

From Airstream to Page: Aboriginal English Dental Sounds and the Cultural Politics of Representing Indigenous Voice in Australian Media and Writing

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Abstract. This article examines how a pronunciation feature of Aboriginal English, the stopping of dental fricatives (TH-stopping), becomes a resource for representing Indigenous identity in Australian writing and media, and how such representations reproduce or contest racialised language ideologies. An integrative review coded 21 verified studies (2000–2026) by linguistic level and research design and interpreted them through articulatory, sociolinguistics and media theory. Descriptive overviews predominate; no study measures TH-stopping, and representation research is confined to screen media and health communication. The article proposes the Articulatory–Indexical Representation (AIR) framework, linking substrate articulation, indexical meaning, representational choice and audience ideology. It explains why the same respelling can signal sovereignty or caricature, and it offers testable propositions and implications for media, publishing, education and justice.

Keywords: Aboriginal English, Media Representation, Language Ideology, Sociolinguistics, Dental Fricatives.

INTRODUCTION

Speech carries social meaning long before it is written down, and the moment it is written down that meaning is negotiated again. When a novelist, screenwriter or journalist decides how an Aboriginal character should "sound" on the page, a phonetic fact about the mouth becomes a social fact about the speaker. This article is concerned with one such fact. In many varieties of Aboriginal English (AbE), the dental fricatives of Standard Australian English (SAusE), the sounds spelled <th> in *think* and *that*, are produced as stops. Linguists describe the process neutrally as TH-stopping [1, 2]. Written representation rarely treats it neutrally. A respelling such as <dat> or <tink> can signal intimacy and belonging when it is chosen by an Indigenous author for an Indigenous readership, yet the same spelling can work as caricature when it is used by an outsider to mark a speaker as uneducated [3, 4].

The social stakes are considerable. At the 2021 Census, 812,728 people identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, 3.2 per cent of the Australian population, and fewer than one in ten of them reported using an Indigenous language at home [5]. For most Aboriginal people, English, and very often AbE, is the everyday medium of family, community and institutional life [6, 7]. How that English is heard and represented therefore shapes access to justice, education and health care as well as cultural recognition [8, 9].

Research on AbE has expanded quickly in the past five years, particularly through community-partnered variation work in Western Australia [10, 11]. Studies of its representation, however, have developed separately from studies of its sound system. Phoneticians describe articulation and acoustics; sociolinguistics describe variation and identity; literary and media scholars describe voice and authenticity. Earlier syntheses, including an earlier review by the present authors, attempted to bridge these fields by aggregating percentage estimates of stylistic features across heterogeneous studies. On re-examination, such figures cannot be traced reliably to primary data, and pooling them across incompatible designs is not methodologically defensible. This article takes a different route.

The question is sociological as much as linguistic. Representations of how a group speaks belong to the wider media and cultural processes through which social categories are produced, circulated and contested. Media research has shown that the voices given to Indigenous characters, and the ways those voices are subtitled, spelled or translated, shape public understandings of Indigeneity and can either reproduce or unsettle colonial hierarchies [6, 12]. Sociolinguistics scholarship adds that judgements about "correct" speech often stand in for judgement about race and social worth [13]. The article therefore treats a pronunciation feature as a site where language, media, power and identity meet.

The study has three aims. First, it maps the peer-reviewed evidence on AbE published between 2000 and 2026 by linguistic level and research design, so that strengths and gaps can be seen rather than asserted. Second, it explains, in articulatory and aerodynamic terms, why TH-stopping arises and why it is perceptually salient enough to become a marker in writing. Third, it proposes an Articulatory–Indexical Representation (AIR) framework that connects the oral cavity to the printed page and sets out propositions that future community-led research can test. The guiding question is simple to state: how does a difference in the way air leaves the mouth become a difference in how a people are imagined?

BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Aboriginal English as a variety and as a social resource

AbE is best understood as a group of related dialects of English spoken by Aboriginal people across Australia, ranging from forms close to SAusE to "heavier" forms that share features with Kriol and other contact languages [1, 2]. It emerged from contact between speakers of Australian languages and English-speaking colonists, but it is not a degraded copy of SAusE. It is rule-governed at every level and carries cultural conceptualizations of kinship, place and story that are not shared by mainstream English [14, 15]. Recent overviews emphasise both change and continuity. Younger speakers adopt innovations such as qualitative *be like*, yet long-standing preferences, such as the strong encoding of direct speech, persist across generations [16, 17].

