

The language of governance in a cross-cultural cultural context: what can and can't be translated

Frances Morphy

Introduction

In a forthcoming book, *English: meaning and culture*, linguist Anna Wierzbicka addresses the proposition that English, like any other language, 'carries with it a great deal of internal cultural baggage'. She examines key English concepts such as 'fair', 'reasonable' and 'impartial', and shows that many of these are unique to English—they have no equivalents in other European languages, let alone the languages of other, non-Western cultures.

English is now the global language of governance and development, and it might be expected that many of the terms of the governance discourse are similarly dependent for their meaning on the cultural assumptions of English-speaking peoples. In this paper I will explore the implications of this for governance discourse in Indigenous contexts in Australia, focusing on my own research with the Yolngu people of north-east Arnhem Land over 30 years, and more particularly in recent times in the context of my case study of the Laynhapuy Homelands Association as part of the Indigenous Community Governance project.

My fieldwork on governance terms is only in its very preliminary stages, and so much of what I will say today relates not so much to governance terms per se as to the question of translatability more generally.

I start with a caveat. In much of what I will say today I am setting up an opposition between Yolngu-speakers as bearers of Yolngu culture, and English-speakers as bearers of Anglo-Australian culture. I do not mean to imply by this, and not does Anna Wierzbicka imply in her work, that language and culture are somehow coterminous, nor do I take the strong Whorfian view of language that suggests that languages constrain what their speakers can think about. In other words, I am not going to argue for a strong

form of incommensurability. I will draw a distinction between translation and explication, and argue that whereas the former may sometimes be impossible the latter never is. The problem is realising the necessity for it, and developing the tools that are needed to carry it out successfully.

An example of non-translatability

Let me start with an illustrative example of non-translatability. Earlier this year, during my initial short period of fieldwork with the Laynhapuy Association, I sat in on a two-day ‘Indigenous Governance Improvement Program’ workshop that had been arranged for the Association’s council members. Near the beginning of the first session, the instructor briefly mentioned ‘cultural match’ and discussed the idea that there might be ‘two world views’. The handout materials contrasted an idealised ‘Aboriginal world view’ in which ‘issues of family, relationship with country, traditions, and lore [sic] all come together to provide a framework in which each person relates to each other’, with the ‘rules and customs’ of western society based upon the principles of ‘equality, fairness and democracy’.

There is the word ‘fair’ again—one of the words characterised by Wierzbicka as being unique to English. And that was really the end of any attempt to engage seriously with what might or might not be principles of governance derived from the Yolngu world view.

Later on the first day, we broke up into smaller groups to work on particular issues. I suggested that one group might like to look at some of the English terms that had come up so far, and think about how those might be translated into Yolngu-matha. Me and my big mouth—I found myself acting as the facilitator for the group that did just that.

One of the words that we decided to work on was ‘honest’—a term that had been put forward as a desired quality in people in positions of responsibility. The word had not been commented on by Yolngu during the main session, but it quickly became evident that there was no simple way to translate this word into Yolngu-matha.

The translation equivalents that people came up with were:

ngayangu dhunupa

ngayangu ‘feeling, emotion’

dhunupa ‘straight, right, proper’

<i>ngayangu wanggany</i>	<i>wanggany</i> ‘one’
<i>ngayangu dhapinya</i>	<i>dhapinya</i> ‘generous, kind-hearted’
<i>mulkurr wanggany</i>	<i>mulkurr</i> ‘head, part of the body where thinking happens’
<i>rom dhunupa</i>	<i>rom</i> ‘law laid down by the ancestors, culture, custom, customary way of doing things’

What are the essential differences in meaning between this collection of terms and the English word ‘honest’?

Dictionary definitions of ‘honest’ appeal to terms such as ‘fair’, ‘just’ and ‘trustworthy’, and oppose it to actions such as lying, cheating and stealing, for example: ‘not given to lying, cheating, stealing, etc.; trustworthy’ (Collins); ‘showing uprightness and fairness’ (Macquarie); 3) ‘fair and just in character and behaviour, not cheating or stealing’ (Oxford). All these definitions have some things in common: they describe characteristics of the individual, they appeal to moral principles or abstract qualities of character, and they are described in terms of the behaviour that results from having the quality of honesty.

