

Verbing *Meahcci*: no beginning, no end¹

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Abstract

This paper is about translating and mistranslating a Sámi landscape word. That word is *meahcci*. In what follows we start by exploring the logic of *meahcci*, contrast this with Norwegian land practices, *utmark* the term which is usually used to (mis)translate it into Norwegian, or *villmark* (wilderness) and such English language terms as wilderness. We show how *meahcci* has nothing to do with agricultural logics, ideas of the wild, or cartographic spaces. Rather *meahccit* ('*meahccis*' in the plural) are practical places, uncertain but productive social relations with lively and morally sensible human and non-human beings in which there is no division between nature (Norwegian *natur*) and culture (*kultur*). *Meahccit* are taskscapes (Ingold) or locations-times-tasks. Then we consider the relatively verb-or action-oriented character of the (North) Sámi language, and show that Sámi land practices and the patterns of words weaving through these enact contextual, processual, and radically relational versions of space, time, interaction, subjectivities, objectivities, and the beings that live in the world. We also touch on the material character of this difference – the location of words and forms of knowing. We conclude by reflecting on what Sámi *meahcci* practices suggest for a hegemonic English-language social science that is also struggling to articulate situated and radically relational ways of knowing.

Starting

'I am a Sámi who has done all sorts of Sámi work and I know all about Sámi conditions. I have come to understand that the Swedish government wants to help us as much as it can, but they don't get things right regarding our lives and conditions, because no Sámi can explain to them exactly how things are. And this is the reason: when a Sámi becomes closed up in a room, then he does not understand much of anything, because he cannot put his nose to the wind. His thoughts don't flow because there are walls and his mind is closed in. And it is also not good at all for him to live in dense forest when the air is warm. But when a Sámi is on the high mountains, then he has quite a clear mind. And if there were a meeting place on some high mountain, then a Sámi could make his own affairs quite plain.'

Johan Turi, *Muitalus sámiid birra, An Account of the Sami* (Turi 2012 [1910])

'Today, negotiations with *meahcci* are largely superseded by negotiations about *meahcci* ...'
(Schanche 2002, 169, our translation)

This paper is about translating and mistranslating a Sámi landscape word. That word is *meahcci*.

Sámi people live in the subarctic north of Scandinavia, in Sápmi. In the past they have hunted, gathered, fished, and herded reindeer, and the landscape, *meahcci*, has been central to their lives. At the same time for at least three hundred years they have been marginalised by sometimes brutal and racist forms of colonialism, whilst Sámi languages, practices and relations to the land have been

squeezed.² As a part of this the word *meahcci* has been readily mistranslated and its practices have been ignored because they fit poorly with those of the colonising nation states and their languages. (They fit equally poorly with the English language.) In what follows we start by exploring the logic of *meahcci*, and contrast this with Norwegian land practices and terms. Then we consider the relatively verb-or action-oriented character of the (North) Sámi language, and show that Sámi land practices and the patterns of words weaving through these enact contextual, processual, and radically relational versions of space, time, interaction, subjectivities, objectivities, and the beings that live in the world. We also touch on the material character of this difference – the location of words and forms of knowing. We conclude by reflecting on what Sámi *meahcci* practices suggest for a hegemonic English-language social science that is also struggling to articulate situated and radically relational ways of knowing.

Some cautions before we start. First, *meahcci* practices are highly variable, and there is no single, unchanging or essential ‘Sámi culture’. The latter is diverse, has changed throughout history, and very substantially with the arrival of motorised transport and integration into market economies.³ Second, since the relation between Sámi and their colonisers is one of long-term reciprocal (albeit asymmetrical) entanglement, any attempt to divide these is an analytical and political convenience rather than a binary essentialism.⁴ Third, as a consequence of this colonial history, many Sámi do not speak the language, and virtually all of those who do are bilingual. How this subordination is shaping the Sámi language is a matter for debate, but it is probably eroding at least some of the ways in which it is distinctive (Helander and Kailo 1998,66). Fourth, as an aspect of these changes, many Sámi have not grown up with *meahcci* practices, and would not, for instance, recognise the practices or vocabularies of reindeer herders.⁵ And fifth, though similar dynamics might be detailed for Sweden, Finland, and Russia, here we focus on primarily on Norway and on the largest and the strongest of the remaining Sámi languages, North Sámi.⁶

