

## The Note on Page 146 of *Paper and Talk*: A Response

Rupert Gerritsen

In 1994 I published a book, *And Their Ghosts May Be Heard* (Gerritsen 1994a), the result of three years of research, one year of writing and another negotiating the publishing process. I argued there, employing a variety of lines of evidence, that marooned Dutch sailors were the first Europeans to live in Australia, beginning in 1629. The evidence and arguments I used relied heavily upon a comparative anthropological methodology and included a significant element of historical linguistics.

In 1995 Aboriginal Studies Press published a textbook, *Paper and Talk: A Manual for Reconstituting Materials in Australian Indigenous Languages from Historical Sources* (Thieberger 1995), which contained a number of editorial insertions, including one on page 146 referring to my work. I did not, however, become aware of the contents of this publication until the latter part of last year. Regrettably the arguments put forward in that particular editorial insertion, as will be shown below, were, in my view, seriously wanting. To be subject to criticism is, of course, it to be expected when publishing one's research. However, I took great exception to erroneous or unsupported arguments being used, as they were in *Paper and Talk*, as the basis for portraying my work as a textbook example of bad historical linguistics. Consequently I took a series of steps which began initially with an exchange of letters and culminated in a legal settlement in which AIATSIS agreed to publish an apology. The apology, contained in this volume,<sup>1</sup> goes some way toward rectifying the injustice that has been perpetrated, though I am a little disappointed that I had to go to such lengths to obtain a retraction. I am also a little disappointed in AIATSIS's refusal of my request for an errata sheet to be inserted in remaining copies and to reimburse my legal costs. These steps, I believe, would have provided a more complete and just remedy.

Be that as it may I would now like to take the opportunity of rebutting some of the criticisms made on page 146 of *Paper and Talk*.

The erroneous or unsupported statements put forward as 'evidence' of my work's inadequacy in this publication began with the assertion that I had used "old sources for the languages of the area without understanding their flaws". In making this assertion the author chose to overlook the fact that there was considerable discussion in *And Their Ghosts May Be Heard* (see especially pp.124,212-220,303n38,323n22,n24,n31) about flaws in old language sources. This, I would have thought, quite clearly demonstrated that I had an awareness and understanding of where such flaws may arise in early language recordings.

The as yet unidentified author then asserted I had made a number of 'mistakes' in my interpretation of early language recordings which included:

1. '... for example ... the use of *kn* at the beginning of words written in these records .... (in fact, this is a common way of recording the sound *ng* at the beginning of words where it does not occur in English).'

In the languages under discussion in *And Their Ghosts May Be Heard* valid evidence and cogent arguments (see especially pp. 212-4) were put forward to show that the recording of word-initial *kn* in the areas in question did not arise from a mistranscription of word-initial nasal velar *ng* but were an extant phoneme in the early colonial period.

But of greater significance in this regard was the fact that this particular statement is not supported and neither would it appear to be supportable in any way. There is no body of evidence or statement in any Australia historical linguistics textbook or published analysis, as far as I am aware, which supports the claim that the *ng* sound was commonly transcribed as *kn*. This even includes *Paper and Talk* itself, where there is some discussion of transcription errors and the use of non-standard orthographies in other parts of this publication (cf. pp.85-6,113). At no point in these sections is there any statement made or indication given that *kn* was a common mistranscription for *ng*.

In point of fact, *Paper and Talk* itself even lists a well recognised word-initial *kn* phoneme, the word-initial pre-stopped velar of Eastern Arrente, *kng* (see p. 107).

2. 'He also suggests that the word for water in the region should look something like *ngapa* or *gapa*, and that the recorded form is *howa* or *owwa*. It is well known that a neighbouring language can change sounds like *p* to *w* between vowels; this has happened further north in the Pilbara languages Ngarluma and Yindjibarndi ..."

In order to demonstrate I was mistaken in this instance, as the author of the article in *Paper and Talk* appears to claim, it is necessary to show such a sound substitution occurred in the region in question, not one another 800 km (and 2 language sub-groups) away. There is no evidence presented to indicate that such a sound substitution occurred in the area under discussion.

The example cited is therefore highly misleading. It is analogous to saying I was mistaken because there is a regular sound substitution between similar words from French and Italian which therefore explains a feature of Swedish. To sustain such an argument it would be necessary to show that this sound substitution is evident in the Nordic languages as well.

In other words it is not sufficient to state that a particular sound substitution could happen in order to sustain a claim that I was mistaken, it was also necessary to provide some evidence that it did in fact occur in the area in question. No evidence of this nature was put forward in the article, nor is there any.

3. '... there is good recent work in the languages of the area (e.g. Austin 1992), a handbook which lists available work (Thieberger 1993) and a language centre operating in Geraldton which could have provided accurate information.'

The article in question directly or indirectly implied that my information was not accurate and that I had failed to consult readily available sources. Such an assertion is a serious indictment of any researcher and quite unjustifiably reflected most adversely upon my credibility, capabilities and reputation as a researcher.

