

“Speaks Indigenous language” – the use of English for referencing Aboriginal languages in Australian screen media

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I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal people, the traditional custodians of the land on which this study was undertaken and from which I’m speaking today. I pay my respects to Elders past and present and extend this respect to any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people in the audience today.



Australia's linguistic landscape

- Diverse language ecologies, including across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Angelo et al., 2019)
- Inner Circle variety: distinct due to settlement, physical distance, and contact with traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages (Burridge, 2021, p. 130)
- Tension between this multilingual ecology and Australia's "monolingual mindset" (Clyne, 2005, p. xi)
- How does English mediate Aboriginal languages in public discourse?

Our study

- Use of English for engaging with Aboriginal languages in fictional screen media
- 16 Australian television series broadcast from 2012 to 2021 which centre on Aboriginal characters (see Bednarek in press)
- All series had some involvement of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander screen creatives (director/writer/producer), but addressed ‘mainstream’ audiences (ABC/SBS)
- Analysis of different text types: shooting scripts; broadcast dialogue; subtitles for the deaf or hard-of-hearing; post-production scripts
- ‘Textual tracing’: where the dialogue includes utterances spoken in a specific Aboriginal language, how is English used to represent this dialogue in the other text types? (adapting Bleichenbacher’s 2008 taxonomy)

Four representational practices

More specific



More generic

- Use of an English translation (e.g. “Galiya Mabu (**Goodbye**)”)
- Use of specific language labels (e.g. “Some of the conversation could be peppered with occasional **Gija** words and phrases”)
- Use of the Aboriginal English term *Language* (e.g. “are speaking to each other in **Language**”)
- Use of highly generic mainstream English terms (e.g. “speaks **Indigenous** language”)

Presence



Absence

General trends

Bednarek, Herriman & Troy (2026):

- Limited presence of Aboriginal languages (18 episodes in 7 series)
- Trend towards generic terms, not identifying the specific language
- The actual dialogue spoken in an Aboriginal language is mainly absent from these texts
- Makes invisible the diversity of Aboriginal languages and risks homogenising Aboriginal peoples, with [flow-on effects](#)
- Exceptions show that different practices *are* possible despite the constraints of the screen industry

Flow-on effects beyond Australia

Internet Movie Database (entry for *Cleverman*)

Details

Release date [June 1, 2016 \(United States\)](#)

Countries of origin [Australia](#) · [New Zealand](#) · [United States](#)

Languages [English](#) · [Aboriginal](#)



9. RODDY
(in language to THOMAS)
Mbah, kwerne une aleme.
(Come on, let's go inside.)

Shooting script



Subtitles

241 10:16:32:14 10:16:35:05 2 :16

NAN Wenhme elbenehe etjenhenge. Apmere
altjenenge aye.
(Who are these people? This is not your
house, it's someone else's.)

Post-production script

References

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