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## Why historians need linguists (and linguists need historians)

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# Why historians need linguists (and linguists need historians)

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## Introduction

In the 1970s and 1980s, Luise Hercus pioneered interdisciplinary approaches to Aboriginal history. Bringing her linguistic expertise to history, she presented Aboriginal histories in Aboriginal languages to an academic readership. *Biḏa-ru* ‘*gana mayi aḷali baldi-lugu gadna-ru* ‘they killed her, they ripped her open with a bullet’. Speaking in Wangkangurru, Ben Murray retold stories of the massacres of his forebears in the Simpson Desert in the pages of *Aboriginal History* (Hercus 1977: 56, 58, 61). Hercus conducted and recorded interviews in Wangkangurru and Arabana to hear Aboriginal perspectives on the *wadjabala maḏimaḏi* (‘white fellows with hair-string’), that is, the ‘Afghans’ and their travels across South Australia (Hercus 1981, 1985: 27, 39). Whereas others had tended to ignore or downplay the actual words Aboriginal people spoke and the language of their stories, she insisted on representing Aboriginal stories first in Aboriginal languages, and then in English (Austin, Hercus & Jones 1988: 116-117; Hercus & Sutton 1986:4). Of course, these histories come to us mediated by Hercus’ transcription, translation and interpretation – we are not with Ben Murray as he speaks – but Hercus brought her readers closer to Aboriginal people’s experience and memories through representing Aboriginal languages.

As Hercus knows, language matters in Aboriginal storytelling. In my own research into the language history of the Christian missions on Groote Eylandt, I learned that words are important. In Aboriginal storytelling (as in many ritual and storytelling traditions), language is part of the story itself. The words come from the ancestors who form places, people and ceremony. As Gula Lalara explained in his language, Anindilyakwa, in 1993:

*Ena ayaka eningarakburakba-kiya ngakwurra-langwa nara-wiya a-kirukwularrina aduwaba ngakwurra-langa ena ayakwa ... Ena Amurnduwurrariya amamurukwa-murra akina nangekburakjungwunuma ngakwurra-langwi-yada, angalyi-yada akwa warnumalyi-yada ngarraki-dirrburakinama.*

These words of ours are from the old days before we were born ...  
The words come from our ceremonies to teach us about places and relationships.

Given the connection between Aboriginal languages and ‘the old days’, historians need to consider language if we are to better understand Aboriginal pasts. The study of Aboriginal history in particular lends itself to interdisciplinarity more so than other histories. This is because, although the academy is divided into its various branches of knowledge, Aboriginal cultures are more likely to see connections between ways of knowing that academics presume are separate. Aboriginal people told me of their songs, stories and places showing how an appreciation of these was necessary to understand their pasts. Like a number of scholars of Aboriginal history before me, I have found interdisciplinarity to be a fruitful way of approaching Aboriginal pasts, and the integration of linguistics with history particularly so (Shellam 2009; Neale & Thomas 2011; Bracknell 2014).

This chapter makes the case for greater cooperation between linguists and historians and celebrates recent developments in Aboriginal history which bring linguistic data to history. Indigenous language sources are bringing rich new insights to historical research. The particular importance of language to Aboriginal mythology, placenames and song cultures means that, to better understand Aboriginal history and perspectives, historians must increasingly draw on partnerships with linguists and consider language in their work. This is a matter not only of good scholarship, but also of exposing the privileged status of English as the language of colonisation in Australia. Likewise, linguists can illuminate the interpretation and practice of oral history for historians, especially with participants who do not speak English as a first language. By considering histories of linguistic and philological research and translation, historians can shed new light on the dynamics of colonisation. So linguists also need historians who can deepen their understanding of the contexts, relationships and colonising assumptions which informed practitioners in the past and how speakers of Indigenous languages responded to colonial linguistic projects.

