

# Aboriginal Words in Australian English

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## Abstract

Aboriginal languages have been used in radio and television. The study of Aboriginal words is necessary in the study of Australian English. The term of Aborigine came from the first British settlement that was inhabited with a total population of about 300,000 Aborigines. There were roughly 600 tribes with an average of 500 members each.

At first the settlers seemed to believe that there was only one Aboriginal language and words from the Sydney area were used by the white man in other areas as these were opened up. The white man's habit of picking up words in one area and taking them to another can make it difficult to trace just where a word was adopted and whether certain words found in Aboriginal languages are part of their inherited word stock or recent importations.

In some cases it is difficult to be certain whether a word is of Aboriginal origin or not. 'Mopoke' and 'jumbuck' are Australian words and Aboriginal origin has been claimed for them. However, 'mopoke' may have been coined by the early settlers in imitation of the bird's call, and 'jumbuck' may be a form of the English phrase 'jump up'.

Altogether the white man has adopted over 200 words from the Aborigines. These fall into the following categories:

fauna, e. g. kangaroo, kookaburra, taipan

flora, e. g. kurrajong, mulga, jarrah

Aboriginal culture, e. g. boomerang, coolamon

colloquial terms, e. g. yabber, yakka

How are they related to Australian English? Are they related to languages outside Australia? How many are there? Are they simple?

The Australian Aborigines do not develop a system for writing their languages. Any written representation is the work of Europeans or of Aborigines trained by Europeans.

Australia was inhabited by a total population of about 300,000 Aborigines. There were roughly 600 tribes with an average of 500 members each.

The vocabulary of Aboriginal languages expanded when the white man came, in order to embrace new features such as 'bullock', 'policeman' and later 'aeroplane'. The vocabulary of English had to be expanded in similar fashion so that the settlers could describe new fauna, new flora and facets of Aboriginal culture. In many cases the early settlers found that the local fauna and flora resembled a familiar animal or plant in Britain, so they simply applied their old word to a new species.

It is said that within a decade or so of the first settlement at Port Jackson at least a few dozen words had been borrowed. Some of these words were words for animals or plants, but many were general words that were used in the pidgin that developed, words like 'baal' (no, not), 'murry' (very) and pyalla (to speak).

Aborigines in other parts of the continent did not know Sydney words and had no way of telling that they were not English. The vocabulary consisted of Aboriginal words (at first from the Sydney area and then with an admixture of words from other areas as settlement progressed), English words, and a few words that had already become traditional in pidgins, e. g. 'piccaninny' for 'Aboriginal child', a word of Portuguese origin. Some of the Aboriginal words used in this pidgin survived in colloquial English speech through the nineteenth century, but only half a dozen or so remain in use today, e. g. 'coo-ee' (call) 'wongi' (talk). A few survive in those parts of the country where pidgin is still spoken, 'yarraman' (horse).

The white man's habit of picking up words in one area and taking them to another can make it difficult to trace just where a word was adopted and whether certain words found in Aboriginal languages are part of their inherited word stock or recent importations. Where a word is recorded in the Sydney area from the early period before there were any other settlements, it is possible to pinpoint the area where the word was borrowed. However, with later borrowings it is often difficult to say that a word was borrowed from one specific area since many words are common to a number of different languages.

Words for fauna and flora have been adopted ever since Captain Cook's party collected the word 'kangaroo' at the Endeavour River in 1770, eighteen years before the first settlement. Some of these words are widely known, e. g. 'wallaby', 'wombat', 'koala' and others. But most are restricted since the item to which they refer is restricted to a certain area or is the concern of only a few people, e. g. 'cunjevoi'. Only a small number of words has been borrowed to describe artefacts or features of Aboriginal culture. A few are well known, eg. 'boomerang', 'corroboree' and 'woomera'.

In some instances English words or phrases have been used to describe Aboriginal culture, e. g. 'dreaming' or 'dreamtime' is used to describe the period when the ancestral beings were alive, and word like 'bullroarer'.

