

Aboriginal place names

Geraldine Triffitt, linguistics bibliographer at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Studies, provides an insight into their meaning

Aboriginal place names fascinate people. They see a name on a signpost and hare off to their local library to find out its meaning. If successful it may describe a topographical feature, or be a flowery descriptive phrase, or even express an abstract idea. This makes the linguist wonder how such meanings have been derived. How does one point to 'peace' for example.

With increasing databases and dictionaries of place names compiled as a result of linguistic, historical or anthropological research, it is worth looking deeper into the correct derivation of the name.

Place names encapsulate many other characteristics of the local language. Remember that Australia at the time of settlement was a continent peopled by nations of probably 250 language groups who did not understand each other and had different attitudes to life, in the way that Europe is a conglomerate of different peoples. Even Captain Cook experienced differences in language when his word for the black Cape York kangaroo *gan-guru* in Guugu Yimthirr was not understood by the Dharawal people of Botany Bay. Many of the languages of Cook's time have disappeared so that place names may be one of the few indicators of the sound system, word structure or grammar of the language.

Aboriginal languages have different sounds to English, causing difficulties for the explorer or surveyor trying to record them. As there was no difference between k/g, p/b or t/d, the same word may be written with a *k*, a *g* or even a *c*. However there were dif-

ferences between the four *n* sounds as to where they were pronounced and whether the tongue was behind the teeth, through the teeth, curled back or flat against the roof of the mouth. An initial *ng* is common in many languages, but not in European languages where it may be heard and written as an *n*. As a consequence, most Aboriginal place names have been so distorted by the Anglicised spelling that it is difficult to ascertain the correct word and its ending. For example, *Ngudyumbuny* became Woodenbong, Brewarrina came from *burri* Acacia pendula and *warinna* standing.

People remark about the up towns of South-Western, Western Australia or the frequency of *ong* endings in the Southern NSW towns. This demonstrates the importance of suffixes in the grammatical systems. Instead of a preposition and a noun as in English, Aboriginal languages have word stem plus suffixes to show location, direction and the grammatical case, similar to noun declensions in Latin. The locative ending meaning *at*, *in* or *on* something is often translated as *place of*. In the same way verbs and their auxiliaries show person, tense, number, or aspect through suffixes or even prefixes in some northern languages.

A common suffix signifies *having* a characteristic. In NSW, Gilgandra is on the border of Wiradjuri and Ngiyampaa countries. It has the Wiradjuri *dra* ending corresponding to *dhuri* or *djuri* meaning *having*, and not the *bone* ending from *puwan* which means *having* in Ngiyampaa words like Gulargambone.

Recently on the radio program *Australia All Over* there was discussion and speculation as to the reason for the doubled place names, such as Grong Grong or Goonoo Goonoo, (one enthusiast had collected more than 120 of these). Reduplication is a common feature of Aboriginal grammar. Depending on the language it can express intensity, diminution, unreality or more likely plurality and widespread distribution. Hence, *wag-gan* is a crow and Wagga Wagga, many crows.

Place names may also reflect the spiritual life of the people. Some are named after the activities (including bodily functions) of the ancestral beings who roamed the country in the Dreaming. Hence, many NSW names incorporate *gunu* or excrement in their names, this being abundant at Goonoo Goonoo and Coonamble, *gunu* plus *bil* meaning plenty of.

There is increasing academic interest in the origin and correct representation of Aboriginal place names. In projects, such as the one carried out in the Flinders Ranges, teams comprising linguists and cartographers are led by the Aboriginal elders who explain their country and teach the origins of the place names. Government guidelines for new names give preference to Aboriginal names. Names may be changed from the European to the Aboriginal, so that Ayers Rock is now Uluru. Aboriginal names have even been chosen for features on the planet Venus as a gesture to the International Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples.

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