The Yolngu ‘translations’ are very different. Two of them at least—*ngayangu wanggany* and *mulkurr wanggany*—describe characteristics of a group rather than of an individual—a free translation might be ‘of one feeling’ or ‘of one way of thinking’. So here ‘honesty’ is not being seen as a personal quality, but rather as a property of a group—something we might translate as consensus—produced by interactions between its members.

Three of the translations are compounds with the word for ‘feeling or emotion’ as the first element and one has the word for ‘head’ which is commonly used in compounds describing mental qualities. In these translation equivalents it is the mental or emotional state of the individual or group, with reference to an implied context, rather than some timeless personal characteristic that is invoked. *Ngayangu dhunupa* comes closest to having the moral qualities carried by the English word, but it is still couched in terms of emotion or feeling rather than in terms of qualities of character. All of the Yolngu definitions concern internal states or dispositions of the individual or group rather than their behaviour.

Perhaps closest to the English sense in some ways is *rom dhunupa*, which appeals to a set of principles outside the individual in the form of *rom*. But *rom*, in turn, is a very complex word that has no direct translation equivalent in English, as we will see later. Most importantly, an appeal to *rom* is an appeal to a set of laws and principles sanctioned by ancestral forces rather than an appeal to a set of context-free moral precepts.

What these definitions suggest is that the differences between Yolngu and western ideas about governance might go deeper than terminology, and deeper even than the perceived differences in sociality that are captured in commonly cited oppositions such as ‘dispersed polities’ versus ‘centralised polities’ or ‘consensus decision making’ versus ‘electoral representation’, or ‘kin-based’ versus ‘corporate and bureaucratic’.

Some Yolngu principles of governance

Leadership in Yolngu society existed and continues to exist at several levels, in the context of patrilineal estate-owning clans linked together in a complex marriage system. The kin networks generated by this system are known as *gurrutu*, and this is the Yolngu ‘governance environment’ par excellence (Christie and Greatedorex 2004). At the clan level, primogeniture is an important principle of recruitment to leadership. But leadership can be a matter of contestation, and in contested circumstances personal qualities become important.

Ultimately a leader is someone to whom other people listen, a person who can create consensus, that is, a sense of *ngayangu wanggany* or *mulkurr wanggany*. Thus leadership is only conferred conditionally, and has to be constantly earned. It is a process rather than an ascribed position in a hierarchy. Clan leaders in Yolngu society are not called *mulkurr* ‘head’: they are not the ‘heads’ of their clans. Rather they are called *ngurru*, ‘nose’, and in *ngurru-X*, ‘leader of clan X’. The implications of this metaphor need further investigation, but at the very least it suggests that whereas the English metaphor implies a view of the leader as the apex of a vertical hierarchy, the Yolngu metaphor characterises a leader as being on the same horizontal plane as those who confer authority on him through consensus.

On the homelands the Yolngu leadership system still operates according to Yolngu principles. It has adapted to the circumstances of small settlement life. The system still depends on the same mix: genealogical seniority combined with an ability to lead through consensus. And it is still grounded—settlements cohere around the senior male members of the owning clan. Groups of related homelands are the modern equivalent of the large seasonal groupings: regional leaders still emerge according to the same principles as they did before. The key to such a system is nested spheres of influence, and in the sets of connected homelands the spheres of precontact times have been reproduced in a new form.

‘Fairness’, ‘equality’ and democracy’ are not words that have any significance in the context of this Yolngu system of governance. There is nothing ‘fair’ or ‘equal’ about primogeniture, all people are not created equal, and leaders are not elected by their ‘constituents. But the Yolngu see nothing wrong with their governance, which has its own system of checks and balances. Leaders who lead by consensus are constrained by the need to reproduce consensus. Good governance does not depend on crucially on western notions such as fairness.

