Before Hercus: pioneer linguists in the south-east

Barry Blake

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Barry J. Blake
La Trobe University

1. Introduction

When Luise Hercus began travelling around Victoria in the 1960s in search of speakers of Aboriginal languages, she was following in the footsteps of a number of nineteenth-century investigators. Most of the early recordists were missionaries or administrators with some training for the ministry. They were men, as one might expect, but some women played a part, including, Isabella Dawson, Mary Green, Frances Sievwright and Christina Smith, herself a lay missionary. In this paper I look at the records of these amateur scholars in the south-east (the Murray and south of the Murray), highlighting the problems that arise in interpreting their notation, in understanding their glosses, and in extracting grammar from their sentences, and I assess the value of the records, particularly with respect to language reclamation.[1]

2. The early investigators

Permanent white settlement in the south-east of the mainland of Australia began in 1834 with the Hentys at Portland. Melbourne was founded in 1835, Adelaide in 1836. Almost half of the material we have on Indigenous languages was collected in the 1840s immediately after the frontier had passed on. Writers in this period were mostly motivated by their desire to Christianise Aboriginal people, and to some extent to facilitate communication between the races. Rather less was collected in the 1850s and 1860s, then in the period from 1878 to 1899 seven books appeared. The next two decades were dominated by one man, R.H.

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[1] Thanks to the following for data and helpful suggestions: Gavan Breen, Ian Clark, Mary-Anne Gale, Thomas Lindner, Stephen Morey, Fritz Schweiger, and Clara Stockigt, plus two anonymous reviewers.

Mathews, who published nearly three dozen papers on the languages of the south-east. Many of the later writers were keen to compare records, mainly lexical, of a variety of Australian languages and to compare these records with similar records from other parts of the world with a view to finding relationships.

George Augustus Robinson took up the position of Chief Protector of Aborigines in the Port Phillip District in 1839. During his travels around Victoria and neighbouring parts of New South Wales Robinson compiled around forty word lists of various lengths from sixteen languages. He has left no record of grammar and his glosses reflect only the meaning of the root and take no account of suffixes. In his records of *Waverong* (Woiwurrung), a language with which he had extended contact, he gives *u.muc* as 'to throw spear', but this is in fact the imperative yumak. Similarly he gives *dare.rer.dun* as 'stand up', but this is taridhan 'I stood up'.[2]

Two of his Assistant Protectors, William Thomas and Edward Stone Parker, also left records. Parker collected short vocabularies of eastern and western varieties of Djadjawurrung plus a partial translation of Psalm 139, which provides some grammatical information. One of Parker's sons, Joseph, compiled a glossary of 750 words of eastern Djadjawurrung.[3]

Thomas left extensive glossaries for 'The Melbourne Language', Boonwurrung and the closely related Woiwurrung. He elicited the equivalents of a few thousand words, including place names, and over a hundred short sentences such as *Winda bobup*? 'Where are the children?' and *Windowie koim*? 'Where are the kangaroos?' He also translated over fifty longer sentences and a number of Christian texts into the Melbourne language. Unfortunately, these reveal an ignorance of the grammatical suffixes and enclitics and are of little use in extracting grammatical information (see also below).[4]

Charles Sievwright, the Assistant Protector appointed to the Geelong or Western District, by his own admission found the task of learning local tongues beyond him.[5] In a nice irony we find that Sievwright's eldest daughter, Frances (Fanny), recorded words and sentences in Wathawurrung, and her notation is the best we have for the language.[6]

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[2] Examples are drawn from Clark (2000).

[3] E.S. Parker's translation is in Parker 1854 (reproduced in Morrison 1967, 2002). Joseph Parker's vocabulary is in Smyth (1878, part II: 154-165).

[4] Thomas (1838-1868). Revised versions of some of these texts are in Victoria Legislative Council Votes & Proceedings, 1858-59, pp. 98-100, and Smyth (1878: 130-133). Further transcriptions can be found in Byrt (2004) and Stephens (2014).

[5] Robinson to Sievwright 18 June 1839, 28 November 1840, Sievwright to Robinson 1 December 1840 in Lakic and Wrench (1994: 132-133, 138).

