

## Letter Choices when Writing WA's Goldfields Languages

People often ask why the letters p t k are used in Goldfields languages when then these letters don't appear to sound correct at the start of the word. For example *kapi* is pronounced more as 'gabi'.

This is a quick explanation of why these letters are used to represent those sounds.

### Voiced versus Unvoiced Sounds

The letters **p t k** represent unvoiced sounds. If you put your fingers on your throat, and say these sounds, there is only a small movement. You don't use much voice to say these sounds.

The letters **b p g** represent voiced sounds. If you put your fingers on your throat, and say these sounds, there is strong movement. You use your voice to say these sounds.

These letters/sounds are actually produced in the mouth the same, they just differ in whether they are voiced or unvoiced. They are pairs of the **same sound**.

<u>Voiced</u>	<u>Unvoiced</u>
b	p
d	t
g	k

In the English language, we hear and say these voiced and unvoiced sounds as separate sounds eg: *big* versus *pig*, *dot* versus *tot*, *gin* versus *kin*. That means in English, there are **6 different sounds**.

However, in most of WA's Aboriginal languages, there is not a difference between the voiced and unvoiced sounds and therefore they are heard as a single sound. That means in Aboriginal languages, there are 3 sounds with a varying degree of a voiced or unvoiced quality.

e.g.

b/p  
d/t  
g/k

People who read and write English often get confused as they are use to the 6 sounds used, as in English, where as there are only 3 sounds in the Aboriginal languages.

Aboriginal language speakers (who learnt little English as a child) get confused as they only hear the 3 sounds. So *big* and *pig* sound like a similar word to these language speakers.

It is easy to see why many Aboriginal children starting school have immediate literacy learning difficulty when plunged into learning literacy in Standard Australian English. Literally, they do not hear the 6 different sounds in English, only the 3 sounds of Aboriginal languages.

### Sounds in Aboriginal languages

The 6 letters used to represent English sounds (b,p,d,t,g,k) are therefore not needed in Aboriginal languages as there are only 3 sounds. These sounds can sometimes be heard to be more towards the voiced end of the sound or sometimes heard to be more towards the unvoiced end of the sound, depending on where they are used in a word.

Often the sounds in Aboriginal languages are half way between the voiced and unvoiced way of saying the sound. For example:

The sound is said about here

**b** \_\_\_\_\_ \* \_\_\_\_\_ **p**  
**voiced**  **unvoiced**

However, sometimes the sound used in Aboriginal languages is more voiced such as *kapi* 'water' where the first sound is said more like the English 'g'.

Then sometimes the sound is more unvoiced such as *pakala* 'get up' where the middle sound is said more like the English 'k'.

Same for *purni* where the first sound is more voiced (like an English b) but then in the word *kapurli* it is more unvoiced (like an English p ).

Linguists look at many different words and count up the times where the sound is more voiced or unvoiced and make a decision on which letter is more representative of the sound.

### Writing Aboriginal Languages

When Aboriginal languages are therefore written, we can choose to use either

b or p  
d or t,  
g or k

to represent the three sounds.

Usually it is best to choose either the voiced set of letters (b d g) or the unvoiced set of letters (p t k) so as to not confuse the reader and mix between voiced and unvoiced.

Linguists look at all the sounds (phonemes) in the Aboriginal language and consider whether it would be best to use the voiced or unvoiced set of letters.

We also look at how the words will be written and consider which set of letters would be best to use to make sure people read and say the word as close as possible to the way it should be said.

### **Kuwarra Alphabet**

In the case of Kuwarra, there is the 'ng' sound such as in *ngurra* 'house'

The 'ng' represents one single sound, even though two letters are used. In English there is the same thing such as 'sh' in **ship** and 'ch' in **chips**.

Two letters are used because there is not a single English alphabet letter that can represent the 'sh' or 'ch' sound.

Then the linguist looks at the types of words and how they would be spelt. For example, *mangka*, 'hair' we choose to use 'k' for the sound because if we used 'g', the word would be spelt *mangga*. This means the word would be said very differently than what it should be by most people.

People who read and write English see the 'gg' as one sound. Like in the words 'little', 'million' and 'rabbit', the double letters are seen as a single sound but said a little longer. They would say the Kuwarra word as man-gga rather than as it should pronounced as mang-ka.

*Nyimangka* would be written as *nyimanga*. This means people would see the 'ng' in *nyimanga* and pronounce it as 'ng' not as 'n' and 'k'. This means people would read and say the word totally differently to what it should be said. They would say the 'ng' sound when it doesn't exist in the word.

*Wangka* would be written as 'wangga' if we used the b/d/g set of letters. As you can see, using the 'g' letter to represent the g/k sound would create new problems for readers and change the way they said the word.

So for Kuwarra, it is best to use the **p t k** set of letters as they:

1. best represent the sound in most places in the words.
2. prevent confusion in words where there is already 'g' used as in 'ng'.

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