

## Guugu Yimidhirr brother-in-law language

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### AVOIDANCE LANGUAGE AND SPEECH REGISTERS

Aboriginal Australians are celebrated for their use of linguistic devices to mark the subtleties of social situation and relationship. Three sorts of phenomenon are widely reported (see Capell 1962; Dixon 1972: 19): (1) special vocabulary is often associated with male initiation (see, for example, Hale 1971); (2) there is often extensive word tabooing, usually involving strict prohibition on names of deceased people, as well as on words that sound like such names (for examples of such practices across Cape York Peninsula, see Roth 1903); and (3) many societies have so-called 'Mother-in-law' languages – special vocabularies that replace all or part of the normal lexicon in speech between kin who stand in certain avoidance relationships to one another. Prototypically across the continent, a man must avoid his own mother-in-law. Such vocabularies have been reported from widely separated areas, but the most detailed and best-known descriptions involve languages of North Queensland (see Thomson 1935; Dixon 1971, 1972). The material I discuss in this paper is of the last type and comes also from Cape York Peninsula.

Recent descriptions of special languages in Australia exploit the systematic connections between ordinary vocabulary and initiation or avoidance language to comment on the semantic structure of the languages in question and of language in general. An avoidance vocabulary may represent a skeletal semantic map of the more elaborated everyday lexicon (Dixon 1971); or ritual usages may derive from semantically and culturally illuminating inversions of ordinary language (Hale 1971).

In this paper, I concentrate instead on avoidance language as a speech 'register', a sensitive and expressive index of social relationships. That a special word replaces an ordinary word in conversation between certain people is a *formal* index of aspects of their relationship. Moreover, that only certain words engender such replacement may illuminate the *content* of the relationship that calls into action the linguistic reflex. Thus, a special vocabulary of Respect has compelling ethnographic interest. People select and shift words, styles, often entire languages, on the basis of, among other things, changing setting and different audiences and interlocutors. Such seemingly innocuous entities as words have penetrating and peculiar emotive and social potency, often, proverbs notwithstanding, far

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this chapter first appeared as "Guugu Yimidhirr Brother-in-law Language." *Language in Society*, 8, 365-393.

widely reported (see Capell 1962; Dixon 1972:19): (1) special vocabulary is often associated with male initiation (see, for example, Hale 1971); (2) there is often extensive word tabooing, usually involving strict prohibition on names of deceased people, as well as on words that sound like such names (for examples of such practices across Cape York Peninsula, see Roth 1903); and (3) many societies have so-called "Mother-in-law" languages--special vocabularies that replace all or part of the normal lexicon in speech between kin who stand in certain avoidance relationships to one another. Prototypically across the continent, a man must avoid his own mother-in-law. Such vocabularies have been reported from widely separated areas, but the most detailed and best-known descriptions involve languages of North Queensland (see Thomson 1935; Dixon 1971, 1971). The material I discuss in this chapter, for Guugu Yimidhirr, is of the last type.

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In the Guugu Yimidhirr area, people in early times were said to have known and to have borrowed words from neighbors to the north and west, whose languages were markedly different. As a result, a man from Starcke Station once characterized several words in this way:

*Balinqa* is 'porcupine'; that's my word. I got another word, too, *nhalngarr*; you can use that word to Brother-in-law and Father-in-law. Some of these other people call it *barradhal*; well, I understand that word but that's not my word. That's *their* word, people who come from up north, near Cape Flattery. There is good reason to suppose that, as elsewhere in Cape York Peninsula, individual Guugu Yimidhirr speakers controlled distinct language varieties from a range of neighboring areas, and thus had constantly at their disposal, for a given concept, words from several dialects. The availability of alternative lexical items, as I suggest below, may have been an important resource in maintaining a distinct Respectful language.

Writing at the turn of the century, Walter E. Roth (1908:78) reported of Aboriginals throughout North Queensland: Certain of an individual's relatives are strictly tabu from him, so much that he must neither approach, *converse with*, accept from, nor give them anything. This especially refers to the father-in-law and mother-in-law....It is the usual practice for a man *never to talk to* his blood-sister, or sometimes *not even mention her name*, after she has once reached womanhood [italics added].

Roth describes such prohibitions, along with 'the tabu of names of persons deceased' and other 'forbidden words', as among the contemporary practices of inhabitants of Cape Bedford, at that time the main settlement and school of the Lutheran Mission from which the modern Hopevale has descended.

The most knowledgeable present-day speakers of Guugu Yimidhirr were brought as children to the mission school during the twenty years or so following Roth's Bulletins. Except for those people who had adult relatives living within mission boundaries, most of these people grew up with only peripheral contact with the sorts of social arrangement that supported the prohibitions Roth describes. Thus, the use of the special avoidance vocabulary, along with practices in accord with what people at Hopevale still call 'the law'--correct marriages, affinal avoidance, and so on--had already lapsed by World War II. During the war, the entire Hopevale community was moved to a reserve inland from Rockhampton. There the colder climate and a series of epidemics decimated the population, so that when Hopevale

was resettled after the war, the community was virtually without people who had lived any significant part of their lives in the bush. Traditional kinship practices have, since the war, been still further submerged under new missionized patterns. Among other things, it seems to have been implicit mission policy to encourage residents of the mission with some white ancestry to intermarry, a practice which has led over generations to a predominance of marriages which are, from a traditional point of view, 'crooked' (see Terwiel-Powell 1975).

Only a handful of people at the Mission know more than a word or two of the special avoidance vocabulary I describe in this paper. Early in my fieldwork I was acquainted with only one man who could actually speak connected sentences in the respectful style.<sup>2</sup> Virtually all I know of the structure of the special vocabulary I learned from him. Most of my descriptions of the circumstances and manner of its use come from his characterizations, both verbal and mimed. (A few other people at Hopevale speak confidently of proper demeanor and posture in the presence of one's mother-in-law, father-in-law, etc., without necessarily knowing the appropriate lexical items to go with such behavior.) My first goal here is to record what I can of a set of practices (and some corresponding bits of language) now fallen into disuse. An important disclaimer is in order: the pitfalls of mistaking natives' own idealized accounts of their behavior (for example, of speech with a brother-in-law, or of respectful demeanor with a mother-in-law) for detailed descriptions of behavior actually observed are well known. Most of the materials I have gathered about Guugu Yimidhirr brother-in-law language are, unfortunately, of the former, less reliable variety. Moreover, a man may accurately mime respectful postures and speech towards an affine, leaving us still in doubt about his affine's responses. I know, accordingly, a good deal less about the behavioral expression of a Guugu Yimidhirr mother-in-law's

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<sup>2</sup>This man, Billy *Muudu*, born around 1915, spend a good deal of his youth, though on the Mission, in the company of adults living more or less in the bush. Other accomplished Guugu Yimidhirr speakers, who also lay legitimate ancestral claim to the language and locales within the Mission, but born in the mid-1920s, are almost completely ignorant of the special vocabulary. In 1977 I also had the opportunity to hear several older men speaking to each other in the 'Brother-in-law' (BIL) style, during a reunion near the original mission site. See p. 385 below. In my earlier work, these men were, evidently, constrained from teaching me BIL words because they were not legitimate speakers: their own ancestral languages were different.

relationship to her daughter's husband than of the reverse relationship.

#### BROTHER-IN-LAW LANGUAGE

Roughly the special avoidance language may be summarized as follows: A man, in the presence of certain affines, was obliged to speak with special words in the place of certain ordinary words. He utilized ordinary 'grammatical words': pronouns, particles, derivational formatives, etc. But for many ordinary lexical items he had to substitute special respectful equivalents. For example, whereas one would say in ordinary Guugu Yimidhirr:

Ngayu                      mayi                      buda-nhu.

isg+NOM                  food+ABS                  eat-PURP

I want to eat food

In respectful speech, one must substitute the respectful word *gudhubay* for the everyday word *mayi* 'food' and the

respectful verb *bambanga-* for *buda-* 'eat'.

