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Translating the Indigenous. Words for God in Central Australia

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Abstract

The Lutheran missionary Carl Strehlow translated narratives of the Arrernte of Central Australia into German. In the first volume of his huge ethnographic study, published in 1907, he describes the Arrernte Altjira as a high god, arguing that the name should not be translated as “dreaming”, which is how most Australians understand the mythological primal time of First Nations cultures. Strehlow also implicitly justified the appropriation of Altjira as the name of his Christian god. The split between these two translations of Altjira became a confrontation between two networks that distributed trust in translations in very different ways. Although Strehlow offered no theory for his translation practice from Arrernte into German, his discourse can be understood as drawing on a nineteenth-century tradition of pedagogical translation, on the theory of natural religion expounded by the Lutheran Max Müller, and on the linguistic humanism of Wilhelm von Humboldt, which saw a common human aspiration in language, demanding respect for the words and ideas of the other, but also provided secular justification for the imposition of supposedly advanced cultural forms.

Keywords: cultural translation, missionaries, humanism, religion

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Translating the Indigenous. Words for God in Central Australia

Introduction

When Western cultures translate indigenous texts, there seems to be no simple equitable solution. To absorb the indigenous, perhaps in accordance with models of inculturation, constantly risks obliterating it. And to maintain foreignness courts the merely exotic: “wanton translation can make natives sound as queer as one pleases”, opined QUINE (1960: 76). Between those traditional polarities, it is then worth sifting through the complexities of historical practice – in this case through a much-studied translation dispute informed by Western ideologies that may have been equally injurious: evolutionist anthropology and evangelical religion. In an Australia that is now feeling its way towards a very belated treaty, what one seeks is some informed way of cooperating with the indigenous.

The amateur anthropologists Baldwin Spencer and Francis Gillen published accounts of the Aboriginal cultures of Central Australia in 1896, 1899 and 1904. Their extensive writings had a profound impact on intellectual circles in Europe and America. They were believed, trusted and cited by the likes of MAUSS (1900), FRAZER (cited from at least 1905, 1910: 452), DURKHEIM (1912), FREUD (1913), and MALINOWSKI (1913a), the last-mentioned going so far as to remark that “half the total production of anthropological literature has been based on their work and nine tenths affected or modified by it” (MALINOWSKI 1913b: 278). The anthropologists’ influence also extends to the words that contemporary Australian cultures use for Aboriginal belief systems, located in the mythical time of the “dreaming” or “dreamtime”. Such was Gillen’s translation of the Arrernte word *alcheringa*, since, we are told, “the word *alchéri* means dream” (SPENCER & GILLEN 1904: 745).

That translation, however, was challenged by a Lutheran missionary who, in similar years, worked in Central Australia, learned Arrernte¹ and other Aboriginal languages, and declared that Spencer and Gillen’s translation of *alcheri* as “dream” was not correct: “‘To dream’ is *altjirerama*,” says the missionary, “derived from *altjira* (god) and *rama* (to see), thus ‘to see god’” (STREHLOW 1907: 2). And so, within the translation as dreaming or dreamtime, the missionary identified a word for his God. Does this mean we have we all got it wrong? Is the reference to a divinity or to a primal past?

We need to know more about this adverse translator. The mission at Ntaria, which the Lutherans called Hermannsburg, was founded in 1877. By 1880, the missionaries had translated hymns into Arrernte, as well as a primer and a book of Bible stories (PETERSON & KENNY 2017: 11-12). Our particular translator, Carl Strehlow, arrived there a little later, in 1894, learned Arrernte and the neighbouring language Luritja (or Loritja), began preaching in Arrernte and assisted with translations into that language. At the same time, he translated Arrernte and Luritja narratives, songs and ceremonies into German. Those translations are in the seven-volume *Die Aranda- und Loritja-*

¹ There are several spellings: Arrernte, Aranda, Arunta, Arranta, all with politics attached (see KENNY 2017). There would seem to be no wholly correct version, although I have here opted to move away from both Strehlow’s and Spencer’s spellings.

Stämme in Zentral-Australien, published in Frankfurt from 1907, becoming a lasting monument that openly questioned the widespread trust invested in Spencer and Gillen. Right at the beginning of that massive work we find Strehlow's note on *altjira*. The passage is much commented on, in fact done to death, in terms of both ethnography (in J. STREHLOW 2004; KENNY 2013, 2019, and many more) and translation (for example in GREEN 2012, KENNY 2018, MOORE 2016, 2019a, 2019b). I have no new information to bring to those commentaries. My purpose here is instead to read Strehlow's text closely as the discourse of a translator, to place it in framework of trust and distrust, and to extract from that analysis a translation concept that might be at work.² My focus is on just on two opposed translations. But there was much else happening.

Reading the translator

Here is the text that includes Strehlow's note (1907: 2), with the German on the left and my version³ on the right:



1	Die vier Schwarzen, die die meisten Sagen erzählt haben	The four blacks who have recounted most of the myths
2	Mythen, Sagen und Märchen der Aranda.	Myths, legends and stories of the Aranda.
3	Altjira.	Altjira.
4	Nach der Überlieferung der Alten gibt es ein höchste gutes (mara) Wesen, Altjira. Dasselbe ist ewig (ngambakala) und wird als großer, starker Mann von roter Hautfarbe, dessen langes, helles Haupthaar (gola) über seine Schultern herabfällt, vorgestellt. [...]	According to the tradition of the ancients, there is a highest good (mara) being, Altjira. Altjira is eternal (ngambakala) and is presented as a big, strong man of red complexion whose long, fair hair (gola) falls down over his shoulders.

² The trust-based methodology is expounded in RIZZI, LANG and PYM (2019) and PYM (2020, 2021).

