

# PRINCIPLES OF LANGUAGE REVIVAL

## LANGUAGE IS CULTURE

### LANGUAGE IS CULTURE, CULTURE IS LANGUAGE

Language is the vessel which carries the cultural knowledge of Country, relationship, connection, laws for living, stories, song and dance. 'Language is Culture' sums up the common belief across language communities that language and culture are inseparable.

So 'Language is Culture' equals 'Respect' and therefore becomes the central guiding or foundational principle in Language Revival. It is the foundational cultural approach when an individual and/or community/s travel the pathways of Language Revival.

### ASPECTS OF 'LANGUAGE IS CULTURE'

There are several key aspects that are integral within the overarching 'Language is Culture' principle. Every aspect of Language Revival is measured against this overarching principle. It is the 'given' in any one aspect of language revival.

**Elders, knowledge and authority** - Many communities still have some language in everyday use. This may vary from a few words or phrases to fluent language speakers. Whether your community has a little, or a lot of language in use available or whether you have to search historical records to find your language, the Elders and senior people will play a key role in your language revival journey. The Elders and senior knowledge holders provide cultural knowledge and authority in decisions about language. These decisions might be about the spelling of your language, or a creation story of place in Country, or how to pronounce sounds properly and so on.

*"I think by having Elders guide us, were put on the right track in the first place, and reminded of what we could and couldn't do ... The people who use language and know language and know how it relates to culture and language, they are the experts ... It's the Old People, they grew up with it around them, or they grew up in an environment where language was related to culture and related to how they related to each other." - Doris Paton*

*"Your culture, your language ... It's all rolled into one. You can't separate one from the other." - Maxine Jarrett*

*"In Aboriginal culture you have to be doing everything at the same time on all levels. Because otherwise you learn nothing; the culture is interrelated. The language is interrelated. The objects are interrelated. Their purpose is interrelated. And the family history is interrelated. It says something about the possum skin cloak, which says something about the possum itself. If you're not accommodating all of those things, then you're not being true to the culture." - Bruce Pascoe*

*"The language is very much tied up to the culture as it is to the Country. And so language revival must equal those things. Because that's what our Old People have taught us." - Doris Paton*

### LAYERS OF KNOWLEDGE AND MEANING

Language revival is not just about the words and the mechanics of your language such as 'how do you say this word? What are the sounds? How would we spell the words?' Rather it is about the meaning and context of the word or sound as the vessel to deeper cultural meaning and knowledge.

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Each phrase, word or part of a word carries layers of meaning and knowledge. A placename for example, may describe the physical characteristics of the surrounding environment or a specific geological feature such as a mountain, river or lake. Then there may be a Creation story of how the Ancestors created that place; it may also relate knowledge of habitat for creatures and how those creatures live in the Land.

The story or song of that place may teach Laws for living – such as the seasons for harvesting and gathering food and medicine plants, and the gathering of fibres for manufacture of baskets, string etc. The place may be a gathering place for ceremony and hold significance in the song cycles of that Country.

There are different ways in which language practitioners can bring that knowledge through. You can begin with talking to Elders and community. You can research and study the words of your language and learn the connections between groups of words, developing your understanding of language structure through linguistics.



Den of Nargun - From Nyernila - Listen continuously. Image by Cam Cope

“That was something that was guided by our Ancestors, that everything is not seen straight away. You have to search for it. You have to take it, reclaim it, and build on it. And that’s what I see is the importance now of the reconstruction of the words of our Ancestors’ language.” - Carolyn Briggs

### Sitting on Country and ‘listening’, communicating with the Ancestors ...

Deeper teachings are learned on deeper levels of perception such as dreams and visions from Ancestral beings/spirits who are our teachers and guides. When language is spoken on Country our Country hears us. And lastly, but not least – by practising your language, every day.

“I might go out bush and yell it out in Dhudhuroa...they can hear you yelling out in their Country, in their language. I say, ‘Look, listen, Ancestors, you can hear that? Can you hear that? Am I on the right track?’ You know. Haven’t had a complaint yet!” - Tom Kinchela

“As soon as you start teaching them a few words, they feel the language. Because it belongs to them ... It comes up through the ground into them.” - Geoff Anderson.