Ngayu gudhubay bambanga-nhu.

I want to eat food.

In the Guugu Yimidhirr area, a man was not allowed to address his mother-in-law at all. As I have been told:

You can't tell anything to your mother-in-law.

If a man was unavoidably in his wife's mother's presence, he would sit silently, *guugu-mul*, with head bowed. More commonly,

a man would have occasion to employ the special vocabulary with his father-in-law, even more frequently with his wife's brothers, whom he treated with respect, but with whom he could have reasonably comfortable dealings. I refer to these special lexical items as 'Brother-in-law' (abbreviated BIL) words to mark the fact that in this area a person in the category of brother-in-law was typically the individual whose presence necessitated use of the special forms.

Guugu Yimidhirr does not label the BIL style neatly. The name 'Guugu Yimidhirr' (literally, 'word this way') is not, itself, an ordinary proper name but, rather, a description; one says of one's language, '*guugu nganhdhanun, guugu yimidhirr*', i.e. 'our language, *this* kind of language (that I am speaking now)'.

(The name of the language also seizes on a prominent lexical characteristic-having a form *yí-* or *yimí-* for 'this'.) People characterize ordinary language, as opposed to BIL vocabulary, as consisting of 'common words', saying that one can use them with 'common people', with 'anybody', or '*mundaalgal*' ('with the rest of them'). I abbreviate this ordinary language as EV (Everyday) language. By contrast, people call BIL words 'a bit deep', 'higher', or say, somewhat fancifully, that they sound like words that 'chiefs would use'. Labels for the style in the native language are

a bit more revealing, both sociologically and paralinguistically. BIL words are called *guugu dhabul* 'forbidden words'; *dhabul* is also the term to describe tabooed sites (e.g. graves) and, significantly, kin one must avoid. The style is also described as *dani-manaamaya* 'being soft/slow': one must speak to one's brother-in-law, father-in-law, etc., with respect -- which is to say, slowly and softly. Similarly, a man speaking to his affines *dili yirraalga* or *wurrin yirraalga*; that is, he speaks 'sideways' or 'crisswise', neither facing his interlocutor nor, if he can help it, addressing him directly but, rather, communicating through an intermediary. With an ordinary, non-taboo person, one instead speaks *dhumbuurru* 'straight'.

BIL vocabulary is both parsimonious and selective. Like the Dyirbal Mother-in-law language (Dixon 1971), it may render a large number of ordinary EV words by a single BIL equivalent, using various circumlocutions to make such distinctions as are needed.<sup>3</sup> And like the Umpila Mother-in-law language (Thomson 1935: 480-1), the Guugu Yimidhirr BIL vocabulary contains distinct words only for certain common EV words, while other words either have no respectful equivalent at all or are simply pronounced slowly and softly, but in their ordinary forms, when speaking to a brother-in-law.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, use of the special BIL words is only one of several special behaviors that accompany interaction with

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<sup>3</sup>In Dyirbal the special dialect is called Dyalnguy, and the everyday style Guwal. Dixon writes: 'Dyalnguy contains far fewer words than Guwal -- something on the order of a quarter as many. Whereas Guwal has considerable hypertrophy, Dyalnguy is characterized by an extreme parsimony. Every possible syntactic and semantic device is exploited in Dyalnguy in order to keep its vocabulary to a minimum, it still being possible to say in Dyalnguy everything that can be said in Guwal. The resulting often rather complex correspondences between Guwal and Dyalnguy vocabularies are suggestive of the underlying semantic relations and dependencies for the language' (1971: 437-8).

<sup>4</sup>The 'Ompela' avoidance language is called 'Ngornki'. Thomson remarks: 'Ngornki does not comprise a complete language, but a set of names for the most important objects and articles of everyday life, as well as certain verba. It is a skeleton language only, but it must be remembered that this is probably correlated with the type of behavior obligatory between those by whom it is employed, among whom communication, especially verbal communication, is reduced to a minimum' (1935: 481).

affines. For the moment, I mention only that the use of special vocabulary, like certain other behavioral expressions of avoidance and respect, was activated merely by the presence of tabooed kin. A man would use BIL words if his mother-in-law was within earshot, even if she was on the other side of an obstruction or otherwise out of view. Finding himself in the same camp or clearing as his mother-in-law, for example, a man would speak, if at all, in BIL language, at the same time turning his back and deliberately, departing.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BIL VOCABULARY

I shall first examine the BIL lexicon itself. As I have mentioned, the relationship between BIL words and their EV equivalents is usually one-to-many. Dixon (1971) has used the corresponding property of Dyirbal Mother-in-law to motivate a semantic description of Dyirbal verbs, in which, very crudely put, the avoidance words are taken to represent a kind of semantic core: a set of nuclear words in terms of which the more numerous everyday words can be defined. I can illustrate with an analogous Guugu Yimidhirr example (see Fig. I). The BIL word *balil* is the equivalent of everyday verbs meaning 'go', 'walk', 'crawl', 'paddle (in a boat)', 'float', 'sail', 'drift', 'limp', and so on. But the other EV verbs in the set are rendered, in BIL, by appending certain qualifications to the word *balil*. Thus, 'float' is *balil wabiirri* 'go on water'; 'limp' is *dyirrun balil* 'go badly', and so forth.

BIL	EV
<i>balil</i>	<i>dhadaa</i> 'walk, go'
( <i>balil wabiirri</i> )	<i>dharmbil</i> 'float, sail, drift'
'go on water'	
( <i>dyirrun balil</i> )	<i>yaalgal</i> 'limp'
'go badly'	
etc.	<i>gayndyarr</i> 'crawl'
	<i>biilil</i> 'paddle (canoe)'

FIGURE I. BIL and EV verb equivalences.

Similarly, BIL provides evidence for certain superordinate categories where everyday language omits a generic label. Thus, while EV Guugu Yimidhirr distinguishes at least ten varieties of kangaroo and wallaby, there is no overall term for 'kangaroo'.<sup>5</sup> But BIL groups all ten varieties together

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<sup>5</sup>The English word 'kangaroo' itself is a loan from Guugu Yimidhirr, *ganqurnu*, a species of large black kangaroo which

under the single word *daarraalngan* (see Fig 2). Some surprisingly opaque equivalences are also revealed. For instance, the single BIL word *dyinu* represents an apparent category comprising, roughly, body parts with protruding bones and joints (e.g. hip, chin, knee, elbow, wrist, anklebone, heel, armpit, crotch, and ribs, among others) on the one hand, and certain small animals (including wild pheasant, water rat, worm, a short red lizard variety, and native cat) on the other (see Fig. 3).

In some ways more significant are the EV words which do not map neatly onto BIL words. First, a large number of EV words *can* be used in conversation with brother-in-law and father-in-law if they are pronounced in the proper slow, respectful way. Included among these apparently non-sensitive items are words from nearly every word class and semantic domain: certain kin terms, many verbs, many species of plant and animal, as well as a vast number of adjectives and nouns, including some body part names-- although, in the last case, most such body part words are from the Coastal dialect.<sup>6</sup>

BIL		EV
<i>daarraalngan</i>	<i>gadaar</i>	'small wallaby'
	<i>bawurr</i>	'rock wallaby'
	<i>bibal</i>	'small scrub kangaroo'
	<i>dyadyu</i>	'kangaroo rat'
	<i>gangurru</i>	'black kangaroo'
	<i>nharrgali</i>	'red kangaroo'
	<i>walurr</i>	'female kangaroo'

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Captain Cook presumably saw while repairing his ship at the mouth of the Endeavour river in 1770 (See Haviland 1974).

<sup>6</sup>My BIL teacher is himself a speaker of the Inland dialect. I suggest below that one operative principle in speaking the BIL language is that where a particular lexical item is relatively rare or unfamiliar, or when it comes from a different language or dialect area, its acceptability as its own BIL equivalent is enhanced. Thus, in trying to think of a BIL equivalent for a particular word, a man might first suggest just its Coastal variant; it is thus not surprising that many Coastal words are appropriately used in an *Inland* BIL language.

