# What are community languages?

We start with some tentative definitions of community languages:

The National Centre for Languages (CiLT) offers the following definition:

Community Languages - Taking a broad definition

Community Languages are languages spoken by members of minority groups or communities within a majority language context. Some of these are languages which have been used for hundreds of years in Britain, others are of more recent origin. There is, in fact, no precise information available about how many such languages are currently in use in the country as a whole. However, a recent survey carried out in London has identified some 307 languages, 20 of which have over 2000 speakers. Please note that for the purposes of this website the term Community Languages is interpreted loosely to include languages such as Japanese which for a majority of students may, in fact, be second rather than first languages.

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This term, originating in Australia to denote the many languages other than English or Aboriginal languages in use there, is adopted in preference to other terms such as 'minority' or 'immigrant' languages, or 'mother tongues'. The term 'minority languages' suggests languages spoken by only a small number of people (manifestly not the case in relation to languages of world significance such as Chinese, Urdu or Arabic) or languages which are somehow intrinsically of less value than 'majority' languages (i.e. English in the UK). Terms such as 'ethnic' or 'immigrant' languages indicate that other characteristics, not necessarily relevant or easy to define, have to be taken into consideration; while 'mother tongue' effectively limits attention to the language of the speakers' mothers and also tends to reinforce the erroneous belief that one language must be dominant. The term 'community language' avoids many of the negative connotations which these other terms have attracted, and draws attention to the fact that languages are used in a range of shared social and cultural contexts. The term has been criticised for implying that all speakers of these languages have shared values, including shared linguistic values, whereas in fact those making provision to teach these languages often have to address issues arising from contested varieties and language standardisation, particularly in relation to the development of literacies. However, other terms which successfully convey the nuances of the situation while avoiding the pitfalls have not yet been devised.

Clyne, Michael (1991) *Community Languages: The Australian Experience.* Cambridge : CUP.  Retrieved 11th September, 20050 from
http://assets.cambridge.org/052139/7294/excerpt/0521397294_excerpt.pdf

This term has been used in Australia since about 1975 to denote languages other than English and Aboriginal languages employed within the Australian community. It legitimises their continuing existence as part of Australian society. Terms that have found discriminatory and inadequate for the same languages are: foreign languages, unsuitable for language that are very much part of Australian life; migrant languages, which does not account for their use by Australian born generations; and ethnic languages, which ignores the use of 'community languages' by members of other ethnic groups.