

ON BEING A ‘LANGUAGE AND CULTURE’ LEARNER IN A YOLŪU WORLD

Helen Verran

I begin with what for me was one of the most arresting moments of my involvement with Teaching from Country. Picture me watching and listening to a conversation between Dhāṅgal and Michael about the programme, a conversation that was being recorded on video, and was later transcribed, and posted on the project website.¹ Having decided to speak in English, Dhāṅgal explains how being able to teach from home, being in the country whose story she is telling for students sitting in Darwin, enables ‘proper’ performances: the right person performing the right stories in the right place and the right time...

[I will] teach students to really know about themselves, who they are, and in way of explaining through the YolŪu side, to see things which are good about it, that is within themselves; to know who each person really is and what they can achieve from the teachings, from the YolŪu lecturers... That’s for Balanda (non-YolŪu) students as well. First of all they have to find out for themselves who they really are. And my telling my story from [my country] will help them to do that... That’s right... Because I’ll be at home and feel that... what you would call that, power within... and YolŪu or any person that has the knowledge to pass things to other people [and do that]. [But] a lot of people miss out on it. Finding themselves, who they really are, what they should achieve.

‘Know thyself’! Of course many teachers wish this for their students. Dhāṅgal’s sentiment here echoes an aphorism that has been attributed to at least six ancient Greek teachers. It is perhaps familiar to most of today’s students as what was inscribed in (rather odd) Latin above the door of the Oracle’s house in the film series *The Matrix*. By pointing out that it is a familiar hope espoused by many teachers however I don’t want to explain it away as a significant claim in the context of Teaching from Country. On the contrary I take Dhāṅgal’s hopes for learners of YolŪu language and culture very seriously as expression of an autochthonous YolŪu account of knowledge, teaching, and learning.

¹ Dhāṅgal talking about the program: <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/inc/tfc/writings.html>

Dhāṅgal's hopes for her students embed claims that need to be explicated. They challenge many of the assumptions about knowledge, teaching, and learning that non-Yolḡu are likely to bring to the experience of being students of Yolḡu language and culture. And these challenges need to be brought out into the open. Making things explicit here can provide a useful framing for students.

In beginning let me make clear what I understand Dhāṅgal to be saying here and explain why I find it arresting. Dhāṅgal's articulation of what she hopes to achieve with her teaching suggests to me that she sees a link between story-telling and the coming to life of both people and places. Dhāṅgal imagines a sort of power in live, in-place performance which is generative of places and people – collectively and individually. And this generativity is not of a generalized nature, it is specific both for places and for people. It is a claim that in learning to hear and speak Yolḡu languages, and in becoming familiar with the details of Yolḡu cultural understandings that are necessarily (in Yolḡu logic) particular to clans, learners, including non-Yolḡu learners can become more fully themselves, and more fully and explicitly aware of who they are, and because of that, what they might achieve.

Why am I suddenly 'all ears' when I hear Dhāṅgal say these things? Her claims have me struggling to extend my past ontological interest in the entities of Yolḡu worlds. In studying Yolḡu entities I see myself as following my Yolḡu friends in understanding them as outcomes of going-on together in a single plane of immanence.² Objects are what they do in the here-and-now. What Dhāṅgal says here helps me to see subjects, as similarly outcomes of collective enactments in a world that is a single (though complicated and messy) domain of enactment. In the past some of the Yolḡu objects I have been interested in and struggled to understand ontologically (that is from the point of view of what we might call conceptual design), are wāṅa (places, clan lands), and worrk (land management fires), and gurrutu positions which I understand as essentially comparative concepts like number (Verran 2000; 2002a; 2002b).

