8 *Applying multilingual knowledge to decipher an historical song of change*

Raymond Kelly[1] and Jean Harkins[1]
University of Newcastle[1]

Abstract

Aboriginal songs from the Mid North Coast of New South Wales have been audio recorded since the 1930s, following on from previous written accounts of songs and verse by Threlkeld (n.d. [1820s?]) and others. Here we examine a song recorded at Armidale, in the 1960s, preserved in the AIATSIS sound archive, but not hitherto transcribed and analysed. Although it contains only six lines, the complex interplay of words and phrases from traditional language (primarily Thangatti~Dhanggati) and Aboriginal English (with some NSW Pidgin), had made it difficult for previous researchers to ascertain the meaning even at the surface level.

By employing a combination of local cultural background knowledge and Indigenous-led linguistic investigation, we aim to:

- explore some of the richness of the song's cultural meaning from an Indigenous perspective
- show how the features of the song connect with a contemporary understanding, as a multilingual and multicultural welcome to youngsters of an age to commence formal education
- argue that the potential for re-evaluating, re-analysing and revaluing such cultural material is worth facing the many analytical challenges it presents.

By tracing relationships of structure and meaning, we can discern many of the elements that open up such understandings for 'enculturated listeners' (Turpin and Stebbins 2010:2). The patterned code-switching between language varieties further illustrates features of multilingual discourse at the crossroads of intergenerational language shift.

Keywords: Aboriginal song, sound archives, transcription, multilingualism, language contact, Dhanggati, south-eastern Australia, NSW Pidgin, Aboriginal English

Introduction

We focus here on a single, short song from the Mid North Coast of New South Wales (NSW), where Aboriginal songs were first recorded in the 1930s on wax cylinder, and subsequently with increasingly sophisticated audio recording technologies. Prior to the advent of sound recording, there was some written documentation of songs and poetry in south-eastern Australia (see Skinner and Wafer, this volume). These and subsequent tape recordings made through the 1960s and 70s illustrate song traditions surviving, and to varying degrees thriving, through times of cultural change. At least

some of these traditional musical forms continue to flow into the work of today's songmakers and performers (Gummow 1995; McDonald, this volume).

This particular song was recorded in Armidale, NSW, by the linguist Nils Holmer (1964), along with mostly spoken language elicitation and texts; the song has not hitherto been transcribed and analysed, although accompanying spoken material is transcribed in Holmer's field notes and by Lissarrague (2013). In a mere six lines of song text, there is a complex interplay of words and phrases from traditional language (primarily Thangatti)[1], NSW Pidgin (Troy 1993), and Aboriginal English (Harkins 2008). This, along with the usual difficulties of puzzling out words in songs, had made it difficult for previous researchers to ascertain the meaning even at the surface word level, let alone its more abstract and contextual significances. Similar issues of transcription and analysis have been noted in other NSW languages (Donaldson 1979, 1984, 1995; McDonald 1996), as well as elsewhere on the continent (e.g. Hale 1984:257; Alpher and Keeffe 2001; Bracknell, this volume; Jebb and Marmion 2015). Only through an Indigenous-led process of synthesising local cultural and historical knowledges with deep linguistic investigation (Kelly 2015, Barney 2014), can we begin to open up an understanding of the depth of cultural meaning for Indigenous inheritors of such archived material.[2] Our aim is to demonstrate how this kind of approach can generate potential new insights into what emerges as a multilingual[3] welcome addressed by a senior man to members of a younger, multicultural generation who are soon to be put through the first stages of formal traditional education.

To give some background to the performer of the song and the circumstances of its recording, we note that the singer was Mr Lachlan Vale (nicknamed Locky), who was at the time living on the Aboriginal reserve at East Armidale. The large Vale family extended through Bellbrook and Kempsey as well as Armidale, and are identified principally with Thangatti language and country. This recording was made in February–March of 1964 and is archived as Holmer's Field Tape 4 in the sound archive of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). Mr Vale also recorded two Thangatti narratives for Holmer in April–May 1964, archived as Field Tape 1. Professor Nils Holmer, from the University of Lund in Sweden, was funded by the then Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies to collect language material from northern NSW and south-east Queensland between January and August of 1964. He contributed some, not all, of his field recordings to the AIATSIS archive in the form of four sound tape reels (Holmer 1964). His analyses and vocabularies of Thangatti and Gathang were published in Holmer (1966, 1967), and some texts were published in Holmer and Holmer (1969).

The 1964 recordings were probably made in one of the small tin houses that were built on the East Armidale reserve to replace the tents and makeshift shacks, after concerns were raised about poor health among the Aboriginal population in the early 1960s (Kelly 2015). It is important to note that two other respected language speakers, Mr Doug Scott and Mr Frank Archibald, were present during the song recording. Their approving chuckles can be heard at the end of the song, followed by several minutes of conversation in Thangatti between Mr Vale, Mr Scott and Mr Frank Archibald.

---

[1] While the established spelling is 'Dhanggati' in the excellent grammar by Lissarrague (2007), variant spellings are also used on the basis of personal and family identification and preference.

[2] We express warm thanks to Amanda Lissarrague and Jim Wafer for clarifying several linguistic points; two anonymous reviewers for prompting us to refine our discussion; and John Maynard and the Purai Global Indigenous and Diaspora Research Studies Centre for encouraging and supporting this research.

[3] Many Aboriginal people identify more with the words 'bilingual/bicultural' than 'multilingual/ multicultural', based on the highly salient contrast between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultural contexts. In using the latter terms, we recognise the multilingual and multicultural reality of traditional Aboriginal societies as well as those that came to Australia more recently.

All three men were in their late sixties to early seventies at that time.[4] The voices of children playing and speaking in the language can also be heard in the background on the tape.[5]

Before proceeding to analyse the song itself, we offer an experimental sketch of the kind of intuitive, enculturated understanding of the audio material that emerges for a *gurri* 'Aboriginal person of this region' who grew up at the intergenerational crossroads between traditional cultural practices, and contemporary continuities and discontinuities of language, education, cultural memory, oral tradition, and song. Our aim here is to draw the reader into the conceptual world in which this seemingly opaque jumble of mixed language begins to make perfect sense, before we go on to identify specific textual and linguistic features that anchor these understandings in the process of extracting meaning from a highly complex and elliptical textual form.