Meahcit as taskscapes

Away from the coast and on the plateau much of Norwegian Sápmi is sub-arctic tundra with dwarf birch and willow, marshes with rushes, cotton-grass and cloudberries, and low hills with heather, lingonberries and bilberries. There are rivers and lakes with fish including salmon, arctic char and powan. And there are rocky outcrops, together with wildlife including summertime mosquitoes and midges, crows, magpies and ptarmigan, ducks and geese, hares, reindeer, elk and wolverines. For at least six months of the year it is far below freezing (temperatures of -30°C are not uncommon) while in summer there may also be violent storms. Potentially dangerous for those who do not understand and respect it, this is a landscape that indeed deserves and receives respect. At the same time, since

² See, for instance, Todal (1998), Oskal (2001), (Schanche 2002), Minde (2003), Lantto and Mörkenstam (2008), Kraft (2010), Lantto (2010) and Kent (2014, Chapter 1).

³ For at least a thousand years there has been a distinction between those who live inland, and coastal or ‘sea Sámi’ (Helander 1999), and many Sámi now live in urban environments, in often far from Sápmi.

⁴ For further discussion see Law and Joks (2019, 6-7). We thank Stein Roar Mathisen (private communication) for reminding us that ‘Sámi’ understandings of enchanted nature are widely shared in Norwegian folklore.

⁵ Sara (2009, 158). We touch on briefly on some of these terms below. But see also, for instance, Meløe’s (1988,398) comment on the term *jassa*.

⁶ This is spoken by around 20,000 people (Valijävri and Kahn 2017,4), though estimates vary.

prehistory it has also been a potentially richly rewarding set of relations, a place of sustenance and of safety for Sámi people. To understand this, we need to start by saying that *meahcci* has been and remains *collection of practical places and relations*. To use Tim Ingold's felicitous term, it is a set of *tasksapes*.⁷ Indeed it might be better to talk of '*meahccis*' in the plural (*meahcit*), locations where people undertake different tasks that often continue to form an important part of their livelihoods such as fishing, berry picking, hunting, reindeer herding, gathering firewood, mushrooms or sedge.

A number of points arise. The first is that though they might look so to outsiders, *meahcit* ('*meahccis*') are *not* wilderness (Norwegian *villmark*). (Østmo and Law 2018). As we mentioned above, they may be a part of home and a place of safety (Schanche 2002, 156)⁸. It is also a set of potentially *productive relations*. And crucially, those relations weave together what English language common sense distinguishes as nature and culture (Norwegian *natur* and *kultur*). Our first point, then, is that *meahcci* effortlessly avoids this much-questioned binary without the need for counter-intuitive conceptual footwork.

A second point: there are multiple *meahcit* (*meahccis*) because Sámi people practise different *productive activities* in different places and at different times. This means that *meahcit* are *specific*. This specificity and its multiplication is reflected in the language. *Muorrameahcci* is where you collect firewood, *luomemeahcci* is where you go cloudberry picking, and *guollemeahcci* is where there is a fishing lake – though none of these *meahcit* are fixed places, for where you go always depends on circumstances too. Unsurprisingly, there are also many specialist task-related terms. So *rođut* is an area with woodland and plants close to a river where reindeer may graze early in the winter before there is too much snow,⁹ And *jassa* describes an appropriately sized and sited patch of snow that lasts through the summer and is large enough to cool the air and partially protect reindeer against insect attack (Meløe (1988)). But this time-space specificity multiplies itself further because different families (or reindeer herding collectives, *siida* (Sara 2009, 2011)) undertake these tasks in different locations and it would be wrong for me to pick cloudberries where your family go to do this (Schanche 2002, 166). Writing about this in English is awkward because if we use terms such as 'locations' (as we just have) geography tends to displace activity. But this is not what happens in Sámi because *meahcit* are task-related, shifting according to season and weather, and have little to do with cartographic space (maps are empty of experience), or indeed with calendar time. Instead the relevant conceptual units are better imagined as *location-time-tasks* – combinations of actions, encounters and located potential resources. In short, the practices of *meahcci* bypass not only the nature/culture binaries of Norwegian or English, but also the abstractions that go both with clock time and two- or three-dimensional cartographic conceptions of the spatial (Mazzullo and Ingold 2008).