## 2. The study of language and histories of colonisation

Historians around the world are increasingly considering how the study of Indigenous languages has shaped processes of colonisation, and asking how linguistics has affected Indigenous peoples. Colonial linguistic projects reflect multifaceted interactions on colonial frontiers, where Indigenous people taught colonists their languages, colonists’ sacred texts were translated, and Indigenous evangelists propagated and reinterpreted these texts. But scholarly perceptions of colonial linguistics are polarised. The degree

to which colonisers' encounters with Indigenous languages have entrenched or challenged processes of colonisation is contested (Gilmour 2006: 196). Hilary Carey (Wafer & Carey 2011: 120) identified two main approaches to colonial linguistic texts: those which value these texts for their early insights into Indigenous languages and cultures (especially the work of Otto Zwartjes and Even Hovdhaugen; Hovdhaugen 1996; Zwartjes & Hovdhaugen 2004), and those which see the texts as hopelessly compromised by the colonisers' agendas.

The latter approach was led by anthropologists. In their study of colonial South Africa, Comaroff & Comaroff (1991: 218, 252) depicted the 'long conversation' between missionaries and the Southern Tswana and argued that missionaries pursued a project of the 'colonisation of consciousness' of the Southern Tswana. For them, colonisation entailed a struggle to control meaning, the way people represent themselves and their understandings of the world. The Comaroffs called the process of developing an orthography for African languages and translating the Bible 'colonisation of language' because missionary linguists used Indigenous people's own language to penetrate the culture and to re-make it from inside. Anthropologists and linguists subsequently found evidence that Indigenous languages themselves have changed upon contact with the colonisers in ways which reinforced colonisers' power (Tomlinson 2006; Green 2012). As Errington (2001: 21) explained, early missionary linguists' work is of interest to some scholars, less for its empirical value as for its role in dominating Indigenous peoples through language.

Historians are finding ways to reconcile these polarised perceptions of the usefulness of colonial linguists by examining how Indigenous people used colonial linguistic projects for themselves. Like the Comaroffs, Peterson (1997: 257, 1999: 32) saw missionary linguists' dictionaries – the 'reduction' of Indigenous languages to writing – as instruments of colonisation. Nonetheless, he found evidence of Indigenous voices and concerns embedded in these texts. As Gilmour (2006: 3) found, colonial linguists were dependent on dialogue with native speakers who taught, advised and interpreted. Similarly, historians Elizabeth Elbourne, Isabel Hofmeyr, Helen Gardner and Tony Ballantyne have argued that although colonisers intended their texts and translations as tools of colonisation, Indigenous people reinterpreted the colonisers' messages and integrated them into their own culture and traditions (Elbourne 2012: 79; Hofmeyr 1991: 643; Ballantyne 2005: 28; Ballantyne 2002: 11). This reinterpretation was multidirectional (both coloniser and colonised reinterpreted the other), and unpredictable. Turning to Indigenous-language texts, Paterson (2006: 12) revealed that Māori language newspapers were simultaneously a platform for Māori voices and a means of assimilation into the colonising culture. These approaches find hybridity in colonial linguistic texts, emphasise the dependence of colonial linguists on their Indigenous 'assistants' and explore the ways Indigenous people have created their own meanings from colonisers' texts. Historians are finding that linguistics has presented opportunities to colonised people, even as the study of language has been an instrument for colonisation.

While the role of language and colonial linguistics in unstitching or reasserting Indigenous cultures and identities has been considered by historians overseas, this has been less so in Australia. As Carey (2009: 117) notes, thus far, missionary

linguistics has been ‘almost entirely neglected’ as an historical source on cultural exchanges in Australia. Perhaps this reflects the hegemony of English in Australia, so dominant that we forget attacks on Aboriginal languages ever occurred (even as these continue to occur). It also reflects the smaller scale of colonial and missionary linguistics in Australia. I have argued that the paucity of missionary linguistic work in Australia compared to overseas stems, in part, from conflicting missionary visions for Aboriginal people regarding their place within the Australian nation (Rademaker 2015). Yet what little work has been done on the history of colonial and missionary linguistics in Australia has produced useful insights.

