How to Talk
to Your Brother-in-Law
in Guugu Yimidhirr

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1 EMBEDDED SPEECH

When people exchange words, there is usually much more to be said than that they are simply "speaking to one another."

"Howdy. My name’s Maureen."

"Pleased to meet you. I’m Max."

"How are you, Max?"

"Fine, thanks."

In this dialogue the protagonists are not merely talking; they are introducing themselves. (They are saying hello—even though the word "hello" does not occur.) It is the fact that we can recognize this dialogue as a conventionalized greeting—and not, say, as an interrogation or an interview—that allows us to interpret the question "How are you?" quite differently from the same question addressed, for instance, to

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someone who has just fallen down a flight of stairs. The force of saying
“My name’s Maureen” as part of introducing oneself (which is partly to
invite one’s interlocutor to introduce him or herself in turn) is rather
different from uttering the same words to identify oneself. (“Somebody
named Maureen is wanted on the telephone.” “My name’s Maureen.”)

Now compare the following conversation:

“How do you do? I am Dr. Maureen Smith.”

“I’m delighted to make your acquaintance, Dr. Smith. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Gonzales, Max
Gonzales.”

“How are you, Mr. Gonzales?”

Although each sentence in the second dialogue has its counterpart in
the first, we immediately see a difference in tone between the two
conversations. The second dialogue portrays a more formal introduction
than the first. For the moment we needn’t try to say exactly what
the difference is. Partly it is a matter of different words—“meet you”
and “make your acquaintance” are rather different turns of phrase. It is
enough to see that even these sketchy hypothetical conversations are
pregnant with information about their settings. (We might imagine
the first dialogue occurring at an informal dancing party and the second at,
say, a diplomatic cocktail party. We can even imagine how the pro-
tagonists might be dressed, how they are standing, and perhaps even
how close together they are standing.) It is the settings that are more or
less formal; the conversations are tailored to match them. People learn
to speak as part of learning to live in the world. It is characteristic of
speech that one fits one’s words to the circumstances.

Often, in fact, a speaker’s choice of words helps to create or change
those very circumstances. Imagine two different responses Max might
offer to Dr. Smith’s polite query “How are you, Mr. Gonzales?”

(1) “I’m quite well, thank you.”
and:

(2) “Call me Max.”

The first is a polite reply to the conventionalized greeting that maintains
the formal style. The second invites Dr. Smith to drop the formal
tone—and notice that the invitation is itself a suggestion about how to
talk, rather than an explicit remark about greater informality.

These brief conversations display some notable properties of
speech. First, we see that speaking is embedded in human activity. J. L.
Austin pointed out that much action is accomplished through speech or
simply consists of speech. (One swears allegiance, or promises, by
saying “I swear…” or “I promise…”; one gets married by saying “I
do…”; and so on.) Examining the syntactic structure of sentences or
the properties of words will be only a preliminary to an adequate study of
the place of language in human life. Communicating information, or
stating propositions, is only one sort of task that language accomplishes.
Language also engenders and prompts, or prevents and hinders action.
And a good deal of talk (including that in our hypothetical dialogue)
establishes, reinforces, and changes social relationships between
speakers.

Second, our examples demonstrate that speech mirrors features of
the social context in which it occurs. When an occasion is formal, formal
and stiff language is appropriate. Among specialists, specialized jargon
emerges. Whether, in a given context, one says “damn!” or “darn!”
“shit!” or “shucks!” is an index—a mark—of features of the situation.
(Am I talking to maiden aunt, or roommate? Is this the church or the
locker room? Did I bark my shin, or just bump my funny bone? Am I a
seaman or a clergyman? And so on.) Politeness, formality, and propriety
are features of human intercourse with reflexes in language. Cor-
respondingly, impoliteness and impropriety also find linguistic expres-
sion. Speech can be antisocial and subversive, in form as well as in
content. Speakers often turn conventions on their heads to surprise, to
shock, and to snub. (“Hi, my name’s Fred…” “…” [silence]…”

These are matters that involve not only the properties of language as
a code but also the nature of speech in a social situation. It is a person’s
knowledge of such matters that allows him or her to understand “How
are you?” as a greeting and not a request for information; or to interpret
“Whose junk is this all over the floor?” more as a command than a
question. And it is ignorance of such matters in a different language
community, or deliberate violation of the conventions in one’s own, that
allows one to commit stylistic, lexical, and social blunders in speech,
despite adequate grammar. (Host: “Will you have more to eat?” Foreign
guest: “No, thank you, I’m fed up.” Court Clerk: “Do you solemnly
swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?”
Wiseacre: “You bet your ass!”) Looking at the ways that speech merges
with social life in other communities can put us into illuminating counter-
point our own language practices.

Aboriginal Australians are celebrated for their highly complex social
organization, in which people reckon their relationships to one another
largely in terms of kinship. Amidst a complicated calculus of social
identities that divided everyone into kin or spouse’s kin, into friends,
neighbors, and strangers, or into elders and juniors, many groups of
these original Australians observed elaborate etiquette, treating some
classes of people with extreme respect and caution and enjoying un-
restrained and often rambunctious relations with others. Not surprisingly, this
social complexity is mirrored in correspondingly complex speech practices. In Australia, as elsewhere, respectful, restrained, formal speech differs markedly from ordinary talk, and again from joking, relaxed, or intentionally impolite and abusive language. For example, in the Guugu Yimidhirr language of Cooktown, in far North Queensland, the ordinary way to say “There is no food” is:

Mayi guya. (lit.: “food not.”)

But to speak respectfully to one’s father-in-law or brother-in-law, one must say instead:

Gudhubay ngangarra.

using special respectful equivalents in place of the ordinary words. Instead of mayi, one says gudhubay for “food”; instead of guya for “not.” one says ngangarra. This chapter is about the special language of respect in Guugu Yimidhirr.

Throughout the discussion the reader should keep in mind two facts that we have uncovered about speech in our own society: first, that speech is part of action, that it performs work for its participants; and second, that speech adjusts itself to its surroundings—to the participants and to the social setting. Mechanisms of grammar—including the system of noun cases that we shall consider in the next section—along with the words or stems upon which such mechanisms act provide the tools for speech. However, it will be clear that no matter how much one knows about the formal properties of the language (for example, how to conjugate verbs or decline nouns) to speak Guugu Yimidhirr properly is to be embedded deeply in a particular social environment.

2 THE LANGUAGE OF COOKTOWN

On the eleventh of June, 1770, H.M. Bark Endeavour, with Lt. James Cook in command, struck a coral reef while exploring northwards along the east coast of Australia. The ship began to take water. After Cook directed his men to throw overboard extra weight in the form of guns, ballast, and rotting provisions, the ship again floated and slowly made its way to the mainland for repairs. Cook discovered a good harbor at the mouth of a river, and ultimately, by Friday the twenty-second, he brought the ship to shore where his men could examine and repair the damage. The river was named the Endeavour, and the spot where the Endeavour was beached became the site of the gold boom town Cooktown in North Queensland.

Cook first spied a strange animal “of a light mouse Colour and the full size of a Grey Hound, and shaped in every respect like one, with a long tail, which it carried like a Grey Hound; in short I should have taken it for a wild dog but for its walking or running, in which it jumped like a Hare or Deer.” On July 3 some of the Endeavour’s crew scouting for a passage through the reef to the North and searching at the same time for food, came upon a party of natives, who scattered at their approach. On July 11, one month after the accident that had brought the Endeavour to shore, a small party of Aborigines appeared on the shore of the river and ultimately approached the ship. According to Cook’s Journal:

... they were wholly naked, their Skins the Colour of Wood soot, and this seemed to be their Natural Colour. Their Hair was black, lank, and cropt short... Some part of their Bodies had been painted with red, and one of them had his upper lip and breast painted with streaks of white, which he called Carbanda. Their features were far from being disagreeable; their Voices were soft and Tunable, and they could easily repeat any word after us, but neither us nor Tupia could understand one word they said.³

Cook and his men were not long in learning from the natives that the strange animal that they had, by then, taken to shooting and eating, was called “Kangaroo or Kanguru.” Cook, the botanist Joseph Banks, and members of the crew in fact collected more than sixty words from the “New Holland language” of the Endeavour River. These word lists from the Guugu Yimidhirr language still spoken around Cooktown were the first written records of an Australian language—just as Cook’s men were the first Europeans ever to see a kangaroo. (In Guugu Yimidhirr gangarra is the name for a species of large, black kangaroo now rarely seen near the coast.)

Despite the fact that the Endeavour put to sea again in early August 1770 and that the Aboriginal inhabitants of that area were not again to be visited by white men in great numbers for nearly a century, they as well managed to learn a good deal from Cook about Europeans. On July 19 Cook reports that a party of Endeavour River natives visited the ship, evidently with a thought to sharing in the crew’s meal of freshly caught sea turtle:

Those that came on board were very desirous of having some of our Turtles, and took the liberty to haul 2 of them to the Gangway to put over the side; being disappointed in this they grew a little Troublesome, and were for throwing every thing overboard they could lay their hands upon. As we had no Virtuals dress’d at this time, I offer’d them some bread to Eat, which they rejected with Scorn, as I believe they would have done anything else excepting Turtle...
After returning to shore the Aborigines remained "troublesome":

...[T]hey all went to a place where some of our people were washing, and where all our nets and a good deal of linen were laid out to dry; here with the greatest obstinacy they again set fire to the grass, which I and some others who were present could not prevent, until I was obliged to fire a Musquet load with small Shott at one of the Ring leaders, which sent them off."

Friendly relations were soon again established, although the Natives showed the good sense, "whether through Jealousy or disregard," never to bring "any of their women along with them to the Ship," leaving them always "on the Opposite side of the River, where we had frequent Opportunities viewing them thro' our Glasses."24

After the Endeavour departed, the Guugu Yimidhirr-speaking natives of the area were spared more visits by white men in any numbers for the next hundred years. Some explorers came near in the 1840s, and in the previous two decades some ships had surveyed the area. But it was only the discovery of gold on the Palmer River in September 1873, inland from the spot where Cook had beached his ship, that brought Europeans (and later Chinese) in great hordes to the territory of the Guugu Yimidhirr and neighboring tribes. So numerous had the miners and prospectors become that in October 1873 the need was felt to open a port to supply them. A cutter was sent to land at Cook's original landing spot at the mouth of the Endeavour and to establish a camp. By early November there had been several major battles between the diggers bound for the gold fields and the Aboriginal natives of the area, almost certainly including Guugu Yimidhirr speakers or their close relatives. By February 1874, the height of the wet season, Cooktown was "a roaring, cosmopolitan, gold boom town, with hundreds of wood and iron buildings crowding both sides of two-mile-long Charlotte street, which ran from the wharves out to the beginning of the Palmer road, and dotting the bush on either side of it."25 By 1876 Cooktown was a major seaport, surpassed only by Brisbane in the volume of its trade. The town had a population of over four thousand, of whom some two thousand were Chinese; and these figures do not include the estimated six thousand European and seventeen thousand Chinese miners in the gold fields.

Amidst this incredible invasion, the original inhabitants had little hope, indeed. According to the earliest reports, the policy of European gold hunters towards Aborigines was one of "dispersion"—a euphemism for massacre by rifle. No doubt some Aborigines found their way into the new town, for G. C. Bolton reports that by 1885 Cooktown imposed on Aborigines a formal curfew after dark.26 Travelers on Cape York toward the end of the 1880s who bothered to pay any attention to Aborigines reported wholesale slaughter, as well as kidnappings of women and children, and addiction to alcohol and opium.

There were also, inevitably, missionaries, following close on the heels of the gold diggers, who probably offered timely sanctuary to the local Cooktown Aborigines. In January 1886 a Lutheran missionary en route to New Guinea established a mission among Guugu Yimidhirr-speaking Aborigines at Cape Bedford, some thirty miles north of Cooktown. The next year the Reverend G. H. Schwarz arrived from Germany to take over the mission, which was christened Hope Valley, or Hopevale. And although the Palmer gold was exhausted after ten years and Cooktown itself largely abandoned after being destroyed by a cyclone in 1907 and never rebuilt, Schwarz remained at Hopevale, with his community of newly Lutheran Aborigines, until 1942 when the entire mission population was relocated because of World War II.

Before the European invasion, Guugu Yimidhirr was spoken in an area that extended inland from the mouth of the Endeavour to a place called Battle Camp (named after that first bloody encounter between a party of diggers heading for the Palmer and a large group of armed Aborigines). Dialects of the language were spoken to the north past Cape Bedford and the McIvor River to the present St Barke station and from there inland to the source of the Jack River. Most of the natives of these and surrounding regions were at the mercy of encroaching Europeans: first the gold seekers and fishermen who scoured the coast for beche-de-mer (a giant sea slug, much esteemed in dried form in Chinese cookery), and later the settlers. Hopevale and its sister mission to the south at Bloomfield River became receptacles for the Aborigines driven from elsewhere. (Neither mission site was of much use to settlers: Hopevale was described as "mainly on rock and sand"; and the site of the Bloomfield mission seemed, according to an early report, to have been selected by some "evil genius.") Here was somewhere to take children who survived "dispersion," especially children of mixed white and Aboriginal ancestry who could not be forced to grow up unchristened. Children brought to the mission, usually without their parents, were interned at the mission school at Cape Bedford. A few adults lived in camps on mission territory and seem to have been reliable aides to native police and local landowners in monitoring the movements of other Aborigines—especially those who worked on nearby properties—

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1Ibid., p. 289.
2Ibid., p. 312.
The traditional territory of Guugu Yimidhirr—speaking people covered a wide area northwest of Cooktown in Northern Queensland. It was divided into thirty-two named locales (listed on the map), each with a dominant family group, and each with sacred places and favorite hunting spots. The shaded lines show major dialect areas. The dhuulum-dhiin dialect was spoken in locales 25–32. The waguny-ga dialect was spoken in the remainder of the territory, except in locales 1, 2, 3, and 22, where individual dialect names have survived: Guugu Nyiyiyuindi in 1, Guugu Nyalaadi in 2, Guugu Yina in 3, and Guugu Diirra in 22.

The map shows Lt. Cook's landing place at Cooktown on the Endeavour River and Battle Camp, scene of the first great battle between miners bound for the Palmer River gold fields and the aboriginal owners of the land. It shows the old mission site at Cape Bedford and its present location at Hopevale, where most of the surviving speakers of Guugu Yimidhirr and surrounding languages now live.