Aboriginal words are always a popular source of proper names for houses, country properties, boats and racehorses. In some instances it is just as well that the meaning of the Aboriginal word is not revealed. The citizens of Cunnamulla, south of western Queensland, will not be pleased to hear that the name of their town means 'bad faces'. However, undoubtedly the most unfortunate choice of a proper name from the city's annual festival 'Moomba'. The name is supposed to mean

'Let's get together and have fun.'

In fact 'moom' means 'buttocks' in various Victorian languages. The following list does not contain every word that has been borrowed from an Aboriginal language into English. It also contains a number of other words, mostly fauna and flora names, that can be found in popular books.

In some cases it is difficult to be certain whether a word is of Aboriginal origin or not.

baal, bail, bale : No, not. Collins (1798) records 'beall' from Port Jackson.

balanda : White man, European. The word is of Dutch origin (Hollander).

bandy bandy : Used for a number of different kinds of small snake, e. g., *Vermicella annulata*, the common bandy bandy. A word from the north coast of New South Wales.

bangalow : The palm, *Archontophoenix cunninghamiana*. A New South Wales word.

barcoo : The name of a river in south-western Queensland which has been used in compounds such as barcoo grass, barcoo rot (a skin disease), barcoo challenge (shearer's challenge), barcoo vomit or barcoo spew (s) (vomiting sickness).

barramundi : (Often abbreviated to barra). In general use as the name of the fish. A Queensland word from the Rockhampton-Gladstone area. The earliest recorded form is burra-mundi and the present form may have been influenced by the word barracouta.

bilby : Rabbit bandicoot. The form bil-bi has been recorded in Wiradjuri, the language of central and southern New South Wales.

billabong : Branch of a river cut off from the main stream. A Wiradjuri word from central and southern New South Wales.

binghi : An Aborigine. This word, pronounced bing-eye, is derived from the term for elder brother in the languages once spoken between Kempsey Newcastle, viz. Ngamba, Birbai and Wanarua.

bogong moth : The bogong moth, *Agrotis infusa*, was prized as a food source by Aborigines. The word bogong is from the Murray River area of South Australia and has become the name for a range of mountains in south-east New South Wales after the profusion of bogong moths that gather there in summer.

bombora, bomboora : A submerged reef or rocks that causes the sea to lift but not break. A New

South Wales word than still enjoys current use and was popularised as the name of an instrumental 'hit' in the early 1960s.

boomerang : Curved throwing weapon. Captain P. P. King in his Survey of Intertropical and West Coasts of Australia notes 'Boomerang is the Port Jackson term for this weapon...' Threlkeld (1834) recognised the word as one that was introduced into the Awaba language of the Newcastle area, which suggests that settlers had picked it up very early.

bora : Initiation ceremony ; site for such a ceremony. Ridley gives the word as kamlaroi, the language once spoken around Gunnedah, N. S. W.

borak : A Victorian word meaning 'not', used in English to mean 'nonsense'. Once common, especially in the phrase to poke at meaning to give cheek to or to make fun of.

brigalow : Various kinds of Acaia, especially A. harpophylla.

broilga : Large kind of crane, *Grus rubicunda*, also known as the native companion. Forms such as broilga and burilga have been recorded over a large more or less continuous area extending from Wellington N. S. W. to Cooper's Creek in South Australia and up into western Queensland as far as Dajarra.

brumby : A wild horse. The origin of this word is obscure and it may not be Aboriginal. It records brumbi as wild horse in the area to the north of Brewarrina, N. S. W. and booramby means wild is recorded from the Cunnamulla, Q., area.

budgerie, boojery : Good. The word seems to be obsolete, but it once enjoyed currency in colloquial speech.

bung : This is a word from the Brisbane area that originally meant dead. It is now used to mean bankrupt or broken as in the phrase to go bung.

bunya-bunya : The tree *Araucaria bidwillii* ; the fruit or seeds of this tree. The Bunya-Bunya Mountains are named after the tree. It gives the form bon'yi for Kabi, the language once spoken around Gympie, Q.

