Behrens’ narrative of the discovery of Easter Island: Two editions, two personalities, two realities

Zuzanna Jakubowska

This article is dedicated to the figure of Carl Friedrich Behrens, a member of the Dutch expedition led by Jacob Roggeveen, who re-discovered Easter Island in 1722. Behrens, a German soldier serving on one of the ships, left a narrative describing the whole journey. The first edition was published in 1737, followed, among others, by a re-published edition made by German anthropologist Hans Plichke that was published in 1923. The important thing is that this version differs from the original to a great extent and the editor did not account for the changes he had introduced into the text: besides grammar and orthography modernization, he omitted certain portions, misinterpreted other ones and added some comments without marking them as his own. As a result, the narrative gives an impression of having been written by another author; Behrens appears as a person with a different character and attitude, weaker, less convincing and even less trustworthy than he really was. This article presents numerous examples of the distortions as a warning against making a scientific or an anthropological use of unreliable editions of source texts, as this may yield a negative influence upon our view and interpretation of the culture we are analyzing.

Introduction

I am working on a project that comprises the translation of all the 18th century narratives on Easter Island discovery into Polish and their extended historical and anthropological analysis. The first version of the narrative written by Carl Friedrich Behrens that I had at my disposal was its translation into English, made by Alexander Dalrymple within his collection of voyage reports. As its accuracy left much to be desired, I decided to acquire the German original of the aforementioned text. I purchased an edition issued in 1923 (edited by Hans Plichke), and translated the portions of the text that I needed for my purposes. However, what aroused my suspicions were numerous comments in brackets, inserted into the text; strange comments that sometimes create an impression that Behrens contradicts himself and that certain passages of his story lack cohesion. I drew a conclusion that these must have been unmarked interjections by the editor. Two questions are raised. Firstly, how many of these interjections are included in the text? Secondly, are they the only changes introduced by Plichke? To examine these questions, I collated Plichke’s edition with the original first edition of the text, published in 1737.

The comparison between the two versions of the narrative revealed major modifications in the 1923 edition. They can be grouped in the following general types:
- errors;
- misinterpretations and/or over-interpretations;
- omissions;
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• stylistic changes (‘embellishing’ of the original text);
• language modernization (orthography and grammar changes);
• order and sentence division changes.

The last two alterations are technical ones and are the least invasive, easy to justify, and quite common in this kind of popular re-edition (the 1923 version was published within a series of adventure books), so I will not analyze them, except for the toponym’s modernization. Nevertheless, as can be inferred from other examples, the narrative underwent a serious transformation.

Following the order I established above, I present the most representative and interesting examples of the enumerated modifications. I firstly quote chosen excerpts from both editions in chronological order, translating them into English, deliberately rendering them as literally as possible, even at the expense of style. What is most important here is the original sense of the presented quotes. I then comment upon them, giving necessary explanations. For the sake of making the quotes’ recognition easier and discriminating them from the main body of the article, all quoted excerpts are indented.

1. Errors

Coarse

“10 Meilen Westwärts von Joan Ferdinando sahen wir die Insel Klein Ferdinando” (Behrens 1737:78-9).
[10 miles to the west from Joan Ferdinando we saw the island Klein Ferdinando.]

“Ötivitàs von Juan Fernandez sahen wir die Insel Klein Fernandez (wohl Massafuero)” (Behrens 1923:62).
[To the east of Juan Fernandez we saw the island Klein Fernandez (or Massafuero).]

Anchoring

“[Wir] kamen aber selbige Tages noch nicht zu Anker” (Behrens 1737:82).
[This same day we have not already anchored.]

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Noch am selben Tage gingen wir vor Anker” (Behrens 1923:64).
[This same day we have anchored.]

Shooting incident

“Es wusse einer von denen, welche in den Fahrzeugen waren, unerhessen geschossen” (Behrens 1737:83).
[One of those who were in their boats was accidentally shot.]

The first example – putting aside the distance omission – is obvious proof of the editor’s inattention: he confuses compass directions. The second one is similar: it shows a typical tendency of overlooking negation (a characteristic, for instance, for students solving a multiple choice test); in the first edition, Behrens states that at the moment the ships have not anchored yet; in the 1923 edition they have.