³ My translation follows the German as closely as possible on the points of particular concern in this analysis. Alternative translations into English have been published by NICHOLLS (2007: 104) and KENNY (2013: 39).

5	Seine Wohnung ist der Himmel (altkira), der von Ewigkeit her gewesen ist (ngambakala); denselben stellen sich die Eingeborenen als ein Festland vor. [...]	His dwelling is the sky (altkira), which has been from eternity (ngambakala) and which the natives present as a land. [...]
6	Altjira ist der gute Gott der Aranda, der nicht bloß den Männern, sondern auch den Weibern bekannt ist. Sein Herrschaftsgebiet erstreckt sich jedoch nur über den Himmel; die Menschen hat er weder erschaffen, noch bekümmert ihn das Ergehen derselben.	Altjira is the good god of the Aranda, known not only to men but also to women. His dominion, however, extends only over the sky; he has neither created people, nor does he care about what happens to them.
7	Anmerkung. Eine sprachliche Ableitung des Worts Altjira konnte noch nicht gefunden werden; die Eingeborenen verbinden jetzt damit den Begriff des Nicht-Gewordenen.	Note: A linguistic derivation for <i>altjira</i> has not yet been found. The natives now associate it with the concept of that which has not become.
8	Über die Bedeutung gefragt, versicherten sie mir wiederholt, Altjira bezeichne einen, der keinen Anfang habe, der nicht von einem anderen hervorgebracht worden sei (<i>erina itja arbmanakala</i> = ihn keiner geschaffen hat).	When asked about its meaning, the informants repeatedly assured me that <i>altjira</i> signifies one who has no beginning, who has not been produced from another (<i>erina itja arbmanakala</i> = one that no one made).
9	Wenn Spencer und Gillen (Northern Tribes of Central Australia, p. 745) behaupten: „the word alcheri means dream“, so ist diese Behauptung nicht zutreffend.	When Spencer and Gillen (Northern Tribes of Central Australia, p. 745) say “the word alcheri means dream”, the assertion is not correct.
10	Träumen heißt altjirerama, abgeleitet von altjira (Gott) und rama (sehen), also „Gott sehen“. Ebenso ist in die Loritjasprache träumen = tukura nangani zusammengesetzt aus tukura = Gott und nangani = sehen.	“To dream” is <i>altjirerama</i> , derived from <i>altjira</i> (god) and <i>rama</i> (to see), thus “to see god”. Similarly, in Luritja “to dream” = <i>tukura nangani</i> , composed of <i>tukura</i> = “god” and <i>nangani</i> = “to see”.
11	Dass unter altjira und tukura hier nicht der höchste Gott des Himmels, sondern nur ein Traum-Gott zu verstehen ist, den der Eingeborene im Traum zu sehen glaubt, wird später gezeigt werden. [...]	It will later be shown that <i>altjira</i> and <i>tukura</i> are not to be understood here as the highest god of the sky, but only as a dream god that the natives believe to see in a dream.
12	Das Wort „alcheringa“, das nach Spencer und Gillen „Traumzeit“	The word <i>alcheringa</i> , which Spencer and Gillen say means

	bedeuten soll, ist offenbar aus altjiréninja verdorben. Von einer „Traumzeit“ als Zeitperiode weiß übrigens der Eingeborene nichts; gemeint ist die Zeit, in der die Altjiranga mitjina auf Erden wanderten.	“dreamtime”, is clearly a corruption of <i>altjiréninja</i> . The natives know nothing of a “dreamtime” as a period; the reference is to the time when the <i>altjiranga mitjina</i> [demi-gods, totem gods or spirits] roamed the earth.
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The informants

The first element here is a photograph of four men. It functions in much the same way as Arabic histories would begin with a genealogy, an *isnād*, telling who has passed the information down, making a claim to trustworthiness (RIZZI, LANG & PYM 2019: 44). One is tempted to crop the photo to focus more on the men (as is done in INKAMALA 2018), but no, country occupies a healthy portion of the image, reminding us that language is embedded in the land, which speaks when mistreated. Aboriginal travellers might change the language they speak in order to address the country they are crossing (TRIGGER 1987). The photo remains uncropped.

I insist that the image is part of the translation. Strehlow’s first volume here has images of totem sites and diagrams of where and how ritual ceremonies take place, and the other volumes are replete with drawings and photos of many artefacts. This is a multimodal translation.

The pose of the men is striking, kneeling and kneeling-sitting on the ground with hats off, as if in obeisance. If this were an American film, one might expect to see shackles. Nothing is said here about who they are. The important point, for Strehlow’s translation, is their age: they should appear at least old enough to have been initiated into tribal law prior to the founding of the Lutheran mission in 1877. If so, one might claim they present knowledge untainted by Christianity. Hard to say if this holds for the two men on the right, who are kneeling as if trained to do so as an act of church-going supplication. But the two on the left, dressed differently and not afraid to sit, yes, they could be old enough. And the one on the far left, unnamed, is visibly the oldest and thus potentially the most valuable in this economy of information.

No name is given to the photographer, to whom the men are kneeling. And thanks to the photography, they appear to be kneeling to us. So is the photographer’s mediation also a transparent translation?

A text typology that does not work

The first title here is perhaps the most theory-laden element in the whole text. “Mythen, Sagen und Märchen” [2] are not just descriptive genre names. The categories connect with a tradition that leads to the Brothers Grimm and beyond, to the Germanic study of traditional narratives as representative of a European *Volk*. The terms tell German readers what to expect. This first volume contains 64 *Sagen* and just four *Märchen*, but there is no named category for the first six narratives.⁴ The German categories seem not to fit. More worrying, there is no meta-discourse to tell us why. One suspects there might be an unnamed genre at work: perhaps religion?

