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Tracing the new: processes of translation and transculturation in Wirangu

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1. Introduction

The philosopher G.W.F. Hegel wrote that ‘the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk’. For Hegel, philosophy arrives late on the scene: the world comes to be apprehended only after the fact, in retrospect. Events and historical processes outrun our ability to think them. In many ways, so-called salvage linguistic and anthropological studies in the south-east of Australia have been similarly backward-looking and caught behind the game. Many have struggled, perhaps none more so than Luise Hercus, to document fragmenting and fading languages and traditions in the face of the massive social disruption and change. This paper is an attempt to think the present by asking what can be done with the results of such studies in the context of Indigenous projects of cultural rejuvenation. The key question is: how does something new emerge? I describe how a group of Wirangu people translate a mythical narrative back into their language by drawing on archival materials and using Luise’s salvage grammar of Wirangu as a key. A third, crucial, ingredient is the everyday lived experience of the translators.

2. Taking flight

I first met Luise Hercus in Canberra in 1999, the year in which she published her salvage grammar of Wirangu (Hercus 1999). Luise told me about two elderly sisters in a small Far West Coast (South Australia) town who spoke Wirangu but knew Kokatha as well: ‘someone really needs to work with them’. In 2004, when the chance arose for me to do this, Luise asked me to present a gift to the sisters on her behalf: ‘something small – some mugs or a tablecloth – you choose’. Luise

had stayed in touch, sending cards each Christmas, and there was a real fondness and respect shared between the women (see also Nathan, this volume). When the elder and more taciturn of the sisters opened her gift she couldn't hide her displeasure: 'awww not MORE mugs!' When our language session began, the daughter-in-law turned to me and asked: 'what these ladies want to know is what you are going to do that Luise hasn't already done'. 'Well,' I began, 'I won't give you any more mugs'.

The women's question was perspicacious. What happens after the salvage linguistic project of painstakingly (re)constructing a lexicon and a grammar is done? One view is that these written products amount merely to 'an incomplete, mummy-like preservation' (Humboldt [1836] 1999: 49), at best of limited historical interest or at worst of merely academic linguistic interest. The latter, on another view, is the realm of 'zombie linguistics' (Perley 2012), in which the disembodied voices of the dead live on in an aimlessly static fashion. In less colourful language, it is here that the owl of Minerva takes its evening flight. It is true that there is a strong tendency among documentary salvage and revival linguists to focus on the product, in Humboldt's sense, rather than the process. A core practice is to privilege archival texts that are gathered and translated into a new consolidated form. A well-known example is the Kaurna reclamation, which was built upon a painstaking examination of historical sources in the absence of living speakers (Amery 2000, this volume). Innovative, non-academic approaches to community language projects that utilise digital technologies, such as *Miromaa* (www.miromaa.com.au), also privilege the written historical form. Clearly there is a crucial role for written products to play in heritage language work. What tends to get lost however is the experience of individual actors, who in the bare life condition of many modern Aboriginal communities, struggle to keep their inheritance alive. Samuel Beckett's famous distillation of the crisis of modern experience in *The Unnamable* is apposite here: 'you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on'.

The women's concern with how to go on was not a simple question of what happens next. The two interactions sketched above – the presentation of a gift and the negotiation of heritage language research – share an underlying principle that forms a part of the women's everyday system of values. Put simply, the women want to be given something they do not already have and to play a role in the creation of something that has not already been done. In this paper I show that this principle, a desire for novelty, and the broader set of everyday values of which it is a part, also informs the process of translating a mythical narrative, *Bilarl* (Sooty Bell Magpie, Bates ms), from English back into Wirangu. The values that govern the translation process in this exercise differ from the set that underpins the standard practices of salvage linguistics. A key point of contrast is formed on the one hand by the repetition with difference that characterises Aboriginal storytelling and the grounding of this in everyday lived experience, and on the other hand by a focus on the static product (text or textual fragments) by the linguist. Importantly, as I will show, the everyday values that inform the translation process are themselves influenced by a contemporary cultural orientation towards the north and west, and the 'traditional' culture still practised in these regions.

3. Theoretical excursus: structure and reshaping

According to Humboldt (1999: 49), language comes to life on the breath but dies on the page; it is *energeia* not *ergon*, an activity not a product. It is possible, however, to question the sharpness of Humboldt's division of these two dimensions of language and their hierarchical relation. By focusing on the interaction between *energeia* and *ergon* rather than on their division, a more dynamic dialectical process comes into view. We find a process that gives rise to a product P_n , which may in turn recursively influence or stimulate the process and hence give rise to a new product P_{n+1} , and so on. In this analysis the process or *energeia* is an internal semiotic space that includes individual knowledge and an understanding of shared everyday practices and conventions. These processes are basic to linguistic systems – from birdsong that shows some recursivity but very limited alteration (Berwick et al. 2011) to the dynamics of linguistic development through processes of structural expansion and accelerated restructuring in pidgin and creole situations (Mühlhäusler 1997).

Humboldt viewed language as historically situated. While it is inherited, it also undergoes a continual reshaping by living speakers. Reshaping is a dynamic everyday translation process (Hanks & Severi 2014), which also extends to the introduction of recovered archival materials into the present. Jakobson (1960) long ago noted the stimulatory influence of historical writings on creative linguistic practices of the present. It is here that Humboldt's priority of process over product may be destabilised to make way for the new.

Luise's salvage grammar of Wirangu (Hercus 1999) provides an excellent example of this process in operation. The lexicon and grammar are built upon fragmentary written products of the colonial encounter and the fading memories of a small group of elderly speakers. The colonial documents provided the catalyst for language remembering among the Wirangu participants; they stimulated and revived a part of a multilingual *energeia* that had lain dormant as a potential within them. This was not the end of the process, however. A significant product of my work with the Wirangu women was the creation of *Wardugu Wirn* (Miller 2005; discussed in Monaghan 2012). This is a bilingual book that documents a culturally central everyday activity, hunting for wombats, and it could not have been prepared without Hercus (1999) as the reference point for language construction. In many ways, in constructing a salvage grammar, Luise also built a shelter for the language. For Wirangu, the salvage work is only the beginning – *ergon* can stimulate *energeia* with the added ingredient of individual and group experience. I turn now to show how the translation of *Bilarl* continues this process.

4. *Bilarl* (Sooty bell magpie)

The translation of *Bilarl*, a mythical narrative recorded by Daisy Bates¹ in about 1912 (Bates ms), took place as a classroom activity in 2011. At the time I was lecturing to five adult students undertaking a Certificate III course focusing on Wirangu at the Ceduna Technical and Further Education (TAFE) College. Four of the five students were Aboriginal. A senior cultural advisor, pseudonymously named Auntie Rosie, participated in most of the sessions. My intention was for the students to undergo an experience with the language and to produce a short text that could be used for developing language learning materials. It was not our aim to perform a fine-grained exegesis of the myth because we could not hope to reconstruct a 1912 emic point of view. Equally, the translation presented below is not the best and only translation possible. After all, a translation is never complete (Derrida 2007). Rather than to attempt these things, our focus was on the Wirangu language and the processes involved in producing Wirangu texts rather than on the final product.

4.1 The archival form

The *Bilarl* (Sooty Bell Magpie) text was encountered in a folio of Daisy Bates' manuscript collection entitled: 'Eucla Myths'. This folio contains 40 listed contents, many of which concern birds. Some of these contents relate to Mirning, a neighbouring language unrelated to Wirangu, and some to Wirangu. The copy used for this paper, which is held in the Barr Smith Library, varies slightly from the copy held in the National Library of Australia. The latter includes a handwritten annotation to the title: 'Beelarl (Magpie)' that reads 'pied bell magpie'. The published Wirangu wordlist in Bates (1918) has: 'bi:larl pied bell magpie'. Charles Sullivan, a medical doctor based at Denial Bay in the 1920s (near present-day Ceduna), and a keen ornithologist, has 'Brown Currawong peelool' in a wordlist he provided to Norman Tindale (Tindale AA338/1/29). The precise referent of *bilarl* was not known among the group.

The interaction of a number of languages in contact gives the text its formal character, which is inherently polyglossic. These include varieties of English (pidgin/Aboriginal English and Standard English), Wirangu, and other Aboriginal languages (such as Kokatha). This polyglossic character presents a major set of difficulties in interpreting the text, although it does reveal the region's history and illustrates the centrality of translation in everyday life on the Far West Coast, both historically and today.

¹ See also Thieberger (this volume).

4.2 Interlinear gloss

Here is the text of *Bilarl* as recorded by Bates:

Old woman making a *wurli* for the rain sings. (Old woman – *bilarl*) She asks which way water comes in through the *wurli*. Inside young *wiana*, a *dhalgara* (young woman married) can't speak and points out with *warda* and shows where water comes. By and by old woman sees *nunga* bringing *mālu*. They give the old woman *kuldu* and *junda* (ribs and thighs) and their own *murduru* who can't speak eats plenty. Old woman is their *mingari*. One day the *nunga mukka* comes back. *Mingari* leaves young woman (*thalbu*) and tracks them up. She was sharpening her *wana* and by and by she saw *Mamu* (Devil) catching them. She killed *Mamu* with her *wana* and took *nunga* back alive. *Nunga* young *bilal* [sic].

The following is the class translation:²

- (1) *Gabarli* *bilarl-ngu* *garn.gu* *yadu-ma-rn*
 old woman magpie-ERG wurley good-make-PRES

gabi-gu *gulga-rn.*
 rain-PURP sing-PRES
 'Old woman *Bilarl* making a wurley sings for the rain.'
- (2) 'Gabi *indha-birna*' *yamurdu* *bala* *wangga-rn.*
 rain where-from like.this 3SG speak-PRES
 'She asks "which way is the rain coming from?"'
- (3) *Wiyana* *dhalgara* *garn.gu*
 woman young.woman wurley

gulybi-nga *nyina-dha* *nhaga-rn.*
 inside-LOC sit-SER look-PRES
 'The young married woman sits inside the wurley and looks.'
- Warda-ngu* *maRa* *dhaga-rn* *bala*, *gabi* *indha-birna* *urldi-rn*
 stick-INS hand cut-PRES 3SG rain where-from come-PRES
 'She points with a stick to show where rain is coming from.'
- (4) *Banyini* *gabarli-ngu* *nhangga* *nharn*
 by-and-by old woman-ERG man see-PRES

marlu-garliya *galda-rn.*
 kangaroo-HAVING bring-PRES
 'Later the old woman sees the man bringing kangaroo.'

² Abbreviations used in the glossing are: 1 = first person, 3 = third person, ALL = allative, DU = dual, ERG = ergative, GEN = genitive, INS = instrumental, LOC = locative, PRES = present, PURP = purposive, SER = serial, SG = singular, SWITCH = switch reference. The Wirangu orthography used here follows the practical orthography in Hercus (1999). Note that *dhalgara* is young married woman under a speech taboo.

- (5) *Baladhaga baRu bandyi gandyi yungga-rn. Baladhaga-gu murduru*
 3DU meat rib thigh give-PRES 3DU-GEN wife
 ‘They give (her) ribs and thighs. Their own wife
guda wanga-rn, nyina-dha baRu marna-ardu ngalgu-rn.
 cannot talk-PRES sit-SER meat marna-EMPH eat-PRES
 who can’t speak sits and eats plenty.’
- (6) *Gabarli bilarl baladhaga-gu minggari*
 old.woman magpie 3DU-GEN mother-in-law
 ‘Old woman magpie is their mother-in-law.’
- (7) *Banyini nhangga maga yagulu urldi-rn*
 by-and-by man not back again come-PRES
 ‘Later the man does not come back.’
- (8) *minggari-ngu dhalgara (dharlbu) windy-dha*
 mother-in-law-ERG young.woman (pinkie) leave-SER
dyina wana-rn.gu.
 track follow-PRES-PURP
 ‘Mother-in-law leaves the young married woman (under a speech taboo)
 and follows the tracks.’
- (9) *Bala wana iri-ma-rn. Banyini bala mamu*
 she stick sharp-make-PRES By-and-by 3SG devil
nharn bala maRa-nda.
 see 3SG catch-SWITCH
 ‘She sharpens her stick. Later she sees the devil catching (them).’
- (10) *Gabarli bilarl-ngu mamu gurnda-rn wana-ngu.*
 old.woman magpie-ERG devil kill-PRES stick-INS
Bala-dinga ngura-gu gadi-rn.
 3sg-with camp-ALL take-PRES
 ‘Old woman magpie kills the devil with her stick and took (him?) back to
 camp.’
- (11) *Nhangga bilarl bala.*
 man magpie 3SG
 ‘The man is (a) magpie.’

4.3 Which way the water comes (in)

I turn now to discuss the *Bilarl* translation process in more detail, sketching the classroom setting and then addressing two main themes:

- the difference in orientation towards the text among the group, with a focus on how the group made sense of the first section of *Bilarl*; and
- discussion of the broader cultural orientation among the Wirangu translators which points to processes of transculturation as informing everyday translation activities and decisions.

4.3.1 Classroom setting

This was a group translation exercise in which seven participants brought different perspectives to the task. Despite these differences, norms of negotiation and consensus characterised the work of firstly making sense of the text and then performing a responsible translation. Approximately five hours of class time were devoted to translating 11 sentences. Much of this time was spent on exegesis rather than sentence construction, highlighting the importance of group dynamics and a sense of shared agency in the translation process. As course instructor and ‘language expert’, I was central to this process and cannot pretend to remove myself from it. Class leadership was assumed by one of the students for part of the exercise.

The five students were predominantly aged between 35 and 50 years and Auntie Rosie, the cultural advisor, was aged over 60 years. Auntie Rosie, a senior Wirangu woman, brought to the task a high level of authority and cultural knowledge. One of the students was a well-travelled man in his 30s who is multilingual in Aboriginal languages. Both of these participants play an important role in transcultural transmission on the Far West Coast and will be discussed in this connection in 4.3.4 below. Two of the women were sisters, daughters of one of the main recognised Wirangu speakers. The other two class members were a Wirangu woman and her non-Aboriginal daughter-in-law. The latter, in her early 20s, was raising small children and wanted to speak Wirangu to them. This non-Aboriginal woman did not contribute much, speaking mainly in response to direct questions. No one in the class knew the *Bilarl* story. Even though traditional stories are no longer transmitted in Wirangu or English, the students were familiar with aspects of the oral narrative genre.

A number of questions confronted the group, including:

- what is the nature of the action taking place;
- how many people/beings are involved;
- what are their relationships to each other; and
- what is the story trying to teach?

In the space available, I focus on the processes involved in making sense of the first section of the story. I make one final point before proceeding: the resources for the translation consisted primarily of Hercus (1999), Miller et al. (2010) and the collective knowledge of those present in the classroom.

4.3.2 Group translation

The translation of *Bilarl* into Wirangu took place in three stages. We began with a word-for-word translation into Wirangu. This was felt necessary as many of the Wirangu translation equivalents had to be looked up because the most competent speakers, Aunty Rosie and Ernie, were absent from the class. This version was subsequently scrapped. A second translation followed in which the narrative was effectively reshaped in a way that reflected the everyday experience of the group. According to Aunty Rosie, the second translation, the one described in this paper, ‘feels Wirangu’ and ‘it gives ownership of the story to Wirangu’. The third phase was to refine the translation with the main recognised speaker who did not participate in the group phase. This led to a few small stylistic changes.

When Aunty Rosie joined in the second phase, she asked the group: ‘so what are you trying to do here – translate word-for-word or are you trying to make sense of a story? That’s what you have to decide’. This was a major catalyst for the group as it served to focus their shared intention and subsequent activity. Aunty Rosie pointed out that within Aboriginal culture, stories are not seen as fixed or finished, such as the *Wanampi* (Snake) story at Pedinga, a site near Yalata (SA). There are a few slight variations to the story: ‘I always explain that with like a Chinese whisper. You go round telling a story and by the time it gets back to where it started from it’s slightly different’.