bunyip : Mythical monster inhabiting rivers. A Victorian word.

carbora : A name in use in the nineteenth century for the koalas.

carney : Lizard, especially the bearded dragon. A Wemba-Wemba word from the Murry River

region.

cobbra, cobra : Head. It records cabera from Port Jackson. In use still in some northern Australian forms of pidgin. Mt Cobberas in East Gippsland, near the N. S. W. border, preserves this word according to Morris (1898).

cooe : A call used to attract attention from a distance, particularly in finding someone lost in the bush ; also used as a verb to cooe ; within cooe, within a short distance. It records cow-ee from Port Jackson. Forms related to these are found all over Australia and they can be shown to be authentic forms of a widespread root rather than forms spread by settlers.

corroboree : Aboriginal singing and dancing ; also used for a European social gathering or a disturbance. It records the form caribberie from Port Jackson. Numerous spelling were used in the nineteenth century.

cunjevoi : Animal growth found on rocks along the east coast, sea squirt. It's from coastal languages of New South Wales. It records conguwa and kunje-wy. The term is still in use. There is another word cunjevoi which refers to the plant, *Alocasia macrorrhiza*. This is also thought to be of Aboriginal origin.

currawong : Birds of the genus *Strepera*, black or grey birds with white marking the size of a magpie ; also known as the bell magpie. The word was recorded from languages between Newcastle and Brisbane, e. g. cur-ow-ung in Awaba (Newcastle area) and kirriwong in Birbai (Port Macquarie area).

didgeridoo, didjeridu : An Aboriginal wind instrument. It was earlier found only in Arnhem Land and the word comes from the languages of north-east Arnhem Land. The Monash University Music Department suggests that it may be a kind of onomatopoeic word imitating the pattern of syllables or tongue movements that players use, either when actually playing the instrument or when talking about the patterns they play.

dingo : Native dog ; also used as a term of contempt. It records tingo and Collins (1798) dingo, both from Port Jackson.

euro : A type of wallaroo, *Macropus robustus erubescens*. This word comes from northern South Australia.

galah : The grey, rose-breasted cockatoo, also used in the extended sense of fool. A number of forms similar to galah occur in eastern Australian Aboriginal languages and it is difficult to ascertain where this was borrowed.

gibber : Stone, rock. It records kibba from Port Jackson. The word is most frequently used in the phrase gibber plain referring to a boulder-strewn plain.

gidgee : Various kinds of Acacia. In western Queensland the red kangaroo. Or a spear, which is a word from southwestern Western Australia.

gin : Aboriginal woman. Collins records din from Port Jackson. The spelling represents a form dyin, sounding somewhere between din and gin.

gundy, goondie : An Aboriginal hut. It records kundi from the Wollongong area. Morris (1898) claims it is a Wiradjuri word.

hielamon, hielaman : A shield. In western Queensland, and possibly in other areas, this term is the normal among Aborigines and the word shield is hardly known. Pronunciations with and without the initial 'h' occur. Aborigines did not have a 'h' sound and when they learnt English they often introduced it in words that do not have it in English and omitted it in words that did have it. It is common in Aboriginal English to find forms like harm for arm and arm for harm. The problem of putting 'h' into the right words was compounded by the fact that many English speakers do not have an initial 'h' sound, saying 'ouse' for 'house' etc.

humpy : An Aboriginal hut ; also used of any rough hut or shack. The 'h' is intrusive. A word of south-east Queensland origin.

jackeroo : An employee on a sheep or cattle station being trained for management. It was found in Brisbane area and gives the meaning as 'wandering white man.'

jarrah : Western Australian tree, *Eucalyptus marginata*. This is a Nyungar word from southwestern-Western Australia.

kangaroo : This word in the form kanguroo is recorded in Cook's journal. It was recorded by Cook's party at Endeavour River in 1770 from the Guugu-Yimidhirr language. The popular story that kangaroo is not a genuine word for the familiar animal, but means 'I don't know', is incorrect. The word figures in a large number of compounds, kangaroo paw, kangaroo hop, kangaroo grass, etc.