[6] Frances Sievewright would have been eighteen or nineteen when she recorded language material in Wathawurrung. She later married Arthur Davenport and some of her work was published under the name 'Mrs Davenport' in the original edition of T.F. Bride *Letters from Victorian pioneers*, pp. 307-311. In a journal entry for 31st May 1841 Robinson reports a Mr Tully as saying, 'Mrs and Miss Sievewright (Frances) drank like the Devil' (Clark 1998: 239). All in all the Sievwrights contrast with the religious authors of most of our sources. Captain Sievwright had to leave Malta because of gambling debts and in Australia he was accused of adultery.

Bunce (1851) contained a vocabulary of around 1,000 words in Woiwurrung and a score of sentences. Bunce was a botanist cum horticulturist, but like the missionaries and would-be missionaries he published his work 'as an assistant to parties engaged in civilizing, Christianizing, and otherwise ameliorating, the condition of this most unfortunate race of human beings' (Bunce 1851: iii-iv).

Francis Tuckfield and his wife ran a mission on the Barwon River from 1838 until 1848. Unfortunately, a fire destroyed part of the mission in 1840 and a lot of Tuckfield's language material was lost. However, his notebook survived and it contains about two hundred short sentences, some translation of Scripture, and a vocabulary of over two hundred words in Wathawurrung.[7]

In South Australia, Heinrich August Edouard Meyer of the Evangelical-Lutheran Mission Society of Dresden and his wife, Friederike, established a mission school in 1840 at Encounter Bay just to the west of the Murray mouth. Meyer set about learning the local Ramindjeri dialect of Ngarrindjeri and published a competent description of the language in 1843 consisting of 40 pages of grammar and 60 pages of vocabulary.

Matthew Moorhouse, a medical practitioner, arrived in South Australia from England in 1839 to assume the post of Protector, a position he held until 1856.[8] Like Meyer he lived in Ngarrindjeri territory and took a keen interest in the local languages. He learned Ngayawang, the language upstream from Ngarrindjeri and at Governor George Grey's request, he published Moorhouse (1846), a substantial description comprising over 20 pages of grammar and nearly 40 pages of vocabulary.

Recording of language continued through the eighteen fifties, sixties and seventies though not at the same rate. John Green, a Presbyterian lay preacher, who was appointed in 1860 as 'Inspector to The Central Board to Watch over the Interests of the Aborigines', compiled a vocabulary of nearly a thousand words of the language of the 'Yarra Tribe' plus a few pages of sentences and some grammatical information. He and his wife, Mary, also collected plant names.

In 1859 Moravian missionaries Friedrich August Hagenauer and Friedrich Wilhelm Spieseke established the Ebenezer mission on the Wimmera River near Lake Hindmarsh.[9] These two and one of their successors, Adolphus Hartmann, left records of Wergaya in the form of vocabulary lists and grammatical information, mostly verb paradigms. Hartmann also recorded a story.

Thomas, whose records of the Melbourne language were mentioned above, was appointed in 1849 as Guardian of the Aborigines in the counties of Bourke, Mornington and Evelyn, and he acted as interpreter in court cases involving speakers of Woiwurrung or closely related dialects. Around 1860 Thomas drew up a list of over 600 words and over 100 sentences and elicited the equivalents from native speakers in six tongues (Thomas 1862). This is a valuable source with a consistent system of notation, complete with diacritics, and although there is no grammatical

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[7] Tuckfield's Wathawurrung material, along with a small amount of *Dantgurt* (a dialect of the Warrnambool language) and *Kolijon* (Colac) data, was published nearly sixty years later by J. J. Cary.

[8] Jenkin (1979) passim, Serle (1949).

[9] Massola (1970: 31ff).

analysis, there is enough consistency between the vernaculars and the translation to allow the identification of a large number of grammatical suffixes and enclitics.

