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How technology is saving Indigenous languages



Language is a precious asset, a commodity that many are doing their utmost to preserve. NITV looks at how one Newcastle-based organisation united 240 passionate experts from across the globe in a bid to help to save Indigenous languages worldwide.

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"We are losing our languages," explains Daryn McKenny, manager of the [Miromaa Aboriginal Language and Technology Centre \[http://www.miromaa.org.au/ \]](http://www.miromaa.org.au/) (MALTC) in Newcastle.

"Our languages are our most precious asset, our commodity. Languages are the foundation of who we are and where we came from, how we care for this country and how we care for one another.

"But more and more, they are at risk. And more and more, we are realising that we can't let this happen."

According to the [Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies \[aiatsis.gov.au/ \]](http://aiatsis.gov.au/) (AIATSIS), there are more than 250 cultural groups which make up Indigenous Australia, yet only 120 languages are still used. About 100 have been identified as endangered.

While Indigenous languages are disappearing as fast as ever, McKenny says individual efforts to halt this loss are incredibly strong.

McKenny's employer, MALTC, is but one organisation determined to change the fate of endangered languages and revive those already considered lost.

"I'm an Aboriginal fella and this [topic] lights the fire..."

The centre is currently involved in supporting over 250 language activities around Australia and the world with the purpose of conserving and teaching the nation's Indigenous languages.

Ever passionate about ensuring that the momentum for language preservation continues to increase over time, McKenny and his team also facilitate the biennial [Puliima National Indigenous Languages and Technology Forum \[http://www.puliima.com/ \]](http://www.puliima.com/).

The fifth Puliima forum was held in Melbourne in October to showcase language conservation success stories and share the methods being used to save some of the world's oldest languages.

"I'm an Aboriginal fella and this [topic] lights the fire," expresses McKenny with feist.

But, he adds, "what we are doing is for all Australians. We want everyone in Australia to speak our languages. It helps us all care for this country".



The conference included a special entertainment feature: the first ever Australia's Got Language Talent Contest, inspired by reality TV, which aimed to showcase deadly Aboriginal Australian talents performing in Aboriginal Language.

Passion meets preservation

The 2015 Puliima National Indigenous Languages and Technology Forum marked the biggest ever since the event's inception in 2007.

Attracting 240 language experts from over Australia, Torres Strait, New Zealand, the United States and Mexico, forum attendees came together with one aim in mind: to use technology to conserve Indigenous languages.

"This was a conference that went for four days, and from the first moment to last moment where people were leaving it was full of enthusiasm and passion," explains McKenny.

"We were blown away. It was absolutely amazing."



The event proved so popular that around 50 delegates were turned away because capacity was reached.

"Technology is a tool we have up our sleeve to help us capture our knowledge and language, not only to preserve but conserve and disseminate," he says.

Showcasing what can be done in a short space of time with expert support and passion, a group of experiential book creators from [KIWA® New Zealand \[kiwadigital.com/ \]](http://kiwadigital.com/) designed and launched a language app live at the event.

"They started creating it on the Monday, finished it on the Tuesday, gave [the work] to the KIWA Digital app team who polished it. They got the app to Apple and launched it in the App store by the Thursday afternoon."



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Forum attendees also learned tools for documenting and recording language; methods of documenting and recording best practice using audio recorders and computers; and how to create language dictionaries.

The palawa kani Language Program team from the [Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre \[http://tacinc.com.au/new-digital-palawa-kani-resources/ \]](http://tacinc.com.au/new-digital-palawa-kani-resources/) shared their experience of devising and producing two digital apps with the crowd.

Staff explained how they built the apps into existing and new language activities in Aboriginal Children's Centres, youth programs and community activities.

"Technology is a tool we have up our sleeve to help us capture our knowledge and language, not only to preserve but conserve and disseminate."

Teachers and students from [Santa Fe Indian School in New Mexico \[http://www.sfis.k12.nm.us/ \]](http://www.sfis.k12.nm.us/), USA also presented on a learner-driven intergenerational learning course supporting languages of their Pueblos including Keres, Tewa, Towa, Tiwa, Zuni, Apache and Navajo.

They showcased their students' journey to language competence and reflected on how it is difficult to find language teachers who are certified to teach all of these languages in a school setting.



“Indigenous languages have a value within this country that cannot be underestimated... and at present, it is.

0 But that’s changing and these people [and the popularity of the conference] are examples of that.”

“...The people who attended the forum will take their passion [for Indigenous language] back home and the energy will continue on. What more can we ask for than that?”

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