

Introduction

Multilingual Australia, operating since 2000, is dedicated to creating a language-friendly nation by promoting linguistic diversity. Australia is known for its cultural diversity, with over 22% of Australians speaking a language other than English at home. Over 400 languages are represented, including 183 Indigenous languages and AUSLAN. However, language maintenance and preservation remain pressing concerns.

In February 2023, Multilingual Australia organised a "Navigating Multiple Languages" roundtable discussion for multicultural, faith, and multilingual community members. The event aimed to provide a platform for people to share experiences, learn about language maintenance strategies and discuss barriers. Our goal is to present a narrative that is engaging, interesting, and easy to understand. We have used clear language and avoided jargon to make the paper more accessible.

The roundtable identified three key themes related to social cohesion:

- The personal cost of language loss
- The impact of bad language policies on families
- Australia's English-Only language systems are out of step with the rest of the world

These findings have been summarised in a comprehensive paper intended to be a valuable resource for governments, policymakers, teachers, community leaders, and others interested in promoting linguistic diversity.

Key Challenges for Multilingual Families

The roundtable discussion identified several key challenges multilingual communities face in Australia, including the personal cost of language loss, the impact of insufficient language policies on families, and the consequences of a predominantly English-Only (Monolingual) approach. Participants expressed concerns about the loss of identity, the undervaluation of language skills, and the need for more specific services for multilingual Australians. Proper language policies and support systems also contribute to cross-cultural conflicts and stress within diverse families.

Multilingual Australia calls for national leadership on language policies that foster social cohesion, cultural understanding, and linguistic diversity. Addressing these issues is crucial to ensure a more inclusive and harmonious future for all Australians.

We acknowledge the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation as the traditional custodian of the land where the roundtable discussion took place We pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging.



The personal cost of language loss

Participants told Multilingual Australia that loss of language leads to loss of identity, making people and families very vulnerable. Their language skills are often undervalued and underutilised in their workplaces, school and in the home while they view it themselves as a strength.

Families or staff members from the same community are often asked to undertake interpreting and translation; multilingual people use their language skills without being paid.

Mental Health services are not reaching multilingual Australians in times of need, leading to experiences of grief and loss. Even less documented but regularly communicated to Multilingual Australia, silencing different languages is experienced as racism and bullying. This has implications for government services, youth and justice, mental health services, or even triaging in an emergency department.

- ▶ A mature-aged Polynesian woman lamented how parents experience the challenges of keeping their language alive said, “Now, it’s so sad, none of my kids can speak the Niuean language. I tried teaching my kids simple things they could understand. Language is your identity.”
- ▶ A Bolivian woman who migrated to the US from Bolivia as a young child recalled her family’s decision about language maintenance and its impact on her identity. “At 7 I started a new life in the US after moving from Bolivia. My father decided not to speak in Spanish with me anymore; I left that culture. Not speaking Spanish, and this wasn’t easy. It felt like a punishment.
- ▶ An Indian mother living extensively in different countries said, “It’s not just for your identity. It gives you a lens to look at other cultures from another perspective and question your own ideas and philosophies, which helps you better understand the community you’re engaging with at least for me. Especially in schools, to see the different perspectives and to work together. I love that.
- ▶ A Salvadorian woman shared her story of coming to Australia with her family and stressed that, “It’s essential to be able to speak Spanish. I was very glad we were able to maintain the language for over 30 years. My parents did that for us. It wasn’t a punishment. We wanted to do it.