2 Listening between the lines

In this section I, Ray Kelly, am writing in the first person, as one who grew up on the East Armidale Aboriginal reserve in daily contact with the speakers recorded on this tape. The singer, Lachlan Vale, is the father-in-law of my mother's auntie, Hazel Vale *née* Archibald; my siblings and I grew up as classificatory brothers and sisters to our generation of the Vale family. Doug Scott is a great-uncle of my father. I may well be among the children playing in the background on the tape, as I would have been three years old at the time, and was the kind of child who hung around listening to the elders as much as possible. I present the full song text here, as I understand it, followed by an account of its cultural resonances from my perspective as an 'enculturated listener' (Turpin and Stebbins 2010:2).

My current understanding of this song is formed through some decades as an inheritor and student of this cultural material, through a learning process very like the traditional one described by Hale (1984:259-60). But even within the shared cultural knowledge of a community, each listener brings a unique set of knowledge and experience to the text, and each person's interpretation and response to it will be their own. No doubt my present understanding will deepen as lifelong learning unfolds. Nothing like an absolute or definitive interpretation is being suggested here, but I try to explain where my understanding is coming from, both in terms of my cultural background knowledge and in the song text itself. Here is my transcription of the song as I hear it:[6]

You an' me, tiny man, maaguraalu galay,
You an' me, tiny man, maaguraalu galay.
Do you see? No, no sabi;

[4] Doug Scott was recorded as being eight years old in 1903, as a pupil at the Nulla Nulla Aboriginal Reserve school, so in 1964 he would have been 69. Lachlan Vale's two younger sisters are on the same school roll, aged 10 and 12, and Frank Archibald lived 1884–1975, so Mr Vale was probably at least five years older than the other two men. Birth date records are not fully consistent, but indicate that Mr Vale was born around 1888, Mr Scott between 1890-94, and Mr Archibald between 1884-91. Mr Vale was also called Bubba Vale (from *babaang* 'grandfather', in recognition of his status as an elder), and sadly, passed away in 1965. (Referring to those who have passed away by title plus surname, with first name only if needed for clarification, is frequent in Aboriginal English to show respect for the departed. This convention probably arose from widely documented traditional practices of not speaking the personal name of the deceased.)

[5] After these tapes were digitally remastered in 2008, as described in Kelly (2015), the greatly improved sound quality facilitated a more thorough analysis of both the language material and contextual background sounds. Modern remastering of all such material is urgently needed to improve language inheritors' access to it.

[6] My representation of the sounds agrees in most respects with Lissarrague's (2007) orthography, apart from a few words that are discussed individually below.

Caught in bingaay yirruu,
Caught in a bingay yaarripirringu.
The top lady to the bottom say:
An' sting you bun, yaarriurrikayi!

For me, this song evokes the voice of a *Thupara* 'knowledge holder'[7] whose role was to serve as a guide or mentor for younger members of the Aboriginal communities in and around the Mid North Coast of New South Wales. As each child grew, the senior women would make regular assessment of their readiness to progress through the stages of growth as a person. This song references one of the important periods of growth for Aboriginal children: the transition from tiny people into the world of the *guraa* or *guraamun* 'big boy' or 'big girl'.[8]

Against the backdrop of the Aboriginal Welfare Board, as a child living on the Aboriginal reserve at East Armidale during the 1960s, I was extremely lucky to be raised in a communal environment that still practised leadership and personal development within culturally defined cohorts or age groups. In my childhood community, Aboriginal children were encouraged to embrace stages of proper behaviour and leadership appropriate to their age. Our words for age-groups and social roles were not only labels and meanings, but also guideposts for how young people acted – good, bad and indifferent.

For a young person in their formative years, as a *guraa* or *guraamun*, the expectation is that they are now community members who can be relied upon to think of the safety, health and actions of those younger than themselves. They might take action to prevent dangerous behaviour, or they might simply act as the voice of the grown-up in the absence of anyone older.

Family kinship played an enormous part in how some community members saw their roles. Uncles and aunties on your mother's line at times seemed way too strict, and would whenever the opportunity arose remind you where you stood in the family structure. *Dhalayi* 'younger children'[9] were keenly watched over by the community at large; any child found to be acting inappropriately or abusive to others or property could be marched home to face the music.

For a little *gurri* like the 'tiny man' in this song, to be escorted away by older male members of his family for training or instruction could be a new and potentially frightening experience. However, the women in his family would have reinforced that his time was approaching and that he would be expected to change, he would need to modify his behaviour, he would need to grow up. When I listen to Lachlan Vale sing about a 'tiny man' I hear a song of compassion and solidarity, of hope and remembrance, as if the song was sung by an old man who remembered that he was once a little *gurri* himself.

3 So much meaning, so few words

We turn now to the challenge of unpacking and analysing the song text, with a view to identifying what are the textual and linguistic features that signal or correspond with the enculturated

---

[7] *Thupara* is formed from the same root as *dhupiyn* 'know, understand' (Lissarrague 2007:134); probably a verb stem *thupa-* 'know' plus a nominalising suffix *-ra.* As in the language name, the digraphs *th/dh* can be used according to individual preference, as can the symbols for stops *p/b*, *t/d, k/g.*

[8] *Guraa/mun* is related to *gurraarr* 'long, tall, straight' (Lissarrague 2007:145); Holmer (1967) wrote that *gurruman* (as he spelt it) meant 'uninitiated boy or youth', while his language consultant Mr Len Duckett said 'a big boy' (Holmer 1964; Lissarrague 2007:146). The first rhotic in *guraa* and *guraarr* is spelt here as approximant rather than trill, from my perception of multiple instances of these words.

[9] *Dhalayi* 'child, girl, boy, baby' (Lissarrague 2007:129-130).

understanding expressed above. We want to explore how the words, phrasing and structure of the text itself contribute to Ray's interpretation, while also recognising other possible understandings. Although in one sense there is 'so little to work with' (Walsh 2007), there is so much meaning here that the question for us has become not 'What does it mean?' but 'How is so much meaning packed into so few words?'

