THE MARAWARA LANGUAGE OF YELTA:

INTERPRETING LINGUISTIC RECORDS OF THE PAST

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Because of the loss of the majority of the languages of the south east of Australia we have to turn towards the information collected last century with gratitude. But we are tempted to ask for too much from some of these sources, particularly the word-lists: the people compiling them had difficulties that it is hard to appreciate now in the age of electronic recording equipment. The aim of the present paper is to attempt to elucidate some of the problems involved.[1]

Gaining fluency in any language has been and remains a difficult task, with or without the use of tape-recorders. But when it comes to collecting basic vocabulary and a few sentences, tape-recorders allow a dramatic improvement.

Modern linguistic maps would show many blank areas without the vocabularies published in R. Brough Smyth's 1878 compilation *The Aborigines of Victoria*, George Taplin's *The folklore, manners, customs and languages of the South Australian Aborigines* (published posthumously in 1879), and E.M. Curr's 1886-87 volumes *The Australian race*. In evaluating these materials we must remember that most of the contributors to the compilations did not have a deep commitment to the study of Aboriginal languages, and were not fluent speakers of the languages they recorded. In the absence of tape recordings they had no chance to correct their initial mistakes.

There are a few instances where, thanks to the survival of the languages into the 1960s-1970s, we can examine the nineteenth century word-lists in the light of a much larger body of knowledge and we can reconstruct what actually happened during the recording process. This paper attempts to elucidate some of the problems involved, using information on *Marawara* collected by John Bulmer over the years 1855 to 1860 at Yelta, and modern studies of *Pākantji* (often called *Barkindji* in the ethnographic

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[1] In this paper a practical orthography has been used for *Pākantji*: Plosives have been written as unvoiced, (*k, p, th, t, rt*), except in the nasal-plosive clusters *mb, nb, rnd*.
Retroflexes have been written as *r* + consonant, i.e.
   rl is retroflex *l*
   rn is retroflex *n*
   rd is retroflex *t*
Interdentals have been written as consonant + h, hence *nh, th*.
ng has been used for velar *n*.
Long vowels are indicated by a superscript line, *ā*.

literature) the language of the Darling River people. *Marawara* was the southernmost dialect of *Pākantji*.

The questionnaires sent to pastoralists, magistrates and missionaries by Smyth in 1863, by Taplin in 1874-75 and by Curr from 1878 yielded four Marawara vocabularies and fragmentary information about the local and social organisation of this group of Aborigines. They are mentioned in most histories of southeastern Australia, but identified only as the anonymous 'blacks' who reportedly menaced the explorers Sturt and Mitchell and were killed by Mitchell's parties, by some pastoralists using the overland route to Adelaide from 1838, and by South Australian punitive expeditions in 1841-42. The *Marawara* vocabularies discussed in this paper were written down by three inexperienced lay missionaries, recruited at public meetings of the Melbourne Church of England Mission Committee to staff the Yelta Mission, located on a square mile of reserved land immediately southeast of the Murray-Darling junction. Up to 150 Aborigines visited in 1855 but Yelta was finally abandoned because of depopulation, exacerbated by the rapid growth of the adjacent New South Wales town of Wentworth.[2]

The description of *Marawara* discussed here was entitled 'Native language, Gippsland and Murray' in Smyth's *Aborigines of Victoria*. The 'Murray' language referred to was *Marawara*. Internal evidence suggests that Smyth solicited Bulmer's comparison of the Gippsland and 'Murray' languages some years later than the 4 July 1863 questionnaire which produced other word-lists in Smyth's volumes.[3]

