TRANSLATING ABORIGINAL WORDS ACROSS LANGUAGES

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The *Stefano* manuscript is not only a unique ethnographic document but it also contains a collection of Aboriginal words and expressions which, although small in number, give us a valuable and rare record of the language spoken along the North West coast of Australia during the second half of the nineteenth century.[1] The only other comparable North West vocabulary from this period of colonial history is the 1861 Ngarluma vocabulary of 70 words, compiled by Pemberton Walcott.[2]

How phonetically accurate is the *Stefano* collection of words and expressions and what can it tell us about the culture of the North West Aborigines? Ideally one would want to compare the *Stefano* wordlist with other available vocabularies in the North West region of Australia and cross-correlate as many manuscript words as possible. Some of these words are evidently derived from English words and it would be of great interest to know the extent of the colonial contact that gave rise to these hybrid words. Conversely we would also want to know what the original pre-contact North West language may have been like.

These are the broad questions I wish to address in this eight-part treatment, *Indigenous Languages in the* Stefano *Manuscript*. My interest in the *Stefano* indigenous words was not entirely planned or intentional, but came out of a particular set of circumstances that arose while I was editing the 1920 translation of the original manuscript by Angelina Baccich.[3] During the publication process I became aware that in her translation Angelina Baccich did not translate the indigenous words in the manuscript but left them in the original Italian orthography. Italian pronunciations are not the same as English pronunciations and the resulting mismatch was considerable. This omission is repeated in all other publications on the *Stefano* shipwreck that followed, including my own previous writing in this journal.

The first word in the *Stefano* indigenous word collection, namely, *Giunovagnabari*, the much feared deity, will serve as a good example of this difference in pronunciation.[4] The Italian *g* is pronounced as in English (give, gain), except when it is followed by the vowels *e* and *i,* when it sounds as the English *j* (jaw, jib). In Italian *ge* and *gi* have a soft palatal pronunciation, like the English *je* and *jy* (or *jih*). Thus

Giuno in *Giunovagnabari* becomes *Jiuno*. In addition when the cluster *gi* is followed by a further vowel – *u* in this case – then the first vowel *i* becomes mute, and the English *j* sound is followed by the second vowel. Thus *giu* sounds like *ju* (not *jyu*) and *Giuno* becomes *Juno*.

Something similar can be said of the *vagna* element of *Giunovagnabari*: *gn* in *vagna* is pronounced as a Spanish ñ, as in señor, and *ny* as in English onion. Thus *vagna* becomes closer to *vanya* and *Giuno-vagna* becomes *Junovanya*. It is not yet necessary to say anything about *bari*. Thus, at the first translation pass the Italian inscription of *Giunovagnabari* when translated into English becomes *Juno-vanya-bari* – *Junovanyabari*.

Something similar can be said of words that start with the *ci* and *ce* sounds. Italian *c* is normally pronounced as *k* except when followed by *i* and *e*, in which cases *ci* is pronounced as *chi* (as in chin) and *ce* is pronounced as *che* (as in chair). Thus *Chilie* translates into *Kilie – Kylee* – but *Cialli* translates into *Challi*. Both translations are much closer to the Aboriginal sounds of these words, which indicates the value of such translation when identifying words. If we want to know what the Aboriginal words sounded like to Miho Baccich and other *Stefano* mariners, then in an English text we first need to translate these Aboriginal words and expressions from Italian into an English orthography.[5]

Another difficulty associated with the manuscript orthography has to do with the *Stefano's* Croatian-speaking crew. The *w* sounds are not at all common in the Croatian language – *w* does not exist in the Croatian alphabet, only *v* does. In contrast, the *v* sounds are not at all common in any Aboriginal language – *v* sounds are usually *w* sounds. This is a long way of saying that all Indigenous *w* sounds heard by Croatian-speaking castaways were understood as *v* sounds and subsequently recorded as *v* words. To correct this double incompatibility all we have to do is to replace *v* letters in the *Stefano* indigenous wordlist with *w* letters. Hence *vanja* in *Junovanyabari* should be translated into *wanya* as in *Junowanyabari*. The result of all these translations and transformations are given in Appendix 1. Of around 150 words in the *Stefano* Aboriginal vocabulary about 50 per cent required some sort of adjustment.

Yet another problem associated with the *Stefano* indigenous wordlist has to do with errors that invariably accompany the transcribing of any handwritten manuscript. Previous *Stefano* publications contained only typed words without the original handwritten texts. This gave rise to unnecessary speculations regarding the accuracy of the transcription. Making a scanned copy of the original handwritten words available to readers brings the issue of transcription errors into the open in a way that can be verified directly. These scans of the manuscript words are given in Appendix 2.

From these phonetic translations and scans it is evident that quite a few words in the manuscript take on a different form than that in the original inscription. Perhaps the best example is the word / expression *Caciugliamoru* (Poor fellow!) – when translated it becomes *Kachullyamoru*.[6] This, in turn, only invites the question: Would these phonetic changes help us better identify the indigenous words they represent?