As I note below, body part terms seem inherently to *require* special BIL equivalents.



*wudul* 'whip-tail kangaroo'  
*dhulmbanu* 'gray wallaroo'

FIGURE 2. Kangaroo species

BIL	EV	
	<i>bandiin</i>	'hip'
	<i>baari</i>	'chin'
	<i>bunggu</i>	'knee'
	<i>dhinbaar</i>	'elbow, forearm, wrist'
	<i>dhunggan</i>	'anklebone, heel'
	<i>gaamurr</i>	'armpit'
(body parts)	<i>gala</i>	'crotch'
	<i>marda</i>	'wrist'
	<i>nuurnul</i>	'flank, ribs'
	<i>nhuru</i>	'heel'
	<i>waara</i>	'hip'
	<i>yurnggal</i>	'elbow'
<i>dyinu</i>	<i>guugulu</i>	'pelvis, hip'
	<i>bulbuurmbul</i>	'wild pheasant'
	<i>durrigin</i>	'water rat'
(small animals)	<i>dhabulin</i>	'worm'
	<i>gundhirr</i>	'short red lizard'
	<i>dhigul</i>	'native cat'

FIGURE 3. EV equivalents of BIL word *dyinu*.

Here is an example of an EV word which can appear in BIL speech. Informants often created imaginary scenarios to exemplify the use of some BIL or EV word. Names for plants and animals, in ordinary conversation, are normally prefixed with the words *mayi* 'edible plant' and *minha* 'edible animal', respectively (see Dixon 1968). In walking through the bush, a man may point out a plant to his companions simply with the word *mayi*, not necessarily elaborating with a more precise identification. If pressed to say what sort of edible plant he saw, he might go on to say, for example, *mayi bambubul*, indicating a particular sort of fruit that causes itchy lips when eaten raw. BIL for *mayi* is *qudhubbay*; but *bambubul* is its own BIL equivalent. Thus, in any hypothetical scenario created to illustrate proper speech with one's affines, a man points out the fruit to his wife, in the company of her parents, by saying *qudhubbay bambubul*. Strikingly, some words in the EV language simply have *no equivalent* in BIL. Words in this category clearly form a coherent and significant class. They include the EV words for 'bad smell (e.g. human sweat)', 'testicles', 'vagina', 'pubic hair', 'masturbate', 'woman's pubic area', 'have

sexual intercourse', 'penis (also means greedy)', 'erect phallus', 'rape', and 'clitoris'. Of such words it is said: You can't use those *quugu* [words] against your mother-in-law.

The proposition *against* is deliberate. The sensitive relationship between a man and his wife's kin, formally indexed by the use of special vocabulary, seems, here, to have a specific *nature* which involves, in part, sexual relation -- of which all the forbidden words are metonymic reminders. Notice that many other EV words which are, at least currently at Lutheran Hopevale Mission, impolite or vulgar have perfectly good BIL equivalents: 'buttock', 'excrement', 'urine', etc.

Finally, some EV words do a kind of double service in BIL speech. These words can serve as their own equivalents in the respectful language, but they also stand for certain other everyday words as well. One particularly notable example is the 2nd person plural pronoun *yurra*, which in BIL replaces *all* 2nd person pronouns. Thus, *nyundu qadli* 'you (sg) come!' becomes, in BIL, *yurra madaayi* 'you (pl.) come!' This device clearly resembles the polite use of the 2nd person plural pronouns in Indo-European languages.<sup>7</sup>

The most common sort of case in which an EV word survives in BIL, and serves as the BIL equivalent for some other words as well, involves lexical items from the Coastal dialect. I was taught BIL words by an Inland speaker, who quite frequently suggested a Coastal synonym as BIL equivalent for an Inland EV word--as if such a word, by virtue of its belonging to another place had the desired qualities for a language of respect.<sup>8</sup> These various kinds of formal

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<sup>7</sup>Brown & Gilman (1960) discuss these related Indo-European usages. Capell, commenting on Elkin's (1940) description of Gugadja special initiation vocabulary from South Australia, writes: 'Some terms given by Elkin are clearly terms of special politeness. The outstanding term among these is *dana*, "you", as used between brothers-in-law, because this word is a very common term for "they" in Australian languages. The parallel between the polite use of Sie in German, which is "they" but transferred to use as a term of address to the second person, is drawn by Elkin himself' (1962: 517). And see Elkin (1940: 345-8).

<sup>8</sup>See footnote 7 above. It is possible, moreover, that in earlier times different groups in Cape York Peninsula practiced language exogamy, so that multiple lexical resources were quite commonly available; speakers could then quite simply choose an 'alien' word--someone else's word--as a non-sensitive equivalent for their own lexical item.

equivalence between EV and BIL vocabularies are schematized in Fig. 4.

We observe a dual motivation for words in the BIL language. On the one hand, an everyday word may, because of its meaning (having to do, for example, with sexual intercourse or genital organs), require at least a special BIL word different from the EV word; or it may simply have no equivalent whatsoever. On the other hand, an everyday word may stand in need of a different BIL equivalent seemingly only because it is a *familiar* word, regardless of its meaning-- and in this case, even a word from a neighboring dialect may be adequate as the respectful replacement. This dual motivation reappears below on p. 381.

EV	BIL	Type of correspondence
<i>dhadaa</i> daynydyarr .. .. ..	<i>balil</i>	A. Many-to-one.
<i>bambubul</i>	<i>bambubul</i>	B. EV word survives in BIL
<i>yurra</i> nyundu yubal	<i>yurra</i>	C. Ev word survives in BIL, and extra service.
<i>gulun</i> equivalent	* * * *	D. EV word has <i>no</i> BIL

FIGURE 4. Everyday and brother-in-law correspondences AVOIDANCE BEHAVIOR

I remarked above that speaking with special BIL words was only one of several behaviors activated by the presence of tabooed relatives. Let me recount some of the striking features of such behavior, as it has been described to me. First, as I have mentioned, BIL words are pronounced in a particularly soft voice, very slowly--contrasting strongly with rapid ordinary Guugu Himidhirr. As Billy *Muundu* remarked, when your father-in-law is around:

Ah, keep away! But don't *guugu wudyigu yirrigi* [talk hard]! *Dani-manaayi* [stay quiet]. Well, *nhanu biwul* [your mother-in-law], she can't talk. But *hnanu hgadhiina ganaa guugu bandil* [it is alright for your father-in-law to say words]. *Nhanu dyiraalgal yirraalga nyulu*. [He talks to your wife.] But *nhanun.gal gaari* [not with you]. But *nhanuumun dyiraalnqun nganu mirril* [your wife will tell you (what he wants)]. You can't say '*Nganaa* [what]?' *Gaari* [no]...

-here he laughed, somewhat uncomfortably, at the thought of addressing one's father-in-law so directly and impolitely-

... But *nhanu dyaaraalnda dhaabangal* [your wife will ask (whatever you want to know)]<sup>9</sup>

Speaking loudly and rapidly seems to be associated not only with familiarity but also with anger and scolding. One speaks softly to a brother-in-law, and, accordingly, one doesn't 'fight him'. Similarly, with a *ngandya* (spouse of grandchild) one is obliged to sue BIL words, and I can't make fun of him. *Nyulu* [he] just son't talk. He won't joke or tease or get angry. And I won't growl him. If *nyulu ngadhun.gal guli gadaa* [he gets angry with me], I won't answer. I'll just walk away. Sometime next morning or afternoon, he'll apologize.

Most conversation in normal tones--to English ears at least--is sharp, abrupt and preemptory; BIL speech avoids such tones.

Guugu Yimidhirr speakers contrast the restrictions associated with BIL vocabulary with behavior that accompanies EV words.

*Nyundu quugu yarra yirraalga* [you talk with words like these, ordinary words], *walu* any-person-*gal* [as if you were talking to any person]. You can talk anything, laugh anything.

