Authenticity, ideology and early ethnography – untangling Far West Coast Gugada

Paul Monaghan

Australian Museum
Sydney
[paul.monaghan@austmus.gov.au]

Abstract

One of the main features of the Far West Coast Gugada (South Australia) language and culture revitalisation project has been the digital repatriation of a wide range of archival materials, including the writings and audio recordings of missionaries, anthropologists and linguists. These materials have informed the publication of the *Gugada Interactive Talking Dictionary* and the preparation of a more detailed draft dictionary. While research has turned up numerous historical sources for FWC Gugada (a variety of the far-flung Western Desert language), this has not meant that the process of documenting it for revitalisation has been free of tensions. Apart from the usual difficulties encountered when interpreting historical sources, there have been particular problems arising from the attempt to reconstruct a language that is (i) distinct from other local languages, such as Wirangu, and that is (ii) distinct from other Western Desert varieties. In many ways this has been informed by a desire for authentic form on the one hand and a desire for non-traditional functions for the revitalised FWC Gugada on the other. This paper describes the ways decisions made by community and researchers have shaped the documentation produced for attempts to revitalise a language.

Introduction

For the past four years the University of Adelaide, in association with local communities and organisations, has been involved in a number of language and culture revitalisation projects on the Far West Coast of South Australia (FWC). This paper reflects on the local political forces that have shaped recent work on the Wirangu and Gugada languages, affecting decisions on the linguistic work and relations within and between FWC communities. It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a full account of the socio-historical context that has influenced the fortunes of FWC languages. It is nevertheless useful to frame the following discussion by reflecting upon two broad processes (or sets of processes): the first is encounter or coming together, a largely historical process driven by colonialism and dispossession, and the second is untangling or drawing apart, a more recent political and linguistic process.

The Encounter Coastal Trail

In 2002, to celebrate the bicentenary of the charting of the coast of South Australia by Matthew Flinders and Nicolas Baudin, a walking trail along Murat Bay from the town of Ceduna to nearby Thevenard, the site of a deep-water port, was opened. 'Encounter 2002' was a project designed to celebrate the coming together of three worlds on the southern coast of Australia. In this paper I am not interested in the British and French parts of the story, but in the Indigenous. A sign erected at the end of the trail describes an Indigenous song about the coming of a sailing ship that was recorded by the anthropologist Norman Tindale in 1978. The song is said to be about 'a great white bird that came out of [the] sky and was tied up to the land so it could not get away'. The text goes on to speculate that the song may relate to the visit of the Dutch ship *Gulden Zeepaert* in 1627. The song is said to belong to the local Indigenous people, named as Wirangu. One of the interesting things about this sign is that the word 'Wirangu' has been erased. According to one story, this was done hurriedly at the opening ceremony, with a group of local Indigenous people forming a screen for the vandal as a government minister and other VIPs approached along the trail.

Figure 1. Encounter Coastal Trail sign at Pinky Point Lookout.

This anecdote is instructive for a number of reasons. The first is that it leads to the general observation that information recorded in relation to Indigenous languages and cultures often reappears years down the track in vastly removed contexts. The gap between the context of the original recording and its later uses may be so great that the material may be considered to have undergone a process of re-authoring. In other words, archival cultural materials used in new contexts may take on different meanings. Now much of this re-authoring may occur at a metalinguistic or symbolic level: archival material passed through the filter of

