

THE TASK OF THE TRANSLATOR

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‘The language of Truth, the tensionless and even silent depository of the ultimate truth which all thought strives for...whose divination and description is the only perfection that a philosopher can hope for, is concealed in concentrated fashion in translations. There is no muse of philosophy, nor is there one of translations.’

The Task of the Translator (Walter Benjamin 1969, p. 77)

What is the Yolŋu Speaking?

On the first day of the Teaching from Country seminar, Maratja gave us the question ‘What is the Yolŋu speaking?’ He had begun his contribution to the panel discussion by standing and giving to the small crowd, a strong message in Yolŋu language (which very few of the people there would have understood). Saying first that he wished he had a spear thrower with him so he could speak with clear Yolŋu authority, he then said: ‘Wäŋay ga ŋuruŋi ŋayatham rirrakay ga bulu ŋanapurr yolŋu’yulŋuy. Dhiyaŋ bala napurr ga waŋan, ŋunhi rirrakay ga dhawaŋthuna’. ‘It’s the land which holds the sound, and then after that, we Yolŋu people. What we are talking about, is how that sound emerges’.

By the end of 90 minutes, I think every one of the Yolŋu who spoke on the panel had made the point at least once, that it’s the land which does the speaking. They had been asked to think about the Teaching from Country program, and how it was different from classroom teaching. Yiŋiya: ‘It makes a lot of difference teaching on the land because I’ve got support from all the background, the spirits of the trees, my fathers, the ground himself speaks, the land itself speaks as well. And here, (in Darwin), I feel I’m standing in another man’s land. This land doesn’t belong to me.’; then turning to the other Yolŋu panel members said: ‘Nämum ga muka wäŋay’ – ‘The land here doesn’t recognize us, does it?’ – to which they all readily agreed. Maratja added later: ‘It’s not just coming from a head knowledge. It is the non-verbal too, it’s the land speaking through us.’

Gotha used the transitive form of the same verb which Maratja had used, to describe the way she would ‘dhawaŋmaram’ – *cause to emerge* – some of the short stories, parables really, she was telling. (Dhawaŋmaram is the same word used when ceremonial leaders bring things – songs,

images, sacred objects, dances – out from a secret-sacred shade and make them public.) Her stories, all of them cautionary tales, were really about how things can go so wrong when you don't listen to what the country (and the wind) is telling you. One story was about a few women of her acquaintance who had received a nasty fright in the jungle because they weren't listening properly before starting out on a yam collecting expedition.

Garnḡulkpuy took the cue to speak of 'going out into the bush for a yam as a collective research procedure'. She went on to tell the sacred story of her own Wangurri clan's knowledge tradition, the Garmak Gularri – the sacred Yirritja floodwater. 'Where does the source start?'

(At) Dhälinybuy (then it) flows out to the sea. The source talks the Wangurri learning and teaching methodology. It talks about confidence, it talks about research. When the water wells up in the wet season it starts to flow and it talks, agreeing, negotiating, consulting, stating and empowering. It empowers us to be able to tell ourselves that we belong to something, the land, the sea speaks, the river speaks. And this is where all these methodologies, or theologies, come from, here.

In the panel discussion at the seminar, we were watching the other end of the discursive spectrum: people bunched up together in front of a (mostly) strange and (maybe) uncomprehending audience, being asked to *represent* how they feel and know. Yiḡiya beginning in Teaching from Country mode (in the same room from which he had been teaching all semester) using his PowerPoint presentation and taking us quietly through his philosophy and practice. When he showed a slide of a giant python draped around a few people's necks, Dhāḡgal exclaimed most emphatically: 'That *is* me. I *am* that! Me and that woman there in the audience – Gämiritj!' (An anthropologist would have called it her totem, but she called it herself.) Waymamba – the recently retired Yolḡu lecturer reflected on the different 'heads' that Yolḡu have and how those differences relate to different clan-based estates.

Standing, wishing for a spear thrower to hold while he spoke (that bit not in his English translation), thanking and honouring the audience several times, acknowledge and honouring the Larrakia man who had welcomed us to his ancestral land (on which the university is built) – Maratja adopted the hortative style which is a recognized discursive form in Yolḡu society, and at which he had become adept as a senior spokesperson for his Djambarrpuyḡu family line as well as a strong Methodist churchman.