Marawara people drawn to Yelta originally occupied the lower Murray from the Darling-Murray junction downstream to the Rufus river and Lake Victoria, and extended northward on the Darling to Avoca station, according to N.B. Tindale.[4] They also called themselves *Wimbaya* 'people' and are sometimes referred to by that name. The only major work on their language is by Tindale.[5] He was able to make a study of a text in *Marawara* in 1939. The language became extinct soon after with the death of 'Auntie Polly', the last Marawara speaker, who was looked after for many years by the Lawson family, speakers of Southern *Pākantji*. They could understand everything she said, but they found her pronunciation a little different: *Marawara* and Southern *Pākantji* from Pooncarie were closely-related dialects of one language, *Pākantji*. Fortunately I was able to collect an extensive amount of information on Southern *Pākantji* during work on the Darling between 1964 and 1981: the information came from descendants of people who had originated from Pooncarie and Menindee. We can therefore examine the vocabulary given to Bulmer by people at

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[2] Information from Diane Barwick. Published contemporary accounts of the 'wanton slaughter' of the Marawara include Moorhouse in Taplin 1879, 115-123; Jenkin 1979, 283-284; Eyre 1845, 11: 212; Sturt 1849, 1: 90-93. G.A. Robinson's 1846 manuscript cites the toll from South Australian Government papers and reports from personal observation that 'All the males excepting boys had gunshot wounds and other marks of violence on their persons . . . Bleached human bones lay on the surface and craniums perforated by bullets were seen by me'.

[3] Smyth 1878, 11: 33-37, 67. In response to Curr's 1878 questionnaire Bulmer also provided a vocabulary containing some 124 words (Curr 1886-87, 11: 238-241), labelled 'Marowera Language'.

[4] The location of the Marawara is discussed by Tindale (1974: 130-131, 134, 196, 211).

[5] Tindale 1939.

Yelta between 1855 and 1860 in the light of the language material which we have learnt from Pooncarie people.[6] This enables us to see some of the problems involved in the study of early vocabularies.

1. BREAKDOWN IN COMMUNICATIONS

Bulmer clearly got his information from highly intelligent speakers who were doing their utmost to make their language understood by that relatively rare person, a white man who took a genuine interest in their culture. There are only a few occasions when there was some breakdown in communications. This is always likely to happen, particularly when a person is asked to translate a question: he is apt to think that he is meant to translate an answer. Mistakes of this kind are generally absent from the pages by Bulmer. However there is a curious entry (p.37):

'Arn akie' — 'Whose is this?'
The rendering we would expect is:

windjikana   ithu
whose   this

It is possible that 'Arn akie' may be *nhanganja kiki* 'how is this?'.
'What name you?' (p.33) is rendered by 'Wingi a nimba'.
This is no doubt *windjika ngimba* 'who are you?'

Sometimes there is confusion as to who is being talked about:
'Paddy urta, Go we', is in fact *Pariwurta* 'you (pl.) go'.
This plural form occurs also on p.34:
'Purragia urta, lie all (or you all lie)',
i.e. *Parkayaurta*, 'you (pl.) lie'.

It seems that owing to some breakdown in communication, Bulmer thought that '-urta' implied 'all', whereas it is the second person plural subject-marker. He continues with:
'wilka wilk urta'
Hungry   all (or, all are hungry)'.
This should be translated as 'you (pl.) are hungry'. There are also some breakdowns in communications regarding tense.

2. REPETITION

In his efforts to make himself understood, the *Marawara* speaker(s) resorted to the device of saying things in another way, hoping that would prove more comprehensible. This happened to such a degree that Bulmer wrote (p.35): 'One thing I have observed with regard to the language — it is a double language. They have two words to express everything'. In his list of words and sentences Bulmer gives near synonyms as equivalents and this underlines his comments on a 'double language'. Thus *wanga*, the word for 'meat', and *manba*, which means 'flesh', are treated as synonyms, as are *kulpera*, which means 'to speak' and 'parel go', *parlku-* which means 'to make a noise'.

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[6] Hercus 1982.