Tindale's tribal categories (1974), for example, may be assigned a tribal name where none existed in the original. Pastor Carl Hoff's vocabularies of the FWC (Hoff, 2004) were originally recorded in the 1920s and intended for use in translating scripture at the Koonibba Mission. Their recent publication stimulated much interest and debate within local communities among people who are now de-missionised and more interested in saving their culture than in being saved. Re-authoring may also involve decisions about the origin of individual words found in old word lists based on a contemporary political view of the traditional country of a group of ancestors – in the case of the FWC this is influenced by the ideology of a coastal people (Wirangu) versus that of a desert people (Gugada). This view ignores the long history of cultural exchanges between coastal and inland groups involving ceremonial, trade or other links that can be traced in archival and published ethnographic writings from the mid-nineteenth century (eg Provis, 1879; Dowling, 1892; Maurice, 1901; Wiebusch, 1901-1913; Basedow, 1920; Bolam, 1923; Cleland, 1924-1934; Tindale, 1924-1936; Johnston, 1941 to name but a few). Certainly static representations of 'Aboriginal tribes', such as those appearing on Tindale's tribal distribution map (1974), contribute to the problem by encouraging the view that populations and countries were fixed in historical times.
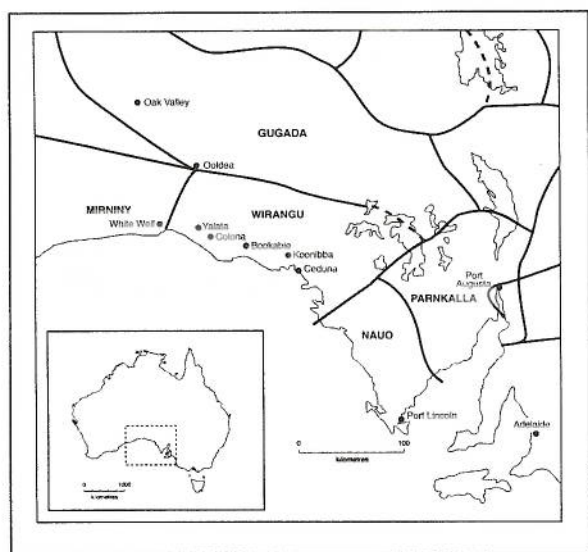

Figure 2. Map of important FWC locations overlaid with Tindale's tribal boundaries (1974). Adapted from Hercus (1999).

From my research it appears that the sign contains a typographical error and that it should in fact read '1928' rather than '1978'. During that year Tindale and University of Adelaide ethnomusicologist E. H. Davies recorded on wax cylinder a 'Ship Song' sung by 'Susie' at Yardea in the Gawler Ranges (Davies, 1928). Neither performer nor recorders could have imagined that the song would be perceived as an index of land-language association in the context of FWC Native Title politics so many years later. It is within this context that the erasure of the word 'Wirangu' took place.

Taking archival materials back to country often plays an early and crucial role in language and culture revitalisation projects. This process is often considered by researchers to be a type of repatriation, and apart from using the materials to inform the writing of dictionaries and other educational products, little further attention may be paid to the effects of their return. The return of archival materials to a community may be likened to throwing a stone into a pond; and the question of where the ripples ultimately run is often not of central concern to linguists. In one case I was warned by a community member to make sure that I 'got the copyright' for archival materials as once they reappeared in the community they would be claimed (or re-authored) by an opposing group as belonging to their language. While this reflects a misconception about the workings of copyright law, it nevertheless clearly reflects an acute local concern that archival materials, whatever their form and content, are open to manipulation for political ends upon their return to and subsequent circulation within local communities. Apart from this, researchers should pay attention to such basic questions as: who has the right to see/hear the materials; who has the right to speak about them; does someone have rights of ownership according to the traditional knowledge system of the region? On one occasion a man refused a cassette containing examples of spoken language because the tape also contained songs relating to another country. While he said that he was concerned that the daughters of the singer would not be happy if they heard he had the tape in his possession, he was also wary of the power residing in the recorded material.

The erasure of the word 'Wirangu' from the Encounter trail signage is part of a long-running language conflict on the FWC. This conflict is fuelled by a small group of detractors of the Wirangu language who often air their discontent in public. Other attempts at Wirangu erasure include a petition against Wirangu language products that have been produced over the last couple of years (eg Miller, 2005) as well as the threat of legal action that led to the removal of an informant's photograph from a published Wirangu grammar (Hercus, 1999) on the grounds that the informant was not a Wirangu person. The language conflict is a result of the steady erosion of the traditional language ecology of the FWC since colonisation and local responses to the Native Title process. This erosion that can be characterized crudely as the loss and decline of traditional languages (Mirniny, Gugada, Wirangu), the development of Mission Talk (at Koonibba), the rise of Southern Pitjantjatjara (at Yalata) and a shift to English more generally across the region (for further details see Monaghan, 2006). Since 1993, the Native Title process has unwittingly encouraged divisions within groups and has stoked the flames of conflict over cultural identity and cultural ownership. This is particularly acute among some former residents of the Koonibba Mission, who view the language spoken at Koonibba during the

middle of last century as Gugada rather than as a mixture of Wirangu and Gugada (which can be crudely characterised as a reduced Wirangu heavily infused with Gugada lexemes, most notably pronouns, kinship terms and verbal stems, and pidgin English/English lexical borrowings). By claiming Mission Talk as Gugada, such Wirangu detractors subscribe to an ideology of the basic form: we identify as X so our speech must be language X. This can best be understood as a response to recent political changes in the FWC region in which people have had to make choices about group identity. I have heard it said many times that before Native Title 'we were all just Nungas', (that is, 'Aboriginal people of the West Coast').