3.1 Rhyme and metre

Looking first at the text structure as a whole, we can see that despite its brevity, the song displays remarkable complexity in its structural organisation, with strong correspondences of rhythm and text (Turpin 2007a, b). It has rhyme both within and between lines, though not in the specific formal structures of European poetry (Walsh 2010:125). The first two lines are identical, but the other lines are not repeated, giving a six-line structure of AABCDEF:

You an' me, tiny man, maaguraalu galay _	A
You an' me, tiny man, maaguraalu galay _	A
Do you see? No, no sabi	B
Caught in binga-ay yirruu	C
Caught in a bingay yaarripirringu	D
The top lady to the bottom say	E
An' sting you bun, yaarriurrikayi!	F

This sequence can be repeated cyclically, in the 'timeless' manner described by Turpin (2007b:100) for Central Australian song.

The rhyme scheme operates both between lines and within them. Lines A, E and F all end with the sequence [ai], while C and D end in the high back vowel [u]. The usual pronunciation of the long variant [uː] is lower and more open (approaching [ɔ]) than for short [u]; in lines C and D this difference is reduced, probably because of the rhyming effect. The only line that otherwise doesn't participate in the rhyme scheme, line B, has an internal rhyme with high front [iː] on the stressed syllables. The metrical structure is regular, with nine sets of four beats each (indicated by underlining of the vowel/diphthong on which the beat falls). While not as complex as the rhythmic structure described by Turpin (2007b), similar principles can be seen in the alignment of rhythm and text. Examples include: a 'rest' beat at the end of line A; lengthening of *bingay* in C; and stress on the second syllable of *lady* in line E (producing a rhythmic structure closer to that of line B).

3.2 Code-switching

The pattern of code-switching is remarkably regular in relation to both the rhythmic structure and the grammatical structure. Each line starts off in English, and switches into traditional language (or NSW Pidgin in B) at roughly the halfway point. In line A there are four beats in English and four in Thangatti. Line B has two beats in English and two beats in Pidgin. Lines C and D are distinguished by a change in the pattern, with one beat in English and three in Thangatti. The effect of this is to highlight the words most central to the song's message, as will be explained in the next section. There is no switch in line E, and F returns to the two-plus-two pattern of line B.

Audio example 8.1: 'Tiny man', sung by Raymond Kelly

You an' me, tiny man,	*maaguraalu galay _*	A
You an' me, tiny man	*maaguraalu galay _*	A
Do you see? No,	*no sabi*	B
Caught in	*binga-ay yirruu*	C
Caught in a	*bingay yaarripirringu*	D
The top lady to the bottom say:		E
An' sting you bun,	*yaarriurrikayi!*	F

Grammatically, most of the switches are at phrase boundaries (MacSwan 2013). In line A, the subject noun phrase (NP) is English and the verb phrase (VP) is Thangatti. In B, the interrogative clause and its answer are in English, and the VP is in Pidgin. Lines C and D have subject ellipsis, with the first part of the VP in English and the postverbal NP in Thangatti. There is no switch in line E, and F has a main clause in English and subordinate clause in Thangatti.

Structurally impressive as this is, its pragmatic effect is most striking, in relation to the context and purpose of the song. The singer, the traditional knowledge holder, whose first language is Thangatti, is addressing the song to young multilinguals, who may be more familiar with English (and Pidgin) than with the full traditional language. So he[10] begins each line at their level, with simple English structures, before switching to more traditional language (Auer 2013). In effect, he is meeting the youngsters in their linguistic space before gently drawing them into the traditional language domain of the educational process that is to come. In today's educational terms of developmentally appropriate practice, and translanguaging in language teaching (García and Wei 2014), the pedagogical sophistication of the *Thupara* could hardly be bettered. A young listener with limited traditional language proficiency could still perceive messages of caring solidarity ('you and me, tiny man'), an impending if mysterious gathering ('caught') involving elders ('top lady') and a jocular but pointed warning of behavioural regulation ('sting on the bum').

3.3 Phonological, semantic and grammatical features

Having shown how these various text-level structures support the purpose and message of this song in its social and cultural context, we turn now to the analysis of each line, examining phonological processes, morphosyntactic structure, and semantic content. The aim of this is not to advance an interpretation intended to be definitive, particularly in the light of the many obstacles to a full interpretation of elliptical, opaque and thoroughly 'tricky' (Hale's loan-translation of Warlpiri *yajiki*, 1984:259) text. Instead, we want to open up some space for well-grounded and critically aware hypothesising about how linguistic aspects of song point toward and lead us into multiple layers of meaning and possibilities for deeper linguistic and cultural understanding.

For each line, we present our current morpheme-by-morpheme gloss, and comment on the salient features of phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics that guided us to these interpretations. This is not an exercise in starting from a cultural understanding and then hunting for language evidence to support it; rather, we think we can point to at least some of the pieces of language that prompted this interpretation within its cultural context. Songs, however, have the power to generate many possible interpretations, of which, as Michael Walsh points out, 'it is simply wrong to enquire which of these explanations is the "right" one, any more than sifting through the numerous accounts of James Joyce's *Ulysses* would reveal a single, "right" one' (Walsh 2007:129).

[10] The song is gender-specific in regard to the addressee (tiny man), but there is nothing specifically indicating a male singer. While this seems a reasonable inference from the broader social context in which older men educate boys, and from its being sung by Mr Vale, the point remains open to consideration.

(1) *You an'* *me,* *tiny man,* *maa-guraa-lu-galay.*
me get-big.boy-let's-many
'You and me, tiny man, it's time to get [you big boys] together.'