The variety also functions as an emblem. Eades [7] shows that ways of using English, from the indirect handling of questions to the value placed on silence, are central to how Aboriginal people recognize one another and how they are misrepresented in institutions. In courtroom settings these differences have been turned against witnesses [8]. Schneider's [18] model of postcolonial Englishes helps to frame this double status. Features that originate in contact can, over time, be re-valued as markers of a distinct identity, and the same features can remain targets of stigma among outsiders.

The articulatory phonetics of dental sounds: oral cavity and airstream

All the sounds discussed here are produced with a pulmonic egressive airstream: air is pushed from the lungs through the larynx and shaped in the oral cavity. What distinguishes a fricative from a stop is the degree of constriction. For the SAusE dental fricatives [θ] and [ð], the tip or blade of the tongue approaches the upper incisors and leaves a very narrow channel. Air forced through that channel becomes turbulent, and the turbulence is heard as friction noise [19, 20]. Because the channel is short and lies in front of almost no resonating cavity, the noise of [θ] is weak and spectrally diffuse. It is among the quietest consonants in English and is easily confused with [f] [20].

In a stop, by contrast, the articulators form a complete seal. Air continues to flow from the lungs, intra-oral pressure rises behind the closure, and the release of the closure produces a brief burst. When the seal is made with the tongue blade against the upper teeth and the front of the alveolar ridge, the result is a lamino-dental stop, transcribed [t̪] or [d̪]. Figure 1 sets the two configurations side by side and shows, schematically, how pressure and airflow behave over time. The fricative maintains moderate pressure and continuous flow; the stop interrupts flow entirely and then releases it in a single transient.

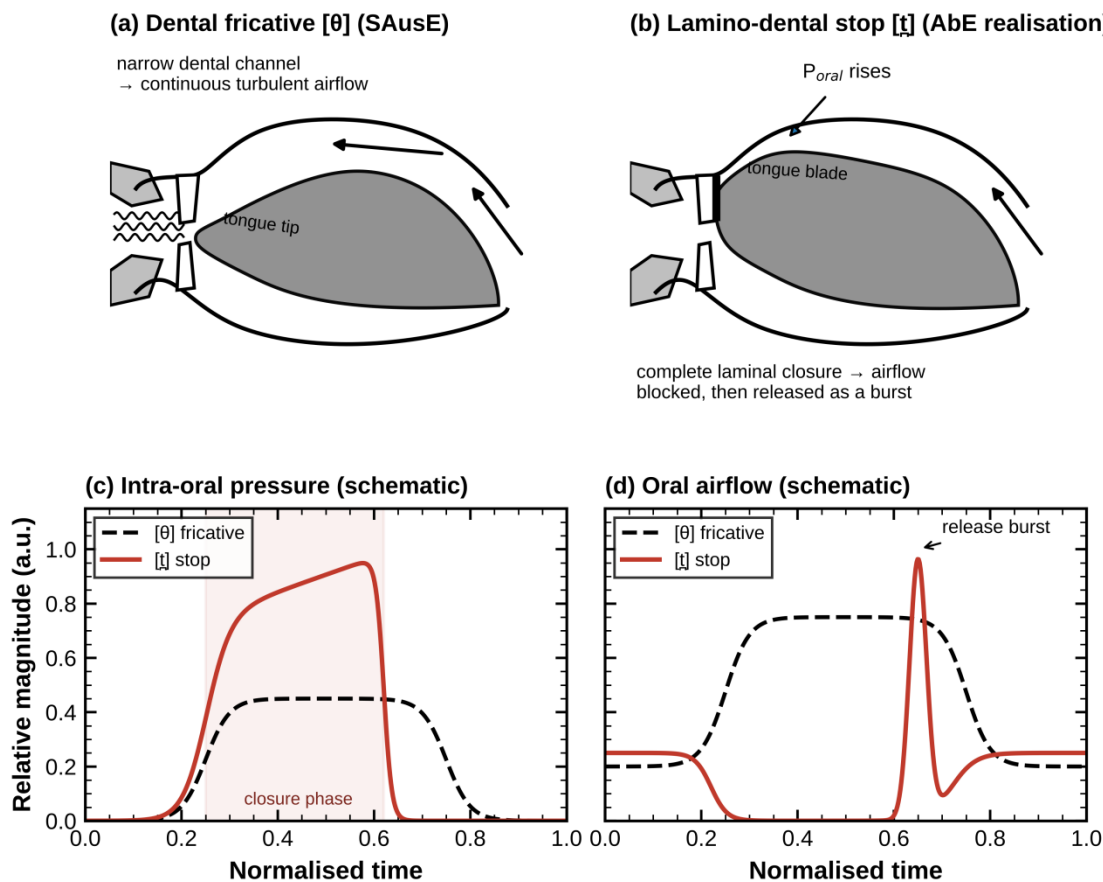


Figure 1. Articulatory configuration and schematic aerodynamics of the SAusE dental fricative [θ] and the lamino-dental stop [t̪] reported for Aboriginal English.