Here is a sample. Interviewees have been asked to translate, 'Have you any brothers?' though only one reply actually translates the question.[10]

Wathawurrung	*Wee-a-wahr-din?* **Wiya wat-in?**	Where brother-your?
Woiwurrung	*Windya-wah-winna?* **Windja waw-ina?**	Where brother-your?
Djadjawurrung	*Windya-wah-win?* **Windja waw-in?**	Where brother-your?
Gippsland	*Wōōrnman-da-dahndŭng?* **Wunmanda dhandhang?**	Where brother?
Bunganditj	*Nirring-ngŭn-mēē-ŏ?* **Nhiri-ngun miyu?**	Brother-your query?
Wuluwurrung	*Napahn-wardang-ngōō?* **Nhapan warta-ngu?**	How many brother-your?

In 1866-7 an Intercolonial Exposition was held in Melbourne. The President of the Exhibition Commission was Judge Redmond Barry. Barry was keen to see Aboriginal culture on display and he solicited vocabularies from twelve mainland sources, one Tasmanian source and one New Caledonian. The list of over 600 words Barry sent out was unsatisfactory in that it contained numerous words that were not suitable for elicitation out of context, such as prepositions like *of* and *on*, pronouns like *himself* and abstract nouns such as *discontent*, *forgiveness* and *sorrow*. Not surprisingly, all the lists were returned with a large number of blanks. The published version, Barry (1867), was further marred by errors of transcription, presumably from manuscript to type-setting. In the letter accompanying the list Barry writes about 'compiling the results, and evolving from them the general laws which regulate the construction and grammar of the different languages or dialects spoken in Australasia.' Barry intended that the list be used in other countries 'to ascertain with probable certainty the relations and affinities which the forms of speech of the aborigines may have with those used in other parts of the globe' (Barry 1867: xiii).

The second volume of Smyth (1878) contains over 400 pages of information on languages of the south-east including some words lists from Tasmania. Smyth served as honorary secretary and later as chairman of the Central Board for the Protection of Aborigines from 1860 until 1876. During the eighteen sixties and seventies he had cause to correspond with those dealing directly with Aboriginal people and he used the opportunities his position gave him to elicit ethnographic material and language data from his correspondents. Smyth's compendium is the principal source for the four decades preceding its publication.

Interestingly, 1878 marked the beginning of a burst of important works on the languages of the south-east. George Taplin, who had been a missionary among the Ngarrindjeri for twenty years, died in 1879 with two books in press: Taplin (1879)

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[10] The original transcription is presented in italics and my reconstitution and analysis is given in boldface using a practical orthography.

contains a list of 71 words in 43 Australian tongues, 14 of them from the south-east; Taplin (1880) was the final version of his Ngarrindjeri grammar, consisting of 24 pages of grammar and 16 pages of vocabulary.

Christina Smith, a lay missionary, published Smith (1880) on *Booandik* (currently Boandik for the people and Bunganditj for the language), spoken in south-east South Australia and far south-western Victoria. This is an ethnographic account of the people liberally sprinkled with Bunganditj words. More importantly it contains an appendix on the language (a vocabulary of over 600 words and some grammatical information) from her son Duncan Stewart, who had learned Bunganditj as a boy and had been acting as interpreter from the age of fourteen. His vocabulary contains some sentences illustrating valuable grammatical data, e.g. he gives *krit-an-in-ine* 'you are scratching me', which is krit-an-in-ayn 'scratch-PAST-you-me'.

James Dawson lived on a property near Macarthur with his family in the 1850s and 1860s. During that time he and his daughter Isabella learned the local tongues. In 1870 Isabella sent a sample of the Warrnambool language to the *Australasian*. This led to a request for more information, and James and Isabella set about gathering such data, but they soon found they had so much that it demanded publishing in book form (Critchett 1981). Dawson (1881) is a result of their joint work; in the preface James Dawson writes of his daughter's 'intimate acquaintance from infancy with the aboriginal inhabitants of that part of the colony, and with their dialects.' The book contains vocabularies of over 2,000 words for *Chaap wuurung* (Tjapwurrung), the southernmost dialect of Western Kulin, and for *Kuurn Kopan noot* (Kurnkupanut) and *Peek whuurung* (Pikwurrung), two dialects of the Warrnambool language.