karri : A Western Australian tree, *Eucalyptus Diversicolor*. The word is from south-western Western Australia.

kipper : An Aboriginal male who has been initiated into manhood. This is a word from the Sydney

area and in fact is a derivative of the word gibber given above as stone, rock. Some early versions show an extra syllable, this third syllable apparently representing a suffix, e. g. Collins (1798) gives ke-ba-ra which he relates to ke-bah the stone used in the initiation ceremony.

koala : A tree-dwelling marsupial. Forms such as cullawine, colo, coola etc. begin appearing as early as 1798, so the word appears to have originated in the Sydney area.

kookaburra : Large types of kingfisher of the genus 'Dacelo' known for their laugh-like call.

kooree, koori : An Aborigine. The form koori is recorded in Curr (1886-7) from several places from the Lower Macleay River to the Hawkesbury. Forms such as kooli, which may be related, are recorded from the Riverina and Victoria. The term is in current use among Aborigines in eastern Australia.

kopi : Gypsum clay. The term is used in western Queensland.

koradji : An Aborigine skilled in medicine, tribal doctor.

kurdaitcha, kooditcha : An evil spirit ; an expedition undertaken to perform an act of sorcery ; the special emu-feather slippers worn on such an expedition ; the sorcerer. The term kurdaitcha or kurdaitcha man is used in the sense of bogey man. The word comes from the Aranda language of central Australia.

kurrajong, currajong : This word was first recorded in the form 'curra-duin' from Port Jackson by Hunter (1793). The meaning given was various trees on the basis of their having fibrous bark that was used, at least by Aborigines, to make lines and ropes. Nowadays it is usually used only of certain species of Brachychiton.

kweeai : Young Aboriginal woman. This word has been borrowed from Aranda or one of the related dialects where the form kwiya is found.

kylie : Boomerang. A Western Australian word. It occurs in all the languages from New Norcia down to the south-west corner of the continent including the Perth area. Spelling such as kylie, kylee and kiley occur suggesting a pronunciation kaili.

leangle : An Aboriginal club with a pick-like striking head. The word comes from western and central Victoria. Early spellings include 'leungail', 'lee-eng-ile' and 'lee-ung-ile'.

lerp : A manna-like secretion from Psyllid insects found on the leaves of the mallee tree,

*Eucalyptus dumosa*. The insects that leave the secretion are referred to as lerp insects. The word comes from the Murray area. It records a form *lereb* in Wemba-Wemba and notes that the word 'lerp' has been borrowed from Wemba-Wemba or a related dialect.

*lowan* : Mallee fowl. This is a Victorian word. It records the form *lauan* in the Djadjala dialect of Wergaia, the language formerly spoken in the Wimmera district of western Victoria.

*lubra* : Aboriginal woman. A Tasmanian word recorded in 1834 in a French source with spelling 'loubra'. The word has been in wide use mainly in south-eastern Australia.

*luderick* : The blackfish, *Girella tricuspidata*. A Victorian word recorded from Gippsland.

*marri* : A Western Australian tree, *Eucalyptus calophylla*.

*mai-mai, mai-mai* : An Aboriginal hut. The word is of Western Australian origin but has been widely used in southeastern Australia.

*mogo* : Stone tomahawk. The form 'mogo' is recorded by both Hunter (1793) and Collins (1798) from Port Jackson. The word enjoyed some currency in the nineteenth century.

*mopoke, morepork* : A term used for the boobook owl and sometimes for similar birds such as the tawny frogmouth. It is not established that it is an Aboriginal word. It is certainly an imitative word and it seems to have come from New South Wales. It may have been coined by early settlers.

*mulga (1)* : Types of *Acacia* especially *A. aneura*. 'Mulga Wood' ornaments are made from the timber. The term the *mulga* refers to a remote area, the outback, the boondocks.

*mulga (2)* : Also spelled 'malka' and 'malga' in early sources, this term refers to a large shield. It is a Victorian word.