Note: Panels (a) and (b) are simplified midsagittal sections; panels (c) and (d) are schematic time courses in arbitrary units that illustrate principles described by Ladefoged and Maddieson [19] and Stevens [20]. They are not measurements. Source: authors' own illustration.

Australian languages explain why the stop is the expected substitute. Their phonologies are "consonant-salient": they typically distinguish many places of articulation, often including both laminal dental and laminal palatal stops, while having few or no fricatives and little or no phonemic voicing contrast in stops [21, 22]. A speaker whose first or heritage phonology contains a lamino-dental stop but no dental fricative will tend to map English /θ ð/ onto that stop. Place is preserved; manner changes. The Perceptual Assimilation Model predicts exactly this kind of mapping, in which an unfamiliar sound is assimilated to the closest native category [23]. Comparable patterns are reported in the mixed language Light Warlpiri, whose speakers combine English, Kriol and Warlpiri phonologies and handle fricative contrasts less securely than stop contrasts [24].

TH-stopping is not unique to AbE. It is reported in Irish, Caribbean, New York and many other Englishes [25]. That wider distribution matters for the argument of this article. The feature is phonetically natural, so its social meaning cannot come from the sound itself. It has to be assigned, and it is assigned differently in different communities and texts.

Table 1 summarises the consonantal features of AbE that are most often noticed by listeners and most often targeted by writers. The descriptions are drawn from overviews rather than from new measurements, and the degree to which each feature occurs varies by region, speaker and situation [1, 2, 6].

Table 1. Consonantal features of Aboriginal English most relevant to written representation.

Feature	SAusE target	Reported AbE realisation	Articulatory and aerodynamic change	Substrate motivation	Typical written device
Dental fricatives (TH)	[θ] think, [ð] that	[t̪, d̪] ~ [t, d]	Narrow dental channel replaced by complete laminal closure; turbulence replaced by a release burst	Few or no fricatives; laminal dental stops common	<t>, <d> respelling

Feature	SAusE target	Reported AbE realisation	Articulatory and aerodynamic change	Substrate motivation	Typical written device
Labiodental fricatives	[f], [v]	[p], [b] in heavier varieties	Labiodental channel replaced by bilabial closure	No labiodental place; few or no fricatives	<p>, respelling (rare)
Sibilants	[s], [z], [ʃ]	Variable [s] [ʃ] in heavier varieties	Shape and place of the grooved channel vary	No sibilant contrast in most languages	Seldom represented
Glottal fricative	[h]	Variable omission and insertion	Glottal frication absent or added	/h/ absent from most inventories	Apostrophe (eye-dialect risk)
Stop voicing	/p b/, /t d/, /k g/ contrast	Weakened contrast	Voice-onset and closure-duration cues differ from SAusE	No phonemic voicing contrast in most languages	Rarely represented

Note: Realisations vary by region, speaker and situation and are most frequent in heavier varieties. Sources: Butcher [1], Dickson [6] and Malcolm [2] for AbE; Butcher [21] and Fletcher and Butcher [22] for substrate phonologies.

From sound to sign: indexicality, enregisterment and orthographic representation

Three strands of sociolinguistic theory connect the oral cavity to the page. The first is indexical order. Silverstein [26] distinguishes a first-order correlation between a linguistic form and a social group, observable by analysts, from higher orders at which speakers and observers notice the form and attach evaluations to it. Eckert [27] extends the idea to the "indexical field", the set of related meanings that a single variable can call up depending on context. A stopped TH may index regional origin in one setting, toughness in another and solidarity in a third.

The second strand is enregisterment. Agha [28] describes how a set of forms comes to be recognised as a register linked to a social type through repeated circulation in commentary, media and everyday metapragmatic talk. Johnstone et al. [29] show how local pronunciations become "Pittsburghese" as they are listed, printed on souvenirs and performed. Written representation is one of the main engines of enregisterment because it fixes a feature in a visible and repeatable form.

The third strand concerns orthography itself. Respelling is never a transparent record of speech. Jaffe [3] and Jaffe and Walton [33] show that non-standard spellings ask readers to perform a voice, and that readers bring their own stereotypes to that performance. Preston [4] warned that "eye dialect", spellings such as <wuz> for *was* that change nothing in pronunciation, mark speakers as deviant without adding phonetic information. Raciolinguistic research adds that the perception of difference is filtered through racialised listening and reading subjects, so that identical forms are evaluated differently when they are attributed to different speakers [13]. Literary stylistics has long recognised these effects in the representation of speech and thought [30], and corpus stylistics now offers tools to measure them across large bodies of text [31, 32]. Bakhtin's [34] notion of heteroglossia, the coexistence of socially marked voices within a single text, remains a useful reminder that a dialect voice is always heard in relation to the voices around it.