The Yolḡu were excited about Teaching from Country because it gave them a chance to *do* their knowledge in a relaxed, supportive environment rather than to *represent* their knowledge in a dangerous, alien context – as they were required to do on the panel. Clearly, you can see Yiḡiya in the teaching trial from Dhamiyaka, a sacred waterhole created by the legendary Djaḡ'kawu

sisters, teaching all the way to California, almost beside himself with pride and joy and reduced to the state of humble deference to the leaders, the ancestors, the Californian undergraduates and the young men around him. We in Darwin could see the beautiful patch of rainforest, we could look in the direction from where the sisters had come, see the direction they went off in, hear some hints about the bad things that befell them. Yiñiya had beside him his older brother – the final authority on the place and its story – no need to use the phone to get permission or check the details. No need to do all that lonely classroom talking work to summon up in the students' imagination the trees, the breezes, the systems of authority and renewal of knowledge. The group of young men, close relatives, beside him, were also a source of strength and inspiration to him. (It's surprising how often children are mentioned by the Yolŋu in the panel discussion given that they were never the intended audience for the Teaching from Country program.)

We get the same sense of joy of people *doing* their knowledge when we see Mätjarra at Ramingining, or Dhänjal at Birritjimi surrounded by their families, all peering into the screen, introduced one by one, stressing their connectedness, calling out the kin terms (John or me writing the names and terms on the whiteboard for later discussion) or Gotha, almost falling over herself in her excitement carrying her Mac laptop around Gäwa showing us the tree where the school was started and the beach where the turtles come out from the sea to lay their eggs right near the house.

For months before that seminar and for months after it, I spent many hours a week transcribing and translating what Yolŋu had been saying in connection with Teaching from Country: transcriptions of what Yolŋu had said to camera, and of the 24 chaotic trials. Transcription and translation are for me, mostly enjoyable activities. Despite the considerable drudgery there are moments of great excitement – beautiful new ideas and interesting ways of rendering them in English, and sudden flashes of insight into connections never seen before, now blindingly obvious.

Stories like Gotha's and all the Yolŋu statements to camera are easy enough to translate, and the translation is easy enough to justify. But the Yolŋu impetus to be on country and to sink back into allowing the land to speak, to which the panel members referred, made me stand back a little and rethink the nature and value of translation.

I could not help, listening to the Yolŋu panel, but feel the comments about land and language as some sort of rebuke against my passion for translation. Thinking about the way I go about my work made me feel if somehow translation served to reinforce the western notion of language as *representation* rather than *constitution*. Remembering the wild and useful things Walter Benjamin had said about translation (and art) I decided to reread him as I reread the hundreds of pages of transcribed-translated texts, and reflected upon my work of translation.

Good and Bad Translations

Any theory of translation presupposes a theory of language. In 1923, when the Methodist missions in Arnhem Land were just starting up, Walter Benjamin (1969) in the middle of Europe at the beginning of the modern era just after the Great War, wrote an essay called ‘The Task of the Translator’. He was fixated on the notion of a pure transcendent language and tried to argue that the work of the translator (unlike that of the original writer) provides an opportunity to reach out towards that pure language. Benjamin was Jewish and interested in Jewish mysticism. He, (like the Methodists, most likely, who were sending out edicts to their field workers to learn the languages of the Aboriginal people), pondered the existence of a once complete and perfect language, which had been disintegrated by God after the Tower of Babel.

‘In all language and linguistic creations, there remains in addition to what can be conveyed something that cannot be communicated.. It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work.’ (Benjamin, 1969 pp. 79-80)

Benjamin was very clear about what he considered to be a bad translation – and he had a few in mind. I could see myself immediately. ‘A translation that seeks to *transmit* something can transmit nothing other than a message – that is, something inessential. And this is...the hallmark of bad translations...an inexact transmission of an inessential content’.

This happens to a large extent, because, ‘A common error in translation is that we try to make it change the source language rather than the target language’ ..to paraphrase Benjamin (talking in 1923 about Hindi and German) we make the mistake of ‘trying to turn Yolŋu languages into English instead of turning English into a Yolŋu language’. ‘The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue.’

