Aboriginal ways of using English is a collection of journal articles, book chapters and newspaper articles published by Diana Eades, between 1982 and 2012. Divided into ‘Part I: Describing Aboriginal ways of using English’ (Chapters 2–5) and ‘Part II: Focusing in the criminal justice process’ (Chapters 6–11), it tracks the programmatic contribution Eades has made over three decades to a range of fields: Aboriginal people’s use of varieties of English; interactional sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology; and language and the law, leading most recently to the field of critical sociolinguistics. In both the introductory chapter and the brief introductions prefacing the ten subsequent chapters, Eades gives contextual commentary, theoretical grounding and thematic links, drawing the chapters into a cohesive collection.

Chapter 1 provides an explanation for the selection of texts, their intended audiences and an overview of Aboriginal Englishes and Aboriginal ways of using English. The texts are selected from over fifty articles and chapters, and represent key works and/or hard to access publications. The intended audience is broad; students, scholars and practitioners in the fields of language and linguistics, education, law and beyond (see the acknowledgement in the book’s preface by Former District Court Judge, John Nicholson SC).

Important points regarding changes in society and terminology over time are also established in the opening chapter. Eades is mindful and careful of the danger of generalising to all Aboriginal people (and non-Aboriginal people) and all communicative contexts. To this end, some retrofitting appears in some chapters, with the insertion of ‘[many]’ and ‘[often]’ in front of statements about Aboriginal people. Other alterations to the original texts are flagged in this way (p.7) and through text boxes beside the original text. Eades also seeks terms to distinguish the language practices of Aboriginal people living in remote and urban settings, drawing on ‘traditionally oriented’ and ‘non-traditionally oriented’. In using the latter, she acknowledges ‘continuities between pre-invasion societies and languages on the one hand, and contemporary societies and their ways of using English, on the other’ (p.6), an important theme in itself. A further challenge is ‘finding ways of talking about commonalities and shared cultural norms and ways of speaking in the broader Australian society’ (p.6) and generalising distinctions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. This is resolved through a range of terms, but more importantly, it makes the reader aware of these useful, though not water tight distinctions (see the discussion of ‘strategic essentialism’ in Section 1.5).
Part I: ‘Describing Aboriginal Ways of Using English’ has three chapters based on Eades’ PhD research in Queensland which focus on conversational pragmatics among Aboriginal speakers. The first, the 1982 essay, ‘You gotta know how to talk…’: ethnography of information in seeking in South-east Queensland Aboriginal society’, establishes ethnography of speaking as the framework to investigate what people do with language. The chapter lays out socio-cultural aspects of information exchange, investigating and contrasting the roles of interpersonal relationships and linguistic strategies and practices important to the transmission of knowledge in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communication. The chapter not only establishes the importance of the web of social practices that bear on communicative events, but recognises the implications of differences for ‘schools, law courts, advisory bodies and land claim hearings’ (p.44), as well as for researchers. These themes are continuous throughout the book.

Chapters 3 and 4 further explore distinctive ways of using English in in-community interactions. Chapter 3 focuses on time and talk about future events, in particular the use of the verbal auxiliary ‘will’. Published in 1984, this relatively short paper does not fully argue its analysis of ‘will’ (a conditional predication of the future, p.53) or provide enough data to provide a strong case for the analysis. However, it provides a good discussion of the context, its importance in investigating language in use and the scope for misunderstanding in intercultural interactions. Chapter 4, ‘They don’t speak an Aboriginal language, or do they?’, appeared alongside a range of similarly influential essays, published in Being Black: Aboriginal culture in settled Australia (Keen, 1997). In this essay, the idea that the social world is reflected in interaction is expanded to show that it is indeed re-created and reproduced through interaction, illuminating continuities between previous and contemporary social and language practices. The final chapter, ‘Aboriginal English’, is a reference work aimed at primary school teachers published in 1993. It remains an excellent resource for educators.