Taken together, these strands imply that the meaning of a written TH-stop depends on who writes it, for whom, alongside which other features and within which history of representation. This is the premise on which the AIR framework is built.

METHODOLOGY

Review design and search strategy

The study is an integrative review in the sense defined by Torraco [36]: it critically combines empirical and theoretical literature in order to produce a new conceptual framework, rather than to estimate a pooled effect. This design suits a field in which studies differ in method, unit of analysis and aim, and in which statistical meta-analysis would be inappropriate [35]. The review is based entirely on published research; no new primary data were collected.

Searches were carried out in October 2026 using web-based scholarly search services, the platforms of the major linguistics publishers (Cambridge Core, Taylor & Francis, Wiley, John Benjamins and De Gruyter) and the institutional repositories of Australian universities active in AbE research. Search strings combined "Aboriginal English" or "Australian Aboriginal English" with terms for phonology, phonetics, variation, discourse, representation, media and literature. Reference lists of included studies were checked, and recent outputs of established research groups were traced forwards.

Eligibility and coding

Studies were included if they (a) took AbE, or a closely related Australian contact variety used as a phonological comparator, as their main object; (b) were published between 2000 and 2026 as a peer-reviewed article, scholarly monograph or edited-volume chapter; and (c) could be verified against a publisher record or digital object identifier. Conference abstracts, unpublished presentations, newspaper commentary and records that could not be verified were excluded. Applying

these criteria yielded 21 core studies. The aim was a purposive and fully verifiable evidence base, not an exhaustive census, and this limitation is returned to in the Limitations section.

Each study was coded on two dimensions. *Linguistic or analytical level* had six non-exclusive categories: phonetics and phonology; morphosyntax; lexis and semantics; discourse and pragmatics; media or literary representation; and research ethics and methodology. *Research design* had six exclusive categories: descriptive overview or review; variationist corpus study; experimental or acoustic study; discourse-analytic or ethnographic study; textual or media analysis; and community-methodology study. Coding followed explicit decision rules: a study was assigned to every level it addressed substantively, but to only one design, namely its principal method. The coded matrix is reproduced in Table 2 and is available as supplementary material.

Reflexivity and ethics

The authors are not Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people and write from outside the communities whose language is discussed. The review therefore follows the AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research, whose principles of Indigenous self-determination, Indigenous leadership, impact and value, and sustainability and accountability apply to secondary as well as primary research [37]. It also draws on Nakata's [38] account of the "cultural interface" and on Smith's [39] critique of research that extracts knowledge from Indigenous peoples. In practice this meant prioritising work produced with Aboriginal co-researchers, avoiding the reproduction of stigmatising respellings beyond what the analysis requires, and framing future research as community-led rather than outsider-driven.

RESULTS

Composition of the evidence base

Table 2 lists the 21 studies. Figure 2 cross-tabulates linguistic level against research design. Descriptive overviews are the largest single design (6 of 21 studies), and they are the only design that covers all four structural levels at once. Variationist corpus studies (5 studies) are recent and concentrated on discourse-pragmatic and morphosyntactic variables, such as quotatives and *was/were* variation, with one study of the phonological variable (ING). Discourse-analytic and ethnographic work (4 studies) dominates the earlier period and focuses on narrative schemas and institutional, especially legal, interaction.

Table 2. Coded evidence matrix of the 21 studies included in the review.

