

Pilbara Languages

Speak more than one traditional language with Elders commonly speaking 5 to 8 languages.

Some of the cultural features of language use include:

- the valuing of silence- as in Japanese culture.
- the valuing of minimalised speech- using as few words as possible to convey meaning
- the assumption of shared understanding- not speaking about something that it is assumed the other already knows about.
- the valuing of multilingualism.
- complex 'rights to speak' rules- people may only speak about their groups, may not speak for another, may not speak about something which is not their business etc.
- avoidance speech- speech varieties which may only be used with people of particular relationships.
- relationship speech rules- the relationship with another person dictates the way one may speak with them such as only seriously, a joking relationship, in a demanding way etc.
- complete speech avoidance- some people in particular relationships may never speak.

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Wangka Maya provides a diverse range of services including:

- Linguistics
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Pilbara Aboriginal History, Cultures & Languages

Pilbara History

Aboriginal people have lived in the Pilbara for more than 40 000 years. Until the 1800s, there was no contact with other cultural groups other than with Malaysian fishermen. In the 1800s, European settlers began moving into the Pilbara. This brought massive change to Aboriginal society.

The first wave of Europeans to the Pilbara were explorers. Male pastoralists and missionaries quickly followed. Aboriginal people were overpowered and moved off traditional land to allow pastoral undertakings. Whole Aboriginal populations were moved to different locations and many traditional links were damaged or broken. Forced relocation and several Aboriginal massacres occurred in this period.

In the Pilbara it was common practise to forcibly retain Aboriginal people on pastoral stations to be used as slave labour. This practise continued until 1946 when a mass walk off the stations by Pilbara Aboriginal people occurred. The people went on strike for better pay and living conditions.

Many Aboriginal people, especially of mixed descent, were removed from their families and placed into missions, orphanages, children's homes, adopted or fostered out during the first half of the 1900s. Many children were forcibly removed from their families by the Government of the day.

From the early 1800s State and Federal governments legislated for Aboriginal people. A number of these legislations reflected the unenlightened and racist attitudes of the day and therefore impacted negatively on Aboriginal people. The legacy of these legislations is strongly evident in the number and high degree of social issues affecting Pilbara Aboriginal people.

The WA Aborigines Act of 1905, which gave the Chief Protector of Aborigines complete power over Aboriginal people and guardianships of all children to age 16, had a far reaching negative affect on Aboriginal people. This Act was amended in 1936 and eventually repealed in 1963. Equally, the 1944 Natives (Citizenship Rights) Act had a massive negative impact on Indigenous people because citizenship was granted on application and in order to gain this, Aboriginal people had to renounce Aboriginal culture, language and contact.

Until 1967, Aboriginal people were not governed by the Commonwealth Government of Australia and so were, strictly speaking, not classed as Australian citizens until a change in the Australian Constitution was enacted late that year.

Pilbara Cultures

There are more than 31 Aboriginal cultural groups in the Pilbara. Most groups are referred to as language groups. Each culture has a traditional location where their people practised a hunter-gatherer and fire-stick farming lifestyle. A cyclical movement through the cultural group's land was determined by the availability of seasonal foods and water.

The cultures are highly spiritual with links to specific land features and locations. Custodianship obligations, care for specific land areas and the initiation of boys into tribal Law forms much of the cultural and spiritual activities.

Today Pilbara Indigenous culture still follows traditional Law patterns, processes and custodian duties. The beliefs that Dreamtime beings, who created the land features, control the water and provide food supplies, are still in existence in the land features, is still strongly felt throughout the Pilbara.

However, movement off traditional land due to European settlement issues, and changes in the land due to the impact of pastoral, mining and settlements, has changed the way traditional Law is practised. This process of change is still underway as Aboriginal people search for a balance between their custodian role and their involvement in wider Australian society.

Pilbara Languages

There are 31 Pilbara Aboriginal languages. Many of these languages have between 2 and 5 dialects. Within some languages there are further varieties that are not as distinct as a dialect. Today many Aboriginal people speak Standard Australian English and/or Pilbara Aboriginal English in addition to one or more traditional languages. Some people no longer speak their traditional language but identify as being from that heritage.

Pilbara Aboriginal languages are vastly different in their phonemes (sound making processes), morphology (word making processes) and grammar (sentence making processes) to English. Thus it can be very difficult for an English speaker to learn to speak and understand a Pilbara language.

The Pilbara languages have some similar features such as they may :

- have few vowels- three short and three long vowels.
- have few consonant sounds- between 11 and 17.
- are agglutinative- meaning that multiple suffixes can be added to a root word.
- have between 2 and 5 verb classes- as in the Italian language.
- have between 11 and 14 tenses.
- have free word order as the subject and object are marked by a suffix rather than being shown by the word order, as in English.
- have free and bound pronouns- pronouns can be a word or a suffix.
- have no prepositions.
- have few adjectives- this function is performed in a different way to English.
- have few adverbs- this function is performed in a different way to English.
- have nominalisers- suffixes that change a verb into a noun.
- have verbalisers- suffixes that change a noun into a verb.

Sign language was also a very widely used communication form and is still very evident today. Many people also