

'How many languages again?' Different views of language identity and ways of thinking about them

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A common question asked of VACL is "How many Aboriginal languages are there in Victoria?" For Aboriginal communities, it is important to know what and where are the boundaries between their language and other languages – the language next door, or languages of contact from forced relocation practices. Tracing your people, land and language is a vital component of establishing identity, not least for Native Title purposes. In the broader Australian community, people often want to know which language to use – for an acknowledgement of Country, or a school language awareness program. The question is also important to linguists, for purposes such as language reconstruction or dictionary development.

The problem is that there is a significant discrepancy between answers. For Victoria, we say there are around 11 or 38 languages. The "11" answer reflects linguistic constructions of genetic lineage, calculated by shared basic lexicon and phonological or grammatical features. This approach holds a reservoir of potential for communities reclaiming language, as shared language equates to shareable language records. The "38" answer reflects the cultural, social, political and geographic identity of the language communities. This approach cannot simply be relegated to sociolinguistic considerations – because for Aboriginal people the language comes from the land, because the need for concordant research between linguists and communities is too urgent, and because there is a great deal at stake depending on whose definitions are taken seriously. But it is too easy to see the linguistic answer as the "real" one and the community answer as "really just dialects".

Is there space within linguistics to take on board the more complex answer that communities live by? Ultimately this would require us to revisit definitions of language, seeking equally valid alternatives. It is not too hard to find potentially fruitful leads for theorising such alternatives – revisiting notions such as competence and performance, *abstand* and *ausbau*, focussing and diffusion. Definitions and delineations of language/s rest on the purpose of the definition, requirements or assumptions of the discipline or culture, and the history of beliefs about language and nation. For areas like Victoria, where 'Language' entails 'language reclamation', a reconfiguration matrix is useful, to account for records of language boundaries of the past as well as their interaction with active dynamics of language identity in the present.