

# The NSW Aboriginal Languages Trust 2025 Languages Gathering Highlights Report





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## Featured Artwork

### Let Our Voices Fly by Saretta Fielding



This artwork represents the NSW Aboriginal Languages Trust's ongoing commitment to grow the capacity of Aboriginal Communities, celebrate their achievements and create connections for Aboriginal Languages.

The imagery within the design highlights the success of the Aboriginal Languages Trust's work with partners and the growing capacity of Aboriginal Communities, celebrating opportunities and connections for Aboriginal Languages.

The large Gathering circles within the design are interwoven with pathways of traditional people symbols, reflective of the Aboriginal Language Custodians and their Communities, coming together from across NSW for this important Languages Gathering.

Traditional Elders symbols and stepping stones flow across the artwork, depicting our Languages from past, present and into the future, being reawakened and passed down to coming generations. This imagery appears to fly across the canvas, reflecting "Let our voices fly".

The five people symbols within the Gathering represent the five key focus areas of the Aboriginal Languages Trust, being: promoting Language activity, identifying priorities for Language activity, managing the funding of and investment in Language activity, promoting education and employment opportunities in Language activities and promoting the wider use and appreciation of Aboriginal Languages.

## Acknowledgement of Country



The NSW Aboriginal Languages Trust acknowledges and pays respect to Aboriginal Peoples who are the custodians of Country. We acknowledge their unbroken connections to this place through Story, Kinship and Language, from time immemorial.

The Aboriginal Languages Gathering 2025 was held on Wonnarua Country. We would like to acknowledge and thank the Wonnarua Language Custodians and the Wonnarua Community for welcoming us and allowing us to gather, share and learn on their Country.

## About the Languages Gathering

The NSW Aboriginal Languages Gathering 2025, the third statewide Languages Gathering, brought together over 225 participants representing more than 35 Aboriginal Languages from across the state. It was held in Wonnarua Country from February 18-20, 2025.

Under the theme "Let Our Voices Fly," the Gathering celebrated the power and resilience of Aboriginal Languages and recognised the incredible, often unseen work of Communities in Language revival and maintenance. The theme embodied the journey of Language revitalisation through three connected concepts:

- **Connect** - Build strong relationships between Language groups, share knowledge, and pool resources to support each other's efforts to nurture and grow Languages together.
- **Speak** - Honouring the ongoing work of Communities speaking Language on Country, within families, and across generations, while recognising the innovative ways Communities are reclaiming and revitalising their Languages daily.
- **Fly** - Looking forward to imagining a future where more people are speaking their Languages, ensuring voices are heard, strong, and proud for generations to come.

The three-day program included keynote presentations, panel discussions, interactive workshops, cultural performances and an awards night that recognised those working hard in Language revitalisation across the State. Participants had opportunities to network, share resources, and learn from each other's Language journeys.

The Gathering saw significant participation from Language centres, Community organisations, and educational institutions.

Over 40 presenters shared their knowledge and experiences through various sessions, demonstrating the breadth and depth of Language revitalisation efforts across NSW.

As Nardi Simpson reflected in her opening address, "In the two years since we last came together, Aboriginal Communities across NSW have continued to drive powerful change in bringing our Languages back to life through sustained and continuous effort to get Language back on tongues. This Gathering is a space for our Communities to learn from each other, share our stories, and continue to grow as we uplift and honour the unique strength and beauty of our Languages."

The event concluded with renewed commitment and energy to continue the vital work of ensuring Aboriginal Languages not only survive but thrive into the future.

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*"I feel so much more connected to Country and Culture and forged Kinships that have strengthened me on a spiritual level"*  
**(Respondent #27)**

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## Day one - Connect

The State-wide NSW Aboriginal Languages Gathering 2025 opened with a warm Welcome to Country on Wonnarua Country. The day began with a traditional Smoking Ceremony by Uncle Glen Morris, followed by the Welcome to Country from Tammy Hunter and a [video message](#) from Wonnarua Elder and Language Practitioner Aunty Sharon Edgar-Jones.

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*‘Our is the place where the mountains cohabit with the heights’ ‘The eaglehawks and wallabies are happy’ ‘Ours are the boomerangs and weapons. They are like snakes lying asleep’. ‘The kangaroos dance on the grass to smooth it down’ ‘Ours is the head of the fish in the water, the sweet honeycomb, the nectar inside the wooden bowl’ ‘Ours are the splendid and beautiful young women’ - **Aunty Sharon Edgar-Jones***

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Nardi Simpson, as MC, introduced the theme "Let our voices fly," highlighting how Aboriginal Communities across NSW continue to drive powerful change in bringing Languages back to life.

