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## 'I am sorry to bother you': a unique partnership between Luise Hercus and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

Grace Koch and Kazuko Obata

*Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies*

### 1. Introduction

Few linguists who have worked on Australian Aboriginal languages can begin to match the breadth and depth of research done by Luise Hercus in the last 50 years. Throughout her long career she has maintained close ties with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS).<sup>1</sup> This paper describes Luise's connections with the Institute since the early 1960s, the collections of Aboriginal languages she lodged at the Institute Library and Audiovisual Archives, the uses that clients have been making of her collections, and her relationships with Institute staff.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, all references to 'the Institute' will refer to both the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS) and to its successor in 1989, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). We thank present and past Institute staff members, Jacquie Lambert, Marisa Harris, Stephen Leahy, Barry Cundy, and Rita Metzenrath, for sharing their personal experiences with us.

## 2. Linguistic research and Institute's support for Luise's research in the 1960s and 1970s

Since its inception, the Institute has been sponsoring research in many disciplines, including linguistics. Luise was one of the first researchers to receive support from the Institute for her fieldwork.

In 1961, Luise became aware that there were still people who had knowledge of languages of Victoria, which were considered to be extinct.<sup>2</sup> Encouraged by Arthur Capell, Reader in Linguistics at the University of Sydney and member of the Interim Council of the Institute, she located people who knew Victorian languages and began to record them in 1962. However, fieldwork in Victoria brought special problems. Some of the white people who guided Luise to Aboriginal people who 'might know something of their languages' thought that Luise was on an impossible quest.<sup>3</sup> Also, Aboriginal people, afraid that they would be ridiculed, hid from Luise and she had to proceed very carefully to convince them that she respected their knowledge so that they would work with her. Once they realised what she was trying to do, they took great interest in painstakingly recording words, phrases and songs. Some people took pity on her because she had walked far to find them, carrying a very heavy tape recorder. The recordings that she made captured the voices of the last people in Victoria who had grown up speaking their languages. They wanted to record as much of their languages as possible for those who would come after them. Luise went far afield looking for remaining knowledge holders and meticulously compiled data, analysing it thoroughly. Hercus (1969:1) writes:

It would probably be true to say that there are no elderly or even middle-aged persons of Aboriginal descent in Victoria and the south of New South Wales who have not at some stage been questioned by us about the languages.

Luise started her fieldwork in Victoria at her own expense until her successful application for an Institute grant in 1963. In the early 1960s, linguistic studies were facing problems. There was not much known about the languages compared to other aspects of Aboriginal culture and also fewer potential field workers were available for linguistic studies compared to anthropology or archaeology (AIAS Newsletter. Jan. 1965:27). Under these circumstances, her application was most welcome and received unanimous support from the Interim Council of the Institute. Her subject matter, languages of Victoria, also made the application significant, and the Council even decided to reimburse the costs incurred by her previous fieldwork.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Capell (AIAS Newsletter. Jan. 1965: 28) writes: 'it was for long believed that Victorian languages were extinct'. The term 'extinct' is less widely used these days, at least in Australia, and the term 'sleeping' is often used in its place, especially by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, indicating that the language has never died.

<sup>3</sup> Hercus (2008: 165) writes: 'If I was told anything, the Aboriginal people 'were making it all up', and I was being taken in by fabrication and just 'gibberish'.

<sup>4</sup> Institute Central file 1964/23-3. Interim Council Meeting 30 April – 1 May 1963. Extract from discussion on Mrs. Hercus' application.

Her research was supported by grants to defray field expenses and by loans of tapes and tape recorders, as well as loans of vehicles. Access to a good quality tape recorder was much appreciated by Luise as her own recorder was not suitable for recording music.<sup>5</sup>

In 1965 the Institute decided to sponsor fellowships and postgraduate scholarships at Australian universities because Australian languages were rapidly disappearing and had not been documented or studied systematically. At that time, Luise's fieldwork on the languages of Victoria was coming to an end. The Institute appointed her as a part-time Fellow at the University of Adelaide in order to extend her work to the languages of South Australia (AIAS Newsletter. Jul. 1965:7). This was the beginning of her long term research on these languages that continues until the present day. Her fellowship extended until 1969 when she was appointed as Senior Lecturer at the Department of South Asian and Buddhist Studies at the Australian National University. The Institute continued supporting Luise's research by providing at least ten grants towards her fieldwork expenses, issuing her with tapes and a tape recorder, and giving her access to vehicles.

