A forgotten philology

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Richard Fox's *More than words* represents a sea change in the way we look at philology and textuality by decisively addressing a problem that was identified by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in *Metaphors we live by*. In this work, Lakoff and Johnson developed the idea of conduit metaphors, the notion that thought is communicated by first being packaged and conveyed in script language and then unpackaged at the receiving end of communication.[1] According to the conduit metaphor and its descendants and allies, there is an ineffable mental picture of thought, or thought as an ineffable presence in communication, that can be communicated across languages and cultural systems. While this idea has been expressed by different thinkers in different ways, in all variations of it, languages are conceived as a value-free tool for conveying a message. Some, like Walter Ong, tried to question this paradigm;[2] but Ong's work on noetics ultimately also carried forth the old metaphor of script and language as a kind of packaging and thus did not provide us with a way to get beyond the conduit.

Fox, on the other hand, treats *aksara Bali*, the Balinese script, not as a kind of envelope for an essence that is then transferred in translation and in the work of scholarship. Instead, he looks at it from the point of view of what the Balinese say about their script and how they use it. Through my study of Old Javanese and Balinese, I myself have also had a long association with the Balinese script and, in this context, became acquainted with practices around *aksara* that go far beyond questions of translation and philology. As I set out to study *kakawin*[3] as a graduate student, I was raised in the Western philological tradition and received training in the tools and techniques of philology; but when I went to Bali and stayed and worked in the field, I realised the limitations of such approaches. A formative experience in this context was my involvement with a *kakawin* club called *sekaha mabasan* around the late Ida Pedanda Ketut Sideman,[4] a master at the verbal translation of *kakawin*. In these clubs, students practised *mabasan*, which in this context means that they read texts and translated them extemporaneously in a kind of stylised version of literary

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1 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors we live by* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).
2 Walter J. Ong, *Orality and literacy: The technologizing of the word* (London: Methuen, 1982).
3 *Kakawin* are Old Javanese courtly epics with specific aesthetics that were partly based on the Sanskrit *kāvya*.
4 Ida Pedanda Ketut Sideman (d. 2011) was a highly regarded Hindu priest and an influential teacher of traditional Balinese literature.

Balinese. *Mabasan* constitutes a literary form that is developed, presented, and preserved orally and represents a tradition alongside the original texts themselves.

I think some of my colleagues frowned upon my excursions into the world of *mabasan,* seeing it as not conducive to increasing our 'understanding' of the original text. But in time, and especially under the influence of Fox's *More than words*, I have come to see that the dismissal of the significance of such literary practices is an example of how Western academics and their philological tradition have constituted the text. To reduce the process of *mabasan* to philological analysis, however, necessarily limits our understanding of the totality of the act. *Mabasan* is a socially situated process of translation that has its own rules and its own aesthetic, and always includes the enunciation of the original text in metrical patterns. For about the last five hundred years, these metrical patterns have been aligned with the musical tones of the Balinese gamelan scales. As a student I was taught to recognise them as what Richard Wallis defined as '*reng*', musical patterns that represent the tonal structures of each metre.[5] In time, however, I learnt that Ida Pedanda did not believe that the *reng* correctly represented the structures of *kakawin* and other oral literary presentations of Balinese textual materials. Instead, he thought of them as a kind of simplification of more melismatic patterns that he had learned directly from his *guru*. Ida Pedanda held that it was not enough to reduce metres to schemata that can easily be reproduced and based on recognisable *gong* tones from the Balinese scales, and that it was more important to understand the melismatic features of the enunciation of the text.

A similar principle applies to Ida Pedanda's understanding of translation: for him, translating something in the oral literary medium of *mabasan* is not about reducing it to what we would find on a printed page in one of the typical major translations of Balinese literary works of the *kakawin* genre. Rather, it is a matter of enunciating the text anew in a specially formulated Balinese literary idiom, an oral medium that runs parallel to the original medium of the text. His translation does not entail the reduction of a text to a simpler form or to a form recognisable on a printed page, but the representation of texts in a living way that embodies principles of metre, the melodic contours of metre, and an especially elegant way of using the Balinese language. Crucially, for Ida Pedanda, the written representation of the text is not neutral: he felt that only *aksara Bali* were useful for transcribing Balinese texts, that *aksara Bali* were irreplaceable in even as mundane a context as the reproduction of *kakawin* metres. Likewise, Fox in *More than words* insists on the significance of *aksara Bali*, but he goes even further: Fox decided to take the Balinese at their word by adopting the principle that they hold to, which is that *aksara Bali* have a life of their own which cannot be reduced in translation to a set of philological principles, or to a conduit metaphor; and in the process he discovers that *aksara Bali* have, in certain contexts, an agency that is irreducible to representation.

Fox's insistence that language and script need to be grasped in their context resonates not only with Ida Pedanda's understanding of *kakawin*, but also with a philology that long preceded the conduit theory but has largely been forgotten. We

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5   R.H. Wallis, 'The voice as a mode of expression in Bali' (PhD diss., University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1980).

find this forgotten philology in the work of the brilliant Indian mathematician and philosopher Bimal Krishna Matilal, who elucidated the thought of the sixth-century linguistic philosopher Bhartṛhari in a beautiful volume called *The word and the world*.[6] In his analysis of Bhartṛhari's work, Matilal looks closely at the theory of *sphoṭa*, which first came into existence and became prominent in the early first millennium BCE. It proposes that words have quanta of energy called *sphoṭa* which explode in the mind as one realises what they mean. While the weaknesses of the *sphoṭa* theory were revealed in time, it took a genius like Bhartṛhari to show that the *sphoṭa* of individual words is dependent on their place within *vākya* or utterances. In his major work, the *Vākyapadīya*, Bhartṛhari claims that it is only at the final summation of a *vākya* that the *sphoṭa* is revealed, and that all meaning is in that sense contextual meaning. As Matilal pointed out, for Bhartṛhari there is no thought prior to language, and thought is always already phrased as language. He begins his analysis of language with an analysis of the desire to speak which, he says, motivates languages, and motivates individual expressions of language; but these expressions are dependent on contextual meanings. Articulating a similar insight, Alton Becker spoke of 'languaging', or making use of language within social contexts and to accomplish certain social purposes.[7] Because there are no meanings outside of contextual meanings, Matilal analysing Bhartṛhari noted that a dictionary is nothing more than a set of contextual meanings that have been collated for pedagogical purposes.

Building on the work of Becker and Bhartṛhari, we should be looking at languaging rather than the static products of philological production and the commitment to conduit theory. Fox, in *More than words*, offers such a move beyond the idea of an ineffable essence called thought that precedes language. Languaging, through the technique proposed by Fox for *More than words*, is a tacking back and forth between ethnographic observation and theoretical reflection. It cannot be reduced to a set of protocols about conveying a message in a new way that goes across languages and scripts and assumes an ineffable presence in processes of translation. Following Fox's example, it is high time that we find a better way to link script and language on the one hand, and its social contexts and meanings on the other. Richard Fox's *More than words* offers many examples of how to move beyond the impasse of conduit theory and towards a new understanding of languaging and its role in the human sciences.

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6 Bimal Krishna Matilal, *The word and the world: India's contribution to the study of language* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990).
7 Alton L. Becker, *Beyond translation: Essays toward a modern philology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), pp. 11–13.