Historical Problems and Methodological Issues Regarding Nhanda, an Aboriginal Language of Western Australia

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Abstract. While salvage linguistic studies are valuable projects in fostering language retention and recovery, such studies are prone to methodological difficulties that have the potential to compromise their validity. In Australia particularly, salvage linguistic studies may be employed by parties involved in competing Native Title claims, making the validity of the study a critical issue. Furthermore, the validity of such studies may also have a bearing on other historical questions. In this article, a particular study is critically examined, possible methodological shortcomings and historical problems identified, and the relevance of these to a particular historical linguistic debate are considered.

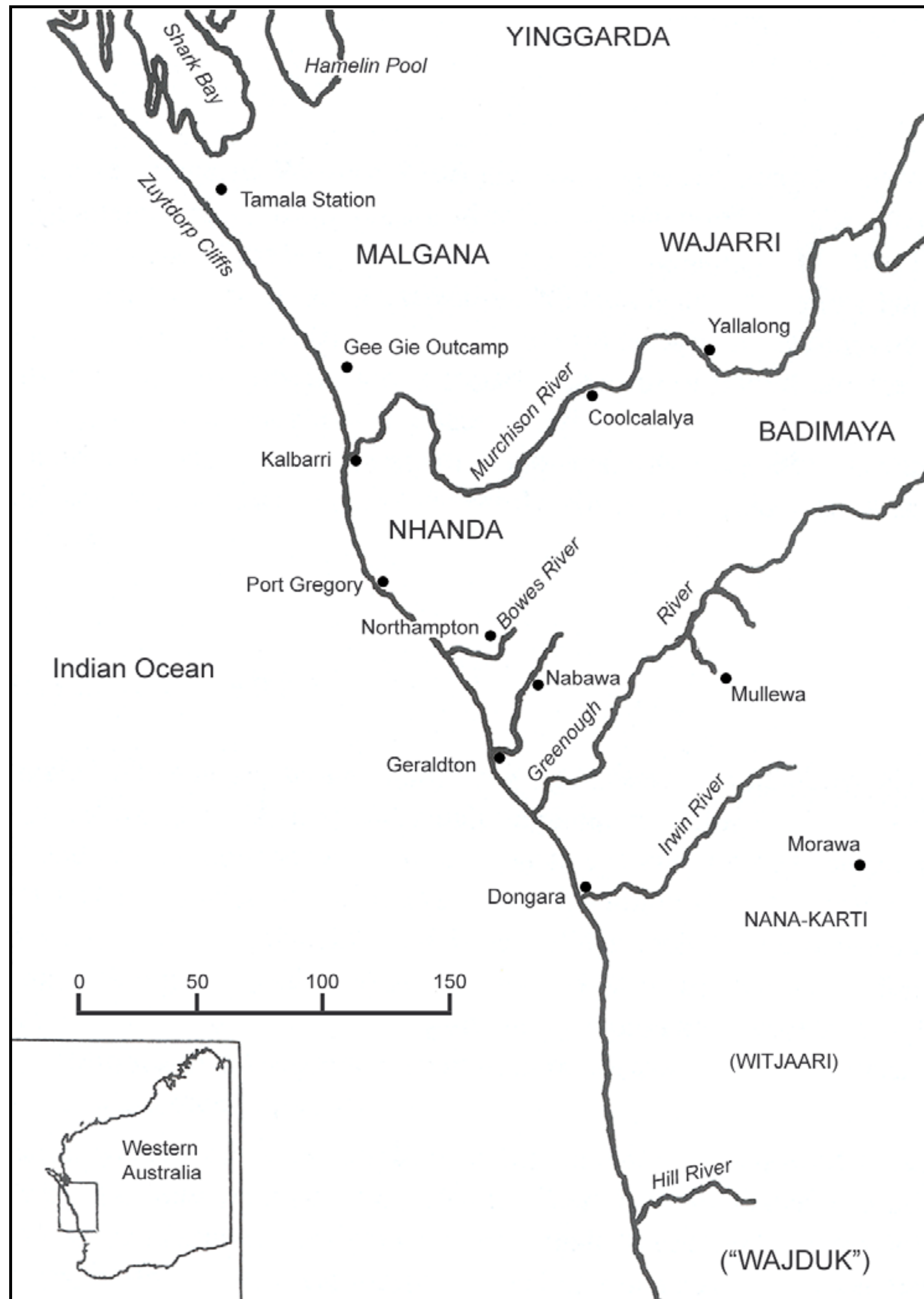
Linguistic studies have a range of important purposes and functions, the specifics depending on the particular context in which they are carried out. In Australia, such studies of indigenous languages have served as: a record of languages in danger of extinction; a tool in language maintenance and recovery programs; a form of evidence bearing on questions of history and prehistory; and a significant element in the substantiation of Native Title claims (Evans 2001:260). Nhanda is typical in this regard (Yamaji Language Centre 1998, 2001:4). Consequently, given that these are issues of some account, it is imperative that such studies be as accurate, cogent, and valid as possible. Unfortunately, this is not always the case, as I endeavor to demonstrate below for Blevins (2001a), indicating in passing where I believe the methodology has been defective and erroneous conclusions have been drawn.