The dynamics of the group played a central role in the sense-making phase of the translation process. Group dynamics provide a window onto the everyday and the norms and values that underpin the sense-making process, such as negotiation, shared agency, consensus, and authority. Apart from myself, the group had a kindred structure consisting of close consanguineal and affinal relatives. This meant that they brought to the classroom a pre-established set of relationships, including asymmetrical authority relations, which clashed at times with the norm of classroom consensus. Nevertheless, the epithet ‘are we all agreed?’ is heard frequently on the recordings of the classroom interaction. Among the seven voices, four are frequently heard and three less so. While a particular shape of authority emerged within these contingencies, the notion of responsibility and obligation also played a normative role. According to Aunty Rosie ‘that’s a lesson that’s being taught to someone’. Ernie explained that there is an obligation to be true to the underlying knowledge within the story: to capture the right sense. This extends also to the phrasing, which needs to sound Wirangu. He suggested listening to old tape recordings to hear how the old people spoke. Here Ernie explains responsibility:

What’s happening in the moment is insignificant. To the singing, to making the shelter, to looking after her in-law, to the man providing food, to the old lady saving him. What’s important in the whole story is this – and relationships. The way you tell the story is that it’ll tell you about looking after people, it tells you about all the basic stuff you know. Don’t talk, don’t say anything, don’t speak ... always do the right thing and then you move out of the story and there’s something deeper going on.

The notion of being held accountable if a story or a translation transgresses the boundaries of what is considered to be acceptable speech in a particular social situation also plays a background role.

4.3.3 Defamiliarisation

My interest in thinking through the translation process more fully was sparked by a disorienting moment in the classroom when it struck me that the Wirangu translators did not value the written text as highly as I did. This effect, known as defamiliarisation in literary studies, is one in which the ordinary takes on a strange hue. Rather than developing an interpretation of the text that privileged the written document before us, the Wirangu translators appeared intent on a radical reshaping of the story that ventured, as it seemed to me, significantly from the original. It was as if the words merely pointed in a general direction to where meaning might reside – somewhere in a semiotic landscape, the contours of which I could not clearly see. For these translators meaning was not inherent in the words but emerged through a reimagining that drew upon the coordinates of lived experience. In other words, this was not a case of felicitous translation but of interpretation in the broadest sense. In the moment this was worrying because it works against the notion of fidelity in the transfer of meaning. Translation, as Steiner (1975) reminds us, starts with an act of trust, which presumably must rely upon a shared concept of truth. This was particularly apparent with the first section of the story. At the beginning of the text by Bates we read: ‘She asks which way water comes in through the wurli’. The agreed translation was: ‘*Gabi indhabirna*’, *yamurdu bala wanggarn* – She asks ‘which way is the rain coming from?’ The key moment in the discussion was the following exchange:

- PM One just needs to be aware of the fact that what you begin with, you’re changing the meaning. If you want to do that that’s up to you – but I wouldn’t do it myself.
- Ernie You’re saying how’s the water coming in.
WE WOULDN’T SAY THAT. We would look in the direction and see which way it would come, and that’s what they’re trying to get at ... Which way is the water going to come through, she wants to know, she’s looking around, she’s looking on the ground, she’s looking outside, she’s taking in ...
- Evelyn Looking at clouds, checking out the environment around her, to see the clouds coming. Coz that’s the first instinct when you say rain’s coming, you look up inni? See the clouds coming.
- Ernie And *dhalgara* is sitting there taking note, she’s looking and she’s watching the old lady.
- PM Well you do as you do and what you agree on – you write what you want.
- Evelyn No it’s good coz we’re getting where you’re coming from – you don’t understand where we’re coming from.

I did understand, however, that coming up with a meaningful translation into Wirangu involves drawing on cultural knowledge that is not represented in the Bates text.