The third quote is more problematic. Namely, of all available narratives of the Dutch voyage, only Behrens reports two gun-firing incidents. Except for a widely known tragedy on the shore – an accidental shooting that ended with the death of a dozen islanders – strangely, the German soldier mentions another case that is said to have occurred on board one of the ships. According to the 1737 edition, apparently an islander was wounded or even shot, Pilschke is obviously confused with this information and deliberately omits it, changing the passage to a laconic expression: “After a shot...” In my opinion, the next example contains two mistakes. One is clear: in the first version of the narrative, it is the islanders that fall to their knees in front of the newcomers. In Pilschke’s edition, however, they throw their gifts to the feet of the strangers. The core of the problem is the German verb used in this context in both versions: werfen: ‘to throw’; sich werfen: ‘to throw oneself’. But one more inconsistency can be observed in this fragment: the 1737 text seems to state that women and children – apart from adult male islanders – also came to meet the travelers, bringing various gifts; meanwhile, the editor of the 1923 version decides that the islanders brought along all the mentioned objects or

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wefeas women and children. For me, there is a significant difference in the attitude towards the indigenous Rapanui. I will return to this later.

2. Misinterpretations, over-interpretrations

Curiosity of indigenous Rapanui

“Theils hatten sie bey 50. und hundernten niedergelassen, und sahen unsere Schiffe mit Wewurzandung an” (Behrens 1737.82-3).

[Partially they were sitting [on the shore] in groups of 50, 100, and were looking with astonishment at our ships.]

“Trupps von 50 und 100 hatten sich dort niedergelassen und asehen mit Wurrewandung nach unsern Schiffen heriber. Sie betrachteten sich alle diese ihnen fremde Dinge” (Behrens 1923.65).

[Groups of 50, 100 sat down and looked with astonishment at our ships. They were watching all these things, strange to them.]

Huts

“...die Häuser waren 40. bis 60 Schuh lang, 6. bis 8. Schuh breit und so hoch von hölzernen Stangen aufgerichtet” (Behrens 1737.86).

[...the huts were 40 to 60 feet long, 6 to 8 feet wide and of the same height, supported by wooden posts.]

“The Häuser waren vierzig bis sechzig Schuh lang, sechzis bis acht Schuh breit und aus hölzernen Stangen hoch aufgerichtet” (Behrens 1923.67).

[The huts were forty to sixty feet long, six to eight feet wide and supported on wooden posts.]

Ear piercing

“Ihre Ohren waren so lange, daß sie ihnen bis auf die Schultern hingen; Eingeb hatten weisse Klütze darinnen liegend zur Bedeutung einer besonderen Zierath” (Behrens 1737.87).

[Their ears were so long that they were hanging down to their shoulders. Some of them had white blocks stuck [lit. lying] there [i.e. in the hole] for a strange ornament.]

“Die Ohren hingen ihnen bis auf die Schultern herab. Viele hatten darin weiße Klütze als Zierat hangen” (Behrens 1923.68).

[Their ears were hanging down to their shoulders. Many [of the indigenous Rapanui] had white blocks hanging from them for ornament.]

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3. Omissions

Reference to other authors

“Der Herr Dampier und Wafffer davon melden in ihren Beschreibungen, nach der Süd-See entdeckt seyn” (Behrens 1737.78).

[Mister Dampier and Wafffer inform on that in their reports, after the discovery of the South Sea.]
Seeking land

“We saw also many land birds, among which there were many Pfl-Storven [I could not identify that species – ZJ]; they could also be a sign of a land to be seen, also the wind changed and began to blow to the West, and along all the shores, where a permanent trade wind blows, is a sign that one is not far from the land; but, to a great consternation of our Admiral, we did not see the Land of Davids; I think we went past it or there must be no land at all. What is sure is that all shores of the south lands generally extend in the direction from the East to the West, or from the N.-West to the South-West, and that may be the main reason that the South Land remained undiscovered by so many; then, following the WNW course one sailed past the land and following the NW course one turned away from it, what I examined accurately by marking all the discovered lands and making a special chart, it can be seen very clearly that they either went past the land or, following the NW course, turned away from it.”