She outlined the three-day journey of Connect, Speak, and Fly – each representing a key part of Language revitalisation.

Jason Behrendt, ALT Chairperson, and Catherine

Trindall, ALT Deputy Chairperson, presented on the Aboriginal Languages Trust's work, reflecting on its role in bringing stakeholders together to network and showcase Languages revival work.

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*“What a journey it has been thus far, and at this point, I’m reminded of the legislation and the Act, as it confirms from a western legal framework what we already know. That our voices, footprints and our cultural identity have always been here since time immemorial. And our bloodlines, song lines that we hold carriage of descends from our ancestors and tells us who we are and that we are part of the oldest continuous living peoples in the world.” - **Catherine Trindall***

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The morning featured a powerful keynote presentation titled "'Lost without a trace': Breathing life back into the 'extinct' high country lingos linguists wrote off" by Callum Clayton Dixon and Philip Winzer, who shared their journey of reconstructing Anaiwan and Ngarabul Languages.

The keynote panel, "Kinship Between Languages", explored how kinship between Language groups and connections to a Country can support Language revitalisation. Facilitated by Jesse Hodgetts, the panel featured Edith Maher from the Irra Wangga Language Program, Leitha Assan, Dr Raymond Kelly, and Martin Hagan.

After lunch, participants attended regional breakout sessions to explore how Language groups can better connect to amplify efforts in their regions.

The five regional groups – Far North Coast and High Country, Sydney & North Coast, Sydney & South Coast, Northwest, and South West – gathered to discuss collaboration and shared challenges.

### **Regional Breakout Sessions: Building Connections and Strengthening Languages Together**

After the sessions, participants gave their feedback to the room about what they discussed in the regional breakout sessions. Representatives from each region presented their insights to the Gathering, sharing powerful reflections on Language revival and connection.

In the breakout sessions, participants explored several key questions:

- Can we understand our own Language without knowing our neighbours?

- What are some things that our Language groups have in common?
- How can we use these to strengthen Language learning across our region?
- How can our Language groups come together to practice speaking, even if our Languages are different?
- Does technology have a role in connecting and supporting Language groups across our region to revitalise our Languages?
- How did our Old People learn and speak so many different Languages? Is this something we can do again, or are our Communities not ready yet?
- What is one thing we can start doing right now to support the growth and continuation of each other's Languages?

## Key Themes from Regional Feedback

### *Interconnection of Language, Country and Culture*

- "No, we can't [understand our Language without knowing our neighbours]. We talked about how everything is overlapping – Country, bloodlines, kinship, continuing the legacy of our old people, spiritual connection and stories, and the way that Language changes around Country."
- "Our Languages are relational, we're all connected. We share many words and features of our Languages regionally."
- "Language belongs to Country. We don't own the Language, it's a part of the land, a part of Country. Stories within families show connections to Language Country."

### *Building Relationships and Safe Spaces*

Many groups emphasised the importance of face-to-face connection:

- "Connecting with each other face-to-face, building strong relationships with each other, creating safe spaces to learn from each other – come together to listen, not just to speak."
- "We need to have that humility to sit down and listen to each other with our differences and approaches and different ideas."
- "Being comfortable in an uncomfortable space. Get ready for those difficult conversations. Until those difficult conversations happen, there's always going to be a fallback – as soon as we take it on the chin, it will benefit our Community, especially the kids."

### *Role of technology*

On technology's role in Language revival, responses were nuanced:

- "For us it was a yes, using technology through music, connecting across countries through songlines, Dreamtime stories, being purposeful in using technology, utilising tech to support and evolve – but not fully use technology in



Language learning. It's also very important to have face to face, as our Language and how it was taught was mainly through oral tradition."

- "If we had a platform that we could share – if we could look at that, that would be good."

#### *Participants noted important considerations around recording:*

- "With recording, barriers have been put in place from past experience, hesitation of recording. It's important to know when to record and when to consent – especially if you're going out on Country with Elders and asking for permission to share recordings and audio."

#### *Learning from Old People's Multilingualism*

- "A major part of sharing is body Language – it plays a huge role in sharing Language."
- "Our old people travelled knowing neighbouring Languages. Present day, knowing what Country you're on, and also learning – all interconnection through dance, songlines, country – and surrounded by it. Live it, breathe it."
- "We learnt many Languages as a necessity – trade was important to be able to speak and travel, share knowledge and Culture."

