Language and Difference in Hakluyt's Principal Navigations

Marianne Montgomery

Abstract The presence (and absence) of non-English vernaculars in the travel narratives in the second edition of Richard Hakluyt's Principal Navigations (1598 – 1600) is considered in light of what Stephen Greenblatt calls the "epistemological optimism" of early modern English travelers. While linguistic difference (and some resulting incomprehension) would seem to be an inevitable condition of travel, especially travel beyond Europe, English travelers tend to give relatively little attention to the languages spoken by the people they encounter. They acknowledge linguistic difference in two contexts in which epistemological optimism fails: when they encounter the languages of people they consider savage and when they find themselves under stress and mention their interpreters. When the English hear unfamiliar foreign languages, they tend to take them as overwhelming, and their textual descriptions and judgments seek to reinscribe distance and difference. Language is worth writing about when it is heard as strange, and travelers seem to hear patterns and sounds as much as they hear individual, meaningful words. In court settings, language difference is acknowledged mainly through occasional mentions of interpreters. Interpreters are mentioned either when the possibility of comprehension is novel or when the English traveler is uncomfortable or uncertain in a foreign setting. When travelers write about language difference we can see a break in the epistemological optimism that often characterizes encounters between the English and the other in early modern travel texts. The captivity narrative of Miles Philips is a striking exception. Philips uses language flexibly in order to navigate global networks of exchange.

Key words travel writing; vernacular language; interpreter; epistemological optimism

Author Marianne Montgomery is Assistant Professor of English at East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina, USA. She is working on a book on foreign vernaculars on the early modern English stage. Email: marianne.montgomery@email.com

Early modern travelers regularly encountered unfamiliar languages. Incomprehension produced by these languages must have been part of their experience of travel. But language does not seem to register in early modern travel texts as a significant category that travelers use to think about the foreign, or even to describe their own experiences of exchange. Randall Davis describes this phenomenon in texts of New World encounters: "Many of the accounts often describe instances of intercultural communi-

cation—sometimes involving rather abstract concepts—without explaining the method of exchange" (231). According to Stephen Greenblatt, when faced with unknown languages, European travelers register persistent "epistemological optimism," since "the greatest temptation was to assume transparency" (94, 95). They want to understand, so in writing they tend to present their exchanges as untroubled by the problems posed by language difference. And, to the merchants and traders whose accounts make up much of the corpus of early modern travel writing, language is less interesting as a cultural sign than as a tool for exchange: "in almost all early European accounts... the language of the Indians is noted not in order to register cultural specificity but in order to facilitate barter, movement, and assimilation through conversion" (Greenblatt 104). Bruce Smith points out the ideological and phenomenological significance of travelers' relative lack of interest in native languages. English voyagers privilege the visual over the aural, in part because sound, non-linear and uncontrollable by the listener, is threatening to travelers. Sound overwhelms the listener and renders him passive (505).

Despite the epistemological optimism of early modern travelers, however, language difference does register in their writings, and in certain key contexts. When do writers of travels and voyages talk about language, and to what ends? To answer this question, I turn for a representative sample to the second edition of Richard Hakluyt's Principal Navigations, a massive compendium of travel accounts published in three folio volumes from 1598 – 1600. This essay describes how and when language difference is acknowledged in Hakluyt's collection. I am not interested in when language was "really" a problem for travelers. Rather, I am concerned with when language registers as something worth writing about, when it makes its way out of the realm of lived experience and into the discourses around travel that, in part thanks to Hakluyt, contributed, as most critics now agree, to forming an English nation and establishing trade and colonization as dual goals of the English overseas project. Like Mary Fuller, who argues for the centrality of writing—as a record and consequently as an organizing force—for voyages, I am interested in the interface between travel and the written record of travel (7). In other words, in what specific generic and narrative contexts do the sounds of exchange make it into print, becoming part of the printed record of voyage, discovery, diplomacy, and commercial negotiation?