How human beings are constituted

Yolngu also participate in governance structures that are founded on western principles: the Laynhapuy executive council, for example, is an elected body on which those elected represent the interests of their constituents. I am suggesting, however, that Yolngu bring with them into this arena a very different set of ideas from those of English speaking westerners about how the person is constituted as a thinking, feeling, acting and moral being, and about how the individual is nested in their social and physical universe and their culture (see Hunt (2005) 13–15 for a related discussion of cross-cultural aspects of ‘capacity development’.

Because this is so, it is hard even for Yolngu with good English to understand what English governance terms, with all their western cultural baggage, *really mean* to English-speaking westerners. In the Yolngu view nothing happens or exists independent of its context. In western thought this is considered to be a limitation of ‘non-western’

thinking, but from Yolngu viewpoint it is the western way of thinking that is limited and peculiar—something that leads westerners to be without roots, almost a-social. A Yolngu man once said to me: ‘We Yolngu are like the trees of the forest, because our roots go deep into the land. *Ngapaki* (white people) are like the grass, their roots are shallow and they come and go with the seasons. We withstand the fire, while they get burnt out.’

This metaphor relies for its power crucially on the word ‘root’. The Yolngu matha word *djalkiri* can be translated as ‘root of a tree’, but it also means ‘footprint’, ‘the visible and tangible evidence of ancestral presence in the land’, and is also often translated by Yolngu using the English word ‘foundation’. Yolngu see themselves and their social relationships as just the outward manifestation of a deeper, ancestral world, which is their *djalkiri*. The *djalkiri* metaphor is elaborated in many ways, some of which resonate with similar English metaphors. For example, young people who are alienated as described as having been cut off from their *djalkiri*.

But for Yolngu, those roots are always there in the land, even if people on the surface are becoming dissociated from them. This was brought home to me forcefully many years ago when a Yolngu elder came to stay with us in Canberra for a while. Whenever we went out in the bush he was constantly looking for and interpreting signs of ancestral presence in the landscape—particular rock formations, the shape of a particular watercourse—it was quite clear that for him, even if there were no Aboriginal people still in the area who could interpret the landscape, those ancestral roots were still there.

For Yolngu, this is a profound difference between them and other Australians. We live on the land, may even call it our home, but they come from the land, and are a part of it. This is the underlying context for everything in Yolngu life.

There are no universal principles of good governance

Anglo-Australians tend to assume that, for all their difference, Indigenous principles of governance appeal, as western principles of governance do, to what are assumed to be universal concepts such as ‘fairness’. I was at a seminar in Canberra where Professor Wierzbicka, with whose words I introduced this paper, was discussing the concepts ‘fair’ and ‘reasonable’. One of her questioners, after the paper was over, demonstrated an

inability to believe that Polish (her native language) did not have such words. He implied that it was unthinkable that the language of any ‘civilised’ society did not encode such concepts. Her response was, as she observed, thoroughly Polish. She was vehemently assertive (an Anglo choice of words) in stating that it was perfectly possible to have a language, and a civilised society, without such words and concepts.

If Polish does not have them, why should it be assumed a priori that any other language does? Attempts at ‘capacity building’ that assume a set of universal principles underlying all human actions, whatever their surface form, are doomed to failure. Such an assumption is based on a perception that Anglo notions of governance appeal to universal principles—or principles that *ought to be*, in our minds, universal—such as fairness, and reasonableness.

The question of whether people should be persuaded that concepts such as ‘fairness’ *ought to be* universal is certainly an interesting one, but that is a different issue—one that is at the crux of the debate about human rights versus cultural relativism. I am not trying to address that debate here, but to make a point that needs to be made before such a debate can even begin. I have already discussed briefly how it is possible for good Yolngu governance to exist without such concepts.

The realisation that our Anglo notions of governance are as culture-bound and relativistic as anyone else’s—in other words that they are not founded on self-evident truths—is hard to achieve. The course that I sat in on at Laynhapuy was, of its kind, a good one. But it treated the Yolngu participants as if principles of Anglo governance could simply be grafted onto their existing ideas because of an assumption about the universality of concepts such as ‘fairness’ and ‘honesty’. It was not that the instructor failed to recognise difference—after all he did acknowledge that ‘cultural match’ was desirable and that there might be two ‘world views’. But he did not understand the nature of the difference. So when the graft fails to take, as it often does, this is seen as a deficit in the Indigenous people concerned rather than in the nature of the training enterprise itself.

