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Guugu Yimithirr

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The Language and Its Speakers

Guugu Yimithirr (Guguyimidjir) (hereafter GY) is the language originally spoken in the area between the Annan and Jeannie Rivers on the coast of northeast Queensland and inland. Most of its modern speakers now cluster around Cooktown, at the mouth of the Endeavour River. The language name combines *guugu* ‘word’ or ‘language’ with the comitative *yimi-thirr* ‘this way’—thus, ‘this kind of language’ or ‘speaking this way.’ (Contrast the name of its southern sister Kuku-Yalanji, which has *yala* for GY *yii* ‘this, thus’.) GY contributed Australia’s most widespread loanword to the languages of the world, via the word *gangurru* [IPA *gʷaŋuru*] ‘large grey wallaroo’, which was recorded as ‘kangaroo’ by members of Captain Cook’s crew during their stay on the shores of the Endeavour in 1770. Speakers of the language were spared further contact with Europeans for about 100 years, when gold was discovered inland at the Palmer River in the mid-1870s. The consequent gold rush and invasion of the territory by settlers decimated local Aboriginal populations, and within 10 years the few surviving speakers of GY lived in scattered hunter-gatherer bands pushed off their lands or on the fringes of Cooktown and other smaller towns. A Lutheran mission established on barren land at Cape Bedford in 1885 became a refuge for the remaining GY speakers, and GY was the lingua franca of the community as legislation relocated Aboriginal children from a wide area—including many who spoke different languages—at the mission school. The earliest written information about GY derives from the Cape Bedford missionaries, systematized by W. E. Roth, the first Northern Protector of Aborigines. The 20th century saw a severe GY diaspora, as speakers of the language who had migrated to Cooktown and Cape Bedford were forcibly relocated to southern Queensland during World War II, and returned to their homeland in only a fraction of their already reduced numbers in the 1950s. Nowadays, though most GY speakers still live around Cooktown, others are scattered through other Queensland Aboriginal communities, and as far away as Melbourne and New Zealand. Despite repeated predictions, starting in the 1920s, that GY was on the verge of extinction, the language remains a central feature of life at the Hopevale community north of Cooktown, and there are currently more than 1,000 speakers of the language, which has undergone rapid change over the past half-century.

Genetic Relations

GY is fairly typical of northern Paman languages, and is very closely related to Kuku Yalanji, still a relatively healthy language spoken in the rainforest to the south, with which it has perhaps 40%–50% lexical overlap. GY has a fairly typical Australian phonemic inventory. Although most stems are disyllabic and consonant initial, GY is closely related to the now extinct ‘initial dropping’ languages originally spoken to the north at Barrow Point and Flinders Island. Early accounts describe two varieties of GY, one *thalun-thirr* or ‘coastal’ and the other *waguurr-ga* ‘inland’, though most diagnostic coastal lexical items have given way in modern speech to forms judged to be from the inland dialect. The language is now frequently written in a practical orthography which distinguishes two laminal series of stops and nasals (*th* and *nh* for laminodentals [d̪] and [n̪], and *j* and *ny* for laminopalatals [dʲ] and [nʲ], respectively), although earlier orthographies still survive, including one developed by missionaries which omits laminal (and other) contrasts entirely. Rhotics contrast between an alveolar trilled *rr* and a retroflex *r* [ɾ]. There is a typical three-way vowel contrast between *i*, *u*, and *a*, and vowel length is phonemic. There is further a complex interaction between vowel length, canonical stress and syllable patterns, and suffixing morphology. (Long vowels are doubled in the practical orthography; in this article a colon marks a ‘lengthening’ suffix, and a dollar sign a shortening one—see below.)

Basic Facts

GY is wholly suffixing, with free personal pronouns (which follow a nominative/accusative case-marking pattern—contrasting with ergative/absolutive morphology on other nominal elements) and no bound pronominal forms. Pronouns, normally only referring to animate entities, distinguish three persons, three numbers (singular, dual, and plural), and, for some speakers, also an inclusive/exclusive distinction in non-singular first person. The case system is elaborate, with a variety of ‘local’ (locative/allative, ablative [= causative], superessive, abessive, adessive [= goal]) and peripheral syntactic cases (dative, purposive, instrumental) in addition to those marking the core syntactic relations of subject and object. This case system is elaborated still further with the morphologically hypertrophied cardinal direction roots, detailed below. Genitive constructions allow dual case marking, where a possessed nominal functions in some further case-marked role, as in the following examples (which

morphology, providing delicate resources for GY directional precision.

