



Breathing new life into a living Indigenous language

Indigenous languages don't just describe the world around us – they actively shape it. And they, in turn, are shaped by the world.

These languages carry knowledge systems, ethical frameworks and spiritual understandings that have existed and evolved over thousands of years.

In Australia, there are over 250 such languages. One of them is Gumbaynggirr, spoken by the Gumbaynggirr people, whose Country stretches along the Mid North Coast of New South Wales (roughly from the Clarence River to the Nambucca River).

For Gumbaynggirr people, their language is far more than a communication tool. It's a living force – an active conduit between them and Country.

And for Dylan Berger, a Gumbaynggirr, Dhanggati, Yuin and Birpai man completing his PhD at The University of Queensland, this dynamic and living language is the core of his research.

Mixing Indigenous metaphysics with linguistics

Dylan's research sits at the intersection of Indigenous metaphysics and language revitalisation. Through his PhD, he is exploring the mutually beneficial and deeply reciprocal relationship between Gumbaynggirr language and Gumbaynggirr people – and how that relationship exists within Gumbaynggirr Country.

"I'm looking at this through a lens that assumes Gumbaynggirr language is alive and it does impact the world in a very real sense," he says.

"I'm trying to unearth how this relationship benefits both Gumbaynggirr people and Gumbaynggirr language."

To do this, Dylan speaks with Gumbaynggirr individuals and communities about their unique connections with the language and how it enriches their connection to Country.

"Indigenous metaphysics and Indigenous language are the two main domains of my research. My multidisciplinary supervisory team cover these domains at depth, and together they helped me actualise a research project I can take pride in."

Because while these links are intrinsically felt and understood by the people living with them, they're not so simple to explain to the wider public.

Dylan's collaborative PhD experience

For Dylan, pursuing a PhD with the UQ School of Languages and Cultures wasn't just about personal growth or academic curiosity – it was about contributing to something bigger, with the right people around him.

"Supervision and support were key," he says.

"I trusted in the knowledge and experience of my supervisory team. With their support, and the support of the broader network of staff, undertaking a PhD felt a lot more achievable."

Dylan's research has been guided by a pair of supervisors:

- his principal supervisor, Professor Felicity Meakins, a linguistics expert known for her work with Indigenous



Dylan Berger, a Gumbaynggirr, Dhanggati, Yuin and Birpai man, is completing his PhD at The University of Queensland. Dylan is pictured here collaborating with his principal supervisor, Professor Felicity Meakins.

languages across Australia

- his associate supervisor, Professor Norm Sheehan, a Wiradjuri man born in Mudgee, who brings deep knowledge of Indigenous metaphysics to the project.

With their complementary perspectives, this team has helped Dylan shape a project that bridges theory and lived experience, drawing from both Western research methods and Indigenous ways of knowing.

"That idea of 'finding joy in your work' is real during your PhD."

His PhD program has also helped Dylan discover other chances to work with researchers – both locally and across the globe.

"I had opportunities to travel to Canada and Aotearoa for collaborative experiences," he says.

"It has also provided an opportunity to speak with many Gumbaynggirr community members who I don't get to spend a lot of time with."

What led Dylan to his PhD?

Dylan's community is what first inspired him to pursue research.

Gumbaynggirr Country has already made great strides in revitalising their language. While it's still technically classified as critically endangered, many in the community believe it would be almost impossible to lose the language due to the progress that's been made.

But there's still work to be done.

"Gumbaynggirr Country is lacking in researchers who focus on the language space," says Dylan.

"With this in mind, research appeared to be an ideal way to contribute to Gumbaynggirr language revitalisation in my own way."

During his undergraduate studies, Dylan met one of his future supervisors, Norm Sheehan – a connection that encouraged him to explore this research area further.

Dylan's advice for future PhD candidates

Dylan encourages anyone considering a PhD to take that first step, because it's not as impossible as it might seem.

"If you're seriously thinking about a PhD, there's a strong chance you already have the tools to undertake one," he says.

"It's not challenging because it's difficult – it's challenging because it's long."

Want to embark on your own research journey?



Learn more about UQ's PhD program and apply today at study.uq.edu.au/research-programs

Celebrating the heart of Indigenous excellence at UQ

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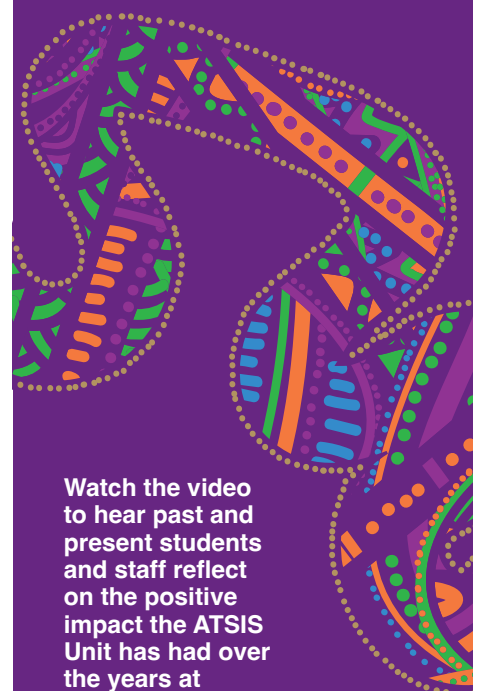
Years of Belonging

The University of Queensland's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (ATSIS) Unit is celebrating its 40th anniversary in 2025, giving the UQ community the opportunity to honour its profound legacy of connection, culture and community.

The ATSIS Unit emerged from the passionate advocacy of trailblazers like Dr Lilla Watson, Dr Kev Carmody and Ribgna Green. Forty years later, every person active within the ATSIS Unit continues this passion, ensuring that it remains the heart of Indigenous excellence and support at UQ.

The ATSIS Unit has always been more than an academic space – it's been a second home. From InspireU to Goorie Berrimpa to shared moments in the common room, it's a place to connect with mob, feel a sense of belonging and build lifelong connections.

Looking forwards, the ATSIS Unit's story will continue to be written – by every student who finds their place, every graduate who gives back, and every person who understands that true excellence flourishes when everyone belongs.



Watch the video to hear past and present students and staff reflect on the positive impact the ATSIS Unit has had over the years at uq.edu.au/atsis-40

