



# Celebrating young Indigenous Australian children's speech and language competence



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## ABSTRACT

World-wide it is important to recognize Indigenous children's speech and language competence and their language learning environments. Indigenous Australian children participated in the child cohort of Footprints in Time: Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children, a national study supported by Indigenous Australians and the Australian Government collected annually (in waves). There were 692 3–5-year-old children in wave 1, and two years later, 570 5–7-year-old children were in wave 3 (77.0% of children in wave 1 were also in wave 3). Data were obtained via parent interviews and direct assessment. The children spoke between one and eight languages including: English (wave 1: 91.2%, wave 3: 99.6%), Indigenous languages (wave 1: 24.4%, wave 3: 26.8%), creoles (wave 1: 11.5%, wave 3: 13.7%), foreign languages (non-Indigenous languages other than English) (wave 1: 2.0%, wave 3: 5.1%), and sign languages (wave 1: 0.6%, wave 3: 0.4%). Children who spoke an Indigenous language were more likely to live in moderate to extreme isolation than their English-speaking counterparts. Parental concern about speech and language skills was similar to data for non-Indigenous children with approximately one quarter of parents expressing concern (wave 1: yes = 13.9%, a little = 10.4%). Children's language environments were rich, with many family members and friends telling oral stories, reading books, and listening to the children read. Almost a third of families wanted to pass on their cultural language, and many indicated that they would like their child to learn an Indigenous language at school. Overall, Indigenous Australian children have rich cultural and linguistic traditions and their speech and language competence is promoted through family, community, and educational experiences.

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## 1. Introduction

The acquisition of speech and language is a key aspect of development for all children. The ability to communicate enables participation within the contexts children live. In addition to the development of oral communication skills, children also acquire written communication skills in many societies. While much is known about the speech and language acquisition and competence of monolingual English-speaking children (McLeod, 2013; Oller, Oller, & Badon, 2006), less is known about children who live in multilingual and multicultural environments (Grech & McLeod, 2012), and even less is known about Indigenous children's speech and language competence (Westby & Inglebret, 2012). Indigenous people who share their lands with English-speaking people include Native Americans in the US, the First Nations People of Canada, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia. There are reports that Indigenous children in English-speaking

countries are not achieving similar language and literacy benchmarks on English tasks compared with their peers. For example, Lee, Grigg, and Donhaue (2007) document that in the US, American Indian/Alaska Native children have not demonstrated the same level of achievement compared with White, Black, and Hispanic students in grades 4 and 8 over a 15-year period. The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY, 2013) published a Report Card: The Wellbeing of Young Australians that highlighted the discrepancy between the health and wellbeing of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian children. This included evidence that poor literacy and numeracy skills significantly disadvantage Indigenous children, particularly in regard to school completion and unemployment. These benchmarking reports primarily focus on English language and learning and do not enable reporting of the richness of Indigenous children's language learning experience and competence.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2007. It contains 46 articles and the current paper draws on three of these:

*Article 13:* Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories,

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languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures. . .

*Article 15:* Indigenous peoples have the right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information. . .to combat prejudice and eliminate discrimination and to promote tolerance, understanding and good relations among indigenous peoples and all other segments of society.

*Article 22:* Particular attention shall be paid to the rights and special needs of. . .children and persons with disabilities in the implementation of this Declaration (United Nations, 2008, pp. 7, 9)

Consequently, this paper aims to promote understanding of Indigenous Australian children's speech and language competence and their families' and communities' aspirations and practices.

## 2. Languages of Indigenous Australians

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up approximately 2.5% of the entire Australian population, of which 38% are children aged less than 15 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2006). The rich cultural and linguistic traditions of Indigenous Australians have been widely documented and Indigenous Australian languages have been described as "storehouses of cultural knowledge and tradition" (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [AIATSIS], 2005, p. 21). Approximately 250 Indigenous Australian languages have been described (AIATSIS, 2005; Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages [VACL], 2010). However, currently, most of Australia's Indigenous languages are "no longer fully or fluently spoken" (AIATSIS, 2005, p. 7). While currently 145 Indigenous Australian languages are spoken to some degree, 110 are severely or critically endangered, and there are less than 20 Indigenous languages that are spoken across all generations (AIATSIS, 2005; McConvell, 2008; Obata & Lee, 2010). Indigenous Australians also speak *creoles* (e.g., Kriol). Creoles began as *pidgins* by merging English and Indigenous languages to enable communication on missions and outstations. Over the years, these pidgins have developed in complexity into languages in their own right, and are learned as first languages by some children. Today, many Indigenous communities are undertaking Indigenous language revitalization programs and some children are learning Indigenous languages that are not spoken by their parents (Obata & Lee, 2010; VACL, 2010) and additionally, new Indigenous languages are emerging from some communities (O'Shannessy, 2005).