My research, which took 3 years, was carried out in 20 different libraries/research facilities in four different states (all at my own expense). This included the premier language centre in WA, the Institute of Applied Aboriginal Studies at Edith Cowan University, as well as the AIATSIS Library in Canberra. The research phase was completed in April 1992 and I then spent the next year writing before the manuscript went to the publishers in April 1993. After a year going through the publishing processes the book reached the shelves in April 1994.

In the course of this research I carried out an exhaustive search for written material, and located and examined every single relevant historical and recent source ever identified up to that point in time

(April 1992) for the languages in question, including all those listed in the 1987 edition of the Thieberger's *Handbook of Western Australian Languages South of the Kimberley* (not markedly different from the 1993 edition), with one small exception.<sup>2</sup> Many of these sources are referred to in the book. I also included a number of additional sources not encompassed by the 1987 or 1993 editions of the Thieberger *Handbook* in my analyses (cf. Gerritsen 1994a:324n41). Furthermore a 22 page bibliography, 'Bibliography of Anthropological Works Employed in the Preparation of "And Their Ghosts May Be Heard"' (Gerritsen 1994b), which includes reference to Thieberger (1987) on page 8, was lodged with the Battye Library in WA and is listed on the Australian Bibliographic Network. Reference to that publication may have established the extent to which I went in order to obtain 'accurate information'.

But to make matters worse, the works which I had allegedly failed to consult, Austin (1992) and Thieberger (1993), had in fact either not been published or were not publicly available by the time my research was completed. Similarly the "language centre operating in Geraldton", presumably the Yamaji Language Centre, did not come into existence until 1990 and again did not publish anything until 1992 when *Wajarri Wangga* (Yamaji Language Centre 1992), a picture dictionary evidently intended as a teaching aid, was released. I could not, therefore, have obtained 'accurate information' in these instances as the works referred to had yet to be published and/or reach the public domain.

Given these points I hope the reader can now appreciate my fundamental objection to the note on page 146 of *Paper and Talk*, which, apart from the lapse on page 146, is undoubtedly a valuable resource for those interested in historical linguistics and language reconstruction.

Before concluding I would also like to make a few remarks in regard to some the issues engendered in my work and the note in *Paper and Talk*, beginning with the nature of the attack upon my work. I found this rather intriguing in many ways but suspect someone may be having problems accepting the import of my work. If this is the case I find it rather surprising considering the ready acceptance of pre-contact Macassan influences in northern Australia, a case probably no better substantiated than mine.

The issue of the appearance of the *kn* phoneme in historical vocabularies, clumsily raised in the note in *Paper and Talk*, I readily accept is a problematic aspect of Australian historical linguistics. I have argued that its occurrence in languages on the west coast of Western Australia, and adjacent areas, arose because of the influence of Dutch sailors. I did not, however, argue that this is true where ever such phonemes appear in historical compilations, as they often do. Because of contentious nature of this facet of my work, and the relevance of this issue to a project in which I am currently engaged, I have carried out a research project involving an examination of virtually every historical linguistic source ever produced in Australia. As a consequence I have arrived at what I believe are some most interesting conclusions and hope to have the results of this project available for publication late in 1998, time permitting.

Finally I would like to point out that although *Ghosts* aims to establish a case for the earliest European settlers in Australia, making it in essence an ethnocentric work, it nevertheless performs an educative function in regard to Aboriginal culture. Through this vehicle I have endeavoured to present, in an accessible form, information that I hope will promote an appreciation of the degree of diversity in traditional Aboriginal cultures, and by this means help to break down popular stereotypical conceptions. How far I have succeeded in this is of course unknown at this point in time, though I hope the well-informed will appreciate this aspect and provide more considered responses in the future.

## NOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> See page 1 [of *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 1997/2]

<sup>2</sup> F. Morphy (1985) 'Working Notes', which I was unable to locate.

## REFERENCES

- Austin, P. 1992 *A Dictionary of Yinggarda*, Department of Linguistics, La Trobe University, Bundoora.
- Gerritsen, R. 1994a *And Their Ghosts May Be Heard*, Fremantle Art Centre Press, South Fremantle.
- Gerritsen, R. 1994b Bibliography of Anthropological Works Employed in the Preparation of 'And Their Ghosts May Be Heard' (typescript).
- Thieberger, N. 1987 *Handbook of Western Australian Languages South of the Kimberley*, Institute of Applied Aboriginal Studies, Edith Cowan University, Mt. Lawley, Western Australia.
- 1993 *Handbook of Western Australian Languages South of the Kimberley*, Department of Linguistics, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, Canberra.
- 1995 *Paper and Talk: A Manual for Reconstituting Materials in Australian Indigenous Languages from Historical Sources*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra.
- Yamaji Language Centre 1992 *Wajarri Wangga*, Yamaji Language Centre, Geraldton.