In the English part of this first line, we see some Aboriginal English features familiar to Aboriginal people in this region. The final stop of *an(d)* is lenited, as in many colloquial varieties of English, and the first sound in *me* sounds more like [n] than [m] on the tape, possibly by assimilation[11] to the preceding alveolar nasal. The semantic scope of *tiny* is extended to the collocation *tiny man*, where *little* would be more likely to occur here in contemporary Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal English.[12]

The Thangatti verb phrase has the transitive verb *maa* 'get' followed by several suffixes for which we can offer at least two possible analyses. Our first impression was of a sequence with purposive *-gu* (*-gurayi* if it follows a nominaliser, Lissarrague 2007:70) followed by what appears to be the locative suffix *-ra*, probably with a nominalising function before the hortative *-lu* and plural suffix *-galay.*[13] All of these suffixes are attested in Lissarrague (2007), but not in this particular order and sequence. We need more evidence to be sure if we are identifying them correctly. Our alternative analysis (shown in the gloss above) is that *maa* is followed by *guraa* 'big boy' before *-lu* and *–galay.* Both analyses accord with the listener's understanding of the meaning as, essentially, 'it's time to get all you big boys together [for ceremony]'. The second analysis could involve a kind of noun-incorporation, not identified elsewhere for Thangatti. Both analyses indicate more complex verbal morphology than seen in analyses of spoken Thangatti. This morphological complexity could be related to the high information density of the song text compared with everyday spoken language, and/or to the tendency of song to preserve more archaic, and often more complex, forms of language. Nonetheless, there is no individual element here that is not found in the recordings of Thangatti speech as well as song.

This line could be seen as rather opaque, in that the verb indexes an unstated agent or agents with the purpose of getting many unstated entities together. The verb *maa* itself is richly polysemous, as indicated in Lissarrague's (2007:148) glosses of 'get, fetch, take, catch, grab'. The words inserted in square brackets in the gloss are inferred on the basis that, in the social context of an older mentor addressing a young boy or boys about such a potential event, this is likely to be preparing the youngsters for the prospect of being gathered by senior men into a 'young men's camp' for education in the next stage of their progress toward manhood. This degree of subject and object ellipsis, or surface referential opacity, is not at all unusual in Australian languages (as highlighted by Garde 2013). The intense community interest in cultural, educational and ceremonial activity ensure that this is the first thing people would think of in relation to an unspecified someone intending to get together many unspecified others, despite the apparent contextual vagueness (Garde 2006, Donaldson 1979). This understood inference puts a clearer perspective on the solidarity expressed in the phrase 'you and me', reassuring the youngster that he will not go through this experience alone: that he will have a mentor's guidance and support.[14] Nonetheless, the elliptical structure combined

---

[11] There is a faint, sibilant-like sound at the end of *me,* producing something that sounds more like *nirr* with devoiced trill [niɾ̥], but could be an effect of the tongue moving toward the initial sound of the following word, *tiny*. We mention this detail as an illustration of the auditory challenges in the taped material.

[12] Ray Kelly finds himself singing *little man,* as often as *tiny man,* to his grandsons.

[13] Lissarrague's (2007:18) spelling is *-galayi* based on her analysis of a VCV sequence *ayi;* but we think there may be a difference in the sound files between a disyllabic sequence /a.yi/ and a monosyllabic sequence /ay/, based on our observation that the latter is often realised as a monophthong [eː], while the former remains [a.yi]. We are seeking more evidence on this point, but for now we are spelling this *-galay.* On the identification in this line of *guraa* 'big boy' versus *-gu-ra* 'PURP-LOC', the difference in vowel length isn't sufficient to make a firm determination, because it could be a rhythmic effect within the song.

[14] It will be noticed that we are not using the term 'initiation', which has been rightly critiqued for its connotations of occultism, anthropological exoticisation and othering of traditional educational practice. Its European cultural baggage does not fit comfortably with a traditional intellectual environment where hierarchical behaviour, individual credentialism, and ritual abuse of power are discouraged on a principled

with polysemy requires so much interpretive effort from the listener that we would not present our interpretation as definitive.

(2) *Do you see? No,* *no* *sabi.*
NEG know
'Do you see? No, [I/you] don't know.'

The English part here is fully standard, with *see* used in the sense of 'understand'. The question and answer sequence has at least two possible readings because of the subject ellipsis. It may be a switch of voice, with the *Thupara* asking the question, then answering it in the voice of the addressee saying 'I don't know'. Or it could be a rhetorical question, where the *Thupara* asks and then answers his own question: 'No, you don't know'. The switch to Pidgin for *no sabi* might be motivated by the need for a rhyme here.[15] Or it could be the adult framing the child's reply in Pidgin, seen as a simplified, childlike or 'light' form of language. Code-switching to signal change of speaker in Aboriginal storytelling has been noted elsewhere (Klapproth 2004).

(3) *Caught in* *binga-ay* *yi-rruu,*
brother be-transformation
'Caught [gathered] into brother [hood] [at daybreak *or* to be transformed],'

The English verb 'caught' echoes its Thangatti equivalent *maa* 'get' in line (1), with reference to the same prospective event. In Aboriginal English, 'caught' and 'got' are often perceived as interchangeable, because the voicing distinction between English /k/ and /g/ is non-phonemic in most Aboriginal languages. The vowel distinction between /ɔ/ and /ɒ/ is likewise non-phonemic for languages with the rounded back vowels /u/ and /uː/. The Thangatti phrase is semantically and referentially opaque without the cultural knowledge that the young men being passed through the Rules are regarded as a cohort of brothers, and that the gathering up of the youngsters was traditionally done just before daybreak. This gathering into the men's camp for commencement of instruction was sometimes spoken of in Aboriginal English as *breakaway from daylight.*

Lengthening of the final syllable in *bingay* is almost certainly due to a rhythmic constraint, where this word carries two beats and is thus extended into three syllables [pi.ŋai → pi.ŋa.ai], as the melody moves upward by four notes on the second syllable. This places great metrical and melodic emphasis on *bingay,* which is a cultural keyword and core cultural concept governing men's relationships and obligations to each other, in everyday life as well as in ceremonial activity.