Or, with the EV word *banggamu* 'potato':

You can use *mayi banggamu* to any common person, to *gami* [father's father] or *dhawunh* [friend]. But not with *ngadhina* [father-in-law], not *ngandya* [grandchild's spouse]. But *'dhirruidhirr'*--you can use that *quugu* [word] to father-in-law.

Contexts appropriate for EV words are also appropriate for joking and laughing, for example with a friend or a *gami* (father's father).

Tabooed relatives adopted physical postures so as to minimize interaction with one another. Elsewhere in Australia, it is reported that a man will walk out of his way to avoid possible meeting with a mother-in-law. For missionized Hopevale residents, prohibitions are phrased in terms of rooms and walls.

If your mother-in-law comes to visit, she can't talk, she can't sit. *Nyulu* [she] start walking, *nhaa bada* landed [gets down there], *nulul nhaa bada* sit down, not facing this way. But

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<sup>9</sup>Here and below I quote exactly the mix of Guugu Yimidhirr and English I transcribed from taped conversations. To clarify the meaning I enclose rough glosses in square brackets.

*nyulu* behind wall *nhin.gaalnggal* [sits], so you can't see her and *nyulu* can't see you. But *nyundu murrqa yimmuunhi* [you can only sit this way]. You can't look *yarrba* [in her direction]; and *nyundu* [you] can't walk towards her. If you walk down that way, well *nyulu* might be *dhadaa* [she might just go away].

Similarly, I was told, if one were asleep in a room with the door shut, one's mother-in-law could be in the next room, but if the door were opened, she would have to leave. Tabooed relatives did not look one another in the eye, did not stand face to face, and did not sit in each other's presence with legs parted. They *dili nhin.gaalnggal* and *dili yirrgaalga* (both sat and spoke *sideways*).

Typically, a man would be around his parents-in-law only when his wife was also present. Conversation directed between father-in-law and son-in-law was, in such circumstances, mediated by the wife. A husband, speaking with BIL words, directed messages to his father-in-law via his wife. And a father, speaking either in BIL or EV words, gave his daughter messages for his son-in-law. A man might also use his children as bearers of messages; Thomson's description of indirect address among 'Ompela' speakers is similar:

A father-in-law, i.e. the husband of a yami, is armpai'yi. This man may speak to his daughter's husband (ngartjamongo), but the latter may not reply directly. The son-in-law may talk 'one side', that is, while he may not address his elder in ordinary speech (koko), he may speak in the language known as ngornki. Even in this language, however, he may not address his remarks in the first person directly to his armpai'yi, but to his child, or even to his dog, to which he speaks as to a son, and not directly to the person for whom the remark is intended (1935: 480-1).

The principle among Guugu Yimidhirr speakers seems to be the same.

*Ngayu* [I] can't talk to my mother-in-law. But I got my children. And *ngadhu dyiral* [my wife] can talk to her own mother. But I can't. She can be talking over there, but I'm going this way [i.e. facing away]. My kids can talk: she is their *gami* [mother's mother]. But *ngayu nhin.gaalnggal yiway* [I'm sitting over here] behind the fence.

It seems likely that in former times severe restrictions on sharing of food and possessions further characterized avoidance between son-in-law and parents-in-law. One such symptom of avoidance surfaced when *Muundu* hypothesized a situation in which a father-in-law wants to know whether his

son-in-law has a *banjyarr* 'four pronged spear'. (The example arose when I was learning the BIL equivalent for the word.) In BIL dialect, this like other spears, is called *yalinggan*.

But *nqadhina* [father-in-law], he won't ask you. But *nhanu diyral nyulu dhaabangal nhangu* daughter [he'll ask your wife, his daughter]. *Varba qural* [this is what he'll say]:

'*dunhu way yalinggan wambulhaa?* [Where is your husband's *yalinggan*?]'

*Nyulu waadal. 'Aa, yiyi'*. [She'll say: 'Here it is'.]

But, as *Muundu* hastened to point out, having found out where the spear was, the father-in-law would under no circumstances use it himself.

But *nyulu*, he don't touch your anything--spear or anything.

*Nyulu murrqa dhaabangal* [he only asks] just to know if you got that *galga* [spear].

I am told that in former times a man who spoke EV words to his mother-in-law would have been speared for his offense. Less drastic reactions to breaches of avoidance etiquette are also described. Confronted with anger, insult, inappropriate joking or rough speech, one might simply withdraw from the presence of one's tabooed relatives. A child, speaking impolitely in front of his classificatory father's sister, for example, might be scolded by his parents and it is said, made to feel *muyan* 'shame'. One man, commenting on the lapse of traditional law, told me: 'Young people here at the Mission talk to their mothers-in-law, fight and scold and curse. But we older people *just can't*. The man seemed to be talking of his own feelings--inner psychological restraints on familiarity with one's mother-in-law, now without supporting social sanctions. It is from *muyan* 'shame' that one cannot bring oneself to speak in EV language to a *dhabul* relative, to look at, still less to *touch* him or her.

*Nyundu mangal gaari qaribal* [you can't grab her hand], *muyan* [it would be shameful]. If *ngayu* mother-in-law *qaribal* [I were to touch

mother-in-law], *hiiu, muyan!* Then *mangal* I might *buurrayay balqaalga* [I might have to wash my hand].

The spectre of having to wash away the touch of a mother-in-law's hand then moved *Muundu* to venture an explanation for the feelings of shame involved:

*Biwul gaga*. [Mother-in-law is poison.] You know why?

*Nyundu ganggal maani nhangu*. [You married her child.] And

*nhanu bidhagurr-dhirr nyulu* [her daughter has your children]. *Nhamidhinbi*

[for that reason], real shame, real *myan*.

The imagery of restraint and avoidance is suggestive. A mother-in-law is *poison*; a man's relationship to the woman who bore his wife occasions *shame*. The emotions are clearly potent--even for this man who lives in a community where the practices involved have vanished.

As an aside we may contrast this Guugu Yimidhirr account with Radcliffe-Brown's famous formulation:

I once asked an Australian native why he had to avoid his mother-in-law, and his reply was, 'Because she is my best friend in the world; she has given me my wife'. The mutual respect between a son-in-law and parents-in-law is a mode of friendship. It prevents conflict that might arise through divergence of interests (1952: 92).

Whatever functional and stabilizing effects avoidance might have had among Guugu Yimidhirr people, the content of the relationship between son-in-law and mother-in-law was charged with danger and feeling. Friendship it may have been, but a peculiarly well-insulated friendship, in which proximity could lead to mortification, if not to beatings and spearings.

Avoidance and restraint in the relations between a man and his affines clearly had a life cycle: as a young man grew older and as his wife's parents and uncles died, his own social autonomy expanded, and this expansion coincided, I would guess, with a gradual shedding of the restraints associated with silence and the use of BIL vocabulary. These are, unfortunately, matters about which living Hopevale residents have little to say.