Juliette Blevins's monograph *Nhanda: An Aboriginal Language of Western Australia* purports to be a salvage linguistics study of Nhanda,[1] a language "currently on the verge of extinction" (Blevins 2001a:1). It relies upon material elicited principally from a single informant, Lucy Ryder, and while Blevins acknowledges that the "risks of working with a single speaker on a moribund language are numerous" (2001a:8), elicitation nevertheless proceeded on this basis. Verification of Ryder's language as Nhanda was based, in the first instance, on "a comparison of her speech with Gratte's (1967) recording of her Uncle Watty Barker speaking Nhanda, [which] suggests that her pronunciation of Nhanda is native, and that phonetic, phonological, morphological, and syntactic nuances of the language are very much intact" (Blevins 2001a:8). This was supported by the observation that Ryder reported that there was a lack of "mutual intelligibility," apart from "scattered lexical items" (Blevins 2001a:6), with other languages from the region.[2]

One of the significant risks in studies of this nature relates to the possibility of material from other languages becoming unconsciously incorporated into, or influencing, an informant's or their forebears' knowledge of what they believe to be their language, a common problem in Australia (Breen 1981:281, 1990:6–7; Dixon 1981:14–15, 1983:437; Morphy 1983:5; Dench 2001; Evans 2001:250; Gerritsen 2001:69–70). In order to identify and take account of such influences, comparable investigations typically involve elicitation from a proportion, if not all, of individuals with significant knowledge of the language, with the researchers in some instances leaving "no stone unturned looking for other speakers" (Hercus 1999:xv; see also Dixon 1991:353; Evans 2001:251). Elicited material is also usually compared with other recorded forms of the language, if such material is available, as an additional means of reconstructing the language in question and verifying the integrity of the informants' knowledge. Where necessary, the issue of whether informants have been influenced by speakers of other languages is explicitly considered (e.g., Breen 1990:6–7; Hercus 1994:2–6, 1999). In a number of respects, as I argue, the methodology employed by Blevins in her study of Nhanda has not taken sufficient account of this issue, or of other influences arising from recent historical impacts on speakers of the Nhanda language. However, before proceeding to a closer examination of the methodology employed in her study, it is necessary to review the tribal and language names employed by Blevins and the territories these are associated with, in order to establish the proper context.

As stated earlier, in Australia evidence and pronouncements proffered by linguists carry particular weight, as they may be used as supporting evidence in Native Title claims. Conversely, the basis upon which land boundaries are established also has some bearing on the assignment of languages to their respective speakers, a consideration particularly relevant to the study of Nhanda. In this context, it must be borne in mind that boundaries in Australia are, in fact, a highly problematic issue, with its history over the last two centuries or more of dispossession, severe disturbance, gross dislocation, and catastrophic depopulation affecting most Aboriginal peoples. The central west coastal region of Western Australia is no exception (Douglas 1981:199–200; Thieberger 1993:1; Gerritsen 1994a:266–69, 2001:69–70). A further complication is an ongoing debate as to the very nature of boundaries and the commonalities that constitute group identity (Hill 1978; Davis and Prescott 1992; Thieberger 1993:15; Sutton 1995). Consequently, careful research and some caution is required in any attempt to establish boundaries.