Three. They are also about *unfolding encounters* with other more or less powerful actors (Ingold 1993, Mazzullo and Ingold 2008) including people, animals, birds and fish, what outsiders might

⁷ For this in the context of his dwelling perspective see Ingold (1993). For an account of Sámi movement, encounters, and understandings of landscape see Mazzullo and Ingold (2008).

⁸ If strangers appear, Sámi children may be told to go and hide in *meahcci* – though this was more common in the past.

⁹ Mikkel Nils Sara, personal communication.

think of as natural phenomena such as snowstorms or mountains, lakes or rivers, and invisible entities such as ‘sacred places’ or visible but ‘occult’ phenomena including messenger birds, or visions. Crucially, those encounters are also *unpredictable*. ‘The term «stability» is a foreign word in our language’ writes reindeer herder Johan Mathis Turi (Oskal 2008,24). As Sámi people put it, ‘*jahki ii leat jagi viellja*’, ‘one year is not the next year’s brother’, which means that *meahcci* practices cannot be rigidly planned or controlled (Schanche 2002, 168, Sara 2009,172). How circumstances will unfold can be anticipated, in part on the basis of long-term observation and experience growing out of practice, and such educated and contexted observation is crucial to survival. But the taskscapes of *meahcci* demand flexibility. If the water level in the river is right and this combines with other appropriate circumstances, then it is possible to fish salmon. If it is not then there is no point (Joks and Law 2017). The implication, once again, is that *meahcci* generate realities in which the order and the character and location of contingent encounters come first.¹⁰

Four. As we have seen, *meahcci* are constituted in encounters with *lively and powerful beings*. Sámi people distinguish between *luondu*, beings that breathe such as animals, and those that do not, such as lakes (*jávri*), but many of both are powerful.¹¹ If the snow is too icy, if the lake does not want to give fish, if a *sieidi* (a ‘sacred place’) is offended, then you cannot successfully hunt, graze your reindeer or catch fish. However, whether or not they breathe, these actors are often *morally-sensible beings*. The Sámi word *bivdit* catches this: it both means to ask or request, *and* to hunt, snare, or fish. You ask lakes or animals before you fish or hunt, and some animals – for instance wolves or bears – also have the power to divine your thoughts and intentions, so you may also need to disguise your thoughts¹². Similarly, the beings in *meahcci* demand and deserve *respect*. Mikkel Nils Sara (2009, 173), citing Nils Oskal, notes that to think of a reindeer ‘as a means for our own intentions and not as a means with its own dignity’ is a dangerous insult, and Oskal himself observes (Oskal 2000, 176) that fishing luck relates in part to how a lake and its fish are treated. So after fishing you should bless a lake even if you caught nothing, and you return the bones of any fish you have eaten to a nearby birch tree (Østmo and Law 2018). In short, your actions, your intentions and your thoughts have moral and practical consequences. As Schanche puts it, you negotiate *with*, not *about*, *meahcci* (see the second citation at the head of this article), so *meahcci* practices have nothing to do with interactions with insensate objects in a morally neutral empirical world. Rather, they participate in a world in which what unfolds is intended – or not.¹³ If we borrow Max Weber’s terminology, these are practices of enchantment (*Entzauberung*) (Weber 1978) that enact what we might think of as *extended sociality*.

¹⁰ For the implications of this for salmon fishing in the context of state conservation policy which works with calendar time and cartographic location and therefore squeezes traditional net fishing, see Joks (2017).