Traditionally marriages were contracted between individuals from widely separated locales. For example, one man from Dyundyu (7) married two sisters from Balggarr (18) some fifty kilometers away. Guugu Yimidhirr people had extensive contacts with, and often married, speakers of neighboring languages—Guugu Yalanti to the South, the Barrow Point and Flinders Island languages to the North, and the so-called Guugu Warru and "Lama-Lama" languages to the West. The whole area formed a single large society, with the same basic kinship system, in which an individual spoke and understood several different languages in addition to his or her own native tongue.

and though in the mission school they received all their instructions in the English language, among themselves always used the vernacular of the district, the Koko Yimidir dialect. They possess and read their English Bibles, and sing from the English Hymn Book, but their own tongue, the Koko Yimidir, speaks direct to their hearts, and their souls yearn to hear the Word of life in their native tongue, the Koko Yimidir.*

People have continued to come to Hopevale from other areas, but their own native or ancestral languages, if they still knew them when they arrived, have been largely submerged under the dominant local language.

Much remains to be learned about the recent history of the Hopevale Mission. Its residents clearly worked in large numbers cutting cane on sugar plantations farther down the coast. They have been, among other things, stockmen, sand miners, evangelists, seamen, professional boxers, and beche-de-mer fishermen. During World War II Reverend Schwarz was interned as a German alien, and the entire mission population was moved south to a large reserve inland from Rockhampton. There the colder climate decimated the Hopevale population.

*Board of the Lutheran Mission, Hope Valley, Order of Service and Hymnals (Brisbane, Australia: Watson, Ferguson and Co., 1946) p. 2.
people, after finishing boarding school in the south, simply stay away, returning only to spend Christmas with family, at the beach near the old mission site, and singing some of those English hymns, now supplemented by a few Guugu Yimidhirr hymns written by an energetic Aboriginal minister.

Children still are taught in the white man's language, learning to read and write only in English. Although everyone speaks Guugu Yimidhirr, very few people are comfortable speaking only Guugu Yimidhirr. Instead, their language is full of English words and phrases, and detectable changes in Guugu Yimidhirr syntax and pronunciation are taking place. Much of the special linguistic knowledge about how to speak to a brother-in-law, or how to be especially polite (or impolite) is now lost, or confined to a handful of older people at Hopevale. The linguistic knowledge has faded, even though the social principles that motivated special speech remain matters of concern to Guugu Yimidhirr people. (The author apologizes in advance for saying so little about Guugu Yimidhirr women's speech, an omission that reflects serious gaps in his own knowledge and experience.) Perhaps the bits of information recorded here will contribute to some fate for Guugu Yimidhirr—whatever changes it may undergo—other than extermination.

3 THE GUUGU YIMIDHIRR LANGUAGE

Guugu Yimidhirr is in most respects a typical Australian language, sharing many features with the roughly two hundred other languages that faced the European takeover of Australia. For one thing, spoken Guugu Yimidhirr sounds like other Australian languages. It has only three vowels, a, i, and u, although long vowels (here written doubled) differ from short ones. For example, the word bala means "skinny" or "weak"; but the word baala denotes a kind of tree with a black, edible fruit. Guugu Yimidhirr also uses a number of sounds, called "laminals," produced with the blade of the tongue; the sounds represented as dh and nh are produced by pushing the tongue against the back of the front teeth so that it almost protrudes. (Dh sounds a bit like the th in there; nh sounds like an n pronounced with the tongue in the same position.) The sounds dy and ny result from putting the tongue against the roof of the mouth and sound something like the j of judge or the ny of canyon. There is also a difference between the "flap" or "trilled" rr and the single r which resembles the r of rat, with the tongue curled back. (The laminal sounds and the retroflex r are particularly common in Australian languages.) For the most part, the other sounds of Guugu Yimidhirr are pronounced much as their spellings suggest. The ng sound of Guugu Yimidhirr is like the ng's of singing (and not like the ng of finger, which would be written in Guugu Yimidhirr with two g's, as ngg). In Guugu

after the war, Hopevale was resettled (without Reverend Schwarz) inland from the original site at Cape Bedford, most of the old people who had once known life in the bush had not survived.

Hopevale is now a small community of six hundred permanent residents (and a dozen missionary staff). It is a community in most ways more substantial than nearby Cooktown, which Holthouse describes as "a shabby town in which about two hundred contented people potter about, fish, and sip an occasional beer..." The population is transitory. Many of the men work elsewhere: some nearby mine silica at Cape Flattery; others work in distant cities or towns. Some young

FIGURE 4.2 Avoidance

Fred Jacka (also shown in the photograph at the beginning of this chapter), the son of an important Guugu Yimidhirr leader from the Starke River, and now in his fifties, is one of the few remaining people at Hopevale who still remembers and uses the respectful "brother-in-law" style of speaking. He uses the avoidance language here, for example, in conversation with another man who married a woman Fred classed as his granddaughter. In such a relationship, both men not only use the respectful vocabulary; they sit far apart, orient their bodies so as not to face one another, and avoid direct eye contact.
YimidhIRR a word can begin with ng: ngaabaay “head.” Notice that there are no “fricative” sounds like English s, z, f, or v, and, finally; that there is no contrast in Guugu YimidhIRR between voiced and unvoiced consonants: b sometimes sounds like p, or d like t.

Guugu YimidhIRR also resembles other Australian languages in having a highly developed system of noun morphology. The specific form a noun takes in a sentence delimits the role of the corresponding person or thing in the event described. The system is extremely elaborate, allowing a Guugu YimidhIRR speaker to pack a good deal of meaning into a simple ending on a noun. The overall system and its detailed elaborations are worth our attention in this chapter, for such productive devices are among the verbal resources Guugu YimidhIRR provides to its speakers for accomplishing verbal tasks, or for endowing speech with a character appropriate to specific social situations.

3.1 Guugu YimidhIRR Pronouns

Let us transpose our original dialogue into a Guugu YimidhIRR setting. How does one introduce oneself in Guugu YimidhIRR? Or, to imagine a more likely situation—since most speakers of Guugu YimidhIRR know one another in the first place—how does one perform a greeting, or “say hello,” at the Hopevale Mission?

Wanhdharrra, dhawuunh? Nyundu ganaa?
Howdy, friend. Are you well?

Ngayu ganaa. Nyundu ganaa?
I’m fine. Are you well?

The word wanhdharrra (which means “how”) is a normal greeting for friends, corresponding to “howdy” or “what’s up?” or “how are you?” Dhawuunh means “friend.” Another informal greeting is:

Wanhdharraga?
How are ya?

in which the suffix -ga conveys still more informality. The word ganaa means “all right, well, fine, okay.”

The pronouns of a language are called “pro-nouns” because they are said to stand for nouns. When we say:

George likes fried grasshoppers, but Mary abhors them.

we have used the pronoun them to stand for the full noun phrase fried grasshoppers; this device allows us to avoid repetition without sacrificing clarity. (We know that it is fried grasshoppers that Mary abhors.) And pronominalization allows us to replace extremely long and complex noun phrases with single monosyllables. For example:

The head dogcatcher’s one-eyed son went out to look for the spotted black-and-white cocker spaniel that George lost at the creek. Did he find it?

But there is another sort of pronoun that does not, in any straightforward sense, stand for a full noun phrase and that illustrates a basic sense in which all languages are embedded in the speech contexts of their use. When a Guugu YimidhIRR speaker says to his friend:

Nyundu ganaa?
Are you well?

he uses the pronoun nyundu “you” not as a replacement for some full noun phrase, but rather as a pointer that denotes the friend, that is, the person to whom he addresses his words. In a similar way, there is no longer noun phrase which the pronoun ngayu stands for. (Ngayu denotes the speaker, but “I am sick” does not mean the same thing as “The speaker is sick.”) All languages must have this kind of word (called a deictic pronoun or shifter) in order to situate utterances in their typical contexts, such as when two people speak to one another about their own affairs or about the circumstances in which they find themselves. (Words like this, here, and now depend in the same way on the contexts of their occurrence and have shifting reference.) The pronouns of Guugu YimidhIRR are somewhat different from English pronouns. We have seen ngayu ‘I’ and nyundu “you.” Here are a few more:

Nyulu Billy ganaa?
Is Billy OK?

Nyulu ganaa.
He’s OK.

Nyulu Mary ganaa galmba?
Is Mary OK too?

Nyulu galmba ganaa.
She too is fine.

galmba also, too
Nyulu can mean both "he" and "she"; it can also mean "it" when it replaces, for example, a noun like gudaa "dog."

*Nhanu gudaa ganaa?
Is your dog OK?

Nyulu gaari ganaa. Nyulu biini.
It's not OK. It died.

nhanu your (Second person singular possessive)
guari not
biini die

(Each new word will be glossed as it appears in the examples that follow. For words you have seen before but whose meanings you can't remember, you should consult the full glossary at the end of the chapter.) However, unlike English, Guugu Yimidhirr has no pronoun that can stand for an inanimate noun, a thing.

*Nhanu galga wanhdhaa?
Where is your spear?

Gadabadhi.

(It) broke.

galga spear
wanhdhaa where?
gadabal break, be broken

One cannot say here:

*Nyulu gadabadhi.

because nyulu can only be used to replace a noun that denotes some animate entity, not a spear. Here, then, the Guugu Yimidhirr system of pronouns has only one word, nyulu, where English has three: "he," "she," and "it." But Guugu Yimidhirr also distinguishes between certain sorts of nouns that can be replaced by a pronoun and others that cannot. Notice that a sentence like:

Nyulu Billy ganaa.

would be translated, word for word, "He Billy is OK." That is, the word nyulu is not simply standing for the noun Billy but actually occurs together with it. We might think of this doubling up of pronoun and noun as a device both to highlight the topic of the remark and to tell us, among other things, that Billy is a person (or at least an animate being) because an inanimate thing could not generate the word nyulu.

Where English has different pronouns for singular and plural, Guugu Yimidhirr distinguishes a further set of forms; it has pronouns that denote exactly two people, called "dual" forms.

*Nyundu dhadaa?
Are you going to go?

Yuu, ngayu dhadaa.
Yes. I'm going to go.

Ngayu galomba dhadaa:
I too am going to go.

Ma, ngali dhadaa gulbuuyu.
Come, we'll go together (the two of us).

dhadaa go
gulbuuyu together

Ngali means "you and I"—that is, it includes just the speaker and the hearer. Another pronoun, ngallin, is called an 'exclusive' form because it indicates the speaker and one other person who is not the hearer. It thus means "he/she and I (but not you)." Yuhaal means "you two," and bula "the two of them." Notice how one says "X and Y" for animate things:

Dharramali bula Wurrbal
Thunder and Fog

Thunder and Fog are mythical beings, here conceived as animate. Inanimate things are conjoined by simply putting them together with no overt equivalent for "and."

yugu nambal
stick(s) and stone(s)

Table 4.1 shows all the different 'personal pronouns' in Guugu Yimidhirr.

A pronoun like ngayu, as we have seen, is a kind of pointer that each speaker can use to talk about himself or herself. However the precise form of the pronoun tells us something about its syntactic function in a sentence. One way of putting this is to say that the form of the pronoun
Now, how do I say that the person with whom I am speaking saw me? First let’s recall how we say this in English.

You saw Billy.

You saw me.

Notice first the order of the parts in these sentences. The subject (the person who did the seeing) comes first, followed by the verb, and then by the object (the person who was seen). Second, notice that when the subject is in the first person (i.e., the speaker) the form of the pronoun is nominative—“I.” But when there is a first-person object, the form of the pronoun is “you”; in English this is the “objective” or “accusative” form of the pronoun. Similarly there are accusative forms of “he” and “she”; and what are the accusative forms of “you” and “it”? These are, of course, extremely elementary facts about English. The situation in Guugu Yimidhirr is similar.

Nyundu Billy nхаадхи.

You saw Billy.

Ngayu Billy nхаадхи.

I saw Billy.

Nyundu nganhi nхаадхи.

You saw me.

Notice that the typical order here is different from English; instead of the order Subject–Verb–Object, Guugu Yimidhirr has the order Subject–Object–Verb. Moreover, we can see that the Guugu Yimidhirr first-person singular pronoun also has an accusative form; nganhi corresponds to me. You can see some of the other accusative forms in the following sentences.

Ngayu nhina nхаадхи.

I saw you.

Nyulu nganhi nхаадхи.

He saw me.

Ngayu nhа-ngu dаамay.

I speared him.

daamay spear
First we can see that Guugu Yimidhirr is more systematic than English about distinguishing nominative from accusative forms. In the sentences:

You saw it.
It saw you.

only the order of the words determines what (or who) saw what (or whom). But in Guugu Yimidhirr each pronoun has an accusative form distinct from its nominative form.

Nyundu nhangu nhaadhi.
You saw him.
Nyulu nhina nhaadhi.
He saw you.

One corollary of this specificity of forms is that the precise order of words in a Guugu Yimidhirr sentence is rather variable. Although ordinarily a sentence follows Subject-Object-Verb order, this is by no means always the case.

Billy ngayu nhaadhi.
I saw Billy.
Nhina nhaadhi ngayu.
I saw you.
Nhaadhi nhangu nyundu.
You saw him.

There can be no confusion about who did what to whom since each pronoun is unambiguously marked as either subject (nominative form) or object (accusative form). Table 4.2 shows the accusative forms of Guugu Yimidhirr personal pronouns.

(The reader might try to formulate a concise statement of the shape of alternate accusative forms for dual and plural pronouns. Which pronouns have alternate forms, and how are they formed? Notice that some non-singular pronouns end with consonants and others with vowels.)

### Table 4.2 Nominative and Accusative Forms of Guugu Yimidhirr Personal Pronouns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1st person (inclusive)</th>
<th>2nd person</th>
<th>3rd person</th>
<th>singular nom.</th>
<th>dual nom.</th>
<th>plural nom.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ngayu</td>
<td>nyundu</td>
<td>nyulu</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>nganhi</td>
<td>nhina</td>
<td>nhangu</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ngai</td>
<td>ngalin/h</td>
<td>yubaal</td>
<td>bula</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ngalingan/ngaliin</td>
<td>ngalin/hun</td>
<td>yubalin</td>
<td>bulangan/bulaan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nganhdhaan</td>
<td></td>
<td>yurra</td>
<td>dhana</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nganhdhanun</td>
<td></td>
<td>yurrangan/yurraan</td>
<td>dhanangan/dhanaan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The alternate accusative forms are dialectal variants.