Hakluyt's generic diversity requires a cautious approach. Julia Schleck has recently and persuasively argued against the tendency of literary scholars to treat Hakluyt's Principal Navigations as a source of discrete, divisible, and historically reliable facts and anecdotes about early modern attitudes towards the foreign; we need, she says, to produce more historically and generically sensitive readings of Hakluyt. To this end, central to my method was a thorough reading of the entirety of the English voyages in the second edition of the Principal Navigations (1598 – 1600). Much of this mammoth expanse of text—comparable to the expanses of the globe crossed by Hakluyt's narrators—consists of genres that usually do not make it into modern anthologies or abridgements: letters patent, travel logs (daily diaries derived from ships' logs), diplomatic reports, letters from factors to their company masters, charts of navigational distances, lists of commodities, accounts of sea battles, and, most fre-

quently mined by literary scholars, proto-ethnographic descriptions of the bodies, practices, and customs of foreign peoples. References to and descriptions of language difference are present in Hakluyt primarily in the subgenre that Schleck calls the "trade report." Trade reports feature narratives of travelers' receptions by foreign peoples or in foreign courts as they seek to make deals or secure trade and transport privileges; the primary initial audiences for these reports were investors or sponsors back in England. Within the trade report, language is acknowledged most prominently in two contexts: when the traveler cannot understand what he hears or when he finds himself socially or diplomatically disadvantaged. In other words, language registers when a traveler feels "lost," either aurally or socially.

This aural displacement occurs when a traveler encounters language that he hears as alien, highly unfamiliar, and therefore threatening. These sounds occur outside of diplomatic or commercial contexts that might render them usefully meaningful (and then, paradoxically, inaudible in the text). In other words, they occur in contexts in which epistemological optimism is unwarranted or impossible. When the English hear unfamiliar foreign languages, they tend to take them as overwhelming, and their textual descriptions and judgments seek to reinscribe distance and difference, to put these sounds back in their place, as it were. Moreover, they conventionally focus on the most alien and highly ritualized forms of language: war cries, songs, and prayers. In other words, language is worth writing about when it is heard as strange, and travelers seem to hear patterns and sounds as much as they hear individual, meaningful words.

A prototypical example is Giles Fletcher's description of the Tartars. Fletcher's account seems shaped as much by ancient discourses as by observation; he points to "their barbarous condition" and compares them to the Scythians, the notoriously brutal cannibals who stand, in Herodotus' Histories, as the barbaric "other" against whom the Greeks define themselves.[1] This groundwork laid, Fletcher begins his discussion of language with the Tartar battle cry: "When they make any onset, their maner is to make a great shoute, crying all out together Olla Billa, Olla Billa, God helpe us, God helpe us" (2.317). He also describes the sound of the Tartars' language: "Their speech is verie sudden and loude, speaking as it were out of a deepe hollowe throate, When they sing, you would think a kowe lowed, or some great bandogge howled" (2.321). Fletcher's attention to the sound of language is typical in several ways. First, he describes a battle cry, giving the Tartar phrase and its English translation. He presents this cry as customary; this is not narrated as a single observed event but a customary occurrence that other, future travelers might witness and hear. Though he does transcribe the words "Olla Billa," when he describes Tartar speech the terms he chooses, "sudden" and "loud," seem shaped by his own incomprehension; could he have heard their language as anything but sudden and loud? Third, he describes song as well as speech. Unlike an exchange with a potential trading partner, song does not require comprehension. Because it is not useful, it does not need to be interpreted. Rather, it is more safely alien, and does not need to be heard as carrying semantic or syntactic meaning. Finally, Fletcher compares the sound of the song to the lowing of cows and the howling of dogs; he seems no longer

to hear words at all. That a cow and a dog produce different sounds seems not to matter to this description, and the description makes it difficult to imagine what this song might actually have sounded like. But the description makes it quite clear that the writer heard a language that he did not understand, and he describes that language used in alienating forms (a battle cry and a song) and with alienating figures (animal noises). Fletcher's account becomes progressively more loaded and judgmental as he moves from the words of the battle cry through speech to song and finally to the noises of animals (2.317 –22).