¹¹ *Luondu* is often used to (mis)translate the Norwegian word *natur* (nature) with serious practical and political consequences.

¹² See Sara (2009, 173). The first Sámi author, Johan Turi, who was a wolf hunter, details the complex strategies needed to disguise intentions on the part of the hunter. See Turi (2012 [1910], 99.) Note that some animals are able to disguise their own intentions.

¹³ See (Joks and Law 2017, 155). Or you may say that no catch was *intended*, and ‘*jávri addá dan maid addá*,’ ‘the lake gives what it gives.’ See (Østmo and Law 2018, 353, 354).

Mistranslating *Meahcci*

As we noted above, Sápmi is colonial. Over at least three centuries there has been settlement, and the imposition of state frontiers, laws, citizenship, national languages, forms of economic extraction, agriculture and religion (Minde 2003). There has been recent pushback, starting in the 1980s, with recognition of Sámi indigeneity and language, the creation of Sámi parliaments, and the return of state-owned land in part of north Norway to a body, the Finnmark Estate, with substantial Sámi representation (Johnsen, Benjaminsen, and Eira 2015, Broderstad 2014). But still the pressures unfold: roads, mining, offshore oil and gas extraction, fish farming, hydroelectric power, wind turbines, national parks, outdoor recreation, tourism and environmentalism, all are at work and squeezing *meahcci* practices.

In this context words become important. So, for instance, *meahcci* is habitually mistranslated as *utmark*. Like *meahcci*, this Norwegian term does not readily translate into English. Briefly, however, it is one half of a binary *innmark/utmark* division in which it is the uncultivated other of the farming that defines *innmark*, the unfenced area without permanent habitation beyond the fields of a farm where, for instance, cows may graze in summer.¹⁴ This agricultural logic is complemented by a second logic which Norwegians call *friluftsliv* – roughly ‘open-air life’. This indexes a set of imaginaries and practices central to Norwegian national and personal identity, for *utmark* is also where urban Norwegians practise *friluftsliv* by skiing, walking, climbing, camping, and seeking physical and spiritual renewal. Indeed, so important is *friluftsliv* that Norway has been criss-crossed for more than a century by much-used marked trails for walking and skiing (Ween and Abram 2012), and new trails are being marked in and through Sápmi. All of this was codified in a 2009 ‘right to roam’ *friluftsliv* law. So long as you do not harm the environment and you clear up after yourself, the law allows you to walk or ski, gather wild berries and mushrooms, camp and make fires in *utmark*.¹⁵ The word *villmark* (wilderness) is not in the text of the law but the logic of (a specifically Norwegian version of) wilderness is clear: there is that which is *cultivated*, and then there is that which is *wild* (the law mentions ‘wild berries’, ‘wild mushrooms’). The latter is potentially fragile and needs to be protected and conserved (Schanche 2002). So how does *utmark* relate to *meahcci*?

Two answers. On the one hand, it does not. ‘The Sámi term *meahcci* and the general meaning of this term are not identical to the definition of *utmark* in the *friluftsliv* law.’ (Sámediggi 2007, section 2, our translation from Norwegian). These words come from the Sámi parliament. On the other hand, they are (taken to be) the same: ‘... *meahcci* shall be understood as identical to *utmark* ...’¹⁶. These

¹⁴ This law counts as *innmark* farmyards, housing plots, cultivated land, meadows, and enclosed pastures. Smaller pieces of uncultivated land that lie within cultivated land or meadows or are fenced together with such areas, are also considered to be *innmark*. This law treats as *utmark* uncultivated land which, in line with the preceding paragraph, does not count at *innmark*.’ (Klima- og miljødepartementet [Norwegian Ministry of the Environment] 2009, paragraph 1a, our translation). For discussion of agricultural logic in another context see Nadasdy (2003)

¹⁵ (Klima- og miljødepartementet [Norwegian Ministry of the Environment] 2009, paragraphs 2 (walking and skiing), 5 (gathering), 9 (making fires) and 11 (leaving no traces behind).)