#### *Moving Forward Together*

Participants emphasised collaboration over competition:

- "We had an agreement to force the relationship, conversation and create a space and a platform to come together. We might get angry and sad, but if we don't face that, we won't move forward."
- "Instead of competing and comparing – we don't want to be that way."
- "We're at similar stages of revitalisation and we want to continue. We have a big emphasis on shared experiences and responsibility – we could be sharing more resources across our area."

#### *Focus on Youth and Normalisation*

- "For us, our key areas were our young ones – making sure our kids have that strength and see people around them that have pride in the sharing of that practice and sharing their Language – and let them know that Language is their birthright, and no one can take that from them – we can only give it to them."
- "Language stays with us and young ones – where fluency is normal – where you don't get bullied for having a Koori name at school. We have an obligation. Speaking Wiradjuri is as normal as speaking English."

Through these rich discussions, participants reinforced the importance of collective effort, emotional readiness, and commitment to supporting each other in Language revival across regions and communities.

### *On Country Together*

The afternoon continued with "On Country Together," featuring weaving and artifacts workshops, followed by a Corroboree on the Haven Lawn that celebrated Culture and connection.





The day concluded with an "Eat Street Dinner" in the Pergola Area, where participants enjoyed a variety of street market food stalls, live music performances by Cianna Walker and Olivia Coe, and an Open Mic session where attendees shared their talents.

Throughout the day, the Gathering emphasised the power of connection in strengthening Language revitalisation efforts across NSW, building relationships between Language groups, and sharing knowledge to support each other's work in nurturing and growing Aboriginal Languages together.

## Day two – Speak

The second day of the NSW Aboriginal Languages Gathering 2025 embraced the theme of "Speak," celebrating the ongoing work of Communities speaking Language on Country, within families, and across generations.

The day began with a recap of Day One's connections and insights, setting the stage for deepening conversations about Language revitalisation.



Dr. Roseanna Hanare-Solomona and James Munroe delivered the morning keynote address, "he Takano ahau – I am a seed of greatness." They shared their cultural wisdom from Aotearoa/New Zealand, drawing powerful parallels with Aboriginal Language revival journeys.

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*"Seeing the progress of the Maori Language Nest was an eye opener and seeing how the different schools work and use various methods to implement Mother Tongue within the learning space."*

**(Respondent #37)**

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The day concluded with the highlight Gala Dinner in the Conference Centre, hosted by Andy Saunders. The evening featured tributes and Language awards recognising outstanding contributions to Language revitalisation, followed by a moving musical performance by acclaimed First Nations artist Loren Ryan.

The celebration continued with dancing and connections that emphasised the power of spoken Language in building Community.

Throughout Day Two, participants shared innovative methods for putting Language back on tongues, honouring the legacy of Elders while embracing new technologies and teaching methods. The day embodied the power of speaking Language as an act of resistance, resilience, and cultural pride.




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*"It was my first ALT forum, and I absolutely felt empowered, connected to Culture and honoured to be with my people who speak and teach Language." - (Respondent #31)*

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## Award Recipients

The NSW Aboriginal Languages Awards ceremony was a highlight of the Gala Dinner held on Day Two of the Gathering. The awards recognised the outstanding contributions of Elders, Community leaders, and young people who are working tirelessly to revitalise Aboriginal Languages across NSW. Andy Saunders emceed the ceremony, which was presented by eight members of the Aboriginal Languages Trust Board.

### Honorary Award

This award honoured Language Elders and Community members who have passed away, celebrating their enduring legacy and contributions.

#### *Uncle Harry "Tiger" Buchanan (Gumbaynggirr)*

Born in 1898, Uncle Tiger was the last story man in the Nambucca Valley and held profound knowledge of Gumbaynggirr Dreaming stories, Language, and Cultural practices. His extensive recordings of songs, stories, and cultural practices remain central to Language teaching and Cultural revitalisation efforts today. The award was

accepted by his son, Les Buchanan.

*Aunty Lena Chapman nee Carpenter (Gammea-Dharrawal and Wandiwandian)*

Born in 1902 at Roseby Park (Jerrinja), Aunty Lena was instrumental in keeping Language alive, passing down knowledge she learned from her grandparents and Aunties. Her recordings from the 1960s are among the most referenced resources for current Language revival on the South Coast due to her clear pronunciation and use of complete sentences. Her great-grandsons and great-nephew accepted the award: Jacob Chant Morris, Joel Deaves, and Drew Longbottom.

