

*'An awakening'*

*'Unexpectedly  
illuminating'*

*'Filling up and  
overflowing'*

# Throw a Language Party!



## Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Ohlone, Bininj, and Larrakia people and their Elders past and present. It was on their Countries that we conceived and grew this work. We acknowledge all Indigenous peoples whose oral storytelling inspired Language Parties, and all Indigenous lands where Language Parties have been held.

## Content Warning

Aboriginal people are warned that this report contains images of people who have passed away.

## Aikuma Project

Language Parties are an initiative of the *Aikuma Project: Creating a world that sustains its languages*. The Aikuma Project is hosted in the Top End Language Lab in the Northern Institute at Charles Darwin University. Reach us via [aikuma.org](http://aikuma.org) or [contact@aikuma.org](mailto:contact@aikuma.org).



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# the Aēsop Foundation



**Australian Government**

**Indigenous Languages and Arts**

# Language Parties

Celebrating Languages through Storytelling



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# Stories in the original languages told by people who live in our midst



# Foreword



*We collide with linguistic diversity. It's in our social media streams: where's the translation button? It's in our streets: are they talking about me? We might see linguistic diversity as an inconvenience, or even a threat.*

*We think of language as 'content'. When we can't access the content we see a problem. We might think that 'solving linguistic diversity' calls for technology, or assimilation.*

*Yet language is far more than content. Language is mother, father, home, roots, safety, identity, country, stories, knowledge, wisdom. First Nations people and immigrants employ their linguistic repertoire to navigate between worlds. It's hard for monolinguals to grasp this feat of meaning-making.*

*Over the last 8 years I've been privileged to develop Language Parties alongside some wonderful people. I have been moved by stories of resilience and hope. I can confirm that Language Parties are a joyful celebration of linguistic diversity and of the people who are keeping their languages strong. Language Parties are a practice of deep listening. They set up lines of connection. They are a sweet medicine for our world.*

*-Steven Bird*

*Professor, Top End Language Lab, Charles Darwin University.*



# Connection and belonging

Language Parties are a format for storytelling events where local members of the community gather to share stories *in the original languages*, followed by interpretation into a common language. This report describes the format and presents what we have learnt about the social impact, and the way Language Parties foster connection and belonging.

As you leaf through these pages we trust that you will hear the voices and sense the hearts of the people who have brought these shows to life. We hope to connect with you as:

- potential hosts of storytelling events;
- philanthropists open to supporting us; or
- allies on the same journey.





# Why Language Parties?

At the core of human connection is the stories we tell: stories of origins and new beginnings, stories of how to care for our land and thrive in it, stories that connect my lifeworld to yours. Through stories we enrich each other's lives, understand beyond our differences, and come to belong in a deeper way.

**Language Parties** celebrate the diversity of languages that exist within our communities. Language Parties recognise and honour the courageous people who are keeping their languages strong.

We believe that:

- stories told in the original languages enliven and enrich local communities;
- storytellers receive recognition from mainstream audiences and experience solidarity with other storytellers, and renewed pride in their languages and identities;
- storylisteners experience a new way of being in the world, listening not only with their ears but with their eyes, their bodies, and their hearts;
- Language Parties can help make cities and towns more friendly towards linguistic diversity, in the promise of more caring and cohesive societies.

*... listening with our eyes, our bodies, our hearts*



**Storytellers** include Indigenous people, migrants, expatriates and refugees, each one a living conduit of a language that may be little known or rarely heard. By sharing their languages, storytellers forge a deeper connection to their community, while their languages grow stronger. Language Parties form bonds between newly arrived people and the original inhabitants.

They tell stories learnt from their parents, stories of spirits and ancestors, stories of beasts and tricksters, stories of displacement and new beginnings. They tell their stories by heart, from the heart, with no notes and no words projected on screens. Their expressions and gestures bring the story alive. We **'listen to appreciate'** the rhythms and melodies while picking up the emotions. Then we **'listen to understand'** the individual words and phrases as they are interpreted into the common language of the audience.

# What are Language Parties?

*Language Parties* are a fresh and intimate style of gathering that celebrate the sea of languages spoken in our cities, towns, and neighbourhoods. The host welcomes everyone and invites people to 'listen to appreciate'. This is language as art, music, spoken soul.