For the most part I have studied these objects as a participant in 'workshops', witnessed how they come to life in such a setting, how they are enacted, in actual on-the-ground collective performance. But I have also considered how senior Yolḡu teachers use screens to achieve similar ends (Verran & Christie 2007). Now here was Dhāṅgal saying that the screens of the Teaching from Country project might be used not only to effect, to bring to life, these

2 I use Deleuze's notion of concepts as inhabiting a 'plane of immanence', and take it as connecting well enough to Yolḡu metaphysics to be a useful translating tool. Yolḡu cosmos has a transcendental domain Wāṅarr and its entities as expressed in the secular here-and-now, effecting a philosophy that seems to have much in common with Deleuze's transcendental empiricism. Importantly, in engaging Deleuzian philosophy, no less than in engaging Yolḡu thought, we must abandon the notion that concepts are representations corresponding to some essence 'out there'. Concepts are fragmentary wholes, multiplicities, and they 'solve' problems in thinking. Thus every concept has a history and is self-referential, positing itself as its object. For Deleuze the plane of immanence is a non-fragmented yet open whole which harbors concepts but is not itself a concept, nor, and this is important, is it the concept of all concepts. It is the unlimited milieu, the horizon within which concepts are created and hang together, the plane of immanence is the reservoir of events and is inhabited from within concepts, implicit and preconceptual presupposition of what is taken as belonging to the power of thinking and what every philosophy builds itself on. (Deleuze & Guattari 1994)

ontologically odd performative Yolŋu objects (things that have a different conceptual design to the modern objects I usually come across), but also to evoke or elicit, or perhaps mould, subjects who know these performative objects, and simultaneously know that they know these different sorts of objects, and hence who know themselves as such knowers in a complex and reflexive way.

Where have I met such knowers before? I am reminded of the bilingual Yoruba children I met while struggling to understand the conceptual structures (what I now call the ontics) of Yoruba quantifying concepts, and how they are different from the quantifying that is conventional in science. I found that not only are there profound differences, but also that even quite young bilingual children could comment on the differences and explain how (what concepts) they use to translate between these two forms of conceptual ordering: Yoruba quantifying and the quantifying of modern science (Verran 2001; 2007). Recognising this I also came to see that the resources of mainstream Western philosophy were quite inadequate for describing this phenomenon, let alone beginning to explain it. This seeming blindness of much Western thought to difference is also why it is necessary to make explicit assumptions about knowledge, teaching, and learning that non-Yolŋu bring to the experience of being students of Yolŋu language and culture.

Before I get on to that however let me present material from one of Dhänŋal's later teaching sessions, a text performed by Dhänŋal during the Teaching from Country program. It is the beginning fragment of a story of the constituting of areas around where she is currently living, in the actions of the Ancestral Beings. On the screen in their classroom the students saw an image of Dhänŋal and heard her telling a story against the background noises of the yard outside her house. We (who were not present either in Dhänŋal's place Birritjimi-Wallaby Beach, or in the CDU classroom on that occasion) can see and hear what the students experienced by playing a video displayed on the Teaching from Country website. We hear Dhänŋal clearly as among other voices and background music; behind Dhänŋal there's a wall reflecting the colours of the setting sun. On the lower left hand side of the screen we see students seated in the CDU seminar room, taking notes on paper balanced on their knees.

Dhänŋal tells a story of land immediately around that site where she's sitting, her performance is delivered in a mixture of English and Yolŋu matha, with interventions by teachers sitting in the same room as the students (which I have not reproduced here). The video record makes it clear that Dhänŋal's screened performance offers rich language learning while conveying what for Dhänŋal as a Yolŋu teacher is significant cultural information.

This area, dhanŋum Birritjimi...Birritjimi. Wallaby Beach. Birritjimi yäku. Ga Mararrapan, the name of a dog that came across through this land, but on the beach, ya'. Nji, Mararrapan....

walked down...liṅgu because I'm now showing you the nhawi..... out in the sea, gunda...the rocks...Nunha where those rocks are out in the sea, gurtha, the fire came down. And the rocks represent where the fire has died out. Gurtha, and that's where Mararrapan came out, and just walked along this beach here, right around to where the conveyer belt is, the overhead conveyer belt, and through that the other side where the yacht club is, is called Mänyimi, or Golpuy.

