Indigenous Languages Collection

The Indigenous Languages collection contains rare and valuable documents that help keep Indigenous Australian languages alive.

a1193454h.jpg
Aboriginal word list collected by Joseph Banks on board the Endeavour, August 1770

What's in the collection

These records are vocabularies and other language material from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and date from 1788 to the 1930’s. More than 40 different language groups from all Australian states and territories have been identified in over 200 original items within the State Library’s collections. Some of these items are the only known surviving records of these languages.

Compiled by Europeans – colonists, government officials, explorers, missionaries and travellers, this material includes vocabularies embedded in historical documents, letters, manuscripts, diaries, journals and printed works.

These records are particularly valuable as it is thought that approximately only about 20 Aboriginal languages are now spoken comprehensively in Australia (Gamble, 2011), whereas at the time of Australian settlement in 1788, more than 250 Indigenous languages were actively spoken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people. Because of this, the Indigenous language material held in the State Library of NSW collections is a precious asset to assist Indigenous communities, organisations and linguists to strengthen, preserve and revive Indigenous languages.

Explore the Rediscovering Indigenous Languages website to know more about the Library's collections.

Links