



On Being a ‘Language and Culture’ Learner in a Yolngu World

Helen Verran
 History and Philosophy of Science,
 University of Melbourne

hrv@unimelb.edu.au

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 Dhāngal 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, Dhāngal 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 Yolngu 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 Yolngu lecturers.... That’s for Balanda (non-Yolngu) 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 Yolngu 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. Dhāngal’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 Dhāngal’s hopes for learners of Yolngu language and culture very seriously as expression of an autochthonous Yolngu account of knowledge, teaching, and learning.

Dhāngal’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-Yolngu are likely to bring to the experience of being students of Yolngu 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 Dhāngal to be saying here and explain why I find it arresting. Dhāngal’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. Dhāngal 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 Yolngu languages, and in becoming familiar with the *details* of Yolngu cultural understandings

that are necessarily (in Yolngu logic) particular to clans, learners, including non-Yolngu learners can become more fully themselves, and more fully and explicitly aware of who they are and what they might achieve because of that.

Why am I suddenly ‘all ears’ when I hear Dhāṅgal say these things? Her claims have me struggling to extend my past interest in the *objects* of Yolngu worlds to *subjects*—learners and knowers. In studying Yolngu objects I see myself as following my Yolngu 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 Yolngu 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.³

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 Yolngu teachers use screens to achieve similar ends.⁴ 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 ontologically odd performative Yolngu 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.⁵ 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-Yolngu bring to the experience of being students of Yolngu language and culture.⁶

Before I get on to that however let me present material from one of Dhāṅgal’s later teaching sessions, a text performed by Dhāṅgal 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 Dhāṅgal and heard her telling a story against the background noises of the yard outside her house. We (who were not present either in Dhāṅgal’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 Dhāṅgal clearly as among other voices and background music; behind Dhāṅgal 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.

Dhāṅgal tells a story of land immediately around that site where she’s sitting, her performance is delivered in a mixture of English and *Yolngu 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 Dhāṅgal’s screened performance offers rich language learning while conveying what for Dhāṅgal as a Yolngu teacher is significant cultural information.

This area, *dhanum Birritjimi... Birritjimi*. Wallaby Beach. *Birritjimi yäku. Ga Mararrapan*, the name of a dog that came across through this land, but on the beach, *ya' Di, Mararrapan...* walked down... *lingu* because I'm now showing you the *nhawi*..... out in the sea, *gunda*... the rocks... *Dunha* 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 *ñunha? 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, where I said the conveyer belt was, that's where he stopped. What he would do is walked... On this side of the point... I mean half way there he stopped because the pheasant *bukpuk* called out. *Bukpuk*. Called out where the refinery is, so that area is *Dhuwa. Galpu*. And the *bukpuk* was taking care of that area because where the *wititj* (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 *wititj*. And as you two have already been here, and you saw the pile of raw bauxite (powder/dust) that's how the *wititj* 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 *Bukpukpuy*. And that spring was blocked as soon as the refinery was built. And still there where the *Bukpuk* 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 ñurru ñunha* the export wharf, where they ship from ??? gets the alumina ore, and the bauxite. 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 *Bukpukpuy. Mararrapan Gumatj* dog. And it is to do with the *bäru* (crocodile). It's another name for *bäru. Mararrapan, Dararrwi, 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 Yolhu*. 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*.⁷

Dhänḡal 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; *Wititj* 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 Yolngu cosmos is re-enacted in narratives like to one Dhänḡal begins here, the like of which which Dhänḡal has often performed before, both for Yolngu learners and for non-Yolngu 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 Dhänḡal is hoping for more than this

minimal participation as audience by learners of Yolngu language and culture in the *Teaching from Country* programme, she hopes that learners of Yolngu language and culture (Yolngu and non-Yolngu 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 Yolngu 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 Yolngu language and culture in a Yolngu 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 Yolngu 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 (1925-1995) 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*.⁸

So in becoming a learner of Yolngu language and culture there is some preliminary work to be done in thinking about concepts *as such*. And here’s a neat irony. Yolngu 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’ Yolngu 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 Yolngu 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 Yolngu language and culture. We begin to see a way to meet Dhāṅgal’s expectations.

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

² I use Deleuze’s notion of concepts as inhabiting a ‘plane of immanence’, and take it as connecting well enough to Yolngu metaphysics to be a useful translating tool. Yolngu cosmos has a transcendental domain *Wanḡarr* 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 Yolngu 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 harbours 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 Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari *What is Philosophy?* (trans. Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson) Verso 1994

³ See Verran, Helen, "A Postcolonial Moment in Science Studies: Alternative Firing Regimes of Environmental Scientists and Aboriginal Landowners' *Social Studies of Science* 32, 5–6, 1–34, 2002; Verran, Helen, "Transferring Strategies of Land Management: Indigenous Land Owners and Environmental Scientists", in Marianne de Laet (ed.), *Research in Science and Technology Studies*, *Knowledge and Society* (Oxford: Elsevier & JAI Press) 13, 155–81, 2002; Verran, Helen, "Aboriginal Australian Mathematics: A Mapping of Disparate Mathematics of Land Ownership", in *Mathematics Across Cultures The History of Non-Western Mathematics*, Helaine Selin and Ubiratan D'Ambrosio (eds.), Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, pp 345-372, 2000

⁴ Verran, Helen and Michael Christie. "Using/Designing Digital Technologies of Representation in Aboriginal Australian Knowledge practices", *Human Technology*, Vol 3(2), May 2007, pp.214-227

⁵ Verran, Helen. *Science and an African Logic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001, Chapter six; Verran, Helen. "Software for helping Aboriginal children learn about place. The educational value of explicit non-coherence" *Education and Technology: Critical Perspectives and Possible Futures*. David W. Kritt & Lucien T. Winegar, (eds). Lexington Books, Lanham, MD, 2007, pp. 101-124.

⁶ Verran, Helen. *Science and an African Logic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001, Chapter two.

⁷ 6 May 2009: Dhaṅgal telling stories about land
<http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/inc/tfc/trials21.html>

⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations 1972-1990*, (trans Martin Joughin) Columbia University Press, 1995, p. 164-5.

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