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- ▶ A mature-aged Vietnamese woman who has been living in Australia for many years shared her experience with her children, "I spoke Vietnamese with them, but when they were 6 or 7 years old, at Kindy and Primary, they started speaking English. They didn't want to speak Vietnamese anymore. They just didn't want to."
- ▶ Despite the initial resistance, this Vietnamese mother's efforts paid off in the long run. Her daughter, now a nurse, expressed gratitude for being forced to learn Vietnamese. She recounted her daughter's comments, "Mum, I know you forced us, and we didn't like it, but I would like to say thank you for forcing us to learn Vietnamese." Whilst her language skills enabled her to connect with patients directly and provide translation services from Vietnamese to English, it is important to recognise that, like many other bilingual and multilingual Australians, she did not get officially recognised nor compensated for these very valuable language skills.
- ▶ The issue of silencing different languages is still prevalent, as it is often experienced as racism and bullying. A mature-aged Indian woman and active community leader observed, "The ABC [The Australian Broadcasting Commission] could do more work. They have added different faces but not different accents. Children don't learn their parents' languages because they see their parents shunned because of their accents. There's a low likelihood of parents changing their accent."
- ▶ An Arabic-speaking primary carer from North Africa pointed out that Australia doesn't discourage teaching children multiple languages, but the system's focus on English can be intimidating. "They want

your kids to simply learn English. They [Schools] want you to have native English only, and that is bullying; it's not correct. [English systems] want the kids to learn English, and parents want a better life for their children, so they don't speak the heritage languages. They can be successful as bilinguals, but parents often don't have the knowledge, key information [to maintain their language]." He also added that "...my children do have a connection to their cultural heritage. They have an identity. They consider themselves to be North African. They are whiter than white but think of themselves like that."

- ▶ A mature-aged man from mixed heritage (Indian Chinese) explained that his parents' decision to prioritise English was driven by a desire to protect their children from racism and help them fit in. "Don't blame my parents," he said, "They were trying to protect us from racism and fear, trying to help us fit in."
- ▶ A Bolivian woman who migrated to the US from Bolivia shared a similar sentiment. "I remember my father said to me to start speaking English early so I'd have no accent," she recounted. "He was very conscious of his Spanish accent"
- ▶ In some cases, parents might feel guilty about not providing their children with a strong foundation in their native language. One parent, who enrolled her child in Arabic school, expressed her concern, "They call each other names in Arabic only, then when they become teenagers, they will feel the bitterness that they don't have the language. Maybe they will blame me. I feel guilty."



Bad language policies are stressing families

Further discussion highlighted the crucial role languages play in holding together migrant families' memories and identity and how multilingual households demonstrate increased resilience. Despite these strengths, the absence of proper language policies and support takes a toll on families, often resulting in cross-cultural marital and family conflicts. The stories shared by participants underscore the need for comprehensive language policies and support systems to foster harmony and alleviate stress within diverse family units.

- ▶ A mature-aged Indian community leader expressed her concern about language loss in her own family: "My eldest son can speak Punjabi fluently, but my youngest can't. He had not picked up any Punjabi. He can understand, but he never replies back in Punjabi."
- ▶ A Bolivian woman who migrated to the US as a child shared a similar experience: "When we returned to Bolivia, we still spoke English. Spanish was completely eradicated from my mind. It only resurfaced in my life later. Meeting people from my background. That's only been in the last 2 years, and I've been here such a long time now. Language is part of my identity. I need to get back to my roots."
- ▶ An Indian mother living in different countries found a creative solution to help her children maintain their language: "I put my kids in a Hindi theatre, where they may not understand the exact meaning of all the words, but with theatre and acting, they learn through their actions the meanings. They are learning all the Hindi authors. They're not only gaining in confidence, but they feel very comfortable to express themselves." She also mentioned the challenges of incorporating additional languages into the Australian school system: "We brought Hindi into WA's schooling system, but adaptation, making that work at a young age is really difficult to explain to a school board and explaining why a second language is useful."
- ▶ A Salvadorian woman shared her family's success in maintaining their native language: "I came here when I was 4 years old. I only spoke Spanish. Went to school. At school we got helped a lot at school. My parents were strict. At home, you spoke Spanish. I just did it. It just flowed. When my sister was born here, it was exactly the same story. She spoke Spanish. If that hadn't happened, I would have lost it [my language skills]. On the other hand, my cousins refused to speak Spanish, and the parents only spoke to them in English."