⁴ PETERSON & KENNY (2017: 12) report that the manuscript notes for Strehlow’s seven-volume work were actually divided into *Sagen* (myths), *Cultus* (religious ceremonies) and *Leben* (life).

Altjira

We reach the title of the first narrative: a simple name, *Altjira* [2], in Arrernte. I hasten to add that the title of the *second* narrative in the volume is in German: *Die Urzeit*, primal time, in German, corresponding to the concept others had rendered as “the dreamtime”. So *Altjira* has priority over primal time, and Arrernte over German.

The grammar of handing-down

The narrative proper does not begin with variants of *Es war einmal*, “Once upon a time”, as the four *Märchen* in the volume do (STREHLOW 1907: 102). It begins instead with its sources: “according to that which has been handed down from people in the (distant) past” [3]. This would be the authority for everything that is to be said. Yet no mention is made of how the handing down or legacy, this *Überlieferung* that so concerned Heidegger (1957: 164-165), has actually worked. The voice that refers to *die Alten*, the ancients or forefathers, is logically itself in the present time, connected to the past through a chain of handing-downs. The four informants in the photo would be one link in the chain that is doing the presenting. We thus have the present tense: *gibt es*, “there is”, now, both in what was said and in what those men say. If there was any doubt about the existential status of this present tense, it is affirmed in the next sentence: *Altjira* “is eternal”, remaining the same at all points along the way, in what was said in the past, is said by the men, and now is said in German – the voice speaking in this sentence could be all three. A footnote here gives four Arrernte words for “eternal”, with no explanation of why just one is chosen. If there are different modes of eternity, we do not want to know about them in the narrative proper.

Then comes a present-tense passive: *wird vorgestellt*, “is presented/imagined”, the agent of which is absent. The presentation could be as eternal and thus subjectless as the thing itself, but this act of presenting cannot be associated with the narrative voice of the preceding clause: if it were, there would be no passive. This sets up a grammatical opposition between the certainty of the eternal and the subject-dependent nature of the presentation. If some people are presenting the thing this way, others might present it differently.

In context, one is led to suppose that the informants in the photo would be one link in the chain that is doing the presenting. And the bringing over of their discourse into German must therefore be a further, separate link. The theological trick is that something that is “highest”, “good” and “eternal” has been grammatically separated from its presentations: we know it only through a series of partial revelations and handing-downs. And that divinity exists very clearly in the *present* tense, not in the past.

Componential analysis

Altjira is the god whose domain is the sky or the heavens [6]. We know that *Himmel* can be both, but no tricks are being played on that term: the passage makes it clear that what is in question is the sky, seen as land. We learn that *Altjira* is masculine in gender, has emu feet, and has many beautiful women and beautiful children. Most of the stars are his campfires as he moves around. He did not create humans and does not care about their fate. There is componential analysis at work here: line up the features of *Altjira*, then those of the reader’s God, and we see that some correspond: eternal, good, masculine in gender, and somehow above. And also, thanks to grammar, the eternal present. Then there are other features that do not correspond: *Altjira* did not create humans and does not care about them. The analysis only gives partial revelation.

Etymology

The note proper begins with the claim that an etymology for the word *altjira* has not yet been found [7]. This implies that the search continues and is considered worthwhile. Why the search? Because the study of words can lead to some kind of deeper, hidden truth. Why might it be worthwhile? Because there is some greater problem to be solved with respect to *altjira*, where genre, grammar and componential analysis have only taken us part of the way. Yet the kind of etymologies that located proto-Indo-European are not available for Australian languages, where the time scale of more than 40,000 years is simply too great.

A note on a possible conversation

So we move on to what people say when asked: “the informants repeatedly assured me that ...”. And the answer is what the first-person questioner seems most to want: *Altjira* is one who has not been made. So we tick another box in the list of “God” features. But exactly what question was asked? We are not told. We have to trust Strehlow our informant, just as he has trusted his informants.

A counter-translation

We are now told that these partial attempts at a translation are to be opposed to an alternative rendition: “alcheri means dream”, correctly cited from a previous expedition. More, there should be no confusion with a “Traumzeit” or “dreamtime” [12] when the lesser spirits wandered the earth. *Altjira* is not a minor spirit, is not only seen in dreams, and above all is not restricted to the past. This is to be demonstrated “later” [11], although I have not found where.⁵ No matter: all previous analyses have been pointing to these features. The amateur anthropologists are wrong.

Although the text stops there, one could continue the logic: *Altjira* is partial revelation of the divinity, alive in a people who, far from believing in magic from a distant past, believe not just in totem spirits but also in a high god. And yet the text does not go that far.

An equivalent

Note that in the middle of this argument, Strehlow sneaks in the etymological equivalence “*altjira* (Gott)” [10], which the entire previous text skirts around but does not actually say. He might have intended this to be a lower-case “god”, but German requires a capital for all nouns.

The players and their strategic interests

What is really going on here? What is at stake? The religious is certainly appropriating the indigenous, and is doing so in opposition to anthropological appropriation, but how does this happen in human terms? To make further sense of the text, here is a *dramatis personae* in the order in which they appear in the above text, along with their exchanges:

Loatjira, born around 1849, is the informant on the far left of the photo. He was a respected *inkata* (ceremonial chief) and *nankara* (healer, doctor). Only after Strehlow’s death did he live on the mission, becoming baptized so he could die on his people’s land. He reportedly revealed narratives to Strehlow on the understanding that

⁵ In a footnote in the second volume of his account (1908: 2), Strehlow does return to the issue, noting that the old men affirmed their belief in the higher eternal being but then he admits that this belief is “far from being as important to them as are the legends about the totem ancestors”.