In her study, Blevins provides a map indicating the position of Nhanda and its neighboring languages. This is reproduced below with minor modifications for the purposes of illustration and clarity.



Map 1. The location of Nhanda and neighboring languages (after Blevins 2001a:xv). Here language names given in parentheses represent the inaccurate designations in Blevins's original map.

Unfortunately, there are a number of serious concerns regarding Blevins's original map and the identification and delineation of the groups named in her study. First, according to Blevins the northern boundary of Nhanda lay just north of the Murchison River, "close to Gee Gie Outcamp" (Blevins 2001a:5, see also pp. 2–3). This delineation was based primarily on information derived from geologist cum historian Phillip Playford, who reported that he had been informed that this was the boundary "by elderly Aborigines during the late 1950s" (Playford 1996:211). However, this assertion is at odds with all other investigations and research carried out over the last 117 years, which places the northern Nhanda boundary around Tamala Station or beyond, at least 90 kilometers further north (Barlee 1886:306; Bates 1907a, 1907b; Tindale 1974: 249–50; Davis 1993; Thieberger 1993:70; Gerritsen 1994a:104; Horton 1994:803; Yamaji Language Centre 1998:6). This view was, moreover, communicated to Blevins by "two elder Nhanda" informants (Blevins 2001a:5), whom she seemingly chose to ignore in preference to Playford's sources.

In terms of the northern extent of Nhanda territory, the only real point of contention or uncertainty for other researchers has been the status of the Shark Bay region. Some have assigned it to Nhanda (Tindale 1974:249–50; Davis 1993), others to Malgana or other local groups (Barlee 1886:306; Thieberger 1993:70, 80–83; Gerritsen 1994a:104; Horton 1994:803; Blevins 2001a:2), while another is uncertain (Bates 1907a, 1907b). A Nhanda elder informed me that he considers it to have been Nhanda (Bill Mallard p.c. 2002).[3] Consequently, Blevins's assignment lacks support from any other source and is contrary to all other investigators. Therefore, based on the totality of all investigations and information, it should be concluded that the northern Nhanda boundary extended at least as far north as Tamala Station.

In considering the southern boundary of Nhanda, and the location of neighboring languages, Blevins presents contradictory information, cites nonexistent evidence, and makes judgments that are at odds with all other research relating to this area. For example, while stating that Amangu, the southern Nhanda dialect, extended from Champion Bay (Geraldton) to Hill River (Blevins 2001a: 140), her map nevertheless shows Witjaari in that area. South of that she places "Wajduk" (sic), stating elsewhere that it is "unclear what languages were spoken between the southern extent of Nhanda . . . and the northern extent of Wajuk" (Blevins 2001a:5). However, it would appear that Blevins is the only investigator who is unclear about this. Wajuk is an extinct language of the Nyungar subgroup, originally spoken around Perth, the current state capital.[4] North of that to Hill River it is widely accepted that the language was Yuwat (Yuat/Juat) (Tindale 1974:243; Thieberger 1993:32, 68–69; Davis 1993; Gerritsen 1994a:104; Horton 1994:1011). In support of her contention that Witjaari, "now a ghost language" (Blevins 2001a:ix), lay to the south of Nhanda, Blevins cites Tindale (1940), but there is absolutely no mention of, or reference to, Witjaari in that source. Moreover, if later work by Tindale (1974:142, 260,

310) or Thieberger (1993:40, 56) had been consulted, it would have been quite evident that Witjaari is simply an alternative name for Wajuk.