In 1886-1887 Edward Micklethwaite Curr (1820-1889) published his monumental four volume vocabulary collection. In 1862 Curr had taken up the position of Inspector of Stock, later Chief Inspector of Stock. On his travels in this capacity he collected information from Aboriginal groups in Victoria. He used a list of 116 English words and elicited the equivalents in two dozen tongues. To assemble a more complete set of data he sent out questionnaires to 'Gentlemen scattered through the Australian Colonies and Tasmania' in those parts of Australia that had been occupied by whites up to that time, mostly eastern Australia. The questionnaires included a list of questions about local culture and an expanded list of 124 words. Curr managed to obtain around 300 word lists, 55 of which relate to the south-east.

In 1845 Peter Beveridge and his brothers established a property on the Murray ten miles down from Swan Hill and ran it till Peter retired to French Island in 1868 (Hone 1969). During his decades on the Murray Peter Beveridge learned Wati-Wati and Letji-Letji and he published language data on these groups in several papers and a book, Beveridge (1889), which contains a substantial vocabulary of over 500 words of Wati-Wati, some sentences and a translation of the Lord's Prayer.

After the great outpouring of publication in the period 1878-1889 there was practically only one source of published data over the next two decades, namely R.H. Mathews. The only other substantial publications were Mathew (1899) and Stone (1911). Robert Hamilton Mathews (1841-1918) was born in Narellan, New South Wales, and practised as a surveyor from 1870 till around 1890. He then

retired and spent the rest of his life collecting data on Aboriginal culture and languages, mainly from New South Wales and Victoria. He published prolifically, and during his retirement produced nearly 200 papers in learned journals in Australia and overseas, 34 presenting data on the grammar and/or vocabulary from 55 different tongues mostly from the south-east (Koch 2008:211). While most earlier recordists collected just words, or words and a few sample sentences, Mathews collected information on grammar. He used a kind of questionnaire or template to elicit language data, based on Latin and including the categories of case, number, gender for nouns, and tense and person-number inflection for verbs. For many languages of the south-east he is the major and best source.

2. Interpreting the sources

2.1 Notation

Almost all our nineteenth-century notation uses English orthography with its irregular relationship between sound and spelling. Letter *u*, for instance, represents one sound in *but*, another in *put* and another again in *use*. William Thomas writes the Boonwurrung/Woiwurrung word for 'more', 'again' as *uung*, which in modern transcription is [yuwang], the first *u* being as in *usual* and the second as in *but*. The silent *r* in words like *car* and *card* presents another problem. This means that when we find *r* in one of these positions in our sources, it can be hard to tell if the *r* indicates an r-sound or just contributes to the representation of the vowel. The Bunganditj word for 'blood' is recorded as *kamar*, *kammar* and *gah-mur* and we are left uncertain whether there was a final rhotic or not. Fortunately, we have *kamaroong* 'his or her blood' [kamar-ung], which makes it clear there is a rhotic at the end of this word, though we cannot determine whether it was a flap/trill or glide.

2.2 Glosses

For some referents such as 'sun' and 'moon' we have numerous tokens, while for others sometimes only one (cf. Thieberger, this volume). These *hapax legomena* are problematic. We find a number of errors in glosses in cases where we can check, so uncorroborated glosses need to be treated with caution.

   Glosses can prove unsatisfactory for a variety of reasons. Some sources such as Green, and more particularly Bunce, tend to give unnecessarily complex words as glosses, sometimes words that are misleading as to part-of-speech. Green, for instance gives, 'abhor' and 'fume' for *booang* 'rotten', 'dastard' for *bamboon* 'afraid' and 'reek' for *boort* 'smoke'. Bunce gives 52 glosses including 'gasconade' and 'despotic' for *dullallally* 'proud', 'nugatory' for *n'uther noogee* 'not good' and 'perambulation' for *yannathan* 'I went'.

   Euphemisms can be a further problem. Meyer uses Latin 'concubitio vel concubare' for *tyin-in* 'copulation or copulate' and 'concubavisti cum matre tua'

for *tyin-emb-inde ninkin*, an insulting expression which in modern vernacular would be 'mother-fucker'. Both Green and Bunce use 'costive' for constipated. The most obscure euphemisms are Robinson's *leen.ne* for 'penis' and *devery* for 'vagina', two words he learned in Tasmania (Plomley 1976: 127-129).