¹⁶ Klima- og miljødepartementet [Norwegian Ministry of the Environment] (2009, section 1a, our translation). The (advisory) Norwegian Sámi parliament writes, to the contrary, that ‘The Sámi term *meahcci* and the general meaning of this term are not identical to the definition of *utmark* in the *friluftsliv* law.’ (Sámediggi 2007, section 2, our translation).

are the words of the *friluftsliv* law from Norway's national parliament, the *Storting*, and since the Sámi parliament can only advise, this means that in Norwegian law *meahcci* and *utmark* are the same. Many have commented on this (Schanche 2002, Ween and Lien 2012), but as is obvious this is colonialism at work, an *imposed but performative mistranslation*. And we have said enough about the logic of *meahcit* above to see why. One, Sámi land practices *work* the land and have no notion of wilderness or a nature-culture distinction (Helander-Renvall 2010). Two, they don't imagine it as a bounded area, a cartographically delineated territory on a map, but rather as a series of circumstantial and practical task-related *meahcit* in the plural. And three, those *meahcit* involve encounters with lively, powerful and morally sensible beings. In all of these respects, *utmark* is alien to *meahcci*. It enacts landscape, space, time, human, non-human and extra-human relations very differently. It has quite different understandings of rights and wrongs or normativities. And it also enacts different versions of *what is to know*.¹⁷ So how are the latter reflected in language?

Knowing/knowledge language

The answer comes in several parts. First, in Sámi nouns are easily made out of verbs and *vice versa*. For instance, the verb *njeađgat* means 'snow blowing lightly on tracks' (Grenersen, Kemi, and Nilsen 2016, 1185) from which *njeađgan* (a noun) can be derived as a description of a particular form of snow. How to translate this? Modifying Nielsen (1962) (as cited in Grenersen) we suggest 'the wind blew a little, so that snow settled unevenly on tracks leaving them barely visible especially on the side from which the wind was blowing.' Second, Sámi nouns are often *relationally descriptive*. *Njeađgan* is a case in point, as is *muorrameahcci* which, as we saw above, is *meahcci* where firewood is collected. But proper names may also be descriptive. For instance, there have been avalanche skiing deaths on the mountain north of Tromsø called *Sorbmegáisá*, whose name aggregates *sorbmi* (accidental death) with *gáisá* (high mountain) (Grenersen, Kemi, and Nilsen 2016, 1191-2). Third, often in Sámi the emphasis is less on nouns and more on verbs and actions. The Sámi authors of this paper tease their British co-author by asking 'What is the wind doing in English if it is not blowing? Is it sitting in a tree?' (Østmo and Law 2018, 359). In Sámi it is grammatically possible to say '*biegga bieggá*' ('the wind [noun] is winding [gerund]') but this is self-evident and sounds strange. Indeed, often in talking of wind the noun *bieggá* is absent and instead you might, for instance, say '*eske iđđes biekkai*' ('this morning was blowing'). Fourth, this relational subtlety is also assisted by a series of noun cases including the locative (expressing physical relations or movement), the illative (direction towards, into), the comitative (accompanying) and the essive (a temporary or changing duration).¹⁸

¹⁷ The politics of this (mis)translation are colonial, deeply significant, and run through other major controversies in Sápmi including: how *meahcci* is codified into Norwegian law as usufruct rights; how national parks are established and maintained; how the Norwegian state seeks to protect the environment beyond those national parks; and how its policies for conserving salmon stocks are created. Ween and Lien (2012), Ween and Colombi (2013), Benjaminsen *et al.* (2015), Østmo and Law (2018) and Law and Joks (2017)

¹⁸ Examples: the illative '*mun manan meahccái*' means 'I am going to *meahcci*'; the locative '*mun lean meahcis*' means 'I am in *meahcci* somewhere' and '*mun lean muorremeahcis*' means 'I am in *meahcci* working with firewood', the comitative '*mun lean mánáiguin meahcis*' means 'I am together with the children in *meahcci*' (though this sounds rather odd); and the essive: '*dál lea diet guovlu meahccin fas šaddan*' means 'now [*dal*] that [*diet*] the area [*govlu*] has become [*šaddan*, with *lea*] *meahcci* [*meahccin*, essive] again [*fas*]'.