During the early to the mid-1970s, Luise was able to influence the Institute's policies on research by serving on its Linguistic Advisory Committee. This committee made decisions about funding for projects, and Luise always spoke fearlessly in support of research that she thought should be supported. Jacquie Lambert, who was administrative assistant to the Principal and the Executive for many years, remembers that the Institute was establishing its relationships with Aboriginal people and vice versa during that time. The warmth with which Luise referred to the Aboriginal people with whom she worked impressed Jacquie. Without Luise's support for research projects, many languages would never have been recorded (Lambert. pers. comm. 2015-04-07).

Luise has been a very conscientious Institute grantee, ensuring that she submitted fieldwork reports promptly. Between 1964 and 2012, she submitted 22 reports that name 40 languages and dialects from Victoria, South Australia, New South Wales, and Western Australia, all of which are held in the Institute's Pamphlet Manuscript Collection.

These reports, along with items in the Institute newsletters, annual reports about research on Aboriginal studies, correspondence, and documents held in the Institute central file, provide a chronology and a context to Luise's fieldwork and research. Sometimes they mention the difficulties she encountered, always gently understating the ghastliness of the situations.

For example, during her early fieldwork in New South Wales and South Australia, Luise camped in order to keep her fieldwork expenses to a minimum, but she suffered because of the rough conditions she was forced to endure. Her reports to the Institute mention the difficulties in locating people who remembered their languages, the heavy rain from at least one cyclone, some persistent skin infections, and terrifying noises made by shooters and others as they came round her tent early in the morning (AIAS Newsletter. Jan. 1976: 2).

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<sup>5</sup> Institute Central file 1964/23-3. Letter from Luise Hercus to the Institute dated 13 May 1963.



*Location of Luise Hercus' fieldwork sites. Cartographer: Jenny Green.*

Luise's correspondence with the Institute and vice versa illustrates the fieldwork situation at that time. For example, the Institute asked Luise to give comments with regard to appropriateness of payment to Aboriginal consultants. Luise herself had some difficulties when she was working in the South Coast where cash payment was expected. She usually paid people in kind, but felt quite awkward to be offered presents by Aboriginal consultants.<sup>6</sup> In writing to the Institute, Luise was always humble and would often start her letter with: 'I am sorry for bothering you'.

<sup>6</sup> Institute central file 1964/23-3. Letter from Luise Hercus to the Institute dated 8 December 1964.

Luise used the grant money so sparsely that an administrative assistant at the Institute asked whether she was using it only for out-of-pocket expenses. Her response to this illustrates her fieldwork situation and modesty, as when she wrote:<sup>7</sup>

because of the great difficulty of obtaining material, and the many unsuccessful expeditions, I have often felt happier to regard some of these as ‘part of family annual holidays’.

The recordings Luise made and information she collected during her fieldwork resulted in several important publications, such as *Hercus* (1969), which is a pioneering book on the languages of Victoria (second edition *Hercus* 1986). Fifteen of Luise’s works are referenced in 61 records in the AUSTLANG (Australian Indigenous Languages) database.

### 3. Luise Hercus’ contributions to the Institute collections

Over a period of 50 years, Luise lodged with the Institute over 1,000 hours of sound recordings that cover over 56 languages and dialects.

Her recordings are valuable resources, both for languages which are no longer fully spoken (or ‘sleeping’) and for songs which are no longer sung. Among them are the only available sound recordings of Pantyikali, Nukunu, Woiwurrung, Dadi Dadi, Djadjala, Gunnai, Narungga, Wadi Wadi, Wergaia, Kurnu, and Nari Nari. Cother & Gale (2005) list 44 languages for South Australia, 16 of which have sound recordings by Luise. This guide also states that Luise’s work is the main documentary source for nine South Australian languages.

Her collections of sound recordings include language material from all states and territories apart from the Australian Capital Territory and Tasmania. In recognition of the significance of her collections, the Institute nominated her sound collection for inclusion in the *Sounds of Australia* (formerly known as the National Registry of Recorded Sound) and in 2012, it was accepted for inclusion (National Film and Sound Archive: n.d.). Apart from the size of Luise’s collections, though, there is another factor that makes her recordings unique. Marisa Harris, a former Institute staff member, who auditioned<sup>8</sup> some of Luise’s recordings while working on the *Preserving Endangered Languages Heritage* project, was impressed that Luise ensured that her recordings came with metadata on their context, such as the speaker’s name, what other languages they speak, and other details that go beyond the needs of purely linguistic elicitation. The scope of her recordings goes beyond a narrow research focus and constitutes an authentic reflection of culture because Indigenous people do not separate out languages from songs and stories. Her recordings are natural, reflecting how people express themselves in conversation rather than more strict elicitation (see Gara & Hercus (2005:14-16) and Gara,

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<sup>7</sup> Institute central file 1964/23-3. Letter from Luise Hercus to the Institute dated 6 November 1964.