*Murry, Mari, Murrai* : An Aborigine. The word *mari* is the word for Aboriginal man in a number of languages of eastern Queensland and the term 'murry' is often used by Queensland Aborigines (in speaking English) to refer to themselves.

*myall (1)* : Wild, uncivilised ; often used to refer to bush Aborigines as opposed to civilised ones.

*myall (2)* : *Acacia* trees especially *Acacia pendula* 'the weeping myall'. The word 'boree' covers much the same range. Ramson (1988) explains that the word is the same as *myall* the word for stranger, the term having been applied by the Kamilaroi to the wood they traded with



the strangers of the Sydney region.

namma : Hole in rock containing water, natural well. The spelling 'gnamma' has also been recorded which suggests the word may be derived from ngama, a widespread word for 'water' in Australia.

nannygai : A fish, *Beryx affinis*. A New South Wales word.

nardo : The clover fern, *Marsilea drummondii*, or the species, *M. hirsuta*. The edible seeds can be crushed to make flour. The word is found in languages near the Queensland/South Australian border where the form of the word is ngardu.

nulla-nulla : An Aboriginal club. A Port Jackson word. It's the original form was ngala-ngala.

pademelon, paddymelon : Small wallabies of the genus *Thylogale*. A word from the Sydney area or the south coast of New South Wales. Confusingly the forms 'pademelon' and 'paddymelon' also refer to a trailing plant *Cucumis myriocarpus* naturalised in inland Australia, bearing small melon-like fruits.

perentie : *Varanus giganteus*, a goanna. A word from south-western Queensland or north-eastern South Australia.

pinkhi, pinkeye : Celebration, binge, holiday, walkabout. The word has been used in Australian Pidgin. A West Australian word from the Port Hedland area.

pitchi : Aboriginal wooden dish or bowl ; coolaman. A central Australian word.

pituri : A shrub, *Duboisia hopwoodii*, found in south-western Queensland and adjacent areas, the leaves of which were used as a narcotic by the Aborigines. It would perhaps be better spelled pedgery or bedgery as it sometimes was in the nineteenth century, these spelling reflecting the pronunciation better. The word is found in languages of western Queensland, but it is difficult to establish in which languages it is the established word as opposed to an importation spread by Europeans.

pyalla : To talk. A Port Jackson word that once enjoyed currency in Australian Pidgin.

quandong, quondong : The tree, *Santalum acuminatum*, and its fruit ; also used for a low or disreputable character. The explorer Thomas Mitchell recorded the form quandang in central New South Wales, possibly from Wiradjuri.

quoll : This term was recorded by Joseph Bank in 1770 at the Endeavour River from the Guugu-Yimidhirr tribe as the name of a spotted native cat. It is noted by Morris (1898) as not now in use, and Ramson (1966) notes that it became part of the scientific name for a native cat but achieved no wider currency.

taipan : The snake. This comes from the Wik-Munkan language of Cape York.

toopong : A fish, of the genus *Pseudophritis*. It records dubong in Gurnditj, in the Western District of Victoria.

tuan : Type of glider or flying squirrel or flying possum. A word from the western district of Victoria.

Waddy : An Aboriginal club ; any stick or cane used for corporal punishment. It records the form wad-dy for stick or tree.

wallaby : Used of any of the smaller macropods. Collins records wal-li-bah in the sense of black kangaroo from Port Jackson. Hunter (1793) records the form wo-la-ba for young kangaroo.

wallaroo : Mountain kangaroos of the *Macropus* genus. A Port Jackson word.

warrigal : Dingo, native dog ; also used in the nineteenth century for wild. A Port Jackson word recorded by Hunter (1793) as waregal and by Collins as wor-re-gal. Related forms are recorded from other parts of New South Wales and from Victoria. The name of the Gippsland town, Warragul, derives from this source.

weeai : Aboriginal boy or young man. This word has been borrowed from Aranda or one of the related dialects where the form awiya or wiya occurs.

wilga (1) : The tree, *Geijera parviflora*. A Wiradjuri word from inland New South Wales.