The word *yirruu* poses an analytical puzzle to which we can only offer some points we think are worth considering. The word is not in the dictionary (Lissarrague 2007), nor have we found it in the written documentation by Holmer or others. Originally we thought it was *yingu* or *yinguu;* Ray remembers this as a word of cultural importance, signifying or connected with a place of traditional education and/or a 'cohort' or 'brotherhood' of those involved in ceremonial activity. On closer investigation in the audio files, a sound like a devoiced rhotic can be heard before the nasal, more like [jiɻŋuː] or *yirrnguu.* This may simply be a hitherto undocumented word, of sufficient cultural importance that one can hope it might be remembered by others. However, we would also like to point to possible connections with two other words, as indicated in our gloss of 'be-transformation'. The form *yi* is mentioned by Lissarrague (2007:169) only as a variant of the suffixes *-kayi* (subordinator) and *-tayi* (nominaliser). In some of the sound files, however, *yi* seems able to function independently with existential sense, though not as a syntactic copula; hence our tentative gloss 'be'.

---

basis. Aboriginal people of this region usually speak of mature men as having 'gone through the Rules', or having been 'put through' (with unspecified object, understood as transition to manhood).

[15] Of course the second *no* could be just a repetition of the English negator; our interpretation of it as part of the Pidgin verb phrase *no sabi* is not dogmatic.

The second syllable is even harder to pin down, but we suggest a possible connection with *rruu*, which conveys sudden transformation or illumination.[16] We gloss this tentatively as 'transformation', to leave open the possibility that it refers to either or both the transformation to daylight, and the transformation of boys into men.

This does not explain the velar nasal. An epenthetic nasalised onset to the back vowel [jiɾ̥ᵑuː] is one possibility; another is that the word *yirrnguu* is unsegmentable and the cultural association with transformation is noncompositional. The only other evidence for our suggestion of epenthesis comes from the placenames Euroka and Euroka Creek, in Thangatti country, near Burnt Bridge. Euroka Creek, pronounced *yirruu-ka,* is also known locally as Sunrise Creek, which suggests an identification of *yirruu* with sunrise or daybreak (followed by locative suffix *-ka).*

(4)	*Caught in a*	*bingay*	*yaa-rri-pi-rri-ngu.*
		brother	enter-PROG-him-PL-THRU

'Gathered into a brotherhood going through [the Rules] together.'

The English portion is parallel to the previous line, except for the addition of the indefinite article, possibly for rhythmic variation in a line where the melody does not rise as dramatically as in the previous line. The Thangatti portion is also parallel, with only the last word changing. This word poses an analytical challenge because of its polysemy, morphological complexity and very rapid pronunciation in the song. *Yaa* 'enter' occurs frequently in the sound files, and is represented in the dictionary as *yalaa* 'enter' (Lissarrague 2007:168). There is also some fortition of word-initial [j], such that it sounds more like [ˈj] or even [ɟ]; initially we thought we were hearing something like *djampingu* [ɟaɾ̥.ᵐpi.ŋu], but we are fairly sure the verb is *yaa* 'enter' with another series of suffixes. This verb has many meanings related to its core sense of 'go into', depending on what is entered, hence the derived forms *yalaati* 'swim', *yalaanya* 'bury (transitive)'. In this line the listener can discern who is entering, i.e. a group of brothers, but what they are entering is left unspecified. This ellipsis is also seen in Aboriginal English, where *going through* in such a context would so clearly signal 'going through the Rules' that there is no need to state this overtly.

The first suffix is *-(i)rri,* often heard in the sound files in a context of ongoing action; that is, progressive or continuous aspect. This does not correspond exactly to Lissarrague's (2007:45-46) account of aspect, but the continuous suffix that she identifies as *-tiyn* could possibly be our *-(i)rri* with non-future suffix *-n* (Lissarrague 2007:43-46). We think that *-(i)rri* loses its initial vowel by assimilation to the preceding vowel of the verb *yaa*, and its rhotic is devoiced on the recording.

Perhaps the most tentative of our suggestions here is the association of *-pi-rri* with third person reference plus plurality. Lissarrague (2007:29-30) notes examples of first person kin-possession markers as possible remnants of a larger system of bound pronouns. We are very tentatively suggesting that *-pi* might be a third person bound pronominal form (agreeing with the ellipsed third-person subject of *caught*). This is something we are investigating further in previously unanalysed data. One possible piece of evidence for this comes from the placename *Yarrahapinni*, which commemorates a koala ancestor rolling down the mountainside, analysed by Lissarrague (2007:168-169), following Gerhard Laves, as *yarri* 'koala' *yapani* 'rolls down' (Lissarrague 2007:168-169). However, in a recording by Mr Doug Scott, his pronunciation is more like *piyaarri yaarripirrni,* which we think may correspond to *pi-yaa-rri yaa-rri-pi-rri* '3sg-go-PROG go-PROG-3sg-PROG'. That is, the understood subject (the koala, known locally as *guula* rather than *yarri)* was going [i.e. rolling]: the gloss in Aboriginal English would be 'he went over and over, he did'. Obviously, we need more evidence before advancing this as more than a tentative hypothesis.

---

[16] When *rruu* appears as an independent morpheme, the trill is fricativised (a phonological process noted by Lissarrague 2007:5), sounding more like [ʂuː], usually with exaggerated intonation: *Rruuuu!* as an interjection akin to *Lo and behold!* or *Abracadabra!* This sense probably accounts for its appearance as *Djuwa* 'a magic word' in Lissarrague (2007:135), in a narrative context of sudden transformation of a carpet snake into a shark.

Also tentatively, but with firmer support, we identify a pluralising suffix *-(u)rri,* not to be confused with the progressive suffix *-(i)rri* because it follows a pronoun, not a verb, although it also loses its initial vowel by assimilation. This *-(u)rri* is attested several times in the sound files, possibly related to the plural suffix *-kurr* identified by Lissarrague (2007:19)[17]. The form *-ngu* at the end of *yarripirringu* is likewise not listed by Lissarrague, but this form also occurs frequently in songs, in contexts of someone or something entering and travelling through (or along) something else. A perlative case (Dixon 2002:532) has not been described for Thangatti; further investigation of *-ngu* in the sound files may yield more evidence for or against this possibility. Our tentative gloss of *-ngu* as 'THRU' reflects an Aboriginal English gloss of this line (i.e. *going through* or *being put through*).