“Die Ölhälßchen hingen bis auf die Schulltern herab (wohl wegen der Ønhilke) (Behrens 1923:64).”

Their earlobes hung down to their shoulders (probably because of our pegs).

Glass of wine

“We gave this Southlander, our guest, a glass of wine to drink; but he took it and threw it into his eyes; this amazed us; but I think that he thought that we wanted to poison him, what is common among the Indians.”

“We gaben diesem Süd-Länder, unserm Gast, ein Glas Wein zu trinken; alleine er nahm solches, und stürzte es in seine Augen; worüber wir uns verwunderten, alleine ich glaube, daß er gedacht, daß man ihm dadurch verlegen wolte, welches unter den Indianern ein allgemeiner Gebrauch ist” (Behrens 1737:81).

“…wir gaben diesem Süd-Länder oder fremden Gast ein Glas Wein zu trinken; alleine er nahm solches, und stürzte es in seine Augen: worüber wir uns verwunderten; alleine ich glaube, daß er gedacht, daß man ihm dadurch verlegen wolte, welches unter den Indianern ein allgemeiner Gebrauch ist” (Behrens 1737:81).

Maneuvers

“…da gingen wir S. O. in eine [sic] Bucht (Bucht) oder Einlauf zum Anker” (Behrens 1737:82).

“…we went SE into a bay [Behrens uses three different terms to design it – ZJ] to anchor there.”

“We went into a bay to anchor there.”

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“We went into a bay to anchor there.”
Gifts for indigenous Rapanui

“[we] beschenkten sie mit einem Stück Buckten Leinwand, von ungefähr 50 bis 60 Elen lang, welches sie über hundert mal’t Klafter weise gemessen” (Behrens 1737:85).

[we gave them a piece of colorful linen, about 50 to 60 els long, which they measured over a hundred times with a sunstretched am.] 54

[we gave them a piece of colorful linen that was about 50 to 60 els long.] 64

Storks


[But it cannot be that at the height of 28 ½ degrees, at which this island lies, the storks can make a stop, regardless of any strange features that the nature could bestow upon this bird, everyone has to acknowledge that, if the stork were looking for a warm climate, it would not be seen in our country; then, at the latitude of 28 degrees there is no winter during the whole year, and the air is constantly warm, moreover, I think that the stork, when it migrates, looks for the climate near the South Pole, regardless of what it could find here to the north, then it migrates during our fall to look for the spring there, because in the fall all it feeds on

holes up from it [sic]; on the other hand, there, in the springtime, its food comes out and [the stork] stays at the latitude between 40 and 60 degrees South in some unknown lands, or in the land of Hernandus Gallego, discovered by him in 1595, and as the fall begins there, and then because of the air and of the food, it undertakes its journey to the North. The stork was frequently mentioned in a kind manner by such learned men as Epiphanius, Francisci, Heldelino, Guicciardyno, Munstero and by other distinguished scholars.

["Und doch spricht manche Daugen, das die Störche hierher ziehen" (Behrens 1732:69).]

[Ast still are reasons to believe that the storks do not migrate here.]

As I view it, all the examples of omissions in the 1923 version of the Behrens’ text result from a single general idea of the editor: the idea of offering the audience an easy-reading adventure book. That is why all the information that seemed superfluous, or ‘unnecessary’ in the course of the narration, was left out. I suppose that what reinforced the editor’s decision to delete these fragments was their style: they are often vague, rough, or sometimes incoherent. The problem, however, is precisely that these passages frequently reveal Behrens’ true character: he was an experienced soldier and seaman, who had a certain knowledge of the world, although nowadays we may consider this knowledge naïve. In the excerpts from the 1737 edition, Behrens speaks about geography, winds and charts, about supposed customs of Mughals and Indians, about climate and bird migrations, and also uses varied marine terminology. The last excerpt is particularly stunning (that is why I decided to quote it in spite of its length): the German elaborates on stork habits, wondering if the birds could or could not make a stop on Easter Island (in fact, what he saw on an Easter Islander’s head were probably frigate and not stork feathers), and in the 1923 edition, the whole passage is reduced to one short sentence.

4. Simplications

Journey

“...wir hatten täglich einen guten Fortgang, weil uns der S. O. poco Wind trefflich favorable war” (Behrens 1737:79).