3.2 The Dative Case and Possession

So far we have distinguished several different relationships that a person (denoted by a pronoun) can have to the action or event depicted in a sentence. In sentences with intransitive verbs there is a subject; in those with transitive verbs there is a subject (who is typically the actor) and an object. A third sort of sentence, typically one that describes some sort of giving, has an actor (the person who gives), an object (the thing given), and a beneficiary (or indirect object: the person to whom the object is given). In English, the indirect object form of a pronoun is like the object form, and it often occurs with the preposition to.

He gave me water.
He gave water to me.

I brought you food.
I brought food to you.

In Guugu Yimidhirr there are distinct indirect object (or ‘dative’) forms of the first- and second-person singular pronouns.

Nyulu ngadhu buurraay wudhi.
He gave me water.
Ngayu nhunu mayi maandi.
I brought you food.
  buurraay water
  wudhi gave
  mayi food, vegetable food
  maandi bring
  maandi brought (past tense of maandi)

For the other persons and numbers, the dative and accusative forms are the same.

Nyudu nhunu mayi wudhi.
You gave him food.

Dhana ngalin mayi maandi.
They brought us two food.

When a noun is the indirect object of a transitive verb, then it combines with a special ending or suffix to give its dative form. The suffix is -bi if the noun ends in a consonant and -wi if it ends in a vowel.

Ngayu Billy-wi mayi wudhi.
I gave food to Billy.

Nyulu dyin-gurr-bi minha maandi.
He brought meat to his sister.
  dyin-gurr younger sister
  minha meat

(Notice that the word dyin-gurr “sister” changes to dyin-gurr- when the suffix -bi is added. Most noun endings in Guugu Yimidhirr cause such lengthening on words of two syllables if the word ends with a consonant other than n. Be on the lookout for lengthening in the later examples.)

The dative form is used in another, clearly related meaning, which we have already seen in the phrase nhunu gudaa “your dog”; it expresses what might be called ordinary possession.

  buurraay ngadhu
  my water

  mayi nhunu your food

  nhunu ganggal
  his/her child

  ngalin bayan
  our house (of the two of us)

  ganggal child
  bayan house

Similarly, noun possessors require the dative suffix.

  yarrga-wi galga
  the boy’s spear

  ganggala-bi mayi
  the child’s food

  yarrga boy
  galga spear

Dative forms of nouns and pronouns are used to express sentences that in English would use the verb “have.”

Bayan nhunu wunaa.
He has a house. (lit.: his house exists.)

Mayi gabiir-bi guya.
The girl has no food.

  wunaa exist
  gabiirr girl
  guya lacking, nonexistent, not

Table 4.3 summarizes the different dative forms for nouns and pronouns.

All languages have shifters, including personal pronouns, that connect speech to the world by pointing at objects (or places or moments); demonstratives like this and that (and here and now) have this character. One particular act we perform frequently in speech is to give something its name, or to identify it.

Yiyi ngadhu bayan.
This is my house.

Nhanyun bana ngadhu biiba.
That man is my father.
TABLE 4.3 Dative Case Marking

1. Personal Pronouns
(a) First and second singular have distinct forms:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st person sing.</th>
<th>2nd person sing.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ngayu “I”</td>
<td>nyundu “you”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nganhi</td>
<td>nhina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ngadhu</td>
<td>nhanu</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(b) For all other personal pronouns, the dative form is the same as the accusative form (see Table 4.2).

2. Nouns
(a) If the noun ends in a consonant, add -bi. (The second syllable of a two-syllable word ending in a consonant other than -n is lengthened.)

dyin-gurr younger sister  dyin-gurr-bi to the sister, the sister’s
yarraman horse  yarraman-bi to the horse, the horse’s
(b) If the noun ends in a vowel, add -wi.

yarrga boy  yarrga-wi to the boy, the boy’s

Yiyi yugu.
This is (called) “yugu” (wood).

yiyi this, here
bama person (especially Aboriginal person)
nhayun that, there
biiba father
yugu wood

Notice that in Guugu Yimidhirr there is no separate word corresponding to the English word is. In equational sentences (of the form “X is Y”) Guugu Yimidhirr simply puts X and Y together.

3.3 Subjects and Objects
Let’s look again at the nominative pronouns. These forms are used in two different sorts of context: as subjects of intransitive verbs:

Ngayu ganaa.
I’m well.

Ngayu dhadaa.
I’m going to go.

and as subjects of transitive verbs:

Ngayu Billy nhaadhi.
I saw Billy.
Ngayu nhanu mayi maandii.
I’ll bring you food.

Since these two ‘functions’ both employ the nominative forms, and since in both cases the pronoun serves as the ‘subject’ of the verb, on what grounds may one distinguish the two cases at all? For one thing, not all Guugu Yimidhirr pronouns have a single form that can occupy both sorts of position. Consider the interrogative pronoun wanhu.

Wanhu gaga-dhirr?
Who is sick?
Wanhu dhadaara?
Who is going?
gaga-dhirr sick

These intransitive sentences are correct, but it is impossible to say:

*Wanhu nhanu mayi wudhi?
(Who gave you food?)

Instead, Guugu Yimidhirr has an entirely different word, wanhdhu, that serves precisely as the subject of transitive verbs.

Wanhdhu nhanu mayi wudhi?
Who gave you food?
Wanhdhu Billy nhaadhi?
Who saw Billy?

And although a transitive verb cannot have wanhu as its subject, it can have wanhu as its object.

Nyundu wanhu nhaadhi?
Whom did you see?
If we diagram the pronoun forms that can serve in various capacities—as subjects and objects in intransitive and transitive sentences—we see two patterns. (Refer to Table 4.4.) In one case, the same form *(ngayu)* is used for subjects of both intransitive and transitive verbs, and a special accusative form is used for the objects of transitive verbs. In the other case, the same form serves as the subject of intransitive verbs and object of transitive verbs, and a special form *(wanhdhu)* is required as the subject of transitive verbs. The first pattern, with a nominative case for subjects and an accusative case for objects, is common throughout the world and predominates in the well-known languages of Europe. (Russian is a typical nominative/accusative language—see Chapter III in the companion volume. English once had this pattern for all nominal expressions and, as we have seen, retains it for pronouns.)

The second pattern, in which the form used for intransitive subjects and transitive objects is often called the “absolutive” form and the special form for transitive subjects the “ergative,” is considerably less frequent; although languages that display this pattern in some parts of their grammatical systems are widely distributed, occurring in every continent. In Guugu Yimidhirr both patterns coexist in the marking on nouns and pronouns; for in Guugu Yimidhirr nouns and a few pronouns follow the absolutive/ergative pattern, while personal pronouns follow the nominative/accusative pattern. (Some American Indian languages show the same split between an ergative/absolutive pattern for nouns and a nominative/accusative pattern for pronouns. Georgian, a language of the Caucasus, has an ergative pattern with perfective sentences but not with those in other tenses or aspects. A similar split holds in Yucatec, which like other Mayan languages—including Jacaltec [see Chapter I]—exhibits an ergative/absolutive pattern not by noun suffixes but in the system of pronominal cross-reference on verbs.)

Let’s examine the ergative/absolutive pattern more closely. The greetings now complete, our hypothetical conversation continues.

_Ngayu gaga-dhirr._

I'm not feeling well.

**TABLE 4.4 Two Patterns of Subject/Object Marking**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transitive subject</th>
<th><em>ngayu</em></th>
<th><em>wanhdhu</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intransitive subject</td>
<td><em>ngayu</em></td>
<td><em>wanhu</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitive object</td>
<td><em>nganhi</em></td>
<td><em>wanhu</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

_Ngaanii? Nyundu buli?_

_Why? Did you fall down?_

_Ngayu gaari buli. Nganhi dhuurngay._

_I didn’t fall down. I was pushed._

* ngaanii why? 
* bulii fall down

In this last sentence _dhuurngay_ is the past tense of the transitive verb _dhuurngal_ “push.” And as we know _nganhi_ is the accusative (or object) form of the first-person singular pronoun. Thus this sentence means, word for word, “me pushed”—roughly comparable to the English passive sentence “I was pushed.” Another translation with an indefinite subject is possible: “Somebody pushed me.” In Guugu Yimidhirr such a sentence with no overt subject is quite ordinary; the subject simply does not appear, and there is nothing special about the form of either object or verb.

The natural response now is to ask “Who did the pushing? Who pushed you?” (a question the reader should be able to construct from the words he or she already knows.) The special ergative form _wanhdhu_ has precisely the properties needed to query the actor, the subject of the verb _dhuurngay_, the pusher.

_Wanhdhu nhina dhuurngay?_

_Who pushed you?

Just as Guugu Yimidhirr allows transitive sentences with no overt subject, so too does it allow transitive sentences with no explicit object. Thus one can ask simply:

_Wanhdhu dhuurngay?_

_Who pushed?_

Here, of course, the object is understood to be _nhina_ “you”; prior conversation has already established who was pushed. (How do you think one might ask “Who got pushed?” Hint: use the “absolutive” form of the pronoun for “who.”)

The first speaker, prodded by his interlocutor’s questions, now reveals who the culprit was:

_Billy-ngan nganhi dhuurngay._

_Billy pushed me._
Here all the parts of the sentence are familiar except the special ending -ngun on Billy. This is an ergative suffix that marks the proper noun Billy as the subject of dhuurrngay.

A noun with the -ngun suffix is functionally parallel to the form wanhdhu, and the unsuffixed noun is like the absolutive form wanhu. This is clear from the following sentences:

*Billy dhadaa.*
Billy is going to go.

*Ngayu Billy nhaadhi.*
I saw Billy.

*Billy-ngun nganhi nhadhi.*
Billy saw me.

As we can see from Table 4.5, the noun Billy follows the ergative/absolutive pattern of wanhdhu/wanhu rather than the nominative/accusative pattern of personal pronouns. In fact, all nouns in Guugu Yimidhirr follow the ergative/absolutive pattern. The unsuffixed form occurs when a noun is the subject of an intransitive verb or the object of a transitive verb; when a noun is the subject of a transitive verb, an ergative suffix is attached to it.

*Yarraman-ngun nhina dhuurrngay.*
The horse pushed you.

*Gudaa-ngun yarrga dyinday.*
The dog bit the boy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>gundal</th>
<th>hit, kill</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dambil</td>
<td>break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yarraman</td>
<td>horse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dyindal</td>
<td>bite, peck</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Guugu Yimidhirr grammar here poses a puzzle for us: Why is there one pattern for pronouns but a different pattern for nouns? To find part of the answer requires that we examine more closely the sentence roles that different case markings distinguish (as such systems of special pronominal forms or of special noun endings are usually called). The nominative/accusative pattern marks subjects differently from objects; the ergative/absolutive patterns lump together intransitive subjects and transitive objects and distinguish these from transitive subjects. We can abbreviate these different sentence functions as follows: S means intransitive subject, O means transitive object, and A (for actor or agent) means transitive subject. Nouns in these different functions can have quite different roles in the actions described, depending on the meanings of the words involved.

Consider, first, the subjects of intransitive verbs (nouns in function S). An intransitive sentence by definition makes some statement about a single principal noun phrase.

*The little dog laughed.*
(Tells us what the little dog did.)

*The stone rolled away.*
(Tells us what happened to the stone.)

*The plot thickened.*
(. . . or to the plot.)

*The funny little man split into a thousand pieces.*
(. . . or to the funny little man.)

In intransitive sentences, the subject is sometimes the actor (the one who laughs, for example), sometimes the patient (the one that rolls or splits), and sometimes merely the neutral receptacle for some predicated property (color, existence, etc.). Sometimes the subject is part actor and part patient, both initiating action and undergoing its effects. Contrast:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transitive subject</th>
<th>ngau</th>
<th>(nominative)</th>
<th>wanhdhu</th>
<th>(ergative)</th>
<th>Billy-ngun</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intransitive subject</td>
<td>ngau</td>
<td>wanhu</td>
<td>(absolutive)</td>
<td>Billy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitive object</td>
<td>nganhi</td>
<td>wanhu</td>
<td>(accusative)</td>
<td>“I”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“who”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Billy”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The bird flew out the window.

(Subject is both agent and patient.)

The Frisbee flew out the window.

(Subject is patient only.)

or:

The child skipped.

The record skipped.

Thus a noun in an S function can have one or more of a variety of roles in the event or action depicted in a sentence.

In a transitive sentence, on the other hand, there are typically two major noun phrases. The subject (function A) is usually an actor who does something; the object (function O) is the thing to which something is done, the patient.

The cat put the rat on the mat.

(Tells us what the cat did to the rat.)

The funny little man split the queen into a thousand pieces.

(Tells us how Rumplestiltskin repaid his tormentor.)

In most cases the actor will be animate, capable of independent initiative. The sentence will emphasize the actor's operation on the patient, whose own potential activity (if any) is thus deemphasized. (The rat isn't just on the mat; the cat put it there. She didn't just split; she split her.) Of course, not all transitive sentences, at least in English, fit this pattern, but this is the typical form of a transitive sentence.

The entities of the world thus fall into two natural categories. Some things—inanimate objects, stones, trees, food, etc.—are natural patients or objects, often acted upon but infrequently themselves actors. Other things—typically human beings, but also animals (occasionally machines, etc.)—are likely potential actors, capable of initiating and carrying out operations on other things.

For nouns that denote things in the first category, the absolutive/ergative patterning has a certain naturalness. Consider the following sentences:

The tree fell.

I felled the tree.

In both sentences more or less the same thing happens to the tree; it falls. In the first "tree" is the subject of the intransitive verb "fell"; in the second it is the object of the transitive verb "felled." The word yugu "tree" has the same absolutive form in both the corresponding Guugu Yimithirr sentences:

Yugu bull.

Ngayu yuga bandi.

handil: chop, fell.

