

Speaking freely in your native language is a basic right

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On January 26 this year in Adelaide, Australia, a woman called Elizabeth Close – a well-known artist – was talking in the street to her small child in her native language, Pitjantjatjara.

The homeland of the Pitjantjatjara-speaking people covers a vast area of the Central Australian desert, in South Australia, the Northern Territory and Western Australia. Their language, unlike most Australian Aboriginal languages, is surviving rather well, and has about 4,000 speakers.

A young white woman overheard Elizabeth talking to her child and started abusing her: "It's Australia Day," she shouted. "We speak English in Australia!"

The English language arrived in Australia less than 230 years ago. Pitjantjatjara and the other 250 or so Aboriginal languages have been in Australia for tens of thousands of years. There is nothing very Australian about English. But everything about Pitjantjatjara is Australian. It is a truly Australian language. The young woman, as well as being guilty of crass racism and linguicism, was also guilty of gross ignorance.



■ The landmark Uluru, Ayers Rock, in Australia where many native languages still survive.

Picture: PA

There is another story on the same theme from the USA. It may well be apocryphal, but it's true enough in its way all the same. A dark-skinned woman in the American Southwest was in a supermarket, talking on her mobile phone in a language that wasn't English. When she finished the call, a white man nearby turned to her and said: "You're in America now – you need to speak English. If you want to speak Mexican, go back to Mexico!" The woman replied, "Sir, I was speaking Navajo. If you want to speak English, go back to England!"

There is of course no such language as "Mexican". But Navajo is one of the 250-odd Native American languages that

were spoken in what is now the USA for millennia before the arrival of Europeans.

It's bad enough to take somebody's country away from them. But to then attempt to take their language away from them too is really adding extreme insult to dreadful injury. Being able to speak freely in your native language and dialect, in your native land, is a basic human right.

We have no cause in this country to feel smug and complacent about this. In 1746 the British government declared the speaking of Scottish Gaelic "illegal" in the Highlands and Islands. And there are, sadly, still English people who accuse the Welsh people of "rudeness" for speaking their own language in their own country.