

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF THE
ABORIGINAL SPEECH OF TASMANIA.

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As far as I am aware, the work done hitherto with regard to philological studies of the Tasmanian language has not been extensive. Ling Roth gives in an Appendix to his book on "The Aborigines of Tasmania" an apparently full bibliography of the subject. Among the works mentioned there as dealing with the Speech of the Aborigines, we find the following:—

CALDER.—Language of the Aborigines of Tasmania.

JORGENSEN.—The Aboriginal Languages of Tasmania.

LATHAM.—Elements of Comparative Philology.

MILLIGAN.—Vocabulary of the Dialects of some of the Aboriginal Tribes of Tasmania.

MILLIGAN.—On the Dialects and Languages of the Aboriginal Tribes of Tasmania, and on their Manners and Customs.

MULLER.—Grundriss der Sprachwissenschaft.

J. B. WALKER.—Notes on the Aborigines of Tasmania, extracted from the manuscript Journals of G. W. Walker.

There are, besides, vocabularies by Norman, Dove, Braim, Cook, Gaimard, La Billardiere, McGeary, Peron, Roberts, Scott.

Ling Roth has evidently made use of all these sources of information, and embodied the result of his researches in his book; but though very valuable for its suggestiveness, his work is not that of a trained philologist, and it will be necessary to verify and re-examine his references.

In Appendix F, he states:—"As all the vocabularies handed down to us are English-Tasmanian, and none are Tasmanian-English, it was suggested to make a compilation of one Tasmanian-English vocabulary from all the vocabularies. The initiative is due to Mrs. E. B. Tylor. In preparing this vocabulary, I have attempted to simplify the spelling as follows, where I have felt that I could safely do so without impairing the integrity of the word."

Then follow the phonetic letters proposed to be employed. They are, as far as the vowels are concerned, analogous to the Italian "u," "i," "e," "ia." "C guttural" is to be written as "k." No other letters are mentioned. Duplicated consonants are simplified, and "th," "ch" are to be left unchanged, being doubtful.

When we examine this Tasmanian-English vocabulary we observe that—

1. There are words in it not contained in the English-Tasmanian vocabularies given in the same book. For instance, "abri," arm; "arpu," yes. It would seem that Ling Roth used other vocabularies as well, or else did not give the whole of the vocabularies he names; or permitted misprints to remain. He quotes "alree" for "arm," from Dove's list. How is a reader to know whether "alree" or "abri" is a misprint? At all events, this work will have to be done over again.

2. There are many words taken from the French vocabularies, in which the French phonetic spelling is retained, instead of being transliterated according to Italian phonetics.

In Appendix C we find Milligan's vocabulary of various tribes. This, apart from some printer's errors, is almost, but not quite, identical with that quoted by Calder in the Parliamentary Paper which Sir Elliott Lewis caused to be compiled in 1901. Here, again, verification is necessary.

A curious discrepancy exists in connection with portions of the Book of Genesis, translated by Thos. Wilkinson at Flinders Island in 1833. One specimen of it is given by Ling Roth in Appendix D; another is in the J. B. Walker Memorial Volume, and is evidently an extract from Geo. W. Walker's Journal.

Now, we should expect transcripts of the same text to be practically identical; but these two specimens differ essentially from each other.

In the first place, the spelling is quite different. A few examples will suffice to show this: Walker gives "pomleh" for "made;" Ling Roth, "pomable." Walker gives for "darkness" "lywerreh;" Ling Roth, "lewara." For "said," Walker gives "kany," Ling Roth "carne."

Walker states that Thos. Wilkinson translated three chapters of Genesis, and also composed a considerable vocabulary of words. If the rest of the translation and that vocabulary could be found, they would be most serviceable for the study of the language.

In Appendix E, Ling Roth transcribes fairly accurately the "Popular Song" from Walker's Journal, and refers, for the purpose of comparison, to a version of the same "song" by Milligan, in Appendix C, but overlooks the version quoted by himself in Appendix D, from Davies.

These three versions of the same song are very interesting, and may prove very important.

To compare small things with great, we might notice the curious analogy with the Rosetta stone, and its inscription in three languages, which enabled Champollion and Young to find the key to the hieroglyphics of Egypt; and also with the trilingual rock inscriptions at Behistan, which led Rawlinson to discover the secret of reading the ancient languages of Persia, Babylon, and Assyria.