Fletcher's description is by no means unique. Other travelers also hear unknown languages as strange, sudden, and even painful to the ear, and they pay special attention to songs and war cries. One voyager into Russia complains that he heard singers whose "songs or voices delighted our ears little or nothing" (1.421). Richard Fisher encounters a long-haired "Savage" in Cape Breton and gives, untranslated, the words of his war cry: "He cryed thrise with a loude voyce Chiogh, Chiogh, Chiogh. Thereupon nine or ten of his fellowes running right up over the bushes with great agilitie and swiftnesse came towards us with white staves in their hands like halfe pikes" (6.94 –5). Comparing foreign languages to the noises of animals is also common. On Martin Frobisher's second voyage for the Northwest Passage, his men encounter on a northerly island "certain of the country people... making great noise, with cries like the mowing of Buls seeming greatly desirous of conference with us" (5.205 –6). This description, as is typical, emphasizes the noise and cries of the locals and compares them to the lowing of bulls. But these signs appear to be relatively easy to interpret; it takes the writer no time at all to conclude, optimistically, that these are welcoming, not aggressive sounds, despite their loudness and animal characteristics.

Besides battle cries and songs, another type of speech frequently emphasized is prayer, particularly public, ritualized prayer. Richard Johnson describes the "devilish rites" of a Samoed priest: "Then he singeth as we use here in England to hallow, whope, and showte at houndes, and the rest of the company answere him with this Owtis, Igha, Igha, Igha, and then the Priest replieth again with his voyces" (1.354). This description, in contrast to Fletcher's, figures not the singer but his listeners as beasts, and the ritual is compared to the cacophony of an English hunt. Moreover, the company responds with repetitive sounds, words that Johnson leaves untranslated. This ritualized language produces startling bodily effects: "And they answere him with the selfsame wordes so manie times, that in the ende he becommeth as it were madde, and falling down as hee were dead, having nothing on him but a shirt, lying down I perceive him to breathe" (1.354). Johnson's syntax imagines a causal relationship between the refrain and the priest's ecstasy. The untranslated words of the ritualized refrain, however, are strikingly juxtaposed in Johnson's account with a moment of optimistic comprehension. He received an explanation of what is happening to the priest:

> I asked them why he lay so, and they answered mee, Nowe doth our God tell him what wee shall doe, and whither we shall goe. And when he had lyen still a

> litle while, they cried thus three times togther, Oghao, Oghao, Oghao, and as they use these three calles, hee riseth with his head and lieth downe againe, and then hee rose up and sang with like voyces as he did before: and his audience answered him, Igha, Igha, Igha. (1.354 –355)

In this middle of a noisy passage, with repeated answering refrains of untranslated words in song, Johnson describes a moment of apparently perfect communication (or at least the optimistic production of such a moment). He requests an explanation and receives it, without any acknowledgment of language barriers that might frustrate such open and clear communication. In this moment, language disappears, only to recur a sentence later, when the refrain that seemed to cast the priest down to the ground now lifts him up again. The two sentences are linked, though, by the word "answered." Johnson positions himself in a position of power like the priest's; both have the power to ask for and receive responses from the worshippers. In this sense, Johnson's optimistic moment of explanation, placed within the ritual, derives some of its narrative power from the ritual itself. Even as he observes the call and response, he positions himself as a participant in it, and its very structure seems to produce answers, even as its language otherwise remains alien.

When encountering languages that they hear as strange, English writers typically acknowledge their own incomprehension. The voyage of Arthur Barlowe to Virginia in 1584 brought on board one native off the coast of Virginia, who spoke of "many things not understood by us" (6.123). A description of "three savages brought to England" in Fabyan's chronicle excerpted by Hakluyt locates their languages among other signs of wildness: "These were clothed in a beasts skins, and did eate raw flesh, and spake such speech that no man could understand them, and in their demeanour like to brute beasts" (5.91). The incomprehension of the Londoners—"no man could understand them"—becomes part of a more extensive catalog of signs of difference that makes these visitors seem more like "brute beasts" than like men. Moreover, because they sound bestial, their words do not, to the chronicler, even count as words: "I heard none of them utter one word" (5.91). The sounds they make, which were likely words in their language, do not for Barlowe even register as language and so invite no attempts at interpretation. They are just sounds. Many travelers, though, recognize words as words and attempt to describe their sound, even when they don't understand them. The writer of John Davis's first voyage for the Northwest Passage in 1575 seems especially alert to the sound of language: "Their pronunciation was very hollow thorow the throat, and their speech such as we could not understand: only we allured them by friendly embracings and signs of curtesie" (5.286). Another tribe's language is described in nearly identical terms: "they pronounce their language very hollow, and deepe in the throat" (5.296). But with this tribe, Davis's men do not rely entirely on optimistic gestures. Instead, they learn words.