Arrernte ceremonies could then be performed on mission land. When Strehlow did not allow this to happen, perhaps renegeing on the deal, Loatjira left and his relations with the missionary became cold (T. G. H. STREHLOW 2015, INKAMALA 2018: 23).

Silas Tmala Ulakararinja Mbitjana (born around 1860) and **Moses Tjalkabota** (born about 1870) are in the center of the photo. They worked on the mission and had been baptized. They might thus have recounted these stories as part of their obligations to their employer. They would perhaps not be old enough for anyone to claim that their accounts were uncontaminated by missionary culture – the mission had been there since 1877.

Talku (born about 1867) was Strehlow's main informant for Luritja. He was shot while attempting to spear the cattle and was then nursed back to health on the mission (INKAMALA 2018: 28). In exchange for that, he recounted stories and explained language, then left.

Carl Strehlow (born 1871) is invisible in the photo. As a Lutheran missionary, he sought to bring the word of his god to the Arrernte and Luritja. Here he is indirectly defending the use of *altjira* as the Arrernte word for the Christian God, although this decision had actually been made several decades earlier by the previous Lutheran missionaries. He has, however, made a personal investment in the translation. In a letter dated 8 January 1901 and published in the Lutheran periodical *Kirchliche Mitteilungen*,⁶ he reportedly states that the Arrernte have a high god named Altjira (VEIT 2015: 79).

Strehlow's overriding aim was undoubtedly to ensure, with the considerable help of his wife Frieda, the survival of the mission. He would live and die in Central Australia, bringing up his youngest son Theodore as an Arrernte-German bilingual. That said, he resolutely placed himself outside of the Aboriginal cultures: he refused to attend rites and ceremonies, relying wholly on his informants. VÖLKER (2001: 205; cf. NICHOLLS 2007: 106) notes that, following publication of this first volume in 1907, Strehlow shipped Arrernte cultural objects to his editor Leonhardi, who sold them to museums. So the images in the ethnographic account might also be part of a sales catalogue. The proceeds allowed Strehlow to build a house in Germany for his family and to make improvements to the mission church. The appropriation was economic as well as cultural.

Freiherr Moritz von Leonhardi (born 1856) was a German baron and armchair anthropologist with humanist leanings. Following Strehlow's published letter, from 1901 he sought information on Arrernte culture (VÖLKER 2001, VEIT 2015: 79), initiating a question-and-answer process that was to culminate in the seven-volume ethnographic description, which he edited, prefaced and published with the then new Städtisches Völker-Museum in Frankfurt. What we see in the book are thus Strehlow's answers to Leonhardi's absent questions, just as Strehlow's informants provided answers to his own absent questions.

⁶ "Ein Bericht über die Mission in Neu-Hermannsburg, Australien, in einem Brief von H. Missionar Strehlow vom 8. Januar 1901", *Kirchliche Mitteilungen*, 15 May 1901. I have not seen the letter. A typewritten translation of what might be a different letter, reportedly dated 20 December 1901, is held by Museum Victoria: <http://spencerandgillen.net/objects/50ce72f6023fd7358c8a964b>. It corresponds to the German cited in SPENCER (1903) and would seem to have been produced by Spencer so that posterity would follow his truth.

From Leonhardi's introduction to that first volume in 1907, it would seem that he has asked Strehlow about this word *altjira* because he has also come across Spencer and Gillen's alternative translation as "dreamtime", as mentioned in the text we have just analyzed. Leonhardi had received a letter from Strehlow further affirming the existence of Altjira as a high god. Leonhardi circulated that letter to the Scottish folklorist Lang, who then sent it on to Baldwin Spencer in Melbourne "for perusal and comment".

Leonhardi thus controlled Strehlow's communications with a small network of anthropologists across Europe (VÖLKER 2001), just as he managed Strehlow's shipments of cultural objects.

Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer (born 1860) was an English Oxford-trained Professor of Biology at the University of Melbourne, President of the university's Professorial Board, eventually Chief Protector of Aborigines and, if the other titles did not impress enough, President of the Victorian Football Board. Although trained in biology, he had completed a short apprenticeship in anthropology under E. B. Tylor at the Pitt-Rivers Museum at Oxford (VEIT 2015: 76). He was then on the Horn expedition to the interior of Australia, observing not just animals and plants but also "stone age" people. In his four-volume report, published in 1896, we find the "dreamtime" translation accompanied by an explanation of how an evolutionist biologist might view Australian Aboriginal cultures:

The morality of the black is not that of the white man, but his life so long as he remains uncontaminated by contact with the latter, is governed by rules of conduct which have been recognized among his tribe from what they speak of as the "alchëringa," which Mr. Gillen has aptly called the "Dream times." (SPENCER, ed. 1896: I, 111)

Leave them alone and they will die out, since they come from an earlier stage of evolution. Such at least was a longstanding Australian ideology: through to the 1970s, evolutionist thought would also underwrite practices of cultural assimilation and the stealing of children, seeking to breed out or culturally replace the inferior. The notion of separate "moralities" (which assumed there was no religion among the Arrernte) conveniently locates Arrernte beliefs in the distant past, hence the translation of *alcheringa* and cognates as "dreamtime". Much was riding on the translation of this one word.