Many languages have verb pairs, like "fall" and "felled," that hold constant the relationship of the intransitive subject and the transitive object. Think of such English verbs as "roll" (intransitive) and "rolled" (transitive—i.e., "cause to roll, set rolling"), "open" ("come to be open") and "opened" ("cause to be open"), or even "die" and "killed." (Can you think of other such verb pairs? Can you think of any intransitive/transitive pairs that do not hold constant the relationship between S and O functions? See Chapter II for a discussion of this aspect of the grammar of Maninka verbs.) Guugu Yimithirr also has a productive system of deriving from intransitive verbs corresponding "causative" transitive verbs, meaning "cause to X" where X is the intransitive verb.

Yugu bull.

The tree fell.

Ngayu yugu buli-man.

I made the tree all.

Nambal dudy.

The rock rolled away.

Yaruga-ngun nambal dudaay-man.

The boy rolled the rock away.

nambal: rock (also means "money")

dudaay: run, roll

Nouns that denote inanimate, concrete things are natural subjects for the intransitive members of such verb pairs (which mean "something happened to ____") and similarly are natural objects for the corresponding transitive verbs (which mean "____ caused something to happen to ____").

Nouns that denote these "natural patients" can be subjects of transitive verbs as well. (That is, inanimate things can cause other things to happen, although they cannot properly be said to "act"). But it is precisely to such nouns that the special ergative endings attach, in the A function.
Yugu-ngan bayan dumi.
The tree crushed the house (i.e., by falling on it).

Galga-ngun nganhi daaamay.
The spear speared me (i.e., it was thrown at me).

The unsuffixed absolutive form of such nouns thus coincides with their normal patient or object status (in functions $S$ and $O$); the ergative form marks the atypical situations in which such nouns are in the $A$ function.

On the other hand, the nominative/accusative pattern of case marking seems especially appropriate for first- and second-person pronouns. These words denote entities that clearly belong to the class of potential or likely actors: the people actually present, taking part in a conversation. Speaker and hearer are certainly qualified actors (being human, conscious, and active), whose own doings are salient topics for speech.

Ngayu buli.
I fell down.

Nyundu duday.
You ran away.

Ngali mayi budal.
We two will eat food.

*budal* eat

Personal pronouns in Guugu Yimidhirr exhibit normal nominative form when they act as subjects, in both $S$ and $A$ functions. It is on those occasions when they are robbed of activity—when they are the patients of the actions of others—that special accusative forms appear.

Nganhi daaamay.
Somebody speared me.

Dyaarba-ngun nhina dudaay-mani.
The snake chased you (i.e., made you run).

*dyaarba* snake

It is thus the expected, normal situation when a pronoun is in the $A$ function and an inanimate thing is in the $O$ function.

Ngayu galga dumi.
I broke the spear

In such a case the pronoun is nominative and the noun is in absolutive form. A reversal of the expected roles (when the inanimate thing acts on me) engenders special forms of both pronoun and noun.

Galga-ngun nganhi daaamay.
The spear speared me.

What becomes of nouns that denote likely or potential actors: nouns for humans, or for animals? As nouns, such words in Guugu Yimidhirr receive ergative/absolutive case marking. But it is these nouns that typically occur together with third-person pronouns, inflected on the nominative/accusative pattern. Let's look more closely at this situation.

We have already seen sentences in which a noun and a pronoun occur together.

Nyulu Billy ganaa.
Billy is OK. (lit., He Billy is OK.)

The subject of this intransitive sentence is *Billy*, a proper noun. The pronoun *nyulu* adjoined to it is seemingly redundant, although we have seen that it shows that Billy is an animate being (since the pronoun *nyulu* cannot stand for an inanimate noun.)

In fact, Guugu Yimidhirr as a rule adjoins a third-person pronoun to an animate (especially a human) noun in $S$, $O$, or $A$ function. This is especially likely to happen in a sentence that introduces the noun as a new topic of conversation—when it initiates a discourse in which the noun figures prominently.

Nyulu Billy-ngun nganhi dhuurngay.
Billy pushed me.

Nyulu Billy gaday.
Billy came.

Ngayu nhangu Billy gunday.
I hit Billy.

(Each of these sentences gives special prominence to the noun phrase represented by *Billy* plus the adjoined pronoun.) In other words, in the case of a human noun, *both* the ergative/absolutive noun pattern and the nominative/accusative pronoun pattern co-occur, and they unambiguously distinguish between the three possible sentence functions.

Table 4.6 presents these three functions diagrammatically. Here we see the motivation behind the fact that only animate, and usually only human, nouns can be replaced by third-person pronouns.
These are exactly the nouns that denote members of the category of potential actors. It is, therefore, not surprising that these are also the nouns that can occur together with (or be replaced by) personal pronouns, which as we have seen are inflected on a pattern appropriate to potential actors. As we might predict, inanimate nouns do not allow the adjoined third-person pronoun in either subject or object position.

**Yugu-ngun nganhí gunday.**
The stick hit me.
(Not: *Nyulu yugu-ngun...*, if nyulu is to refer to the stick.)

**Ngayu galga dumbi.**
I broke the spear.
(Not: *Ngayu nhangu galga....*, if nhangu is to refer to galga.)

When a pronoun does appear in a sentence, we know that it must refer to something animate, probably a person, and not to an inanimate object.

**Ngayu Billy nhaadhí, nhangu gunday.**
I saw Billy and I hit him.

(Notice how the two parts of this sentence are chained together so that the noun object of the first clause appears in the second clause as an accusative pronoun. And notice further that the subject is not repeated in the second clause.) But:

**Ngayu yugu nhaadhí, nhangu gunday.**
cannot mean "I saw a stick, and I hit it (the stick)." (Why not?) Instead it must mean "I saw a stick, and I hit *him* (i.e., someone already mentioned)."

In much the same way, a sentence like:

**Nyulu galga-ngun nganhí daamay.**
cannot mean "The spear (lit: it the spear) speared me" because *nyulu* cannot refer to the spear. Instead, *nyulu* must refer to some person (whose identity is understood from what has gone before in the conversation). In this case, the ergative ending on *galga* signifies not the transitive subject, actor, or first cause, but rather the *instrument* by
which the action was carried out. Thus, the sentence means:

He speared me with a spear.

In such a sentence the ergative suffix is doing a different (though clearly related) sort of job in the sentence, still marking something instrumental in bringing the action about, but not marking the active agent.

As a result, a single sentence can have two noun phrases with ergative marking, one for the agent and the other for the instrument.

[Nyulu Billy-ngun] [yugu-ngun] ngandi gunday.
Agent Instrument Object Verb
Billy hit me with a stick.

3.4 Animate and Inanimate Nouns,
Alienable and Inalienable Possession

The contrast between animate and inanimate nouns thus affects both the interpretation of an ergative suffix (animate nouns are generally interpreted as actors and inanimate nouns as instruments, if they have ergative endings), and the possibilities of pronominalization (animate nouns can be replaced by or adjoined to third-person pronouns, but inanimate nouns cannot). In fact, the distinction between animate and inanimate nouns figures in other areas of the language as well, and it intersects with a difference between two kinds of possession. We have seen that dative forms of nouns and pronouns express ordinary possession.

Yiyi ngadhu yarraman.
This is my horse.

Yiyi yarrga-wi galga.
This is the boy’s spear.

Ordinary possession is a transitory, often socially constituted, relationship between a thing and a person or being that has control over it (rights to its use, its disposal, etc.). Several features characterize ordinary possession: first, generally only human beings (and very occasionally animals) are able to exercise this sort of control over their possessions. (In our society it is also possible to talk, in an extended sense, of institutions possessing things: “the Chase Manhattan Bank’s oilfields,” “the Army’s stock of antipersonnel weapons,” etc. In English there are also certain abstract nouns that both inanimate and animate things can “possess”; for example, we can say both “the villain’s demise” and “the forest’s destruction.”) But a rock cannot have a house in the same sense that, say, a man can (although, of course, there can be a house for a rock). In a similar way, I cannot give food to a tree in the same sense that I can give food to a child (to have, to eat, etc.) Only potential recipients can be ordinary possessors; that is, precisely those nouns that allow adjoined pronouns in Guugu Yimidhirr (nouns denoting humans or other animate beings) are potential indirect objects or possessors. Only these nouns can take the dative ending -bi-wi in this possessive sense.

There is, of course, another sort of possession in regard to which things as well as people can be possessors. This is the relationship between a thing and its parts. We can talk about “the man’s foot” and “the foot of the mountain”; or “the back of the man” and “the back of the house.” Such a part-whole relationship is often called “inalienable possession,” since a part cannot be separated from its whole in the same way that an ordinary possession can be separated from its owner.

In English, possession can be represented by at least two different constructions:

X’s Y
and:

Y of X
Thus, we have:

the parson’s bulletproof vest
and:

the bulletproof vest of the parson

In many cases, the choice between one construction or the other seems more or less indifferent:

the house’s hilltop location
the location of the house on a hilltop
a woman’s position in her family
the position of a woman in her family
the car’s acceleration
the acceleration of the car

When we talk about parts, however, there seems to be a difference between animate and inanimate possessors. Thus we can say “the man’s
head” but not “the line’s head” (rather: “the head of the line”), or “the horse’s mouth” but not “the cave’s mouth.” In fact, inanimate nouns often allow an entirely different construction to express the part/whole relationship.

- the refrigerator’s door (questionable)
  the door of the refrigerator (correct, but somewhat awkward)
  the refrigerator door

In the last example, whole and part are simply put together with no overt mark of the possessive. This structure is frequently, but by no means always, successful:

- the top of the tree
  the tree top
- the foot of the tree
  the tree foot.

Here, then, English distinguishes, within the category of inalienable possession, between animate and inanimate nouns, with animate nouns using the X’s Y or Y of X constructions, and with inanimate nouns using only the Y of X or the more restricted X Y constructions.

Another interesting, if less conspicuous, reflex of the interrelated distinctions of animate/inanimate and alienable/inalienable possession in English appears in sentences like:

I patted George on the head.

which seems a somewhat more natural way of saying:

I patted George’s head.

(This latter sentence seems, somewhat oddly, to suggest that I could pat George’s head without patting him in the bargain.) But the sentence:

I patted George’s watch.

is not equivalent to the very dubious sentence:

I patted George on the watch.

Seemingly only parts (of the body, of some larger whole) allow a construction like:

Verb X in/on the Y.

where X is the whole and Y is the part. Such an expression will be equivalent to one of the form:

Verb X’s Y

when what happens to the part also happens, in some sense, to the whole. Thus, the verb in question affects the possibility of the in/on the formulation. For example, we can say:

I ran over George’s big toe.

but:

I ran over George on/in the big toe.

seems doubtful, because, though I may have run over his toe, I didn’t actually run him over. But the fact that the whole as well as the part must be affected by the action seems to disallow this sort of construction with inalienable entities and their parts. So, for example, though one can say:

I dented the door of the car.

and, although when I dent the door I at the same time dent the car, it does not seem possible to say:

I dented the car in/on the door.

Although the details are complex, in English, the division between animate and inanimate possessors crosscuts the division between alienable and inalienable possession, with varying constructional possibilities for each case.

The same distinctions operate in Guugu Yimidhurr, although the syntactic realization of the facts is somewhat different. First, as we have seen, inanimate nouns cannot be recipients (indirect objects) and therefore are not possessors in the ordinary sense, with the -lij-wi suffix. In Guugu Yimidhurr inalienable possession requires no special case marking, nothing that corresponds to the dative marking of ordinary possession. The part and the ‘possessor’ merely appear together as a compound noun phrase, both nouns in the case appropriate to the function of the entire phrase in the sentence. (Recall the English example “the refrigerator door.”) This construction is possible with inanimate nouns:

Yugu njarraa munhi.

The tree’s) bark is black. (lit.: tree skin black)

njarraa skin
munhi black
And it works equally well with animate nouns:

(Nyulu) yarrga mangal munhi.
The boy’s hand is black. (lit.: he boy hand black)
mangal hand

In this sentence both yarrga and mangal appear in unmarked absolutive form. Contrast this sentence with another that displays ordinary possession, with a dative case ending:

(Nhangu) yarrga-wi bayan munhi.
The boy’s house is black.

(What accounts for the difference between nyulu in the first sentence and nhangu in the second?) Similarly, if a body part is the object of a transitive verb, both part and possessor appear in the case appropriate to an object.

Nyundu yarrga dhamal wagi.
You cut the boy’s foot.

Nyundu nganhi dhamal wagi.
You cut my foot.
dhamal foot
wagi cut

(What is the case of nganhi and why?) Contrast these sentences with the following:

Nyundu yarrga-wi ngamu nhaadhi.
You saw the boy’s mother.

Nyundu ngadhu ngamu nhaadhi.
You saw my mother.
ngamu mother

We see that Guugu Yimidhirr uses the -bil-wi suffix, with animate possessors, for ordinary possession. For both animate and inanimate nouns Guugu Yimidhirr represents the part/whole relationship by simply putting whole and part together, in the form [X Y] (plus case). The situation is diagrammed in Table 4.7.

Can you now translate the following sentences? (Check in the
glossary at the end of the chapter for words you do not recognize or whose meanings you don’t remember.)

Nyulu gabirri-ngun yarrga-wi ngamu mangal wagi.
Ngayu nhamu biiba dhamaal daamay.
Nyulu nhina dhamal galga-ngun daamay.

When a body part is called upon to act as the subject of a transitive verb, both part and possessor receive the case appropriate to sentence function A (ergative for nouns, nominative for pronouns), hence;

Nyulu yarrga-ngun mangaal-ngun nganhi gunday.
The boy’s hand hit me. (i.e., the boy hit me with his hand.)

(Notice the two different interpretations of the -ngun suffix.)

Ngayu nhina dhuurrngay dhamal-ngun.
I pushed you with my foot.

The same sort of thing happens when a body part is the object of a transitive verb.

Nyundu nganhi dhamal wagi.
You cut my foot.

Here dhamal is in absolutive form, appropriate to a noun in O function; and nganhi is the appropriate accusative object form of the first-person pronoun.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ordinary possession</th>
<th>Inanimate nouns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>XY -bil-wi Y yarrga Wi ngamu</td>
<td>XY yugu ngarren the treet’s bark</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inalienable possession</th>
<th>Animate nouns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
3.5 Further Elaborations of the Case System

Guugu Yimidhirr performs rather complex work with case endings, not simply distinguishing the syntactic functions of S, A, and O. We have already seen that the ergative suffix -ngun can signify either actor or instrument, depending on the noun in question. There are also different ergative endings that suggest action remote in time. Instead of simply:

Nyulu gabiirr-ngun nganhi wagi nambaal-ngun.
The girl cut me with a rock.

one can say:

Nyulu gabiirr-nda nganhi wagi nambaal-nda.
The girl cut me with a rock some time ago.

using the “remote” ergative suffix -nda. Guugu Yimidhirr thus accomplishes with case endings what English expresses with an adverbial expression or a special verb tense.