3. SPELLING OUT

The speaker has obviously tried to improve Bulmer's comprehension by talking slowly and splitting up words into syllables which Bulmer then probably repeated, syllable by syllable. In *Pākantji* there was (phonetic) doubling of consonants other than *d*, *r*, *y* and *w* at the end of the first syllable; Bulmer's vocabulary splits up words at that point as can be seen from the following examples:

'Thul-lagga	Bad'	for *thurlaka*
'Mel-inya	Fingernails'	for *Milinja*
'Tar-lin-ya	Tongue'	for *tharlinja*
'Young-oly	Swan'	for *yunguli*
'Yap-pera	Camp'	for *yapara*

The emphasis goes even to the extent of pre-stopping certain consonants, or inserting a *d* before an *l*, a feature that is more characteristic of adjoining South Australian languages:

'Kad-dely	Dog'	for *karli*

'Spelling out' is noticeable particularly where personal endings are concerned, as in the examples with 'urta', 'you pl.' quoted above. Sometimes verbal suffixes are separated off along with the bound person markers, as in:

'paddy-wappa'	for *pariwapa* 'I'm going'
'Go- I'	

and

'Illa parel go rimba'	for *kila parlkurimba* 'you're not uttering a sound'
'Do not speak you'	

and

'Uring ato'	for *yuringkathu* 'I think'
'Think I'	

The participial ending *-na* may also be split off along with parts of the verb or verbal suffixes, as in:

'Yaton uri wanna'	for *ithu yuriwana*
'He thinks'	

This unnatural 'spelling out' may render individual words almost unrecognisable:

'Kate-wail-yo'	for *katjiluku.*
'Little'	

The false divisions created in this manner have a more general effect; they distort the whole of the verbal system, and obscure a major grammatical rule: in the present tense, in the absence of bound pronouns, the participial ending has to be used.

4. EXTREME EMPHASIS AND OVER-SIMPLIFICATION

In his attempts to make himself clear the speaker often used highly emphatic expressions rather than normal ones. Particularly noticeable in this regard is the use of free pronominal forms, *in lieu* of the ordinary bound markers, as in:

'Ninnin kambia'
'our father'

This is *nginina kambiya* 'that very own father of ours' where *kambiyinina* 'our father' is the normal expression.

'Gnoo-yal nappa'   *ngūyala ngapa* 'I am the one that is afraid'
'Afraid I'

where *nguyalapa* 'I'm frightened' is more usual.

Similar comments apply to 'Gnooyal nimba', which means '*you* are frightened'. There are many other examples.

There are cases where this over-emphasis does not simply reflect an uncommon usage, but is completely ungrammatical. The speaker resorted to a kind of pidgin for the benefit of the learner, with sentences of the 'me see you' variety, as in:

'Nindu kulpera gnana'

'You spoke to me'

This is   *ngindu kulpira nganha*
          you   speak   me

which is ungrammatical, because the present tense form cannot stand on its own without a participial marker. Moreover it is highly unusual for two emphatic free pronouns to occur in one single sentence. The sentence

'Minna uring nindu'

'What think you'

is of a similar kind; it does not obey the rules of *Pākantji*, presumably because the speaker has tried to 'put it in an easy way' for his European interviewer.

5. SPELLING PROBLEMS

The contribution by Bulmer suffers from spelling problems in the same manner as many other early works, to the degree that without a knowledge of the language it would be impossible even to guess the correct pronunciation. It would, for instance, be impossible to decide whether 'i' was to be pronounced as a short 'i' as in English 'bit', or as a diphthong 'ai', resembling the 'y' of English 'by'. Thus Bulmer's 'Uri-uri' 'spirit' is really for *yuri-yuri*, but 'Yapperi' 'my camp' stands for *yaparai*, and 'Kambe i' 'my father' for *kambiyai. ai* in the last two cases is the possessive marker of the first person singular. The confusion is considerable, especially when the diphthong *ai* is spelt not only as 'i', but also as 'ie', for instance in 'Gnie' *ngai* 'mine'.

'ie', however, can also stand for:

'i', which in turn has other spellings such as

'y' in 'Murndy' *marndi* earth',

'ey' as in 'Murney' *marni* 'fat',

'ee' as in 'Thingee' *thingi* 'knee'

and

'ai' as in 'Paddy waimba' for *pariwimba* 'you are going',

and even as

'a' in 'Makega' for *mikika* 'doctor'.

