

Language, Australian soldiers, and the First World War: Honest History lecture, Manning Clark House, Canberra, 21 July 2014

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My paper today emerges from a couple of different areas that I have done work on in recent years. I've had a long-standing interest in soldier slang and lexicography; I've been interested in soldiers' reading – including guidebooks, phrasebooks, dictionaries, and textbooks; and I've also been interested in soldiers' experiences of sound.

The work of a British scholar, Hilary Footit, who recently completed a large project funded by AHRC in Britain, to examine language policy and conflict – her interest primarily centred on language policies and interpretation as they were developed through D-Day and the experience of liberation and occupation in World War II, as well as more recent language policies put in place during the Bosnian war – has been particularly of interest to me. We've also seen some recent scholarly and media interest in the role and experiences of Afghan interpreters in the war in Afghanistan, some of whom have been resettled in Australia.

I therefore decided that I would more explicitly think about bringing some of the work I have done together to think about how we might approach language and war (beginning with a focus on World War I) in a more direct fashion. This remains an area very much under-researched, especially from a social history perspective. Yet it is one that would seem to be vitally important. I am still at the beginning of this research, and I am drawing upon some of the bits and pieces of research that I have so far collected; a more thorough survey of the archival and manuscript sources awaits.

Footit writes that there has been little study of the 'language experiences of the majority of so-called ordinary people caught up in war', and that languages 'are an integral part of the dynamics of war'. Studying language in the context of war can tell us a great deal about soldiers' experiences; it can tell us something about attitudes to other people and communication between people (cross-cultural encounters); the role of interpreters, etc., remain under-researched; and it can also be insightful of remembrance and commemoration.

So today is just something of a preliminary foray into starting to look at some of all this in an Australian context. I'll start off with talking about slang, and attitudes to slang, and slang's function for Australian soldiers. I'll also mention some of the attitudes of people on the home front to slang.

Then I'll move on to take a look at the ways in which soldiers encountered foreign languages in war, and some aspects of cross-cultural communication during the First World War. I'll conclude by briefly looking at language and historical remembrance.

Slang

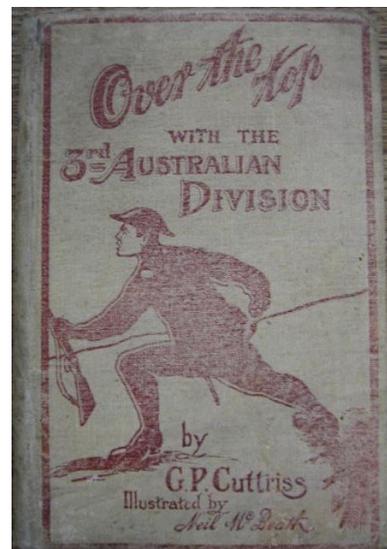
One approach to studying language in war is to consider the ways in which language changes during wartime. Wars are generally productive for a language: most particularly, they generate a range of new terms for weapons, tactics, and other aspects of the military conduct of the war. The First World War was particularly productive of many new weapons and terms to describe them (for example, 'whizz-bang'; 'Jack Johnsons'; 'coal boxes'), as well as popularising and making common a range of terms

which came to define modern war (for example, 'trench', 'camouflage', 'strafe', 'no man's land', 'tank', 'barrage', and so on).

Soldiers quickly adopted many of these new terms of war. They were sometimes struck by the new words that the technology of war was creating: Cleve Potter, observing a tank near Pozieres in April 1917, wrote in his diary: 'It is quite evident that our vocabulary was never meant to accommodate such outlandish indescribably contrivances devised for the destruction of human beings in the present war.'¹

The language of the Western Front was evocative and for many intimately associated with the experience of the trenches: as one newspaper observed: 'Nobody will ever think of "Jack Johnson" in future as a woolly-headed pugilist. The vision will be rather of a great gun belching out grim darkness, desolation, and death on some far field in Flanders.'² And of course soldiers developed a lexicon to help them deal with death: euphemisms or humorous terms such as 'hanging on the barbed wire'; to 'chuck a seven'; to 'pass in your check'; to refer to someone as having 'gone west'.

