

Orthography of Australian Aboriginal Languages

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(easy version)

What's meant by 'orthography'?

It's a standardized way of writing words in a particular language. Many of us are aware that Americans spell some English words differently from the Australian and British spelling. For example here in Australia we spell the word "colour" with a "u", but the Americans spell the same word as "color". In Australia, we follow British spelling, so the words "theatre", "centre" and "metre" are spelled differently from American spelling of those words. The Americans spell them as "theater", "center" and meter."

It's not very long since the English language has adopted a standard spelling. "Shakespeare", for example, spelled his own name in more than 70 different ways, including "Shakspere", "Shackspeare" "Shakespear", and "Shakspeare". He even spelled his first name, "William" in different ways!

But since then, the English language has changed and in different parts of the world people now insist on "correct spelling", although this seems to be changing on the internet. But still today teachers give school children spelling tests and words are marked as "right" or wrong, correct or incorrect.

With Australian Aboriginal languages (which are technically called "Australian languages" because they are not spoken anywhere else in the world), it's even more tricky.

Why? Because when the British colonists arrived, there were NO written Australian languages. Aboriginal people passed on knowledge by memorising it and passing it on to the next generation. So, when the colonists came here, they began writing down the sounds of words they heard, but often they had no idea of how to go about it.

For one example, a sailor on Captain Cook's ship the Endeavour, spelled the famous Australian marsupial, the koala, wrongly. The sailor should have written it down as "koola", which is how the locals pronounced it. One reason for this mistake is that the sailor didn't have what is known as a "good ear" for languages. There's also a theory that the Englishman might have been dyslexic.

But the incorrect name (and spelling) has stayed the same right up to the present day (and by the way, it's not a bear, either). This type of error often happened when the colonists tried to transcribe words from spoken Australian languages. Some colonists were of course much better than others at hearing the sounds correctly and transcribing them (which means 'writing them down') successfully.



A koala – well whoops, NO - it's actually a KOOLA.

Photo by [David Clode](#) on [Unsplash](#)

With thanks to David Clode

Over the years professional linguists have been working towards more accurate spellings that include the different sounds of Aboriginal languages. Words in Australian languages are not pronounced the same way that English is pronounced. One really big change is that now Aboriginal people themselves are having much more say in how they want their languages to be spelled. This will continue over time, and it's a good thing that nowadays more Aboriginal people give more input into their own languages' spelling. That's the way to go.

The Orthography of Ada Bird's Language, Anmatyerr

Ada Bird Petyarre's language was Eastern Anmatyerre, but in the past it has been spelled in the following ways (and more, too):

Nmatjera

Unmatjera

Anmatjara

Yanmajara

Janmadjara or Janmadjari

Imatjera

Urmitchee

Janmatjiri

Yanmedjara

Yanmadjari

The name 'Anmatyerre' has recently been changed to Anmatyerr, but in this exhibition we're sticking with 'Anmatyerre' because that's how it was spelled throughout Ada's lifetime.