[...every day we were making a good progress, because the SE trade wind was very favorable to us.] 75

“Wir hatten gute Fahrt. Der Südostwind war uns sehr günstig” (Behrens 1923:63).

[We had a good ride. The southeast-wind was very favorable to us.]
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Fields

“Anch de Accker oder das Land altes nach der Schur accurat abgemessen, und sehr aigrt ies mitanzt. Auch war ganz die Zeit, als wir da waren, alles in der vollkommenen Reife und Zeitigung; die Felder und Bäume trugen sehr reichlich ihre Früichte, und ich glaube sicherlich, daß, wenn man dieses Land recht durchsuchet hatte, daß man darinnen viel gutes wäre gefunden haben” (Behrens 1737:86).

[Also the fields and the land, all of them [were] scrupulously measured up and nearly tilled, also at the time that we were there everything was in full bloom and ripe; the fields and trees yielded their rich produce, and I am sure that if we examined this land thoroughly, we would find there many good things.]

“The land ringsum was genau zu Ackern aufgeteilt und schön bearbeitet. Gerade um die Zeit, als wir dort waren, stand alles in voller Reife. Felder und Bäume trugen reichlich Früchte. Hatten wir dieses Land genau durchsucht, so glaube ich, wäre dort viel Nützliches gefunden worden” (Behrens 1923:67).

(The land all around was precisely divided into fields and nicely tilled. Right in the time when we were there everything stood in full bloom. Fields and trees yielded their rich produce. If we examined well this land, I think, many useful things could be found there.)

The simplification of the original narrative is a measure similar to the previous one, but operates in a slightly different manner: the message of a given excerpt is generally preserved, but made cleaner or less complicated. The resulting text is lighter and easier to read. We find various examples of this in the narrative, although I decided to present only two passages that illustrate this point.

5. Editor’s comments and explanations

Tapanui

“10 Meilen Westwärts von Ioan Ferdinando sahen wir die Insel Klein Ferdinando” (Behrens 1737:78-9).

[10 miles to the west from Ioan Ferdinando we saw the island Klein Ferdinando.]

“Otwärts von Juan Fernandez sahen wir die Insel Klein Ferdinando (wohl Masafuero)” (Behrens 1923:62).

[To the east of Juan Fernandez we saw the island Klein Fernandez (or Masafuero).]

Tattoo

“Er war sehr artig bemalt, mit allerhand Figuren” (Behrens 1737:81).

[He was very nearly painted with various figures.]

“Sein Körper war mit allerlei Figuren nett bemalt (Tätowierungen)” (Behrens 1923:63).

[His body was nicely painted with various figures (tattoos).]

Gifts for indigenous Rapanui

“...we bessehneten sie auch mit Corallen, kleinen Spiegeln usw” (Behrens 1737:85).

[...we gave them also corals, small mirrors etc.]

“Wir gaben ihnen Korallen (Glasherzen), kleine Spiegel und anderes mehr” (Behrens 1923:66).

[We gave them corals (glass beads), a small mirror and much more.]

Food

“...eine gute Menge der Erd-Apfelel” (Behrens 1737:85).

[...a whole lot of potatoes.]

“...eine Menge Erdäpfel (wohl Bataten)” (Behrens 1923:66).

[...a whole lot of potatoes (or sweet potatoes).]

Banana leaves


[...the leaf is 2 to 3 feet wide and about 6 to 8 feet long. Our first parents in paradise, after the lamentable Fall of Man, must have covered themselves with these leaves.]

“The land of the Pflanze ist zwei bis drei Fuß breit und wohl sechs bis acht Fuß lang (Banane). Unsere ersten Eltern, Adam und Eva, sollen sich im Paradies, nach dem Sünden-Fuß, mit diesen Blättern bedeckt haben” (Behrens 1923:67).

[The leaf of this plant is in two to three feet wide and about six to eight feet long (banana). Our first parents in paradise, Adam and Eve, after the Fall of Man must have covered themselves with such leaves.]

Tapa

“...dieäm Woher-Steihle haben, verumstet deren sie solche [Decken] selbst verfertigen” (Behrens 1737:87).

