



Keeping languages alive

Academic encourages people to preserve indigenous dialects

INDIGENOUS languages continue to disappear at an increasingly alarming rate.

Before European settlement in 1788, more than 250 indigenous languages – including 800 dialect varieties – were spoken across Australia.

According to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 90 per cent of indigenous Australian languages are now endangered.

JCU adjunct research professor RMW Dixon has written a book called *Australia's Original Languages*, which is about 30 indigenous languages from across Australia.

“My book gives all Australians, indigenous and non-indigenous, an idea of what the languages were like,” he said.

“I wanted to use my book to show that Australian languages are just as worthy of study as European languages.

“The book teaches the reader how to pronounce certain words, how language reveals social constructs, and how a language reflects the way people classify things around them.”

According to Prof Dixon, there has been a recent revival of interest in learning First Nations languages.

“Every language has its way of dealing with the world and the language encapsulates the culture,” he said.

“Indigenous Australian languages have rich vocabularies and grammars as intricate as those in Latin and Greek.

“The indigenous people are trying to recapture these languages because it helps to give

them an idea about their heritage.”

Indigenous languages are a tool to communicate a person's cultural history, traditions, memory and identity.

Prof Dixon's main motivation for writing the book was to preserve indigenous languages for future generations.

“Indigenous peoples are the traditional guardians of this land,” he said.

“It's extremely important to learn more about the original languages and cultures on the land in which we live.”

The book is a collation of more than 50 years of Prof Dixon's research and it talks about how indigenous languages are related across the continent.

“The indigenous languages have similar sound systems, consonants and vowels that would have been picked up during meetings, dances and marriages,” he said.

Throughout his career, Prof Dixon has worked with elders, researching their culture, language and dialects.

Most of his research has focused around studying indigenous languages in northeast Queensland, including Dyirbal, Yidiny, Warrgamay, Nyawaygi and Mbabaram.

“Most memorably, I have worked with the last speaker of Mbabaram over the range beyond Mareeba,” he said.

>>2019 is the International Year of Indigenous Languages