Mänyimi where the Yacht club is there, where Mararrapan walked across from this side to the other side is called Golpuy. What you see on the Golpuy factories nunha? Golpuy. After that he went to on the other side where Galupa is along that beach. Right around the point, and on to Galupa. He kept walking along, right up to that point where the export wharf is...But just before he crossed to the other side, on this side of the beach, he walked across on that little sand spit, where I said the conveyer belt was, that's where he stopped. What he would do is walk and stop. On this side of the point I mean half way there he stopped because the pheasant bukpuḱ called out. Bukpuḱ. Called out where the refinery is, so that area is Dhuwa. Galpu. And the bukpuḱ was taking care of that area because where the witiṭj (Olive python) stays. And where that area wasn't clear it used to have a billabong, a real big billabong, the waterlilies ga paperbark grew there and there is a little creek that goes down on the other side of the bay at Golpuy represents the tail of the witiṭj. And as you two have already been here, and you saw the pile of raw bauxite (powder/dust) that's how the witiṭj curled up, and its tail went out at the little creek where the creek comes out and that is the creek that came out where the billabong used to be. And that's the remainder of it, and everything else, this case is the billabong and the fresh water spring that used to come out, during the wet and just go down on from the rocks straight from the rocks came down the beach on this side of Bukpuḱpuy. And that spring was blocked as soon as the refinery was built. And still there where the Bukpuḱ sang and called out making sure that Mararrapan...came around the point, and crossed on the other side and still go along the beach at Galupa, Galupa to the point there where the wharf is there called Warrimbiri. Warrimbiri, yäku ṅurru nunha the export wharf, where they ship the alumina ore, and the bauxite from. The point where the export wharf is and around that point, is a place called Djanbirrk Djanbirrkpuy. That's where Mararrapan stopped, at a place called Djanbirrkpuy...just around the point and round the corner and the rest of the area from there is Bukpuḱpuy. Mararrapan Gumatj dog. And it is to do with the bäru (crocodile). It's another name for bäru. Mararrapan, Njararwi, Mandimirri, all those names. And most of the ?names? is used that is connected with bäru, we name our dogs. In our mother's side, Gumatj Yolṅu. and um Mararrapan is connected with the bäru, and the other nhawi area has to do with the gurtha, and fire. Yow, So one is bäru, the gurtha and the fire, it's the fire area, and it connects to the um.. quail. So all those things, the quail, the dog Mararrapan, is connected with the bäru. Yow all Yirritja, Gumatj.³

3 6 May 2009: Dhanganal telling stories about land <http://learnline.edu.edu.au/inc/tfc/> and <http://learnline.edu.edu.au/inc/tfc/trials21.html>

Dhāᅅgal is telling a story about country – her country and her kin’s country; stories of its origins in the travels and other doings of Ancestral Beings – Mararrapan...a dog that came across through this land; Gurtha, the fire [that] came down; Witiᅅ the olive python that stays near that place; Bukpuk the pheasant who calls out. These are Beings who bring places and people into ordered being – we could say they are concepts that constitute an order; about which an order hangs. This ordered constitution of the Yolᅅu cosmos is re-enacted in narratives like to one Dhāᅅgal begins here, the like of which which Dhāᅅgal has often performed before, both for Yolᅅu learners and for non-Yolᅅu visitors. These narratives which re-perform the Ancestral order are also enacted collectively in formal ceremony where song, and dance, and painting add to the richness of the re-enactment.

Being a crucial part of those narrative performances as listeners, learners of language and culture will actively contribute to the re-making of places and themselves. Their engagement with the stories – confused, puzzled, and uncomprehending though it may be for many students, is a crucial element of the performance. But clearly Dhāᅅgal is hoping for more than this minimal participation as audience by learners of Yolᅅu language and culture in the Teaching from Country programme, she hopes that learners of Yolᅅu language and culture (Yolᅅu and non-Yolᅅu learners alike) will come to ‘know about themselves, who they really are...’.