[...they must have had cloths with which they could make such mantles.]
...die Einwohner mißten韦stihüte besitzen, mit deren Hülfe sie sich bald von den Wolken zu erteigen. (Eins Urdu, es handelt sich hier nicht um gewebte Stoffe, sondern um Rindenstoffe, die Tapu, die aus der Rinde des Papiermaulbeerbaumes gewonnen wird.)

...the inhabitants must have possessed hoods with the use of which they could make such mantles. (It is a mistake, what is meant is not a woven cloth but a bark cloth, the tapa, manufactured from the paper mulberry tree)

"Das Haupt war mit einer Krone geziert (flache Zylinder aus vulkanischem Gestein)."

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...the head adorned with a crown)"

Appearance of Indigenous Bapamis

"Er hatte eine ziemliche Länge, war ziemlich stark von Gliedern, und gut von Gesicht, mutter von Gestalt, angenehm im Reden und Gebaren." (Behrens 1737:81).

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...the inhabitants must have possessed hoods with the use of which they could make such mantles. (It is a mistake, what is meant is not a woven cloth but a bark cloth, the tapa, manufactured from the paper mulberry bark)
I am not opposing the modernization of the toponyms, especially because centuries ago, there were no written regulations of their spelling. However, in my opinion, for the sake of preserving the spirit of the original, a separate remark or some footnotes should be added, to give an account of which versions of the names were used by Behrens in the first edition.

Another question relates to the versions proposed by Plischke. Some of them are still incorrectly spelled, as the editor was an untrained scientist and a professional anthropologist. ‘Klein Fernandez’ – called Alejandro Selkirk today – was then properly called ‘Más Afuera’. ‘Pasch-Eiland’ is an old version of the Dutch name of Easter Island, which now, after an orthography reform, is Paaseiland. In the journal by Roggeveen himself, published in 1838, an almost identical spelling, ‘Pasch Eiland/Eiland’, was used (Roggeveen 1838:101). At the beginning of the 20th century, around the time when Plischke’s version of the narrative by Behrens was edited, the journal of Bouman – discovered almost 200 years after Roggeveen’s voyage and then published – referred to the island as ‘Paaseyland’ (Mulert 1911:143). Nevertheless, I was told that this spelling was incorrect as well (von Saher pers. comm. 2012).

Dazu wiesen sie auf ihre Weibsbilder, ob wir sie vielleicht mit auf die Schiffe nehmen oder ob wir mit ihnen in ihre Häuten gehen wolten” (Behrens 1737:85).

Besides they were pointing at their women, as if asking whether perhaps we wanted to go with them to their huts or take them on board.

Dazu wiesen sie auf ihre Weibsbilder, ob wir sie vielleicht mit auf die Schiffe nehmen oder ob wir mit ihnen in ihre Häuten gehen wolten” (Behrens 1737:85).

Table 1 includes these three general types of rock art interpreted as representations of bird eggs. On the other hand, there are some cases that are not discussed in studies dedicated to Rapa Nui rock art.

For some days we were sailing (cruising/tacking; the verb breven is ambiguous – ZJ) to and fro through these seas, searching for clearer directions. But the Land of Davis was nowhere to be found.

I suggest that the carving hints at a naturalistic, arm and the elaborated fingers and toes point to a later variant of the motif. The extended arm, the straight leg, and the proportions of the statue are thin when compared with other early 19th century images.

One might also wonder why Behrens calls the Schouten Islands ‘Schouten schlecht Wasser’ (literally, ‘Schouten Bad Water’). As I have no access to Schouten’s original narrative and cannot look up how he personally describes the discovery of these islands, all I could resort to were online versions of books of the type I consider more reliable: second-hand publications, and early English compilations of travel stories proceeding from different countries. The Internet is a rich source for these kinds of texts (I also found a two-volume collection by Dalrymple), but it is also possible to get access to valuable scanned materials, such as the 1st edition of the journal by Roggeveen or the complete works by Georg Forster. As for the Schouten voyage, one of the mentioned books is ‘General History and Collection of Voyages and Travels’ by Robert Kerr (1824). The first is a scanned book, while the second

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It seems logical to see images of bird eggs in close proximity to the birdman symbols on the front of the statue (Figure 7). Lee (1992) there is an easy way to demonstrate that the carving hints at a naturalistic, arm and the elaborated fingers and toes point to a later variant of the motif. The extended arm, the straight leg, and the proportions of the statue are thin when compared with other early 19th century images.