#### AVOIDANCE, RESTRAINT, AND FAMILIARITY

There existed, in any case, a wider set of practices and social arrangements that supported the special speech style and related it to other behavior, both linguistic and non-linguistic. Let me first sketch the logic of my expanded argument. In the canonical case, BIL vocabulary is the linguistic reflex of the relationship between a man and the people who gave him his wife. Both the structure of the BIL vocabulary and the behavior associated with its use suggests that this relationship involves a tension between sexuality and its control. Traditional kinship organization was itself concerned with the regulation of sexuality (through marriage), and it turns out that a variety of special linguistic registers were employed with a wide range of actual and classificatory kin, both consanguineal and affinal. Not surprisingly, avoidance language accompanying restrained and respectful relationships has its parallel in joking language, organized obscenity, which accompanies

relaxed, familiar 'joking relationships'. And the linguistic range, like the corresponding behavioral range, is further elaborated as restraint and avoidance are tempered by genealogical distance, or by special circumstances. I now examine these complexities in detail. As elsewhere in the area, among Guugu Yimidhirr speakers two exogamous moieties existed, with distinct totems, and subdivided into named locales. A man married, preferably from far away [*gadhiimungan*], often a *guugu yindu bama* 'person who spoke another language'--in this case probably a distinct dialect of Guugu Yimidhirr. Occasionally a man would marry a *bubu gudyin*, a 'neighbor' from a nearby locale, a practice frowned upon but rendered acceptable by being categorically correct: that is, it was permissible to marry the daughter of a *biwul*, a classificatory mother-in-law; or, to put it the more normal way, one married *muqurngan* 'from a mother's brother', but not *yubaaygu* 'too close'--either geographically or genealogically. Special BIL vocabulary was required in the presence of a wife's relatives, in descending order of stringency, as follows:

WM (*biwul*)--WF (*ngadhina*)--WB (*gaanyil*).<sup>10</sup>

But, as it turns out, BIL vocabulary could also be used, not obligatorily, but as a special sign of respect and politeness, with

FZ (*biimuur*)--MB (*muqur*)--MBS (also *muqur*)

- that is, precisely with those people who fall into the categories of kin from whom one can take a wife: *potential* in-laws, as it were. Whether or not one spoke in BIL style, with people in these latter categories--*biimuur* and *muqur*--one had to behave always in a respectful and decorous manner, without joking or cursing, using no 'bad words' (see below), and refraining from anger--restrictions that clearly parallel in somewhat reduced form the full avoidance practices described in the previous section. (One also used the BIL language reciprocally, for reasons about which I speculate below, with one's *nganyidya*.)<sup>11</sup> The system of

<sup>10</sup>Strictly, only MB's eldest son was called *muqur* and usually *muqu wawuga* 'inside uncle'. I use standard abbreviations here, viz. Z (sister), B (brother), W (wife), H (husband), F (father), M (mother), S (son), D (daughter), and C (child).

<sup>11</sup>According to Roth (1901), this same word (which Roth writes *ngan-tcha*) referred also to the sacred initiation site (see Roth 1909: 16ff.). It may well be that the term, and



linguistic restrictions here obviously fulfils the logic implied by the categorial collapsing of WM/FZ and WF/MB. Though such relationship seem now somewhat ambiguous at Hopevale Mission,<sup>12</sup> it is notable that one's relations with WZ (and BW or BWZ) were considered to be very free:

You can joke, laugh, anything.

Similarly, for a woman, relations with one's affines seem to have been more relaxed than for a man. A woman, living in her husband's locale (now: his house), observed no special restrictions with her mother-in-law; and she spoke respectfully and with restraint, but not necessarily in the BIL language, to her father-in-law. (In my research at Hopevale mission, I have been unable to explore the range of behavioral and linguistic restrictions observed by women in contact with their affines, except through relatively disinterested and sketchy accounts offered by male acquaintances.)

It now begins to be apparent that, between the poles of unrestricted interaction (e.g., between friends) and the near-total avoidance between son-in-law and mother-in-law-- as well as between the poles of linguistic interaction characterized by the use of EV language at one extreme, and BIL words at the other--lie various intermediate points. First, it is clear that genealogical distance and geographical remoteness temper otherwise strict regulation of speech and behavior. A distant classificatory FZ from far away may be treated with somewhat less caution than a nearby *bimuur*. Billy *Muundu* once told me of a visit, in the hospital, to an uncle (*muqur*) of his brother's wife, who had suffered a leg injury.

He showed me where he was hurt. '*Yiyi nganku wagi.*' [Here they cut me.] Well I don't like to look at that, *ngayu yiyi nbaadhulahi*, I looked away. Because *nhanqu* Doris-*bi* uncle. [He is Doris's uncle.] Well, *ngadhu biwul* [that makes him my mother-in-law('s

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the associated avoidance between people standing in this relationship, had something to do with obligations surrounding cutting initiation scars.

<sup>12</sup>The English word 'sister-in-law' has taken over to label the relationship between a man and his WZ and also his BW and BWZ. The rarely used term *gumanqa* seems to label WZ. (In a Guugu Yimidhirr song a man is depicted as joking freely with his *gumanqa*.) But there is, in modern Hopevale usage, some confusion about what one should call, say, BW; one says 'sister-in-law', but would, if she were unmarried, be able to call her *dyiral* 'wife'.

brother)]. *Ngayu gaari nhangu nhaadhi* [I didn't look at him] straight out. I looked away, *nyulu yiyi* talking [while he sat there talking]. Finally I left him. Well, he's my brother Jellico's *biwul*, *ngadhu galmba biwul* [so he's also my *biwul*]. He is *biiba-biwul* ['father-mother-in-law']. You can't say 'Goodbye, *biwul*'. You can't face-to-face look at him.

In this clearly uncomfortable situation natural sympathy and a certain genealogical distance conflicted with ordinary presumptions about avoidance. Notice that the need for restraint survived even in the context of a modern hospital. Notice further that it was the person ordinarily deserving of respect, the *biwul*, who initiated greater informality in the interaction.

There are, furthermore, categories of people with whom one deals frequently but with whom one must be more than ordinarily circumspect. A man must monitor his behavior particularly with his *qaanhaal* 'elder sister', and, to some extent, also with his *ngamu* 'mother'. A man can share food with a sister, but he cannot sit or facing or even close to her. (A man once introduced me to his *qaanhaal* in the Hopevale store, and induced me to shake her hand, all without moving from the far end of the room.) And a man must carefully prune from his conversation with her all 'bad words'--words which, in ways to be described, have sexual, vulgar overtones.

That such 'bad words' exist further elaborates the continuum of familiar to polite lexical items. I have already distinguished (1) ordinary EV words which can themselves be spoken to affines from (2) sensitive EV words which require more 'polite' BIL replacements, and these again from (3) words whose referents simply cannot be labeled at all in formally polite BIL speech. Words in the last category are 'swearing words', mostly referring to genital organs, which function in extremely rude curses in the everyday language. Saying *mangal gulun*--literally, 'hand penis'--usually with an accompanying gesture, is a very rude way to call someone 'greedy'.<sup>13</sup> But some EV words that refer to seemingly innocuous objects have impolite sexual connotations; and

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<sup>13</sup>*Gulun* is one of the EV words which simply has no BIL equivalent (see again Fig. 4). Derek Freeman has suggested to me that the image of the 'greedy penis' illuminates the tension that surrounds possible sexual contact between men and certain categories of women, a tension that is formally recognized in and partially tempered by an elaborate linguistic etiquette.

such connotations are thought to be activated precisely by speaking the words in the presence of people who ought to be treated with care, typically *qaambaal*, but also one's mother, maternal aunts, etc.

'Bad words' evidently draw their connotative load partly from their referents. That is, some fairly plain images are evoked when innocent literal meanings are extended to sexual ones; none of the examples seems to me totally opaque:

*warrbi* 'axe' (also: 'male genitals')

*nambal* 'stone' (also: 'testicles')

*warrigan* 'hole' (also: 'vagina')

*wulungurr* 'flame' (also: 'genitals')

*qinngaan* 'itchy' (also: 'sexually aroused').

But the impolite connotations of these words seem not simply to rely on some symbolic or metaphorical association between the ordinary referent and an 'extended' sexual meaning; rather, the impolite connotation seems to inhere in the word itself, in one particular phonological shape. (Recall, here, the dual motivation for BIL words, especially the use of lexical items from different dialects as the BIL

equivalents of EV words.) Thus, for example, the word *warrbi* 'axe' is a word of common currency in conversation; but a man should not say '*warrbi*' to his sister. Instead he might use the more polite word *qulirra*. Or, in modern times, he could simply use the English word 'axe':

*Ngadhu* axe *wambulhaa* [Where's my axe]?

Neither word would offend his sister. Such devices would, however, be insufficient for speaking to brother-in-law or father-in-law, and BIL has the word *gadul-baga*, said to be the 'deepest', i.e., the most polite word for 'axe'. Fig. 5 illustrates the relationships between various lexical items, arranged on a scale of familiarity, respect, and politeness. Certainly the lexical complexity of the language supports Billy *Muundu*'s claim that *nganhdanun quuqu qaalmbaaqaalmbaa* 'our language is piled on top of itself'.