(5) *The top lady to the bottom say:*
'The senior woman says to those under [her authority]:'

In local Aboriginal English, *top lady* (or *boss lady*) refers to a senior woman, holding cultural authority in a family and/or ceremonial context. This corresponds to the cultural role of *buulaa*, or *baluwa* in Lissarrague (2007:120), where this role is described in terms of age: 'a very old woman, a great-grandmother'. Oral tradition tells of senior women's authority in the days when traditional ceremonies were still maintained. Such women were recognised with the title of *buulaa* (or *granny*), as with 'Bolar' Callaghan, also known as 'Bolla' Pearce, who is still well remembered.[18] The standard Aboriginal English uninflected third-person singular verb form, *say* without inflection *-s*, is also seen here.

(6) *An' sting you* *bun,* *yaa-rri-urri-kayi!*
bum enter-PROG-PL-SUB
'that you'll be chastised [i.e. you' d better behave], when you mob go in there.'

Several Aboriginal English features can be observed here. The conjunction *an(d)* shows cluster reduction as above, but here it functions as a complementiser rather than a coordinating conjunction, signalling an indirect quotation of the *top lady*'s instructions. Subject ellipsis produces a passive-like effect: the *top lady* tells those under her authority 'that you are to get a sting on the bum' to regulate behavior. A shift in place of articulation of the final nasal of *bum* (backside) to *bun* is a politeness feature to avoid attributing a potentially offensive word to a senior woman (a strategy that can be seen as related to traditional etiquette or avoidance register). Inalienable possession of that body part is signalled by unmarked *you* rather than possessive *your*. This is also observed in first-person usage, as in *me eyes* versus *my glasses*, in some Aboriginal English of this region.

In the Thangatti word *yaarriurrikayi*, we see the same array of non-future and simultaneous suffixes *-rr-i* on *yaa* 'go', followed in this case by the plural subject marker *-(u)rri* and subordinator *-kayi.* This subordinating suffix, described by Lissarrague (2007:67-70), functions similarly here to the English subordinator *when,* as in the gloss '*when* you mob go [there]' (i.e. to the men's camp). An alternative possibility is that the addressees here could be women and girls being warned by the elder woman not to go there (i.e. you'll be chastised *if* you go there).[19] Phonologically, the five

---

[17] *-kurr* is a nominal suffix, while *-rri* on a verb stem is found where a group of actors are performing the verb action together (i.e. plural subject marking, glossed in Aboriginal English as *all together*); this also requires further investigation.

[18] Two Thangatti elders, speaking with Barry Morris (pers. com.) in 1980–81, described the crucial role of women at various points in the *Murrawon~Marrwan* ceremonies: 'They['d] dance every night. If they didn't dance every night, according to the Law, brothers'd get sick out in the bush. They had to dance' (John Quinlan). 'Granny Callaghan nickname *Bulaw:* had to do it her way' (Ellen Quinlan Davis).

[19] We think that, culturally speaking, it is a little more likely that the addressees are the boys, because of the traditional practice of women ritually and often playfully chasing or 'hunting away' the boys from the women's camp, sending them off to the men with their mothers' and aunties' encouragement.

syllables here are reduced to sound more like three. The trills are devoiced, and epenthetic alveolar nasals appear syllable-finally: [jaː.r̥i.u.r̥i.kai → jar̥^{n}. ar̥^{n}.kai]. The morphological complexity in lines (4) and (6) is greater than in the recordings on which Lissarrague's analysis was based, and our analysis here is more speculative than hers. Our intention is to encourage and promote a broader community interest in this line of enquiry, as well as making case for deeper investigation of this rich material and what it means to its inheritors.

4 Reflections on form and meaning

While we have been discussing these six lines as a 'song', in keeping with Turpin and Stebbins' (2010:3) definition as a sequence of syllables that is sung, from an Aboriginal perspective this stretch of text is *not* in itself a song, and most definitely not *bayirati* 'singing' (clearly also related to *baayati* 'dance', Lissarrague 2007:123, 119).[20] Turpin has pointed out that Aboriginal song is a multimedia package (Turpin 2005:90, quoted in Walsh 2007:137), seamlessly interweaving text, rhythm and melody, solo and choral performance, with dance, story, percussion, instrumental and sound effects, visual design (body painting, costume, sand patterns), staging and lighting, props, associated ceremonial and/or recreational practices – all grounded in Country, kinship, language, and Dreaming. Most of these multimedia elements were absent on the occasion of Mr Vale's 1964 recording session, but the pleasure expressed in his and Mr Scott's laughter no doubt derived from the old men's rich memories of the full performances that were so central to traditional intellectual and cultural life.

Alongside the important caveat that songtext does not equal *bayirati* or capital-S Song in an Aboriginal sense, we reiterate that our tentative attempts toward enculturated (Kelly) and intercultural (Kelly–Harkins) understandings of meaning do not equal assertions about Meaning in any essentialist sense. They are simply the hypotheses that we two individuals can make at this present moment, bringing our current resources of knowledge, experience, analysis and (perilously) intuition to the task of assigning meaning to cultural material. Trying to do this in a scholarly way, we welcome the challenge and rigour of presenting the evidence that underpins our current hypotheses, in hope of encouraging others to engage in their own hypothesising, while avoiding as best we can the pitfalls of selective interpretation and over-enthusiastic reconstruction so rightly warned against by others (Moyle 1986, Walsh 2007).

On our voyage around this song, it has been most encouraging to meet others writing about the same kinds of questions and intellectual challenges posed by the information density and structural underspecification of song language. We can offer a few reflections on the above, prompted by the marvellously pertinent questions posed by Michael Walsh (2007:130-135). Although we are far from satisfying his linguist's wish list (pp.136-139), or even formulating our own intercultural educators' wish list, we have at least tentatively proposed some morpheme-by-morpheme glossing, and have tried to provide explanations with as much explicitness and candour as we can.