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- ▶ An Arabic-speaking father who was the primary carer of his children reflected on their language learning experiences: "My lack of organisation came from myself. My wife supported me. We think now that each parent speaking in a different language would have been a good way to do it."
- ▶ A mature-aged woman of Indian heritage who has lived in Perth for over a decade reflected on intergenerational loss. She observed that "I can relate to [losing my language]. I've seen a transition with my grandparents. They spoke a language called Multani in Pakistan. Nobody could speak it to me when my grandparents passed away, so I lost that language."
- ▶ The lack of language policies and support can contribute to cross-cultural marital and family conflicts, as demonstrated by stories from a participant.
- ▶ A Bolivian woman shared her experience, "When I got married, I learnt my husband's language, Portuguese... I got so good at that, and it was so easy. I thought to myself, and I need to go back and speak Spanish. When you're young, and the language goes, it gets taken away from you; you can lose it forever."
- ▶ A member of the Vietnamese community said, "I have friends who got married with Australian men... one of my friends' children only speak English with their Dad... She [the wife's mother and grandmother] lives here and cook. She says "ready", the kids come out from their rooms to eat and then go back into their rooms without speaking to her. It's Sad" This example illustrates the impact of language loss on family dynamics and the ability to care for elderly relatives.
- ▶ An Arabic-speaking father expressed regret, "I have a sad experience... I was her primary carer and I spoke to her mainly in Arabic... by 2008 I lost it and stopped speaking to her in Arabic and spoke to everyone in English, speaking only English." This quote emphasises the difficulty of maintaining heritage languages when the surrounding environment promotes a monolingual approach.
- ▶ An Urdu-speaking man commented, "Some kids have a flair for languages... we always spoke Urdu... but didn't speak it with my ex-wife. Culturally she was Burmese... The kids went to School here, picked up English easily and are just like Aussies today." He also added I remarried to a woman who also speaks Urdu, I could pick that up very easily. The first wife was Christian, and the second was Muslim. Religion also plays a big part. What's happening in India now is difficult."



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Languages Spoken in Australia



183

Australian Indigenous Languages



16,000

people use AUSLAN at home



Australia's English-Only language policies are out of step with the rest of the world.



“Going into the future, in school, teachers need to see that additional languages are a gift and not 'a problem'.”

Australia's insistence on a monolingual (English-only) education system has profoundly impacted families, with many feeling the strain of generational disconnect and loss of cultural heritage. Local communities are increasingly vocal in their calls for national leadership on language policies, recognising that linguistic diversity is crucial in fostering social cohesion and cultural understanding. However, geopolitical hotspots often prioritise existing language needs in Australia, leading to a neglect of the vast linguistic resources present within its multicultural society. It is essential to address these issues to ensure a more inclusive and harmonious future for all Australians.

- ▶ •A mature-aged Indian woman discussed the changing sentiments towards language, saying, “There’s a push to bring Punjabi into WA. Before, it was Mandarin. The sentiment in the diaspora changes. Sometimes a very dangerous sentiment can inhibit language development.”
- ▶ A Bolivian woman emphasised the importance of recognising the value of additional languages, stating, “Going into the future, in school, teachers need to see that additional languages are a gift and not 'a problem'. Different languages in books will help because kids don’t know what they don’t know. Kids need to be empowered to value languages.”
- ▶ An Indian mother and professional suggested looking to Canada as an example, explaining, “Australia can look to Canada. The Canadian Government does a lot of the policies. They celebrate days. In Canada, we’ve got multiple schools teaching multiple languages....The curriculum is the same as for everyone, but the classes are conducted in languages. How seriously the government takes that, keeps having good policies in place, informs the decision the schools are taking, and in the home, it’s amazing to see the effects on the community.”
- ▶ An Arabic-speaking father who was the primary carer of his children emphasised personal determination in maintaining languages, saying, “There’s lots of opportunity to maintain the language, but it’s people’s decision. So, if they aren’t determined to keep the language going with their kids, then they won’t. Yes, harassment from school makes it harder, but with technology and social media today it is easier than before to keep it going. Most people have the intention to keep their language going.”