Of course, our own task is not so difficult, nor is its importance so great; still, the trilingual record of the same meaning should lead us to some definite result in our quiet backwater of human life.

Let us then compare the three versions of our song, and see what conclusions we can deduce from them. Omitting mere repetitions, as not pertinent to our present purpose, we quote from Ling Roth:—

Milligan's version:—Pappela rayna 'ngonyna; toka mengha Leah; lugha mengha Leah; nena taypa rayna poonyna, nena nawra pewillah, pallah nawra pewillah; pellowah!

Davies' version:—Ne popila raina pogana; thu me gunnea; thoga me gunnea; naina thaipa raina pogana; nara paara, poivella paara; ballahoo! Hoo!

G. W. Walker's version:—Poppyla-renung, onnyna; temingannya, lemingannya; taukummingannya; nyina tepe rena ponnyna; nyina nara pewilly para; nara pewilly pallawoo!

This version is slightly different in the Memorial Volume:—Instead of temingannya we have lemingannya. It is probable that temingannya is a misprint for lemingannya, or vice versa.

On analogy with the rest of the song, it is more likely that lemingannya should be repeated than that another word, however similar, should be used. Still, temingannya will also give an appropriate sense; and we shall refer to it again in that light.

For convenience of reference, we shall denote Milligan's version by M., Davies' version by D., and Walker's by W.

Looking at the whole text, we at once notice that practically all the words end in "a," "ah," "na," or "ne." We may safely assume that these endings have no essential meaning, whatever meaning they may have had originally. We find the same phenomena in many other languages. For instance, the ending "a" indicates the feminine gender in all the languages of the Indo-European family; "s" is most commonly the sign of the masculine gender, as we find it, e.g., in Aeneas, dominus, eques, visus; in "res," etc., the "s" is really borrowed from the masculine nouns, and the word is akin to mensa.

In Icelandic, we have a still more striking instance in the addition of the sound "r" to nouns and adjectives; in verbs this is softened to "a." We have, comparing the Icelandic words with their English equivalents, kongr for king, hundr for hound, vikingr for viking, grar for gray, langr for long, blindr for blind.

To get at the chief meaning of the words, therefore, we must cut off these excrescences; but this must be done judiciously, for we may not know at first whether in rayna, for example, the "n" belongs to the root or to the ending.

Our merit in trilingual interpretation is very much diminished by the fact that we possess already fairly complete lists of the words used by the Aborigines. We are not to expect in their case a vocabulary as copious as that of a race far more remote from the "simple life," and the words we have are, comparatively speaking, quite numerous enough to supply all the needs of communication that may have been felt by the primitive minds of our predecessors. The word "predecessor" is singularly appropriate in this connection. It means "One who has stepped down before," "One who has pre-deceased," "One who has done before our time what ourselves shall have to do before long—that is, stepped down from the eminence of being the lord of all he surveys."

Now, Milligan tells us that our song was sung in praise of a great chief, one who has been high in power and glory, and has stepped down and is now forgotten. The very fact that this song was, as Walker tells us, used by all the Aboriginal tribes, must have had a melancholy interest for the temporary recipient of the honour, if ever he realised that, after all, he was not the very first in power and glory.

From these hints, we may conclude that the song probably indicated the reasons for conferring special honour on a man. Now, in their simple lives, there was not much scope for the display of excellence; their needs were few, consisting almost exclusively of food and protection against enemies; and the best man would be who was best able to procure plenty of food, and security in the peaceful enjoyment of it. Their hero

would be a man strong of body and swift of foot and arm; and the song in his honour would lay stress on these qualities, and express admiration for their possessor.

Resuming our scrutiny, we find in D. the first word "ne," which does not occur in M. and W. We know that "ne-na" means "sharp;" it also means "you," and "no," and "that" (the probable meaning of the ending "na"), and "lo!" or "pay attention!"

We may take all these meanings together in the idea of "separate from me." The significant sound "n" is formed by closing the mouth and parting the lips; with the "sharp" teeth pressing on the tongue, the outer world is shut off from the speaker. As the joining of the lips inwards forms "m," and refers to the speaker as "me," so the exclusion implies the "not-me," the "you," "that," "no," the object of our attention.

We may therefore take "ne" in D. to mean Lo! The real beginning of the song is pappela, popila, poppyla. Ling Roth gives us pawpela and papla as "big," "large."