Since colonisation Indigenous people on the FWC have adopted a number of linguistic strategies for the new communicative and political contexts in which they have found themselves and which they have created. These days the linguistic focus is on separation or disentanglement and while there are a number of reasons for this, the main drivers are the perceived requirements of the Native Title process and endangered languages funding, which requires work to be done on discrete languages. It is against this general background that the FWC Gugada language project has been developed.

Untangling endangered languages

The Koonibba Aboriginal Community Council initiated work on FWC Gugada in 2004, when it applied for and received endangered language funding from the federal government. At first, this event received a lukewarm response from a range of people who had in common the fact that they had grown up at Koonibba and viewed it as being in traditional Wirangu country. While it turned out that the application took its particular form due to the simple fact that Wirangu had already received funding elsewhere, it nevertheless took some time for people to feel comfortable about Koonibba's central role in the process. The main outcome of the project so far is the *Gugada Interactive Talking Dictionary* (Miller *et al.*, 2006). The result of many hours of archival and field research, its main features include: approximately 200 headwords and illustrative sentences arranged into ten semantic fields, linked audio files of Gugada speakers and English text glosses. Each frame also includes an illustration made by students from Koonibba Aboriginal School. The platform allows for a degree of interactivity as users can navigate through the dictionary in a number of basic ways. Work on a larger dictionary, currently 650+ entries, is proceeding.

After a preliminary examination of the archival material and consultations with people identified by Koonibba as Gugada speakers, it became clear that in order to produce a basic lexicon of FWC Gugada it would be necessary to make two cuts in the linguistic fabric of the FWC region: the first to disentangle Gugada and Wirangu and the second to distinguish Gugada from

other Western Desert lects such as Pitjantjatjara, Yankunytjatjara, Antikirinya and the type of Gugada spoken in places to the east, such as Pt Augusta. The name 'Far West Coast Gugada' was adopted to distinguish the language under revitalisation from the eastern variety of Gugada described by John Platt (1972).

It soon became apparent that FWC Gugada is in a state of extreme endangerment, with only a small number of speakers, most of whom are semi-speakers. Against this, however, it was possible to find a number of relatively good archival sources to work with, including audio recordings made by Platt on the FWC in the 1960s.

The task of untangling the Gugada and Wirangu found in archival sources and in the memories of semi-speakers was occasionally as much based on political as it was on linguistic considerations. I have already noted that some people tended to overlook the long history of intercultural exchange on the FWC. They often held the view that if a word was somehow related to the coast, it must be Wirangu: Gugada would not have had the names for berries found in coastal sand dunes, for example. Intercultural exchange led ultimately to the formation of Mission Talk at Koonibba, a mixture of the two languages (with borrowings from pidgin English/English). During interviews, people who had grown up at Koonibba sometimes found it difficult to distinguish Gugada and Wirangu words. At first I suspected that there may have been a level of censorship operating but later formed the view that it was more the case that such people simply did not know how to make meaningful distinctions between the two languages. On the other hand, some people had little problem in assigning words to these languages and where it did become difficult we were able to refer back to two published works to inform a particular decision: Luise Hercus's Wirangu grammar (1999) and Cliff Goddard's Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara dictionary (1996). We also benefited at times from the care taken by the authors of archival materials to note word origins in their recordings, such as Pastor Carl Hoff (Hoff, 2004), Norman Tindale (1924-36), Geoffrey O'Grady (1959), and John Platt (1966).

One of the strongest motivating factors among the people consulted during this part of the process was a desire for an authentic account of the variety of Gugada spoken on the FWC by earlier generations. When Luise Hercus was working on Wirangu in the region in the 1990s, she worked largely with Gladys and Doreen Miller using archival materials recording the speech of their grandmother Lucy Washington (from a wordlist written by Daisy Bates, c1914) and their aunty Lena Miller (from three audio tapes recorded by Platt in 1966). As Gladys and Doreen had forgotten much of their Wirangu, this process gave them great confidence that, with Luise, they were reconstructing an accurate account of the Wirangu language they had heard as they were growing up. With FWC Gugada we have followed a similar model. In particular, Platt's recordings of Ernie

Queama reflect the type of Gugada spoken on the FWC before the arrival of Western Desert speakers at Yalata after the closing of the Ooldea mission in 1952. Ernie Queama had lived on and around Colona Station well before that date. During fieldwork at Yalata, an elderly woman, introduced as one of the last Maralinga survivors, confirmed that of Platt's recordings Queama's speech best represented FWC Gugada. Laughter occasionally greeted the playing of Platt's tapes as the speech was deemed by a group of five senior women to be 'all mixed'. Wangki Peel, one of the voices in the talking dictionary, is not only Ernie Queama's grandson but someone with a deep interest in Indigenous languages.