The Australian census (ABS, 2006) recorded that 12% of the Indigenous population over the age of 5 years speak an Indigenous language at home, and 83% speak a form of English only, which may include Australian Aboriginal English (AAE). AAE differs from Standard Australian English in pronunciation, vocabulary (including the use of English words with other meanings), grammar, and sentence structure (Butcher, 2008; Eagleson, 1982; Kaldor & Malcolm, 1979, 1982, 1991; Sharpe, 1977; Williams, 2000). It is important to recognize that AAE is "a different dialect of English that is just as efficient a medium of communication [as Standard Australian English]" (Butcher, 2008, p. 625). To date, there has been limited research considering Indigenous Australian children's speech and language competence and the nature of their language environments.

## 3. Children's language environments

The acquisition of languages is dependent upon the interaction of a number of factors including level of exposure to languages,

and attitudes toward languages (Patterson & Pearson, 2004). Children's early models of language are largely received in their home environment (Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2006). Therefore, the level of language exposure that children receive from their home environment, in addition to the choices made by parents regarding multilingual acquisition, will shape their competency in the languages they speak. Parents may choose to raise their children monolingually; speaking either English or their Indigenous language, or they may choose to raise children to be multilingual, speaking either multiple Indigenous languages or a combination of Indigenous language(s) and English, or other languages including creoles, sign, or foreign languages. Parental choices for and against maintaining home languages or encouraging multilingualism are influenced by a number of factors. Parents may choose to maintain home languages to maintain cultural identity and community participation (Park & Sarkar, 2007) or because they have limited knowledge of other languages (Saravanan, 2001). Alternatively, parents may decide it is best for their child to cease using their home language and speak the dominant language of the community (in this case, English) if their home language has a comparatively low status (Dixon, Wu, & Daraghme, 2012) or if parents believe that use of the dominant language will increase future success in education and employment (Wong Fillmore, 1991). These choices, and therefore the patterns of language maintenance and loss, vary between language groups (Verdon, McLeod, & Winsler, 2013).

It has been well documented that support from parents and family members in the home environment through activities such as reading books and sharing stories has a positive impact upon children's language skills and their speech and language competence (Duursma, Augustyn, & Zuckerman, 2008). These skills include phonological awareness, alphabet and vocabulary knowledge, syntax, grammar, receptive and expressive language skills, understanding of story structure, and learning to read (Bus, Van Ijzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Ehri & Roberts, 2006; Vivas, 1996). Currently, little research has been conducted into the language environments of Australian Indigenous children and their impact upon language and literacy development.

There are a number of different circumstances under which Indigenous children may be or become multilingual. Multilingual language learning for Indigenous children may be understood by considering the dimensions of language learning proposed by Paradis, Genesee, and Crago (2011). Paradis et al. (2011) juxtaposed simultaneous versus sequential language acquisition within majority versus minority ethnolinguistic communities. Indigenous people are highly mobile (Taylor & Bell, 2004), with approximately 22% of families reporting to have moved house within a one-year period (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs [FaHCSIA], 2012a). However, typically children moved to locations with similar levels of relative isolation. This change in context will impact upon children's ability to learn, use, and maintain languages cultural languages which may be context-specific. Indigenous children who speak Indigenous languages as their mother tongue primarily live in remote communities where the Indigenous language is still the *lingua franca*. According to the Paradis et al. (2011) framework, these remote children's Indigenous language learning could be described as occurring within majority ethnolinguistic communities (because they are separate from the predominantly English-speaking areas of Australia). When these Indigenous children learn English, they are likely to learn English sequentially (after they have learned their Indigenous language) at school (where Indigenous language speakers are in a minority ethnolinguistic community since English is the *lingua franca* of Australian schools). In contrast, urban Indigenous children may learn an Indigenous language as a second or other language within English-speaking homes. In this instance, these

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