No.	Study	Level(s)	Design	Data
S1	Malcolm & Rochecoste [15]	D	Discourse/ethnographic	Spoken narratives
S2	Malcolm & Sharifian [14]	L, D	Discourse/ethnographic	Spoken narratives
S3	Eades [8]	D	Discourse/ethnographic	Courtroom transcripts
S4	Butcher [1]	P, M, L	Descriptive/review	Secondary sources
S5	Eades [7]	L, D	Discourse/ethnographic	Fieldwork and legal data
S6	Malcolm [2]	P, M, L, D	Descriptive/review	Mixed corpora
S7	Dickson [6]	P, M, L, D, R	Descriptive/review	Secondary sources
S8	Rodríguez Louro & Collard [17]	P, M, L, D	Descriptive/review	Secondary sources
S9	Rodríguez Louro & Collard [10]	E	Community methodology	Fieldwork reflection
S10	Clews et al. [40]	L, D	Variationist corpus	Spoken naturalistic
S11	Bundgaard-Nielsen & O'Shannessy [24]	P	Experimental/acoustic	Elicited speech
S12	Rodríguez Louro et al. [16]	D	Variationist corpus	Spoken naturalistic
S13	Rodríguez Louro & Collard [9]	R, E	Community methodology	Media co-production
S14	Rodríguez Louro & Collard [11]	E	Variationist corpus	Spoken naturalistic
S15	Rodríguez Louro & Collard [41]	E	Community methodology	Reflective essay
S16	Rodríguez Louro, Collard, & Reynolds [42]	P, M, L, D	Descriptive/review	Secondary sources
S17	Wang et al. [43]	P	Experimental/acoustic	Spoken conversational
S18	Bednarek et al. [12]	R	Textual/media analysis	Screen texts
S19	Fraiese, Rodríguez Louro, Gardner, Collard, & Walker [44]	P	Variationist corpus	Spoken naturalistic
S20	Fraiese, Rodríguez Louro, Gardner, & Collard [45]	M	Variationist corpus	Spoken naturalistic
S21	Rodríguez Louro, Collard, & Clews [46]	P, M, L, D	Descriptive/review	Secondary sources

Note: Levels: P = phonetics/phonology; M = morphosyntax; L = lexis/semantics; D = discourse/pragmatics; R = media or literary representation; E = research ethics/methodology. S11 concerns Light Warlpiri and is included as a phonological comparator. Source: authors' coding.

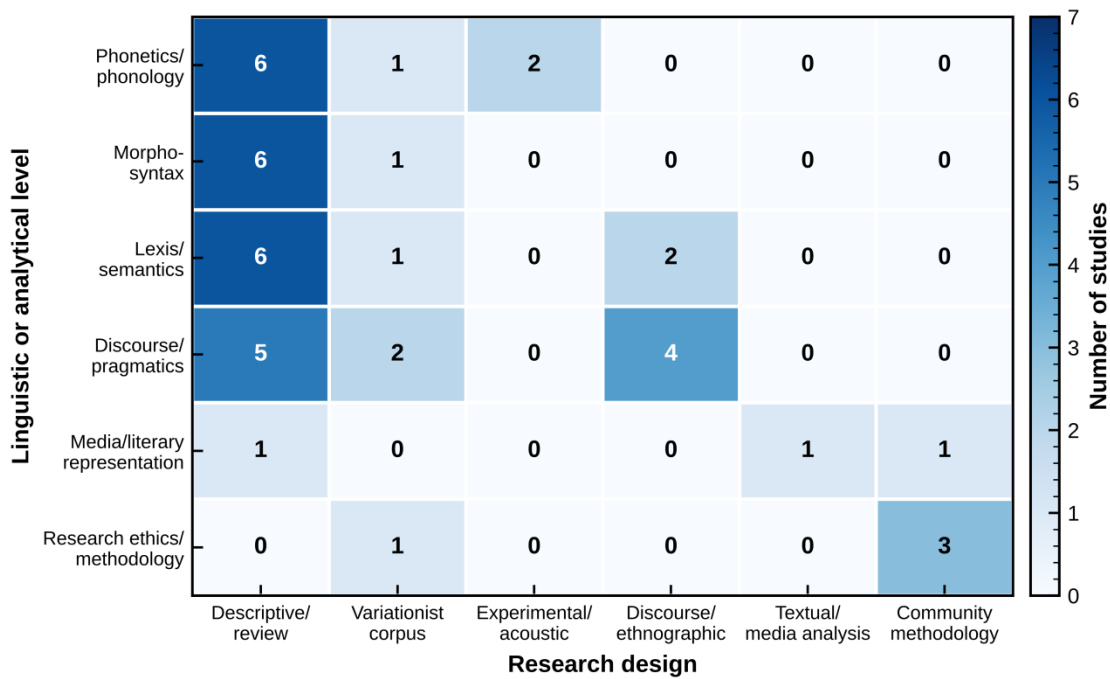


Figure 2. Evidence map of 21 studies on Aboriginal English (2000–2026) by linguistic or analytical level and research design.

Note: Cell values are numbers of studies. Levels are non-exclusive, so multi-level overviews contribute to more than one row; designs are exclusive. Source: authors' coding of the studies in Table 2.

Two features of the matrix stand out. The first is how little experimental phonetic work exists. Only two studies use acoustic or perception methods, and only one of them examines AbE itself: an analysis of monophthongs in Central Australian AbE based on six speakers [43]. The other concerns Light Warlpiri [24]. No study in the evidence base measures the articulation or acoustics of TH-stopping in AbE, although every descriptive overview lists it. The second is that representation research is sparse. Three studies address media or literary representation, and none of them analyses written literature quantitatively.