Of course this model has its limitations, the most obvious being that while we might come up with an account that is authentic for one speaker, or even one set of speakers, it may well not be for another. This is essentially a methodological point, and while the model is a useful starting point more linguistic arguments and analyses should influence the documentation process as the revitalisation project develops. This is in fact what happened on the FWC, with people being fairly comfortable with the incorporation of a wider range of materials once the familiar reference or starting point had been clearly established and the expansion processes negotiated. The term 'authentic' is of course relative to the position of the speaker and it may be better to unpack the term in its current application by appreciating that for the Millers, for example, Lucy Washington's Wirangu was perceived to have great cultural credibility owing to the closeness of the source.

As a further point, it was felt by a number of people that given the political problems triggered by the Wirangu language products every effort should be made to be transparent in the use of archival materials. Again, Hercus (1999) provided a lead here in her discussion of the various sources used in her reconstruction of Wirangu grammar and lexicon. It is planned that a similarly detailed discussion of sources will accompany the longer FWC Gugada dictionary currently in preparation. If it is accepted that the process of untangling is a form of re-authoring, then this practice makes good sense.

Distinguishing Gugada from other Western Desert lects might be considered to be a form of dialect cutting or language-internal untangling. In practical terms there are a number of problems or limitations associated with this aspect of the documentation process. For a start the historical materials guiding this process are often overly reductive: wordlists appearing in early ethnographic accounts in particular typically link Indigenous headwords to English equivalents on a one to one basis (eg Lindsay, 1893; Wells, 1893; Helms, 1896; Black, 1915; Tindale, 1933; Tindale, 1934-51). Further, such materials often yield few details on the identities of informants, including their social affiliations. This means that, at a metalinguistic level, it is often difficult to draw firm conclusions about the relationships

between people, place and language in the Western Desert from such materials (see Monaghan, 2003 for a fuller discussion on this point). In a word, such materials are often not the rich source they might appear to be at first glance.

The limitations of such materials can be seen from a slightly different perspective when they are employed as language elicitation tools. During a number of documentation sessions for FWC Gugada, the 'tentative lexicon-dictionary of the Ooldea dialect' produced by Wilf Douglas (1951) was used as an aide memoire. According to Douglas, 'wangka kukatja ... is a name for this dialect' (1951: 27), and it is known that Gugada people moved between Ooldea and the coast. In certain respects this was a productive approach: it was possible for FWC Gugada informants to reflect that they had heard a particular word in use in the coastal region by a Gugada person. The question of how confident we could be that it should more generally be accepted as a Gugada word soon arose. The concern described here is only heightened when it is remembered that Western Desert people had, and in many cases continue to have, rich passive lexical knowledge. In other words, there is a risk when working from archival materials in this way that we will put too much into the Gugada basket. When dealing with the often failing memories of senior people, for whom the recollection of any relevant term might be seen as a minor victory, it is important to bear this limitation in mind. Of course, this difficult situation is further complicated by the history of dialect mixing at Ooldea, which is mentioned by a number of authors (e.g. Berndt, 1942; Tindale, 1934-51).

Yet another complication in the task of untangling FWC Gugada is the fact that there have been a number of important sociolinguistic changes in the FWC region over the last 50 years. Most significantly, Pitjantjatjara has risen as a power language in the region in its particular local form known as Southern Pitjantjatjara, especially at Yalata. One of the results of this process has been dialect levelling of the speech of a variety of groups who moved there after the closure of the Ooldea Mission. It should also be appreciated that Pitjantjatjara is taught in standardised form in most schools in the region. Among other things, this has meant that on the FWC Gugada has lost much of its profile. While daunting, one can draw some comfort for the task of untangling FWC Gugada by considering that there has been a process of separation across the wider South Australian Western Desert region over the last 30 years. There has been a range of published and unpublished materials (either dictionaries, grammars and/or educational materials) produced for such languages as: Pitjantjatjara, Yankunytjatjara, Antikirinya and (eastern) Gugada.

