

Writing, complexity, translation

Richard Fox

Let me begin with an expression of gratitude to Verena Meyer, Thomas Hunter, Penny Edwards, Laurie Sears, Tom Patton and Kaja McGowan. It is a rare privilege to be read with such nuance and generosity by one's colleagues. I have learned much from their comments here, as I have from their work more generally. Given the brevity of my response it will have to be selective, focusing on a couple of the more prominent themes—namely, cultural complexity and translation. But I hope to return in future and think further along several of the other, very productive lines of questioning they have opened up in relation to the book.

Problem, context, complexity

From curative ink (Meyer) and protective cloth (McGowan) to petitionary leaves (Edwards) and empowered amulets (Patton), we have ample evidence that script and writing make more than mere words in Southeast Asia. It takes a disciplined effort—in every sense—to ignore these uses and acts of writing. The question is what to do with them. Should they be seen as aberrant? Or perhaps as additive to a prior and more philologically-compliant textuality? Given the constitutive role of text for modern scholarship, is it even possible to engage these 'other' uses of writing on their own terms? And, if it were, what might this do for (or even *to*) our field of study? These were a few of the questions *More than words* (MTW) set out to address. As Penny Edwards has rightly noted, I am not alone in these concerns. But, in my view, we have so far been unwilling—or possibly unable—to grasp the theoretical nettle—that is, to describe adequately the issues at stake, and to recognise the implications that might follow from thinking otherwise.

Here a few contextual notes may be helpful. For, although MTW is driven by an explicitly textual problematic, it responds to a set of questions that originally grew out of an earlier period of research focused on Balinese offerings. Briefly by way of background, I had spent some ten months in 2010–11 working with a group of mostly older Balinese women, learning how to make the small-scale domestic offerings

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prepared daily in most houseyards on the island.¹ Despite their apparent ubiquity, and widely acknowledged importance, very little research had been done on what these little offerings were meant to accomplish, let alone how.² As the research progressed, it became clear that the very notion of ‘offerings’ was itself problematic. For, in at least some cases, they were not being ‘offered’ at all—but rather deployed as weapons—or instruments—directed to self-fortification, purification, apotropaic transformation of potentially dangerous beings into more benevolent forms, or to ensure the fluent circulation of a subtle life-sustaining force. In many cases, I found one and the same ‘offering’ could be directed to any or all of the above. And yet, crucially, each of these aims appeared respectively to entail a different understanding of the world and what it meant to flourish as a human being, both individually and collectively. As with rival conceptions of writing embodied in the Caru Rsi Gana (*MTW*, chapter 4), it was indeed possible to imagine a ‘cultural system’ that might reconcile these seemingly conflicting ideals, synthesising their rival conceptions of agency and collective life. But to do so would have introduced a degree of uniformity and coherence that was not only absent from the Balinese accounts themselves, but also actively resisted by many of those who provided them. The question, in short, was how to approach this seemingly irreducible complexity. And, in this regard, the Balinese findings were not unique—as, again, we see with several of the examples cited in the commentaries above. Historical and ethnographic studies from across Southeast Asia have drawn attention to cultural complexity under various descriptions—from great and little traditions to syncretism, hybridity and abundance. Yet, on reflection, I felt our ability to engage critically with this complexity was hindered by terminologies and approaches Southeast Asianists had perhaps too readily adopted from other fields. I wanted to find out whether an alternative approach was possible, one that was better equipped to take seriously Balinese ways of knowing, being in, and working to transform the world. Beyond its contribution to the study of social life in Bali, I hoped this might also potentially have wider-reaching implications for Southeast Asian Studies, as well as for the human sciences more broadly.

It was with these issues in mind that I began working on Balinese script and writing in 2012, as a new member of the University of Heidelberg’s Collaborative Research Centre on Material Text Cultures (CRC 933).³ There I had the privilege of working with Annette Hornbacher and a wonderfully engaging group of colleagues specialising in textual traditions from other historical periods and parts of the world. My own research at the CRC was directed to exploring issues of cultural complexity through an ethnography of Balinese writing practices. As Verena Meyer has noted in her Introduction to these essays on *MTW*, this new project brought me back to a set of issues I had tried to address in earlier work on textuality in Old Javanese studies.⁴

1 I am indebted to the Fulbright Program for the Senior Scholar Award that supported this period of research, between September 2010 and July 2011.

2 See Richard Fox, ‘Why do Balinese make offerings? On religion, teleology and complexity’, *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 171, 1 (2015): 29–55.

3 Collaborative Research Centre, Material Text Cultures; <https://www.materiale-textkulturen.org>.

4 The two essays included: Richard Fox, ‘Substantial transmissions: A presuppositional analysis of “the Old Javanese text” as an object of knowledge, and its implications for the study of religion in Bali’,

There I had argued for a performative approach to textuality that would recognise philological practice as but one among many ways of constituting ‘the text’. At that point the work was predominantly oriented to critique, revealing the contingencies and tensions at play in the philological enterprise—with the aim of opening up possibilities for thinking otherwise. Building on this critique, and on the questions regarding complexity that had arisen from the research on offerings, *MTW* was directed to finding out what would happen if we took Balinese at their word.⁵

Translation, transliteration

Translation posed some extremely challenging questions in this connection, as several have noted above. It seems clear enough that acts of translation are foundational for our work as scholars of Southeast Asian history, culture and society. And yet, as a concept, translation is extremely difficult to explicate. In this respect, it is comparable to the esoteric practices of Tom Patton’s Burmese *vijjādhara*—insofar as it ‘somehow’ seems to work, but precisely *how* is ‘hardly ever discussed’. As with Buddhist wisdom, what is ‘of utmost importance for those who engage with and wield’ translation is ‘that it works’. But, again, it is not self-evidently clear what it means to ‘work’ in this context. And, when the issue *is* addressed, it is often with reference to a fuzzily justificatory logic of ‘imperfect’ yet ‘satisfactory’ translations, approximations, and the like. We are never explicitly told what a translation is meant to *do*, much less how to know when it has been done well. As we learn from Penny Edwards’ illuminating reflections on translational terminology in Khmer, Thai and Chinese, the broadly Latinate metaphor of translation as a ‘carrying-across’ is anything but universal—a point that should be sufficient to prompt closer consideration, given both the conceptual difficulties already cited and the centrality of translation for our work.