Besides this there is the usual problem that 'u' is used to represent the sound 'a' as in English 'cut' as well as for the 'u' of English 'put', but in addition 'o' is often used to render 'u'. No distinction is made between the two 'r' sounds that occur in *Marawara* except that the flapped r is occasionally written 'dd', as in 'Paddy' for *pari-* 'to go', for example.

Final vowels have sometimes been misheard or not heard at all, and *ng* and *n* are

confused. It is easy to recognise the words if one knows them, and despite the inconsistencies there is no gross misrepresentation.

6. RELIANCE ON OTHERS AND HANDWRITING ERRORS

In Bulmer's work there is a curious spelling (p.36):

'Hippy yhuko   Sundown'

This is obviously meant to render

   ipi   *yuku*

   lay down   sun

It is the use of 'h' in this expression that is perplexing: it is not clear what the function of the 'h' is meant to be. Nor is this apparently random use of 'h' an isolated one, as it is also used in 'Bick-ho' for *piku* 'forehead'. This same use appears in an identical entry 'Hippy yhuko' in the article by the Rev. R.W. Holden, 'The "Maroura" tribe, lower Darling'[7] which is the only other major nineteenth century source on *Marawara*. In fact Holden has the identical spelling of *Hippy yhuka* for 'Sundown'. But this and other evidence suggest that Bulmer and Holden either copied from one another or utilised a common source. R.W. Holden actually succeeded the Rev. Bulmer and was at Yelta from 1860 to 1864.[8] It would be altogether too much of a coincidence if they had both independently arrived at this quite extraordinary spelling, and further investigation shows that there are indeed a number of identical spellings in Bulmer's and Holden's words, but also a few divergences. The correspondences are too great and too unusual to be accidental, particularly spellings like:

'Burley   Star'

'Gnie   Mine'

Holden's vocabulary is longer than Bulmer's, but there are good reasons for thinking that he was the borrower. He probably utilised some basic materials left behind at the mission; these basic materials could have been from his immediate predecessor, Bulmer, or from the most literate and senior of the missionaries, T.H. Goodwin. The secondary nature of some of Holden's work is shown by the fact that he misread some items. Thus Bulmer writes, as quoted above:

'Illa parel go rimba'

'Do not speak you'

for

   kila parlkurimba 'you are not uttering a sound'.

Holden writes (p.24) 'panelgorimba you speak', 'panelgorappa I speak' and 'panelgorana to talk or be noisy', evidently having misread 'r' as 'n'. On account of the problems of handwriting we have therefore a type of error that is of a different magnitude compared to mere spelling confusion. Even someone who knew the language would have difficulty understanding Holden's word 'panelgorimba'. 'panelgo-' being tri-syllabic would not be acceptable as a *Pākantji* verbal root in any case. It is only through a comparison with Bulmer's work that the situation becomes transparent.

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[7] In Taplin 1879. See p. 26.

[8] Massola 1970: 19.

Bulmer, like Holden and T.H. Goodwin (who contributed a very brief word list to R. Brough Smyth,[9] p.75) spent years at Yelta and obviously knew the people he was learning from. He did not encounter any of the other common hazards that await the less well-informed, such as inadvertently mixing-in information from the language of a person from another area who happened to be visiting. Bulmer's work is superior in quality, less sketchy and better thought-out than many of the contributions to the works of Taplin, Smyth and Curr. Yet, as shown above, it is beset by problems. The aim of the present paper is to emphasise the difficulty of using material from these works. As shown by the example of Bulmer and Holden we must beware even when authors corroborate and confirm each other: they may simply be copying, or even mis-copying a common source. For many parts of the southeastern areas of Australia we do *not* have a larger body of information which would enable us to correct and inter-pret the evidence of the contributions to Curr and Brough Smyth. We therefore have to leave many linguistic questions unanswered and admit that we simply do not know, and never shall.

[9] T.H. Goodwin, 'Yelta' pp. 74-76 in the section devoted to 'Language' in R.B. Smyth, *Aborigines of Victoria* 1878, II: 1-220.

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