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Wild Speech, Tame Speech, Real Speech?

Written renditions of Aboriginal Australian Speech, 1788-1850

Penny van Toorn

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From Transcription to Dictation – Bennelong, Biraban and Benjamin

The question of where fiction ends and fantasy begins is bound up with questions regarding the circumstances under which Aboriginal utterances were documented in writing. Non-fictional paraphrases and transcriptions of Aboriginal utterance abound. Not so common are the instances when Aboriginal people dictated the exact words that were to be written down verbatim or with minimal ‘corrections’ by an amanuensis. Elsewhere, I have examined the dynamic interplay of Aboriginal talk and text in south-eastern Australia from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth century.¹ Here, I pick up a thread of that work to tease out some key differences between transcription and dictation.

Within the category of *non-fictional* transcriptions of Aboriginal speech, the difference between transcription and dictation is especially critical. Transcription often over-rides the Aboriginal speaker’s intentions. The transcriber assumes authority to edit the Aboriginal utterance in a manner appropriate to the needs of the intended audience of non-Aboriginal readers. With dictation, by contrast, the scribe is accountable to the Aboriginal speaker. To dictate is to assert your authority, whether in wording a message or ruling a nation.

With the fantasy of Aboriginal wild-speech on the one hand, and the ventriloquising of tame literary English speech on the other, it is not easy to find authentic written renditions of Aboriginal utterances in English in the early colonial period. Yet prior to the 1850s, a small number of Aboriginal people either dictated to an

¹ See Penny van Toorn, *Writing Never Arrives Naked: Early Cultures of Aboriginal Writing in Australia*, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2006.

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amanuensis or put pen to paper in English themselves. In 1796, eight years after Tench represented Bennelong's voice as that of a gothic villain, Bennelong dedicated a letter to Mr Phillips, steward to the British Home Secretary, Lord Sydney. Mr Phillips and his wife had nursed Bennelong through a grave illness during his visit to England earlier in the 1790s.

A second example of Aboriginal dictation is Biraban's translation of Awabakal sentences into English, as transcribed by missionary Launcelot Threlkeld from the mid-1820s to the early 1840s.² Threlkeld established his mission near Lake Macquarie north of Sydney. Many examples of Awabakal language came from the mouth of Biraban, also called 'Eaglehawk', who inspired Eliza Hamilton Dunlop's poem, 'The Eagle Chief', published in the *Sydney Gazette* on the 21st April, 1842.

Occasionally in the process of supplying Threlkeld with ethnographic information, Biraban also documented some of the sad facts of his life. In Threlkeld's book, *An Australian Language*, among the 'Specimens of a Dialect of the Aborigines of New South Wales', we find Biraban's announcement that he is married to a woman known as 'Patty', and that their child has died. When the opportunity arose, Biraban used dictation to put the fact of his child's death on a written record. Biraban was fluent enough in English to serve as a court translator. He stated the fact of his child's death, as if incidentally, in the process of illustrating Awabakal grammatical forms:

Bo-un-to-a – the feminine pronoun, she.
Unne bountoa Patty ammoung kin-ba.
This she Patty with me.
This is Patty with me. [Patty was Biraban's wife.]

Ammoung katoa bountoa wa-nun.
Me with she move-will.
She will go with me.

Wonni bountoa tea unnung tatte ammoun-ba.
Child she to me there dead mine.
My child there is dead.³

Threlkeld, a fanatical ethnographer with tunnel vision, served unwittingly as an amanuensis for his 'assistant', Biraban, who was asserting authorial agency in disguised ways that seem to have entirely escaped Threlkeld's attention.

² For further details and a full transcript of Bennelong's letter, and a transcript of Biraban's account of his dream, see van Toorn, p.55 and p.47.

³ Biraban, quoted in Launcelot Threlkeld, *An Australian Language as Spoken by the Awabakal*, ed. John Fraser, Sydney: Government Printer, 1982, p.135.