Some glosses are obscure to the modern reader because of changes in English. Words like *gammon* ('feign, pretend, kidding'), *plant* ('hide'), *switch* ('a small stick') and *directly* ('soon') are no longer in use in mainstream English. A number of names for fauna have changed. Most people would know that 'laughing jackass' is kookaburra, but 'bat mouse' and 'flying cat' for glider would be obscure, as would 'water mole' (platypus) and 'mutton fish' (abalone). The word 'instep' is a problem. In Aboriginal languages the anatomical correspondence between the back of the hand and the metatarsal (top) area of the foot is captured by terms that are literally 'back of the hand' and 'back of the foot' respectively, but this is obscure to the modern reader since instep nowadays is generally taken to refer to the underside of the foot.

A number of words from the languages of the Sydney area were in circulation among whites in the nineteenth century. These seem to have been part of the ad hoc jargon or established pidgin used in communication between Aborigines and whites, but they were also to some extent in general circulation in the Port Phillip district. The list includes *baal* 'no', *budgeree* 'good' and *warrigul*, originally 'wild dingo', but later 'wild', 'uncivilised', 'untamed'. These are probably obsolete, but others such as *bingy* 'stomach', *bogey* 'to bathe' or 'bath' and *waddy* 'a stick' were still in circulation in Victoria well into the twentieth century and remain in current use among some Aboriginal people. In some instances these words appear in lists of local Aboriginal words. For instance, one source from north-east Victoria, which consists of Dhudhuroa and Pallanganmiddang words, contains *budjeri* 'good', *brolga* 'brolga', *gibba* 'stone', *gunya* 'hut', *baal* 'no' and *womarua* 'woomera'. These are easily identifiable as Sydney-area words and they appear alongside genuine local words. However, words adopted from whites are not always so easy to spot. There is a widespread root [kul**] 'angry', so the appearance of *coolah* in one source for Boonwurrung would appear genuine, but it comes up in the phrase *murry-coolah* 'very angry' and both *murry* and *coolah* are Sydney words attested in the pidgin.

3. Grammar

Some of those who recorded language in the south-east had some familiarity with Latin. This provided a useful panoply of grammatical terms, but probably led them to look for categories that were absent, and to overlook others that were present. The Moravians, Hagenauer, Hartmann and Spieseke, tended to take Latin grammar as a template for universal grammar and look for the equivalents of the grammatical categories and features of Latin.[11] Hagenauer presents tables for present, past, perfect, pluperfect, future and future perfect 'tenses', though the perfect differs from the past not by inflection but by having an accompanying word *mala*, and the pluperfect

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[11] As one reviewer notes, the template may have originated with Brough Smyth.

differs by having a word *malana*. These words may be related to *mala* 'there' (Hercus 1986: 87) and they invite comparison with *malanga* 'long ago'. Hartmann and Spieseke also use *mala*. The following example is from Spieseke (1878:57). Note how the person/number marking appears on the verb in the past, but on *mala* in the perfect. *Kinya* is a demonstrative 'this one'.

woh-räg-in-ngan	I spoke
woh-räg-in-ngar	you spoke
woh-räg-in kinya	he, she spoke
malan woh-räg-in	I have spoken
malar woh-räg-in	you have spoken
mala kinya woh-räg-in	he, she has spoken

The person/number markers are clearly enclitics. In the languages of the south-east these seem to have gravitated to second position in the clause (Wackernagel's position). Nineteenth century writers would have been familiar with the term 'enclitic' from classical grammars, but in Greek and Latin the person/number marking is inflectional.

