



For Aboriginal people, Australia Day is Invasion Day, a time to remember dispossession by an alien culture. Picture: NIKKI DAVIS-JONES

Opinion

# Talking Point: The power of our own words

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THE national theme for NAIDOC Week this year is Languages Matter. In Lutruwita/Tasmania, this translates to Language Matters, as the course of our history has meant we are left with only one Aboriginal language that can be used in everyday life.

To celebrate this continuity, we participate proudly in national projects that showcase Aboriginal languages from all around the country. Our language, palawa kani (Tasmanian Blackfellas Speak) was spoken throughout a full episode of the NITV animated video *Little J and Big Cuz*, a runner up award winner in the 2016 ABC Splash and First Languages Australia Indigenous Language Song

Competition, and in the children's "Goodnight" in Aboriginal language series being shown on ABC TV during NAIDOC. Week

We could not have believed in 1971 that we would be speaking our own language within two generations. It was in the early 1970s that the modern Aboriginal movement was formed here to protect the interests of our community, to have our lands returned and to protect our heritage and culture.

Having been marginalised as a people, we set out to assert our identity separate from the dominant community. Our people had been looked on as second-class citizens or worse. Our lands and culture had been largely taken from us.

Too many of us lived on the fringes of society and were imprisoned without the normal protections of civil society. No one recognised that the wealth they enjoyed came only as a result of our dispossession and disinheritance.

Indeed, it is not yet widely recognised that our community are the survivors of the first and only war fought on this island. Historians like Ryan and Reynolds have done a great job of documenting the deliberate attempts at the extermination of our people and investigating the warfare that cleared this island of our clans to make way for the sheep farms and industries that made the English feel like they belonged here.

Some ask how that is relevant to our lives today. To us, it's obvious. As the wealth and power of the dominant society has enabled others to prosper at our expense, then we say society has an obligation to try to make up for the wrongs of the past; to recognise our rights and the First People of this land.

That's what's behind calls for a truth and reconciliation commission and calls for a treaty.

It's a sign of the depth of our cultural dispossession in this state as well as of our resilience that we had to start almost from scratch to revive our traditional language. We say "almost" because as amazing as it may seem, after all those years of being removed from our lands and so many of our traditional cultural ways, we did not totally lose our cultural connections, including our language. This is the same story we hear from all over the world — no matter how hard the dominant society tried to get rid of all signs of our language and culture, they did not succeed totally.

Through very thorough investigation of community knowledge and historical records plus solid linguistic analysis, we managed to retrieve the language of our ancestors. The first records of our language were made in 1770, so it's not

surprising it took us a couple of decades. Our languages evolved over time, as all languages do. There is now one and only one Aboriginal language for lutruwita. That's the language our children and community are now using daily, the language you are likely to hear on radio, on TV, in song and in the dual names of places all around the island.

So — does language matter, and if so, why? We know how you use the English language matters. If you insist on saying January 26 is “Australia Day” rather than “Invasion Day” it's saying you agree with the celebration of the date on which our country was invaded by the English and declared to be part of the British empire.

If you call us Aboriginal Tasmanians you are saying we are Tasmanian first and Aboriginal second. Most of us do not agree with that description.

If you say we should “get over” our dispossession and appropriation of our culture, you are saying we have no right to the ownership and control of what is ours.

If we ever reach agreement on the terms of a treaty between our peoples, then we will have agreed the terms of our co-existing as equals. We aren't quite there yet so let's hope we can all work harder together on achieving treaty rights as they have in other parts of the world.

And we know that in these challenging times when governments are cutting back on social services, when political parties are sacrificing the needs of the most disadvantaged and dispossessed in return for self-interested votes at the next elections, when groups in this state are claiming to have traditional languages that are just word lists taken from 19th century publications, when our detractors claim we have no culture because we lost our language — all this makes it more important than ever that we support in practical ways the notion that language matters.

Funding for language programs has been reduced. Despite this, more of our people are speaking our language. This NAIDOC Week theme can be a springboard for more of our community to relearn and speak some of our language because we know from our children and grandchildren how empowering that experience can be. And we know how much interest the wider community has in our language. That helps ensure our continued efforts will be one of our major successes.

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chief executive of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre

