Documentary sources on the Ngarigu language: the value of a single recording

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1. The Ngarigu language

The Ngarigu language was traditionally spoken in the inland south-eastern part of New South Wales. The name was especially applied to the Monaro region, but varieties of the same language were spoken:

- in the Tumut region, where the people and their language were called Wolgal or Walgalu;
- the Canberra-Queanbeyan and upper Murrumbidgee region by people known in the nineteenth century as Nyamudy (Namwich, Yammoit-mithang, etc.);
- the Omeo region of Victoria (Koch 2011a).

Since Schmidt (1919) the language has been classified as belonging to the Yuin group, now a subgroup of the Pama-Nyungan language family, along with its northern neighbour Ngunawal-Gundungurra and the coastal languages Dharawal, Dharumba, Dhurga, Jiringayn, and Thawa (cf. Wafer and Lissarrague (2008: chapter 4), and for the coastal languages, Besold 2012).

I here distinguish between the Ngarigu language in the narrow sense, relating only to the Monaro region, and the wider sense, which includes the whole area from Omeo to Tumut and Canberra. This paper will discuss only the documents relating to Ngarigu of the Monaro region.

2. Documentary sources for the Ngarigu language

The first source on Ngarigu is a vocabulary of 171 words in Lhotsky (1839), who in 1834 made an expedition to Monaro and the Australian Alps (see Lhotsky

1979 and summaries in Andrews (1998: 94-103) and Young (2005: 97-105)). His vocabulary was obtained from teenagers, at the foot of the mountains. There is uncertainty about which mountain he ascended (Mitchell 1985: 11), but we might assume that the wordlist was taken from the western side of the Monaro plain. His wordlist contains a number of terms from Sydney Pidgin English (e.g. <waddi> 'tree', <gibba> 'stone', <narang> 'little') – by my estimation at least eight items, with five more possible – and may include words he picked up from his short visit with the Pajong near Gunning on his way to the mountains, which would be in the Ngunawal language.[1]

In 1844 George Augustus Robinson, chief Protector of Aborigines in the Port Phillip District (i.e. Victoria), made an expedition through south-eastern New South Wales, during which he recorded vocabulary on a number of languages. During his stay at Twofold Bay (Eden), he built up a 321-word vocabulary of the Ngarigu, which he called the Maneroo language (see Koch 2011b for an assessment of his Yuin vocabularies). The information was obtained from members of two eastern groups of the Bimmer Mittong, or people of the Monaro plains (Koch 2011a: 132-133). The wordlists are published in Robinson (2000: 191-198).

John Bulmer, of the Lake Tyers mission in Gippsland, completed the wordlist circulated by Edward Curr, with 130 items recorded from Monaro people who visited his mission. This was published as No. 197: Moneroo in volume 3 of Curr's (1886-87) compendium. Unfortunately 15 of the items (from 'canoe' to 'wind') are matched with what should be the gloss of the next word on the list. Thus <mamat> 'canoe' should rather be glossed 'sun', the next word in the list, which other sources establish as /mamady/.

Charles du Vé supplied another wordlist for Curr's No. 197: Moneroo, but his list is shorter, just 68 forms. Since he lived south of the NSW-Victoria border, it might be assumed that his speakers were from the southern regions of the Ngarigu-speaking area.

Alfred W. Howitt, also resident in Gippsland, collected some Ngarigu vocabulary indirectly by means of questionnaires sent to graziers on both sides of the NSW-Victoria border, i.e. from the southern parts of the Ngarigu-speaking area. Some of approximately 70 words he collected are quoted in his 1904 book, but most are in his various manuscripts in the Howitt Papers of the Museum of Victoria.

R.H. Mathews (1908) published a vocabulary of 259 words he obtained at Delegate in the far south of NSW in 1906 or 1907.[2] Although he published grammatical sketches of many other Australian languages (Koch 2008), he produced no grammatical data for the language he called Ngarrugu.

In 1963, during a search for remnants of Victorian languages, Luise Hercus found in Orbost, Gippsland, a group of people who used traditional words in their otherwise English speech. At a 'language barbecue', she recorded 241 words that they remembered

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[1]   An Aboriginal group that Lhotsky met at the Lachlan (then called Fish) River near Gunning, NSW, identified themselves as Pajong, a term which is not otherwise attested. Given their location, they must have been a subsection of the Ngunawal; see Jackson-Nakano (2002).

[2]   See a transcript of correspondence from the Bombala policeman George Stutchbery 8th December 1906 about his projected visit to Delegate, in Young (2005: 364).

(Hercus 2008: 165), and published this list along with notes on the phonetics and phonology of the language (written with Janet Mathews) in her compilation of Victorian salvage linguistics (Hercus 1969, 1986). The language turned out to be very similar to what R.H. Mathews had recorded, so she labelled it Southern Ngarigu. The families had moved to Gippsland from the Delegate area of NSW, and had obviously absorbed some elements of other languages as well (see Section 3). It may be considered remarkable that any of the traditional language was still known, especially in this non-traditional environment, since it was apparently already moribund when Mathews visited Delegate some sixty years earlier, judging from the fact that, contrary to his usual practice, he published no sketch grammar but only a vocabulary.

   In spite of the late date of Hercus' collection, however, this is the only source on Ngarigu that stems from a professional linguist. In the following, we will assess the value of this particular collection in comparison to the other documents, at the same time making observations on how the language was affected during the last stages of its documentation. Our observations are necessarily largely confined to vocabulary and phonetics-phonology, since Hercus' corpus has very little to contribute to grammar. It needs to be mentioned that none of the sources on Ngarigu discuss grammar at all. At best it is possible to discern from vocabulary items a few grammatical words, a bit of inflectional morphology and some derivational processes. The very few short sentences included in wordlists allow almost no inferences to be made about syntax. Furthermore, virtually no textual material is available. Hercus' words will be cited in a modernised orthography, using: *dh* for her dental <*d̪*>; *rd* for her retroflex <*d̠*>; *dy*, *ny*, *ly* for her palatal <*dj, nj, lj*>; *rr* for her tap <*r*>; *ng* for her velar nasal <*ŋ*>; and, to avoid potential confusion with *ng*, *k* for her <*g*> (see section 4 for more on the phonology). In citing particular words I use the abbreviation H for Hercus and H&M for Hercus & Mathews.

3. Vocabulary

3.1 Vocabulary size

Of the seven sources the Hercus corpus has the third highest number of vocabulary items, not far behind Mathews (1908). All are relatively small compared to the thousands of lexical items the traditional language is likely to have included. Table 1 displays the sources according to their date and size.

Table 1: Vocabulary size according to collector

Collector	Date	Size
Lhotsky	1839	171
Robinson	[1844]	321
Bulmer	1887	130
du Vé	1887	68
Howitt	1880s	70
Mathews	1908	259
Hercus	1969	241

3.2 Distinctiveness of the Hercus vocabulary

About 66 words in the Hercus corpus have no equivalents in the other Ngarigu sources. This distinctiveness can be largely explained by the temporal, geographic, and sociolinguistic circumstances of the materials: temporal because the language was documented several generations later than the other sources, geographical because it was spoken outside of its traditional territory, and sociolinguistic because it represents samples of language picked up by people as children interacting in a largely English-speaking environment. All of these factors contributed to the presence of lexical material that would not have been present in earlier versions of the language.

3.2.1 New words

Some 24 (i.e. 10%) of the words in the Hercus corpus denote non-traditional concepts, and can be assumed to have entered the language relatively recently, if not after the Ngarigu people moved to Gippsland. Some denote categories of people: *wadybala* 'white man', *wadyimin* 'white woman', *wadyibaka* 'white boy', *gudha* and *wurrundibuk* 'Chinaman', *dyungka* and *gandyawan* 'policeman', and possibly *yangkai* 'teenage boy, very young man' (given in H's Ganai vocabulary as a term of address 'hey friend!'). Another set of terms denote items of material culture: *kundyi* 'house' (probably from Pidgin English), *bandya* 'blanket', *bidya* 'clothes', *bandyiwan* or *bandyiwuk* 'boots, shoes' (also in other Victorian languages), *dhanda* 'trousers', *dambany* 'hat'. New foods are denoted by: *bungka* 'tea', *kurruk* 'unsweetened tea', *dukun* 'sugar', *burrudan* 'potatoes', *dhangan* 'bread' (widespread in south-eastern NSW). Terms for introduced animals are the widespread *yarramin* 'horse' and *dyambuk* 'sheep', plus *bud* 'rabbit'. Some terms for novel concepts may represent extensions of traditional terms; this is clearly the case for *bindyulung* 'cat', which also refers to 'native tiger-cat' and is attested in this meaning by Mathews' *<bindyellang>*. H's term *mai-mai* 'camp, house' is a word spread after contact with Europeans.

3.2.2 Foreign words

Hercus & Mathews (1986: 165) mention that families originally from Delegate in the 20th century scattered to Orbost and Lake Tyers in Victoria and to Bega, Moruya and other locations on the NSW south coast. Also they report that those living in Victoria had friendly relations with the Bidhuwal people of mountainous inland Gippsland and the 'Gippsland tribes' whose heritage language was Ganai and that the links with the latter, which may be recent, are reflected in the vocabulary. It should be noted that Bidhuwal and Ganai are closely related languages (Mathews 1907).

  Five words can be inferred to be recent loanwords from Ganai, on the grounds that they are unattested in other sources on Ngarigu and are attested in Ganai. These terms are assumed to have been acquired after the Ngarigu people moved to Gippsland. Ganai *niny* 'louse' is H's Ngarigu 'body louse'; Ganai *<ŋanda>*

'teeth' is reflected in H's Ngarigu *nyanduk* (*yirra* in other sources); 'face' is *mrrakin* in both languages; Ganai <ŋarba> 'to poison' is echoed by H's Ngarigu *ngarribi* 'to kill by magic'; and Ganai *landhak* '(younger) sister' seems to be the source of H's Ngarigu *landyakan* 'cousin'.[3]

Two of these terms are also attested in Mathews' Bidhuwal, spelled <ngurndak> 'teeth' and <landhakaiang> 'younger sister'. Two further terms are attested in Bidhuwal but not Ganai: H's Ngarigu 'koala' *ngurraka* appears to reflect <ngurka> 'native bear' and *ngalyan* 'ugly' resembles Bidhuwal <ngallen> 'bad'. One further term, *lika-likal* 'willie wag-tail', looks suspiciously like a loanword, though not attested in either of the Gippsland languages, because of the initial *l*, which is common in these languages but otherwise lacking in Ngarigu (and other Yuin languages), except for the 'cousin' term mentioned above. But some loanwords from the Gippsland languages apparently date from a time before the people moved permanently from the Monaro, judging from the fact that the Ganai terms *kung* 'nose' and *bindyulung* 'native tiger-cat' occur already in Mathews (1908).[4]

A number of words are shared with NSW coastal languages, which are closely related to Ngarigu in the Yuin subgroup, but since they are not attested in the other Ngarigu sources, are assumed to have been acquired through 20th century contacts. Hercus mentions NSW coast parallels for *dyungka* 'policeman' (from 'octopus'), *kanina* 'medicine man's magic beetles' and 'bad', and *karruwangka* 'to dream'. Other words shared with NSW coastal languages (on the evidence of Eades 1976 and Besold 2012) are: *bana* 'rain', *dulukal* 'wild man, killer' (cf. coastal *dul(V)ga(w)* 'big hairy man in mountain'), *walikadha* '(legendary) little hairy people who lived in the high mountains' (cf. coastal *wadhVgVda(w)* 'little hairy man'), *karrung* 'saliva, dirt from nose' (cf. coastal *karru* 'nasal mucus'), and *bukila* 'mouse or rat' (cf. coastal *bukla(ng)*).

3.3 Children's words and reduplication

Hercus notes that *bimbila* 'ugly' is a children's word and that *bib-bib*, glossed as 'jumping, hopping about', is a 'children's word for a kangaroo'. The latter is presumably simplified from the verb <bibburai> 'jump' recorded by Mathews. One might suspect that other reduplicated words may also be from a children's register. Thus *bud-bud* 'water-rat' may be a child's version of Mathews' <batpu>. Hercus compares *bala-bala* 'to talk' to the Pidgin English *bayala* – which is apparently attested in Lhotsky's <payola> and Mathew's <baiallanga>. The

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[3] The Ganai kinship system is unusual within Australia in extending sibling terms to all cousins. According to Keen (2004: 180): 'Kŭnai people had a 'generational' or 'Hawaiian' terminology in Ego's generation…It…did not distinguish between siblings and cousins as classes of relative…Kŭnai people classified everyone of a person's own generation as a close or more distant 'brother' or 'sister' (senior or junior according to the known or assumed age difference).'

[4] Assessment of links with Bidhuwal is complicated by the fact that the only wordlist on this language (Mathews 1907) is relatively late and indicates considerable overlap with Ngarigu, which suggests many loanwords went in the opposite direction to that discussed here.

reduplicated form may be a children's version. H's *ngulu-nguluk* 'smelly, rotten' likewise seems to be a reduplication of a form attested as *<ngulukumban>* 'stinking' in Mathews and *<wo.lo.loke>* 'stink' in Robinson. H's *dyarrung-dyarrung* 'currawong' can be compared to Mathews' *<dyarrandyak>*. Other reduplicated words that lack clear support from other sources are: *burdun-burdun* 'disobedient, fidgety (of children)', *mardang-mardang* 'dirty', *brridy-brridy* 'dirty' (cf. *brriny* 'ashes'), *dwad-dwad* 'bark of tree', *nyarri-nyarran* 'small sticks and bark for kindling', and *dyirri-dyirridy* 'yesterday'. Not all reduplicated words need to be novel, however: H's *duru-duradj* 'to vomit' is matched by Mathews' *<dhura dhurat>*.

3.4 Historic Ngarigu vocabulary unique to Hercus?

The question arises as to whether any of 66 words that occur only in the Hercus corpus represent historic Ngarigu vocabulary that has not otherwise been recorded, rather than words imported from other languages. Some candidate terms include the interrogative *wirrkarra* 'whereabouts' and the temporal *dyirri-dyirridy* 'yesterday'. Other distinctive terms possibly represent colloquial forms that were used informally in domestic situations more than in public discourse and were thus remembered longer than other vocabulary, but because of their more private usage were less likely to be recorded by other language documenters. These include descriptives like *bingkidy* 'bold, cheeky', *dyirrirridy* 'dirty', *kadyarran* 'stubborn, refusing to move', *kunirring* 'useless, silly, stupid thing', *nurriny* 'brave, bold, cheeky', *karribal* 'thin, skinny', *bubuluk* 'fat, a fat person'; verbs such as *nyalany* 'to dribble', *dyungkul* 'to roll eyes, look around', *kuluk* 'to drink, swallow'; the exclamation *wurr* 'good job!'; and imperatives *burrbiyalika* 'come here' and *yabiyalika* 'look out'.

4. Phonetics and phonology

4.1 The phoneme system

Hercus & Mathews (1969, 1986), hereafter H&M, is the only source that explicitly discusses the phonetics and phonology of the language. Earlier sources do not distinguish phonemic (contrastive) units from phonetic, except that R.H. Mathews was aware that voiced and voiceless stops were interchangeable: he also gives, in many of his language sketches, a few notes on pronunciation along with the orthography he uses, but these are common to all the languages he describes (Koch 2008). H&M's description includes a table of the phonemes of Ngarigu, evidence for contrasts, phonotactics, allophonic variation, and accentuation.

   Table 2 gives the system of consonant phonemes posited by H&M, given here in modern orthography. H&M propose three vowel phonemes, /a/, /i/, and /u/, without any contrast in vowel length.

Table 2: Phoneme system of Ngarigu consonants in standardised orthography

	Labial	Lamino-dental	Apico-alveolar	Retroflex	Palatal	Velar
Stop	*b*	*dh*	*d*	*rd*	*dy*	*k*
Nasal	*m*		*n*		*ny*	*ng*
Lateral			*l*		*ly*	
Tap/Trill			*rr*			
Approximant	*w*				*y*	

H&M (1986: 169) describe the palatal /dy/ as a 'palatalised alveo-dental consonant'. Lhotsky (1839: 157) had earlier noted that he used 'the letter *j* [which] would be far more accurately rendered by the Polish *dź*, which has no exact equivalent in the English tongue'. According to Ladefoged (2001: 152) the corresponding Polish fricatives [ɕ] and [ʑ] are alveolo-palatal sounds, with 'the body of the tongue raised and in the front of the mouth, much as in the vowel **i**'.

H&M demonstrate the contrast in initial position of dentals, alveolars and palatals by the near-minimal set *dhukung* 'younger brother', *dukun* 'sugar', and *dyukany* 'snake'. The intervocalic contrast of palatals and dentals is shown by the near-minimal pair *wadha* 'firewood' and *wadyan* 'possum'. H&M is sometimes the only source that specifies a dental articulation (*kadhakan* 'head') or even a palatal articulation (*dyurrang* 'running water, stream' versus Robinson's <*to.rang.go*> 'river').

H&M posit a retroflex stop phoneme /rd/, found in *mardan-mardan* (1986: 167) or *mardang-mardang* (1986: 246) 'dirty'; further examples are *ngardu* 'small flat bark dish', *burdun-burdun* 'disobedient, fidgety (of children)', and *Birdawal* 'tribe between Eden and Orbost'. None of these words recur in other wordlists, but Mathews spells the neighbouring tribe's name as <*Birdhawal*>, which is hard to interpret phonemically. So we cannot be certain about whether Ngarigu had retroflex consonants. These are otherwise hardly attested with any certainty in Yuin languages (see Besold 2012: 90-93).

The palatal lateral *ly* is attested only by *ngalyan* 'ugly' in H&M's corpus. It has been claimed that the only lateral occurring in languages of eastern Australia is an alveolar (see map in Dixon 1980: 141). H&M's palatal lateral is however supported by other likely forms in the Yuin languages: *malyan* (or *maliyan*?) 'eaglehawk' for which disyllabic forms have been given in early sources for Ngunawal, Gundungurra, and Dharrawal; *balya* 'north wind' in Dhurga (spelled <*pal-ya*> by Mathews); and *ngulya* (or *nguliya*) 'possum-string' belt or armband, cited as a trisyllable from Gundungurra and Howitt's south-coast 'Yuin'. Another more distantly related language of eastern Australia which has a laminal lateral is Mathi-Mathi (Blake et al. 2011: 65); here it is spelled *lh*, but there is no contrast between dentals and palatals in this language.

There is no evidence for a separate dental lateral *lh* in Ngarigu or the other Yuin languages. Even if this phoneme occurred in the language one would hardly expect early recorders to have heard it accurately. On the other hand a nasal *nh* matching dental stop *dh* would be expected. H&M do not offer any examples of either *nh* or *lh*. Mathews however gives <*nhamai*> 'see', which is likely to reflect the widespread Pama-Nyungan root **nhaa-*. This verb is not attested in the Hercus corpus, however.

Most Australian languages have at least two rhotics. H&M indicate only the tap/trill, their <r>, which is usually represented in Australian orthographies as *rr*; there is no mention of a possible approximant, normally spelled *r* in modern orthographies. It is virtually impossible to tell from older written sources whether there is a contrast between two rhotics, since they tend to use English spelling conventions for single versus double *r* between vowels. But cognates in better attested languages suggest that certain Ngarigu words are likely to have had the approximant *r*. Such words in the Hercus corpus include her *marriny* 'man', *mirribi* 'thunder', *marra* 'spider', which are likely to have been respectively /mariny/, /miribi/, /mararr/. 'Spider' is probably derived from the widespread /mara/ 'hand', which contains the approximant *r*. The sources that suggest a final rhotic (which is likely to have been the tap/trill *rr*) are Lhotsky's <marrar> and Mathews' <marar>. 'Spider' is also *mararr* in Dharrawal and Dhurga, where 'hand' is *maramal* (cf. Eades 1976: 82 and Besold 2012: 256).[5] Another kind of indication that the rhotic was the approximant comes from variability in the sources between spellings that suggest a rhotic and those that suggest a palatal glide [j], which is spelled *y* in our system. Thus Lhotsky's <meibi> 'thunder' suggests a pronunciation [mejibi], which is more likely to be a realisation of /miribi/ than of /mirribi/.[6] A pronunciation perceived as /mayi(ny)/ seems to lie behind Eyre's (1845: 397) <mai-en> 'men or people',[7] du Vé's (1887: 430) 'Moneroo' <myang> 'a blackfellow', and Robinson's (2000:193) 'Maneroo' <my> 'black man'.

So the possible amendments that could be made to H&M's consonant inventory are: addition of the rhotic approximant /r/, addition of a laminodental nasal /nh/, and omission of the retroflex /rd/.

4.2 Phonotactics

H&M comment on initial consonants, final consonants, and consonant clusters. Ngarigu and the other Yuin languages allow initial apical consonants, unlike some New South Wales languages (Ngiyampaa, Gamilaraay, Paakantyi). Their corpus includes 17 words with initial *d*, four with initial *n*, two with initial *l*, but none beginning with *r*. Some of their examples of initial *d*, e.g. *dambli* 'eat' and *dumbuk* 'smoke', probably represent rather a historic *dh* (cf. Mathews' <dhambilli> and <dhūnbūk> and du Vé's <dhoomdook>). Initial *n* in their *naluk* 'grass' is attested elsewhere. They note the rarity of initial *l*, which contrasts with Ganai and other Victorian languages, where initial *l* is common. They give two words beginning with *l*, *landyakan* 'cousin' and *lika-likal* 'willie wagtail'. These are the only words found with initial *l* in all the languages of the Yuin subgroup;

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[5] For typological parallels cf. *marakak* 'tarantula spider' versus *marang* 'hand' in the Warrnambool language (Blake 2003: 193) and *marnakarrik* 'tarantula' versus *marna* 'hand' in Wathawurrung (Blake et al. 1998: 113, 139).

[6] A cognate form given as *maybi* in Dawsey's (1887: 423) Jervis Bay vocabulary similarly indicates the absence of an overt rhotic consonant.

[7] This is from the language of the upper Molonglo (near Queanbeyan), which is considered to be a variety of the wider Ngarigu language (Koch 2011a).

moreover none occur in the languages that have been classified as Kuri, from Sydney and the north coast of New South Wales. So these two forms are likely to represent loanwords from the Gippsland languages (see section 3.2.2 for the sources of the 'cousin' word). H&M mention the absence of initial rhotics, which is characteristic of Ngarigu, unlike Ganai. This total absence of initial rhotics is in fact characteristic of all the Yuin and Kuri languages.

Ngarigu (and other Yuin languages) also allow word-final stop consonants, unlike many NSW languages. H&M note the occurrence of final *b*, *d*, *dy*, and *k*. Examples from their corpus are: *malub* 'flash of lightning', *bud* 'rabbit', *dulidy* 'throat', *gunyuk* 'swan'.

While word-initial consonant clusters are rare in Australian languages, clusters of stop plus *rr* or *w* are found in Ngarigu. Examples are: *brriny* 'ashes', *mrrakin* 'face', *krrang* 'large edible grubs', *kwangkal* 'honey', *kwandidy* 'old woman', *dwad-dwad* 'bark of tree'. The *kw* cluster, in particular, is paralleled in Mathews' <*gwanggal*>. But Mathews' Bidhuwal <*goang'gal*> 'honey', as well as Mathews' <*goan'ditch*>, and Bulmer's <*kowandit*> for 'old woman', indicate that the cluster was probably occasioned by the loss of the first vowel when unstressed. Mathews' <*birriñ*> 'ashes' points in the same direction.

4.3 Accentuation

H&M point out that, while stress is normally on the first syllable, there are at least 16 words where it is the second of three syllables that receives the accent. While no clear rule for this unusual stress is apparent, it is worth observing that six of the examples involve *rr* as the second consonant. Note that *brriny* and *mrrakin* would be further examples if one assumes an underlying vowel between the preceding initial consonant and the following *rr*, with stress shift entailing the loss of the vowel. The examples of initial *kw* are amenable to a similar explanation.

Another phonetic phenomenon that is related to stress is the reduction of unstressed vowels; the best examples are in the second syllable of three-syllable words with stress on the first syllable. In two examples it appears that the unstressed vowel has actually disappeared and created an unusual consonant cluster: compare *dambli* 'eat' to Mathews' <*dhambilli*>, and *kamyak* 'reeds near rivers with edible roots' to Mathews' (1904: 304) Ngunawal <*gummiuk*> (/kamiyak/) 'bulrushes'. It seems likely that this reduction of unstressed vowels in the direction of schwa is due to the influence of the phonetic patterns of the speakers' English.

4.4 Allophonic variation

Explicit statements are made about the final devoicing of stops, the tendency for *b* to be realised as a voiced fricative before the vowel /*u*/, the weak articulation of *dy* in initial position and before the vowel /*i*/, and the normal realisation of the tap/trill /rr/ as a tap.

4.5 Discrepancies with other sources

In a number of respects Hercus' record does not accord with the pronunciation suggested by a careful comparison of the spellings of words in all the combined records (for the method of 'reconstituting' the phonology from imperfect old sources see Austin & Crowley 1995, Koch 2009). Here I note several phonetic domains that are affected and discuss possible reasons for the discrepancies.

The absence of a contrast between two rhotics was noted in Section 4.1. It is quite likely that rememberers of Ngarigu that Hercus recorded had not acquired this contrast which is alien to their dominant language, English. That there remained some awareness of the trill articulation is obvious from the pronunciation of the interjection *wurr* 'good job!', which was given on the audio recording (Hercus n.d.) with a strong trill a few times, but also with an Irish-type approximant.

Some of the words where H records alveolar *d* have indications in other sources with the dental *dh*. Examples of word-initial *d*, in addition to *dambli* 'eat' and *dumbuk* 'smoke' mentioned in 4.2 above, are *dulidy* 'throat' (cf. Mathew's <*dhulet*>) and *durru-durrady* 'to vomit' (cf. Mathew's <*dhura dhurat*>). A couple of examples involve a preceding nasal: *kundul* 'eye' (cf. Mathews <*gundthul*> and Bulmer's <*kindthuno*>, presumably with a 3rd person possessor suffix */-nu/*) and *munda* 'mouth' (cf. Bulmer's <*mundtho*> and Mathews' <*mundhange*>, perhaps with a 2nd person suffix */-ngi/*). It is possible that the dental articulation was not consistently acquired (although H's vocabulary includes six words with initial *dh*), especially in word-initial and post-nasal environments, where the dental was less likely to be pronounced as a fricative.

We have already mentioned the tendency toward centralisation of vowels in unstressed syllables. H usually gives a full vowel quality, but one that is sometimes at variance with the vowel quality of earlier records. H indicates the unstressed vowel as */u/* in a number of words where otherwise */a/* is suggested; e.g. *birruk* 'dead', *kunung* 'excrement'. Here it is possible that the English-like indistinct articulation of the vowels, which is quite noticeable on the audio recording, has led to speakers' uncertainty as to its underlying quality.

Final nasals seem to be unstable in the Hercus corpus. A number of words for which other sources suggest a velar *ng* occur with a final *n*; including *kadhakan* 'head', *dyirriban* 'old man', *biman* 'bare, empty ground' ('plain' for Robinson). It is possible that these represent the colloquial English habit of pronouncing final *ng* as *n* (especially in *-ing* participles). A few words are given by Hercus with final *ny*, where other sources suggest rather a velar *ng*; e.g. *warrakany* 'snow gum' (cf. Mathews' <*warrugang*>) and *ngambarrany* 'tomahawk' (cf. Mathews' <*ngumbugang*> and du Vé's <*ngumbercung*>, both with a velar stop in the third syllable). Perhaps these represent hypercorrection. In one word *ny* occurs initially where *ng* is expected (although 19 words are given with initial *ng*): *nyanduk* 'teeth' is obviously the same word as *ngandak* given in H's Ganai vocabulary. Here it seems the speaker has substituted a more common sound for the un-English initial *ng*, as many English speakers do.

Most of these discrepancies can be understood when it is realised that words were given by people of Ngarigu descent whose dominant language was English, and hence the words represent linguistically foreign elements that were heard from their elders and perhaps in some cases imperfectly acquired and possibly not accurately remembered. In such circumstances it is not unexpected that the pronunciation will show the influence of English phonetics, while at the same time maintaining some features of the traditional Ngarigu language.[8] The phenomena of 'rhotic collapse' and reduction of unstressed vowels have previously been mentioned in the context of language obsolescence in Australia by Austin (1986).

5. Summary and conclusion

Hercus (2008: 168), responding to the potential charge that her late recording of fragments of a language was of no value, concedes that she was too late to contribute to 'understanding the structure of a language…in those areas where we only had vocabulary'. But she insists on the value of a 'last speaker…someone with language knowledge that is still linked to a tradition of speakers of the past, and who is thereby an independent witness'. She claims that 'the words that could be recorded…tell us something of the phonology, and they help considerably towards the interpretation of the extensive data written down in the nineteenth century'. I would add that, even where the phonology is somewhat altered, such records contribute to our understanding of the process of language obsolescence. Furthermore, we have seen how the vocabulary recorded gives us an insight into the sociolinguistic history of the language community as they progressively lost touch with the traditional language.

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[8] I can attest this from my own experience with Pennsylvania German, of which I learned about 50 words from my parents when I was young. Although most words were learned with purely English sounds, this mini-lexicon did involve the non-English velar fricative (e.g. *milich*, German *Milch* 'milk', *Koch* [a common surname]) as well as the un-English combination of *sh* with other consonants (*shpeck,* German *Speck* 'bacon'; *shmearcase* 'cottage cheese', German *Schmierkäse*; *schnickelfritz* 'term of endearment used with children').

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