*Storytellers* greet the audience in their mother tongue, and teach the audience how to respond in the same language. Then storytellers share a story *in the original language*, before interpreting it into the common language. Later, storytellers return to the stage and we hear about their experience of keeping their languages strong here.

*We close each show with body language to express gratitude to the courageous storytellers*



21 Language Parties in 6 countries  
 135 storytellers, 1600 storylisteners  
 73 languages, 24 endangered languages\*



\*EGIDS≥6 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Expanded\\_Graded\\_Intergenerational\\_Disruption\\_Scale](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Expanded_Graded_Intergenerational_Disruption_Scale)

# Where have Language Parties been held?



**2015**

Oakland, USA

**2016**

Darwin, Australia (×2)  
Oakland, USA

**2017**

Darwin, Australia (×2)  
Melbourne, Australia

**2018**

Darwin, Australia

**2019**

Broome, Australia  
Bundaberg, Australia  
Canberra, Australia  
Darwin, Australia  
Fort Worth, USA  
Gateshead, UK  
Geraldton, Australia  
Manila, Philippines  
Perpignan, France  
Shepparton, Australia  
Tsholotsho, Zimbabwe

**2020**

Manila, Philippines

**2021**

Darwin, Australia



*“What does it really mean for these languages to sit side by side? Globalisation puts things side by side then it flattens them. Here we’re unflattening them, putting them into their whole dimension, and then putting them side by side. That’s what I’m excited about.*

*What happens when I’m listening to a language that I ‘don’t understand’ but understanding still comes through? What happens when a whole room is doing that? Everybody’s going to have this experience of not understanding and understanding.” –Nadia (advisor and emcee)*



*“What I love about this work is that it’s not under any one person’s control; it’s individuals deciding that it could work even though they haven’t tried it before.*

*In our rehearsals we sit together and share stories. People realise they are not alone in keeping their languages strong. After a few rehearsals, there is a new sense of confidence, a new sense of community.*

*In our first show, most of the stories were about monsters. Storytellers connected through the symbolism of monsters, and how they keep their children safe. I didn’t come up with this, it just happened that way.” –Steven (co-founder and director)*

# Hosting Language Parties

## Multicultural Centres

Our festivals are renowned for food, costumes, singing and dancing. Storytelling goes further, creating trust and establishing connections. By hosting a Language Party we help linguistic minorities build pride, encourage civic participation, and enrich the lives of everyone with oral wisdom from across the world.

## Schools

Children from diverse ethnicities naturally want to fit in, but we can create a safe space where they can share more of themselves. Their first language is their superpower. By hosting a Language Party we build pride in children's identities, and we teleport a classroom to other worlds where children glimpse hidden treasures.

## Indigenous Language and Culture Programs

First Nations work hard to keep ancestral languages strong in the face of relentless pressure from the dominant culture. By hosting a Language Party we take a moment to celebrate language champions, recognise their unceded sovereignty, and hear stories from the Country we call our home.

## Spoken Word Organisations

What fraction of the world's 7,168 living languages are heard in our storytelling events? How often do we hear stories that have been passed down solely through oral transmission? By hosting a Language Party we experience the riches of the world's oral traditions, thanks to natural born storytellers who live in our midst.



# Storytelling for language revitalisation

## Australia's Action Plan, Theme 5

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples speak their language with integrity and pride. Wider Australia shares this pride, respecting and celebrating Australia's first languages and all that they encompass.<sup>1</sup>



## Language revitalisation efforts

... are directed toward increasing the use of the language, but the efforts also serve one or more of several larger goals: sovereignty, cultural reclamation, community cohesion, identity, and cultural knowledge transmission.<sup>2</sup>



2022-2032 | INTERNATIONAL DECADE OF  
**Indigenous Languages**

<sup>1</sup><https://www.arts.gov.au/publications/voices-country-australias-action-plan-international-decade-indigenous-languages-2022-2032> (page 29)

<sup>2</sup>Health effects of Indigenous language use and revitalization: a realist review, DH Whalen et al (2023) *Intl Journal for Equity in Health* 21 (1), 169



## Singing

A story leads into a song which is shared in the original language. We're moved even before we know what the words mean. Perhaps we join in the refrain. After, we listen to the interpretation and we learn the backstory: "why me? why this song?"