A good translator, on the other hand, ‘Particularly when translating from a language very remote from his own...must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where *work*, *image* and *tone* converge. He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language. It is not generally realised to what extent this is possible, to what extent any language can be transformed, how language differs from language almost the way dialect differs from dialect; however if this last is true only if one takes language seriously enough, not if one takes it lightly’ (Benjamin 1969, p. 81). In *Teaching from Country* we were invited once more to take language seriously.

Yolŋu Translations

Yiŋiya finally made it to Badaypaday – his ancestral country quite some distance from any of the Yolŋu communities in central east Arnhem Land. Teaching from Badaypaday had been his goal ever since Teaching from Country started. He was frustrated because as the official university Yolŋu studies lecturer, he was stuck in Darwin. But he finally made it home to Badaypaday. There is no mobile phone coverage out there, and there is unlikely to be any into the foreseeable future, so we had hired a remote satellite receiver and John and Yiŋiya and a student set out on the 700 km journey to Badaypaday. There were all sorts of technical hitches, but we finally made contact. Yiŋiya was clearly delighted to be on his country and talking to me in Darwin. How does it feel? I asked. ‘It feels like the stories are all fitting into place.’

He took the opportunity to reinforce some points about teaching and learning. The first to disabuse the students (and the academics) of the idea that knowledge emerges through the agency of the active enquiring mind of the young learner:

Yolŋu education on land has never always been where people can actually choose what they want to learn about...when children are right to start learning, the land, the resources are the land, the trees, the wind, the actual seasons that change, tells the story...The children don't really choose what they want to be when they grow up...in the Task Force or Police Force or in the Army or as a teacher or as just a local, to run a business or that sort of thing.

On country:

Children just grow up, because the land, the old people, and they are grown up. They are born...with a gift of talent which only the wise people, only the land can provide... So the education on the land is the behaviour of children when they grow up and want to be as the signs tell us; we tell the story to our children when certain seasons come up... Straight after the Wet Season, when we sit down by the beach and look at the sea..., around the small islands of the hunting grounds of the reefs where we hunt around turtles and the certain signs in the skies tell the stories, of clouds sitting in the air after people have eaten; tells a metaphor of the shapes of clouds just sitting around the horizon which tells who we are, of the Dhuwa people that actually, it tells the story that we are the right people of that country.

When Yiŋiya talks about the Bulunu wind, or the reef or the sound of the waves or the clouds representing people sitting on the beach after cooking and eating turtle, I can seldom resist piping up and pointing out that these particular images are chosen because they link Yiŋiya in with his

own particular ancestral song – the particular totems and places and connections which make him who he is:

When I'm actually teaching on the ceremonial grounds, when I'm actually teaching in the bush, it is not only I that are teaching or talking, but the land is actually talking with me. I can turn around, the bulunu wind blows gently and gives me the feeling of what the stories are and the stories are automatically being told by the land itself, through me. When I am standing on my own land I feel confident that the stories I'm telling are right. If I'm telling stories that are not right, I feel the land, the atmosphere, the spirits of my people, the spirits of the land where I come from are correcting me, that I'm not doing the right thing, I'm not going the right way.' But when I'm teaching in a classroom...that is not a living thing, there is no breath in it and the classrooms doesn't really help me.

When Yinjiya says of his ancestors:

...they told stories through looking at the first thunderstorm of the year, standing tall and straight when it calls out, and I feel strong, stand up strong and the tears run out from my eyes remembering the land, where I am, and it gives me a new knowledge¹...

I have an urge to point out that at a particular time of year, when the prevailing with positions huge thunderheads in particular parts of the sky as seen from his own land, then his Liya-Dhāliny people have memories flooding back which related to particular ancestral songs which are so sad and so sweet, that everyone sheds a tear. Every image he uses is overdetermined, referring to almost everything else, spurring me to start jabbering, and commanding silence:

Growing up we have never asked questions to our teachers, to our elders. We have never asked them about what the images are, what the stories of this land are. And in fact it is bad manners when I stop an older person, an elder, a senior elder in the clan, and start asking them questions about what the story of this land is and what does he think of my leadership when I grow up.