- ▶ Local communities are voicing their desire for national leadership on language policies. A Salvadorian woman emphasised the importance of preserving languages for maintaining identity, stating, "So important because of time, era, and policies. It's an opportunity to preserve and protect our languages. This is important to maintain my identity, being able to speak with our relatives."
- ▶ A mature-aged Indian woman and active community leader added, " Our experience with the loss of Aboriginal languages is that we are not going to lose any more languages in Australia. We can't. Australia doesn't need to spend more time to learn that point."
- ▶ This community leader also highlighted the need for top-down policies and national support for local government initiatives, saying, " The top-down policies are very important. Some great work is going on in local governments. The City of Canning in WA had a sudden influx in CaLD communities. They did work collaboratively with the community to create a local intercultural community centre. What they did was community consultation with different cultural and language groups. Gave a sense of belonging to different groups."
- ▶ A Bolivian woman who migrated to the US from Bolivia as a young child also expressed the need for national leadership, stating, "Put real effort and resources in. The library has signs in different languages. The local council can do a lot more to help with this."
- ▶ The community leader criticised tokenism, saying, "Tokenism only celebrates in pictures; politicians always try to get leverage with these images for their social media, that's becoming more and more common but doesn't do anything."
- ▶ A Bolivian woman emphasised the need for national support in helping future generations, stating, "If I started a new family and were receiving information about prenatal education, languages, identity, that would help me look towards the future. We can do and need to do much work to help that future."
- ▶ A Salvadorian woman highlighted the changing demographics in Australia, suggesting a need for inclusive language policies, while another Salvadorian woman called for more multicultural events.
- ▶ A mature-aged Polynesian woman echoed this sentiment, saying, "We need more multicultural events. Dances, culture, anything. We try to do it with our Polynesian and Pacific communities. We sing songs even if we don't understand each other's languages."
- ▶ Local communities continue to express their desire for national leadership on language policies. A mature-aged Indian woman and active community leader pointed out the importance of not only spoken language but also written language, stating, "Written language versus spoken is an issue too. Spanish script is the same as English. 'Majority language' has much impact. If the written script is different from the 'Majority language', then he wouldn't be able to read Hindi anymore. If the kids read the dialogue in Hindi, but not only speaking but also reading the script, they will retain that. I may lose my Hindi script when I'm writing letters/emails in

English. Lose the literature, and you lose the perspective. If you have the script, you can still read the language."

- ▶ Geopolitical hotspots often take priority over existing language needs in Australia, leaving some communities feeling neglected. An Indian mother who lived extensively in different countries stated, "Location matters too and proximity. It's like Vietnam being closer while other places; languages are further away to visit. We need to learn from places like Canada and how to undo some of the damage we have done to ourselves." This sentiment reflects the importance of considering all language communities, regardless of their geographical proximity.
- ▶ A mature-aged Indian woman and active community leader added, "India – time-specific issues, language needs to be preserved - especially during difficult

times when the language is under threat, during the transition, that's when we need to have a look at what is important, what identity we want to maintain." She also noted the danger of people splitting into nationalist groups, emphasising the importance of policies that support language preservation and multiculturalism.

- ▶ A Salvadorian woman shared her concerns about the decline of certain cultures within the same language group, saying, "I'm finding that our culture from El Salvador is falling back, maybe different stages, dying out. The category of Latin American or "Spanish speakers "doesn't talk about the different countries and cultures we have. We used to be quite active in the community, and that's dropped off too. New Latin American communities and their cultures are growing, whilst ours is not."



Fastest growing languages

Punjabi (up by 0.4%),
Nepali (up by 0.3%)



Fastest shrinking languages

Italian (down by 1.2%),
Greek (down by 1.%)

Moving forward

- ▶ Implement comprehensive language policies and support systems: The government should develop and implement comprehensive language policies that recognise and value the diverse linguistic backgrounds of Australia's multicultural families.
- ▶ Foster a greater understanding and appreciation for linguistic diversity within Australian media, promoting the inclusion of diverse accents and languages in broadcasting and other media platforms.
- ▶ Encourage national leadership on language policies: Local communities express the need for national leadership. The government should collaborate with local governments and communities to develop and implement policies supporting linguistic diversity and creating a sense of belonging for different cultural and language groups.

Multicultural Australia (MA) welcome being a part of the discussion on the urgency of helping families to maintain their languages. For further information, please contact chair@multilingualaustalia.org.au

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