## Improvisation

Words tumble out in four languages. Each person uses words that no-one else understands. One points, another steps back. It's heated and we all talk at once. One shrugs, another laughs. Now we're all laughing. Was it a misunderstanding? No, we understand perfectly: animated voices, faces, hands, and bodies carry all that matters.

# What we offer

Our vision is for a world that sustains thousands of living languages. We do this by celebrating our languages and the people who are keeping them strong.

To this end, we have developed an intercultural communication and performance model called Language Parties.

We offer support and guidance, along with a detailed production guide with ready-to-use material for hosts, producers, emcees, and storytellers. We use a trauma-informed, evidence-based approach which prioritises the cultural and psychological safety of storytellers and storylisteners.

## *Want to throw a Language Party?*

We offer mentoring and coaching for hosts, producers, and emcees. We cover all aspects of the program, including:

- designing and promoting the event,
- recruiting and rehearsing storytellers,
- venue, sound, lighting, running sheet,
- debriefing participants,
- evaluation and forward planning.

We share our expertise in intercultural communication and in working with minority and vulnerable populations, and offer advice on risk mitigation and on trauma-informed care.

We prioritise capacity building towards self-sustaining programs that operate with limited local resources.

# Our social impact story

*To understand the social impact of Language Parties, we spoke to the people who make them happen.*

We gathered 78 survey responses from storylisteners after they attended a Language Party.

We interviewed 15 storytellers, 3 storylisteners and 4 producers.

The following pages present initial findings about how Language Parties support pride and understanding, and lead to connection and belonging.



*"It was a wow moment  
having many languages together  
and being immersed in all these  
languages I didn't know existed."*

*-Storyteller*

*"The Language Party unlocked  
something that I have inside of me, so  
it brought joy. When your language  
comes out, you feel yourself."*

*-Storyteller*

*"It feels to me like this is a different  
kind of Welcome to Country, so  
people come to know the Country  
in a different way."*

*-Storyteller*

*"We came together to celebrate  
the strengths, the persistence, and the  
resilience of the people who carry these  
languages now and into the future."*

*-Producer*

# What Language Parties do for storytellers

## Pride

Storytellers feel proud after sharing their languages in public:

*“The storytellers felt a sense of liberation and elation.”* –Davy, Tjwao

*“We carry our language all around, wherever we are. We feel really proud.”*  
–Yinin and Joy, Yolŋu

*“I felt proud because I saw they were listening to me even though they couldn't understand the words. I knew that I did something to make them comfortable.”* –Prasanthi, Sinhala

*“Giving people the opportunity to speak and share their language is important for identity and also your pride.”* –Ebony, Yorta Yorta

## Agency

Storytellers show agency by telling their own stories in their own ways:

*“We came to celebrate the strength and persistence of the people who carry these languages.”*  
–Rosie, Toba Batak

*“When we speak the language we connect to all of those people before us. It raises our self-esteem, and boosts our connection to our land, and fosters our community with each other, because we're able to speak something which is unique to us.”*  
–Vince, Chochenyo

*“Storytelling is not something I can plan. It just comes. The story is automatic, it's part of me.”*  
–Carine, Lingala

## Participation

Storytellers are excited to participate in further language activities:

*“It's energised me to be able to keep going at it, keep learning more stories, wanting to tell people back home.”*  
–Bobbie, Cherokee

*“The Language Party has seeded something outside of that specific event, and it can grow.”* –Rosie, Toba Batak

*“I'm going to make sure that my daughter speaks Tigrinya and that she has the support of like-minded people to cheer her on.”* –Tigisti, Tigrinya

*“I think it was just the start of something that's gonna be huge as far as language is concerned.”* –Louise, Māori

*“My Aboriginal language, Ngunawal, has not been spoken live, as a fluent language in a public setting, for 140 years. There is no ending yet. My ending is that the language will be there. You’ve got to keep the tenacity up! You’ve got to stay committed to the cause. The story that I shared at the Language Party is the greatest challenge I’ve had. I realised that the story that I shared has so much relevance. It connects to the moral sides of life. It carries a message about the way we live. It’s about protecting the environment. I realised the story gives reverence for nature. My story is relevant today to the climate splintering, and the chaos, and to things not being in order. Language touched me. The Language Party gives me recognition. Of being the Aboriginal person I am. And in some small way it helps to heal the lifelong hurt inflicted. The Language Party made me realise how important storytelling can be.” –Glen (Ngunawal)*