My own research found that missionaries’ dependence on interpreters and co-translators meant that their power was always limited, their message mediated, and their teachings translated. Though missionary linguists may have hoped for a ‘colonisation of consciousness’ and a window into Aboriginal minds through linguistic knowledge, Aboriginal people were able to manage missionary linguists’ work in a way which suited their own interests (Rademaker 2014b). Furthermore, ideas and practices were transmitted or translated across cultures in ways that were not always expected or harmonious. Anthropologist Austin-Broos (2009: 21) similarly concluded that Western Arrernte people ‘reimagined the Christian message’ in translation. The Arrernte word, *pepe* (derived from ‘paper’ but referring to the Bible, liturgy, church buildings and all things Lutheran) she found, held meanings similar in range to *tywerrenge* ‘law’. Christian concepts became embedded in Western Arrernte language, to the extent that the missionary experience produced a ‘Western Arrernte Christian vernacular’ (Austin-Broos 2009: 264; 2010: 23, 27; 2003: 315). Linguistics in Australia has a complex past; it was both complicit in processes of colonisation while also an opportunity for Aboriginal people to challenge colonisers’ designs for them.

### 3. Unstitching the privileged status of English

The growing awareness of the complex relationships between language and colonisation in the past raises questions about our use of language in the present. Colonisation in Australia involved the systematic destruction of Aboriginal languages and denigration of Aboriginal ways of speaking. But this destruction is not complete. For many Australians for whom English is not a first language, the exclusive use of one language is neither normal nor desirable. Aboriginal people of Arnhem Land societies are highly multilingual and enriched by their knowledge of languages. Judy Lalara, an Anindilyakwa woman, explained to me in 2012 how she switches languages according to her relationships:

I speak Nunggubuyu from the Numbulwar area. I speak Anindilyakwa, I speak Nunggubuyu language. I used to talk in Kriol, but when I’m with white, when I’m with you or with [an anthropologist] I speak English. Because when I’m at home I speak both language, Nunggubuyu and Anindilyakwa. Because my grandmother’s son’s a Nunggubuyu speaker.

Language, for Aboriginal people, not only reflects family relationships, but also indicates how one is related to the land (Williams 1986: 62; Berndt & Berndt 1994: 6; Evans 2010: 6). Each language is connected to a particular country because it is the language of the mythic creative beings who brought the landscape into formation. Language is embedded in the earth. From an Aboriginal perspective, land and language are inseparable; they were formed together. By recognising the language of the country, therefore, one also recognises the speakers of the language as owning and belonging to the land. Given the primacy of language to Aboriginal systems of belonging and land-ownership, the struggle for land upon colonisation also involves the struggle for the survival of Aboriginal languages (Evans 2010: 8-9). The politics of language and land rights intersect. That the demise of so many Australian languages and the survival of others has received little attention from historians could indicate a deterministic and colonising presumption that Australia is and was always going to be an English speaking land (Rademaker 2014a: 237-8; Rhook 2014b: 27).

Linguist Nicholas Evans pointed out that a major contributor to the rapid loss of Indigenous languages today is the belief that ‘everything wise and important can be, and has been, said in English’ (Evans 2010: xxii). Likewise Wierzbicka (2013: 5) criticised the implicit message in the presumption that English-speakers are ‘the most advanced state of human society’. As historian Marijke Du Toit has observed, historians, too have been held captive by an unexamined assumption that English – the language of the colonial metropolis or globalisation – is the appropriate vehicle for our narratives (Du Toit 2000: 89). This is our ‘blind spot’ (Khatun 2012: 14).