As for the dialects of Nhanda, Blevins provides for three—the northern, central, and southern dialects. The northern dialect encompasses the area from Gee Gie Outcamp to the Murchison River, the mouth of the Murchison River, and the lower Murchison River (Blevins 2001a:3). The central dialect, "referred to [historically] as Watchandie," was, according to Blevins, "spoken in and around present day Port Gregory and Northampton north to the lower Murchison" (Blevins 2001a:3). The southern dialect, Amangu, "spoken from Geraldton (Champion Bay) south to Hill River and inland to Mullewa" (Blevins 2001a:3), has already been discussed. Inexplicably, this delineation fails to account for the 50 kilometers from Northampton to Geraldton. Furthermore, according to Blevins (2001a:146, 154), the central dialect was known as Nhaguja, although elsewhere Nhaaguja is designated as an alternative name for Amangu (Blevins 2001a:3). Nha(a)guja is not listed in any other published source as an alternative term for any Nhanda dialect as far as I able to ascertain, and I presume it arose in the course of elicitation. However, the term *Ngaagooja* (also written as *Ngoo'gooja*) appears in material collected by Daisy Bates early in the twentieth century (Bates n.d. a, n.d. b, n.d. c, 1907a, 1907b). This term relates to the virtually unique form of traditional social organization, in Australian terms, present in this region, involving reciprocal marriage groups based on geographical localities (Gerritsen 1994a:137–38, 145–49). As such it is not a term describing a linguistic community, but denotes just one of the many units in the region's traditional social organization. The Ngaagooja group was one of three that Bates (1907b) located on the south side of the Bowes River (which Blevins leaves unnamed). While this may seem a pedantic point, the identification and placement of Nhanda dialectal groups is a critical issue, as I shall show.

Turning to the specifics of the study in question, as noted above, elicited material was, according to Blevins, provided by "the last known speaker" (Blevins 2001a:ix) of this language. But, elsewhere she states that Nhanda "is spoken by a handful of people at most" (Blevins 2001a:1), and that "there are no more than a few speakers or semi-speakers" (Blevins 2001a:7). While another informant did, in fact, provide some material, she passed away in the early part of the field research and her specific contribution is not evident.[5] Blevins also identifies two other individuals who claim to have knowledge of the language,[6] and I am able to identify a further four.[7] None of these other individuals was interviewed, although Blevins's initial collaborator, Doug Marmion, was informed early in the research in 1993 by my informants, Bill Mallard and William Mallard, that they and others were Nhanda speakers (Bill Mallard and William Mallard p.c. 2001 and 2002). One might reasonably expect, given that this language is "currently on the verge of extinction" (Blevins 2001a:1), that all informants who could be identified ought to have been interviewed. Other

researchers in similar situations have "exhaustively" (Dixon 1991:353) searched for other speakers, often employing "a great deal of detective work" (Evans 2001:251) in locating them.

While determining who are legitimate last speakers and what are their capabilities is a problematic issue (Dorian 1986:562–63; Evans 2001:250), it has been suggested that researchers should not to be too "dogmatic" in this regard (Evans 2001:260). For example, in one of the few single speaker studies carried out in Australia (Dench 1995), the investigator still sought corroboration from two other remaining speakers, both of lesser competency. This was, for Dench, an unavoidable situation and he readily concedes that "ideally a linguist should work with a number of speakers" (Dench 1995:22). Despite acknowledging that there are risks in relying upon a single speaker, Blevins seemingly chose to follow what might be considered an unusual path, ignoring other speakers and providing no explanation or justification for this aspect of her methodology. Qualifying her approach by acknowledging that there are risks in relying upon a single speaker may well be considered unacceptable if rigorous steps are not taken to identify, and if possible, negate those risks.[8] Certainly the steps taken by others in similar circumstances were not followed in this instance. As noted below, this is another critical issue.

Initially, Blevins and Marmion, in their first paper on Nhanda, ascertain from their data that the cognate density between Nhanda and the adjacent Wajarri language was 60 percent (Blevins and Marmion 1994:194 n. 1). This differs from an earlier determination by O'Grady, Voegelin, and Voegelin (1966), which produced a figure of 42 percent. This would appear to be a significant difference, which Blevins and Marmion attribute to the earlier study employing a smaller data set (Blevins and Marmion 1994:194). In her study, Blevins also considers material from another reputed Nhanda speaker, Jack Councillor, who was interviewed in a number of sessions by O'Grady in 1960. Regarding this material, Blevins notes that "Jack Councillor's language differs in significant ways from Lucy Ryder's" (Blevins 2001a:9). Blevins suggests that this difference may have arisen because Councillor also spoke Malgana and may have been influenced by this (Blevins 2001a:9). The alternative possibility, that Ryder's knowledge may have been influenced, is not considered. Others claiming to be Nhanda speakers, such as Bill and William Mallard, also report significant differences between their knowledge of the language and that of Ryder (Bill Mallard and William Mallard p.c. 2001 and 2002), which raises the question as to who are the legitimate speakers of Nhanda.

