

# Recording and documenting language

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages — Resource guide



Information communication technologies (ICTs) enable languages to be documented through high-quality digital recordings. This greatly simplifies development of language teaching and learning resources.

Schools — in collaboration with their communities — are encouraged to develop a language toolkit to record, document and archive Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander languages. Some items in the language toolkit, including computer software, may require training or specialist input to maximise their use and application in the school and community.

The language and associated cultural knowledge presented through information technologies belongs to the respective groups, and the authenticity and use of such knowledge should be negotiated with communities, particularly Elders and other custodians.

Schools are encouraged to seek technical advice within their school communities to ascertain what would best meet their needs. Generally, well-known specialist brands of both hardware and software offer the best quality and support for recording and sound production.

## Basic tools

The following tools can give schools and communities capacity to collect, record and document Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. Once collated, this language material can be analysed and further developed to create resources for teaching and learning language.

1. Portable audio recorder — for recording languages.
2. Good quality microphone — for capturing spoken or sung language.
3. Headphones — for listening to languages during recording or learning.
4. Digital video recorder — for recording language in context, including song and dance.
5. Computer with appropriate software — for editing, storing and documenting language collected as sound recordings and movies.

An internet search for “making field recordings”, or similar search terms, should locate useful overviews and product recommendations. When choosing your tools, a rule of thumb is to stick with known brands and identify equipment used and recommended by linguists or language workers in their field work. There are several brands and models of each of the tools that will meet the needs of schools and communities.

## **1. Portable audio recorder**

Portable recorders enable language to be recorded “on-country”, as speakers can be recorded at home or in the community. The recorder needs to be a sturdy piece of equipment, with a good in-built microphone/s, and the ability to add a good windscreen, as wind is a major factor degrading outdoor recordings. It should also have an input connection for an external microphone, which can significantly improve the sound recording quality. For field work, the recorder should have the capacity to record up to several hours on battery.

## **2. Good quality microphone**

A high-quality microphone with windscreen ensures that sounds, words and other elements of language, including songs and music, are recorded at sufficient quality to be really useful. Using a microphone in conjunction with the portable audio recorder, video recorder or computer will usually capture higher quality sound than using the inbuilt microphone/s.

Ideally, language should be recorded and archived at the highest possible level of quality — Waveform Audio File Format (WAV) is ideal for raw sound materials as it is compatible with most operating systems and can then be manipulated to create usable sound bites. MP3 is compressed sound and there may be a loss of quality in recording sound — MP3 files can be created from WAV files for use in the school and community. For example, after recording a fluent language speaker, the original high-quality WAV files can be converted to MP3 files for students to download onto an MP3 player for practice at home.

Recording student work for practice and assessment does not require such high quality. The recorder or computer’s inbuild microphone/s may deliver sufficient quality. If not, there is a range of affordable digital microphones that plug directly into a computer using the microphone jack or USB port. Recording student efforts and hearing them back is a useful tool in language-learning.

## **3. Headphones**

In general, any headphones will be of sufficient quality to hear speech clearly.

If background noise needs to be blocked out, choose from noise-isolating headphones (over-ear or in-ear models, which physically block other sounds from reaching the ear) and noise-cancelling models (over-ear, on-ear or in-ear models, which actively counter background noise using counter-frequencies).

## **4. Digital video recorder**

Look for a video recorder with connections for an external microphone and headphones. This enables high-quality sound capture, as external microphones can be positioned closer to speakers, shielded from wind, and will usually be of better quality than inbuilt microphones (the headphones allow you to monitor the sound quality while you are recording). For indoor recording use a video recorder with good low-light performance and image stability.

Video is a helpful tool for understanding language in its context, including gestures, body language, and changes in word choice and tone depending on who is speaking to whom.

## 5. Computer with appropriate software

Computer software and information technologies are tools that can assist schools and communities in recording, documenting and preserving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages; these tools can also add value to the teaching and learning of languages.

The following resources are available to school communities to support language activities in their communities — some are freeware, while others may require purchase of a licence.