Indeed, part of what English voyagers have to do to make sense of unknown languages, languages they may hear as savage and bestial, is the work of interpretation, turning what they hear as noise into comprehensible, useful language. Some trade re-

ports close with brief glossaries that seem designed to give the next Englishmen visiting the area a few key terms useful for trade and basic communication. Davis's voyage includes a glossary that mixes commodities and provisions with imperatives useful for an English traveler trying to take what he can from the natives. These include "Yliaoute, I mean no harm" and "Quoysah, Give it to me." The visitor might ask for other items in the list, including "Sugnacoon, a coat" or "Maatuke, fish" (5.296). Another such glossary is appended to the end of an account of Sir Francis Drake's circumnavigation; it gives "certain words of the naturall language of Java, learned and observed by our men there," listing 34 words and short phrases for commodities, food, parts of a ship, and numbers, including "Sabucke, silk," "Jonge, a ship," "Suda, enough," and, perhaps optimistically, "Lau, understand you" (8.74). Other glossaries seem less concerned with trade than with even more rudimentary negotiations and the procurement of basic provisions. All glossaries, though, presume that the natives' languages can be learned, understood, and transmitted textually to future voyagers and factors.

Once a language can be understood, whether through these glossaries or when Portuguese, Dutch, Spanish, or English interpreters become available, descriptions of the languages of foreign peoples—as loud, wild, beastly, repetitive, and ritualized—disappear from accounts in the Principal Navigations. Languages used in court settings, with the exception of songs, are never described in these terms. Instead, language difference is acknowledged mainly through occasional mentions of interpreters. In discussing interpreters, I want to emphasize that what is at issue is not the historical presence of interpreters; in most cases, interpreters must have been present in these encounters. Rather, I am interested in when the presence of these interpreters gets recorded in the text; in other words, under what circumstances do writers consider the presence of their interpreters noteworthy? The default position seems to be to leave out interpreters altogether, which makes sense from a class standpoint, since interpreters are servants. When interpreters are mentioned, it is either because the possibility of comprehension is novel or because the English traveler is uncomfortable or uncertain in a foreign setting.

Stephen Burroughs encountered in northern Europe Saami people with whom he shared a language: "some of them could speake the Russe tongue" (1.372). This common language, and the communication it enabled, was surprising enough to be worth noting in the text. In fact, Burroughs, able to communicate, then constructs a glossary of "certaine wordes of their language" (1.372). Likewise, in texts about the Americas, Indian languages are still novel enough that writers often acknowledge interpreters. In the Discovery of Guiana, Raleigh finds "an Indian who spake many languages, and that of Guyana naturally" to interpret for him (7.299). Another Indian interpreter was Manteo, who after spending time in England, returned to his native Roanoke Island with the 1587 colony led by John White. When the colonists are met by natives who first brandish weapons and then turn to flee, "Manteo their countryman called to them in their own language" (6.202). Without Manteo to interpret, "their own language" would almost certainly have been described as beastly war cries. But, with the help of an interpreter, the scene's tension is diffused and the

English now seem to understand the Indians perfectly. The Indians explain that some of their men were injured by Ralph Lane's colony, but this unpleasant incident is quickly forgiven: "they sayd, they knew our men mistooke them" (6.202). This part of the account is typically optimistic, and Manteo as interpreter disappears from the text once the initial, potentially threatening moment of first contact has passed. Manteo of course must have continued to interpret throughout the exchange between English and Indian, but he drops out of the text. Interpreters register when understanding a language is new or surprising; once they have appeared, then, they disappear, because by making language comprehensible, they make their own textual presence unnecessary.

