

# 'Biyal Biyal': the Sydney Language

For all that is known, the Aboriginal people of Sydney did not have a name for their language or even for themselves as a distinct group. They used the word **yura** (transcribed by First Fleet recorders as 'eora') to mean 'people', and the only people around apart from the Europeans were they themselves. They had distinct words for 'man' (**mula**, possibly **mala** [transcribed as 'mulla'] and 'woman' (**dyin** [transcribed variously as 'gin', 'din' and similar]). R.H. Mathews, a professional surveyor but also an ethnologist and prolific writer on Australian Aboriginal languages at the turn of the twentieth century, used the name **Dharruk** for the people of the Sydney Basin in a paper on the Thurrawal Language, the last six pages of which, headed 'The Dharruk Language', included a word list of about 276 words together with 48 other words or expressions included in the text.

While 'Dharug' (variously spelt) is claimed by some to mean 'yam', a search of the records for the Sydney region and southwards for words resembling the sound of the word 'darug' offered no confirmation of this, as the fourth column in the table below shows:

Australian	respelt	English	EngJSM	source & date
"dhooreegoong"	Durigung	"between"	between	Mathews GGA PAPS [147:8] [Gga] [1901]
"dhoorook"	durug	"female identifier"	female identifier	Mathews GGA PAPS [142:27] [Gga][1901]
"Dhoo'-re-ga"	duri-ga	"Grow"	grow I	Mathews DGA 1901 [72:25] [DGA] [1901]
"Troo-gad-dill"	daruga-dil	"Pacific Gull\"Native name \ "Troo-gad-dill\""	Gull Pacific	Painters [:12343:] [BB] [c.1788-95]
"Der-ro-gang"	diru-gang	"\"Blue-cheeked Bee Eater\", native name \"Der-ro-gang .\""	Honeyeater Blue-faced	Painters [:12173:] [BB] [c.1788-95]
"Tu-ru-gā"	duruga	"A star falling"	meteor	Collins 1 [1:507.1:10] [BB] [1798]
"thoó-ree gin'-nee"	duri-gini	"Indeed, it is true! (my word! it is true!) "	middle -for	M&E: GGA 1900 [272:5] [Gga] [1900]
"Dhur'-ree-ga"	Dariga	"Sleep"	sleep	Mathews DGA 1901 [72:5] [DGA] [1901]
"Doo-ra-gy-a"	dura-ga-ya	"To spit"	spit	King in Hunter [408.2:11] [BB] [1792]
"dhuraga"	Dura-ga	"A splinter"	splinter	Mathews DG 1901 [158.2:10] [DG] [1901]
"tarake"	dara-gi	"to stand"	stand	Bowman: Camden [20:105] [DG] [1835]
"Dhar'-ree-ga"	dari-ga	"Stand"	stand I	Mathews DGA 1901 [73.1:2] [DGA] [1901]
"turagun"	daragang	"creek"	stream	AL&T (Ridley) Mrs Malone [DWL] [262:37] [Tw] [1878]
"Terra-guthee"	dara-ga-Di	"Thighs"	thigh	Cunningham, Allan [1:9] [DG] [c.1825]
"dooroogai"	durugayi	"Three"	three	Curr 3 #194 Dawsey [3:422.2:6] [Drgn] [1887]
"Dharrook"	Darug	"... The marking of the trees is called Dharrook. ..."	tree marking	Mathews: 8006/3/8-Nbk 3 [24:] []
"Dar-ra-gal-lie"	daRa-gali	"Fore-finger"	xxx finger	Collins 1 [1:508.2:27] [BB] 1798]

A check of words sounding like 'darug' northwards of Sydney to the Queensland border also produced nothing resembling yam (bone, dead, dive, dog, ear, goanna, grow, handle, palm, pierce, punish, shark, splinter, sun, three, vein, woman and some others).

Mathews did not explain in the section referred to above where he had got the name 'Dharruk' from, and the writer is unaware of anywhere else where he might have done so.

Noted language scholar R.M.W. Dixon, on the subject of language names, in 1980 wrote as follows:

By far the most frequent linguistic form to be used as the basis for a language name in Australia is that meaning 'no'. From **Wira + dhuri** 'no + HAVING' in Central New South Wales to **Biyay + girri** 'no + HAVING' in north-east Queensland there are names that involve the form for 'no' and the comitative [-having] suffix. Over a considerable area in northern Victoria and southern New South Wales the form for 'no' is simply reduplicated to make the language name — **Yota-Yota, Yitha-Yitha, Wemba-Wemba**, among others.