Just as lexical items range from most polite and respectful to extremely rude curse words, it would be gratifyingly systematic if there were also a range of conventional social relationships from the highly restricted avoidance between a man and his affines to some extremely familiar relationship, characterized by, among other things, the free use of rude and vulgar words: in short a joking relationship. There is no doubt that joking relationships existed previously throughout Cape York Peninsula. Thomson describes one such type of joking relationship:

In the Ompela and Koko Ya'o tribes the relation of the father's father (pola) and his classificatory son's son (poladu) is an extraordinary one, and is characterized by extreme freedom and license both of speech and behavior, in the presence of other members of the horde, that is permissible with no other individual. It is the pola and poladu who pursue one another and snatch at one another's genitalia (1935: 475).

Presently at Hopevale Mission all sorts of organized obscenity and sexual play are discouraged for religious reasons, but there is considerable evidence that it is precisely the relationship between FF (*gami*) and SS (*gaminharr*) that typifies, for Guugu Yimidhirr speakers, friendliness, informality and familiarity. Recall that EV words were said to be used appropriately with 'common people', with *gami* and *dhawunh* 'friend': here *gami* seems to represent a prototypical friend.

Two expressions in Guugu Yimidhirr mean 'to joke with someone', with the suggestion that the joking will be obscene: *manu ngathu wuru* (literally, 'neck fun play'), and *quya-qural* (literally, 'say/make nothing'). Examples of the sorts of things one might say, while performing such joking, are explicitly sexual though somewhat roundabout:

*wabala-manayyi*

Literally, 'be wide! I.e. spread your legs!'

*bin.ga mala*

'Open your *guman* [legs].'

A man might use such expressions--which are stylized joking taunts--only with his same-sex grandparents and grandchildren, real and classificatory: his *gami* (FF) and *ngathu* (MF), and *gaminharr* (SC) and *ngathinil* (DC).<sup>14</sup> Two men who spent a good deal of time teaching me about Guugu Yimidhirr also joked continuously, mostly lightly criticizing one another or making ribald suggestions. They explained their constant banter explicitly by revealing that they were classificatory (or rather distant) *gami* and *gaminharr*.

A glance at the highly schematized kin-category chart in Fig. 6 will reveal the categorial coincidence between those

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<sup>14</sup>A man seems to have been allowed considerable license, also, with women who fell into the category of potential wives, although such usage is spoken of with some unease by current Hopevale Lutherans.

people with whom one used the special BIL forms; briefly, one spoke in BIL to actual or classificatory wife givers (parents and brothers of wife, and also MB, MBS, FZ). One also used BIL with *nganydyā* 'grandchild's spouse'. Thus, the nature of the avoidance, the linguistic reflexes of avoidance, and the kinship categories involved, all attest to a tension, an *embarrassment* or *shame*, surrounding a husband's sexual access to his wife. (Similarly, I speculate that BIL usage between a man and his *nganydyā* isolates them from the sexually tinged joking relationship that obtains between the man and his grandchild, the *nganydyā*'s spouse.) Furthermore, restrained relations between a man and his sister and mother again bear unmistakable marks of insulating the protagonists from sexual interaction.

The use of a BIL vocabulary drew upon and supported traditional kin organization; it is especially noteworthy, then, that by turning BIL inwards on itself and looking at the reduced BIL kinship terminology,<sup>15</sup> we can confirm the categorial associations of kin types suggested by the circumstances of BIL use itself (see Fig. 7). Thus, instead of maintaining a strict terminological division between moieties--as a conventional componential analysis of the EV terminology might do--the BIL kin terms merge moieties at +2 generation (*ngunbal* for all grandkin), and -1 generation (*duulā* for all children). Same-side brothers are collapsed into the category *bulngarr*, and father and his brothers are collapsed into *ngagumadharr*. The category *ngulmburr*, whose central focus is the EV word *ngamu* 'mother', is also the BIL equivalent for nearly all the relatives one must avoid or with whom one must exercise restraint: namely, both mother- and father-in-law, maternal uncles (as well as MBS) and paternal aunts. Here the semantic principles by which EV vocabulary collapses to fit within fewer BIL words seem to hold preeminent exactly the principles which, in turn, govern avoidance and behavioral restrictions on language.

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<sup>15</sup>Kinship terms, of course, would normally be somewhat redundant in speaking with affines, and the BIL terminology is thus already heavily constrained by the circumstances of its use. For example, there seems to be no BIL word for 'wife'--the equivalent I have heard is *yurrangan yambaal*, literally, 'your person'--a circumlocation quite appropriate when one is speaking to one's wife's kin. Some EV kin terms survive in BIL--*nganydyā*, for example, is its own equivalent, and most sister terms also are acceptable in BIL.

## THE BIL VOCABULARY AT MODERN HOPEVALE

Young people at Hopevale Mission are now ignorant of the special BIL vocabulary. Although some know that there were once 'deep' words to be used with father-in-law, they are not likely to recognize individual BIL lexical items.

Instead, in the context of a community composed of people with quite different ancestral languages (because most Hopevale residents are or are descended from people brought as children from distant parts of Queensland, to be raised by missionaries), BIL words are heard as probable, though unrecognized, fragments of some dimly remembered Aboriginal language from another area.

Under these circumstances, speaking BIL language acquires a very different significance from that described for traditional Guugu Yimidhirr society. I can illustrate by recounting experiences from a 1977 fieldtrip to Hopevale. I spent several weeks in the bush, accompanying some elderly men, all of whom had come to the mission as young children before World War I. Two brothers came from traditional Guugu Yimidhirr territory, whereas the rest originated in distant areas and thus laid claims to different ancestral languages (though none spoke more than a few words of these other languages). All were fluent in Guugu Yimidhirr and all knew something of the BIL vocabulary.

Those men were all interested in the question of dialect affiliation, partly no doubt because they knew me to be a student of language and were eager that I learn some of *their* ancestral tongues. They were also concerned with the ways of the past, as we were at the time jointly engaged in clearing and mapping the old mission site where they had all grown up. Interestingly, within this group of men, BIL language was spoken spontaneously on two distinct sorts of occasion.

First, one of the Guugu Yimidhirr brothers and another man, a particularly articulate advocate of the strengths of traditional Aboriginal life, stood in a distant avoidance relationship. After a few days in the group, these two abruptly began to speak to each other in somewhat spotty BIL style. This recreation of a lapsed way of interacting followed several long discussions of traditional social relations and avoidance practices, and it was not directed towards me as an outside observer. The intended audience was, primarily, the younger of the two Guugu Yimidhirr men (who had been raised without the benefit of prolonged contact with bush life), as a demonstration of proper demeanor, a kind of moral lesson. The message was: here is what correct behavior looks like--there are rules and laws of which one needs to be reminded. Over the weeks of our joint venture, those of us in the appropriate (if honorary)

kinship relationships began addressing the others with BIL respectful terms, almost like newly coined private nicknames. Here the use of a special way of speaking served as a reminder of the entire set of social arrangements and their moral force, among which brother-in-law language traditionally belonged.

BIL vocabulary occurred in conversation in this group in a rather different context as well. A source of some tension at Hopevale Mission is the fact that, although the mission territory is entirely on land traditionally owned by Guugu Yimidhirr speaking people, their descendants are in a distinct minority in the mission population. They are also somewhat disadvantaged with respect to the 'outsiders', who include in their number the most favored, tractable, and well-spoken families, from the point of view of the mission administration. Nonetheless, to be a real Guugu Yimidhirr *kama* (person) is, given the mission's location, a reason for some pride. And there are few better ways to assert one's legitimate ancestral claim to the land, and, hence, one's right to be there and to speak with authority than to be able to spout a few arcane BIL lexical items, to use 'deep' words. One of the Guugu Yimidhirr men in the group I was with had been teaching me BIL words, and he took to lacing his talk, to himself and to me, but within the hearing of other members of the group, with words from the respectful dialect, although there was clearly no question of deference, respect, or avoidance. I took his actions to be a deliberate way of pointing out to the others that, just this was *his* language, requiring special knowledge that only *true* Guugu Yimidhirr speakers would have, so too was the land on which we camped and where all had lived their lives, *his* land. In the context of deep Aboriginal attachment to land, his use of BIL language was the territorial equivalent of the show-off child's use of 'ten-dollar-words' to impress his companions.