The translation is repeated in a similar report published by Spencer in 1904, which is the one Strehlow cites in his 1907 text:

Alchëringa – Name applied by the Arunta, Kaitish, and Unmatjera tribes to the far past, or dream times, in which their mythic ancestors lived. The word *alchéri* means dream. (SPENCER and GILLEN, 1904: 745)

As noted, Spencer received a copy of the letter in which Strehlow made his claim to the alternative translation. Spencer replies that Strehlow's letter has "more utter misleading nonsense packed into a small space than I recollect having come across before", basically because "the native told Strehlow that *Altjira meant God because Strehlow had told him for many years past that it did*" (SPENCER 1903: 5-6, italics mine). This becomes Spencer's main argument against Altjira as a god, which can only be true because the missionaries had made the word mean God. Spencer does nevertheless cite part of Strehlow's letter in German – a reminder of the status of German as a language of science –, picking out the passage that he most wants to be true:

Merkwürdigerweise hat dies Wort *Altjira* eine grosse Ähnlichkeit mit träumen (=altjirerama). [...] Doch scheint aus der Verwandtschaft dieser Wörter *Altjira* (Gott) und *altjirerama* (träumen) hervor zu gehen, dass ihr Gott ihnen mehr ein traumhaftes Wesen ist sogleich er wie gesagt Realität besitzt.

[It is worth noting that this Word *altjira* has a great similarity with “to dream” (=altjirerama) [...]. The relation between these words *altjira* (God) and *altjirerama* (to dream) would seem to suggest they see their god as more a dreamlike being at the same time as he, as said, possesses reality. (My translation)]

Given this disagreement, we might now understand why the photo of the four informants was such a strategic part of Strehlow’s text, and why the visible age of Loatjira functions as a counter-argument to Spencer. It could also explain why, in his 1907 text, Strehlow steps back from any headline declaration that *Altjira* is God, leaving the theology to the grammar, and why he takes pains to distinguish clearly between *altjira* and *altjirerama*, despite the fact that he had himself noted the association in the letter that reached Spencer.

Spencer digs in, insisting to all and sundry, repeatedly, priggishly, and occasionally viciously that Strehlow is mistaken in his translation of *altjira* (the various letters are summarized in VÖLKER 2001). He may also have forged a letter from Kempe, one of the previous missionaries at Ntaria, to the effect that the Lutherans knew all along that *altjera* was not a good word for God (J. STREHLOW 2020). Spencer’s main argument, as we have seen, is that Strehlow’s informants had been corrupted by mission life; they would say anything in exchange for food: “a savage is not altogether devoid of ‘cuteness’ when a good meal is in view”, and “what they have told him is just what they tell the women” (SPENCER 1903: 7). Much later, in 1927, Spencer would further claim that the earlier Lutheran missionaries themselves actually recognized *altjira* in the sense of a mythical pre-history, not as a divinity, “before the natives had been taught to use it for ‘God’” (SPENCER & GILLEN 1927: 101).

As for Strehlow himself, Spencer makes much of the fact that the missionary had never witnessed any Arrernte ceremony and thus could not know anything beyond what he had been told. Strehlow depended on language alone. Spencer, on the other hand, had witnessed ceremonies and claimed to have been “fully initiated” into the Arrernte (1927: ix).⁷

Spencer’s campaign to discredit Strehlow was remarkably successful. Sir James Frazer believed him⁸ and deleted references to Strehlow from *The Golden Bough* (VÖLKER 2001: 202). Others followed suit. Malinowski notes that Spencer and Strehlow give contradictory accounts and, although he says does not know whom to believe, he inserts a question mark into Strehlow’s account, suspecting bias from missionary ideology: “The *Altjira* is the ‘good god (?) of the Aranda’” (MALINOWSKI 1913a: 215). As the Arrernte became famous in European anthropology, Spencer and Gillen’s translation carried the day.

Faced with the onslaught, Leonhardi wrote to Strehlow in 1909, urging him to explain his methodology, basically to say that he has translated exactly what was told to him

⁷ One doubts that Spencer and Gillen were initiated, since that required subincision of the penis (MULVANEY & CALABY, 1985: 175; NICHOLLS 2007: 99).

⁸ Frazer to Spencer: “From what you tell me about Strehlow it seems to me that I cannot safely use his evidence; so I intend to make no use of it. I wish you would publish your reasons for distrusting his evidence, such as you have stated them to me, so that I could refer to them. The shakiness of Strehlow’s facts ought to be known here in Europe” (FRAZER 1908).

(cit. VÖLKER 2001: 203). Strehlow seems not to have done as asked, so Leonhardi himself takes up the cudgels in his preface to the third volume (LEONHARDI 1910). There he actually goes further, mustering strong arguments against Spencer and Gillen. Most tellingly, Spencer and Gillen might indeed have witnessed ceremonies, but what they saw had been performed especially for them, close to town (rather than at sacred sites), undressed (whereas the Aborigines around Alice Springs wore clothes, as seen in Strehlow's photo above) and in the daytime, for the sake of photography (many ceremonies were supposed to be performed at night). The primitive had been produced and paid for by the anthropologists. And then, continues Leonhardi, since Spencer and Gillen do not know the Aboriginal languages, they parse words incorrectly and are thus fundamentally unqualified to talk about indigenous meanings and unable to know whether the Arrernte knew the meanings or not.

This last point merits investigation.

In one of his many letters of discreditation, Spencer reveals that, just as Strehlow depended on his informants, so Spencer depended on Gillen, whom he assumed was eminently qualified to correct the missionaries:

Years ago Gillen expostulated with the missionaries for translations "Altjira" or "Alcheri" by "God" & now there comes a man who questions the natives of the mission station & finds the "altjira" means "God"! Such is evidence. (SPENCER 1905: 2)

So who was this Gillen who could adamantly correct the missionaries?