The Sámi language also reflects and reproduces processes and relations in other ways. Mikkel Nils Sara characterises reindeer herding as a *compromise* between the herder and his reindeer that benefits both (Sara 2009,160, 2011,148). Control is impossible (Sara 2009,161) so those relations depend on careful observation and communication between animal and human being. Sámi herders speak of *bohcco luondu* (initially mistranslatable as ‘the nature [*luondu*] of herded reindeer [*bohcco*]’) which, however:

‘... includes features such as reflexes, reactions to external stimuli, typical behaviour in relation to other reindeer, natural surroundings and seasons, behavioural characteristics of groups of animals, and, finally, imprinted or learned affiliation to specific landscapes.’ (Sara 2009,160)

The linguistic point is that *bohcco luondu* is *not* an attribute of an animal (‘the nature of reindeer’) or a group of animals, but points to an *unfolding and uncertain process* which includes the relations between herders, animals, and the interactions of the latter with changing aspects of the environment. Sara makes a similar point about the word *oaivil* (2009,148, 171). Reindeer have *oaivil* (most easily mistranslated as ‘opinions’) as they respond to changes in the environment and remembering where they have moved before. Herders read these changing ‘opinions’, in turn responding to them with their own. But this is a mistranslation. *Oaivil* comes from *oaivi* which means ‘head’, and herders are actually watching the heads of their reindeer:

‘Herders can predict the next move of the reindeer by watching what they are focused on and what they seem to sense. So by asking someone’s *oaivil* one would thus express it literally, not as *what do you mean*, but rather *where is your attention?* So *oaivil* in the context of reindeer herding means the beginning of a movement, intention, or proposed direction, and not, as in translation, to a permanent position or opinion one has formed.’ Sara (2011,148, italics in the original)

The mistranslation displaces the reader from relation, focus, unfolding and possible movement in favour of a more stable reality. To put it differently, it shifts emphasis from an interactive and fluid subjectivity to one that is more bounded (people or reindeer now have attributes called ‘opinions’). But something important is being lost here. So, for instance, the word *soabalašvuohta* means peaceful coexistence (Sara’s ‘compromise’) but in Sápmi this is a good rather than a second best. This is partly because it is often important in a context of continuing mutual dependence to sustain social relations of all kinds, and to avoid putting yourself in a position where you have to complain about the behaviour of others. Extended socialities go with soft subjectivities.¹⁹

Knowing/knowledge materials

Knowing to knowledge. Our argument is that while translation is possible (we are, after all, writing in English) it is easier to talk process and unfolding and relations and soft subjectivities in Sámi than in Norwegian or English. Gerunds to nouns and processes to objects, this is the shift in these

¹⁹ One consequence of this is that Sámi may avoid speaking for others, and/or speak indirectly and implicitly. This is a further source of colonial tension, for Norwegians sometimes misread silence as acquiescence.

mistranslations. And the same slippage is at work in the shift from *meahcci* to *utmark* or to terms such as ‘wilderness’ or ‘tundra’ (Ingold’s ‘taskscape’ qualifies as a valiant attempt to avoid this.) But the shift from knowing to knowledge is also reflected in the *material character* of knowing. As we saw earlier, if *meahcci* is mistranslated into Norwegian as *utmark* then this is in substantial part because while *meahcci* practices weave through the uncertain encounters of taskscapes, *utmark* practices belong to the law, to agriculture, to environmental protection, to recreation and to cartography. These, to be sure, are far from identical and the extent to which they differ from the logic of *meahcci* is not complete.²⁰ Thus *noun-knowledge* in these legal and scientific (etc) contexts is uncertain in practice – science and technology studies (STS) and anthropology tell us that formal knowledge systems are endlessly messy in practice (Law 2004). Nevertheless the imaginary is that ‘knowledge’ is something that can be abstracted from the circumstances in which it is produced, gathered in one place, manipulated and consolidated into an adequate description of the world (a body of law, a national cartographic survey, or a set of scientific findings and theories).