wilga (2) : Red ochre. The word comes from south-west Western Australia.

willy willy : A whirlwind. The word comes from north-west Western Australia.

witchetty, witchetty grub : Variuos large insect larvae. This is a South Australian word which originally referred to a hooked stick used for obtaining the grubs and was then used for the grubs themselves.

wobegong, wobbegong : A number of species of shark especially of the genus *Orectolobus*. It's a

New South Wales word.

woma, womma : A python in inland Australia, *Aspidites ramsayi*. The word wama in the sense of carpet snake or snake in general is found in a large number of languages of South Australia and the Channel Country of Queensland.

wombat : Burrowing marsupials of the family *Vombatidae*. Collins gives wom-bat but notes that the native called the animal womback.

woomera, womera : Throwing stick used to launch a spear. There was another word wo-mu-rang in the Port Jackson language which referred to a club sometimes used as a boomerang. This also appears, rather confusingly, with spellings such as womara and womera.

wurley : An Aboriginal hut. A South Australian word. The form warli occurs in a number of languages.

yabber : To talk. This word has been current in Australian Pidgin and is still in colloquial use in Australian English.

yabby, yabbie : Freshwater crustaceans (in Victoria) and marine crustaceans (in Queensland). Forms of this word have been recorded from both eastern and western Victoria.

yack-i : To shout, especially when carousing ; an exclamation. The word is pronounced 'yack-eye' and is in current use mostly in northern Australia.

yakka : Work. In common colloquial use especially in the phrase 'hard yakka'. The word comes from the Tharapal language of the Brisbane area, according to Ridley (1875).

Yamidgee : An Aborigine. A Western Australian word from the Malyara language of the upper Sandford River.

yarrah : The common red gum. The word is recorded in Wiradjuri (central and southern New South Wales) in the forms yara, yarra and yarrah.

yarraman : Horse. Ramson (1966) suggests that this word may have been adopted from Bateman's Bay.

youi : Yes. Forms similar to this have been recorded from all over Queensland. This word is in current use in northern Australia, both among Aborigines and Europeans.

A form of what appears to be this word, 'yooeen' is recorded from Port Jackson.

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Australian English borrows not just words but also concepts from indigenous populations. Concepts such as dreamtime and Aboriginal spiritual beliefs about the foundation of existence and Sorry Business rituals and cultural practices surrounding a death in the family. Australian English can be hard to predict. Many English visitors have been perplexed by the habit of calling flip flops "thongs". Australian English can be highly informal but it isn't always predictably so. Swimwear is known by the rather Edwardian term "bathers", and sweet peppers are known by the Latin "capsicum". It's all part of it. Additionally, some of Aboriginal Australian words have entered Australian English and are widely used in Australia. For instance, Indigenous Australians have historically used "boomerangs" for hunting, sport, and entertainment, and they are now regarded as an Australian icon (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boomerang>), and "didgeridoo" is an Indigenous Australian music instrument associated with their everyday life (Leitner & Sieloff, 1998). Additionally, we found that many everyday Aboriginal words were not so ordinary and had special traditional meanings in the Australian Aboriginal culture. It is well known that the Australian national airline (Note 6) icon is a flying Australian Aboriginal English (AAE) is a dialect of Australian English used by a large section of the Indigenous Australian (Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait Islander) population. It is made up of a number of varieties which developed differently in different parts of Australia. These varieties are generally said to fit along a continuum ranging from light forms, close to Standard Australian English, to heavy forms, closer to Kriol. There are generally distinctive features of accent, grammar Aboriginal English is probably the first language of the majority of Aboriginal people in Australia, who make up approximately 2% of the total population of the country. While many people speak it as their 'mother tongue', in more remote areas it is spoken as a second or third or fourth language, by speakers of 'traditional' Aboriginal languages and the creole languages. It appears that this is a word which is spreading from Aboriginal English into general Australian usage, especially among young people (compare the way that the African American English word 'bad' to describe something very good has spread into many other varieties of English). Back to top background grammar. Sounds.