This issue is central to the study and its validity. Blevins bases her claim that Lucy Ryder is a legitimate Nhanda source on the fact that material elicited from her Uncle Watty Barker "suggests that her pronunciation of Nhanda is native," and the lack of mutual intelligibility with other languages in the region, Yinggarda, Malgana, and Wajarri apart from "scattered lexical items." But this authentication is open to question. Comparison with another family member

would not appear to be a sufficient basis for verifying that the informant is speaking the subject language, unless it can be established that the other family member is in fact an authentic source. In this case, it is not evident if Barker's material was ever authenticated, and if so, how. Certainly there are recordings of reputed "Nhanda words and customs" (Blevins 2001a:8) provided by Barker in 1965 and 1967 (von Brandenstein 1965; Gratte 1967). However, the identification and classification of Nhanda was apparently principally "based on 1960 sessions with Jack Councillor" (Blevins 2001a:9), the same individual whose material differed in "significant ways" from that of Ryder and, by extension, presumably from that of Barker as well. Consequently, the validity of identifying Ryder as a Nhanda speaker is open to question.

As for the other languages in which Ryder reported a lack of mutual intelligibility, Yinggarda lies 150 kilometers away (see map 1), and it is unclear how this was verified with Malgana as there were ostensibly only "two or three speakers" remaining in 1966 (Thieberger 1993:87). This just leaves Wajarri, where the "scattered lexical items" in fact constitute, according to Blevins own calculations, a cognate density of 60 percent. In essence, this test is largely meaningless, akin to establishing an alleged English speaker as such because they do not understand French or Danish.

Given the acknowledged risks involved in a study of this nature, the fact that methodologies aimed at minimizing such risks employed by other investigators in similar situations do not appear to have been applied in this study, that there are apparent shortcomings in the delineation of tribal and dialectal groups, and that in a number of instances significant differences have been reported between material collected from Blevins's principal informant and other sources, one might be entitled to be concerned about the validity of the study.

Such concerns could possibly have been allayed by a comparison of elicited material with material collected in the past. To do this, a source or sources deriving from the same dialectal area as the informant must be identified. In this instance, the material elicited from Ryder was designated as northern Nhanda by Blevins (2001a:3). It would appear that this is based on Ryder's personal and family history, which indicates that she was born at Murchison House Station (on the Murchison River, 15 kilometers upstream from Kalbarri) in 1919 and learned her Nhanda from her mother, Mary Morgan, and her maternal grandmother, Jilinha (Blevins 2001a:7–8). As to the identification of an historical source from the area Blevins deems to be northern Nhanda, a small digression is required.

Historically the Nhanda people first felt the full impact of British colonization when occupation of their lands commenced in late 1849. Between 1850 and 1886, five word lists were collected from Nhanda people (Foley 1865; Oldfield 1865; Anonymous n.d.; Goldsworthy 1886a, 1886b).[9] Of these, the work of Augustus Oldfield is the most relevant. (He, in fact, may have been the original founder of Murchison House Station, around 1858 [Oldfield 1865:219–20, 225,

233, 242; Blevins 2001a:3].) In the period 1858–59 he recorded in considerable detail the quasi-traditional life of the "Watchandie" (Watjandi), a local Nhanda group "in and around Murchison House Station" (Blevins 2001a:3). Included in his work was a discussion of the language spoken by the Watchandie, a 250-item word list, some texts, and a series of place and personal names (Oldfield 1865:289–97). From his accounts and the place names listed, it can be deduced that Watchandie territory incorporated the lower Murchison River, including the mouth, and the country up to 40 kilometers north and south of it (Oldfield 1865:269–82, 293).