Language Situation and Sociolinguistic Features

s0035

s0030 The Syntax and Semantics of the ‘Reflexive’ Suffix *-:thi*

p0045 GY transitive verbs ordinarily require animate subject NPs, whose referents are in an agent thematic role, conceived of as consciously and voluntarily controlling an action performed on some normally distinct object—the theme or patient argument.

- (4) nyundu minha wagi naaybu-unh
 2s.NOM meat.ABS cut.PAST knife-INST
 ‘you cut the meat with a knife’

GY has a productive ‘reflexive’ construction, with the lengthening suffix *-:thi*, which encodes a basic variant of this situation, when agent and patient arguments are coreferential:

- (5) ngayu(-ugu) wagi-ithi naaybu-unh
 1s.NOM(-EMPH) cut-REFL knife-INST
 ‘I cut myself with a knife’

p0050 Interestingly, GY uses the same verbal inflection, with varying case forms on the accompanying arguments, to encode other sorts of situation which depart from the canonical transitive situation characterized above. Thus, for example, in a situation appropriate to what in other languages might be encoded by a passive construction—for example, when there is no agent, or when the agent only accidentally acts, or when the organization of the discursive context promotes the object of the action to a position of prominence—GY uses the same *-:thi* suffix on the verb.

- (6) nganhi wagi-ithi naaybu-unh
 1s.ACC cut-REFL knife-INST
 ‘I got cut on the knife (by accident)’

Similarly, in a kind of generalized action in which no specific agent can be singled out, GY also has recourse to *-:thi*. A typical example might be

- (7) nyulu gunda-athi
 3s.NOM hit-REFL
 ‘he had a fight/was in a fight’

There is also a small group of GY verbs which occur **only** in ‘reflexive’ form with *-:thi*, mostly denoting actions typically performed without conscious outside agency (‘come to an end,’ ‘explode,’ ‘finish,’ among others).

p0055 Because of the particular history of its speech community, and the rapidly shifting conditions under which it is learned and spoken, GY is a language in a dramatic state of flux and variation. The mix of ‘tribal’ origins of its modern-day speakers, and the range of circumstances in which it serves as a medium of interaction, have produced different levels or registers in which GY and different varieties of Aboriginal and standard English combine.

p0060 Traditionally in this part of the Cape York peninsula, Aboriginal people were polyglots, often practicing linguistic exogamy and able to communicate as they traversed dialect and language areas. Even within single dialects, other socially significant linguistic varieties, such as the so-called mother-in-law or brother-in-law languages, provided linguistically marked ways of displaying deference to certain classificatory kinsmen, or of marking intimacy with others. Historically, as speakers of different Aboriginal languages (as well as creolized varieties of other contact languages) either congregated or were forcibly brought together at the Cape Bedford mission, GY became the native language of many people who still had ancestral ties to other ‘tribal’ languages. As knowledge faded of these other languages, so too did the specialized subvarieties of GY disappear, since they were systematically linked to social practices and processes of transmission which were radically altered by the sometimes violent upheavals in Aboriginal society.

p0065 In modern Hopevale, and around Cooktown, where the great majority of current GY speakers live, the language is still widely used, although it has a diglossic functional relationship with English. In the somewhat anarchic conditions of language acquisition in this fragmented speech community, the language is also undergoing probably accelerated simplification, as paradigms once fraught with irregularity are allowed to conform to more productive morphosyntactic patterns. Moreover, different generations in the community, with different kinds of schooling and a variety of personal backgrounds and competence in Australian English, mix English and GY freely in a typified and self-identifying variety of Hopevale English which combines GY pronouns and individual lexical items with a largely English syntax.

See also: Australia (01711); Australian Aboriginal languages (04338).

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Abstract:

Guugu Yimithirr was the first Australian language recorded by Europeans, and is the origin of the word *kangaroo*. It is typically Australian, with split-ergative morphology, an elaborated case system, and a hypertrophied set of cardinal direction terms, insistently used. It is the language of Hopevale, where speakers have different ancestral languages. Traditionally it had a developed avoidance register.

Biography:

John Beard Haviland received his B.A. in philosophy in 1966 and his Ph.D. in social anthropology in 1972, both from Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. He is an anthropological linguist, with principal interests in the social life of language. His major research has been on Tzotzil (Mayan) in highland Chiapas, Mexico and its neighbors, as well as on languages from the area north of Cooktown, in the far north of Queensland, Australia. Dr. Haviland is Professor of Anthropology and Linguistics at Reed College, and concurrently Investigador Titular C at the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, Mexico.

Keywords: Australia, Avoidance Language, Cardinal Directions, Case Systems, Diglossia, Ergativity, Kangaroo, Lingua Franca, Multilingualism, Paman, Reflexive, Register, Vowel Length

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