It was with this awareness of how Aboriginal language names commonly come about that the writer, Jeremy Steele, and colleague Dr Keith Vincent Smith, came up with the name **Biyal Biyal** for the Sydney language (abbreviated in the table above as 'BB') as a way of referring to the language more picturesquely. In the Sydney language the word for 'no' is **biyal**. None of the recorders of the language (Dawes, Collins, Tench, Southwell and one or two others) specifically identified a '-having' suffix, although some words that were recorded suggest it might have been **-arayi**, similar to -having in *Wiradhuri* and *Gamilarayi* (Kamilaroi) both being NSW inland languages not all that far away. While to suggest obscure-looking 'biyalarayi' as a name for the Sydney language might have seemed a leap too far, the reduplication of **biyal** was a less startling option, and a more appealing one given the existence of a documented use of such doubling in the case of the near language *Wodi Wodi* in the neighbourhood of Wollongong. So it was that *Biyal Biyal* was settled upon as a presumptive name for the Sydney language.

Steele and Smith first met on 8 October 1999 when they both attended 'Allowan', a public seminar on the Sydney Language in Sydney. Thereafter they worked in parallel and sometimes together, Smith concentrating on history and historical figures in the Sydney Aboriginal story mostly after the European upheaval of 1788, and Steele on language, first 'Biyal Biyal' then Aboriginal languages more broadly.

Neither is sure to whom the devising of the name can be fairly attributed. It began to be used by them both from about 2001. Steele prepared for a workshop at Macquarie University in July that year, in the title of which (**bayabanyi Biyal-Biyal yaguna**: we will all speak BB today) the name *Biyal Biyal* occurs.

Whichever of them it was, it was definitely Smith who, in an email dated 25 March 2002 and headed *Biyal Biyal?*, revealed his discovery that the name he and Steele had come up with was not so outrageous after all: Archibald Meston had been there before them.

Meston (1851–1924) is described in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* as a journalist, civil servant and explorer, but from his mid-thirties he began to take an increasing interest in Aboriginal affairs, including ethnology and language. So it was that he wrote two articles of particular interest to the matter at hand. In these he referred to the Sydney language by the terms 'beealba' and even the very same 'Beeal Beeal', and it may be inferred from his writings that he was not himself inventing the terms but recording existing names for the Sydney language, perhaps of long standing, that he had come upon in his experiences or research. Here are the relevant extracts:

**bayabanyi**  
**Biyal-Biyal**  
**yaguna**

Sydney language

Workshop at the Warawara Centre  
Macquarie University  
Wednesday 25 July 2001

Display materials prepared by Jeremy Steele

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# 'ABORIGINAL NAMES.'

(BY A. MESTON.)

The meanings of aboriginal names recently given by me to the "Herald" have roused a lot of inquiries from correspondents anxious

to know the correct translation of Borenore, Wagga, Woy-Woy, Boonah, Murrumbidgee, Cooralbyn, Arakoon, Yarra-hapinni, Yarra-bandinni, Baramul, Woronora, and Kiama.

First comes A. J. Cantrill, of Cambridge, with "Borenore," which he spells correctly as "Bora-nora," literally the "Bora Rock" or a rock overlooking an old Bora round, nora being a rock in that dialect and also in the "Beeal-Beeal" dialect of Botany Bay. Wagga,

Wahga, Warr, and Wahwa, were all names of the crow, frequently duplicated as Wagga Wagga, just as the spurwing plover was "dibbin-dibbin," the redbill was "kibbing-kibbing" the scrub bird (the pitta) was "derrim-derrim" and at the Pascoe River the seagull was "doogo-doogo."

Sydney Morning Herald, Wednesday, October 19, 1921, p.11.

Also appeared in The Wingham Chronicle and Manning River Observer, Friday, November 11, 1921, p 8.

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(BY A. MESTON.)

The same poetic license induced the poet to arm our aboriginals with "the nulla, the sling, and the spear," though the sling was unknown in Australia, the nearest being that of the expert aboriginal slingers of Noumea, recalling the famous ancient Balearic Island slingers in the army of Alexander the Macedonian Conqueror. Narrabeen and Deewee-deewee were the aboriginal names of the well-known lakes near Manly. "Narrabeen" was the swan (Cygnus atratus) and "deewee-deewee" was a widely spread name of the little grebe (Podiceps Minor), well known in England and here also as the "dabchick." On my first visit to the Narrabeen Lakes in 1872, they were covered with swans and dabchicks. Five aboriginals who were camped there called the honeysuckle (the "wallum") "gnarrabeen," but they were not speaking the old Beeahlba dialect of the Sydney blacks. They knew more Kamilroi, and the Awaba (Ahwabah) of Port Macquarie.

Sydney Morning Herald, 9 November 1921, p.16

[Last 6 lines]

\* Meston meant Lake Macquarie.

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