In terms of Blevins's treatment of Oldfield's material, she states that it "was referred to as Watchandi, and spoken in and around present-day Port Gregory and Northampton north to the lower Murchison" (2001a:3). The initial basis for this was that the word for 'stone, rock' seemed "representative of a dialect between [northern] Nhanda and Amangu." Allegedly, two different terms were found in northern Nhanda and Amangu, with Oldfield showing "both forms attested" (Blevins 2001a:3). But this is not a satisfactory basis for making such an assignment. Though 'stone' and 'rock' may be considered synonymous, they are, nevertheless, distinct terms. Had Blevins consulted the correct source on Amangu (Bates n.d. 41, not Bates n.d. 85),[10] it would have been evident that Bates, who collected historical material representative of that dialect, did not attempt to elicit this distinction. Knowledge of distinct terms may also have simply been lost prior to the elicitation of the limited material provided by Blevins's informant. What might be considered to be far more basic items evident in historical records are certainly absent from Blevins's elicited material (e.g., 'woman's digging stick'). Moreover, as terms such as 'rock' and 'stone' may well be treated as synonyms by some informants and not by others, some linguists consider it unsafe to determine dialectal distinctions on this basis (Rensch 1992:14).

Blevins further justifies the assignment of Watchandie to the central dialect on the grounds that "is intermediate between Nhanda and Amangu in terms of final vowel loss . . . Watchandies has more vowel loss than Nhanda but less than Amangu" (2001a:3). Again this is a rather insecure basis on which to assign the Oldfield material to the central dialect. First, it may be the result of individual differences or idiosyncratic recording, particularly as the Amangu informant, Winjaroo, was "deaf and dumb" and elicitation took place through a third party, a woman named Marratharra (Bates n.d 41). Second, languages in this part of Australia can be quite variable in terms of the presence or absence of final vowels (Douglas 1976:20). But, more importantly, Blevins's attempt to assign the Oldfield material to her central dialect flies in the face of historical realities. Clearly Oldfield was based, as Blevins herself acknowledges, "in and around Murchison House" (Blevins 2001a:3), and he portrayed "Nhanda language and customs as they may have been in pre-European times" (Blevins 2001a:9). Oldfield indeed provided extensive descriptions and accounts of features and

events in the area that Blevins delineates as northern Nhanda. Furthermore, other authorities (e.g., Thieberger 1993:95) assign Watchandie to Blevins's northern Nhanda dialectal area. Certainly there is not the slightest shred of historical evidence that Oldfield obtained language material from "present day Port Gregory and Northampton."

If one accepts that the Oldfield material derives from the area encompassed by this supposed northern Nhanda dialect, then there is some basis for comparison between that and the material elicited by Blevins. There are 172 terms in common between orthographic forms derived from Oldfield and the material elicited by Blevins.[11] When compared, the cognate density is only 68.6 percent (118/172). A common benchmark applied where materials exhibit a cognate density of 51–70 percent indicates they are different languages (Thieberger 1993:15). On this basis, these two sources must be considered to be separate languages.[12]

Beside this apparent anomaly, confidence in the validity of Blevins's research is further compromised by innumerable errors of a lesser nature. One example includes the attribution of the word *piwi* 'mudlark' (Blevins 2001a: 147), as an attested Nhanda term when it is actually derived from a common English word, *peewee*, found in most dictionaries. Another is the description of *juna* as a "short wooden axe with sharp blade" (Blevins 2001a:143), when actually it was a throwing stick with an adze blade gummed into one end (Oldfield 1865:295; Goldsworthy 1886a:315, 1886b:317; Bates n.d. d:173). And, yet another is the word for 'pelican', *adanyja*, obtained from other sources, O'Grady (1966) and Goldsworthy (1886b) (Blevins 2001a:140), although the second source actually lists it as *knulumberry*, while Oldfield (1865:294) has *knookoo*.

The dangers of working with a single speaker in a region subject to severe disturbance have already been discussed and the argument I have put forward, I believe, illustrates these dangers. Because of this, and the grounds laid out earlier, Blevins's study must be seen as seriously flawed. Whether the apparent differences between the language elicited by Blevins and other sources is a consequence of the informant, or her forebears, having incorporated other language material, or the result of some other factor the took place in the period since 1850 is an open question. Nevertheless, it is quite evident that significant change has taken place. The Nhanda population was reputedly reduced to an estimated dozen individuals by 1879, and this was followed by an influx of people from the east (Gerritsen 1994a:269, 2001:69–70). As suggested earlier, this has obvious and important implications in regard to local Native Title issues, but it is also a significant factor in a debate on the nature and history of Nhanda and the origins of its unusual features.