Language, particularly slang, served (and serves) important functions in wartime. For soldiers, slang helped to provide a common identity. It helped to introduce them to military life, made technologies more familiar and normal, and bonded soldiers together. Slang and language could also be a means of expressing feelings and responses. As we've seen, euphemisms and humour were used to deal with the realities of death and dying; other terms could be used to express resentment and complaints about military hierarchy and army life (complaints about the 'brass hats', 'eyewash' and the 'mother's pets').³



GP Cuttriss, Over the Top ... (1918)
([Astrolabe Books](#))

But language perhaps also changed the identity of the men who served, if only for the duration of the war. One concern sometimes articulated was the way men were being, in the language of the day 'coarsened' by army life and war. John L. Treloar, who later would be a director of the Australian War Memorial, observed in his diary in early 1915 that men were being coarsened by army life, and that this coarsening was reflected (perhaps even was contributed to) by their change in language. He noted that many men now called butter 'grease', milk 'cow juice', and a frequent expression was 'Hit me with a piece of bread, will you?'⁴

¹ 3 April 1917, Noel Potter, *Not theirs the same who fight: edited selection from the WWI diaries, poems and letters of 6080 Private R.C. (Cleve) Potter* Ginninderra Press, Charnwood, 1999.

² Melbourne *Argus*, 11 September 1915, p. 4.

³ See my forthcoming *Furphies and Whizz-bangs: Anzac Slang from the Great War* (OUP, 2014).

⁴ 22 January 1915, J.L. Treloar, *An Anzac Diary* Cambridge Press, Newcastle, 1993, p. 78.

Undoubtedly, soldiers' language was made up of its fair share of obscenities liberally used by many. As Joseph Beeston observed: 'Profanity oozes from him [the Australian Tommy, as he labelled him] like music from a barrel organ'.⁵ *All Abaft It*, a soldier periodical, described the 'Australian language' as having three very marked properties: 'forceful, expressive, and unprintable'.⁶ George Cuttriss, writing in 1918, said of the Australian soldier's language: 'His language at times is not too choice. It is said that on occasions the outburst has been so hot that the water carts have been consumed in flames'.⁷ While such language was sometimes seen as problematic, a common defence was that while the language of soldiers was bad, it was generally, as one chaplain to the soldiers commented, 'without offence or meaning'.⁸

Profanity and coarse language (and humour) was the preserve of the world and culture of the soldier, defined by being an all-male world, and it was international in its dimensions, with many terms shared between the Anglophone armies. But Australians laid particular claim to an informal and even obscene language and slang which blended into their larger celebration of the emerging stereotype of the larrikin digger.

Language more generally could serve to distinguish Australian identity and was sometimes deployed deliberately and self-consciously in order to do this. A short anecdote in the soldier periodical *Honk* illustrates the way language was deployed to reinforce Australian identity within soldier culture.

Two English privates were sitting in an estaminet t'other evening conversing loudly in French. A couple of Australians at an adjoining table decided that they were not going to allow themselves to be out-swanked. So one, who came from NSW, remarked excitedly to his companion: "Wagga Wagga Walgett Woolloomooloo wee waa Wallerawang Woolgoolga yarramalang". "Woollongabba", replied his comrade who came from Queensland, "Cunnamulla toowoomba toowong thargomindah indorooopilly camooweal goondinwindi". "Bondi coogee Maroubra", said the other with great determination. It made the Englishmen slew round and take notice. "Excuse me", said one, "but what language is that you're speaking?" "Oh, that's our Australian language", he was told. "We learnt English before we came away, but we always prefer to speak our own language among ourselves."⁹

This style of anecdote was not only a product of wartime culture; it continued a style that had been cultivated in the preceding years in *The Bulletin* as part of a desire to cultivate Australian cultural nationalism. That culture was picked up and amplified by soldiers in their soldier periodicals. They recognised that culture and language could help to forge a common sense of Australian identity that could mark them out from their fellow Anglophone armies.

⁵ Joseph Lievesley Beeston, *Five Months at Anzac* Angus and Robertson, Sydney, [?1916], p. 21.

⁶ *All Abaft It*, February 1919, p. 33.

⁷ G.P. Cuttriss, *"Over the Top" with the Third Australian Division* Charles H. Kelly, London, 1918, p. 29.