Let’s consider the nuances of meaning connected with the Guugu Yimidhirr dative case. We have seen that an inanimate thing cannot be, in any ordinary sense, a possessor. Nor can it be a beneficiary, an indirect object. Instead, the -bil-wi ending attached to inanimate nouns has a locational sense, encompassing both motion towards an object and rest when it reaches it.

Ngayu dhaday nambaal-bi.
I went to the rock.

Ngayu mayi maandi nambaal-bi.
I took food to (i.e., up to) the rock.

Ngayu dagaadhi nambaal-bi.
I sat on the rock.

dagaadhi sat

The inanimate counterpart to an animate indirect object is thus seen to be a location instead of a beneficiary. Whether motion or rest is involved depends largely on the verb in question.

Ngamu ngadhu bayan-bi nhin-gaalonggal.
My mother is sitting in/at the house.

Wahari ngamu ngadhu
My mother is going.

goong goong go
My mother is going.

Ngamu ngadhu bayan-bi dhadaara.
My mother is going to the house.

Nhin-gal sit, be located

We can provisionally represent the noun cases we have met. (See Table 4.8.)

A separate ending -nganu indicates motion away from a place. (This is called the “ablative” case.)

Ngayu ngulgu gadjay yuwaal-nganu.
Yesterday I came from the beach.

Ngadhu ngamu dhaday bayan-nganu.
My mother went from the house.

Nyulu varrga-ngun galga nangguurr-nganu maandi.
The boy took the spear from the camp.

Ngulgu yesterday
Gadhaa come
Yuwaal beach
Nangguurr camp

The ablative case also has a related temporal and causal sense (shared, incidentally, by the English preposition “from”).

Ngayu maayi-nganu nangguurr-bi dhadaa.
I will go to camp after eating. (lit.: from food. Compare:
This office will be closed from Friday.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Ending</th>
<th>Meaning with animate nouns</th>
<th>Meaning with inanimate nouns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Absolutive</td>
<td>zero ending</td>
<td>S, O</td>
<td>S, O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ergative</td>
<td>-ngun, -nda (remote)</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A or Instrument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dative</td>
<td>-bil-wi</td>
<td>Indirect object, possessor</td>
<td>Location, motion towards</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Nyula bini mugan-nganh.
He died from the cold.

mugan-nganh cold

It is clear that the two meanings of the -bil/-wi suffix divide along the same lines that distinguish the agent and instrument interpretations of the ergative suffix. Just as an inanimate noun cannot in any ordinary sense be a possessor, a human being is not normally a location. We can see this most clearly with personal pronouns. It is at least odd to say:

George is at me.

and there seems to be a difference between the sort of motion/location expressed in:

George came to the house.

and

George came to me.

—at least if by “me” one means my person and not just, say, my body. English seems to make a related distinction between animate and inanimate destinations (or “end points for motion”). All of the following sentences are possible:

I sent the package to John.
I sent the package to England.
I brought the food to Mary.
I brought the food to the picnic.

Both animate and inanimate destinations here seem to be treated in the same way. The verbs bring and send allow another word order, but only when the “destination” is animate:

I sent John the package.
*I sent England the package.
I brought Mary the food.
*I brought the picnic the food.

When we talk of sending a package to John or bringing food to Mary, neither John nor Mary is simply a place; instead we understand them to be recipients. Inanimate places or events cannot usually be recipients in the same sense, and they cannot then immediately follow verbs like bring and send as destinations. In a sentence like:

James Bond sent London a cable.

the word London stands for a good deal more than an inanimate location. And consider what makes a sentence like:

The President sent China thirty tons of surplus wheat.

more acceptable than one like:

The university sent the top of Mt. Everest an expedition.

In Guugu Yimithirr dative inflection can only be used with animate nouns to represent situations in which they are not merely destinations, but are directly affected by the actions involved, usually as recipients. Guugu Yimithirr uses an entirely different case, called ‘adessive’, to signify being in or coming into the conscious presence of an animate being. The case ending is -gal.

George ngadhun-gal nhin-gaalnggal.
George is staying (lit.: sitting with me. (i.e., in my company, under my care.)

George ngaiilin-gal gaday.
George came to (stay with, see) us two.

With verbs of speaking, the -gal suffix marks the person with whom one talks.

Nyula ngadhun-gal yirrgaalga.
He is talking to me.
yirrgaal talk, speak

Similarly, leaving someone’s presence is rendered by the ‘abessive’ suffix -ga.

George nhangun-ga gaday.
George came from (e.g., visiting) him.

(These pronominal forms are based on the dative pronoun, plus -n- for all singular pronouns, plus the appropriate case ending.)
Motion away from a place is marked with the ablative case, and motion away from a person is marked with the abessive case in a combined sentence like the following:

Nyulu duday dhaana-n-ga mangguarr-nganhr.
He ran away from them, from the camp.

The -ga suffix also represents the reverse of the dative. Where the dative marks the beneficiary, recipient, or possessor, the abessive marks the origin, source, or former possessor of an object.

Ngayu yarraman biiba-ga maani.
I took the horse from (my) father.

This sense extends even to inanimate nouns. Compare:

Nyulu yugu yalmba-nganh maani.
He took the tree from the sand hill. (i.e., he chopped it there and brought it away.)

Nyulu yugu yalmbaa-ga maani.
He took a tree of the sand hill. (i.e., a tree of the type that comes from the sand hill.)

yalmba  sand hill

(You will see that the suffix -nganhr does not cause words that end in a vowel to lengthen, although the suffix -ga does. Several other case suffixes cause both vowel- and consonant-final words to lengthen.)

Table 4.9 summarizes these interrelated case usages. With these four cases an animate noun represents a possessor or a conscious presence; an inanimate noun represents a location.

Three final examples will demonstrate the range and power of the Guugu Yimidhirr case system. There is a suffix -ngu that can express the goal or purpose of an action or the intended function for an object.

Ngayu gadaay mayii-ngu.
I came for food.

Nyulu bayan galgay gudaa-ngu.
He made a house for the dog.

Yiyyi galga gudyaun-ngu.
This is a spear for fish.

balgal  make, do, wash
gudya  fish

This 'purposive' case also allows a Guugu Yimidhirr speaker to incorporate into a sentence a noun that is not, syntactically, subject or object, but that is involved in some way in the action or event depicted.

Nyulu wanggaar nhin-gaalngal ngaliin-ngu.
He is waiting for us outside. (lit.: he above is sitting for us.)

wanggaar  above

This device occurs particularly frequently when an idea that we might express in English with a transitive verb is rendered in Guugu Yimidhirr by an adjective or other intransitive construction that does not admit a direct object. For example, instead of using a transitive verb like "fear," Guugu Yimidhirr uses the adjective yinil "fearful, afraid," with the object that inspires fear marked by -ngu.

Nyulu Billy yinil dyaaarbaa-ngu.
Billy is afraid of snakes.

In much the same way Guugu Yimidhirr expresses desire by means of the word wawu "soul, breath, insides" plus the derivational formative -dhirr (which means "with"). The object of one's desire carries the purposive ending.

Ngayu wawu-dhirr mayii-ngu.
I want food. (lit.: I am with-soul for-food.)
### TABLE 4.10 Composite View of Guugu Yimidhirr Cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Personal pronoun form</th>
<th>Noun suffix</th>
<th>animate referents</th>
<th>inanimate referents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nominative</td>
<td>ngayu, nyundu, nyulu, etc.</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>S, A (personal pronouns only)</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accusative</td>
<td>nganhi, nhina, nhangu, etc.</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>O (personal pronouns only)</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolutive</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>zero</td>
<td>S, O (nouns but not pronouns)</td>
<td>S, O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ergative</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>-ngual/nda (remote)</td>
<td>A (nouns, but not pronouns)</td>
<td>A, Instrument</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### II—locational cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Personal pronoun form</th>
<th>Noun suffix</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dative</td>
<td>ngadhu, nhanu, nhangu, etc.</td>
<td>-bil/wi</td>
<td>possessor, beneficiary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ablative</td>
<td>Dative form + -nganl</td>
<td>-nganl</td>
<td>from possession of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adessive</td>
<td>Dative form + -gal</td>
<td>-gal</td>
<td>in or into presence of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absessive</td>
<td>Dative form + -ga</td>
<td>-ga</td>
<td>from possession or presence of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purposive</td>
<td>Dative form + -ngu</td>
<td>-ngu</td>
<td>goal, purpose, intended effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comitative</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>-dhurr</td>
<td>accompaniment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privative</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>-mul</td>
<td>lack</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The ending -dhirr transforms a noun into an adjectivlike word that means “with _____” or “having _____. Thus one can say:

Ngayu gambahul-dhirm.
  I’m full, satisfied. (lit.: I am with stomach. This can also
  mean “pregnant.”)
  gambul     stomach

Here are some further examples:

Ngadhu dhawuungh gaday yarraman-dhirm.
  My friend came by horse.

Ngayu dingga-dhirm.
  I’m hungry.

(In modern Guugu Yimithirr there is no word *dingga for “hunger” and
only the compound exists.) This ‘comitative’ suffix is, in fact, part of the
name Guugu Yimithirr. Guugu means “word” or “language.” Yimithirr
comes from the demonstrative root yi (which occurs in some forms as
yim- or yimi-) and means literally “this-with”; that is, “this way, in
this way.” Hence, Guugu Yimithirr means “speaking this way” or “this kind
of talk”—a literally descriptive label for the language.

Completing the comitative suffix -dhirr is a ‘privative’ suffix
-mul that means “without.”

Nyundu wawu-dhirm buurraay-ngu?
  Do you want water?

Ngayu wawu-mul.
  I don’t want (any).

Or consider the following short conversation. (Can you understand it?)

Ngayu dingga-dhirm.Ngayu wawu-dhirm mayii-ngu.
  Ma, ngali dhadas bayaan-bi mayii-ngu.

Personal pronouns occur with locational and purposive cases as
well. Pronouns use the same suffixes as nouns, attached to the dative
form of the pronoun (with an added -n on singular pronouns). For
example, the dative form of ngayu “I” is ngadhu. One says:

Nyulu ngadhu-n-gal dhadaa.
  He’s going to (be with) me.

Billy ngadhu-n-ga gaday.
  Billy came from (being with) me.

(What are the cases involved here?)

We can summarize the Guugu Yimithirr cases we have met in a
single composite chart. The first four cases in Table 4.10 interact to
delimit the syntactic functions of nouns and pronouns as subjects and
objects. Cases of the second group elaborate on further entities involved
in the action or event depicted in a sentence—providing locational and
dative complements or introducing auxiliary personnel. These cases also
maintain a systematic distinction between animate and inanimate things,
with distinct meanings when applied to nouns from different categories.
The last cases further expand the expressive potential of simple noun
endings—introducing goals, purposes, and accompaniments to action by
simple morphological mechanisms. Hopefully even this much abbrevi-
ated treatment conveys a picture of the richness of the system.

4 THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF SPEECH IN
TRADITIONAL GUUGU YIMITHIRR SOCIETY

The common Western theory of language, in a tradition that derives
from Aristotle, holds preeminent a language’s logical structure; its
capacity for conveying information or expressing propositions.
However, when Aboriginal Australians theorize and talk about language,
they concentrate on its social aspects. Language does not exist and
utterances do not occur in a social vacuum. Speech between two people
both expresses and helps to maintain the relationship between them. In
Guugu Yimithirr words are not simply linguistic units. They belong to
people (their rightful users), and they have striking social properties,
rendering them appropriate or inappropriate to different circumstances.
Moreover, the way one Guugu Yimithirr speaker chooses to speak to
another creates in large part the relationship they establish. The rela-
tionship, once set up, itself has consequences for future linguistic
interaction.

Both aspects of language—its systematic and logical properties on the
one hand and its social applications on the other—feed one another.
For to use language for social ends, speakers must master its grammar:
Guugu Yimithirr speakers, whether speaking in ordinary language or in
the respectful language, which we shall examine in this section, must
employ the system of case marking, along with all the other syntactic
devices of the language. (Although the respectful style uses special
4.1 Kinship and Geography

The Guugu Yimidhirr social universe is composed entirely of kin. Like many people throughout the world who live in limited, relatively small groups, Guugu Yimidhirr speakers apply classificatory principles to extend kinship to everyone with whom they come into contact. One’s family, of course, can be reckoned so as to extend a long way—from remote cousins and great-uncles, to half-kin and step-kin. In the Cape York Peninsula people employ a further classificatory device: every individual belongs to one of two great groups, or moieties, each of which has a representative animal as its symbol (its ‘totem’). One moiety has waandaar “white cockatoo,” the other ngurrara “black cockatoo.” One moiety is my own and my father’s; the other belongs to my mother and her brothers and sisters. In my moiety are also my siblings. In the other moiety I find my wife or husband. And so on. Moiety membership is a feature that goes well beyond tribal or linguistic boundaries, so that a person from a distant area, whose language one cannot understand, nonetheless has a moiety affiliation. Through such affiliation it is possible to assign a stranger to a likely and appropriate kin category. If I am from white-cockatoo moiety and you are someone about my age from the same moiety, even if we are strangers, we may agree to call one another “brother” or “sister.”

The system of moiety generalizes on local genealogical relationships to categorize every member of the social world. It divides the world into two sorts of people: members of “my moiety” and members of “their moiety.” If we distinguish further between generations (starting with one’s grandparents’ generation and going to one’s grandchildren’s generation—a total of five generations including one’s own), and between men and women, we will have a system that divides the whole society into twenty discrete categories, as shown in Table 4.11. For example, in the box marked X go men of my moiety of my parents’ generation. (This category includes my own father.) A person in the category marked Y is a woman of the other moiety of my parents’ generation. (My closest relative in this category would be my own mother.)