Here we notice first the reduplication of the "p," which indicates emphasis, as implying greater energy in pronouncing the initial sound of the word. Ling Roth gives several examples of this—e.g., kana, to talk; kakana, to talk loudly; mura, heavy; mumura, tree.

This leaves "pel" as the chief part, and in it we find the echo of pill, ball, and the Tasmanian palla, "man" and "sun," and peura, "round." To the Aboriginal mind, muscular development or roundness was an indication of strength; a lean man would not have the same strength as a stout one. In confirmation of this, we need only refer to the Japanese and Turkish wrestlers, who are usually very corpulent.

Thus we get for popela the meaning "very strong." We have not taken any notice of the vowels, and that for two principal reasons. In the first place, vowels in all languages are very subject to variation, and secondly, the uncertainty of the accuracy of the phonetic representation of the vowels given in our records makes it unsafe to rely on it for an argument.

The next word is given as rayna, raina, renung. In W., it is almost certain that the letters have been wrongly apportioned, for M. gives the following word as 'ngonyna, which is confirmed by gunnea in D.; so that the second word in W. should be rene, and the third, 'ngonnyna.

Thus we get in each case rene, which means "speedy," "to run."

The third word in common is 'ngonyna in M., 'ngonnyna in W., and three words farther on D. gives us gunnea. These are evidently identical with 'ngune, "fire." We note that the D. version gives words of simpler and more guttural sound than those of M. and W., so that it is quite in accord with the general character of the D. version to have gunnea as equivalent of 'ngonyna. D. alone gives here pogana, "man." We shall find other words for "man" farther on, in the three versions.

Next we have—

In M., toka mengha leah, lugha mengha leah.

In D., thu, me gunnea, thoga me gunnea.

In W., lemingannya or temingannya, taukummin-gannya.

To begin with, we must split up the long words in W. We get le mi 'ngannya or te mi 'ngannya, tauku mi 'ngannya.

Now, toka means "heel," and lugha, "foot."

We recognise toka again in thoga in D., in tauku in W., and in the shortened form thu in D.; while lugha appears in the short form of le in W., and toka in the same version as te, as alternative. Thus it is possible that both lemingannya and temingannya are right; at all events, the analogy between lugha, le, and toka, te is striking.

The word lia means "speedy" (like a spear).

There remain the words mengha, me, mi. In me, mi, we see the short forms of mena, meaning "I," "me," or "my;" but mengha requires further consideration. It occurs in M., and, when we turn to Milligan's

Phrases in Ling Roth, we find the explanation. There we get, in the first ten lines, the following words for "give":—tyenna, teang, tecany. From this we may deduce several conjectures.

If Milligan got those phrases from the same individual, the words were liable to variation at will, within certain limits. If he got them from individuals of the same tribe, there was the same liberty of variation given to each speaker. As Milligan published his work in 1858, he got his information perhaps at second hand, or else from the Aborigines after their banishment from the mainland. In the latter case, tien, tian, and tiang might represent different dialects.

The variation of tian and tiang is of a type very common in various languages. A man of Flanders is in French called Flamand, and in the marshes of England, Fleming. An English chamberlain becomes in France a chambellan, and at the Vatican a camerlengo; while the Latin minus is in elegant Italian meno, and in the popular speech, mingo.

The next verse of the song is:—

In M., nena taypa rayna poonyna;

In D., naina thaipa raina pogana;

In W., nyna tepe rena ponnyna.

Ni-na is common to the three versions, though in D. it appears as nena. Ni means thou or you, and the different vowel in D. suggests that the dialect of D. bears to that of M. and W.—for these seem to be practically the same, except in the phonetic rendering—a relation analogous to that between Doric and Ionic Greek, or between North Britain and South Britain English.

Taypa, thaipa and tepe are evidently the same word, meaning "come," or, rather "here." Ta means "stop," and is an echo of the "thud" heard when one thing strikes against another. In pa or pe we recognise the word of denoting "activity;" pe-na means "spear," the symbol of effective activity, and the syllable be or pe is characteristic of verbs—i.e., words of activity.

Rayna, raina, rene we know already.

Pogana, in D., we know to mean "man."

Poonyna or ponnyna means "bird," literally active, speedy, as ni, like li and ri, means "moving."

The next line is—

In M., nena nawra pewillah, pallah nawra pewillah, pellowah.

In D., nara para poivella para; ballahoo! Hoo!

In W., nyna nara pewilly para; nara pewilly, palla-woo.

Nena, nyna, we know. Nawra, nara means "he," "that one," "the man."