When it came to describing case, the early recordists had to hand the labels for Latin cases: nominative, vocative, accusative, genitive, dative and ablative.[12] Faced with the unfamiliar ergative case, Meyer used 'ablative' in Ngarrindjeri, presumably influenced by the use of the ablative to mark the agent of the passive in Latin. Taplin (1872), writing about the same language, also used 'ablative', but used 'causative' with pronouns. This use of the ablative left him in need of a label for the case expressing 'from' so he invented the label 'exative'. He also invented the term 'ergative' for a local case glossed as 'with'. This appears to have been based on Latin *ergā* 'towards, in respect of, in relation to'. He abandoned it in his later work, but not before it had been taken up by others including Hagenauer and Bulmer.[13] This would not have been a problem, but the term was then reinterpreted by Schmidt (1902: 88) as the case for the agent of a transitive verb, presumably by associating it with the Greek root *erg* as in *ergon* 'work' (Manaster-Ramer 1994; Lindner 2014). Taplin (1880) used 'causative' for the agent of a transitive verb with nouns as well as pronouns and used 'ablative' for the case expressing 'from'.

Those who wrote about grammar often reported a class of prepositions. From what we know of better recorded languages in Australia, we expect a class of words expressing local notions without a fixed position. Words seem to be called prepositions if they are the translational equivalents of English prepositions, and also fostered by the practice of attaching enclitic object pronouns to the words in question. For instance, in Djadjawurrung 'behind you' is [warmi-ngin], literally 'back-you'. John

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[12] Latin also had a vestigial locative, which does not appear in the paradigms of Latin grammars.

[13] The esoteric terms 'exative' and 'ergative' used for a peripheral case were probably part of a questionnaire used by Smyth, hence their adoption by Hagenauer and Bulmer (Clara Stockigt p.c.).

Bulmer, for instance, who ran a mission at Lake Tyers in East Gippsland, reported 31 prepositions in reply to a questionnaire from Smyth (Smyth 1878: 26, 28). In reporting cases he presents an invariable noun preceded by prepositions, thus the genitive is *wa kani* 'of a man' and the dative *mo kani* 'to a man'. These prepositions are in addition to the 31 listed and their origin is obscure. The dative *mo* appears to be the suffix on a preceding word marking the possessor: [wangin-ma kanai-a], literally, boomerang-his man-of, i.e. the man's boomerang (Fesl 1985: 115).

Some of the shortcomings do not interfere too much with the material available to the modern linguist and to Aboriginal people reclaiming their language. However, what is disappointing is the lack of understanding of grammar on the part of early investigators and consequently their failure to report it. I conclude with one extended example, which illustrates that grammatical incompetence on the part of an investigator disadvantaged contemporary Aboriginal people, quite apart from leaving their descendants a defective legacy.

On 10th March 1863 the Prince of Wales married Princess Alexandra of Denmark, an event celebrated throughout the Empire. In May of that year some Aboriginal people from the newly formed Coranderrk station (near Healesville) decided to come to Melbourne to attend the Queen's Birthday Levee to bring a message of congratulations for Queen Victoria and presents for the queen and her newly-married son. When the Board for the Protection of Aborigines heard of this, Smyth, the secretary, got Thomas to draft a loyal address and to translate it into Woiwurrung. The English text is given below and the Woiwurrung translation, complete with its liberal use of capitals. I have used hyphens to separate suffixes and enclitics from stems and include glosses where possible.[14] The alternation between 'I' and 'we' may be connected with the fact that the address was delivered by one man, Wonga, a Wurundjeri elder.[15]

> Blacks of the tribes of Wawoorong, Boonoorong and Tarawaragal send this to the Great Mother Queen Victoria.
>
> We and other blackfellows send very many thanks to the Great Mother Queen for many things.
>
> Blackfellows now throw away all war-spears. No more fighting but live like white men almost.
>
> Blackfellows hear that your first son has married. Very good that! Blackfellows send all good to him, and to you, his great mother, Victoria.
>
> Blackfellows come from Miam and Willum to bring this paper to the Great Governor. He will tell you more.
>
> All blackfellows round about agree to this.
>
> This is all.

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[14] Barwick (1998: 66), Clark (2014: 35, 44-45), *Illustrated Melbourne Post* 25 June 1863, *Argus* 27th May 1963, p5.

[15] Abbreviated grammatical glosses are IMPerative and GENitive. The word for 'man' is *kulinh(dh)* or *kulin(dj)*, the extra syllable [-i] in *kulinge* (line 1) and *kulingee* (line 12) is added to nouns when followed by another word in the phrase.