### Software

**Audacity** <[www.audacity.sourceforge.net](http://www.audacity.sourceforge.net)> is a free software program to assist language recording/audio editing. The program is easy to use and allows for manipulation/editing of sounds in a range of formats, including MP3 and WAV.

**italklibrary** <[www.italklibrary.com](http://www.italklibrary.com)> is a free web-based program that uses its own specialist italk software to create and share multilingual digital stories.

**Lexique Pro** <[www.lexiquepro.com](http://www.lexiquepro.com)> is a free dictionary software program for making interactive lexicons or word lists. It also makes picture dictionaries and lexicons for CDs and websites.

**Microsoft software** <[www.microsoft.com/downloads/en/default.aspx](http://www.microsoft.com/downloads/en/default.aspx)> can be used to support language revival, particularly in terms of producing language teaching/learning resources. Useful programs include:

- Word, Publisher, PowerPoint (all part of the Office suite, requiring a licence)
- Movie Maker (free to Office licence-holders).

**Miromaa** <[www.miromaa.org.au](http://www.miromaa.org.au)> is a licensed software program developed by the Arwarbukarl Cultural Resource Association Inc. to serve as a database for the collection, analysis and documentation of languages.

**Sharing Culture** <[www.sharingculture.com.au](http://www.sharingculture.com.au)> is an online software program that enables schools and communities to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. The licensed software platform allows for schools and communities to record, document and learn about language, culture and histories.

### Resources for language toolkits

**Australian National University (ANU) field methods website** <[www.anu.edu.au/linguistics/hash/LSA.301/sw.html](http://www.anu.edu.au/linguistics/hash/LSA.301/sw.html)> lists software useful for linguistic analysis, aimed at linguists and other language workers. It includes software for transcription, editing and file conversion, as well as more specialist applications.

**Language Archiving Technology** website <<http://tla.mpi.nl/tools/tla-tools/>> is a portal at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics that provides information on language software and tools available.

**Miromaa Aboriginal Language and Technology Centre** recommends software to comprise a “language computer toolkit” <[www.miromaa.org.au/Miromaa/Toolkit.html](http://www.miromaa.org.au/Miromaa/Toolkit.html)>.

**Nick Thieberger** is a linguist based at the University of Melbourne. His homepage <<http://languages-linguistics.unimelb.edu.au/thieberger/>> links to many relevant projects and organisations.

**Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures (PARADISEC)** <[www.paradisec.org.au/softlinks.html](http://www.paradisec.org.au/softlinks.html)> has software links that support the documentation and digital archiving of endangered languages. At the time of publication, all links on this page were active and useful, although the page notes that they have not been updated since late 2009.

**Resource Network for Linguistic Diversity (RNLD)** <[www.rnld.org](http://www.rnld.org)> RNLD aims to advance the sustainability of Indigenous languages and to increase the participation of Indigenous peoples in all aspects of language documentation and revitalisation through training, resource sharing, networking, and advocacy. The website has extensive resources for language workers and includes a webpage on computer software for language work <[www.rnld.org/node/41](http://www.rnld.org/node/41)>.

**Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) International** is a faith-based non-profit organisation committed to serving language communities worldwide as they build capacity for sustainable language development. SIL's website <[www.sil.org/computing/catalog/index.asp](http://www.sil.org/computing/catalog/index.asp)> and their computing software webpage <[www.sil.org/linguistics/computing.html](http://www.sil.org/linguistics/computing.html)> are geared towards resources and support for language field workers' day-to-day language activities.

**Tools for Linguistic Anthropologists** <[www.kit.linguisticanthropology.org](http://www.kit.linguisticanthropology.org)> is a US-based website hosted by the Society for Linguistic Anthropology that identifies tools for recording language in terms of ethnographical and/or anthropological perspectives.

**Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages** <[www.vaclang.org.au](http://www.vaclang.org.au)> provides a range of resources, including a list of tools for recording language, software applications for use in language revival programs and associated activities (under Resources > Tools for Recording Language).

## More information

Please email [langtrial@qsa.qld.edu.au](mailto:langtrial@qsa.qld.edu.au), phone (07) 3864 0310 or visit the QSA website <[www.qsa.qld.edu.au](http://www.qsa.qld.edu.au)> and search for “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages”.