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is an already elaborated html text. Both publications contain images of the Schoen and his crew stayed around the aforementioned islands, there was an earthquake that made them very frightened (Callander 1768:257; Kerr 1824). Firstly, I supposed that this is a reason for the supposed production of these waters. Nevertheless, Herbert von Saher explained to me that the true cause of the so-called slecht water (in Dutch) is the phenomenon of vehement waves produced when the wind strikes a rocky coast, gets refracted and makes the breakers roll in the opposite direction. When these waves meet regular oceanic waves, they lose their regularity, the sea turns rough, and – on one hand – it causes a difficult situation for ship crews, but – on the other hand – they can expect to arrive at some land before discerning it on the horizon (von Saher pers. comm. 2012).

Conclusion

When comparing the two editions of Behrens’ narrative, one may have an impression that this is not the same text. Although it may sound paradoxical, it seems to be translated from German to German. The editor acted at his own will, without consideration for the original spirit and message of the story. He even changed the title of the work and chapter titles.

In the first edition of his narrative, in 1737, Behrens appears to us as an experienced, stubborn soldier that possesses a cognitive base and convictions. He may not be a skilled writer and he surely shows a tendency to confabulate, but he knows how to justify his points of view and defend his opinions. In comparison, in the 1923 edition, Behrens seems to be a pretentious man with a musket, but without character or charisma. Perhaps the phenomenon treated in this article would not be worth analyzing if we were not for the fact that many scientists and researchers who study the course of events related to the European discovery of Easter Island want to refer to the narrative by Behrens. However, due to a lack of availability or linguistic barriers, they use English or French translations, or newer German editions such as the one edited by Plischke. Often they are unaware of the grave alterations present in a given text. If the German edition of 1923 is so negligent, what can we expect of old English or French versions, prepared in times when people were strove for success and not for accuracy? This problem concerns not only the narrative by Behrens, I also know of abridged, popular editions of Georg Forster’s work that were published in German and Polish. Presently, when the world has virtually no real mysteries for us (at least when it comes to geographic discoveries), and technological progress has made our lives hasty and hectic, people tend to seek out easy entertainment —when it comes to books as well. Nowadays, the old travel stories do not teach us about the world, but serve to amuse us; that is why many editions distort and simplify the text, sometimes without admitting it explicitly enough. And not all the researchers are careful or competent enough to resort to the original diaries and memoirs.

However, I am aware of one more aspect of the whole situation that I see as problematic. If the edition edited by Plischke is so different from the first edition of the book, then how different is the first edition from the original manuscript? I cannot appeal for studying all the circumstances, if we read a simplified, nearly falsified version of the narrative, through which we see its author as a plain, boring soldier without personality, we will treat him with mistrust and underestimate his relation to the public also knew the narratives by Cook and Forster, was found and published in 1838, in a moment when the Rapanui culture is presented to us and how we perceive it from the perspective of this particular narrative. It is a known fact that the first published news about Easter Island were the so-called anonymous sailor’s narratives’ (included in Kort en nauwkeurig verhaal . . . 1727, and Tweejaarige Reys rondom de Werdel . . . 1728). But when Behrens’ story appeared in 1737, it was this text that was considered as a credible report. However, when the journal of Roggevem was found and published in 1838, in a moment when the public also knew the narratives by Cook and Forster, Behrens’ text was disregarded as unreliable and full of conflicting data. Now, taking into consideration such circumstances, if we read a simplified, nearly falsified version of the narrative, through which we see its author as a plain, boring soldier without personality, we will treat him with mistrust and underestimate his relation to the...
kind as to make me a free copy of the analyzed excerpts of the first edition of Behrens’ narrative. Also, I want to thank my friends: Herbert von Saher, especially for his advice and the information about Schouten Island and the Dutch orthography reform, and Bartosz Mielnikow for his interest and help; our discussions are always very inspiring to me. Moreover, it was thanks to him that I became aware of the article by Pilat.

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