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Aboriginal people devised various means of using their voices to smuggle their viewpoints and stories into official written records. During the 1884 inquiry into the treatment of Aboriginal prisoners on Rottnest Island in Western Australia, a Nyoongar man known as Benjamin delivered the following oral testimony, knowing that his evidence would be included in the official written report:

I come from Eyre's Sand Patch. I am here for stealing; another blackfellow "coax'em me". I have just arrived here. I little bit like Rottnest. I am going back at lambing time. I get plenty to eat. I am warm, but have a rotten blanket. I only half work'em. The Warders are kind not sulky. I will not return to prison when I once get away from this. I walked from Eyre's Sand Patch to Albany naked, with a chain on my neck. My neck was sore from chain. I knocked up from the long walk. Policeman Truslove no good. He hit me for knocking up. Policeman Wheelock a good fellow, nothing sulky. I like ship, I was not sick. I do not like walking so far. I came with a bullock chain round my neck from Eyre Sand Patch to Albany. When it rained my neck was very sore from the chain. I have the same blanket I came with a fortnight ago. I had a cold in Fremantle. The doctor saw me at Fremantle, when I was ready to come to Rottnest. I was ill, and when I got here I was very ill. My trousers and shirt I came from Albany in are now in the Prison. I gave them to a native this morning. I did not get any from the Prison. What clothes I have on were obtained by inter-change with other natives. I had no clothes given me from Eyre Sand Patch to Albany. I was quite naked all the way, no clothes or blanket. Three of us came from Fremantle, we were a little ill. One of us was left behind at Fremantle, sick. He has now come over. My companions have the same clothes and blankets that they came with. My clothes and blankets were obtained at Albany.

Comparing Benjamin's testimony with those of the other prisoners, it becomes apparent that his statement was not a monologue at all, but rather a set of answers to a series of questions, which are not included with the testimony. At first glance, it seems that Benjamin is structuring his own narrative of his experiences. However, the transcript is in fact only one half of a dialogue. Comparing Benjamin's testimony with the statements of the other Aboriginal men interviewed for the inquiry, it becomes clear that they have all been asked the same questions in the same order.

Benjamin manages to break out of the constraints imposed by those questions, however. He puts on record the fact that policeman Truelove abused and

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humiliated him by forcing him to walk naked with a chain around his neck, all the way from Eyre Sand Patch to Albany. He returns to this humiliating experience again and again. His testimony breaks out of the constrictions imposed by the official line of questions. Nothing the questioners do can deliver Benjamin from his story. He returns time after time to what *he* wants to divulge for the record.

Conclusion

Analysts of Aboriginal literacy texts often remark on the oral qualities of the writing. Orality serves as a mark of authenticity, a hallmark of Aboriginal writing. There is no such single thing as 'the Aboriginal voice'. There are many permutations of orality in literacy practice, however, ranging from exact transcriptions to loose paraphrases, and from ethnographic fantasies to closely observed realities. Some renditions of Indigenous orality, like Warrup's testimony, are peppered with English literacy devices designed to evoke what the author thinks are the sound-qualities of Aboriginal oral discourse. In today's Indigenous-authored books, the provenance of the text is often featured prominently in a preface, a foreword or an introductory chapter. In so far as authenticity is marketable, the provenance of the text may be prominently featured on the covers.

Orality has always been a medium of fleeting, unverifiable, transgression, a speech-crime that leaves no material trace. On the Wybalenna Aboriginal Settlement on Flinders Island in the 1830s and 40s, Aboriginal breaches of verbal propriety were difficult to detect or document. Especially when congregating together, the people in Wybalenna knew they could break the verbal rules with minimal danger of getting caught and punished. In 1838, for example, at the marriage of Walter George Arthur and Mary Ann Cochrane, the Aboriginal guests 'mispronounced' the toast. The words 'good health' morphed into what sounded suspiciously like 'go to hell'. This breach remained unpunished. In the crowd assembled at the wedding celebration, it would have been difficult to identify exactly who said what, and whether any improprieties were accidental or deliberate. Commandant Robinson had no option other than to turn a deaf ear, or explain away the subversive speech acts as mere Native errors.

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