Francis James Gillen (born 1855) was post and telegraph master at Alice Springs from 1892, eventually becoming Special Magistrate and Sub-Protector of Aborigines in South Australia. He was with Spencer on the Horn expedition of 1894 and worked with him on several subsequent field trips, gaining Spencer's trust as an informant because he, Gillen, was in turn thought to be trusted by Aboriginal informants: "Mr Gillen [...] has gained the most perfect confidence of the blacks" (SPENCER, ed. 1896: I 36). Spencer further tells us that Gillen is allowed to witness secret ceremonies, and that Spencer himself gained permission to attend because he was presented as Gillen's brother, like an adventure out of a Rider Haggard novel. As noted, this witnessing of ceremonies was Spencer's main claim to have more reliable information than Strehlow. Spencer himself did not claim to know any indigenous language. But then, he suggested the Arrernte did not know the meanings of their own ceremonies anyway (SPENCER 1905: 1), so why learn their language? He had to trust that Gillen somehow did know the meanings.

Gillen, for his part, seems to have been adept at managing ceremonies to help Spencer's research, as claimed by Leonhardi: "many sacred enactments were staged away from their correct secret locations in order to occur where the paying audience camped" (MULVANEY & CALABY, 1985: 169, 173, 207; NICHOLLS 2007: 99). Frazer was paying at least cultural capital for Spencer's fieldwork, Spencer was presumably paying Gillen, and Gillen was paying the performers. Again, the appropriation is economic as well as cultural.

We do not know how much Arrernte Gillen might have spoken, but there must be doubt about the extent to which he was actually communicating in the language. In Spencer's notebook of a 1901 fieldtrip carried out with Gillen, the words *alcheri* and *alcheringa* are recorded as adjectives and nouns to refer to the mythical past, but they are done so in a form of Aboriginal English.⁹ Here is an example:

⁹ There are online audio recordings of Gillen gathering language samples of Arrernte (for example, <http://spencerandgillen.net/objects/4fac6aab023fd704f475bd82>), but we only hear him speaking

Panunga man named Urlia in alcheri. jumped up at Taylor Crossing (Purupa) went to Allalgera. stole urlia churinga. The man came and sat down beside the Allalgera mob and began thinking will this mob give me Churinga. No give him Churinga. (SPENCER 1901: 94)

It seems rather unlikely that Gillen was expostulating too strongly about proper Arrernte.

In the various networks of exchanges between all these players, there was clear cooperation between Strehlow, Leonhardi and the mission informants, then between Spencer, Gillen and Frazer and the performers of ceremonies. But there was radical non-cooperation between Strehlow and Spencer, who never met and who defined each other through their divergent translations.

Did the difference really concern just one word? At some point Lang wonders why Spencer is so worked up about issue. Lang remembers having seen something in Spencer and Gillen's own 1986 report on the Horn expedition (KENNY 2013: 107). And sure enough, in the fourth volume of that report we find the word *alkirra* equated to *heavens*, which is where a great spirit lives:

The sky is said to be inhabited by three persons – a gigantic man with an immense foot shaped like that of the emu, a woman, and a child who never developes [sic] beyond childhood. The man is called Ulthaana, meaning spirit. When a native dies, his spirit is said to ascend to the home of the great Ulthaana, where it remains for a short time [...] (SPENCER, 1896: 4 183)

The intrigue here resides not so much in the distinct possibility that Spencer and Gillen's "gigantic man" was Strehlow's *altjira*, with the same emu foot and all¹⁰, but in Spencer's steadfast refusal to consider this belief as being anything like a living religion.

Strehlow's translation strategies

The problem of translating *altjira* is close to what QUINE (1960) describes as "radical translation": a rabbit runs past, the native points and says "Gavagai!", the jungle linguist writes "Gavagai equals rabbit", equivalence. Quine then demonstrates that there must be doubt about this and any other translation, no matter how much checking and revision is done. He calls this doubt the "indeterminacy of translation". The debate between Strehlow and Spencer would be fruit of this kind of indeterminacy, as indeed would seem to be Strehlow's successive attempts to pin down the meaning of *altjira*.

Countless missionaries have faced the dilemma of how to name their god in other languages. In sixteenth-century Central America, a Franciscan solution was reportedly to impose the word *Dios* (God) on native languages, then to take the name of the chief local divinity and give it to the devil, "ensuring he was spat upon whenever named" (REMESAL 1966: 2.277, cf. PYM 2014: 148). The Dominicans, on the other hand, "gave God the name that the natives used, refusing that name to all the idols and reserving it for the one true God" (ibid.). The Hermannsburg Lutherans headed down the Dominican track in this case; Presbyterian missionaries in Australia are reported as going the other way (MOORE 2019b 141, 144). Yet a certain indeterminacy remains: use

English, making his informants translate sentences as telling as "I am hungry. Will you give me some food?". The informants are the translators, not Gillen.

¹⁰ This passage is cited by Strehlow in a footnote in the second volume of his major work (1908: 1), where he notes that the account must be from the Luritja, not the Arrernte.

the Aboriginal word, and you will never be sure that your new god is being worshipped; impose your own word, and you will never be sure it is understood. Either way, the language is changed and missionary ethnographers would forever have trouble claiming to describe a culture as being untouched.

Strehlow's translation strategies are fairly pragmatic. In the matter of *Altjira*, his hands were effectively tied by a decision taken decades earlier. He was historically obliged to translate *Gott* as *Altjira*. In other instances, however, he created semi-neologisms by changing the class of Arrernte words (MOORE 2019a: 32-33). In fact, this seems to be what occurred with *Altjira*, which gained an ergative case marker that it would not have had previously (MOORE 2019a: 64). Strehlow also created new compounds: for example, from *tjalka* (flesh) plus *erama* (to become), we have *tjalkerama*, to become flesh, incarnation (example from HERSEY 2006: 17, who denounces the practice as "usurpation at one extreme and fictionalisation at the other"). For key religious concepts, the previous translators, notably Kempe, had brought Hebrew, Greek and Latin words across into Arrernte, and some of them remain. Strehlow, though, was more given to replacing such terms with words drawn from Arrernte (MOORE 2019a: 31, 60-61). Thus, *Jehova* and *Kyria*, used by Kempe when translating into Arrernte in 1891, become the Arrernte *Inkata* in Strehlow's translation in 1904, a term that he glosses in his 1909 wordlist as "Hauptling, Herr" (chief, Lord) (example from MOORE 2019a: 31).