Writing in English – even mine here – risks perpetuating the very colonising ideologies we hope to uncover by the assumption that English must be the language of public discourse, of authority and of the intellect. As Atkinson (2013: 5) points out, historians ‘participate in the market of language’. We participate in a national culture of English literature which can silence those who do not have access. History is shared through common language, and by using written English I communicate with a particular language community – you English readers – as opposed to any other language community (Ostler 2005: 7). Historian Samia Khatun explains that by historians’ failure to acknowledge the relationship between English and colonisation, historians reproduce the very Anglo-centrism of the pasts they study and they risk presenting English-speakers as the exclusive agents and shapers of history. Where English remains the language of prestige and privilege, our writing can perpetuate the very colonising assumptions which saw many Aboriginal languages silenced (Khatun 2012: 14; Ballantyne 2002: 11). Part of the ongoing process of reconciliation in Australia might mean using Aboriginal languages as well as acknowledging and incorporating the stories of Australia’s languages in our histories (Rademaker 2014a: 222).

As historians, operating within an Anglo-centric academy, it is easy to feel imprisoned by English. Historian Nadia Rhook (2014b: 26) wrote of feeling ‘confronted by the formidable power of the English language’ as she sought to give voice to the diversity of non-English speakers’ experiences in Australia’s past, especially as she wrote in standard academic English herself. Not many of us

are polyglots, fewer still have the tools to engage with Aboriginal languages. My own ambitions to learn more Anindilyakwa were frustrated by practical obstacles: lack of language resources, lack of time, lack of accommodation in remote communities and the busyness of my Aboriginal teachers. My experience has been a common one for English speakers working with Aboriginal communities in remote areas for decades.

South African historian Marijke Du Toit made some practical suggestions as to how we might begin to challenge the hegemony of English by the writing of histories. Her suggestions included calls for ‘cooperative research’ with those ‘differently placed with regards to “academic tongue”’ (Du Toit 2000: 98; Khatun 2012: 2). In addition to this, I would suggest that collaboration with linguists is necessary if this cooperation is to be productive. She also argues that historians explore the possibilities of writing hybridity by, e.g., juxtaposing English and Indigenous languages in ways that subverts the dominant status of English. She surprises us with translation, inverting norms of translating from one language into English, and translates the other way. She also suggests ‘consciously forging a more hybrid academic language’, by incorporating concepts from Indigenous linguistic spaces (Du Toit 2000: 120).

There are also historical sources. Non-English language texts remain an underexplored treasure for Australian historians. There is a wealth of underused source material, particularly relating to Aboriginal missions, which use Aboriginal languages. My own work, for example, uses missionary linguists’ and anthropologists’ transcripts, translations written by partnerships of missionaries and Aboriginal people – mostly evangelical songs, prayers and stories – and Aboriginal compositions in Aboriginal languages to reveal the way Aboriginal people were agents in their mission communities (Rademaker 2014b). Shellam (2009), likewise, used Noongar wordlists to shed light on Aboriginal motivations and understandings in the colonial context. Khatun (2012: 2) and Loy-Wilson (2012: 41) argue that historians, especially those writing transnational histories, must embrace non-English language sources if they are to see beyond the conceptual spaces of colony and nation. Khatun (2012: 14) laments the current situation where stories, songs, poetry, books, letters and place names in languages other than English remain ‘systematically disregarded by contemporary historians of Australia’. In her recent thesis, she re-examined Hercus’ Arabana stories published in *Aboriginal History* to understand the gendered encounters between Muslims and Aboriginal people (Khatun 2012: 44). She also turned to Bengali language books and poetry to understand people and places beyond settler geographies (Khatun 2012: 284). Drawing on Chinese language business archives, Loy-Wilson argues that historians need to acknowledge the agency of non-Western people in Australian history and, to hear non-Western voices more clearly, we must now turn to non-English language sources (Loy-Wilson 2012: 41, 315; 2014: 410). Nadia Rhook’s recent thesis is likewise a deliberate challenge to what she calls ‘defeatist and determinist constructions of the spread of English as the global language.’ That is, the assumption that English was always going to be the language of a global elite; a narrative which, she argues, Australian colonial officials worked hard to entrench (Rhook 2014b: 27).

Her work seeks to ‘de-naturalise the privileged status of English as the settler colonial language of entitlement’ (Rhook 2014a, 2014b: 4). By seeking out non-English language sources, Rhook exposes colonial legislators’ efforts to define Australia as inevitably an English-speaking nation for an English-speaking race (Rhook 2014b: 12).