Figure 3 places the studies in time. Fourteen of the 21 were published between 2021 and 2026, which reflects the rapid growth of community-partnered research led by the Yarning Corpus team in Perth [10, 11]. The same period produced explicit reflection on collaborative and decolonising methods in AbE research [10, 41].

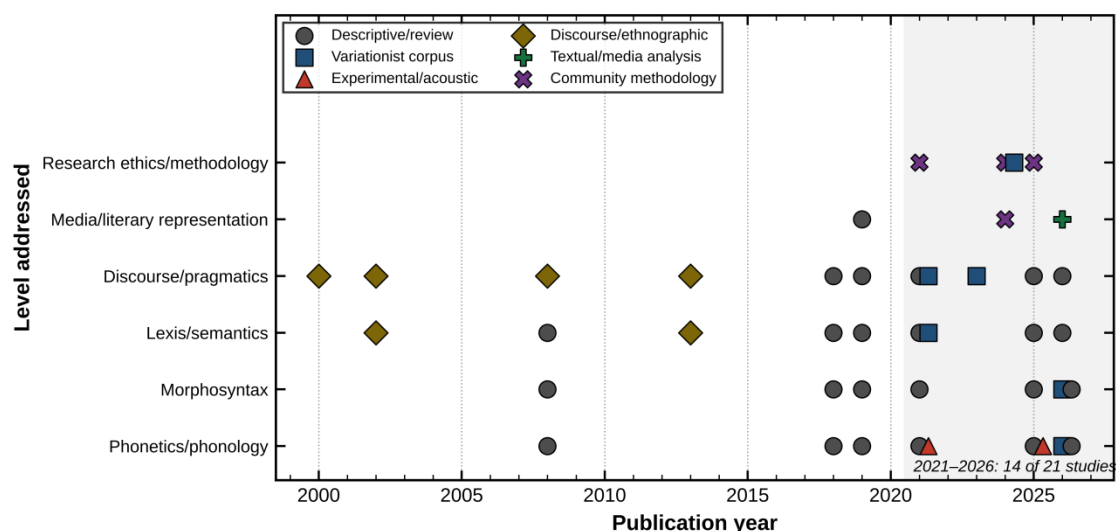


Figure 3. Temporal distribution of the 21 studies by level addressed and research design.

Note: Each marker is one study at one level; markers in the same year and level are offset horizontally. The shaded band marks 2021–2026.

Source: authors' coding of the studies in Table 2.

Phonological evidence on dental and other consonants

The descriptive overviews agree on the core consonantal profile set out in Table 1. Fricatives, including the dental fricatives, may be realised as stops, especially in heavier varieties; the voicing contrast in stops can be weakened; and /h/ is variably absent or inserted [1, 2]. Writing for a clinical readership, Butcher [1] links these features to the phonological systems of Australian languages, a link that matters for speech pathologists and educators who might otherwise mistake dialect features for disorder.

The variationist literature has not yet addressed TH-stopping, but it demonstrates what such work could show. A study of (ING) at an Indigenous boarding school related variation in this phonological variable to school practices, treating it as socially patterned rather than as a deficit [44]. A companion study analysed *was/were* variation as a systematic variable within AbE grammar rather than as error [45]. The acoustic study of Central Australian AbE found a vowel inventory similar to mainstream Australian English alongside distinctive realisations, such as a less open TRAP vowel [43]. These findings warn against treating any single feature as a fixed marker. They show instead that features are variable, socially patterned and locally meaningful.

Representation research: from screen to page

Representation research in the evidence base comes almost entirely from screen media and applied communication. Dickson [6] observes that AbE has become far more visible in film, television and social media and argues that this visibility reflects decades of linguistic research and Indigenous creative control. Bednarek et al. [12] traced Aboriginal-language dialogue through scripts, broadcast dialogue and subtitles in 16 Australian television series and identified four practices, from full English translation to generic labels such as "speaks Indigenous language". They found a drift towards generic terms that risks homogenising Aboriginal peoples. Rodríguez Louro and Collard [9] describe the co-design of health media in AbE with Aboriginal communities, where the deliberate use of AbE is a matter of cultural safety rather than of style alone.

Written literature is the clearest gap. Indigenous writing in English has a long history of negotiating colonial expectations about voice [47], and publishing practice has been shaped by debates about protocols, editing and the control of Indigenous stories [48, 49]. Contemporary novels also experiment with language openly. Tara June Winch's *The Yield* is organised around a grandfather's dictionary of Wiradjuri words [50], and Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance* foregrounds Noongar language and perspective in the early colonial encounter [51]. Yet no study in the evidence base examines systematically how these or other texts represent AbE pronunciation, whether insider and outsider authors differ in their choices, or how readers respond. The percentages that have circulated in some secondary literature therefore lack an empirical basis in this corpus.