The Wirangu translators are literate, some highly so, but they accord a different value to writing and written artefacts than I do. In fact, the most highly literate seemed also the most willing to depart from standard literary practices, such as valuing the intentions of the author and the form of their expression. Did this amount to a devaluing of the individual writer/creator, who was after all non-Aboriginal and not well regarded? It is generally believed that Daisy Bates resolutely planted herself on the track between the Ooldea railway siding and the Aboriginal camp to protect the Aboriginal women from the temptations and depredations of civilisation (i.e., fettlers and rail travellers). Aunty Rosie told the class that Bates was motivated more by an interest in keeping the Aboriginal men to herself. Obviously, the written form and its representation of the intentions of the author as creator are not seen as authoritative. Authority, it might be said, resides within the group on the occasion of the telling, or in this case the translation. This might be conceived of as residual orality (Ong [1982] 2002), even among the highly literate Wirangu translators, in which there is a freedom of approach to the archival text that derives from the priority afforded to the everyday world of lived experience. Strict adherence to the written text is not only antithetical but foreign. For the Wirangu translators, it seemed, without this attention to the everyday, one can become, as per the static vision of Thomas Hobbes (1962: 24), ‘entangled in words, as a bird in lime twigs, the more he struggles the more belimed’.

4.3.4 Orientation

When Old Woman *Bilarl* builds her wurley, she begins by setting the framework and then orienting the opening away from the prevailing weather. In building a translation, the translators orient the text to the west – with a mind not to the prevailing weather but to the prevailing direction of transcultural influences within the Aboriginal culture of the Far West Coast. This orientation informs the everyday norms and practices, including an awareness of their own structural positioning between the ‘traditional’ Aboriginal and the White Ceduna worlds.

Aunty Rosie walks in two worlds. She engages in ‘traditional’ cultural practices with kin at Yalata (to the west) but also in a number of heritage and land management contexts involving interactions with the state and global corporations. Across the broader Far West Coast society native title has created a new context for engagement between Aboriginal townspeople, who claim historical connection to the land, and the ‘traditional’ people who are said to hold the law and culture for the Far West Coast region. This relationship between the historical and the traditional was formalised in the presentation of a joint society argument to the Federal Court, which

determined native title in their favour. This formal structure both enables and stimulates cultural flows throughout the region.

Ernie is not immersed in law but is nevertheless, like Auntie Rosie, oriented towards the west. For a classroom excursion we took a road trip to Streaky Bay, about an hour south-east of Ceduna. Ernie and I went to see Murphy's Haystacks, a cluster of pink granitic inselbergs about 40km further on. Evelyn and the three other women were not comfortable with the idea of accompanying us because 'it could be a men's place' (Auntie Rosie did not come on this trip). I walked around the site for an hour or so, led by Ernie, getting a feel for the place and imagining the past. Ernie told me that 'there was talk' about extending the law from the west to this site, to reincorporate it into the practice of law and custom. This would be a good thing for the status of Wirangu. On the drive back to Ceduna Ernie directed me to pull over. Using the car as a shelter Ernie built a small fire of leaves and twigs. The women chuckled – 'you doing a smoking?' one of them asked. The women smoked cigarettes on the other side of the car as Ernie and I sat huddled by the smouldering fire. During the *Bilarl* translation, he had said: 'I agree with Auntie Rosie. I think we're trying to fill in the gaps of our own cultural knowledge [like?] we're filling in the gaps of the story'.

5. Conclusion

For a language like Wirangu, that still has some speakers and a larger group of hearers, it still makes sense to talk of building a shelter for the language. This work was achieved by Luise Hercus and her Wirangu rememberers. In this paper I have tried to show that there is room for the novel to arise within an incomplete and partially reconstructed language such as Wirangu. Reshaping is a continual process and it may proceed in a multitude of ways, whether by drawing on historical materials retrieved from archives or from the living traditions of neighbouring groups (see also Giacón and Lowe, this volume). There is a trove of archival materials to be found in institutional collections across the country that is yet to be fully explored. Whether, like *dhalgara*, salvaged languages sit in silence or whether they resound like *Bilarl* the bell magpie remains to be seen.

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