Whose deficit?

It has become common to take a deficit view of Aboriginal people, particularly in the field of policy making. The thinking seems to go: they lack all these things—health, education, jobs—so it must be self-evident that ‘the way forward’ is to make up these deficits and all will be well. However, this is not so self-evident when we realise that many Aboriginal people, in turn, have a deficit view of wider Anglo-Australian society. Anglo-Australians are thought to lack family feeling, ties to land, and attachment to anything but money. They give too much importance to the means for getting money, that is, jobs. They are selfish and ungenerous. We may see this as a caricature—but the Anglo-Australian deficit view of them is equally one-dimensional.

Given that Yolngu have a deficit view of Anglo-Australian society, we might expect to find some evidence of resistance to becoming, in the phrase used by Emma Kowal in a recent NARU seminar (Kowal 2005), a ‘well-governing Indigenous person’ if the recognition space for such a person is defined in terms of western notions of ‘good governance’. And evidence of resistance does, indeed exist, in the court transcript of the recent Blue Mud Bay native title hearing. The discourse here was not so much about governance as about ‘law’ and what that might mean, in the context of the ‘recognition space’ that native title law gives to customary law. Here is an illustrative passage:

Counsel: ... you mentioned your law, or ‘our law’ I think you said. Well, what do you mean by that? What do you mean by your ‘law’?

Witness: My law.

C: Yes.

W: Well, what’s that ‘law’ mean?

C: That’s right.

W: What in your - - -

C: That’s the question I’m asking you.

W: I’m asking too: what is ‘the law’ means?

C: Well, you - - -

W: In balanda [English/white person's] way, what youse call it?

C: You – you said, 'Under our law, we line the turtle shells up', as I understood you.

W: Okay, exactly - - -

C: That's part of your law. What did you - - -

W: Well, exactly what I'm talking now. When I'm using Balanda English, well, you should know better than me, you know, because I'm – I'm talking in Yolngu way too you know? My – my tongues are turning around, like, Yolngu way I'm talking, and if I'm using your English now, you should understand this is new to me ... my really language is Yolngu language ... And I cannot – you know, when you talk to me, you know – what is Yolngu story, what this 'law' means, you know, well, I just pick up the English, 'law'. My ngarraku [my] rom, my ngarraku rom is different. I call it rom.

...

C: And what does that word mean?

W: Well, I'm telling you it – the law been there forever. It was given from our ancestors to our grandfathers to our father to me. This is what I call rom and law. I'm just putting that English into my – in my way of using of – using or thinking, you know, law. You call it law; I call it rom.

This is a very complex discourse, and to unpack it completely would be a paper in itself. But one of the things that is clearly going on is a critique of the necessity for translation, and an assertion of non-translatability. The witness is saying, in effect, 'when I use your English word "law" I using it as a translation for the Yolngu word *rom*. I'm forced to do this because the medium used in the court is English. You have to explain to me what you mean by it when you use it, because although I do not fully understand what you mean by the word I know it means something different from *rom*.'

‘These words are Yolngu words now’

Yolngu have pretty clear ideas about what skills they want to acquire, and what roles they want to fill in the organisations they sit on the interface between their culture and ours.

The same group of Yolngu governance trainees said to me as we were discussing the meaning of words: ‘Yolngu need to learn ngapaki skills like being a book keeper, a shop keeper or a teacher, for self-sufficiency, self-management and self-determination. These are Yolngu words now as well.’ It is very true that Yolngu use these terms frequently when talking about governance, but do these terms mean the same to Yolngu as they do to non-Yolngu?

I would suggest that when westerners are using terms like these many have in mind financial independence from the state (self-sufficiency), the acquisition of western-style attitudes to money and management (self-management) and, increasingly, self-determination for individuals (rather than communities), couched in the language of choice.