Kulinge   *Bagarook*   *Tranbulk*   *Wawoorong*   *bar*   *Boonoorong*
man   woman   country   Wawoorong   and   Boonoorong

bar   *Tara-waragal*   *Wondu-nan*   *Parpar-ick*   *Bullito*   *Victoria.*
and   Tarawaragal   send-I   mother-my   big   Victoria

Murrumbeek   *bar*   *ungo*   *kulin*   *Wongon-non*   *Wondu-nun*
I   and   other   Kulin   give-I   send-I

Koongu   *marraineek*   *bondup,*   *Parpar-ick*   *bullito,*
much   thanks (?)   good   mother-my   big

tuduk   *woodulul*   *yarite.*
for   many   thing

Umonnarra,   *Umonnarra*   *koyon*   *bar*   *Wyring,*   *bar*
throw.away   throw.away   spear   and   club (?)   and

Netbo   *tandowring*   *hommergeek*   *narlumb-y.*
now   like   white.man   live-IMP

Murrumarner   *Nargon*   *Mum*   *ganbony,*   *Murrumb-ianner*
we   hear   son   first   you-GEN

koondee   *Brenbun,*   *Koongee*   *Marnameek.*
take   wife   very   good

uge-koolin   *wondu-nun*   *umarko*   *bondup*
all-Kulin   send-I   all   good

Karge-iek   *bar*   *Papi-niek*   *Bullito*   *Victoria.*
he-to   and   mother-my   big   Victoria

Kulingee   *bagarook*   *nerlingo*   *Willam*   *bar*   *Miam*
man   woman   come   humpy   and   hut

Wantag-ee   *paper*   *wa*   *Governor*   *koongee*   *marnameek*
bring-IMP   paper   to   governor   very   good

munniger   *tomb-eannerlin*   *unngo.*   *Piaboring*   *tandowring*   *uge.*
he   tell-?   more   round   as   all

Nogeemee.
enough

By the time Thomas wrote this he had had over twenty years' experience of Woiwurrung and similar dialects, yet he still exhibits errors that characterise his early religious translations, such as using imperative verbs in indicative contexts: narlumby in line 7 and wantagee in line 13. He ignores the case system and makes use of what he seems to think of as prepositions. 'To' is translated by a preposition wa in line 14, even though Thomas gives wa as a suffix elsewhere. 'From' is left untranslated in line 13 and 'to' is left untranslated in line 4, but appears to be translated by -iek in line 7, which is 'my' in other contexts and regularly in murrumbiek [maramb-ayik], the free form for 'my', literally 'my body'.

It is alarming to read that Thomas acted as an interpreter in court cases. It would be unsatisfactory enough to omit inflection and use a kind of telegraphese jargon, but to use incorrect inflections and enclitics would have made his attempts at interpretation confusing and of doubtful help for defendants. One wonders what Kulin people must have thought of him.

4. Conclusion

Until a few decades ago, nineteenth century records of Aboriginal languages were valued as contributions to historical-comparative linguistics, but more recently they have come to be seen as valuable records for Aboriginal people trying to reclaim their languages. For some language groups, such as the Pallanganmiddang and Dhudhuroa of north-eastern Victoria, only a few hundred words have been recorded, but even these are now seen as precious markers of identity. For a dozen or so language groups there are larger vocabularies of 1,000 words or more and a few pages of grammar. Here I have emphasised the shortcomings of the old sources, but some of these problems can be overcome. The poor English-based spelling can be interpreted since Australian languages are remarkably similar in phonology and we have tape recordings and accurate phonetic notation from Luise Hercus for three languages: Wemba-Wemba, Wergaya and Mathi-Mathi. In the context of language reclamation, vocabularies need to be expanded. With the larger corpora we usually find useful word-building suffixes such as the 'having' suffix and the agent-noun-forming suffix. Of course gaps in vocabulary can be filled by borrowing, but currently there are protocols against borrowing from other vernaculars without permission of the owners of the language. Some gaps can be filled by adopting words with an areal distribution. Words can also be calqued, since borrowing a pattern does not violate feelings of ownership. The same applies to syntactic patterns, which can freely be borrowed from other vernaculars or from English.

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