⁸ AWM 1 DRL/0642 R.C. Racklyelf, Chaplain, handwritten script, 'Notes on Chaplaincy Work with the AIF', December 10, 1921, p. 17, 17a

⁹ Item from *Honk*, 29 August 1915, quoted in David Kent *From Trench and Troopship: the Experience of the Australian Imperial Force 1914-1919* Hale and Iremonger, Alexandria NSW, 1999, p. 152.

The home front also displayed a fascination with the new language of war, illustrated in the many articles published in Australian newspapers through the war years. A number of articles that provided glossaries and guides to soldiers' slang served to interpret the world of the soldiers for those at home, as well as perhaps comforting those at home that the gulf between them and their soldier was not impossible to bridge. (The Appendix to this paper is a page from a manuscript example.)

While slang was the subject of ongoing debate as to its propriety – slang often being condemned for the way it corrupted the language, and the corruption of morals and manners that was believed to follow – the war, by linking slang with the soldier, a figure to be celebrated and honoured, helped to give slang some greater acceptability, if not respectability. (We can observe the popularity of CJ Dennis's *The Sentimental Bloke* during the war.) One military chaplain, addressing a public gathering to raise funds for the Australian Comforts Fund, commented that 'the Australian had won for himself the right to use as much slang as he liked'.



CJ Dennis, c. 1910 ([Flickr Commons/State Library of NSW](#))

Slang perhaps also even had some international, cosmopolitan allure for those at home, as well as the soldier. The *Singleton Argus* argued that the war was going to require the updating of the 'Slang Dictionary': 'After the visit of our lads in khaki to England there is no manner of doubt that the vernacular of the home people will be in large measure extended, and we out here in Australia will be able to profit by many florid and rare figure of speech culled from Egypt, Britain, and France, to say nothing of Canadian and Indian specimens.'¹⁰

Communication and the sounds of language

Language could be both a barrier and a means of communication. The ability or inability to communicate framed Australian soldiers' encounters with others during war. Barriers of communication were often the source of many humorous anecdotes in soldier periodicals. For example:

Polite Frenchman: "*Bon soir, monsieur!*"

Aussie (misunderstanding): "Bonza war, be blowed! It's the worst blanky war I've ever been to."

For the most part, communication across language barriers was only ever partial.

For many Australian soldiers, travelling overseas was an exciting adventure. The strangeness of the countries they visited was often marked by the sounds of foreign languages, and the comfort offered by travelling back to England was sometimes expressed through a mention of the pleasure of hearing English spoken.

¹⁰ *Singleton Argus*, 16 September 1916, p. 4.

Australian soldiers, when first arriving in Egypt, found the country confronting on many levels, suffering what we would today call 'culture shock', and often expressing racist views of the local population. Their foreignness was underpinned by their inability to speak English. By necessity, Australian soldiers picked up a few words of Arabic. Words like 'imshi' (yes), 'bukra' (from Arabic 'bukrah', tomorrow), 'mafeesh' (finished) and 'feloosh' (from Arabic 'filus', money) suggests the nature of the basic communication between soldiers and Egyptian locals and perhaps indicative of the nature of their transactions.

Egyptians also picked up a few English terms, something a number of soldiers noticed. For example, when John Treloar went to see the Sphinx, he noted in his diary that 'We were followed by any number of guides, who were beginning to pick up quite a lot of Australian slang, polite – and otherwise'.¹¹ Another soldier noted that the local Arab population were 'picking up slang by the mouthful', and went on to describe the 'Australian Tommies ... laughing and joking with the Arabs'.¹²



Learning the language with the miller's daughter, British Western Front, France c. 1918
([Flickr Commons/National Library of Scotland](#))

There were some soldiers who sought to properly learn languages in order to communicate, as well as further their personal skills. Albert Coates, already mentioned, wanted to learn Arabic while in Egypt not just to improve his range of languages, but also because he believed that 'Arabic is very useful for conversing with the natives ... and they have a great deal more respect for one who speaks a little of their own tongue'.¹³

In some areas of Cairo, it was French that soldiers heard. TE Drane, after noting the strangeness of Cairo in his diary, talked about visiting a French establishment and

¹¹ Treloar, *Anzac Diary*, 16 February 1915, p. 94

¹² *Warwick Examiner and Times* 10 March 1915, p. 7.