Glen (Ngunawal)

# Connection and belonging for storytellers



Language Party rehearsals create solidarity, confidence, and a sense of community:

*“We got together, all the storytellers, and we introduced ourselves: who we were, where we’d come from, what language we speak, and what we gonna talk about, the story. The rehearsals made us more comfortable with what we were doing at the show. We’re happy to be around different people from different cultural backgrounds, and different languages and customs.”*

–Yinin and Joy (Yolŋu)



*“The rehearsals were definitely one of the highlights of this whole experience. We got to know each other, got to know what each other’s language is, what our mobs and our countries are. We were able to share, so it wasn’t just pulling something together on this one night, it really is relationship building. I think it was a really fundamental part of the process.”* –Bobbie (Cherokee)

*“The rehearsals were good exposure for me because then I realised what I could do at the Language Party. It was amazing, because at the time I wanted to know what storytelling is because I didn’t know anything about it.”*

–Prasanthi (Sinhala)

*“It wasn’t just pulling something together on this one night, it really is relationship building.”*



*“Language is our identity, it’s who we are. Even if we don’t speak that language, it’s still within us. When your language comes out, you feel yourself.”*

*–Carine (Lingala)*



*“The rehearsals were an eye opener, especially being with people from all over the world and to see that they have suffered with land and language like we have, as well as Indigenous Australian people, and being with other people who still have faith that the language can survive. I saw that the other storytellers are on the same journey as me.”*

*–Louise (Maori)*



*“We are comfortable with other native people, that we can sit with them and talk. If we step out from our world into this world, together, it would be something different. I would like to see white people respect the First People of Australia and the people coming from a hard life overseas. And to be able to interact with us.”*

*–Yinin (Yolŋu)*



*“Language Parties get people excited to engage with Indigenous languages. It was very meaningful to have strangers genuinely listening to our stories. We could feel that the audience was wanting to know, wanting to listen. Often in multilingual settings people are just looking out for the language that they understand. I really believe that the brain can shut off, and then people do not engage in any way with the first language.”*

*–Bobbie (Cherokee)*

# What Language Parties do for storylisteners

## Understanding

Storylisteners have a new understanding of cultural and linguistic diversity:

*"Understanding the variety of great cultures and languages in our city!"*

*"Increasing connection, understanding and empathy by allowing people the opportunity to 'be themselves' in their own language."*

*"Helps people understand other cultures and how they can enrich ours."*

*"Mainstream Australia would benefit so much from hearing voices like this in contexts like this."*

## Sharing

Storylisteners want to share their new understanding with others:

*"Spreading the word that difference through language is something to be proud of, not shamed by."*

*"More of these events at schools and at community events to help break down barriers."*

*"Do it again in as many places as possible."*

*"Language Parties could become a regular feature of community events."*

## Participating

Storylisteners are inspired to keep participating in language activities:

*"Share stories in my language with others, but also with my children!"*

*"Have a better try myself at hearing and speaking a greeting."*

*"To learn some local Aboriginal language."*

*"Learn to tell a story in my own language."*

*"Attending more multilanguage events."*



What storylisteners said when we asked them to sum up their experience

# Connection and belonging for storylisteners



Language Parties create opportunities where original languages are privileged and celebrated:

*“Introducing lesser known languages and their respective cultures opens the community's understanding about the individual people who live here.”*

–Storylistener



*“Even without understanding the spoken words there is connection and understanding.”* –Storylistener

*“Language Parties are very inclusive and could give a lot of people from different cultures an opportunity to embrace and celebrate their cultures. It's important for current times to defuse widespread and growing intolerance to difference.”*

–Storylistener



*“All of us, we are one at the end of the day. So, I thought that it's a good way to unite people.”*

–Carine, Lingala

*“It feels to me like this is a different kind of Welcome to Country, so they know the Country in a different way.”*