Towards this end she tells stories, one such story is about Mararrapan, an Ancestral Being dog who has certain connections with and separations from other Ancestral Beings and is a conceptual element in the Yolᅅu cosmological order. The implication is that our learning should be how to ‘do’ concepts like Mararrapan; how to ‘do’ the concepts of Ancestral Beings as a class of world making objects.

Have we learned to ‘do’ world making objects before? Yes of course we have – it took up a lot of the first ten of so years of our lives, and intensified once we started school. We learned how to ‘do’ objects of the modern world order like length, and in part that was learning the rules of number.

So here’s a concrete proposal, a slogan on how to proceed on beginning as a learner of Yolᅅu language and culture in a Yolᅅu world. Just as we once learned to ‘do’ objects of the modern world order, concepts like length and area, mass and volume, through learning the unforgiving rules of number so we can learn to ‘do’ the ordering objects of the Yolᅅu world, concepts like Mararrapan by learning the rules of gurrutu.

But of course there’s a catch. That slogan only half catches what’s involved, because modern understandings of concepts are generally deficient, too thin, missing out two thirds of their being. Here’s what Gilles Deleuze an influential philosopher of the twentieth century says about concepts.

Now concepts don't only move among other concepts (in philosophical understanding) they also move among things and within us: they bring us new percepts and new affects that amount to philosophy's own non-philosophical understanding...Concepts, or new ways of thinking; percepts, or new ways of seeing and construing; and affects, or new ways of feeling...you need all three to get things moving (Deleuze 1995, pp.164-5).

So in becoming a learner of Yolŋu language and culture there is some preliminary work to be done in thinking about concepts as such. And here's a neat irony. Yolŋu concepts like Mararrapan which can become our familiars by learning the rules of gurrutu, can help us re-imagine our deficient understandings of concepts in general, understandings fostered by modern concepts misrecognition of what involved in thinking.

We seem to be establishing a virtuous circle. Learning to 'do' Yolŋu concepts like Mararrapan through learning the rules of gurrutu can help in expanding our understanding of concepts as such, which in turn can help us re-imagine the concepts we live through in our modern lives. Then in a further iteration the enhanced insight into the ways we 'do' modern concepts can lead in turn to enhanced insight into Yolŋu concepts and how they are the same and how different from modern concepts. This, it seems to me, is getting close to understanding who we are as learners through learning Yolŋu language and culture. We begin to see a way to meet Dhāṅgal's expectations.

References

Deleuze, G, & Guattari, F 1994, *What is philosophy?* trans. G Burchell and H Tomlinson, Verso, New York.

Deleuze, G 1995, *Negotiations 1972-1990*, trans. M Joughin, Columbia University Press, New York.

Verran, H 2000, 'Aboriginal Australian mathematics: a mapping of disparate mathematics of land ownership', in H Selin and U D'Ambrosio (eds.), *Mathematics across cultures: the history of non-western mathematics*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, pp 345-372.

Verran, H 2001, *Science and an African logic*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Verran, H 2002a, 'A postcolonial moment in science studies: alternative firing regimes of environmental scientists and Aboriginal landowners', *Social Studies of Science*, vol. 32, no. 5-6, pp. 1-34.

Verran, H 2002b, 'Transferring strategies of land management: Indigenous land owners and environmental scientists', in M de Laet (ed.), *Research in Science and Technology Studies, Knowledge and Society*, Elsevier & JAI Press, Oxford, pp. 155-181.

Verran, H 2007, 'Software for helping Aboriginal children learn about place. The educational value of explicit non-coherence', in DW Kritt and LT Winegar (eds.), *Education and technology: critical perspectives and possible futures*, Lexington Books, Lanham, Maryland, pp. 101-124.

Verran, H & Christie, M 2007, 'Using/designing digital technologies of representation in Aboriginal Australian knowledge practices', *Human Technology*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 214-227.