Pewillah, poivella, pewilly, are evidently forms of the same word, and are connected in meaning, if not in derivation, with pallah, para, pellowah, pallawoo, ballahoo; all mean "man."

Ling Roth misprints poivella for powella.

Pe means "active;" wila means "wood," therefore "hard," "tough," "strong;" so that pewila would denote one who was active and capable of resistance, and therefore "a man in his strength." Palla is either, as we have noted before, "round," and therefore "strong," or it is an abbreviation of pewilla—unless, indeed, the latter is an enlargement of palla, by the insertion of the syllable we, which is akin to pe and be, and means "active," and may therefore be used to indicate emphasis. We find such "infixes" frequently in other languages, from "induperator" for "imperator" in Lucretius, to the very modern "In the Sweet (in the sweet) By-and-by."

Thus pallawoo would be just a variant of pawila, with the additional emphasis of the final "hoot," which is repeated in D. as Hoo!

The only remaining word is para, and this is in all probability a variant of palla; the interchange of liquid consonants, "l" and "r," "m" and "n" is a very common phenomena everywhere. For instance, many Chinese will pronounce ring as ling.

Thus we have accounted for every word of the song—truly, I hope, plausibly at all events.

We have yet to establish the meaning of the groups—that is, we have to explain the sentences.

The key to this meaning is contained in the "Phrases" quoted by Ling Roth from Milligan and others.

In these phrases, we observe that there is no sign of any accident. The words seem invariable in form and widely applicable in meaning, as we have already seen. The order of the words, supplemented, probably, by gestures, would define the exact meaning.

In this respect, we find an interesting parallel in the syntax of the Chinese language. We cannot now enter into this subject, except so far as to give a few specimens.

Take the sentence, "I will not give you any water."

Milligan gives for this:—Noia meahteang meena neeto linah; literally, "Not me give you stop water." In the Chinese Mandarin speech, the sentence would be:—Ngo moo ki, ki gni shoey; literally, "Me not give give you water."

In Milligan, the group meahteang meena is interesting; it is, taking the roots only, mi tien mi, and seems analogous with "he gives," where "he" and the final "s" in "gives" have the same meaning. The Indirect Object is expressed in different ways. In Tasmanian we say "you stop," that is, "my giving stops at you." In Chinese, we use the word "give" itself as the index of the object to whom any action applies. "I sing to you" would be rendered "me sing, give you" (the benefit).

We may now proceed with our own English version of the song in its three forms:—

M. is literally,—mighty, run, fire, heel, my, speedy, foot, my, speedy, thou, come, run, bird, thou, very, great man, man, very, great man, hero!

In plain English, "With might runs the bush fire; my heel, too, is speedy, and my foot is swift. Come thou, and run with the speed of a bird! Thou art a real warrior, a man indeed, a warrior, a hero!"

D. would be, in plain language, "Lo! with might runs the man; my heel is swift like fire, my heel indeed is swift like fire. Come thou and run like a man; a very man, a great man, a man who is a hero! Hurrah!"

W. is in meaning a combination of M. and D., thus:—"With might runs the fire; my heel is like fire, my foot is like fire; come thou, run like a bird; thou art indeed a great man; a man indeed, a great man, a hero! Hurrah!"

Milligan says that these verses were sung as an accompaniment to a native dance, in honour of a great chief.

This explanation was very helpful in my search after the meaning of the song. The rhythm is clearly marked, and the repetitions are very suggestive.

Walker says that this song was popular among all the Aboriginal tribes, but that he had not obtained its meaning, as it was by them involved in some mystery.

The fact that the song exists in different dialects makes it most valuable to us. It is quite probable that this song was connected with some important tribal ceremonies, and would not be willingly explained to strangers.

May it not rather have been the "Popela Song," "The Song of the Mighty One," than a "Popular Song"?

Davies says, "I cannot translate it, nor, could I do so, is the subject very select?"

This presents a charming specimen of sly humour. See how neatly he escapes any inquiry as to the meaning of the song, by suggesting that it would not be quite proper to speak of such things in polite society!

We, at all events, have avoided any impropriety in our rendering, and seem to have reconstructed one scene of the life of Old Tasmania; in imagination chiefly, and with a due sense of the defectiveness of our knowledge; but still, in the hope that we have found the way that will, in time and after arduous and sympathetic efforts, enable us to hear once more "The sound of a voice that is still."