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Guugu Yimithirr

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The Language and Its Speakers

Guugu Yimithirr (Gu:guyimidjir) (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 *g'aŋuru*] '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 1000 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 [ɟ] and [ɲ], 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* [ɻ]. 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 also show the ergative/absolutive patterning of nouns and the nominative/accusative pattern of pronouns).

(1) nyulu   yarrga   thadaara   biibaa-:ga-mi.
    3S.NOM   *boy.ABS*   *go.REDUP.*   *father-GEN-*
                            NONP   *LOC/ALL*
    'the boy is going to his father's place.'

(2) jirraayn-da   nyulu   ngaliinh   bama
    man-ERG   *3S.NOM*   *2DU.ACC*   *man.ABS*
    ngarrbal   daama-y
    strange.ABS *spear-PAST*
    galga   thawuuny-ga-mun
    spear   *friend-GEN-INST*
    'the man speared me and a stranger with a friend's spear.'

Verbs fall into three main conjugations, with several minor additional patterns. Morphologically productive verbal categories are again numerous, including past and nonpast tenses, repetitive and continuous aspects, and such moods as contrafactual, desiderative, cautionary, precautionary or 'lest' forms, and a morphologically incorporated negative (in addition to a periphrastic negative construction). A multifunctional verbal suffix *-:thi* marks a syntactically complex reflexive/reciprocal construction, as outlined below.

Word order is completely free, and there is no discernable favored or unmarked order for clausal or, indeed, phrasal constituents. Each word of a discontinuous nominal constituent, including determiners and adjectives, can be marked individually for case. Animate noun phrases frequently appear with both a full nominal head as well as the appropriate case form of an apparently pleonastic pronoun, so that the nominative/accusative case-marking pattern of pronouns frequently coexists within the same clause with the ergative/absolutive morphology on other nominal constituents.

Shortening vs. Lengthening Suffixes and the Rhythmic Canons

GY shows an intriguing interaction between suffixation, vowel length, and stress. Virtually all monosyllabic lexical words have stressed long vowels, and long vowels are usually also stressed. The language

seems to favor a syncopated syllabic pattern, with alternate syllables short and long, unstressed and stressed. Thus, for example, the progressive aspect is formed by a complex partial reduplication of disyllabic verb stems to produce trisyllabic stems, whose middle syllable is a lengthened (and stressed) version of the original second syllable. Thus, *balgal* 'he'll make it' vs. *balgaalgal* 'he is making it.' In addition, suffixes differ according to how they affect stress and length in the stem to which they attach. Most suffixes engender length (when it is not already present) on all disyllabic stems ending in a nonnasal consonant. Thus, *gambul* 'belly' + *-hi* 'LOC' → *gambuulbi* 'in the belly.' Other 'lengthening suffixes' additionally engender length even on disyllabic vowel-final stems. Thus, *yugu* 'fire' + *-:ngu* 'PURPosive' → *yuguungu* 'for the fire.' Still other 'shortening' suffixes shorten the long vowel in the second syllable of a disyllabic stem. Thus, *buurraay* 'water' + *-$a* 'PURP' → *buurraya* 'for water.'

The Morphology and Semantics of Cardinal Directions

Rather than base locative expressions on body-relative or egocentrically anchored perspectives, GY, like many other Australian languages, uses locational descriptors which insistently incorporate cardinal directions. Four lexical roots, *gungga-*, *jiba-*, *naga-*, and *guwa-*, correspond roughly to the English directions north, south, east, and west, respectively, except that the GY terms denote compass quadrants rather than idealized points. In virtually all circumstances, GY speakers keep track of cardinal orientation and incorporate the appropriate directional terms into descriptions of both distant places and immediate locations. In answer to a question like 'Where are you going?' one will answer, for example, *nagaar bayan-bi* 'east to the house.' To tell someone to move a bit 'that way' one must add the correct direction: *yarrba guwa-manaayi* 'move a bit that way to the west' (literally, 'thus west-be').

Whereas ordinary nominal expressions have just a single LOCative/ALLative form, and another ABLative form, the directional roots have more elaborated morphological possibilities. The LOC/ALL forms, for example with the root *naga* 'east,' number three:

(3) LOC/ALL forms
    naga (0-form, 'east from a point')
    naga-ar (R-form, 'to a point east')
    naga-alu (L-form, 'east, over some point or obstacle')

Though all denote, in this case, motion in an easterly direction from some origo, each incorporates a different perspective or set of locational presuppositions. The least marked 0-form concentrates on the starting point of the trajectory, or emphasizes setting out toward the east. The second R-form focuses on the end point of the trajectory, also in the east, or emphasizes arrival. The third L-form is the most highly marked, presupposing some known or inferable location to the east through or beyond which the current trajectory is conceived to pass. Similar elaboration extends to ablative and other locational case morphology, providing delicate resources for GY directional precision.

The Syntax and Semantics of the 'Reflexive' Suffix *-:thi*

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.'

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).

Language Situation and Sociolinguistic Features

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.

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.

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: Language Situation.

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