

# PRINCIPLES OF LANGUAGE REVIVAL

## 'GETTING IT RIGHT'

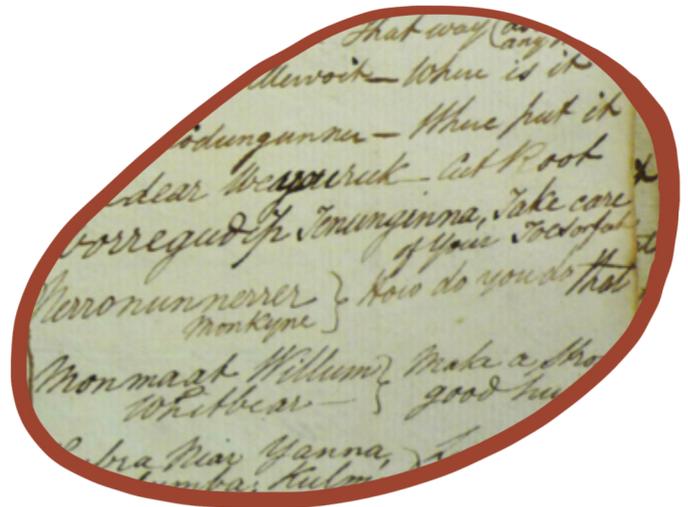
Aboriginal culture is founded in a mandate of Respect. This cultural value of Respect is about 'getting it right'. Respect asks us to listen to and be guided by our Old People, Country and Elders. We approach our language revival journey with deep Respect. But what does it mean when we say we have to 'get it right?'

'Getting it right', like the words and sounds of our language, has many layers of meaning, aspects and ways of doing and being, of 'getting it right'. At every step in our language revival journey we must make decisions:

"... It's not my decision to make ... all aspects of Aboriginal ways of doing things – not only language – education, health, employment, housing – there's all those protocols, the cultural protocols that still exist today ... I need direction from a reference group, to say, 'Hang on – you're doing that right, you're doing that okay – but you're doing that wrong. You know?'" - David Tournier

Decisions about language resources – do we use historical sources? Do we just use language that is known in our community? Sounds and spelling – what are the sounds of our language? How do we know they are the right sounds? Cultural authenticity – is this our word? is this word right for this place? Is that the right meaning for that word? Authority – who says it's 'right'? Who is allowed to learn language? Do we teach non-Aboriginal people? Do we teach it in schools? Grammar – how do we make sentences? How do we talk, converse in our language? Do we relexify (swap some of our language words into English)? How do we teach grammar to our mob? And so on.

**Authenticity** – People feel strongly about their language and as the journey progresses people's opinions around issues can change. Some begin feeling that they must use only the words that are from their language: that is, not using borrowed words or words that are not identified by Elders or written sources as from their language and so in this way keeping their language 'authentic' or 'pure'. However, often as people move along their journey and learn more, opinions and attitudes can change. Many groups work from community and Elders' language knowledge and are guided by this in keeping the language authentic.



Extract from William Thomas Journals SLV MS14624

**Authority** – Language revival journeys have many different starting or beginning points. Some begin with one person and grow to include others, some begin with a group of Elders and other interested community members. These individuals, Elders and community are and/or become the reference point and authority for decisions that need to be made along the journey. Language development brings issues around new words, borrowed words etc. into the spotlight, and cultural protocols with other language groups comes into play.

"...we made a decision: we were trying not to borrow words because if you are borrowing.....you really need to get their permission to use it..." - Richard Kennedy

"I think by having Elders guide us, we were put on the right track in the first place. So that is something I would definitely say must happen, because the people who use Language and know Language and know how it relates to Culture and Language – they're the experts. It's not the books. It's the Old People, because 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

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*"If my Ancestors told these stories to the first settlers, there was a reason for that. It set the pattern. It wasn't a closed shop. It was a door left open, for me to be able to see that and look for the bigger picture. To say, well if they told them, they must have known somehow that that was going to be recorded for the next generation..." - Carolyn Briggs*

'Getting it right' can mean learning how to say the words 'properly': what are the proper sounds; learning the sounds. Some people feel that the words must be spoken like it was in pre-European times. Some people feel it is more important to get people using and speaking language. Others feel that getting the sounds right requires consideration of different factors including pre-European speech, in-depth research into historical resources, even in-depth research into the historical person who recorded their language.

## GRAMMAR, HISTORICAL RECORDS AND AUTHENTICITY

Grammar is the framework, the mechanics and building blocks of a language. Many language communities have English as their first language. Although some Aboriginal language grammar patterns survive into use in our communities through what is known as Aboriginal English, we are still influenced strongly by English language structure or grammar. So part of 'getting it right' is also about grammar, about our language structure.

*"When I was first doing language, I wasn't using endings. I was just putting words together. And so basically it was language done in an English way. Now that I'm starting to learn the endings, and putting endings in the right place, it's becoming more Wathaurong than English. And it's quite interesting, because once you start using the endings, it makes it sound right, and puts it in its right flow." - David Tournier*

*"If you accept the premise that language is constantly evolving and changing – when there's been a period of static, of over 50 to 100 years between when a language was spoken and now being revived - How can you then say to people, 'You can only say it this way'?" - Jeanie Bell*

Again, the issue of authenticity raises its head. If you are using historical records - whether it's grammar in the form of sentences, or more if you are lucky, has been recorded - then the decision about the 'rightness' of these records is a question. In terms of historical records, there are differing opinions on whether these resources should be used - are they authentic? Is our language authentic if we use what white people have written down? Language revival is a journey, of that there is no doubt ...

*"All the argy bargy that's going on, behind it all is a very positive cultural thing. Because ten years ago we wouldn't have been arguing the toss about language. We wouldn't have been arguing about the language boundaries ... It's inevitable that there's going to be some push and shove about whose Country is whose, what language is what... you've just got to accept that that's gonna be part and parcel of the rise of culture and language." - Bruce Pascoe*

*"We've got the language, his [Threlkeld's] publications, you know. It's like reading Shakespeare stuff. And that's where all the evidence of our language is. Inside amongst that. So, to unlock the secrets of the language, we've had to unlock him ... that's just what we have concentrated on. We could've dove in and grabbed his word list and so forth, which appear in these old books – just used those and started pronouncing the words and started talking again. But we couldn't. We needed to understand how he used every single one of those characters, to pronounce that unique sound." - Daryn McKenny*



Gunditjmara children in stone house on Country