¹³ Diary entry, 19 October 1915, Albert E. Coates *The Volunteer: the Diaries and Letters of A.E. Coates No. 23 – 7th Battalion, 1st AIF, First World War 1914-18*, W. Graphics, Burwood Vic, 1995, p. 83.

seeing women and men drinking wine, 'and all speaking French, just like a lot of monkeys in a zoo. I told me pal I was going to learn the French then I could understand their lingo.'¹⁴

The learning of languages occurred in a variety of ways, mostly through picking up the odd word or phrase, presumably often from other soldiers as much as the local population. Phrasebooks and dictionaries often were noted as forming part of soldiers' reading. For some, language was an important part of an education they desired. Albert Coates, for example, was very interested in pursuing self-improvement and education even while serving, took a passionate interest in languages. While in Egypt, he continued the study of French that he had begun while in Australia, and started learning some Arabic. Later, in France, he studied and read both French and German. This increased his opportunities for reading also. (Coates would later be transferred to the Intelligence section and be involved in interrogating German prisoners, suggesting the value of soldiers with language skills.)

And soldiers sometimes attended language classes. Reg Telfer, for example, attended French classes at the YMCA in 1917, as did Edward L. Moore. Prisoners of war took an interest in learning languages: Private CR Armstrong, in requesting items from the Red Cross, asked for French, German, and Russian dictionaries, saying that 'I think the present time will be best to learn', and Private JT Wright requested a German grammar and dictionary so that he could improve his German – perhaps enabling him to better negotiate his captivity.¹⁵

Being in France brought out mixed responses in soldiers. Some found it frustrating to find it so difficult to communicate with French civilians, although views on the French were generally more favourable than on Egyptians. Words from the French incorporated into the Anglophone armies' vocabulary included 'fini', 'napoo', 'san fairy ann', 'toot sweet', and other corruptions of French words and expressions which, like with Arabic, reflected basic communication between soldiers and civilians.

When soldiers took leave in Paris, they could find themselves perplexed by the problems of not understanding the language. Philip Harris, former journalist, soldier, and editor of the trench periodical *Aussie*, noted stopping to ask directions from a French local while on leave in Paris. 'Next instant I was overwhelmed by an irresistible deluge of language. I understand a little French, but this lingual Vesuvius was too much for me. The rapidity with which the language came out of the hole in that policeman's face was astounding.'¹⁶ In communicating with civilians, language was often most useful for soldiers in the context of ordering food and drink, and of course for impressing women.

On the Western Front, the sounds of languages suggested diverse experiences. Serving alongside soldiers from many different parts of the Empire meant that hearing other languages could suggest something of the cosmopolitanism of the experience. One Australian soldier noted what he described as a 'Mohammedan native' observing

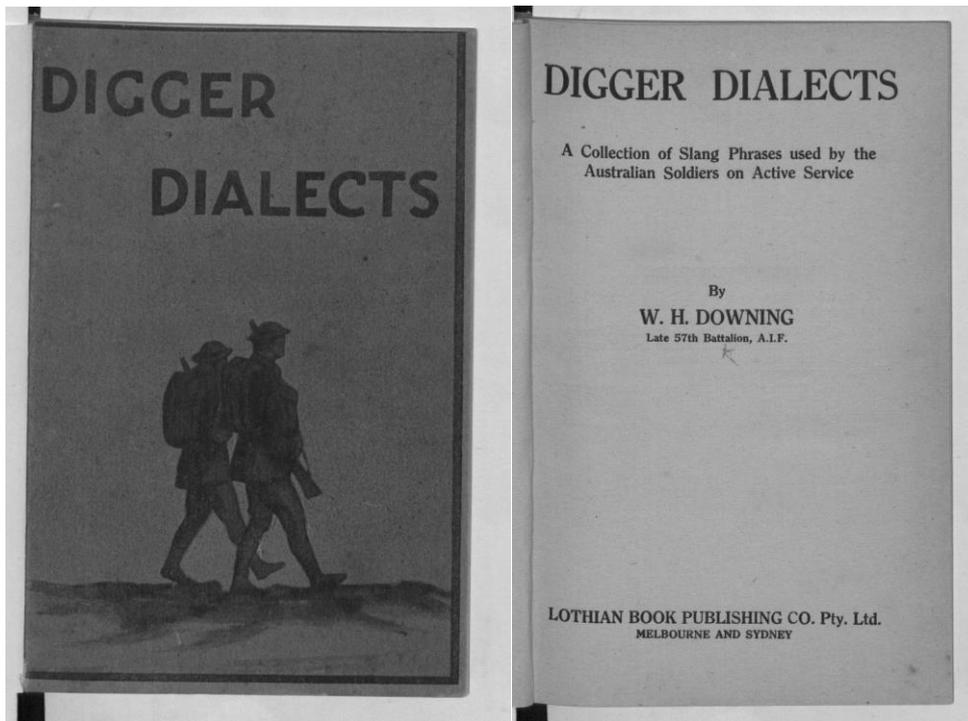
¹⁴ 15 December 1914, *Complete Anzac Gallipoli War Diary* – by T.E. Drane [available online].