#### 4. The opportunities from collaboration

If historians are to work at unpicking the hegemony of English and the privileging of English speakers’ pasts, we need linguists on a practical level, to understand the nuances of translations and the subtleties of non-English language sources. We need linguists to understand the nuances of Indigenous uses of the colonisers’ language and how Indigenous speakers have made these ways of speaking their own. As a historian conducting oral history with speakers of Aboriginal languages, including Aboriginal English, I depended on the insights of linguists who explained the need to be sensitive to different forms of English. Walsh (1997), for example, cautions that differing cultural conceptions of how conversation operates can lead to confusion or frustration on the part of non-indigenous researchers. During my fieldwork on Groote Eylandt, I used photos rather than questions to stimulate conversation about the past, since some Aboriginal people can be made to feel uncomfortable by direct questions. Eades (2013: 100-101) has pointed out that non-indigenous researchers can be unaware of ways Aboriginal people might use English. Aboriginal people themselves warned me of the possibility of linguistic misunderstanding in my interviewing. Eades showed how an apparently simple ‘yes’ is fraught in cross-cultural situations. This ‘gratuitous concurrence’ is a way of easing social situations, expressing one’s social amenability and avoiding potential conflict. It is a common feature of Aboriginal Englishes (Eades 2014: 493; 2013: 101, 176). The ‘gratuitous concurrence’, according to Elkin (1946: 177), was a strategy of appeasement to white authorities in response to the inequalities of colonisation. Yet when I spoke with Anindilyakwa woman Nancy Lalara, she considered her way of speaking a better mode of interaction, not merely a colonised response. As she and her non-indigenous husband Grant Burgoyne explained to me in 2012, gratuitous concurrence can promote honesty and thus facilitate positive relationships:

[Grant Burgoyne]: If you go into a meeting and Aboriginal people say ‘yes’ to you, go with the assumption that it’s a gratuitous ‘yes’ and it’s a pleasant surprise if it’s not.

[Nancy Lalara]: We don’t worry if they never turned up. Later they might come along and say, ‘sorry I didn’t come, I was too lazy.’

[Interviewer]: And that’s okay.

[Grant Burgoyne]: And with a white person you’d make up some bloody complete fabrication or just keep avoiding them.

[Nancy Lalara]: Or leave the island for a while!

Nancy was proud of her Aboriginal way of using English, and I needed to learn to listen to her ways of speaking and take linguistic considerations into account



in interpreting the oral histories. This meant appreciating the cultural tendency to say 'yes' and to tell me what is imagined I might want to hear. I found it important to keep Anindilyakwa perceptions of me (including my age, ethnicity, gender, religion and language), in mind and to consider how my interviewees might give answers that would facilitate a positive relationship between us, according to Anindilyakwa cultural preferences. Sensitivity to linguistic and cultural matters is, therefore, essential in the practice and interpretation of oral history with non-English speakers.

Historians also are using linguistic data from the past, in partnership with linguists, to understand relationships between colonisers and Indigenous people. Keary (2009) investigated the relationship between missionary linguist Lancelot Threlkeld and his Aboriginal co-translator, Biraban. Through detailed scrutiny of Threlkeld's translation of words such as 'God' and 'holy' she revealed how, despite his intention to introduce a universal religion, his translations became entangled in local Awabakal spirituality and meanings, associated with Awabakal placenames and traditions. Carey, in partnership with Jim Wafer of the University of Newcastle's Endangered Languages Research group, conducted a detailed study of Threlkeld's work by comparing it with related or neighbouring languages. They revealed Threlkeld's description of Awabakal to be unexpectedly sophisticated and reliable (Wafer & Carey 2011: 112, 124). This linguistic analysis indicated that the relationship between Threlkeld and Biraban; their collaboration was surprisingly productive. Linguists, too, are contributing to the history of Australian linguistics. McGregor's (2008a) edited collection on the history of Australian linguistics, in particular, includes numerous historical contributions written by linguists. McGregor (2008b) has also contributed to the history of missionary linguistics (both Protestant and Catholic) in the Kimberley. His research on Daisy Bates' documentation of Kimberley languages demonstrates that her documentation was, perhaps unexpectedly, reliable. It was certainly not invented (McGregor 2012: 99). Similarly, Koch (2011) studied George Augustus Robinson's work documenting Aboriginal languages. Yes, his spelling was idiosyncratic, but Koch also demonstrated that Robinson had a deep interest in language, evidenced by the quality of Robinson's work (Koch 2011: 159-160). These linguistic analyses reveal complex, personal relationships between colonisers and Indigenous people that were both intimate and productive, challenging less nuanced accounts of colonisation.

