

The language of the stories

There are many thousands of people in the Northern Territory who use a language other than English as their first language, from the Pitjantjatjara and Warlpiri in the south and west to Burarra and Alyawarre in the north and east. The stories in *Long Time, Olden Time*, however, have been recorded by speakers using varieties of standard English known as Aboriginal English and Kriol. These varieties of English have developed over many years from a number of sources to become, for many people, a first language in themselves, and contain some features of grammar that may appear unusual to the reader unfamiliar with them.

One feature of particular interest to readers of this book is the common Aboriginal English verb-ending often spelled '-em' or '-im', for example in,

'They bin cuttem wood there now''

Whilst this ending clearly derives from a casual pronunciation of the standard English words '(h)im' and '(th)em', the meaning of this ending is different from these standard words and does not necessarily refer to a particular thing or things as 'him' or 'them' does. The ending indicates that the verb, in this case 'cut', is one where the doer of the action focusses on, or affects, someone or something; in this example, the wood. The ending is not found on verbs like 'go' or 'sleep' where the doer of the action does not focus on or directly affect anything.

Another point to note is that most traditional Aboriginal languages do not distinguish between masculine and feminine pronouns ('he' and 'she'), having only one word which can be used to refer to either a male or a female. In the following example, the reader might well be confused about who the 'him' is;

'And so the old man let her go, that old lady. That Freddie took him away, washing clothes...'

although the wider context would suggest that it is the woman.

As well as these instances of differing grammatical features, the reader will encounter words that either differ in meaning from standard English, or have been brought into Aboriginal English from further afield. Many Europeans, apparently in ignorance of the diversity of Aboriginal languages, brought with them words from other Aboriginal languages which had become part of the pidgin used between Aboriginal people and English speakers in other places. Central Australian 'myall', for example, meaning roughly 'uncivilised', came originally from the Dharuk language of the Sydney area. Some words from traditional Aboriginal languages have been retained in Aboriginal English, while in other cases a standard English word is used with the meaning of a traditional language word. 'Cheeky' is used in Alice Springs Aboriginal English with the meaning of words like 'ahe-akngerre' in Arrernte or 'pikati' in Pitjantjatjara, something like 'aggressive, angry', which is subtly different from the standard English meaning.

The above examples show how a reader may misinterpret a sentence or story, a problem that can be compounded in a text-only oral history where the additional meaning lent by the intonation of the speaker's voice is lost. Previous attempts to clarify written Aboriginal English stories by altering them to standard English have often lead to the criticism that they are no longer transcriptions but translations, and that the text no longer represents a wholly Aboriginal view. Thus, the importance of reproducing the original stories on a series of audio cassettes becomes obvious, presenting the stories to the reader/listener with the minimum of editorial interference.

Words and phrases used commonly in Aboriginal English that appear throughout the text have been included in a glossary at the front of the book and these, with the map and linking historical text, provide a meaningful context in which to read and listen to the stories.