In both cases, the use of marked alternative to 'ordinary talk' is deliberate and meaningful. And although the traditional social arrangements, that dictated the use of BIL language and that gave a particular significance to respectful words as verbal equivalents of respectful acts, no longer obtain, both observed cases of modern BIL use draw meaning from the social order that gave rise to respectful style. The 'way of speaking' remains, in residual form, but its value has shifted.

#### SPEECH REGISTERS AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

One way of imagining a person's social environment is as a collection of social relationships arranged along a scale from extreme avoidance and respect, to familiarity and

intimacy, to outright hostility. Such a continuum, perhaps less highly codified than among Guugu Yimidhirr speakers (and occasionally still more rigorously institutionalized), presumably characterizes social life in all societies, for reasons which remain classical objects of ethnological speculation. On the one hand, both avoidance relationships, and institutionalized (and thus defused) joking are seen as functional solutions to the Radcliffe-Brownian dilemma: 'Social disjunction implies divergence of interests and therefore the possibility of conflict and hostility, while conjunction requires the avoidance of strife' (1952: 92). On the other hand, the obviously powerful emotional content of these institutionalized relationships supports Freud's account of the tensions surrounding sexual bonding in marriage.

A mother's sympathetic identification with her daughter can easily go so far that she herself falls in love with the man her daughter loves; and in glaring instances this may lead to severe forms of neurotic illnesses as a result of her violent mental struggles against this emotional situation. In any case, it very frequently happens that a mother-in-law is subject to an *impulse* to fall in love in this way, and this impulse or an opposing trend are added to the tumult of conflicting forces in her mind. And very often the unkind, sadistic components of her love are directed on to her son-in-law in order that the forbidden, affectionate ones may be more severely suppressed (1955: 15).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Freud also finds the explanation for a son-in-law's shame before his mother-in-law in the horror of incest: 'It is regularly found that [a man] chose his mother as the object of his love, and perhaps his sister as well, before passing on to his final choice. Because of the barrier that exists against incest, his love is deflected from the two figures on whom his affection was centred in his childhood on to an outside object that is modelled upon them. The place of his own and his sister's mother is taken by his mother-in-law. He has an impulse to fall back upon his original choice, though everything in him fights against it. His horror of incest insists that the genealogical history of his choice of an object of love shall not be recalled' (1955: 16). Freud objects to Tylor's suggestion that avoidance practices represent the social separation of a man from his wife's family (until the first child is born) on the grounds that such practices do not always cease at this point, and because 'this explanation throws no light on the fact that the prohibition centres particularly on the *mother-in-law*...the explanation overlooks the factor of sex' (1955: 14).



Here, too, belong suggestions about more general social-psychological catharsis: 'Just as the proper observance of the tabus governing behavior towards other wife's mother and certain other relations, maintains a condition of euphoria, the joking relationship induces a state of ritual well-being; in the words of the natives themselves it "makes everybody happy"' (Thomson 1935: 475).

Practices of institutionalized avoidance and joking, however they are to be explained, lean heavily on a system of linguistic indexes which at once signal that a relationship obtains and which, in a crucial way, themselves constitute the relationship. That a Guugu Yimidhirr man, for example, used a specially reduced vocabulary with a certain affine was a formal mark (a pragmatic index, in the Peircean sense) of the special relationship between them. Moreover, the fact that a man chose to employ BIL vocabulary with some particular distant relative, or with some person in an ambiguous kin category, signalled his intention to treat the relationship as of a certain nature--part of the business of establishing and negotiating the terms of the relationship, and a move with certain consequences for future behavior. As elsewhere in the world, among Guugu Yimidhirr speakers words have a special potency. Names offend (and are thus tabooed after their bearers die); curses come true;<sup>17</sup> insult causes sickness and violence; and impoliteness brings with real *muyan* 'shame'.

The word 'shame' brings us to a further observation. These practices themselves have a certain character, mirrored in the semantics of the special vocabulary, which reveals the indexed relationships as more than empty markers of social structural seams. Both avoidance and intimacy concentrate on a sexual theme. A series of prohibitions, including strict regulation of verbal interaction, insulates individuals from sexual contact. And the linguistic prohibitions operate precisely to delete sexual nuances from speech between those people for whom, in this society, such issues seem to be particularly delicate: a man and his in-laws, a man and his own female kin.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>I have been told by several people that one should not wish another ill or curse him, for one's words are likely to come true. Note, also, that special rules regulated the behavior of people who were *gadid-dhurr* 'namesakes'.

<sup>18</sup>The Guugu Yimidhirr are, of course, not the only people in the world who have trouble talking with their mothers-in-law. Westerners have institutionalized this concern in the mother-in-law joke. In this connection, Freud remarks: 'As we know, the relation between son-in-law and mother-in-law is one of the delicate points of family organization in *civilized*

It may also be that the sexual idiom here mask more blatantly political issues. Terry Turner (1976) describes the restrained relations between a newly married Kayapo man and his in-laws (into whose household he moves) in terms strongly reminiscent of the Guugu Yimidhirr situation. Here, too, restraint and respect are motivated by *shame*, by *piám*--a term the Kayapo might apply to the embarrassment resulting from, say, public nudity, or, strikingly, to the cowering of a wild animal brought into the village by a hunter. Yet, deference and shame before one's in-laws may be less an expression of a tension borne of the sexual relationship one has with their daughter or sister, and more a symptom of the generally subordinate status of a newly married man in his adopted 'household of procreation'. This subordinate position has its analogues in the age-sets of men's ceremonial organization, where senior men exercise authority over junior men. And as a man's authority increases, as he assumes a central role in his household, the trappings of subordination--including special restraint around his father- and mother-in-law--drop away. Here, restraint and avoidance are tied to a particular stage in a man's life, a particular political status.

Speech is, of course, *inherently* indexical. To speak at all is to choose a register which will index the moment. The potential complexity of the process involves the analyst in the full range of human devices for communicating meaning. To illustrate, let me briefly relate Guugu Yimidhirr BIL speech to an emerging general notion of how linguistic signs convey meaning in speech situations. Silverstein (1976) proposes two cross-cutting dimensions which apply to speech indexes. He distinguishes referential from non-referential indexes, and he proposes a scale from relatively presupposing to relatively creative (or performative) indexes. Roughly, a referential sign (whether an index or not) contributes to the description of a state of affairs (it helps an utterance 'tell about' something or 'refer to' something). A non-referential index makes no such

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communities. That relation is no longer subject to rules of avoidance in the social system of the white peoples of Europe and America; but many disputes and much unpleasantness could often be eliminated if the avoidance still existed as a custom and did not have to be re-erected by individuals.... But the fact that in civilized societies mothers-in-law are such a favorite subject for jokes seems to me to suggest that the emotional relation involved includes sharply contrasted components. I believe, that is, that this relation is in fact an "ambivalent" one, composed of conflicting affections and hostile impulses' (1955: 14).

contribution but instead 'signal[s] some particular value of one or more contextual variables' (Silverstein 1976: 29). Further, 'presupposing' indexes depend upon and require the presence of some contextual feature to succeed in speech, whereas 'creative' or 'performative' indexes themselves, by their very use, 'can be said not so much to change the context, as to make explicit and overt the parameters of structure of ongoing events' or to 'bring into sharp cognitive relief part of the context of speech' (Silverstein 1976: 31).