In this particular song, the relation of the song language to spoken language (Thangatti, Aboriginal English, and NSW Pidgin) is very close, as befits the song's educational purpose and addressees. The fact that it is addressed to young boys also, obviously, places it in the domain of public rather than culturally restricted song, notwithstanding its implied references to impending ceremonial business. There is an interweaving of language structure and song rhythm, metre, and melody, but no strong influences of one upon the other, apart from phonological lengthening of metrically stressed vowels (especially in line 3), and contraction of unstressed syllables (especially in line 4, where the five syllables of *yaarripirringu* are contracted to sound more like three syllables [ʲjar̥.^{m}pir̥.ŋu]. Phonological processes of fortition, lenition, epenthesis, and unstressed syllable reduction heard in this and other Thangatti songs are the same as those found in the rapid connected speech of fluent speakers in the audio recordings.

---

[20] Vocabulary, semantic structure, and categorisation of song, dance, and related aspects of performance are well worth exploring in this and related languages, as recommended by Walsh (2007:132-133); but that further project is beyond our scope here.

We have noted above the morphological complexity and information density of the Thangatti structures in lines (1), (4) and (6). We have sketched the barest outline of this complexity, hoping to promote more discussion rather than suggest that our current speculations could be final. More investigation of the unanalysed portions of archived spoken language in the audio files will be needed before we can say whether or not this complexity is greater than in the connected speech of the fluent speakers. Syntactically, the Thangatti parts of the song, while highly elliptical, are no more so than the spoken language. They seem to show little syntactic simplification (cf. Koch and Turpin 2008), in light of the clausal subordination in (6) above, and the indirect quotation structure in (5)–(6). High semantic density and extensive polysemy are characteristic of spoken Thangatti, in ways very similar to what is seen in this song. It might be assumed that the polysemy of words like *maa* 'get, fetch, take, catch, grab' and *yalaa* 'enter, go into, put under, bury, swim, dive' (as glossed in Lissarrague 2007:148, 168) is attributable to the hyperpolysemy seen in language attrition (Schmid 2011). However, corresponding semantic elaboration exists alongside it, for example in different verbs for different ways of 'going': e.g. go along, go inside, go into, go on, go upwards (Lissarrague 2007:177). Extensive polysemy among affixes in Australian languages is also well documented (Bowern, Evans and Miceli 2008).

Considering the non-traditional language elements from Aboriginal English and NSW Pidgin, in our view these in no way diminish this song's authenticity. Rather, they demonstrate the strength of cultural continuity (Walsh 2007:134) in the practice of drawing on any and all available linguistic resources in the service of Aboriginal communicative purposes, as well as in the educationally deft use of multilingual strategies to engage young multilingual addressees. In regard to the functions and purposes of the song, we look forward to increasing discussion and awareness of the educational uses of traditional and contemporary song, not only in language teaching but across the curriculum as advocated by Papen (2016, chapter 8), as well as in community building, as demonstrated by the sadly now disbanded Gumbaynggirr Elders Choir (2014).

In exploring the interplay of form and meaning in this song, we have found ourselves dealing with each of the levels of meaning identified by Turpin and Stebbins (2010:8-14). Meanings of individual words and grammatical morphemes required interpretation in their context within the song, including cultural knowledge and potential for multiple meanings. Interactional meanings were central to understanding the relationship of performer to addressees and audience. Connotative meanings were involved in discerning the contextual meanings of *maa, caught, bingay,* and *yaa.* Emotional meanings were particularly rich in this example of a song concerned with highly valued cultural events, evoking solidarity, humour, remembrance, and intellectual pleasure. Linguistic imagery (Curran 2010) was highly salient, in the metaphorical associations of *caught, top lady, bottom,* and *sting you bum;* and the image-schemata of the *bingay yirruu,* passage 'through' the Rules, and ceremonial authority from *top lady* to *the bottom*.

5 Conclusions

All of the form-meaning relations touched upon here contribute to an almost limitless meaning-potential of this little song, for those with eyes to see and ears to hear. The layered nature of Aboriginal cultural meaning is such that anyone willing to have 'skin in the game' can extract satisfying meaning from song and performance, each at their own level of education and understanding. From the young and foolish to the old and wise, from senior knowledge holders and elders to stolen children, visitors from afar and even complete cultural outsiders: every person brings some resources with which to construct meaning in relation to the cultural richness on offer. This applies to contemporary Indigenous performance as much as ancestral cultural practice, though in different ways. The underlying pedagogical principle, requiring the learner to assign meaning on the basis of limited evidence, was insightfully described by Ken Hale, who recognised the thrill of discovery and 'intellectual joy' (Hale 1984:259) to be gained from this style of autonomous learning (Nunan and Richards 2015).

In a time of preoccupation with the troubles faced by our young people, we may lose sight of the fact that all children deserve to live in a society that thinks about and plans for their personal and interpersonal development free from bigotry, violence and shame. If we fail to think critically and act decisively in this crucial development period for the young *dhalayi gurri* in our family and our broader communities, we will continue to see the planning and building of new prisons and correctional, instead of educational, institutions for our disenfranchised Indigenous youth.

Meaningful access to cultural heritage is essential to young Australians' right to an education that is culturally affirming, an education that values and respects the place of Aboriginal people in building our nation and our identity for the future. We think that cultural heritage materials like this song and others like it can be reclaimed and revalued by their inheritors in ways that will be valuable to them, despite challenging issues in interpretation. In exploring this little song to a tiny *gurri,* we hope to have given some indications, both experiential and analytical, of how the deceptively simple, time-honoured but evolving textual, metrical and linguistic structures of this song demonstrate some of the broader power of song as a genre, to support linguistic and cultural resilience across the intersections of Aboriginal multicultural experience.

References

Alpher, Barry and Kevin Keeffe, 2001, Playing songs can be dangerous. In Jane Simpson et al., eds. Forty years on: Ken Hale and Australian languages, 465-476. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics.

Auer, Peter, 2013, Bilingual conversation: language, interaction and identity. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.

Barney, Katelyn, ed., 2014, Collaborative ethnomusicology: new approaches to music research between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Melbourne: Lyrebird Press.

Bowern, Claire, Bethwyn Evans and Luisa Miceli, eds, 2008, Morphology and language history: in honour of Harold Koch. Amsterdam: John Benjamins (Current Issues in Linguistic Theory, 298).

Curran, Georgia, 2010, Linguistic imagery in Warlpiri songs: Some examples of metaphors, metonymy and image-schemata in Minamina Yawulyu. Australian Journal of Linguistics 30(1):105-115.