Part of the problem, I suspect, may lie in how we envisage the ‘object’ ostensibly translated. At a procedural level, we often imagine ourselves to be translating sentences, with the task understood as one of finding ‘equivalent’ terms or phrases between languages, themselves implicitly construed as static systems of signification. But, notwithstanding a few rarified exceptions, sentences (like ‘languages’) do not actually occur in the world. They are heuristic posits, nothing more.⁶ Instead, what

Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde 159, 1 (2003): 65–107; Richard Fox, ‘Plus ça change ... recent developments in Old Javanese studies and their implications for the study of religion in contemporary Bali’, *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 161, 1 (2005): 63–97.

⁵ Here I am indebted to David Halperin’s approach to the history of homosexuality, in which he asked ‘what the consequences might be of taking the Greeks at their word when they spoke about sex’ (*How to do the history of homosexuality* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003], p. 3). As he noted, ‘The student of classical antiquity quickly learns to acknowledge, to bracket, and to screen out their erotic peculiarities, the cultural specificities in their experience of *erôs* that fail to correspond to any category or identity in modern bourgeois society. One simply acquires the habit of allowing for their differences, granting them the latitude to be weird, and then one turns one’s attention to other topics of greater seriousness or philological urgency’ (ibid., pp. 2–3; cited in Richard Fox, *More than words: Transforming script, agency and collective life in Bali* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press], p. 19). As I have tried to argue in *MTW*, there has been a similarly wilful ignorance at play in the study of Southeast Asian textualities, some interesting exceptions notwithstanding.

⁶ V.N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the philosophy of language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), pp. 73–4.

we encounter in the course of research—even when we are examining written texts—are the traces of utterances discerned *ex post facto* in their sequelae, most directly the ‘meaning-making’ we perform in the process of reading, listening and responding.

Reflecting on his work with the renowned priest, poet and scholar of Balinese letters, Ida Pedanda Ketut Sideman, Thomas Hunter develops a closely related point. Commenting on Balinese readings of Old Javanese *kakawin*, Ida Pedanda described translation as ‘a matter of enunciating the text anew’. As Hunter has astutely noted, this re-enunciation is irreducible to representation, or restatement. For, unlike sentences, utterances are unrepeatable. How might this affect our understanding of translation? Here it is useful to specify the questions a given translation is meant to answer. Commonsense approaches tend to focus on ‘what is said’—the locutionary aspect of an utterance, ripped from life mid-flight and fixed on a pin. In lieu of this preoccupation with ‘the said’, *MTW* argues for shifting our attention to what is *done* both in—and through—acts of writing and speaking. I am not yet sure to what extent this aligns with Becker’s notion of ‘surface translation’, as proposed by Laurie Sears. But it is very closely allied to Becker’s anti-dualist account of ‘linguaging’ (see Hunter, above), and more specifically to his remarks on language-learning as a form of attunement. In a manner consonant with Edwards’ citation from Elkin on ‘keeping an ear out’,⁷ Becker described language perspicaciously as ‘not denotational but orientational’, with *linguaging* as ‘one means by which we continually attune ourselves to context’.⁸

The implications of such a radically pragmatic, and orientational, understanding of language are at once wide-reaching and profound. Drawing on her work with Javanese manuscripts, Verena Meyer neatly extrapolates from the critique of translation to standards for transliteration and the use of diacritics. Following a subtly observed reflection on the forms of power and efficacy attributed to Qur’anic writing, she asks a series of pointed questions regarding the aims and consequences of ‘translitterating a Javanese transliteration of an Arabic word into Latin script’. Though perhaps unintended, Meyer’s argument highlights the limitations of recent efforts to promote a universal system for transliterating Indic-derived scripts across South and Southeast Asia.⁹ As her line of enquiry makes clear, the shape of a transliteration is always in part determined by the questions it aims to answer. So, any effort to universalise the transliterational needs of a particular project (for example, an Indologically-oriented study of epigraphy) will end up running roughshod over the potentially incommensurate lines of questioning embodied in other scholarly projects—to say nothing of the acts and utterances the latter projects set out to engage and represent. As with translation, transliteration is ineluctably contingent on the purposes it serves. Consequently, and this point is more broadly applicable, one should resist the desire to upgrade the interests of any particular project to the status of universal wisdom—a point on which I am very happy to end, once again with gratitude to my esteemed colleagues for their thoughtful reflections on *More than words*.

7 Lauren Elkin, ‘Foreword’, in Mireille Gansel, *Translation as transhumance*, trans. Ros Schwartz (New York: Feminist Press at City University of New York, 2017), p. xiii.

8 A.L. Becker, ‘Silence across languages’, in *Beyond translation: Essays toward a modern philology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 288.

9 Andrea Acri and Arlo Griffiths, ‘The romanisation of Indic script used in ancient Indonesia’, *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 170, 2–3 (2014): 365–78.