¹⁵ See my discussion of education and reading in POW camps in A. Laugesen, *Boredom is the Enemy: the Intellectual and Imaginative Lives of Australian Soldiers in the Great War and Beyond* (Ashgate, 2012).

¹⁶ *Aussie*, 18 January 1918, p. 14.

Ramadan, and making 'the air noisy with their prayers and recitations from the Koran'.¹⁷

The language of the enemy heard on the front could sometimes shock. One soldier, Jim McConnell, described going out into no man's land in the middle of the night: 'We all got the fright of our lives when we heard a Fritz sing out and yabber something to his mates'.¹⁸ We can also note the negative views on German languages expressed in newspapers of the time, as well as the push to make it an offence to speak German in public.



WH Downing, *Digger Dialects* (1919) ([British Library](#))

When going to England, soldiers often expressed their relief at finally being in an English-speaking country. Alfred Robert Morison Stewart, for example, wrote in his diary in August 1916: 'It is indeed a treat to be back to real civilization, seeing everybody English, instead of foreigners'.¹⁹ Stanley Thomas Tuck, after receiving a wound that sent him to England, wrote in his diary that England 'looks great, clean, tidy, and sweet smelling, and a Christian language. It's wonderful to hear a civvy speak intelligibly'.²⁰ Another soldier noted when going on leave in England in 1916 that after spending thirteen months in foreign countries 'to see English on the stations & hear it spoken ... was next best to going

¹⁷ Diary entry 16 August 1915, *Letters from a Young Queenslander* (Third Edition) Watson, Ferguson and Co, Brisbane, 1916, p. 99.

¹⁸ 10 February 1918, Dorothy Gilding (ed.) *Letters from the Front*, Horizon Publishing Group, Sydney, 2012 p. 109

¹⁹ 12 August 1916, Margaret Wilmington, *Alfred Robert Morison Stewart: Diaries of an Unsung Hero*, Self-published, 1995, p. 141.

²⁰ Diary entry 9 September 1918, Gertrude Kirby (ed.) *The War Diaries of Stanley Thomas Tuck 1917 and 1918* Self-published.

home'.²¹ And Archie Barwick, when back in England in 1917, similarly saw it as a relief to not just be away from the torn and battered landscapes of France but also 'to be among people who speak your own language'.²²

Interpreters and language intermediaries played an important role, but one that has yet to be explicitly explored by scholars (although scholars such as Aaron Pegram have touched on this in their work). At Gallipoli, Charles Bean made occasional mentions of the role of interpreters in his diaries. Interpreters were used to communicate with, and interrogate Turkish prisoners. While the military made use of interpreters, civilian interpreters also had their uses. Arthur James Russell Davison, who was on Paris leave in February 1918, noted that a French girl was used to interpret the musical and operas he attended. 'At the theatres we always had an interpreter', he wrote, 'and she, did I say she, interpreted most of the shows for us'.²³

Commemoration

Language has played a role in commemoration. Many words have come to be loaded with connotations about war, including of course 'Anzac', 'digger', etc. Ross Wilson has argued in the British context that words can be seen as part of a cultural heritage of the war in Britain (he cites examples such as 'trenches', 'no man's land', etc.). He calls this war discourse 'the ethereal legacy of the Great War'.²⁴ Undoubtedly, some Australian terms from the war continue to resonate – 'Anzac' and 'digger' perhaps being the most powerful of these.