It has long been recognized that Nhanda is an unusual language that sets it apart from the Pama-Nyugan languages and other languages of the Kartu subgroup (O'Grady, Voegelin, and Voegelin 1966; Blevins and Marmion 1994: 193, 209, 1995; Gerritsen 1994a:108–12; Blevins 1999). Some of its features

include a distinctive glottal stop and a loss of initial consonants. There has been considerable debate between myself and others, as to the origin and causes of these distinctive features (Anonymous 1995:146; Gerritsen 1997, 2001; Blevins 1998, 2001b). I originally argued that there was a Dutch component, around 16 percent, in Nhanda as a result of the marooning of Dutch sailors on the central west coast of Western Australia between 1629 and 1712 (Gerritsen 1994a: 123–31, 1994b). I have also argued that some of the unusual features of Nhanda were a consequence of the absorption of Dutch into Nhanda, pointing out as well other unusual phonological features, particularly examples of word-initial <kn>, found in the historical word lists mentioned earlier, as well as in other historical sources. This particular phoneme has not been detected in material elicited in recent times, although it was described by one of Bates's informants, Thomas Drage, in the following terms: "knal-by—me and you—. . . requires the k and n to be pronounced as one, or a combination of both and is spelt thus—hnng-alby" (Bates n.d. e:89; see also Oldfield 1865:290; Gerritsen 1994:212–14, 2001:70). Blevins has contended that this /kn/ is just a mistranscription of the velar nasal (Blevins 1998:43–44, 2001b), whereas I have ascribed its absence in recent materials to the dramatic impacts that have taken place since colonial occupation of the area commenced (Gerritsen 2001). Consequently the issue of linguistic change since 1850 is relevant to this aspect of the debate.

The methodology I employed in my original study was based exclusively upon an analysis of historical materials, at first because I was unaware at the time that any Nhanda speakers remained and thought it unlikely that any did remain, and, then because I was seeking to avoid the particular types of methodological problems outlined in this article. The detailed evidence and arguments employed in that study need not be repeated here to support my case; those who are interested can examine the relevant works and form their own judgments. Blevins has contested my assertion that there was a Dutch component in Nhanda (Blevins 1998, 1999:298, 2001a:9, 2001b). She claims "there is no evidence of Dutch linguistic influence in Nhanda" (Blevins 1999:298 n. 2) and, as mentioned above, alleges that in my use of historical materials I failed to take account of transcription errors commonly found in materials collected by the "enthusiastic amateurs" of the nineteenth century (Blevins 1998), a view I have, of course, vigorously contested (Gerritsen 1997, 2001). Although Blevins alleges that I also failed to show "the precise sound changes or restructurings that have taken place" (Blevins 2001b:75) in the absorption of Dutch into Nhanda, she ignores the evidence that I have presented (Gerritsen 1994a:128–32, 1994b:2–3). As for the Dutch component in Nhanda, Blevins attributes this to "false cognates" (Blevins 2001a:75). However, 16 percent of a language represents a considerable number of "false cognates." Nevertheless, conscious of this possibility, in my original analysis I compared my Nhanda material with English as a test language and found a cognate density of only 1 percent (Gerritsen 1994a:132).

Alternatively, Blevins and Marmion have ascribed the unusual features of Nhanda to “a long period of independent development” (Blevins 2001:36). According to Blevins, by the employment of a “bottom up” (Blevins 1999:297) comparison of Nhanda with other languages “it is possible to show that most Nhanda words originate from a mother-language (called Proto-Pama-Nyungan) which was most likely spoken on the Australian continent between 3,000 and 5,000 years ago” (Blevins 1998:43). While endeavors to reconstruct deep Australian linguistic history are commendable, there are two points where Blevins’s argument lacks cogency. In the first instance, as I have pointed out previously (Gerritsen 2001:72, citing Dixon [1997]), the validity of linguistic reconstruction with such time depth, lacking a means of verification, is quite problematic. Blevins acknowledges there are theoretical problems with this methodology and that a workshop was to be conducted to assess its validity (Blevins 2001b:75). Regarding my second point, if the data upon which such reconstruction is based is flawed, as I suggest is the case with the data in Blevins’s study, then that reconstruction must be compromised to some extent. But, to then use that reconstruction to generate competing etymologies for particular Nhanda words, when the elicited material itself may be compromised, can only be seen as a questionable undertaking.