The Guugu Yimidhirr system of labelling relatives makes many more discriminations than does this simple chart, and it also omits distinctions that appear here. For example, in Guugu Yimidhirr there is only a single term for both males and females of the +2 generation at the upper left of the chart: gami. This term corresponds to the category of “same moiety person of grandparents’ generation.” It is the term one would apply to among others, one’s father’s father. (Can you imagine a woman to whom the term might also apply?) And, within the category of zero-generation males of my own moiety, Guugu Yimidhirr distinguishes yaba “older brother” from garga “younger brother.” Table 4.12 schematizes, in

But speech does not merely fit the social situation in which it occurs. The character of talk between two individuals symbolizes their whole relationship. With his mother-in-law a Guugu Yimidhirr man is guugu-mul “without words, speechless”—a diagnostic symptom of the restraint and avoidance that characterizes all his dealings with her. On the other hand, between two men who stand in the relationship of grandfather to grandson there are unreserved, often ribald relations; accordingly, their talk together is typically a kind of obscene verbal joking called guya-gurral (literally, “saying nothing,” i.e., “speaking nonsense.”)

In this section we shall be concerned first with the partitioning of the traditional Guugu Yimidhirr social universe; second, with the elaborations of Guugu Yimidhirr vocabulary that create a special vocabulary of respect; and finally, with the correspondences between social relationships and kinds of speech.
Table 4.11: Moiety Categorization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>My moiety</th>
<th>Their moiety</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+2 gen.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+1 gen.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 gen.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-1 gen.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-2 gen.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A highly simplified form, part of the Guugu Yimidhirr kinship terminology as seen from a man’s perspective. (An important difference in the kin terms used by men and women is this: a man calls his own children yumurr, but a woman calls her son dyuway and her daughter nguadhurr. This is because a man’s children belong to his own moiety, but a woman’s children belong to the opposite moiety, that of her husband.)

Where a single box in Table 4.12 has two entries there is a distinction of relative age (e.g., older/younger brother; older/younger sister). I call my father and his younger brothers biiba, but there is a different term, mugagay, reserved for my father’s oldest brother. Each term has a genealogical meaning; for example, biimuur means “father’s younger sister” (a Guugu Yimidhirr speaker might give “auntie” as an English equivalent). But by a classificatory extension, the term is also appropriate for an unrelated woman of my own moiety of the appropriate age, just as biiba may be applied to other men of the same moiety and generation as my own father.

A Guugu Yimidhirr man traditionally was supposed to marry a woman from the opposite moiety. One’s biiba “father” married one’s ngamu “mother” from the other side. Similarly, a mugur marries a biimuur; their daughter will be in the category of dyiiral—a word that means “wife.” It is clear that such a woman is precisely an appropriate bride for a man: she is of the right age, and she belongs to the right moiety. This sort of reasoning underlies the typical Guugu Yimidhirr formulation of what makes a good marriage. One should marry mugur-nganh (what is the case ending?): “from a mugur”—but “not too close”; that is, a) not from a closely related mugur (not from a real mother’s brother, for example), and b) hopefully from a distant area of the territory, which was subdivided into named locales.

Certain of a man’s relatives were dhadbul “sacred, forbidden, taboo” to him. Chief among these was his wife’s mother, his biwu, whose presence he strictly avoided. He also avoided, but nevertheless could still have some dealings with, his wife’s father, his ngadhina, and his wife’s brothers, called among other terms gaanyil. (A man was not obliged to avoid his wife’s younger sisters, whom he also called by the term djiiral “wife”; in a sense they were like wives to him, and he could joke with them freely, in ordinary Guugu Yimidhirr, just as he could with his actual wife.) The reader is invited to verify, by examining Table 4.12, that kin in the shaded categories are precisely those who might become a man’s dhadbul relatives through marriage: they are the parents and brothers of a woman a man might marry, his potential in-laws (or “affines”). The structural point is important, for although a man was obliged to use the special “brother-in-law” language with his actual wife’s kin, he could use it as a special sign of respect with any of these potential in-laws: for example, with biimuur who is a kind of potential mother-in-law. (It is worth repeating that women were less likely to use special respectful vocabulary with their fathers- and mothers-in-law than were men, possibly because as members of their husband’s group after marriage, they were in somewhat closer contact with their in-laws than were men with theirs.)

At the opposite extreme, certain kinsmen enjoyed extraordinary freedom and familiarity in their dealings with one another. A classificatory gami (same moiety grandparent) of the same sex was the
prototypical joking partner whom one could tease, insult, and goad, in both word and gesture. A gami and his gaminldharr (same moiety grandchild) were permitted a license completely beyond the bounds of behavior appropriate between ordinary acquaintances, let alone between dhabul relatives.

In the Guugu Yimidhirr area it might be more appropriate to speak of a “father tongue” than a “mother tongue.” For just as moiety membership came from the father, so too did one adopt as one’s own the language spoken by one’s father. Traditionally in the Guugu Yimidhirr area there were more than forty named tribal areas, each with distinctive ways of talking and idiosyncratic words for common objects and actions. (Although the dialects are all mutually intelligible, even the pronouns vary: inland Guugu Yimidhirr speakers say nganhdhaan for the first-person plural nominative pronoun “we”; speakers from coastal areas use ngana instead.) As one’s mother might well come from a distant area and thus speak a different version of Guugu Yimidhirr (perhaps a different language altogether if she came from another tribe) it frequently happened that a child grew up layung claim to his or her father’s language but also speaking, or at least knowing, a good many words from his or her mother’s language as well. Occasional contacts with more distant groups multiplied the words from other languages a person was likely to know, so that many Guugu Yimidhirr speakers were accomplished polyglots. It is important here to realize that it is the norm in Guugu Yimidhirr society for things to have alternate names. Everyone is likely to know two or three different ways of identifying common objects: their own word and some other people’s words as well. The device of substituting a respectful word for an everyday word when speaking with tabooed relatives is, therefore, similar to using someone else’s word in place of one’s own.

Here, then, are two outstanding features of traditional Guugu Yimidhirr society. On the one hand it was entirely subdivided into kin. Each person had a particular kin relationship with every other person in the community. Even a stranger from outside one’s own area could be assigned a categorical status as some sort of a relative, once certain (perhaps hypothetical) kin connections had been worked out. Accordingly, one’s personal relationships with everyone else were influenced by kin categories: every bitumur was to be treated with restraint; every gami was a potential joking partner. And this was true even of a stranger: if he turned out to be a classificatory gami (someone in the same category as my father’s father), I could joke with him; if she were a distant bitumur, I would watch my tongue. On the other hand, despite the interpersonal regularity created by this wide-ranging kinship system, the Guugu Yimidhirr area was linguistically heterogeneous, with many alternate ways of talking circulating throughout the area. It was in this context that the special “brother-in-law” language existed.

4.2 The Structure of the Guugu Yimidhirr Vocabulary of Respect

Guugu Yimidhirr speakers use the English word “deep” to describe the words of the respectful style, which is called gungu dhabul. Ordinary Guugu Yimidhirr words are to be used mundaal-gal—literally, “with the rest of them,” i.e., with people who are not dhabul. In fact, as we have seen, the very name gungu yimidhirr means “this kind of word; this kind of language”—it is a label that describes itself. Guungu yimidhirr or guungu nganhdharrn “our language” are terms one uses to contrast the local language with other Australian languages spoken farther away—guungu dhanangu “their language” or guungu ngarrbal “strange language.”

The dhabul style is also described as dani-manaarnaya “being soft or slow.” To speak respectfully is to avoid the strident tones and rapid speech that characterize ordinary conversation; one speaks to a brother-in-law or a father-in-law in a deliberately subdued voice, drawing out words and dropping into a near whisper. At the same time it is impolite to attempt physical proximity with one’s in-laws; instead one dili irrgaarrgala or wurrin irrgaarrgala—that is, speaks “sideways” or “crosswise,” neither facing one’s interlocutor nor, if it can be avoided, addressing him or her directly. (In areas to the north of Cooktown it was said that a man would avoid speaking to his father-in-law by addressing his dog instead!) This indirectness contrasts with ordinary Guugu Yimidhirr, which is said to be dhumbuurruga “straight out.”

The brother-in-law vocabulary is not in itself a full language separate from ordinary Guugu Yimidhirr. Instead it consists of a relatively small set of special words considered to be appropriate for highly polite and respectful speech. Since there were a number of alternate words for common items, the existence of a separate set of respectful words must have seemed perfectly reasonable. A Guugu Yimidhirr man once spoke of several different words he knew for “echidna” (a porcupinelike Australian animal):

Balgin-ga is porcupine. That’s my word. I got another word, too: nhulingara. You can use that word to brother-in-law and father-in-law. Some of these people call it barradhal. Well, I understand that guugu but that’s not my word. That’s their word—people who come from up Cape Flattery way.

Here the everyday word balgin-ga has a single brother-in-law equivalent. More frequently several different everyday words are replaced in formal brother-in-law speech by a single respectful word that spans the meaning of the whole set. For example, the verb bairl is the respectful word for the everyday dhadaa “go.” Thus, to say to one’s brother-in-law that:
Balin-ga dhaday.
The porcupine went away.

one must say, instead:

Nhalingarr bali.

But balil is also the brother-in-law equivalent of a number of other everyday verbs: gaynydyarr “crawl,” biilli “paddle (in a boat),” dhaarnbil “float, sail, drift,” yaalgal “limp,” daabal “wade,” etc. None of these everyday words can be used with a brother-in-law. But rather than have a separate respectful equivalent for each of these words, balil is used in brother-in-law speech as the equivalent for any of them. A word like dhaarnbil could be rendered more precisely in brother-in-law language by adding further qualification; and here the case system comes into play, for the same case endings are used in brother-in-law language as in everyday Guugu Yimidhirr. The brother-in-law equivalent for buurraay “water” is wabirr. A more specific way to say dhaarnbil in the respectful style is, thus, balil wabirr bi (can you supply a literal gloss?) Yaalgal “limp” may be better rendered as dyirrun balil. (Dyirrun is the brother-in-law equivalent of warra “bad.”) And so on. The principle resembles that described by R. M. W. Dixon for the mother-in-law language spoken by the Dyirbal people (south of Cairns), where the limited lexical resources of the respectful style are pushed to their limits to accommodate everything it would be possible to say in everyday language. The brother-in-law vocabulary itself is kept to a minimum, and syntactic and derivational devices are used heavily to express specific and detailed ideas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Everyday word</th>
<th>Brother-in-law equivalent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>balil</td>
<td>Nhalingarr “echidna”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dhadaa “go”</td>
<td>balil “go”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dhaarnbil “float, sail, drift”</td>
<td>(balil wabirr bi “go in water”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yaalgal “limp”</td>
<td>(dyirrun balil “go badly”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gaynydyarr “crawl”</td>
<td>etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>biilli “paddle”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>daabal “wade”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of course, the special brother-in-law vocabulary in Guugu Yimidhirr is used in somewhat restricted circumstances. Consider how one says “wife” in brother-in-law speech. One way is to use the word munamuna. In brother-in-law muna means “breast, milk”; reduplicated it simply means “woman.” The narrowly defined context surely helps clarify the meaning, for in conversation with his wife’s kin a man’s use of the word “woman” as a replacement for “wife” is a fairly transparent euphemism. Another equivalent for “wife” in brother-in-law is the expression yurrangan yamhaal. Yurrangan is the possessive (dative) form of yurra “you (all).” Yamhaal is the respectful equivalent of the everyday word bama “person.” Hence, yurrangan yamhaal means, literally, “your person”—again, surely a reasonable way for a man to speak about his wife in conversation with the people who gave her to him.

Since the correspondences between everyday and brother-in-law words are generally many to one, they provide evidence for superordinate categories in the Guugu Yimidhirr scheme of things. For example, in everyday Guugu Yimidhirr there are at least ten names for different types of kangaroo and wallaby, but there is no overall generic term for “kangaroo.” Purely on the basis of the ordinary terminology, there seems to be no Guugu Yimidhirr category of kangaroo but only a set of discrete kangaroo varieties. But the brother-in-law vocabulary groups all ten varieties under a single respectful word, daarralaangal. The category thus exists even though it is labelled only in the brother-in-law language. (See Table 4.14.)

The connections between single brother-in-law words and sets of everyday terms are sometimes less obvious. For instance, the single brother-in-law word dyinu encompasses a range of everyday words that form an apparent category comprising parts of the body with protruding bones and joints on the one hand (e.g., hip, chin, knee, elbow, wrist, anklebone, heelbone, armpit, crotch, and ribs), and certain small animals (including wild pheasant, water rat, worm, native cat, and some lizards) on the other. Whatever these items have in common, they are all referred to by the word dyinu in brother-in-law language. Other sets of everyday words collapse into single brother-in-law equivalents according to a clearer logic: the brother-in-law word baligirr stands in for words denoting leg, lap, shin, hip, pelvis, and calf; whereas the lowest parts of the human body are rendered in brother-in-law by a different word, buyithuyi, which replaces everyday words for foot, footprint, corn (on foot), shoes, ankle, heel, and toes.

Some everyday words, if they are pronounced in the proper slow and respectful manner, do not require replacement in conversation with a brother-in-law. The sentence:

Mayi guya.

There is no food.
The Social Context of Speech in Traditional Society

Ngayu nhangu midungadhi.
(Brother-in-law equivalent)

midungal see (Brother-in-law)

However, the second-person singular pronoun is replaced in brother-in-law speech by the plural pronoun yurra. The question:

Nyundu buurraay waami?
Did you find water? (Everyday)

waamil find

becomes, in brother-in-law style:

Yurra wabirr yudurrin?
yudurr find (Brother-in-law)

A speaker uses a second-person pronoun to refer to his interlocutor. When the speaker must treat the interlocutor with deference and respect, he may do so in part by means of various linguistic devices. He may use circumlocution or stylized indirection. Recall formal English style: “Will your Lordship have another slice of raisin toast?” “Allow me to escort Madame to the door.” Many languages use kin terms in order to refer to the hearer without making a direct reference. (Thus, our parody of tribal language: “I invite my white brother to enter the wikup.”) Another device is formally akin to the Guugu Yimidhirr brother-in-law use of yurra: French uses a plural pronoun vous as the polite form of a singular second-person pronoun tu, suggesting perhaps that a plural form that literally makes more of the hearer is more deferential than a singular form. That the same device for showing respect should have been developed in such widely separated regions (and a number of other Indo-European languages do the same sort of thing) attests both to the universality of the problem—expressing deference in speech—and to the naturalness of the solution.