THE ARTICULATORY–INDEXICAL REPRESENTATION (AIR) FRAMEWORK

Four layers

The AIR framework (Figure 4) organises the argument into four layers, each corresponding to a body of theory reviewed above.

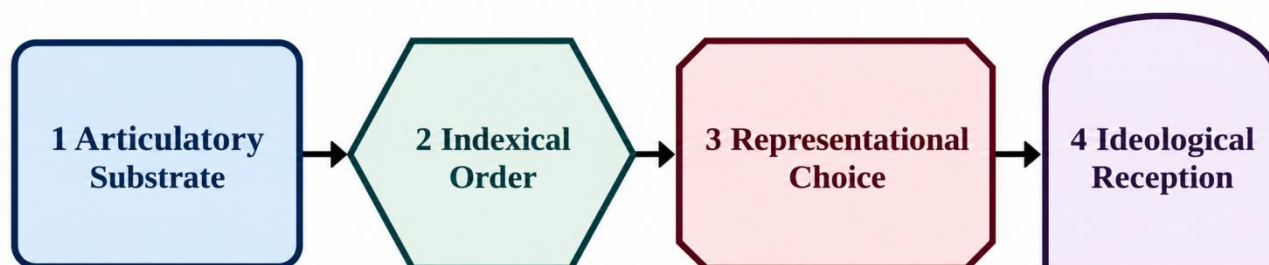


Figure 4. The Articulatory–Indexical Representation (AIR) framework.

Note: Solid arrows show the analytical sequence from articulation to reception; the dashed arrow shows the feedback through which circulating representations re-enregister a feature. Source: authors' own framework.

The *articulatory substrate* layer describes the physical event. A narrow dental channel and continuous turbulent airflow in SAusE correspond, in many AbE realisations, to complete laminal closure and a release burst (Figure 1). The layer explains why the substitution occurs (substrate inventories and perceptual assimilation) and why it is salient: a stop is louder and more abrupt than the weak fricative it replaces, so listeners notice it.

The *indexical order* layer describes the social meanings attached to the event. At the first order, stopped TH correlates with Aboriginal speakers in particular regions and situations. At the next order, it is noticed and becomes available as a marker of Aboriginal belonging, informality or solidarity [26, 27]. The layer explains why a single phonetic feature can carry several meanings.

The *representational choice* layer describes what writers do. A writer may respell the feature, mark AbE only through lexis and discourse (kinship terms, *deadly*, direct quotation), use standard spelling throughout, or foreground Indigenous Language words in place of English. These choices are made within publishing conventions, readership expectations and, for Indigenous authors, community protocols [48, 52].

The *ideological reception* layer describes how readers interpret the choice. The same respelling may be read as authenticity and sovereignty, or as deficit and caricature, depending on the reader's position and the text's history [13, 33]. A feedback loop closes the framework. Circulating written and screen images re-enregister the feature, either as a stereotype at a higher indexical order or as a reclaimed emblem [28, 29].

Testable propositions

The framework generates five propositions. Each can be tested with methods already used in the field, provided the research is designed with, and governed by, Aboriginal communities.

P1 (Salience). Phonetic features that change manner of articulation, such as TH-stopping and the stopping of other fricatives, will be respelled more often in written representations of AbE than features that change vowel quality, because manner changes are more perceptible. This can be tested by comparing feature frequencies in spoken corpora, such as the Yarning Corpus [11], with respelling frequencies in literary corpora.

P2 (Authorship). Indigenous-authored texts will rely more on lexical and discourse-pragmatic marking, and less on phonetic respelling, than texts by non-Indigenous authors depicting Aboriginal characters. This can be tested through corpus-stylistic comparison of matched texts [31].

P3 (Distribution). In both groups, AbE features will cluster in direct speech rather than in narration, which reflects the persistence of direct-speech encoding in AbE oral narrative [16]. The strength of this clustering, rather than its existence, is expected to differ between groups.

P4 (Reception). Readers' evaluations of a respelled TH-stop will depend on the perceived identity of the author and on the presence of other AbE features, not on the respelling alone. This can be tested experimentally with matched text versions, in line with raciolinguistic work on perception [13].