In conclusion, while Blevins now accepts that it is “not impossible” that there is a Dutch influence in Nhanda, she adheres to the position that it is a language with a “long period of independent development” (Blevins 2001b:75). However, as far as I am able to ascertain, no concrete explanation or causal factor operating in prehistory has ever been proposed by Blevins to account for this purported phenomenon and the resultant linguistic features of Nhanda. Instead, she relies on a theory of endogenous linguistic change detected by the application of a self-referential paradigm based on compromised data. In essence, it is an ahistorical explanation employing a complex, speculative and possibly flawed reconstruction. The alternative—my thesis that Nhanda was influenced by Dutch sailors—provides a simple reconstruction with an historical cause. If one were to be in the position of placing these competing theses before William of Occam, I wonder which would he favor?

Notes

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1. Although this form of spelling appears to have become the convention, I note that one of the legitimate alternatives, Nanda (Blevins 2001a:2), is preferred by many in the Nanda community (Anonymous 1999:1; Bill Mallard p.c. 2001).

2. I would like to make it clear at this point that the issues I raise should not be seen as a reflection upon Lucy Ryder, who I respect for her efforts to genuinely and sincerely assist in an attempt to preserve and reconstruct the Nhanda language.

3. The designation of Shark Bay is quite problematic and I now hold the view that

the people who lived there (west of Hamelin Pool) in earlier times ought to be considered as northern Nhanda clans. In this I have concluded that the very limited evidence for group assignment in that particular area is error prone, contradictory or unsubstantiated, and hence inconclusive (see Tindale 1974:250; Thieberger 1993:80–83, 87–88; Blevins 2001a:2). I rely, instead, upon socioeconomic grounds (Gerritsen 2002).

4. Blevins also makes the remarkable statement that "Nyungar, the language of the southwest tip of the continent was gone" (Blevins 2001a:ix). This is not quite the case. While the original languages and dialects of the Nyungar subgroup have, since colonization, merged into a common language and in that sense "disappeared," the resultant language, "today known as Nyungar" (Thieberger 1993:32), is well and truly alive with many speakers (Douglas 1976:8; Dench 1994:174).

5. The late Mrs Pearl Whitby (Blevins 2001a:8, 139).

6. Jack Brand and Phyliss McMahon (Blevins 2001a:8).

7. Bill Mallard, William Mallard, Jack Brown, and Topsie Cross (Bill Mallard and William Mallard p.c. 2001 and 2002).

8. I would suggest that this is only acceptable if the informant is the last remaining speaker or is representative of an extensive speech community and there is little likelihood of the material elicited from him or her being brought into question.

9. Robert J. Foley, who was highly sympathetic to the Nhanda people, arrived in Champion Bay (Geraldton) in 1850 as part of the first wave of occupation and probably collected his material around that time (Gerritsen 1994a:153–54, 266). The source Anonymous (n.d.) is almost identical to Goldsworthy (1886b), but contains a few additional words and so is assigned to that period.

10. Bates (n.d. 85) is Bates's transcription of Curr's (1886:1:310–13) mistranscription of Oldfield (1865) (i.e., it is Oldfield 1886). Another source Blevins cites as Nhanda material, Bates n.d. 37, is also incorrect, this being language material from a Kalaamaya local group called "Natingero" (Adam 1886) of the South East subgroup (Thieberger 1993:22–23).

11. For the purposes of this comparison, I have employed Blevins's orthography to ensure that the basis for the comparison is beyond question.

12. There is evidence suggesting that Ryder's language may incorporate a component of Daguda, a little known language from the Hamelin Pool area. One of Douglas's informants, Joe Marlow, referred to a language he called "Tja urra," "spoken around Murchison House and near Northampton," stating that "Tja urra and Watjarri are all mixed up" (Douglas 1981:202). Thieberger (1993:81–82) equates Tja urra with Daguda.

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