On determining the relationship of FWC Gugada to other Western Desert speech varieties it soon became clear that Gugada is very closely related to Yankunytjatjara. Now, this was not unexpected given Platt's observations (1967) and the history of population

movements to Ooldea and the coast more generally from the Everard and Musgrave Ranges in the north. Tindale (1934-51) recorded a vocabulary at Ooldea in 1934 that he called Southern Pitjantjatjara (400+ words), but it was actually Yankunytjatjara, his informants having travelled down to Ooldea from the Everard Range along well-known *gabi* (water) routes. As a diagnostic test I made a list of all the Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara pairs that appear in Goddard (1996) and found that nearly all of the Yankunytjatjara entries were recognised by perhaps the most knowledgeable senior speaker as FWC Gugada words also. While at the lexical level there are many similarities, there are also differences. As to be expected, FWC Gugada has terms for the natural phenomena particular to its region; there are differences in the pronoun systems of the two speech varieties; and there are differences in verbal morphology that need to be investigated to mention just a few points. The work in drawing out the relationship between Yankunytjatjara and FWC Gugada is ongoing and may prove useful not simply for its own sake but for informing the filling of gaps in the eventually revitalised FWC Gugada language.

Things are a little less clear when attempting to determine the relationship between different varieties of Gugada, and more work needs to be done on this. The term 'Gugada' was originally applied to a range of Western Desert varieties along the desert fringe that used the word *guga* for 'meat' (as opposed to *baRu/parulparlu* in non-Western Desert varieties, such as Wirangu, Parnkalla and Kuyani respectively). The term occurs at many different places in the historical record and one could write an interesting social history of the name itself. The point to make here though is that the boundaries of any reconstructed Gugada language will of necessity be arbitrary to a large degree: at the very least the ground will shift depending on whether one views 'Gugada' as a cover term, as it functioned historically, or as a more restricted label, as it has tended to be applied in more recent times.

John Platt, the linguist who has done most work on Gugada, drew a distinction between two varieties: Kukata and Kukatja, the former an eastern variety and the latter a western variety (1967; 1972). According to Platt, the western variety is closer to Pitjantjatjara, Antikirinya and varieties further to the west. This is a fairly reasonable distinction and one which lines up well with the distinction between Muladjara (*mula*-having) and Madudjara (*madu*-having) based on the lexical alternatives *mula* and *madu* 'true'. Note that the term Madudjara is associated with the east (that is, the area identified by Platt as Kukata country). Although people I asked on the FWC could not remember having heard of 'Muladjara' as a language term, the distinction probably did operate to the east with a deictic function (certainly the term 'Madudjara' can still be heard today at places like Coober Pedy). Having said this, it is important to point out that there is a slight question mark over Platt's formulation of the Kukata/Kukatja distinction. While he did record both varieties of

Gugada, he concentrated on the eastern variety in his fieldwork and writings. From his field tapes it appears that nearly all of his informants were semi-speakers, with some struggling to provide information and complaining that it had been many years since they had spoken the language. There arises a marked tone of uncertainty from some of the informants. What this means for the FWC Gugada project is that more work needs to be done on clarifying the relationship between the eastern and western varieties and on critically reviewing Platt's work.

Conclusion

So far I have said much about FWC Gugada words but little about the illustrative sentences that appear in the *Gugada Interactive Talking Dictionary* (GITD). I would like to close by drawing attention to this aspect of the revitalisation work; it is important to do so because it is perhaps at this level that the difficulties associated with working with reduced codes and semi-speakers are most keenly felt. For those setting out to produce a dictionary of an endangered language there are practical limitations that accompany the ideal of including only 'traditional' lexemes in the revitalised language, and these limitations became apparent when writing illustrative sentences for the GITD. The dictionary was written according to the guiding principle of creating realistic sentences that might plausibly arise within social contexts of relevance to FWC people. The dictionary contains many examples relating to hunting and gathering and traditional ecological knowledge. In many ways this is the strength of the dictionary although we haven't always been successful at attaining our ideal. This of course reflects the imperfect nature of the materials at hand rather than any fault in our combined efforts. As the documentation work on FWC Gugada progresses, we hope to address these and the other problems raised in this paper.

Acknowledgements

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