This distinction between knowing as process on the one hand, and knowledge as (aspiration to) material abstraction and consolidation on the other, has been rehearsed in many literatures. Literary theory and anthropology have described the move from orality to literacy with its shifts from story-telling and prosody to a visual space, particular kinds of reflexivity, virtual objects, and aspirations to completeness (Ong 1988, Rotman 2008). STS has explored the rise of virtual witnessing and technologies such as quantification which combine and manipulate scientific representations in locations far removed from the places where observations were made (Shapin and Schaffer 1985, Lynch and Woolgar 1990). And as we will briefly show below, documentary studies makes related arguments. Interestingly Johan Turi, the founder of Sámi literature and a wolf-hunter turned author, knew this perfectly well over a century ago. His 1910 publication, *Muitalus sámiid birra, An Account of the Sami* (Turi 2012 [1910]) makes just this argument. He opens his book (see the citation at the beginning of this article) by telling his reader that Sámi minds do not work well in rooms. But since that is what government minds do, Sámi people have no choice: they need to write about how they live (Grenersen, Kemi, and Nilsen 2016, 1193). He adds a pithy and possibly ironic one-sentence epistemological observation about the relation between truth and the material character of knowing²¹:

‘Herein [this book] are all sorts of stories, but it is not certain whether they are true, since they haven’t been written down before.’ (Turi 2012 [1910])

‘Written down.’ As Geir Grenersen, Kjell Kemi and Steinar Nilsen (2016, 1184ff) show, the material difference between contexted *knowing* and written *knowledge* is also visible in the Sámi language, and in what follows we gratefully follow their argument. Thus, Sámi has many loanwords, including the noun *dokuameanta*, document, from the Norwegian *dokument*.²² But there are other ways of talking that lead neither to loanwords nor paper and electronic texts. *Duođastit* (verb) means ‘to

²⁰ For discussion of the relations between Sámi agriculture and *meahcci* see Schanche (2002).

²¹ See also Gaski (2011,595)

²² There is also a verb *dokumenteret* (to document) and an abstract noun *dokumentašuvdna* (documentation).

testify, bear witness, confirm’ (Greneresen, Kemi, and Nilsen 2016, 1184ff).²³ Alongside this there is a verb, *vuohttit*, which means both ‘to find traces, to observe, to get to know’ (*ibid.*, 1185) and to ‘look for people’s attitudes and intentions when they act’ (*ibid.*, 1185). So:

‘if you have a quarrel about two different reindeer herds that intermingle you “look for traces” – *vuohttit* – in the terrain that prove your point. If you find these traces they can serve as a documentation – *duođastus* – of the intentions and attitudes of the owner of the neighbouring herd. To interpret and “read” traces, especially in snow and ice, is common knowledge among the herders.’ (Greneresen, Kemi, and Nilsen 2016,1185)

Their argument is that in indigenous contexts documents may not take the form of texts, but include ‘stories, songs, festivals, performances, dances and physical inscriptions in other materials than paper’ (Greneresen, Kemi, and Nilsen 2016,1186) including, for instance, physical inscriptions in the landscape as these are read by herders, or as they witness the movement of reindeer in a landscape in the process of communication and compromise that we have described above. So, though we cannot explore this in detail here, they are drawing our attention to the *material* character of the squeeze on Sámi practices and Sámi ways of knowing. For the difference between knowing and knowledge in Sápmi is that if landscapes count as texts or documents then they cannot be extracted from their taskscapes, taken to another location, gathered together and manipulated to generate overviews. Instead the processes that generate the possibility of knowing well depend on circumstances and cannot be transmuted into knowledge. Apprehension, communication, and the storying that goes with knowing cannot be hypostatised into separable representation. Gerunds cannot be transformed into nouns.