P5 (Change). As AbE becomes more visible in Indigenous-led media [6], respelling of phonetic features in new texts will decline relative to lexical and pragmatic marking. This can be tested longitudinally across publication decades.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical contribution

The central claim of this article is that the stylistic representation of AbE cannot be understood without its articulatory basis, and that the articulatory basis cannot explain representation on its own. Linking the two is what the AIR framework adds. Existing models of enregisterment [28] and indexicality [26] treat phonetic forms largely as given. Phonetic accounts of Australian languages [21, 22] explain the forms but not their uptake. By making the physical properties of a sound part of the explanation, specifically its perceptual salience as determined by airflow and constriction, the framework explains why some features are selected for representation and others are not. This also explains a pattern familiar from other Englishes, in which stopped TH is among the first features writers reach for when signalling a non-standard voice [25, 52].

The framework also sharpens the critique of deficit views. Because TH-stopping follows systematically from substrate phonology and perceptual assimilation, describing it as "lazy" or "incorrect" pronunciation is not only offensive but also empirically wrong. The variationist studies reviewed here make the same point for morphosyntax and other variables [17, 45]. Writers and editors who understand the articulatory basis of a feature are better placed to represent it with respect, or to decide that it need not be represented at all.

Methodological and ethical implications

The evidence map points to a clear agenda. Experimental phonetic studies of AbE consonants are needed, and they should build on the methods already used for vowels in Central Australian AbE [43] and for stops and fricatives in Light Warlpiri [24]. Literary corpora of Indigenous-authored and non-Indigenous-authored texts need to be built with appropriate permissions, so that P1 to P3 can be tested with transparent and replicable counts. Reception experiments should be co-designed with Aboriginal researchers and readers.

Quantification is not ethically neutral. Counting respellings in Indigenous writing could reproduce the very gaze the analysis criticises, if it is carried out without community involvement. The collaborative model developed for the Yarning Corpus, in which Aboriginal researchers shape questions, data collection and interpretation, provides a workable template [10, 41]. The same principles should govern literary and media corpora, including decisions about which texts are included and how findings are reported [37, 39].

A further implication concerns the integrity of synthesis. Percentages and correlation coefficients presented without traceable sources carry an appearance of rigour while hiding uncertainty. A transparent evidence map with a small but verified base, such as the one offered here, is more useful to the field than an aggregate figure that cannot be checked.

Social and policy implications

The findings matter beyond linguistics. For media and publishing, the AIR framework offers a practical test: before a feature is respelled, producers can ask who chose it, for which audience, and which history of representation it joins. Screen research already shows that production constraints push towards generic and homogenising choices [12], and Indigenous editorial control and community consultation, long argued for in publishing [48], are the most direct counterweight.

In education and health, recognising TH-stopping as systematic rather than as error supports dialect-aware teaching and assessment and reduces the risk that dialect features are mistaken for disorder [1]. Health media produced in AbE with Aboriginal communities show that the variety can be an asset in public communication rather than a barrier [9]. In legal settings, where misreadings of Aboriginal ways of speaking have had serious consequences [7, 8], the framework strengthens the case for interpreters, communication guides and training that treat AbE as a legitimate variety. Across these domains the sociological point is the same: how a feature is represented shapes how its speakers are treated.

Limitations

Several limitations qualify the findings. The evidence base is purposive and limited to 21 verifiable studies; an exhaustive search of bibliographic databases might locate additional work, especially theses and regional publications. The coding categories are broad, and multi-level overviews contribute to several cells in Figure 2, which inflates counts at the descriptive end of the matrix. The articulatory account in Figure 1 is schematic and illustrates principles described in the phonetic literature rather than new measurements. Finally, the AIR propositions are hypotheses. They are presented in order to be tested, and some may be disconfirmed.

CONCLUSION

This article set out to explain how a difference in the way air leaves the mouth becomes a difference in how Aboriginal speakers are imagined in writing and media. It reached three conclusions. First, the evidence base on AbE is growing quickly but unevenly: descriptive overviews and recent variationist work are strong, while experimental phonetics and the study of written representation remain thin. Second, TH-stopping is a phonetically natural outcome of substrate phonology, in which complete laminal closure replaces a weak and turbulent dental fricative; its perceptual salience makes it a likely target for representation. Third, the social meaning of a written TH-stop is not fixed by the sound. It is produced across four connected layers, articulatory, indexical, representational and ideological, which the AIR framework brings together.

For writers and editors, the practical message is that phonetic respelling is only one of several ways to voice AbE, and often not the most respectful. For researchers, the message is that claims about the stylistic role of AbE need verifiable data, collected and interpreted with Aboriginal communities. The five propositions offered here provide a starting point for that work.

DECLARATIONS

Declarations

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Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability: The evidence matrix is available from the corresponding author and will be deposited in an open repository upon acceptance.

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