<sup>8</sup> As much as capacity allows, Institute staff create an audition sheet for each recording in the collection, providing a time-coded content description and metadata such as names of people recorded, names of collectors, date, place, and duration.

this volume, on her 'flexible' methodology). She took an oral history approach to her work, looking at the whole life of the speaker. This information makes her collection important to descendants of the people she recorded and members of the Indigenous communities where she worked. Because of Luise's holistic approach to recording language and her forward thinking, Marisa found that it was more enjoyable to listen to her tapes than to those of many other linguists (Harris, pers. comm. 2015-03-27).

Senior Archive Officer (Audio), Stephen Leahy, also enjoyed listening to and documenting Luise's interviews with Mick McLean *Irinjili*. He remarked that those tapes were 'more conversational than interrogative, [compared to other recordings] made by some in the 1960s and 1970s. He came to understand that Luise and Mick had a special rapport and empathy with one another that was rarely heard among other field recordings made at that time (Leahy, pers. comm. 2015-04-01, see also *Irinjili* (1986) and Hercus 1977).

In addition to sound recordings, Luise deposited transcriptions,<sup>9</sup> manuscripts containing mythology, site information, notes on grammar, and earlier versions of her publications. She began to use computers early in her research, and was one of the first contributors of electronic files to the Institute. She submitted word lists of Arabana, Malyangapa and Wadigali to the *National Lexicography Project* conducted by the Institute 1987-1989 (Nash & Simpson 1989). Later, she deposited word lists, dictionaries, and grammars of an additional 12 languages to ASEDA, the Aboriginal Studies Electronic Data Archive.<sup>10</sup> In recent times, she has been sending transcripts of her recordings in electronic format as she completes them.

Luise has also submitted multimedia electronic resources to the Institute that link sound to text files, such as Hercus & Nathan (2002), on Paakantyi (see also Nathan, this volume), which is one of the most popular items she has deposited. This kind of multimedia product can sometimes become obsolete or require ongoing updates<sup>11</sup> and can therefore be difficult to manage (see Hendery, this volume). Further, with files of different types linked by software, such products are not something which can be preserved and archived as a whole. Yet, the value of such products cannot be disputed, especially for language revitalisation. Luise has also submitted unpublished web-based resources, which is again problematic as the Institute does not archive websites.<sup>12</sup>

Luise understands the sensitivities of the content of recordings and potential conflicts they may generate, especially since the enactment of native title legislation. She keeps a close watch on requests to access her materials. When she is no longer able to monitor her collections, the Institute will act as the custodian of her materials deposited there. This is a most important responsibility as her collections are so vast and contain rich, valuable, significant and rare information.

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<sup>9</sup> Nineteen transcriptions are held in the Institute's library and transcriptions which were deposited in more recent years are held in the sound collection, together with the recordings.

<sup>10</sup> Rebranded as AILEC, Australian Indigenous Languages Electronic Collection in 2010. See <http://aseda.aiatsis.gov.au/asedaDisclaimer.php>.

<sup>11</sup> *Wiimpatya palku* runs on Windows but currently only on MacOS up to Lion (10.7).

<sup>12</sup> PANDORA (<http://pandora.nla.gov.au/>, accessed 2015-04-11) only archives published websites.

## 4. Fieldwork experiences

Luise calculates that she has spent several years on field trips since 1962.<sup>13</sup> Usually she arranged for others to accompany her because it was unnerving for a woman to travel alone to places when the roads were bad and there were often no reliable maps. At the beginning, her husband Graham and son Iain accompanied her on weekends and during university and school holidays. Later her Aboriginal consultants and/or a range of other researchers, including ethnomusicologists, anthropologists, linguists, prehistorians, archaeologists, site recorders, and friends went with her.



*Figure 1: Luise Hercus and Grace Koch in the Institute library.  
Photo taken by AIATSIS staff on 29 August 2012.*

Barry Cundy, the Institute Collection Development Manager accompanied Luise in 1998, 2000, and 2007, as did David Nathan during his time at the Institute (see Nathan, this volume). Two archaeologists, Peter Clark and Alan Lance, travelled with Luise and Barry on the first expedition. The trip in 2000 included several people: Peter Clark, Luise's friends Colin and Pam Macdonald, and Donald Rowlands, an Indigenous ranger. Only Luise and

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<sup>13</sup> Luise estimates that she made about 60 trips to the Lake Eyre region alone, and these total about five years (Gara & Hercus 2005: 35-36; Gara, this volume).