**Lifetime Contribution to Language Award**

This award celebrates individuals who have devoted decades to documenting, teaching, and revitalising Aboriginal Languages.



*Uncle Pat Connolly (Wiradjuri)*

Described as a "Wiradjuri Treasure," Uncle Pat grew up on the Mission at Brungle. Despite leaving school at 14 with a Year 3 education, he later completed a Graduate Certificate in Wiradjuri Language and Culture. He has taught Language, song, and dance in preschools and schools for decades and serves as an Elder in Residence at Tumut Community Preschool.

*Uncle Michael "Micklo" Jarrett (Gumbaynggirr)*

A member of the Baga-Baga clan, Uncle Micklo has dedicated three decades to sharing and teaching Gumbaynggirr Language. With a Master of Indigenous Languages Education, he has taught in numerous settings from preschools to TAFEs. As Head Aboriginal Language and Culture Trainer for the Gumbaynggirr Language and Culture



Nest since 2014, his influence has inspired countless individuals to embrace Gumbaynggirr Language and Culture. Nathan Brennan accepted the award on his behalf.

### Language Champion Award

This award recognised individuals whose leadership is supporting the growth and protection of Aboriginal Languages.

#### *Aunty Sharon Edgar-Jones (Wanarruwa and Guringay)*

For over 20 years, Aunty Sharon has dedicated herself to revitalising both Wanarruwa and Gathang Languages. Known as a "walking dictionary," she authored the Wanarruwa Beginners Guide and has conducted significant research on word engineering techniques used by Wanarruwa and Awabakal peoples during early colonisation. The award was accepted on her behalf by Tracey Skene.

#### *Callum Clayton-Dixon (Anaiwan)*

An Ambēyang man who has spent over a decade working to revitalise his ancestral Language, Callum established the Anaiwan Language Revival Program in 2016. He completed the first grammar and dictionary of Anaiwan through his PhD and has led Community Language classes, school programs, and the development of Language learning resources. In 2022, he led a campaign that resulted in the buyback of nearly 600 acres of high-country bushland to support Language and Culture revival on Country.

#### *Dean Loadsman (Bundjalung and Gumbaynggirr)*

Dean teaches Bundjalung and Gumbaynggirr Languages, Cultures, songs, and dances to approximately 200 children each week through schools, preschools, and Community programs. He also organises major cultural events, including the annual River Dreaming Festival in Grafton, which showcases Aboriginal dance, Language, and Culture.

### Young Language Champion Award

This award celebrates young individuals (under 30) who demonstrate an outstanding commitment to Language learning and advocacy.

#### *Zoey Lois Daley (Wayilwan)*

At just 18, Zoey is recognised as a young Language leader in her Community. She began learning Wayilwan at 14 and now teaches weekly classes to Kindergarten students. As the first and only person in Warren to deliver the Acknowledgement to Country in Wayilwan Language, she has performed at numerous Community events. Zoey also plays in the Warraan Widji Arts First Nations youth rock band, performing songs in Wayilwan. The award was accepted on her behalf by her teachers, Aunty Beth Wright and Phyllis Oates.

#### *Reuben Mellor (Gomeri)*

A dedicated advocate for Gomeri Language revitalisation, Reuben has worked for five



**Aboriginal Languages  
Trust**

years to strengthen and grow his Language. As a Founding Director of Gambadul Aboriginal Corporation, he developed Binawarranha, the first Gomerioi Language app to teach Garay through storytelling. Reuben creates YouTube videos featuring the Language spoken naturally in full sentences and teaches regular Language classes in Tamworth and surrounding areas.

The awards ceremony celebrated the resilience, dedication, and passion of these Language champions, honouring their vital work in ensuring Aboriginal Languages continue to thrive for future generations.

## Day three - Connect



The final day of the NSW Aboriginal Languages Gathering 2025 embraced the theme of "Fly," focusing on future aspirations and growth for Aboriginal Languages across the state.

The day began with a reflection on the previous days' themes of Connect and Speak, highlighting the importance of

looking forward to a future where more people are speaking their Languages with confidence and pride.

The morning started with an introduction and recap of Day 2, allowing participants to share their insights and key takeaways from the previous day's discussions about speaking Language in various contexts. Nardi Simpson set the tone by explaining the "Fly" theme, which represented aspirations for thriving Languages in homes, schools, workplaces, and on Country.

A significant highlight was Uncle Gary Williams' presentation on "My Language Centre," where the co-founder and CEO of Murrumbidgee Language and Culture Cooperative shared the remarkable 40-year journey of his Language Centre and the many Language Communities it has supported. This was followed by the screening of a Language Centres Animation that showcased their vital role in Language revitalisation.