–Ebony, Yorta Yorta

*“That's part of our culture, for the Yolŋu people and also the refugees or immigrants, to show that respect and acknowledgement for people from this land, that's a manymak thing. They can come in and share that and be part of that.”* –Joy, Yolŋu

*“... opens the community's understanding about the individual people who live here”*



*"The Language Party was a casual atmosphere and a family friendly environment. Everyone was comfortable with each other and exchanging ideas to learn about each other. There are a lot of interesting stories among people in Darwin. I find that the multiculturalism of the city doesn't get spoken about much. It was great to hear some of these stories at the Language Party."*

*-John, storylistener*

*"Stories are gifts. Listening carefully and staying emotionally present is the gift we offer in return. We can continue this practice of storylistening, of truthlistening, in our everyday lives in the hope of a more caring and cohesive society."*

*-Nicole, storylistener*

*"The Language Party was an opportunity to learn about things that I haven't thought about before. Being an English speaker we don't really know what it's like to be blocked from a discussion. So it made me appreciate the feeling of being a bit lost at sea and trying to forge meaning. I think it's good to get a taste of what it's like to not be at the centre of the universe."*

*-Louise, storylistener*



# What producers say about Language Parties



*“These languages were shared in a place that put them in a position of prestige and respect. Previously, they were seen as little languages that people learnt from their grandparents that have no utility in everyday life. The Language Party showed the audience – and the storytellers – that it is their most natural habitat to belong in a place of importance for everybody.*

*A Language Party creates a place of high culture on land that belongs to the community.*

*Listening to other people tell their stories in their languages can become part of your stories as well. There's a nice little circular feeling when we enjoy these things together and share these things together.” –Rosie (Toba Batak, Geraldton)*

***“These languages were shared in a place that put them in a position of prestige and respect”***



*“In deciding to put on a Language Party, we hoped to inspire people, not to be perfect but to feel the confidence to have a go, and share a story. We hoped to reach members of the wider community and provide an educational experience for them. They can't know about what they've never experienced. We showed people that it is easy to celebrate languages, to put a Language Party together and have a crack at sharing our stories.” – Jacqui (producer)*



*“Apart from speaking some Thai and French, I am not bilingual. That didn't stop me from wanting to throw a Language Party in my hometown. Celebrating the diversity within our community makes for a better city. The Landscape of our languages is a beautiful and unifying thing to behold. The Language Party started gathering its own energy. As more happy faces came on board, the more our momentum built. Sharing their languages publicly filled something in the storytellers: they were keen share more. In pulling together a party we birthed a new community. New voices are rising in our city centre in languages that have been hidden for far too long.” – Jennifer (producer)*