Barry made the 2007 trip. Barry holds a PhD in Archaeology, but he was happy to do the driving only and not to conduct his own research. Barry found that travelling with Luise was delightful, especially because she is a great raconteur. Although she might, at times, be somewhat critical of some people, she is never malicious, conveying the infectious amusement of a lover of the *comédie humaine*. Along with her seemingly encyclopaedic knowledge of country and people, Luise's stories can put many authors to shame with her keen eye for all the dimensions of the human condition. In many ways the stories are just vehicles for the gathering and conveying of a lifetime's wisdom, and heart. She is a great and compassionate scholar, and that's why travelling with her was such a privilege.

Barry describes his trips with Luise as being 'seamless', because she took every situation calmly and did not lay down a lot of rules. Although Luise was clearly in charge, she appreciated everyone and everything that they did along the way. Like everyone who has come to know Luise, Barry was amazed how clearly she remembers everything that happened at different places on all of her field trips. He was also astounded at her understanding of the way Aboriginal people tell stories and her ability to pick up the major topics and hidden details. Barry never encountered any situation where Luise's wealth of knowledge would offend people, although at times her reputation and long associations with communities could be intimidating if not so deftly displayed. In short she doesn't parade her knowledge needlessly for effect and is always willing to give credit to the traditional owners of knowledge.

Luise has a profound love of knowledge and the will to embrace the totality of life without compromise. One thing Barry strongly remembers is when he mentioned the possibility of giving up something in his own life, she replied, '*You give up nothing*'. That's her motto, he thinks, and fieldwork is one of those things she intends to keep doing (Cundy, pers. comm. 2015-03-26).

## 5. Technical issues arising from recording method

As an Institute grantee, Luise was issued reels of tape, a tape recorder, a microphone and field tape report sheet forms from the Institute archive. In the early 1960s, the tape recorders were large and very heavy, such as Butoba reel-to-reel models that used eight large D-cell batteries and weighed around 6kg (Wanderlöf: n.d.). Luise went to places where the mains power sources, if they existed at all, were not dependable, so at least two sets of batteries were vital. Later, the Institute issued linguistic researchers with smaller Uher reel-to-reel recorders. High-quality Nagra recorders were only issued to ethnomusicologists.

The Institute expected that researchers would record either music or speech, however, Luise and many others recorded everything that their Aboriginal co-workers were willing to share with them. Luise was cautioned to conserve space on the tapes, and took this admonition very seriously. Five inch tapes could record 30 minutes at 3.75 inches per second (ips), which was the preferred speed for linguistic material. Researchers recording music were instructed to use 7.5 ips for

better sound fidelity, meaning they could record only 15 minutes per tape. The Institute expected a constant recording speed for tapes, either 3.75 ips or 7.5 ips.

The consultants working with Luise frequently wanted to sing as well as give word lists and sentences, so she came up with a solution to the recording speed dilemma by recording at 3.75 ips during conversation and switching to and from 7.5ips on the fly when the person sang. No other Institute researcher was so diligent in observing the rules for recording! When this material was digitised, the Institute audio technicians needed to constantly check and adjust the replay machine playback speed to account for these changes in recording speed.

## 6. Requests and use of Luise's materials

Over the years, many people and organisations have contacted the Institute for copies of Luise's recordings. Such requests include those from people who want to connect or reconnect with their languages and songs, organisations working on native title claims, researchers (linguists and ethnomusicologists, in particular), those working on language revitalisation projects, and documentary film makers. Some requestors are descendants or relatives of the people Luise recorded, wanting information related to their families. The Institute also holds photographs taken by Luise and provides copies of audio recordings and photographs to them.

Luise's collections are important as documentation for native title claims. When the *Native Title Act (1993)* was enacted, the Institute created a Native Title Unit that included a Research and Access Officer position, once held by one of the authors, Grace Koch. The focus of this position is to advise anyone with an interest in pursuing a Native Title claim about relevant holdings within the Institute collections, which include a wealth of material on landowning and linguistic groups, early histories of settlement and displacement, site information, and genealogical data, all of which could serve as evidence in land claims. Luise's field reports and recordings, with data spanning 50 years or more, are especially relevant to many areas of south-eastern Australia. Native Title Representative Bodies, who prepare the cases for the claims, request copies of items from her collections frequently, especially material from New South Wales, Queensland, and South Australia. Luise has a great interest in all of the people requesting copies of items from her collections, graciously authorising copies and providing extra information or clarifying some of the circumstances surrounding her fieldwork.

Marisa Harris says:

The thing that I found amazing is how much effort Luise put into the clients, how much she really wanted to gain deep understanding about who the requestor was, wanting to make connections with them, with the people she knew. She also wanted to make sure that she respected the wishes of people she worked with.