Ending

Meahcci is not an area on a map because *meahcit* in the plural are taskscapes. *Meahcit* are not mutually exclusive patches of land because they slip over and through one another. *Meahcit* are not *utmark* or empty wilderness because they are lived and worked. *Meahcit* are not extra-social because are composed in lively encounters and relations. Since the English language depends so heavily on nouns, we need to say that this is *land on other terms*. Perhaps we need to say that it is *living land*. Tim Ingold is not wrong. Sámi and other northern people enact space and time experientially. There is no overlay of abstraction until it arrives with colonisation. And the categories and the practices of Norwegian and English writing, together with the institutions within which these are embedded, are other to this extended and uncertain sociality. This generates a paradox. We write a text, and that text extracts material from different places, moves what it extracts and assembles it together. Institutionally it centres the practices of knowing. And materially it stabilises a depiction, and as a part of this it also helps to enact a reality relating to that depiction. To write in

²³ *Ibid.*, 1185, though here they are quoting Nielsen (1962). Again there are related words. So *duohta* is a noun which means sincerity, seriousness, or truth (*ibid.*, 1185) and *duođastus* (a further noun) means “‘evidence, testimony, confirmation, character, testimonial, receipt’”, which may take spoken form, or may simply count as evidence because of its character.

this way is to work with a world that abstracts and hypostasises. It is to move from Sámi *knowing* to social science *knowledge*.

Of course it is more complicated than this. In practice social science practices are messy, uncertain, and relational. It is just that (mostly) we prefer not to talk of this (Law 2004). They are contexted and situated too (Haraway 1991). The problem is that such excellent word-inventions as 'situated knowledge' or 'taskscape' also find it difficult to escape abstraction, and are easily transmuted into descriptions of states of affairs rather than indexing uncertain fluidities or struggles. Processes and uncertainties turn themselves into nouns and solidify before our eyes. Knowing becomes knowledge. But, all this said, what does our text about *meahcci* suggest? What might it imply for English language social science? Given the linguistic, material and institutional constraints within which this works, how might *meahcci* help us to think and to write a little differently? We end with three thoughts about land, and three about knowing.

Land. One. It tells us that this is a process, not a space. Or better, that lands are *processes* rather than spaces. (Not *meahcit* unless we are Sámi, but even so.) Two, it tells us that lands are *unfoldings* instead of (or as well as) spaces. As we said immediately above, lands are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but instead work by slipping and sliding through one another. 'Strong fences make good neighbours'. Robert Frost was a fine poet, but here he is not necessarily right. And then, three, it tells us too that lands are (also) *enchanting* and that their unfoldings are composed in liveliness. Filled with it. We borrow from Schanche once again: you negotiate *with* lands, not *about* them. Verbing *meahcit*.

Knowing. First, we remind ourselves again that knowledges are *knowings* even if the undertow constantly tugs us to hypostasis. Second, we note that Sámi teaches us that gerunds and verbs might well serve uncertain knowings better than nouns. Perhaps, then, we should be talking about *landings* rather than lands. Or *taskscapings* rather than taskscapes. Or *languagings* rather than languages (Becker 1995). Or *processings* rather than processes. But once again the English language and its institutions are snapping at our heels. 'Processing', gerund though it is, has been captured by the more or less routine and predictable industrial conversion of raw materials into products or outputs. This is *fixing the gerund*, pinning it down and robbing it of its liveliness. So here is the third point. What is happening is that the gerund is being pressed into means-end schemes. In this English-language world it is being turned into something to get done because it is the *end* that counts. It is being made is essentially uninteresting. All the work that leads to 'knowledge'. So resisting this is all of a piece with enchanting, unfolding, and extending the social. With softening the subject. With telling uncertainties. With verbing *meahcci*. Sámi singer, artist and author Nils-Aslak Valkeapää writes: 'I have no beginning, no end, and there is also no beginning, no end in the work I do.' (Helander and Kailo 1998, 87) Quite so. We are where we are, we do what we can do, we attend to it, and we try to care for it. No beginning, no end.

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