So what theory might support the practice?

Clues to an absent theory

For a practice of translation from German *into* Arrernte, a Lutheran missionary would have to look no further than Luther himself (cf. MOORE 2019a 29ff.): you seek the non-figurative meaning of the Biblical text, you posit that it can be understood by all, and you render it as clearly as possible into the language that people actually speak: "We do not have to ask the letters in the Latin how we should speak German, as these donkeys do, but we must ask the mother in the house, the children on the street, the common man in the marketplace" (LUTHER 1530: 4av, my translation). All these elements can be seen as guiding Strehlow's translation practice into Arrernte, including the sexism of gender roles (Strehlow's photographed informants were all men, just as Luther's mothers were always at home).

For translations *into* German, however, the issue is not as clear. There is a frustrating absence of theorization in Strehlow's text. To find ideas to support the practice, we have to infer from context.

We know more or less what kind of studies Strehlow would have encountered in his training as a Lutheran missionary at the Neuendettelsau Mission Institute in Bavaria (VEIT 2015, MOORE 2019a: 74ff.). He would have studied Latin, Greek, Hebrew and English, at least, and any linguistics would have involved cultural study as well, since missionary translation practice was recognized as concerning culture as much as grammar (VEIT 2015: 74; MOORE 2019a: 26). But the curriculum seems not to have included studies in translation or comparative linguistics as such. One has to look around for similar practices.

Here I pursue three ways of locating a missing theory: translation in language learning, the theory of natural religion, and proto-theories of equivalence. All three spring, I propose, from Prussian New Humanism and together could account for Strehlow's translation practice.

Translation in language learning

As can be seen in the passage we have analyzed, Strehlow's translations into German, unlike his work into Arrernte, use numerous loan words, which are presented and explained either in parentheses or in the body of the text, with others glossed in notes. There is a section of chants that are translated in interlinear word-for-word, followed by full prose translations (called "free translations"). An attentive reader could pick up and learn a good deal of Arrernte from these translations, and this pedagogical potential is even clearer in Strehlow's 1909 handwritten list of words from Arrernte, Luritja and Dieri (KENNY 2018). So where might such a pedagogical translation practice come from?

All these strategies for mixing languages translationally can be found in the mainstream inductive language-learning methods available in German from the early nineteenth century, for example in textbooks by SEIDENSTÜCKER (1811/1833), AHN (1834/1847) or PLOETZ (1848/1877) (see PYM 2016). There was, in the language-learning practices of the time, a clear set of pedagogical translation techniques. That might explain the presence of translation alongside comparative grammar, etymology and componential analysis in the passage we have read above.

Translation from "natural religion"

Moore (2019a: 59ff.) sees Strehlow as drawing on the philology of the Oxford-based German Lutheran Max Müller, who worked primarily on Sanskrit. The connection is worth pursuing.

In the first of his Gifford Lectures in 1888, Müller describes religion as ensuing from a sense of the infinite. One of his prime examples is the sky, which for primitive peoples "had its horizon, and so far it was perceived as finite; but it was at the same time the infinite sky, because it was felt that beyond what was seen as the sky there was and must be an infinite complement which no eye could see" (MÜLLER 1889: 149). One recalls the infinite that Strehlow claimed to have found: "altjira signifies one who has no beginning, who has not been produced from another" (STREHLOW 1907: 2). Thus, for Müller, "some of the races who are called savage or barbarous possess the purest, simplest, and truest views of religion" (1889: 349). Yet indeterminacy remains in Strehlow, who in the passage we have looked at does *not* declare that Altjira is his God in any full sense, just as there is equivocation in Müller, who recognizes that not all languages can express the infinite: "the more savage tribes can be produced without names and concepts for what is endless, deathless or infinite, the stronger the proof that these concepts were only gradually evolved out of precepts in which they were contained, but from which they had not yet been separated" (MÜLLER 1889: 126).

This might explain how Strehlow can both recognize divinity in Altjira and yet appropriate a name for the imposed Christian God: in his possible self-justification, he was helping the natural precept evolve into a fuller form.

Translation as equivalence

In addition to alternative translations and a reasoned equivocation, Strehlow's text has minor points of equivalence near the end, notably in "*altjira* (god)". In the midst of a whole discussion of what *altjira* means, how can the linguistic jousting so casually assume that the word is actually a simple equivalent of *Gott*?

One suspects the relation here is no more than fleeting comparison, only necessary so that wider plays can be made, perhaps akin to the *points de capiton* that Lacan (1966: 260) recognized as pinning signified to signifiers despite all the slippages of discourse. In the midst of doubts, quick links are made so that the rest may proceed. Yet this is not a trivial term.