The first attempt to identify the indigenous words in the *Stefano* manuscript was undertaken in 1998 by Allan Dench in "Pidgin Ngarluma: An Indigenous Contact Language in Northern Western Australia".[7] Unfortunately this attempt suffers from all the difficulties mentioned above. In his identification of indigenous words Dench used the original Italian orthography and as a consequence these words seem aberrant and inaccurate to everyone except Italian speakers. He also had not been able to sight the original manuscript, which forced him at times to speculate on the finer details of the handwritten words from the copies he had available. These difficulties, along with a number of other methodological departures, compromise what otherwise was a valuable effort at identifying the indigenous words in the *Stefano* manuscript.

Some of the issues associated with this work will be addressed in the body of the writing that follows. Rather than deal with each individual phonetic deviation, I will undertake the identification of the *Stefano* indigenous vocabulary afresh, using a number of different strategies.

[II] *Aboriginal Groups in the Stefano Manuscript* seeks to identify the indigenous languages in the *Stefano* manuscript by identifying the Aboriginal groups that feature

in its narrative. The Yinikurtira people are singled out as the most likely group that helped the *Stefano* mariners.

[III] *Language Groups in the Stefano Manuscript* examines the indigenous words and expressions in the manuscript itself. The Yinikurtira language is identified as the most likely indigenous language found in the *Stefano* manuscript.

[IV] *Some Early North West Indigenous Wordlists* considers two indigenous wordlists that have some bearing on the *Stefano* wordlist – one is south of the North West Cape and the other is north of it. The first wordlist was compiled by Daisy Bates in her 1904 Aboriginal language survey.[8] The second wordlist is by Harold Aubrey Hall, whose knowledge of Aboriginal Ngarluma language goes back to 1876 when he was a fiver-year-old boy living in Roebourne.[9]

[V] *Comparing Three North West Indigenous Wordlists* compares the *Stefano*'s indigenous wordlist with the two North West indigenous vocabularies considered earlier. This comparison confirms a large degree of overlap.

[VI] *Living on the Yinikurtira Country* looks at the writing of Tom Carter, who lived with the Yinikurtira people on the Yinkurtira country for about 13 years.[10] Carter's writing can contribute greatly to our understanding of Yinikurtira land and Yinikurtira language.

[VII] *A Partial Vocabulary of the Yinikurtira Aboriginal People* takes up all the available Yinikurtira words and combines these into a Provisional Yinikurtira vocabulary consisting of about 600 words. This vocabulary sets a good foundation for a deeper, more insightful analysis of the Yinikurtira vocabulary.

[VIII] *South East Asian Influences in the Vocabulary of the Yinikurtira People* examines a number of words in the provisional Yinikurtira vocabulary which seem to have a South East Asian origin.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. All references to the *Stefano* manuscript refer to the publication Baccich, M. & S. Skurla, *The Wreck Of The Austro-Hungarian Barque Stefano On The North West Coast Of Australia,* translated into English by Angelina Baccich (1920), edited with analysis by Josko Petkovic (2007). *IM: Interactive Media* e-journal, No 3:2007. The original Italian title of this manuscript is *I Naufraghi del Bark Austro-Ungarico Stefano alla Costa Nord-Ovest dell Australia.*

2. Gregory, C. G. & F. T., *Journals of Australian Explorations 1846 – 1858*, Hesperian Press, 1981, p. 97.

3. Baccich, M. & S. Skurla, *op. cit.*

4. Baccich, M. & S. Skurla in this publication, manuscript page [264].

5. A good description of Italian-English pronunciation can be found at the following website address: http://www.freewebtown.com/civis_romanus/i-1-1.htm

6. Baccich, M. & S. Skurla in this publication, manuscript page [272].

7. Dench, A., "Pidgin Ngarluma: An Indigenous Contact Language in Northern Western Australia", *Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages*, 13:1, 1998, 1-61.

8. Bates, D., "Vocabularies of Natives from Roebourne, Gascoyne, Ashburton, De Grey" in *Papers of Daisy Bates MS 365* National Library of Australian, Box 25, Section XII Language: Grammar and Vocabularies Part 2.D.12. T. Carter – Point Cloates, J.H Monger – Gascoyne, Edward Cornally – Gascoyne and Ashburton, T.L. Richardson – Gascoyne, Rev. E.R. Gribble – Gascoyne, MSS fol. 50/ 1–44.

9. Hall, H. A., *A Partial Vocabulary of the Ngalooma Aboriginal Tribe*, with concordance and commentary by C.G. von Brandenstein, Australian Aboriginal Studies No. 46, Canberra A.C.T., Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1971.

10. See Vines, Freda, "Thomas Carter, Ornithologist", in Early Days, Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Western Australian Historical Society, Volume VI, part VII, 1968, pp. 7–21.