For Yolngu, on the other hand, I would suggest that what they have in mind is acquiring what they perceive to be a set of necessary skills that will allow them to roll back the involvement of non-Indigenous people in the administration of community organisations. They see self-management and self-determination in terms of taking back control, and the maintenance and strengthening of Yolngu culture, not in terms of becoming more like non-Yolngu. Non-Yolngu tend to see these two propositions—administrative efficiency and Yolngu-ness—as mutually exclusive, and so dialogue breaks down. But it is here, precisely, that explicatory dialogue is most necessary.

Until very recently Yolngu did not think of self-sufficiency in terms of financial independence from the state, because they viewed state support, such as CDEP and housing and infrastructure support very much as ‘help from the government’—as a kind of compensation for the loss of autonomy consequent on sedenterisation and colonisation. And historically this was the view from government too.

This view is undergoing change, partly as a result of recent changes in policy settings, where it is being made increasingly clear that government no longer holds this view. People are beginning to talk about the need—politically—to cut loose from dependence

on the state and develop local economies—in other words it sounds at first sight as if they are beginning to think of self-sufficiency in Anglo economic terms.

But this is very far from the case. Yolngu see no virtue in jobs for their own sake. They do not want just ‘any job’ for themselves, or for their children. They do not subscribe to the notion that paid labour in and of itself confers dignity and self respect on the labourer. They want jobs that allow them financial independence from the state, but which fit in with a way of life that values, above everything else, kinship and spiritual connection to land.

The moral is: we cannot assume a priori that when people from different cultural backgrounds use a particular form of words or a particular term that they mean the same thing by it.

Is productive dialogue about governance possible?

As Yolngu often say: ‘we live in two worlds now’. Dialogue about governance is therefore inevitable. But if it is to be productive, both parties to the dialogue need to understand some of the things I have been talking about in this paper. Put simply, each side needs to know where the other side is coming from before there is any possibility of attempting to explicate governance notions. I use that word advisedly. There are definite limits to translation, but explication is possible under the right circumstances.

I actually think that certain Yolngu are further down the road to understanding this than all but a handful of non-Indigenous Australians. In a situation where one group dominates another politically and economically, it is far more common for bicultural individuals to emerge from the dominated side—because they have to. Just as most speakers of English are monolingual because they have no need in their everyday lives to speak another language, so most members of Anglo cultures around the world have no need to be anything but monocultural. The skilled bicultural individuals who can mediate between the wider society and the local community are usually on the local side of the fence.

Awareness of the need for cross-cultural explication is something that needs to be taught to all public servants who interact with Indigenous people in the course of their work, and to all participants in training and development enterprises—the trainers as much as the

trainees. We need to do some serious work in unpacking the cultural baggage surrounding governance terms in both languages, so that they can be clearly explicated. To continue the metaphor, at the moment Indigenous people are being asked to buy a pig in a poke. If the goods were laid out clearly before them it would be much easier for them to make informed choices, and to understand more clearly the consequences of certain choices. Bicultural Indigenous Australians must be actively engaged in the development of such training, not simply the recipients of it. Until this happens in a serious way, we will continue to talk past each other and blame each other for failing to understand.

We have to train ourselves to listen accurately to what Indigenous people want of their organisations, and of policy that is directed towards their 'welfare', and resist the tendency always to lecture them about what 'they' need to build in the way of capacity. We need to build our own capacities to respect difference and give it genuine space within the wider Australian society. Because when they are in a position to understand more accurately what western governance terms mean to us, Indigenous people might go one of two ways. They might agree to be positioned, or to work towards being positioned as 'well-governing Indigenous persons', but then again they might use the information to articulate more systematically an alternative model of governance.

References

- Christie, M. and Grotorex, J. 2004 . 'Social capital in the contexts of Yolngu life', *Learning Communities: International Journal of Learning in Social Contexts*, 2, 38–51.
- Hunt, J. 2002. 'Capacity development in the international development context: implications for Indigenous Australia', *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 278*, CAEPR, ANU.
- Kowal, E. 2005. 'Elders, experts and entrepreneurs: a postcolonial analysis of the governance debate', paper presented to the NARU governance seminar, 26 October, NARU, Darwin.
- Wierzbicka, A. forthcoming 2006. *English: Meaning and Culture*, Oxford University Press, New York.