampen their enthusiasm for learning. These are some of the reasons why it is important to understand the nature of Aboriginal English.

**Aboriginal English and Koorie English:** Aboriginal English includes words from Aboriginal languages and from English. The meaning or pronunciation may be changed, different suffixes added (such as marras 'hands'), or they may be put together in new ways (such as cousin brother).

Different forms of Aboriginal English across the country reflect the local history and traditional languages of the region. For example, 'white person' is gubba in Koorie English (from 'government'), but goonya in Nunga English (from a word for 'ghost').

**Language and culture maintenance:** Many aspects of traditional knowledge and ways of thinking are maintained in Koorie English. For example, a man might call his grandson 'Pop', or a woman might refer to her grandchildren as 'Grannies'. This 'reciprocal' structure is common in the traditional languages, reflecting the equivalence of the relationship up and down the generations. The Koorie English meanings of family words help to keep people aware of the kinds of relationships that hold between them, and the rights and responsibilities that these relationships imply.

Several features of the sound systems of Aboriginal languages are maintained in Koorie English. For example, most Aboriginal languages do not use fricatives (sounds made by friction, such as 'th' and 's'). So in Koorie English, 'there' is pronounced 'dere', and 'video' as 'bideo'<sup>1</sup>.

Koorie English reflects some of the grammar of traditional languages. For example, many people would say 'My uncle back there', not 'My uncle is back there'<sup>2</sup>. This structure is correct in most Aboriginal languages, which do not require a verb 'to be' (am, is, are, etc.).

Western Australian studies have shown that children speaking Aboriginal English base their stories on different principles to their non-Aboriginal peers. For example, the flow of time through a story can be fluid rather than linear, or there may be unexplained references to items that in the child's world can easily be assumed as part of the story<sup>3</sup>. Understanding these principles can reveal more complexity and maturity in the creative work of Aboriginal students than their teachers realise at first.

Koorie English can act like a memory of people's traditional languages. The memory continues regardless of the extent to which the language itself is being passed down.

**Communication issues:** When people speak different varieties of English, it may not be obvious when there has been a miscommunication. This can extend beyond words and grammar, to expectations about social interaction. For example, many Koorie children are not used to direct question-answer conversations. A teacher misunderstanding this may assume the child lacks the knowledge to participate, or is simply unresponsive.

Diana Eades<sup>4</sup> highlights some situations where Aboriginal English speakers have been misinterpreted in the court system, including 'yes' and 'no' answers, and a witness being reluctant to look at his questioner. In each case, instead of the court realising that there had been a miscommunication, the Aboriginal witness was deemed to be lying and uncooperative. Children in school experience similar problems when teachers do not realise this kind of miscommunication can occur, think they are 'being difficult', and treat them accordingly.

**Koorie English and positive learning:** Just like children whose first language is not English, Koorie English-speaking children do better at school when their home language is affirmed. Koorie children can readily learn a second variety in addition to Koorie English. Being fluent in two cultures and two language varieties is an asset that they can benefit from all their lives.

Encouraging Koorie English is part of a bigger picture of improving cultural inclusivity. Koorie people can experience many aspects of their lives as requiring them to 'act like white fella, live like white fellas' (L. Solomon-Dent). Koorie children need an environment which encourages pride in their heritage, their family and their culture. An environment which threatens this pride also threatens the child's capacity to participate in learning at school, potentially leading to effects such as low attendance and lack of engagement in class. To best support the students and their learning, it is vital that schools take on the need for change themselves, accepting and validating Koorie children's first language variety as a foundation for positive education.

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<sup>1</sup> Examples from Lynnette Solomon-Dent.

<sup>2</sup> Examples from Diana Eades  
<http://www.une.edu.au/langnet/definitions/aboriginal.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Sharifian, Farzad, 2001. 'Schema-based processing in Australian speakers of Aboriginal English.' *Language and Intercultural Communication* 1:2., and 2006. 'A cultural-conceptual approach to the study of World Englishes: The case of Aboriginal English.' *World Englishes* 25:1.

<sup>4</sup> Eades, Diana, 1996. 'Interpreting Aboriginal English in the legal system.' *Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, Canberra*.