Part II draws on the insights and theoretical foundations laid in Part 1, and moves onto Eades’ extensive involvement and research in language and the law. Chapter 6 establishes a fictional account of an Aboriginal woman’s (Nancy) encounter with the criminal justice system to explore a number of important points that come to bear on the interactions between Nancy and the other participants in the legal setting. These include the nature and semantics of Aboriginal English, the pragmatics of questioning, including ‘gratuitous concurrence’ (answering questions with the perceived preferred response to appease a questioner), the use of silence, expressions of and attitudes to time, and broader cultural practices such as loyalty to family and perspectives on private versus public space.

The following five chapters (6–11) build on the observations in Chapter 6, with detailed sociolinguistic analysis of interactions in specific court cases. The linguistic structures and strategies under analysis are situated in, and interact with, prevailing language ideologies of the courtroom. In carrying out this linguistic anthropology, Eades draws on various data:
court documents and transcripts, and her own close and direct observation and participation as researcher and expert in past and unfolding events. Of particular significance is the Pinkenba case, see Chapters 7, 9, 10 and 11 (covered in depth in Eades, 2008).

Chapter 7 examines five legal cases involving Aboriginal defendants and witnesses. The case studies unpack the implications of Aboriginal ways of using English, and the involvement of linguists and linguistic knowledge in court proceedings. It provides a tight overview of the linguistic issues at play. Thanks to Eades' work in this field, legal professionals and students have increasing awareness of these, with the development of documents such as a handbook for lawyers (Eades, 1992). However, Eades raises the potential danger of this increased awareness, describing the manipulation and exploitation of Aboriginal speech pragmatics by the defence counsel in the Pinkenba case (p.124 and Chapter 11).

Chapter 8 closely examines two of the cases in Chapter 7, those of Kelvin Condren and Max Stuart. Both men were convicted of murder, in 1984 and 1959 respectively. Both convictions were contested with linguistic evidence (in Stuart’s case, by T.G.H. Strehlow, and in Condren’s by Diana Eades), which sought to show that the confessions attributed to the two men were in fact fabrications, crafted by specific modes of courtroom discourse. Continuing with the theme of the (lack of) agency of the speaker, Chapter 10 focuses on the special role and nature of storytelling and retelling in court proceedings. It explores how evidence is elicited, organised, examined and revisited by legal professionals, while maintaining the fiction of its authorship by witnesses and defendants. The exploration of these practices illuminates a number of decisive assumptions held in the courtroom. This is one of the longer chapters in the book, rich in data and analysis, and its sociolinguistic examination of courtroom interaction is highly accessible and engaging. ‘A case of mistaken assumptions’ (Chapter 9) is a two-page synthesis of the linguistic strategies and the ideologies that underpin them, used by non-Indigenous legal professionals and by many Indigenous people in court settings, raising the power imbalances this involves. This sharp piece was originally published as a column for a Queensland newspaper article in response to the Pinkenba case, which is central in the final chapter.

Drawing extensively on court transcripts and framed in critical sociolinguistic theory, Chapter 11 mounts a compelling account of the wider ramifications of language ideologies drawn on and reproduced in cross-examination. In the Pinkenba case, three teenaged boys who had been picked up and dumped by police appeared as witnesses in the case against the police. Analysis of the court proceedings shows how the young men were manipulated and victimised through cross-examination, which drew on language ideologies, power structures and discourses of “dangerous” Aborigines. Ultimately their complaint, and they themselves, were completely discredited. Eades shows how these dynamics and language ideologies extend beyond the courtroom, to the perpetuation of social inequity, drawing on and feeding into discourses, which
cast Aboriginal people as dangerous, unreliable and dishonest, discourses which allow continued neo-colonial control over Aboriginal people as a group in Australia.

Aboriginal Ways of Using English is a broad and rich collection of high quality scholarship, of significance to a wide readership. Many of the essays are accessible to non-linguists, beyond the audience of legal professionals. Some chapters would be excellent resources for secondary teachers of English and of legal studies. The book’s focus is weighted towards language and the law, the area where Eades’ research has had most wide-ranging impact. However, Eades skilful application of linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics should inspire students and researchers to investigate language in use in any domain.

REFERENCES