Finally, there are in Guugu Yimidhirr some everyday words that have no equivalent whatsoever in the formal brother-in-law style. These are words that denote things about which one cannot speak with a father-in-law and brother-in-law. Of such words Guugu Yimidhirr speakers say: “You can’t say those words against your mother-in-law.” They include the everyday words for various sexual organs and sexual acts. To use such words within earshot of one’s in-laws would be to curse them, to be deliberately insulting. Plainly, sexual relations—of which the forbidden words are all metonymic reminders—are sensitive issues between a man and his wife’s parents and brothers; and the sensitivity is mirrored in the content of speech between them.
Thus, two sorts of features of everyday words seem to motivate the special brother-in-law vocabulary. On the one hand, an everyday word (having to do, for example, with sexual matters) may because of its meaning require at least a special brother-in-law word, different from the everyday; or it may be excised completely from speech with tabooed relatives. On the other hand, some everyday words seem to require alternate brother-in-law forms simply because they are familiar or ordinary; and in this case even an everyday word from a neighboring dialect or language may have the required properties as a respectful equivalent. These various possibilities are schematized in Table 4.14.

### Table 4.14 Everyday and Brother-in-law Vocabulary: Types of Correspondence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of correspondence</th>
<th>Everyday word</th>
<th>Brother-in-law word</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Everyday word survives in brother-in-law</td>
<td>badhuurr</td>
<td>badhuurr “type of fruit”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Everyday word does multiple service in brother-in-law</td>
<td>nyundu “you sg.” yubal “you dual” yurra “you plural”</td>
<td>yurra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. One-to-one replacement</td>
<td>balin-ga</td>
<td>nhalngurr “echidna”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Many-to-one replacement</td>
<td>gangurru “large kangaroo” gadaar “wallaby that lives on the flat” bibal “small scrub kangaroo” wudul “whip-tail kangaroo” etc.</td>
<td>daarrawalngan “kangaroo” (generic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Everyday word has no Brother-in-law equivalent</td>
<td>gulun “penis”</td>
<td>*** (no equivalent)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3 Respect (and Disrespect)

Let’s look a bit more closely at the sort of respect due a man’s in-laws. First, notice that there are at least two crosscutting dimensions of respect and avoidance. One has to do with kinship: a man is obliged to treat with respect certain people with whom he is related through his wife—in-laws (with the notable exception of a man’s wife’s sisters) become dhabil. Second, the fact that a man cannot speak at all to his mother-in-law suggests that special restraint operates across sexes: the relationship between a man and his wife’s mother is more delicate than that between him and his wife’s father or brothers. This cross-sex restraint will be discussed later.

Furthermore, as we can easily discern in our own behavior, there is more than one way to act deferentially. In Guugu Yimidhirr society more is involved in proper behavior with a brother-in-law or father-in-law than simply speaking with the special brother-in-law words, although the tenor of speech between tabooed kin is symptomatic of the tone of all their interactions.

First, as we have seen, brother-in-law utterances are soft and slow, contrasting strongly with ordinary Guugu Yimidhirr. When one’s father-in-law comes around, this is how one should act:

> Keep away! Don’t talk hard! Stay quiet! If your mother-in-law comes, she can’t talk. But your father-in-law can speak up. Nhanu dyiraat-gal yirrgaalga nyulu. (He’ll speak to your wife.) But nhanan-gal gaart (not with you). Your wife will ask him what he wants. But you can’t say, “Ngaanaa?” (What?).

Notice that the quality of a relationship between a man and his wife’s father is described specifically in terms of speech (or, more accurately, in terms of the absence of or limits on speech between them). Simply asking what someone wants, with the abrupt but quite ordinary word ngaanaa here exemplifies in microcosm all that must not take place between a man and his wife’s parents.

Speaking loudly and rapidly is associated not only with familiarity and informality but also with anger and scolding. One speaks softly to a brother-in-law and, accordingly, one doesn’t “fight him.”

I can’t fight him. If I do he just won’t talk. He won’t joke or tease or get angry. And I won’t growl at him. If he gets angry with me I won’t answer. I’ll just walk away.
Again, the nature of the relationship (respectful, deferential, polite) is expressed in terms of permissible speech interaction (slow, soft, restrained).

Brother-in-law words have about them a character that suggests to Guugu Yimithirr speakers situations that contrast markedly with those situations appropriate for everyday words.

You could use [everyday words] if you talked to any person-gai. You can talk, laugh, anything.

(Notice here the case ending appended to an English word; “any person-gai” is the adessive case form of “any person”—meaning, then, “(talk) with any person.”) So, for example:

You can use mayi banggunu (potato) to any common person, to gami or to dhawunj (friend). But not with ngadhiina (father-in-law). But “dhirraal-dhirr”—you can use that guugu with father-in-law.”

Here the ordinary word banggunu suggests joking, familiar contexts; it suggests speech with friends and with the prototype of the familiar kinsman, the gami.

Relatives who were obliged to avoid each other typically adopted physical postures and arranged themselves spatially so as to minimize mutual interaction. (See Figure 4.2.) Elsewhere in Australia it is reported that a man will walk well out of his way to avoid possible meetings with his mother-in-law. In Guugu Yimithirr society a man and his mother-in-law did not sit in one another’s presence, did not look at each other, approach one another, or stand face to face. They both dili nhingaanggal and dili yirrgaanga (sat and talked sideways). In former times there were also severe restrictions on the sharing of food and possessions between a man and his parents-in-law.

Physical and spatial avoidance has an exact linguistic parallel. Transfer of information between a man and his taboo relatives was mediated and indirect. Speaking with brother-in-law words, a man directed messages to his in-laws via his wife. In return, the wife’s father, speaking either in brother-in-law or everyday words, gave his daughter messages for his son-in-law. Indirect address in speech thus corresponds to sitting sideways, avoiding eye contact, and so on.

I can’t talk to my mother-in-law. But I got my children. And ngadhi, dyirraal (my wife) can talk to her own mother. But I can’t. She might be over there, but I’m facing away from her. My kids can talk—she is their gami. But I sit over here, behind the fence.

In the olden days a man who spoke in everyday language to his mother-in-law would have been speared to death for his offense. But such drastic sanctions applied to breaches of etiquette seem only to supplement deep-seated inner feelings of restraint about those relationships that called into play brother-in-law language and associated avoidance behavior. As we have seen, when confronted with insult or inappropriately rough or joking speech, people would often withdraw in silence from the presence of their tabooed relatives. A child who spoke impolitely in the wrong company would be made to feel muyen “shame.” It is from muyen that one cannot bring oneself to speak in everyday language to a dhabul relative, to look at, still less to touch him or her.

Nyindu mungal gaari garrbul. Muyen. (You can’t grab her hand. It would be shameful.) If I were to touch my mother-in-law, hihi, muyen! Then I might go and wash my hand in water.

The spectre of having to wash away the touch of a mother-in-law’s hand suggested a further image:

Biyal gaga. (Mother-in-law is poison.)

Why? Because:

You married her daughter; and so real shame, real muyen!

A man avoided his actual wife’s relatives. But he was also expected to be restrained and polite—and he might use brother-in-law words as a special sign of respect—with his actual and classificatory father’s sisters, mother’s brothers, and mother’s brother’s sons, people we have seen to be his potential in-laws. Whether or not one used brother-in-law language with these people, one had always to behave in a decorous manner, without joking or cursing and refraining from anger—restrictions that plainly parallel, in somewhat reduced form, the stricter prohibitions on interaction with real in-laws.

Furthermore, a man was expected to monitor his behavior with his elder sisters and, to some extent, with his mother. Here again is a restraint between the sexes independent of dhabul relationships. A man could share food with his sister, but he could not sit or stand facing her or even close to her. (A Guugu Yimithirr friend once introduced the author to his elder sister and induced him to shake her hand, all without moving from the far end of the room and by only glancing sideways at her.) Although one used everyday vocabulary, it was important to prune from one’s speech with such people all “bad words,” that is, words with vulgar overtones.

That there are such “bad words” further elaborates the continuum from familiar to polite vocabulary. We have distinguished between 1)
everyday words that can themselves be used in speech with taboo relatives, 2) sensitive everyday words that, for one reason or another, require brother-in-law replacements, and 3) words whose referents simply cannot be labelled at all in polite brother-in-law speech. Words of the last sort are often called “swearing words”; they are used in extremely rude curses in the everyday language. Saying mangal gulan (literally, “hand penis”)—usually with an accompanying gesture—is a very impolite way to call someone greedy.

Other so-called bad words, however, refer to seemingly innocuous items. They have impolite connotations that are activated merely by the presence of people who must be treated with care (whether or not one used the special brother-in-law vocabulary with them). For example, a man should not say warribi “axe” to his sister because to her it might suggest “penis.” He should not say nambal “stone” because she might interpret instead “testicles.” He should not say warrigan “hole” because it suggests “vagina.” And so on. These are not merely symbolic or metaphorical associations; the impolite connotations seem to inher in the words themselves. It is not that one cannot talk about axes or holes with one’s sister, but only that one cannot use these particular words. Instead of saying warribi, a man might use the more polite word gullirra, which also means “axe.” Or in modern times he could simply use the English word “axe”;

Ngadhu axe wanhadhah?
Where is my axe?

Neither word would offend his sister, although neither would be sufficiently polite for speaking to his father-in-law or brother-in-law. With them he would use the brother-in-law word gadiil-baga, said to be the “deepest” or most polite word for “axe.” The range of politeness associated with individual Guugu Yimidhirr words is more elaborated than a simple distinction between everyday and brother-in-law language would suggest.

The range of conventional social relationships is correspondingly complex. There is ordinary, relaxed amicability between friends and family members, and there is strict avoidance between a man and his mother-in-law. Between a gami and a gaminhdharr there is an obscene joking relationship. Between these extremes are various forms of politeness and restraint, sometimes tempered by special circumstances or genealogical distance. One man spoke of visiting in the hospital a remote relative who fell into a dhabul category. He felt ashamed to speak openly to the sick person, who, in turn, sought sympathy and initiated direct conversation. Also, a man might joke in a suggestive manner with potential wives (for example, with his wife’s sisters) but be obliged to speak circumspectly with his own sister, who could never be

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Relationship</th>
<th>Kinship Category</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Type of Speech</th>
<th>Lexical Alternative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dhabul</td>
<td>opposite sex</td>
<td>police</td>
<td>respectful brother-in-law words</td>
<td>“axe”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>same sex</td>
<td></td>
<td>no speech</td>
<td>“food”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE OF SPEECH</th>
<th>INTERACTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>joke</td>
<td>warrribi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>joke</td>
<td>multi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>joke</td>
<td>gullirra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>joke</td>
<td>gudhaby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>joke</td>
<td>gudhany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>joke</td>
<td>***</td>
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<tr>
<td>joke</td>
<td>***</td>
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<tr>
<td>joke</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>joke</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| TABLE 4.15 Social Relationships, Speech Categories, and Lexical Alternatives |
his sexual partner and who might be offended by an incautious utterance.

Such a highly structured social universe, as we have seen, implies a set of speech styles, levels, or registers appropriate to different sorts of interaction: informal, deliberately obscene, restrained and polite, or deferential and respectful. Formally these registers comprise different sets of words that have the characteristic appropriate to one tone or another. People may often manipulate registers to a particular purpose: choosing a brother-in-law word to convey an extra hint of deference where an everyday word would do; or deliberately violating normal rules of speech politeness to insult, startle, or to undermine a relationship. What is important is that in every case, in more or less highly codified ways, people’s speech is partly determined by and partly itself a determinant of the relationship between speakers. The existence of discrete registers is a symptom of the different sorts of interaction that occasion speech in the community.

5 LANGUAGE IN THE MODERN GUUGU YIMIDHIRR COMMUNITY

In traditional times the Guugu Yimidhirr kinship system probably worked smoothly. Reckoning by moiety membership and genealogical relationships presumably produced few discontinuities, and people doubtless married correctly most of the time according to what older Hopevale residents call “the law.” Nowadays kinship remains an important part of the conceptual apparatus for dividing up the world, but there are frequently crossed ties and “crooked” relationships. For many older people these confusions are distressing since often one doesn’t know what kin term to apply to someone else.

_Walu dhula-gadaadhi, walu gumbih._

It seems all twisted, like a vine.

Frequently, because of the high rate of intermarriage between people of part-Aboriginal and part-European descent, modern marriages violate old rules. And in the present day there are no elders to speak offending parties or to drive them from the community. Instead, Guugu Yimidhirr speakers continually adjust their usage so as to bring their relationships with others under appropriate kin categories.

The habits of language we have discussed in the previous section were largely dependent on social habits. As kin categories became confused, as old-style standards of proper behavior gave way to Lutheran precepts, as groups of people were forcibly relocated or “dispersed,” as dialects were thrown together or died, many of the traditional speech practices that drew meaning from lapsed social arrangements in turn disappeared from Guugu Yimidhirr society. Nowadays, few people remember, and still fewer can use, words of the respectful brother-in-law style. Older people brought up at Hopevale before the relocation during World War II still experienced practices of avoidance and the corresponding speech behavior. Though such practices have fallen into disuse, they have left deep impressions. As one old man says:

_These young people here at the Mission talk to their mothers-in-law._
_They fight and scold and curse. But we older people just can’t…._

Older people carefully monitor their interactions with tabooed relatives, even though they may speak everyday Guugu Yimidhirr, and even though they do not fear physical punishment for breaches of etiquette. But elaborate avoidance is anachronistic in the society in which Guugu Yimidhirr speakers now live. The name of a deceased person cannot be tabooed in the face of a Lutheran funeral; nor can one speak brother-in-law words to a brother-in-law who comes from a distant Queensland town, and who doesn’t even know everyday Guugu Yimidhirr.

It is not only speech habits that are changing. Guugu Yimidhirr is undergoing syntactic changes as well, partly as a result of external influences and partly from internal motivation.

The major outside force is English. Ordinary language around Hopevale is a confirmed mix of English and Guugu Yimidhirr. Young people have difficulty eliminating English words from their speech; quite often they revert to an English laced with Guugu Yimidhirr pronouns (which, as the reader will recall, are organized on slightly different principles from English pronouns).

_Ngalig got no mayi._
_We (two) have no food._

Occasionally, Guugu Yimidhirr speakers attach Guugu Yimidhirr formatives to English words.