# How Language Parties create connection and belonging

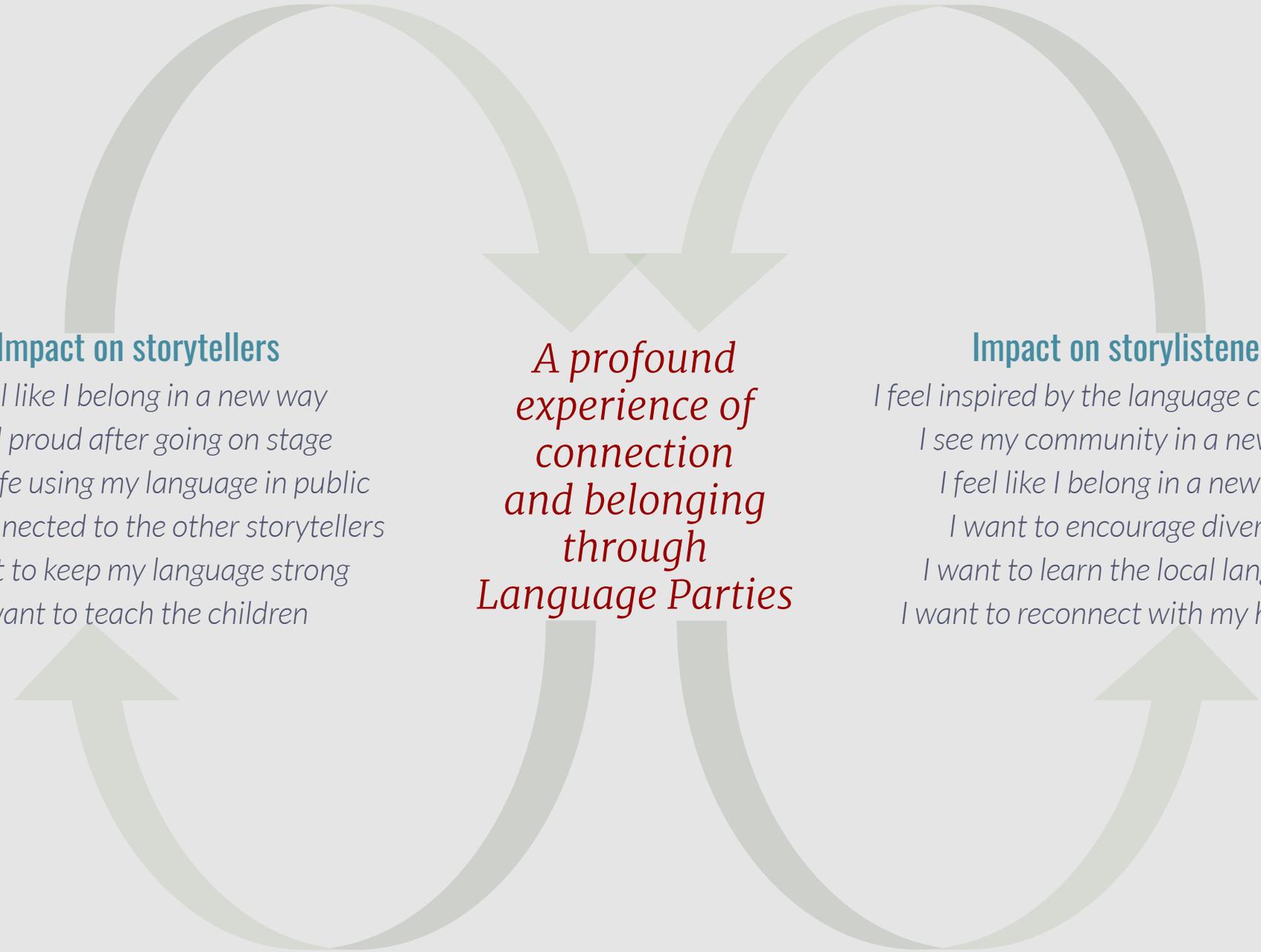
Language Parties foster connection and belonging for storytellers and storylisteners. They “celebrate the value, beauty and importance of Australia’s first languages”<sup>1</sup> a theme of Australia’s Action Plan for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages. And they contribute to community cohesion for a society that “supports connections with family, friends and the community, values diversity, and promotes belonging and culture”<sup>2</sup>, a key indicator in the *Australian National Wellbeing Framework*.

At Language Parties, storytellers share parts of themselves that are seldom seen in mainstream culture. Storylisteners experience deep listening as an embodied experience that draws on all the senses, and enriches their lives. Through Language Parties we honour wisdom from oral cultures and we help to create a world that sustains its languages.

<sup>1</sup>Australian Government (2023). *Measuring what matters: Australia’s first wellbeing framework* (page 4)

<sup>2</sup><https://www.arts.gov.au/publications/voices-country-australias-action-plan-international-decade-indigenous-languages-2022-2032> (page 29)





### Impact on storytellers

*I feel like I belong in a new way  
I feel proud after going on stage  
I feel safe using my language in public  
I feel connected to the other storytellers  
I want to keep my language strong  
I want to teach the children*

*A profound  
experience of  
connection  
and belonging  
through  
Language Parties*

### Impact on storylisteners

*I feel inspired by the language champions  
I see my community in a new light  
I feel like I belong in a new way  
I want to encourage diversity  
I want to learn the local language  
I want to reconnect with my heritage*



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*PULiiMA Indigenous Languages and Technology Conference*, Darwin, Australia.  
<https://puliima.com/component/sppagebuilder/page/213>



*Speech does not consist of words alone...  
it consists of utterance  
– an uttering-forth of one's whole meaning  
with one's whole being –  
the understanding of which involves  
infinitely more than mere word-recognition.*

*With an emotionally-laden utterance  
the meaning may be fully grasped  
even when every word is missed.*

*–Oliver Sacks*