Questions disrupt the work that the land and its stories do to keep the regenerating spirits alive and grow up young people. Months after his trip to Arnhem Land, Yinjiya one day had finished a teaching session to Tokyo, or maybe California, and I asked him how it went: 'It was okay but they asked me lots of questions. I think maybe they don't like me very much.' He was only joking, but was still making a point about Yolŋu pedagogy. Not only is it rude to ask questions, questions raise an epistemological problem. They imply that the world is made of facts, not stories. That it's the somehow the facts of the world to be transmitted, rather than the 'primal elements of language

¹ http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/inc/tfc/docs/TFC_Yinjiya%20Oct2008.pdf

itself...where work, image and tone converge' (Benjamin 1969:81)

Teaching from country, then, freed the Yolŋu lecturers from the stultifying assumption always barely beneath the surface in a classroom: that stories *can* be translated, that they *should* be translated, that it's the *facts of the matter* that count, that stories bear within them the important facts for distilling, and those facts are somehow more useful, true and significant than the unquestionable (in both senses) conversations between the trees. 'The trees are all related, the trees all tell a story.'

Translating from Country

On the last day of March 2009, Gotha used free screen-sharing software and the telephone to teach the Yolŋu studies class from the remote homeland centre of Gäwa. She prepared some PowerPoint slides to show the students a pair of her great grandchildren aged about 6 and 8, off by themselves with axe and pannikin, collecting mangrove worms. Her basic story was really to do with confidence in the environment, and growing up in Yolŋu knowledge. Meanwhile, John had also been speaking with Daymaŋu, Gotha's son-in-law, well known painter and leader, and grandfather of the two boys, asking him if he might be interested to talk to the class about his art. Yolŋu mothers-in-law must never speak to, look at, say the name of, or be in the same space as sons-in-law, and vice versa. But they care for and respect each other deeply. Not long after we started with lots of cutting in and out of sounds and screens, (you can see and hear –and read – the drama unfolding in Trial 14) Gotha mentioned to John that her son-in-law, was hovering outside the door waiting to talk. One of the young boys, Makuyuk was in the room. Only momentarily distracted by the camera and the view of the students in Darwin, he soon found himself in the familiar role of making the world go round, helping his great grandmother out one door and his grandfather in the other one, then, when someone accidentally hung up the phone, ushering out his grandfather and in his great grandmother to set up the sound again, and then the grandfather back in. Meanwhile John had enlisted Yiŋiya's help to talk with the old man, and I was videoing the proceedings and trying to explain to the students about the avoidance rules which made it all complicated. Daymaŋu talked for a long time in complex old language, John doing his best to interpret what he was saying, Yiŋiya doing his best to slow him down. The students were mostly silent and open mouthed, sometimes laughing a little at the chaos. And that was only the beginning.

Telephones, screens, avoidances, connections, words and sound waves, enclosed spaces, ways in and out, and the Yolŋu and academic worlds were all mixing together in a rich, inspiring and barely comprehensible heterogeneous configuration which is approaching the untranslatable. Yet all sorts of translation has been going on, maybe more in the sense of translation used by Michel Callon (1986) where we become caught up in a rather nerve-wracking cycle of problematisation, enrolment and mobilization of actors human and nonhuman.

The Yolŋu had quite deliberately placed themselves in a situation where everyone and everything participates in an old (but new) collective translation of the world through the screen. It is only a good translation if it changes the way the English language works – a point made by Walter Benjamin, but also made by Dhänjal, whose primary goal is to change the way the Balanda students understand themselves, rather than to help them understand or make them feel comfortable in the Yolŋu world although she welcomes them warmly when they come to stay, and teaches them carefully.

The Yolŋu panel discussion as the Yolŋu themselves implied, replicated the perfect conditions for the production of a bad translation: the ‘inexact transmission of an inessential content’. Teaching from country gave all the participants the opportunity for good translation but how do we know when it’s good?

Unlike a literary work, a translation does not find itself, so to speak, in middle of the high forest of the language itself; instead, from outside it, facing it, and without entering it, the translation calls to the original within, at that one point where the echo in its own language can produce a reverberation of the foreign language’s work (Benjamin 1969, p. 76)

Benjamin’s metaphors of the good translation conjure up the ‘high forest of the language itself’ in the landscape at Badaypaday or Dhamiyaka. Yiŋiya almost overcome with the great load of its presence, ‘the trees, the birds talking, the ancestors, the kin ties’, struggling to stand back and communicate with the students in California in such a way that his words ‘call to the original’ world around him (which we will never really understand), produce a reverberation in our struggling English. ‘What we are talking about’, Maratja reminds us, ‘is how that sound emerges’.

References

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