_Nyundu mother-in-law-gal gaari yirrji._
_Don’t speak to your mother-in-law._

Though this situation may change in the future, Hopevale people go to school only in English; they read and write only in English, and they attend church services conducted for the most part in English.

The first German missionaries at Hopevale translated a good deal of evangelical material into a peculiar sort of Guugu Yimidhirr—one that, for example, almost entirely omits ergative inflection. Only older people
can read the idiosyncratic spellings that Reverend Schwarz used. This missionary version of the language is now enshrined as a kind of semiofficial church language—one appropriate to Bible stories but distinctly odd in terms of the actual spoken language.

Even when they speak only in Guugu Yimidhirr, younger people use forms that older speakers regard as incorrect. Modern speech smooths over exceptions and syntactic irregularities of the past language. A good example involves verb forms.

Guugu Yimidhirr verbs display as much morphological elaboration as do Guugu Yimidhirr nouns. A single verb ending can convey a good deal of specialized meaning. There are familiar contrasts of tense.

Nyulu mayi buday.
He ate food.

Nyulu mayi budal.
He eats food; or, he'll eat food by and by.

There are also reduplicated forms that signify action in progress.

Nyulu mayi budaarai.
He's eating food.

Nyulu mayi budaaray.
He was eating food.

There are verb forms that command.

Mayi budala!
Eat food!

Gaari dhadi!
Don't go!

Mayi budaarali!
Keep eating food!

There are special endings that express desire or intention.

Ngali dhadaani.
We want to go, ought to go, intend to go.

And there are even special precautionary endings that issue warnings or try to head off undesirable consequences.

Ngaya buliya.
I might fall.

Nhina gundaya.
You might get hit.

Gaari dhadii, nyunda bullii-gamu.
Don't go, otherwise you might fall.

Nyulu duday biiba-ngun gundayigu.
He ran before his father could hit him.

Guugu Yimidhirr verbs fall into several natural groups, or conjugations. Verbs of one large group have a final -i in the "present" tense (which can be translated into English in several ways).

Ngaya buligi gundal.
I'll hit the bullock. (Or "I hit the bullock.")

Nyulu mayi wagil.
He'll cut the food. (Or "He cuts the food.")

These i-final verbs form an imperative in -la.

Gundala!
Hit it!

Wagila!
Cut it!

The vast majority of these i-final verbs are transitive.

Verbs of another major conjugation end in long vowels.

Ngali dhadaa.

We (two) will go.

Nyulu Billy gadaa.
Billy will come.

The imperative form of these verbs has -ii instead of the final long vowel.

Dhadii!
Go!

Gaari bullii!
Don't fall!

Most of these vowel-final verbs are intransitive.
In the speech of older Guugu Yimidhirr speakers there are a few verbs in each conjugation that do not conform to the normal pattern with regard to transitivity. That is, there are some intransitive 1-final verbs, such as wurrgal “suffer.”

Nyulu wurrgaalgal.
He is suffering.

Gaari wurrgala!
Don’t suffer!

And there are some vowel-final verbs, like banydyii “wait for,” that are transitive.

Ngayu nhina banydyii.
I’ll wait for you.

Nganhi banydyii!
Wait for me!

Older speakers of Guugu Yimidhirr insist that these are the correct forms. In both cases, however, younger people seem to be in some doubt; they seem to have reanalysed these verbs so as to interpret the transitive banydyii as actually an 1-final verb, and the intransitive wurrgal as actually vowel-final. One hears such forms as:

Gaari wurrgii!
Don’t suffer!

Nyulu wurrgaalga.
He is suffering.

(These forms would only be possible for vowel-final verbs). Or:

Banydyil nhang! 
Wait for him!

Nyulu banydyilindyl nganhi.
He is waiting for me.

Older speakers reject such forms as corrupt and incorrect, although they frequently occur in speech.

Here the language seems to be shifting in the direction of greater regularity, where the form of a verb corresponds exactly to its transitivity. Such changes undoubtedly take place constantly in all languages; although in the past, when many variant dialects and languages coexisted in the same wide community, Guugu Yimidhirr might have resisted more vigorously against such shifts, accommodating more irregularity as a means of maintaining its integrity against other forms of speech.

Despite the reduced use of Guugu Yimidhirr and the gradual disappearance of both the brother-in-law vocabulary and associated social institutions, speech in the Hopevale/Cooktown community remains a primary sociolinguistic index. A person’s choice of words from a larger repertoire is as much a function of social facts as it was in traditional times. Here is a crude example to illustrate the principle. In the Hopevale Mission store, which is staffed both by Aboriginal Guugu Yimidhirr speakers and white missionary personnel (who do not speak Guugu Yimidhirr), one decides whether to order an item in English or in Guugu Yimidhirr partly on practical grounds (one does not speak to the white store manager in a language he doesn’t understand) and partly on social grounds. For often people order in English from a Guugu Yimidhirr-speaking shop assistant whenever the manager is present, even when he is not attending them. His presence creates, as it were, an English context, whether or not he himself is part of the dialogue. Speaking Guugu Yimidhirr in front of the store manager is, by contrast, a conscious means to exclude him from the conversation.

Guugu Yimidhirr is a language with limited range in the modern world. Young people at Hopevale say that although they can speak Guugu Yimidhirr, they cannot write it and have little interest in trying to do so. Others lament the passing of skills and knowledge (including knowledge of language) possessed by previous generations but now largely lost. Still others regard Guugu Yimidhirr as an exclusive possession, certainly not to be shared with white men, but not even to be squandered on Aborigines from other areas or on young people whose lives will carry them away from the mission. In the company of non-Aborigines, many Hopevale residents who are uncertain of their English lapse into silence; others deprecate their language and claim to know little of it. These phenomena, taken together, suggest that in the Cooktown/Hopevale area, Guugu Yimidhirr is still an index, still a mark, setting its speakers apart from other people. Choosing to speak Guugu Yimidhirr instead of English can be an unambiguous signal. (In front of the Cooktown policeman it can mean: “Let’s keep him out of this conversation.” With an Aboriginal evangelist or in a gathering of the men’s society it can mean, “Let’s get together on this, speak our true minds, bare our hearts.”)

Although the linguistic registers are different—different languages instead of discrete special-purpose vocabularies—these phenomena formally parallel the use of brother-in-law language to signal a deferential kin relationship, or the deliberate use of insulting or vulgar language.
as part of a special sort of friendship. In each case, some feature of an interaction is mirrored in the character of the speech that accompanies it; or, just as often, some feature of speech sets the tone of an interaction as it develops. Speech is inherently indexical; to speak at all is to choose a register (even if only a word, or a tone of voice) that will index the moment. Such phenomena have been widely described. In Java people speak in a high, a low, or a middle variety of Javanese according to the relative status of the protagonists. (A high-status person speaks down to a low-status person by using the lowest language, and vice versa.) Throughout Asia languages have elaborate systems of honorifics to elevate the addressee. (See the following chapter on Japanese.) Respect for a Samoan chief is shown in part by respectful vocabulary used when common people speak to or about him. Such devices are widespread, although the details doubtless vary from one speech community to another. In every case, speech is connected with a set of situations and social relationships—sometimes binding people and constraining their interactions, sometimes marking and reinforcing social facts, but often facilitating communication, lubricating sore points, and serving as the medium by which people forge new relationships and ideas.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Those students who wish to pursue Australian languages in more detail should begin with R.M.W. Dixon's *The Dyirbal Language of North Queensland*, which surveys the major features of Australian languages (including sound systems and ergative inflection), and which provides a comprehensive look at this language of the Cairns rain-forest region. Readers with a knowledge of introductory linguistics will find especially useful Dixon's account of the relationship between noun and pronoun morphology and the syntax of clauses and complex sentences. Further descriptions of the semantics of a mother-in-law language and an initiation language are in articles by Dixon and Kenneth Hale in the Steinberg and Jakobovits reader in semantics. A good place to start further inquiry into speech as part of and equivalent to action is J.L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*, or Searle's *Speech Acts*. Chapter IV in the companion volume gives a look at another sort of language spoken widely in Cape York, even by some Hopevale residents, called Cape York Creole.

A good deal has been written about Aboriginal Australians. Robert Tonkinson's *The Jigalong Mob* describes a traditional group who have recently come under Mission conditions. But before plunging more deeply into ethnography and learning about the "dream time," students are well advised to read C.D. Rowley's *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society* to locate contemporary Aborigines firmly in the Australian reality.


GLOSSARY

The glossary lists all the Guugu Yimithirr words that appear in this chapter together with their English equivalents. Nouns appear in absolutive form, and verbs appear in unreduplicated present-tense form, unless otherwise indicated.

*baala* fruit tree species
*baaar* womera (Coastal word)
*babi* mother’s mother
*bada* down, yonder
*badhuur* zamia-nut palm
*bala* skinny, weak
*balgal* to make, to wash
*bali* to go (Brother-in-law style)
*balin-ga* echidna
*balingirr* leg (Brother-in-law style)
*bama* person
*bardil* to chop, to fell
*banggamaru* potato
*barndjurri* to wait for
*bayan* house
*biba* small scrub kangaroo
*biba* father
*bili* to paddle
biimuurr father's sister
biinii to die
biwal wife's mother
bubu earth, ground
budal to eat
bula the two of them (Third-person dual nominative)
bualan them two (Third-person dual accusative/dative)
bulangan them two (Third-person dual accusative/dative)
budig bullock
bulli to fall down
buuaraay water
buuribayi foot (Brother-in-law style)

daabal to wade
daanmal to speak
daarraalingun kangaroo (Generic, Brother-in-law style)
dagaadhi sat down
dani slow, soft
dhaarmiil to float
habul sacred, forbidden, taboo
hadad to go
hadam foot
hana they (Third-person plural nominative)
hanan them/their (Third-person plural accusative/dative)
hanaang them/their (Third-person plural accusative/dative)
hdharramal Thunder (Mythical character)
hdhauwun friend
hdhurri-dhirr potato (Brother-in-law style)
dhula flood, confused
dhula-gadaadhi twisted
dhumbuurriga straight, direct
dhuurngai to push
hway son (of woman)
dhiuran down, yonder (Brother-in-law style)
dili sideways
dingga-dhirr hungry
duda to run
dula child (Brother-in-law style)
dunhu husband, sister's husband
dumbil to break
dyaarrbaa snake
dyiiral wife
dyindal to bite, to peck
dyin-gurr younger sister
dyinu small animal, joint (Brother-in-law style)
dyirrun bad (Brother-in-law style)
gaanhaal elder sister
gaanyil wife's brother

gaurr not
gabirr girl
gadaa to come
gadaar type of wallaby
gadabal to break, be broken
gadaa-baga axe (Brother-in-law style)
gaga sick, poison, salty
gaga-dhirr sick
galga spear
galmba also, too
gambul stomach
gami father's father, or mother's mother
gaminhdhirr son's child
ganaa okay, all right, well
ganggaal child
gangurra kangaroo species
garga younger brother
garrbal to grab
ganydyarr to crawl
gudaal dog
gudhubay food (Brother-in-law style)
gulbuuygu together
gulliitra axe (Polite)
gulran penis
gumbin string, rope
gundal to hit, to kill
gurar to say
gudyu fish
gaugu word, language
gaya not, absent, nonexistent

ma now! come! (Exclamation)
maandii to bring
mana to cause to——(Causative verb)
manali hand
maya food, vegetable food
midungadhi saw (Brother-in-law style)
milbirr womera
minha meat, edible animal
mugagay father's older sibling
mugan cold
mugurr mother's brother
mulur barren, infertile, childless
munja breast, milk, woman (Brother-in-law style)
mundal the rest, the others
munhira black
muyan shame
nambal rock, money
nambi  grave, casket
nanggurr  camp
ngaabi  head
ngaana  what?
ngaani  why?
ngadhi  mother's father
ngadhin  daughter's child
ngadhina  wife's father
ngadhu  to me, mine (First-person singular dative)
ngali  you and I (First-person dual inclusive nominative)
ngali  you and me (First-person dual inclusive accusative/dative)
ngalin  he/she and I (First-person dual exclusive nominative)
ngalin  you and me (First-person dual inclusive accusative/dative)
ngalin  him/her and me (First-person dual exclusive accusative/dative)
ngamu  mother
ngana  we (First-person plural nominative, Coastal form)
ngangarr  not, nonexistent (Brother-in-law style)
nganhdhaan  us (First-person plural accusative/dative)
ngan  me (First-person singular accusative)
ngarra  skin, bark
ngarrbol  strange, alien
ngayu  I (First-person singular nominative)
ngulgu  yesterday
ngurar  black cockatoo
ngudhurr  daughter (of woman)
ngaadh  saw (Past tense of ngaamaa "to see")
ngalngarr  echidna (Brother-in-law style)
ngang  him/her (Third-person singular accusative/dative)
ngaru  your (Second-person singular dative)
ngayun  that, there
nhin-gal  to be, to sit
nhina  you (Second-person singular accusative)
nyula  he/she (Third-person singular nominative)
nyundu  you (Second-person singular nominative)
waamil  to find
waandaar  white cockatoo
wavirr  water (Brother-in-law style)
wagil  to cut
walu  like, resembling; side, temple
wanggaar  above
wanhaha  where?
wanhadder  how, howdy
wanhdu  who (Ergative)
wanh  who (Absolutive)
warra  bad
warri  axe
warrigan  hole

wawu  soul, breath
wawu-dherr  want, desirous of
wadul  whip-tail kangaroo
wadh  gave (Past tense of wumaa "to give")
wumaa  to exist, to lie down
wurrbal  Fog (Mythical character)
wurr  to suffer
wurrin  crosswise
wurril  earth, ground (Brother-in-law style)

yaal  to limp
yaba  older brother
yalma  sand hill
yambaal  person (Brother-in-law style)
yarraman  horse
yarrga  boy
yimidhirr  this way
yinil  fearful, afraid
yirraa  to speak, to talk
yiyi  this, here
yubal  you two (Second-person dual nominative)
yubalin  you two (Second-person dual accusative/dative)
yuddurr  to find (Brother-in-law style)
yu  wood, stick, fire
yumurr  child (of man)
yura  you all (Second-person plural nominative)
yurray  you/your (Second-person plural accusative/dative)
yurrangan  you/your (Second-person plural accusative/dative)
yu  yes
yuwala  beach
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