Although equivalence was to become a major paradigm in twentieth-century translation theory, its traces in the nineteenth century are scarce. Garbovskiy (2007: 264) reports having found the term in Baudelaire, but the French poet was actually translating Edgar Allan Poe's *Eureka* of 1848. That text makes a claim that is strangely close to Strehlow's (and Müller's) concerns: "'infinity', like 'God', 'spirit'," says Poe, "and some other expressions of which the *equivalents* exist in all languages, is by no means the expression of an idea – but of an *effort at one*" (1848/2011: 18; italics mine). I would not like to claim that Strehlow could have encountered these lines or would have given any credence to the likes of Poe if he had, and Müller clearly did not agree that equivalents existed in all languages. Yet this text *Eureka* does suggest a further link: it is dedicated to Alexander von Humboldt, no less, one of the main contributors to Prussian New Humanism. And Alexander, we know, prefaced his brother Wilhelm's posthumous tome on the differences between languages, which does indeed make the parallel claim that all human languages are charged with seeking to express the infinite (a claim that Chomsky precariously drew on): "just as thought in its most human relation is a yearning from darkness toward light, from confinement toward the infinite, so sound flows outward from the depths of the chest" (HUMBOLDT 1836: 50-51).¹¹ In principle, this striving holds for all languages, or for language simply as a human fact. Belief in it could presuppose the equivalence that makes comparisons possible.

A few lines from Humboldt's introduction might help us understand how a sense of shared aspiration can relate to Strehlow's equivocation, and ultimately to his actions. Although much cited as a theory of linguistic relativism, Humboldt's text is strongly marked by a sense of human progress, which is also the progress by which one language can influence another. Thus, the Javanese language was informed and developed by contact with Indian languages. Without such contact, we would merely have the "vegetative life of humanity, developing rather mechanically along a given path" (1836: 15, my translation),¹² perhaps of the kind suited to a biologist like Spencer: take note of the culture and leave it alone. At the pinnacle of progress, we then find European culture, with a humanism that makes it superior: the Greeks and Romans, says Humboldt, did not have "the thought of respecting a person simply because they are a person" (1836: 22).¹³ And since we do have this humanism, it is our duty to share it:

*It is a splendid privilege of our own day, to carry civilization into the remotest corners of the earth, to couple this endeavour with every undertaking, and to utilize power and means for the purpose, even apart from other ends. The operative principle here, of universal humanity, is an advance to which only our own age has truly ascended. (1836: 22)*¹⁴

¹¹ "Wie das Denken in seiner menschlichsten Beziehung eine Sehnsucht aus dem Dunkel nach dem Licht, aus der Beschränkung nach der Unendlichkeit ist, so strömt der Laut aus der Tiefe der Brust nach außen".

¹² "Vegetativen und sich auf gegebener Bahn gewissermaßen mechanisch fortentwickelnden Leben des Menschengeschlechts"

¹³ "der Gedanke, den Menschen bloss darum zu achten, weil er Mensch ist"

¹⁴ "Es ist ein schönes Vorrecht der neuesten Zeit, die Civilisation in die entferntesten Theile der Erde zu tragen, dies Bemühen an jede Unternehmung zu knüpfen, und hierauf, auch fern von anderen Zwecken, Kraft und Mittel zu verwenden. Das hierin waltende Princip allgemeiner Humanität ist ein Fortschritt, zu dem sich erst unsre Zeit wahrhaft emporgeschwungen hat"

That kind of humanism could provide secular justification for both Strehlow's respect for the cultural other, since the expression of the infinite is already there, and his incursions into languages and cultures that were not his. This, I propose, could be the translation concept that informed Strehlow's work.

Why this is important

Any praise of missionary ideology is highly problematic, since it is part and parcel of the European invasion of First Nations. It comes, furthermore, with all the benefits and evils of a modernity marked by a humanism self-positioned at the pinnacle, bringing education, writing, healthcare and concern for the other, but also the imposition of cultures seen as superior. In the case of Western Arrernte, the linguistic and cultural effects of Strehlow's translating remain palpable: *Altjira* now refers exclusively to the Christian God, while the neighboring word *tnankara* denotes "the Dreaming, dreaming ancestor mythological past, birthmark, dreaming mark" (KENNY 2018: 164). One might similarly argue that Spencer and Gillen's alternative translation as "dreaming" was an intrusive simplification, an anthropologists' attempt to lock indigenous worldviews into a distant, forgotten past, with long-term negative effects for the vitality of Aboriginal cultures (MOORE 2019b). And as for aspiration to the infinite as an equivalent common denominator, it is hard to find in contemporary Australian cultures and should in any case be replaced by lessons to be learnt from indigenous sustainability.

There can be no question here of one translation being right and the other wrong, or any missionary or ethnographer being more heroic than the other. Perhaps the basic error of the disagreements between Strehlow and Spencer was that meanings could indeed be settled in an either-or way.¹⁵ T. G. H. STREHLOW (1970) similarly pointed out the futility of supposing that systemic thought was common to all people living over a huge territory. That said, Carl Strehlow's text stands as a monumental attempt to understand and translate a culture. It should be seen as a part of understandings that are ongoing, in the present tense rather than a distant past.

There is a second, more political reason why Strehlow's work has been important, along with Spencer and Gillen's, and indeed why translation history itself can be important well beyond translation studies. Following the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act of 1976 and the Native Title Act of 1993 (Commonwealth), First Nation groups can claim native title if they can show evidence of rights and interests in land over time. Since it is not easy to prove claims on the basis of oral history, written translations of those links have become of value. Consultant anthropologist Anna Kenny was employed by the Central Land Council to compile evidence and write Connection Reports involving the Western Aranda and neighbouring groups. Part of her evidence was drawn from Strehlow's *Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme*. The title claims she worked on have been successful in the Federal Court of Australia (KENNY 2019).

The act of translation changes the object translated, in this case eventually to restore just a part of the rights taken by invasion. The passage through German has very belatedly, and no doubt unintentionally, helped return language to country.

¹⁵ This is picked up negatively by Malinowski: "any attempt to give 'strict' or 'exact' sense to aboriginal ideas is completely misplaced. The aborigines are not able to think exactly, and their beliefs do not possess any 'exact meaning.' And if an attempt be made to interpret them in this way, we shall always fail to understand them and to trace their social bearing" (1913a: 213).

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