

ASSESSING GERHARDT LAVES' MATERIAL ON MAYI-THAKURTI

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1. Introduction

Mayi-Thakurti is a dialect belonging to the Mayi group of languages, previously spoken in the Gulf Country of northwest Queensland and named after the word for 'language' in the group. The group is thought of as comprising two languages: one unnamed but made up of dialects called Ngawun, Mayi-Kulan, Mayi-Yapi, Mayi-Thakurti and Wunumara, and the other made up of Mayi-Kutuna and possibly one other dialect called Mayi-Yali (known, however, only as an unconfirmed name). The group as a whole is very sparsely recorded. There have been no competent speakers for many years, and the last person able to even construct simple sentences in one of the dialects, Ngawun speaker Cherry O'Keefe, died in 1977.

An account of the language group, comprising a sketch grammar of Ngawun with notes on the other dialects and language, and a comparative vocabulary, was published nearly twenty years ago (Breen 1981). This was based on all the material from all sources known to exist on the group. It was some time after this that the work of Laves was rediscovered, after having been unaccountably lost for many years.

Mayi-Thakurti material included in Breen 1981 comprised a moderate vocabulary, about 450 words (including, however, often two or more alternatives, from different sources, with the same English equivalent). A substantial number were words, many in the material culture field, for which no equivalents were known in any other of the dialects. Virtually all of the material is from old sources with spelling that gives a very poor indication of the actual pronunciation. Where words are the same as in better attested vocabularies (in most cases, Ngawun) we can be reasonably sure of the pronunciations, but in other cases we must rely on guesswork, supplemented sometimes by indications given by comparison of spelling from different sources.

2. Laves' corpus

The material taken down by Laves comprises about 70 single words, 50 sentences or partial sentences, and a story with about 250 words. A vocabulary compiled from the material contains about 220 words, of which no meaning can (yet) be given to twenty or so. The number of bound morphemes identifiable in the sentences and/or story is about twenty — most of them occurring in both. The sentences are short and very basic, if not positively ungrammatical and the story is rather scrappy and repetitious.

The speaker, Billy Skewthorpe, was old and sick — aged about 70 and interviewed in the Cloncurry hospital. It is unlikely that his speech was particularly clear; in particular, it is likely that he did not have many teeth and so the difference between interdental and alveolar sounds may have been obscured. Note, for example, the spellings maḍi and mati for 'bad', and gurdu, gurrdu¹ and gurrudhu for what, on the basis of a couple of early amateur spellings, I phonemicised (and still do) as kurrthu. It is also likely that unstressed syllables may have been unclear at times; note the spellings yabirri and yaba^oirri for what I write (in other dialects) as yapayirri.² There are a fair number of errors in both hearing and glossing, but no more than what one might expect of a competent linguist exposed for the first time to a new language from a sick old speaker.

3. The value of the material

It seems likely that Laves decided that Skewthorpe was not able to give him high-class material in Mayi-Thakurti and this is why he did not persist in working with

¹ Laves uses two different shapes of the letter r to distinguish the retroflex glide from the alveolar tap or trill. I am using r and rr, respectively.

² My use of the voiceless stop symbol follows my orthographic convention for this language group. Laves, constrained to following the phonetic shapes on this his first contact with the language, used both voiceless and (usually) voiced symbols.

him. This is understandable. However, given the quality and quantity of the other data on the language, his research is a very significant contribution.

Of the 200 or so lexical items that can be identified, about 110 were already in the published vocabulary, either for Mayi-Thakurti (80) or for one or (nearly always) more other dialects (30), including twenty words for which the published spelling can now be corrected. The remainder are new items for the vocabulary, 25 being alternatives to words in the published vocabulary (for Mayi-Thakurti or, in a minority of cases, only for other dialects), and the rest being completely new to the vocabulary.

As for grammar, the previously grammatical information was of the type: “some of the verbs in the wordlist end in -ingu. We know that -ingu is the present tense suffix in some other dialects, so we can presume that Mayi-Thakurti has a present tense -ingu, especially as these verbs are verbs that one would reasonably expect to be given in the present tense.” This can now be replaced by information derived from the analysis of sentences.

It is a pity that Gerhardt Laves did not continue with his work on Mayi-Thakurti. Nevertheless, the little that he did has turned suppositions into certainties and made the dialect the second best known in the Mayi group. It could easily have been the first.

Reference

Breen, Gavan. 1981. *The Mayi languages of the Queensland Gulf country*. Canberra : Australian Institute Of Aboriginal Studies. (AIAS new series ; no.29.)

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