The Language Centre Panel, facilitated by Jazlie Davis, brought representatives from five Language Centres across NSW to share their experiences, challenges, and hopes for the future.

Panellists included Frances Bell-Parker (Yaegl), Marion Wighton-Packham (Wiradjuri), Phil Winzer (Ngarabul), Bradley Hansen (Dharawal), Hank Flett (Gomeri)

A particularly creative session followed with the "Yarning Circles: Language Centre Vision Board" plenary, facilitated by Nardi Simpson. This interactive workshop encouraged participants to dream and collaboratively envision the future of Language Centres and Language sharing.

Participants reflected on what thriving Language Centres might look like in 50 years, drew their visions on butcher's paper, and shared these inspirations with the wider group.



The Gathering was further enriched by a captivating performance from Neville Boney, a Wiradjuri dancer, who presented "The Flight of Language," a creative exhibition that used dance to express how Language connects to Country and Ancestors.

Dr. Raymond Kelly, an ALT Board Member, delivered the final reflections of the conference, expressing gratitude to all Language champions and summarising the journey through the themes of Connect, Speak, and Fly.

He highlighted that Languages are not just words but identity, strength, and survival, holding both the past and shaping the future.

The Gathering concluded with a final lunch, marking the end of three days of powerful connections, knowledge sharing, and collective visioning for the future of Aboriginal Languages in NSW.

## Looking forward: what's next?

The NSW Aboriginal Languages Gathering 2025 concluded with participants feeling inspired, connected, and eager to apply their learning in their communities. Based on the feedback collected through surveys and discussions, the NSW Aboriginal Languages Trust can now develop plans for future initiatives and Gatherings.

### Participant reflections and future aspirations

Participants shared specific plans for implementing what they learned:

- "Taking programs back to Country that I so loved and I can't wait to use in my schools and Community" (Survey Respondent #10)
- "I will use what I've learnt to support my teaching of Language." (Survey Respondent #14)
- "Continue to change with the times & be willing to try new ways of teaching, learning & sharing" (Survey Respondent #20)
- "Strengthen our Language group to support Language in the school and the Community" (Survey Respondent #6)

### Areas for future development

Through survey responses and Gathering feedback, several key themes emerged about what participants hoped to see in future Language initiatives:

#### *Regional Language Networks*

- Establish formal regional Language networks that meet regularly throughout the year
- Create regional resource-sharing platforms to maximize the impact of existing materials
- Support regional Gatherings between state-wide events to maintain momentum and foster ongoing collaboration

#### *Infrastructure and Resource Development*

- Develop a state-wide digital platform for sharing Language resources while respecting ICIP protocols
- Establish dedicated funding streams for Community-led recording projects with proper consent protocols
- Support the development of Language centres in underserved regions
- Create frameworks for documenting and sharing best practices in Language revitalisation

#### *Intergenerational Language Transfer*

- Design family-centred Language learning programs that can be implemented in homes

- Create more opportunities for young people to learn directly from Elders in culturally safe environments
- Develop Language learning resources specifically targeting different age groups, from early childhood to adults

#### *Professional development and support*

- Establish mentorship programs between experienced Language workers and those beginning their journey
- Create professional development pathways for Language teachers and workers
- Provide ongoing training in digital technologies for Language documentation and teaching

#### *Cultural and emotional wellbeing*

- Develop protocols for addressing emotional challenges in Language revitalisation
- Create spaces for healing conversations about Language loss and reclamation
- Support cultural immersion experiences that connect Language learning to Country, kinship, and cultural practices

#### *Community engagement and awareness*

- Create strategies for normalising Language use in public and Community spaces
- Develop campaigns to promote pride in Language identity among young people
- Establish partnerships with mainstream organisations to increase the visibility of Aboriginal Languages

#### *Monitoring and evaluation*

- Implement Community-led frameworks for measuring Language revitalisation progress
- Document and share success stories to inspire ongoing effort
- Create opportunities for regular reflection and adaptation of Language strategies

### **The Path forward**

The Languages Gathering demonstrated the power of connecting Language communities. With the theme "Let Our Voices Fly," participants embraced the vision of Aboriginal Languages flourishing across NSW.

As communities return to their respective countries with new knowledge, connections, and inspiration, the Aboriginal Languages Trust will continue to support the growth and revitalisation of Aboriginal Languages across NSW, ensuring they continue to fly for generations to come.