Besides situations in which language is heard as strange and comprehension is novel, interpreters are also acknowledged in the text when travelers find themselves in disadvantageous positions in foreign courts. For example, on Anthony Jenkinson's journey into Persia for the Muscovy Company, only Jenkinson and his interpreter are allowed to enter the Sophy's court. He has to relinquish his parcels to be carried by the Sophy's servants, for, he writes, "None of my company or servants might be suffered to enter into the Court with me, my interpreter only excepted" (2.21). Here, the interpreter is mentioned precisely because his presence is an exception to the general bar on Jenkinson's servants; the interpreter is only made present in the text because the other servants are absent. The English visitors' distance from the Sophy similarly seems to produce another mention of the interpreter in Arthur Edwards' fourth voyage into Persia: "When he came first to the Sophies presence... bringing his interpreter with him, and standing far off, the Sophie (sitting in a seat roiall with a great number of his noble men about him) bad him come neere" (2.113). As in Jenkinson's visit to the court, here Edwards's small numbers—just him and his interpreter—are contrasted to a much greater number of the Sophy's followers. Being left alone with the interpreter sometimes brings the interpreter into the text.

An interpreter also appears at a tense moment in William Towerson's voyage to the coast of Guinea in 1577. Towerson's three English ships encounter the Spanish fleet, and afterwards Towerson banquets pleasantly with the Spanish admiral, with no mention of an interpreter. But after this audience, the interpreter appears in the text: "I being gone unto the boat, he caused one of his gentlemen to desire Francisco the Portugal, which was my interpreter, to require me to furle my flagge, declaring that hee was Generall of the Emperour's fleet" (4.115). Towerson refuses this order, and, after his ship is fired on by Spanish soldiers and he stands his ground, a Spanish apology resolves the standoff. Francisco the interpreter plays no special role in this affair, but it strikingly demonstrates how interpreters emerge in the text in moments of tension. Francisco's presence at the banquet is not acknowledged and he disappears after delivering the Spanish admiral's aggressive message.

So there are two main circumstances in which the English travelers whose accounts are gathered by Hakluyt acknowledge language difference: when they encounter the languages of people they consider savage and when they find themselves under stress and mention their interpreters. In both cases, when travelers write about language difference we can see a break in the epistemological optimism that often charac-

terizes encounters between the English and the other in early modern travel texts. These acknowledgements of language difference also seem to reassert distance between English and foreign as travelers put themselves back on familiar ground. I close, though, by briefly looking at a more extraordinary example in Hakluyt: the captivity narrative of Miles Philips. Philips, who narrates his adventures in the Spanish New World, is remarkably flexible in learning, using, and acknowledging foreign tongues. While this is in part a function of genre, since the captivity narrative is more plot-driven than the trade report, Philips's openness to learning and using new languages does more than simply reflect generic conventions. Philips is taken by the Inquisition and fails to speak prayers correctly because he only knows English (6.319). This is only a temporary failure, though. While serving his sentence, he learns both the "Indian language" and Spanish (6.323). He later serves the Spanish as an interpreter, befriends Indians, becomes rich running Spanish mines, and apprentices himself to a tailor. Ultimately, he escapes from Mexico, "presuming upon my Spanish tongue," which allows him to pass as a Spaniard. He finally gets passage back to England from Spain by claiming to have spent two years in Spain to learn the language (6.328 – 336). Language difference does not leave Philips lost or defensive, and he does not find alien languages strange, incomprehensible, or stressful. Rather, his language skills enable him to survive, prosper, and make it home to England and to English. Unlike other writers in the Principal Navigations, who use languages instrumentally but acknowledge language difference only when they are in positions of weakness, Philips's narrative emphasizes how language helps him to navigate new global networks of exchange.

【Note】

1. On the Scythians and history writing, see Hartos, *The Mirror of Herodotus*.

【Works Cited】

Davis, Randall. "Early Anglo-American Attitudes to Native American Languages." *Travel and Translation in the Early Modern Period*. Ed. Carmen di Biase. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006.

Fuller, Mary. Voyages in Print: English Travel to America, 1576 – 1624. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Greenblatt, Stephen. *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

Hakluyt, Richard. *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques, and Discoveries of the English Nation*. 10 vols. London: J. M. Dent, 1927.

Hartog, François. *The Mirror of Herodotus: The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History*. Trans. Janet Lloyd. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

Smith, Bruce. "Mouthpieces: Native American Voices in Thomas Harriot's True and Brief Report of... Virginia, Gaspar Pérez de Villagrá's Historia de Nuevo México, and John Smith's General History of Virginia." *New Literary History* 32 (2001): 501 – 17.