Language undoubtedly generated many associations and emotions for those who experienced the war, and perhaps something of the 'postmemory' of war adhered to some of the terms. One writer in 1922 suggested this ongoing resonance: 'Fragments of war slang may thus outlive the generation of its makers, carrying into the world of the future a suggestion of naïve humour and the vague reminder of old, unhappy, far-off things'.²⁵

Dictionaries and glossaries of slang also became a means of historical remembrance. Australia produced one of the first post-war dictionaries of soldier slang: WH Downing's *Digger Dialects*.²⁶ Downing was solicited to compile the glossary of slang by Melbourne publisher, Lothian, whom he had approached to publish his autobiographical account of the war that would later appear as *To the Last Ridge*. Rapidly produced in October 1919 and published in December, the book received a great deal of media attention. According to the *Bayonet*, who reviewed the volume in January 1920, the dictionary and its words was likely to 'refresh the memories of any of the Diggers who, having settled down to the humdrum methods of civilian life, may be forgetting some of the expressive

²¹ 18 June 1916, Daphne Elliott (ed.) *Arthur James Russell Davison: From Private to Captain in the 17th Battalion 1915-1918* DPA Publishing, Adelaide, 2013, p. 99.

²² 12 May, Archie Barwick, *In Great Spirits: the WWI Diary of Archie Barwick*, HarperCollins, Sydney, 2013, p. 260

²³ 25 February 1918, Daphne Elliott (ed.) *Arthur James Russell Davison: From Private to Captain in the 17th Battalion 1915-1918* DPA Publishing, Adelaide, 2013, p. 219.

²⁴ Ross J. Wilson *Cultural Heritage of the Great War in Britain*, Ashgate, Farnham, 2013, p. 54.

²⁵ *Adelaide Register*, 21 February 1922, p. 4.

²⁶ Reissued in 1990 and edited by W.S. Ramson and J.M. Arthur.

phrases of their soldiering days'.²⁷ For soldiers, such glossaries served as a reminder of the war, and the language therein perhaps revived at reunions of returned servicemen. Language deserves the more sustained attention of historians of war. I hope my paper suggests some of the varied ways in which we can approach the topic.

Dr Amanda Laugesen is a historian, lexicographer, and Director of the Australian National Dictionary Centre. Her publications include Diggerspeak: the Language of Australians at War (2005) and Boredom is the Enemy: the Intellectual and Imaginative Journeys of Australian Soldiers in the Great War and Beyond (2012). She has a book forthcoming in November 2014 entitled Furphies and Whizzbangs: Anzac Slang from the Great War.

²⁷ Review from the *Bayonet*, January 1920 in Lothian Papers, State Library of Victoria, MS 6026, Box 12, Folder 6B.

ANNIE. — "Annie from Asia", a ^{Turkish} gun emplaced on the Asiatic side of the Dardanelles which used to bombard the British lines at Cape Helles in 1915.

BEACHY. (or Beachy Bill) The Turkish guns emplaced in the Olive Grove [Yallipoli] which caused ~~most~~ ^{considerable} casualties at Anzac, mainly on the beaches.

N.B.G. No bloody good.

ALLY SLOPERS (CAVALRY). The Heavy Horse Corps

POMPEY. The nickname given to Brig Gen. Elliott of the 15th AIF [probably derived from "Pompey" Elliott, the well known captain of the Carlton (Vic) Football Club].

SQUARE PUSHING. see TRACKING SQUARE.

MALEESH Arabic term much used by the Light Horse & Troop in Egypt, in the same way as the Troop in France adopted. SAN-FAIRY-AN.

NOBBY Nickname usually given to men named Clarke. [~~is~~ of naval origin]

MADAMOISELLE FROM ARMENTIERES The beginning of a ribald song much sung in France.

APRES LA GUERRE. The reply usually given to embarrassing questions (especially from French mademoiselles); or the beginning of a soldier's song.