Dixon, Robert M. W., 2002, Australian languages: their nature and development. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Donaldson, Tamsin, 1979, Translating oral literature: Aboriginal song texts. Aboriginal History 3:62-83.

—— 1984, Kids that got lost: variation in the words of Ngiyampaa songs. In Jamie C. Kassler and Jill Stubington, eds. Problems and solutions: Occasional essays in musicology presented to Alice M. Moyle, 228-253. Sydney: Hale & Iremonger.

—— 1995, Mixes of English and ancestral language words in southeast Australian Aboriginal songs of traditional and introduced origin. In Linda Barwick, Allan Marett and Guy Tunstill, eds. The essence of singing and the substance of song: recent responses to the Aboriginal performing arts and other essays in honour of Catherine Ellis, 143-156. Sydney: University of Sydney.

García, Ofelia and Li Wei, 2014, Translanguaging: language, bilingualism and education. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Garde, Murray, 2006, The language of kun-borrk in western Arnhem Land. Musicology Australia 28:59-89.

—— 2013, Culture, interaction and person reference in an Australian language. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Gumbaynggirr Elders Choir, 2014, Yarri yarrung! CD produced by Gumbaynggirr Elders Choir, Nambucca Heads, NSW (limited community distribution).

Gummow, Margaret, 1995, Songs and sites/ moving mountains: A study of one song from northern NSW. In Linda Barwick, Allan Marett and Guy Tunstill, eds. The essence of singing and the substance of song: recent responses to the Aboriginal performing arts and other essays in honour of Catherine Ellis, 121-131. Sydney: University of Sydney.

Hale, Kenneth L. 1984, Remarks on creativity in Aboriginal verse. In Jamie C. Kassler and Jill Stubington, eds. Problems and solutions: occasional essays in musicology presented to Alice M. Moyle, 254-262. Sydney: Hale & Iremonger.

Harkins, Jean, 2008, NSW contact languages. In Jim Wafer and Amanda Lissarrague, eds. A handbook of Aboriginal languages of New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory, 402-412; 810-815. Nambucca Heads, NSW: Muurrbay.

Holmer, Nils M., 1964, Language elicitation, stories and songs from northern NSW and Queensland. 4 audiotape reels. AIATSIS Sound Archive (accession no. 001755-001756, call no. Holmer_N01; open access).

—— 1966, An attempt towards a comparative grammar of two Australian languages. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.

—— 1967, An attempt towards a comparative grammar of two Australian languages, Part 2. Indices and vocabularies of Kattang and Thangatti. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.

Holmer, Nils M., and Vanja E. Holmer, 1969, Stories from two native tribes of eastern Australia. Uppsala: Lundequistska Bokhandeln.

Jebb, Maryanne, and Doug Marmion, 2015, Singing the train: a Nyamal song is heard again. In Nicholas Ostler and Brenda Lintinger, eds. The music of endangered languages (Proceedings of the 19th Foundation for Endangered Languages Conference), unpag. Bath, UK: Foundation for Endangered Languages. Online at https://www.academia.edu/30210846/Singing_the_Train_a_Nyamal_song_is_heard_again [accessed 27 May 2017].

Kelly, Raymond F., 2015, Dreaming the Keepara: New South Wales Aboriginal perspectives, 1808-2007. PhD thesis, University of Newcastle, Australia.

Klapproth, Danièle, 2004, Narrative as social practice: Anglo-western and Australian Aboriginal oral traditions. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

Koch, Grace and Myfany Turpin, 2008, The language of Central Australian Aboriginal songs. In Claire Bowern, Bethwyn Evans and Miceli Luisa, eds. Morphology and language history: in honour of Harold Koch, 167-183. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Lissarrague, Amanda, 2007, Dhanggati grammar and dictionary with Dhanggati stories. Nambucca Heads, NSW: Muurrbay.

—— 2013, Interlinearised text of Holmer [1967]. Unpublished manuscript. AIATSIS Library (call no. pMS 6603, open access).

MacSwan, Jeff, 2013, Code switching and grammatical theory. In Tej K. Bhatia and William Ritchie, eds. Handbook of bilingualism and multilingualism, 223-250. Oxford: Blackwell.

McDonald, Barry, 1996, Evidence of four New England corroboree songs indicating Aboriginal responses to European invasion. Aboriginal History 20:176-194.

Moyle, Richard, 1986, Alyawarra music: songs and society in a Central Australian community. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.

Nunan, David and Jack C. Richards, eds, 2015, Language learning beyond the classroom. London: Routledge.

Papen, Uta, 2016, Literacy and education: policy, practice and public opinion. New York: Routledge.

Schmid, Monika S., 2011, Language attrition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Key Topics in Sociolinguistics.)

Threlkeld, Lancelot Edward [attrib.], n.d. [1820s?], Songs of the natives of New South Wales to the north of Sydney (manuscript). In Threlkeld, Rev. Lancelot Edward – Papers, 1815–1862 (Z A382), p. 129. State Library of NSW, Sydney. (Microfilm held as CY 820 [frames 777-909].)

Troy, Jakelin, 1993, Language contact in early colonial New South Wales 1788-1791. In Michael Walsh and Colin Yallop, eds, Language and culture in Aboriginal Australia, 33-50. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.

Turpin, Myfany, 2007a, Artfully hidden: phonological and rhythmic correspondences in a Central Australian Aboriginal song series. Musicology Australia 29:93-107.

—— 2007b, The poetics of Central Australian Aboriginal song. Australian Aboriginal Studies 2007 (2):100-115.

Turpin, Myfany,and Tonya Stebbins, 2010, The language of song: some recent approaches in description and analysis. Australian Journal of Linguistics 30(1):1-17.

Walsh, Michael, 2007, Australian Aboriginal song language: so many questions, so little to work with. Australian Aboriginal Studies 2007 (2):128-144.

—— 2010, A polytropical approach to the ‘Floating Pelican’ song: an exercise in rich interpretation of a Murriny Patha (Northern Australia) song. Australian Journal of Linguistics 30(1):117-130.