Luise's continuing involvement with her collections and her care and concern for the people who want access to them have also impressed Rita Metzenrath, who has worked at the Institute Library Reference Desk and is currently Senior Collections Officer in the Library. Rita notes that this depth of interest in the people who ask for copies of her material distinguishes Luise from most of the other people who have lodged collections with the Institute. She may be the only person living who knew elderly relatives of the people requesting information, thus becoming an 'honorary ancestor' who delights in sharing her memories about the people who worked with her (see also Nathan, this volume). Rita recalls that Luise's memory is so acute that she could remember the numbers of the actual field tape recordings where specific speakers or singers appear. If Luise knew the Institute Library clients, she might issue an invitation to them to visit or even to stay a few days at her home in order to pass on her recollections about their elders (Metzenrath, pers. comm. 2015-03-30).

## 7. Musicology research

When Luise began recording the languages of Victoria, the first thing Aboriginal people wanted her to record was songs. This request made Luise realise quickly how important songs are to the people with whom she worked. Later, while serving as the linguist for the *Group Project on Antikirinya Women* 1966-68 (Buckley et al. 1966-68; see also Barwick 1991; Ellis, Barwick & Morais 1990) that was focussed on women's songs and rituals in South Australia, her respect for the importance of songs was strengthened.

Luise formed a valuable research partnership and friendship with Grace Koch, a musicologist and audio archivist who had been research assistant to the noted ethnomusicologist, Alice Moyle, during the mid-to late 1970s at the Institute. Luise had known Harold Koch through the ANU Linguistics Department, and had learned of Grace's work making 'sketch notations', or partial representations of melodies, for Indigenous songs as she listened to field tapes and documented their contents.

The important Arabana-Wangkangurru elder, Mick McLean *Irinjili*, had persuaded Luise to record, for posterity, song series from the Lake Eyre region (see Gara, this volume, for a list). Luise invited Grace to notate and analyse this large body of work. So far, over 200 songs have been notated, and they have collaborated on four articles (Hercus & Koch 1991, 1995, 1996, and 1997) giving the historical background of a number of songs, as well as CD-ROMs (Irinjili 2007, 2010; Irinjili et al. 2014) that present commentaries on previous historical and linguistic research, the song texts with English translations, and recordings of the songs with notations for several 'history' song series, including Emu, *Wurru* the Crane, the Seven Sisters, and the Fire song series. If digital copies are not available for her tapes, Luise creates compilations of songs, edited and digitised from her field tapes for Grace to notate.

## 8. Social scene

Luise's *salon* is well-known among Canberra-based linguists. In the 1990s, the linguists Harold Koch, Jane Simpson, and David Nash began meeting Luise for lunch once a week in order to discuss their Australian Research Council project on Central Australian Aboriginal languages. The successor to these meetings, currently held at *The Fellows Bar* at ANU University House each Wednesday, has expanded to include other researchers, friends, and contacts who work with Luise. The lunch provides the few linguists at the Institute, who are otherwise isolated from the academic community, with opportunities to interact with other researchers. It also provides Luise, who has a great interest in current developments at the Institute, with opportunities to catch up with Institute news.

Before the venue changed to *The Fellows Bar*, the lunch was held at *Chats Café* at the ANU Art School, where a booking was required. Luise made the weekly bookings, and would call and check with regulars, including the authors, whether or not they intended to be there. As always, she would be very humble and apologetic, starting her phone call with: 'I am sorry for bothering you.' These lunches may include up to 12-15 people, and serve as a real meeting point for scholars.

Another well-known event organised by Luise that reflects her generosity and many ties of friendship is an annual party she organises around her birthday in January. She invites her fellow linguists, friends (including people from the Institute), and neighbours to her home near Gundaroo. Her graciousness can be seen if one has to decline her invitation for one reason or another. She would look so sorry but would wish you well for whatever you are doing instead.

## 9. Conclusion

Luise Hercus is one of the most important linguists to have connections with the Institute. As one of its first grantees in linguistics, and, later, as a member of its Linguistics Advisory Committee, she has shaped the directions of research into Aboriginal languages that are in danger of being lost. Her voluminous collections of recordings lodged at the Institute are treasured, especially by the families of the people she recorded. Her seminal studies in Australian languages, especially those of Victoria and South Australia, rank highly in academic circles. Luise maintains an ongoing relationship with the Institute through consultations about her collections as well as continually documenting them. Institute staff who know her or have worked with her collections have found their lives enriched by her knowledge, warmth, and tenacity. They, along with the authors, are honoured to have a chance to pay her tribute through this chapter.

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