A crucial example, for our purposes, is the Dyirbal Mother-in-law speech, which Silverstein assigns to the category of non-referential relatively presupposing indexes. It is relatively presupposing because it is a more or less automatic, mechanical reflex in speech of the fact that a tabooed relative of the appropriate sort is within earshot. It is non-referential because the denotative content of a mother-in-law utterance is, according to Dixon's description (1971), identical with that of the corresponding everyday language formulation. Recall (from footnote 4 above) that is 'possible to say in Dyalnguy everything that can be said in Guwal's (Dixon 1971: 437). Silverstein's classification (which has been elaborated further, and which is only crudely noted here) allows us to separate otherwise conceptually entangled strains in speech performance. However, we can see that, within the framework of the proposed functional classification of indexes, there is more to be said about Guugu Yimidhirr BIL speech. (1) Guugu Yimidhirr BIL usage has creative as well as presupposing aspects, allowing speakers to create relationships of respect: to choose to use BIL words with a distant classificatory kinman represents (and communicates) a decision about how to constitute the relationship. Moreover, in modern circumstances when BIL words emerge infrequently, to use respectful vocabulary is more like a reminder than a reflex--as, for example, when the old men reverted to BIL talk to point out that, in another era, social relations had a character different from that in force today. Thus, though traditionally use of BIL speech was an automatic (presupposing) index of the presence in one's audience of a brother-in-law, a father-in-law, etc., its presence in Guugu Yimidhirr speakers' repertoires represented as well a creative resource for shaping social relations.

(2) Guugu Yimidhirr BIL speech is typically multi-valent; it relates to more than one 'contextual variable': affinal relationships, sexually restrained relationships, and more generally respectful relationships between the protagonists of the speech event. Modern usage shows a further shift: speaking BIL words has come to stand as a demonstration of special linguistic (and hence cultural and moral) competence

and authority, and of legitimate title to the Guugu Yimidhirr language (and by extension to its traditional territory).

(3) BIL words participate, in the context of speech at Hopevale, within a wider system of choices or alternatives, which gives meaning to the style. The entire range of 'ways of speaking' includes a continuum from restraint (or total silence) to ribald *guya-gurral* (uncontrolled joking, literally 'saying nothing'). The effect of speaking BIL words depends on the existence of alternative possible ways of talking: its significance is not isolable but *structural*.

(4) Features of BIL usage begin to blur the distinction between referential and non-referential aspects of speech. In the first place, as we have seen, Guugu Yimidhirr BIL, unlike Dyirbal Gulnguy, does not allow speakers to express *every* proposition which they could formulate in everyday language. The nature of the relationship between speaker and hearer, and the very structure of the BIL lexicon, restrict message content (eliminating certain sexual references, of example). Nor is it clear that the complex mappings of EV Guugu Yimidhirr words into a much restricted and heavily generalized BIL vocabulary leaves the referential content of utterances unmolested. Is vague speech referentially equivalent to more specific talk? The pragmatic neutralization, in respectful speech, of singular, dual, and plural second-person pronouns to a single form, *guura*, is surely semantic neutralization as well.

Propositional content, in BIL speech, becomes hard to distinguish from the overall message of the act of speaking. The existence of alternate words for simple things will not surprise even those of us who live in communities with fairly haphazard language practices. Nonetheless, even highly codified special speech registers may work to very different ends. The Guugu Yimidhirr BIL language effectively *insulates* individuals from ordinary, unmonitored verbal (and hence, sexual) contact, which might potentially offend or shame. And just as, in a joking relationship, protagonists, in word and deed, turn away from each other. In Java, on the other hand, the system of obligatory speech levels seems to celebrate the hierarchy of status in the society.

In Javanese it is nearly impossible to say anything without indicating the social relationship between the speaker and the listener in terms of status and familiarity. Status is determined by many things--wealth, descent, education, occupation, age, kinship, and nationality, among others, but the important point is that the choice of linguistic forms as well as the speech style is in every case partly

determined by the relative status (or familiarity) of the conversers (Geertz 1960: 248).

And although the Samoan vocabulary of respect seems formally to resemble Aboriginal Mother-in-law language -

It consists in the avoidance of certain ordinary words, when speaking to a chief, or about a chief, and in the substitution of equivalent terms of respect (Milner 1961: 303-4).

- nonetheless, here the intention<sup>19</sup> of the special vocabulary is not to insulate but to *facilitate* communications in the face of possible slight and insult.

...[I]t follows from the emphasis placed in Samoan society on rank and status that there must be safeguards against the possibility of lowering the dignity or prestige of a titleholder and consequently of the title itself, whether by design, accident, or negligence. The available of terms of respect, acting as it were as a kind of verbal lubricant, is a most effective device for the purposes of avoiding clashes, forestalling quarrels, and soothing the vexation of wounded pride and imagined or genuine grievances (Milner 1961: 304).

And, of course, what is in one instance a verbal lubricant can become a social monkey-wrench, allowing speakers to be, deliberately or inadvertently, insulting or presumptuous, or simply confounding communication by blocking people's tongues. A social hierarchy may promote language practices which, in turn, can equally support it or topple it. (Thus we learn that the Vietnamese school administrator who was once addressed as *ông hieu truong* 'grandfather principal' may now be called--if not simply 'comrade'--perhaps only *anh hieu truong* 'elder brother principal' (Vu Thanh Phuong 1976). A change in hierarchical structure and the devaluation of a kin-based metaphor of respect here go together.)

The linguistic ramifications of emotionally, or politically, charged social relationships are peculiarly deep. When a constrained or delicate relationship gives rise to special language which is itself constrained or delicate, in form or content, then the symptom reinforces the cause. A concern with sexual contact, or with relative status, is rendered still stronger by the obligatory use of language that deliberately skirts, or dwell upon, sexual or status issues. A relationship inspires language practices; the resulting talk in turn feeds upon the relationship.

As a final note, let me mention that although Guugu Yimidhirr BIL language and the Samoan respect vocabulary relate to quite different social institutions, there is

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<sup>19</sup>I am indebted to Derek Freeman who brought the comments of Freud and the Samoan material to my attention.

striking similarity between them. Milner notes that Samoan, Javanese, and Tibetan languages of respect all have a high proportion of words 'denoting parts of the body, bodily positions, functions and conditions' (1961: 302). That is, in all these cases, polite and respectful speech must avoid ordinary terms for body parts, substituting instead specially elaborated respectful equivalents for these words. The Guugu Yimidhirr BIL vocabulary displays a similar concentration of terms.<sup>20</sup> The body, here, is not only a potent symbol; it is *too* potent, and its potency is tempered and subdued, in certain circumstances, by special names for its parts--or by euphemism, an equivalent linguistic device. Further investigation of the lexical range and distribution in vocabularies of respect may shed light on those features of human life that inspire (and often require) special delicacy of speech. Further work may also allow us to assess two possibly universal devices for defusing lexical items that refer to such sensitive domains. The first allows speakers to exploit social or dialectal distance, substituting someone else's word for a local one with undesirable properties. Foreign curses never have the same impact to one's ears as do one's own, just as Coastal words have respectful properties for Inland Guugu Yimidhirr speakers. The second device uses conceptual distance, metonym, or euphemism, to gloss over a sensitive topic with an indirect turn of phrase. The generality or non-specificity of BIL words compared to their EV equivalents is not so different from the use of pro-words ('it', 'do', 'make', 'thing') for quite specific unmentionables.

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<sup>20</sup>Milner's figures show that in Samoan, Javanese, and Tibetan vocabularies, the percentages of items denoting '[p]arts of the body; actions and states closely associated with the body, including seeing, speaking, hearing, bodily movements (other than locomotion), sleep, wakefulness, sickness, health, life, [and] death' (1961: 301) are, respectively, 42%, 42% and 53%. The categorial breakdown is somewhat less clear for the Guugu Yimidhirr BIL vocabulary, but the comparable figure is roughly 30%. The Guugu Yimidhirr vocabulary, unlike those Milner considers, also has a good many terms for animals, foods, and natural phenomena (plants, the weather, etc.).