Linguists are also benefiting from collaboration with historians. McGregor referred to the 'usefulness of historical research to language documentation and description,' especially for languages which are no longer spoken (McGregor 2011: 110). He has also drawn on Carey's historical work, using her history of missionary linguistics to frame his analysis (McGregor 2008b: 131). Koch has also drawn on historians' work with colonial records in order to trace the Aboriginal origins of placenames, acknowledging that 'it is primarily historians who have the tools to investigate such primary sources'. Koch argues strongly for collaboration between historians and linguists in the interpretation of sources containing Aboriginal placenames (Koch 2009: 121, 164). Luise Hercus' long-term involvement with *Aboriginal History* and her and Jane Simpson's collaboration with historians in Simpson & Hercus (1998) are further example of fruitful partnerships. Historians can provide linguists with a

greater awareness of the context in which linguistic data from the past was collected. What did colonial linguists believe they were doing? And why? In regards to language revival projects, historians can show how languages were recorded and why languages changed by placing these stories in the context of broader histories of how Aboriginal people adapted, negotiated and resisted in the face of colonisation.

## 5. Conclusion: Aboriginal languages and Aboriginal histories

I finish here with the words of an Aboriginal woman, also passed on to the historian by a linguist who transcribed and translated. Derama explained in Anindilyakwa the need to listen closely to her actual words. Don't let these words fly away to some other place, put them inside your mind and ears, she says.

*Ängirraja ayaugwa äna nän̄guwawa niñi-yän̄binama  
Neñgän̄girraja ayaugwa agina yine-maginama nuñgulañwa manja  
mada?  
Wawiyäbajina  
Biya nara alerrajema añärriba añarrema  
Emba yaugujin ñäwa wawiyäbjina  
Arrawa agambilya nuñgulañwa manja mañma augwa nada.*

Listen to this word I am speaking to you  
Do you understand that word I am telling you in your ear?  
Put it in  
But don't let it go right through and fly away  
But put it inside there still  
Let it stay inside your mind and ears.<sup>1</sup>

I have argued that historians increasingly need to embrace interdisciplinary approaches to writing Aboriginal history, and in particular need to work with linguists to engage with Aboriginal languages if we are to better represent Aboriginal pasts and challenge colonising assumptions of the present. This means listening to the words spoken in the past and hearing Aboriginal stories in their own language. A number of historians are indeed taking up the challenge, and we are seeing a rediscovery of some of Hercus' earlier work in Aboriginal languages as a valuable historical source (Khatun 2012). Hercus saw that bringing Aboriginal languages into our history-writing could bring readers closer to what she called 'the real spirit of the authors' intentions' than an English translation. But to her, writing in Aboriginal languages was more than good historical practice. As English threatened, and still threatens, to 'take over', telling Aboriginal stories this way was 'a symbolic act', designed to confront English-speakers with the complexity, nuance and diversity of Aboriginal languages (Hercus & Sutton 1986: 5).

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Stokes, Discourse analysis of text *Mother's advice to Daughter* told by Derama and relating to AIATSIS Archive Tape 3370a-no. 13. 1971, AIATSIS MS 3518, Box 5, Folder 39.

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