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Linguistic 'Purism' and Subcategorizational Labels in Yolngu-Matha

Abstract

The Yolngu-Matha dictionary must take into consideration not only the linguistically derived classification of words, but also the cultural division into moieties, groups, and communilects. Attitudes of the speakers must be respected, particularly those based on taboo and on the concept of sacred words.

1. Introduction¹

Yolngu-Matha (YM) consists of a bloc of communilects spoken in northeast Arnhemland, Australia. There are approximately 4000 speakers distributed throughout the insular and mainland settlements of this area [Yirrkala, Elcho Island (Galiwin'ku), Milingimbi (Yurrwi) and Lake Evella (Gapuwiyak)] where largish concentrations (pop c. 800) exist. All of these speech varieties belong to a single Australian subfamily, whose supposedly nearest genetic relatives can be found more than 1000 kilometers to the southwest.

The YM speakers split themselves, their speech, and all of the known world into two moieties (Dhuwa and Yirritja) and also into numerous other "native" linguistic classifications that were first expounded by Schebeck (n.d.). These divisions are noteworthy because they require the lexicographer to label lemma in a rather unique and unusual way. That is to say, if a phenomenon is considered to be Dhuwa, it will have *only* a Dhuwa name; obviously Yirritja people must use such Dhuwa forms when referring to those phenomena – and vice versa, when Dhuwa speakers refer to Yirritja things.

An illustration from an actual experience I've had should clarify this. While browsing through LOWE's GUPAPUYNGU DICTIONARY with some YM students of mine, we came across numerous words – e.g.,² *bul'manydji* 'shark', *damala* 'eagle', *waltjan* 'rain', *walu*

¹ I am deeply grateful to my many students over the past ten years for their unfailing patience in teaching me about both their language and culture. A list of names would be too long for a piece such as this, but each will be faithfully acknowledged for his/her contributions to the YM Dictionary. I also wish to express my gratitude to P. BLACK, B. DEYLIN and A. WALKER for their insightful critiques of an earlier draft of this article, which have helped me considerably in making a situation with which I am all too familiar intelligible to others. Needless to say, any muddles which remain are my own responsibility.

² The YM orthography as developed by BEAULAH LOWE and used in bilingual schools is employed here, except that the symbols ŋ (velar nasal) and ä (long low central vowel) are here written "ng" and "a:" for typographic convenience. Digraphs with <h> (dh, th, nh) represent lamino-dental

'sun' – about which the students exclaimed, "That word isn't Gupapuyngu; it belongs to the Dhuwa moiety, and Gupapuyngu is Yirritja!". Similar comments have been made about forms used in stories written by YM authors. While any speaker may use any word from some 50 YM communilects (depending on family background and upbringing, death taboos in force, or even style), an author is subject to unprecedented scrutiny or criticism.³ In this regard, YM speakers may indeed be among the world's leading "purists", for when they see a book or wordlist labelled "Wangurri", they expect to find words that are genuinely only Wangurri, even if the speakers do in effect use other forms quite freely. Such purism is not extended to Makassarese or English Loanwords (even though the majority of "new" phenomena are in fact relegated to the Yirritja moiety). However, speakers are genuinely concerned over the "ownership" of the Yolngu-Matha lexicon. Meanwhile, the lexicographer, while being sensitive to the YM world view, must be concerned with actual usage.

It is normal for a dictionary to recognise horizontal vs vertical classifications of language (regionalisms and dialectal elements vs sociological variations), and also stylistic levels (e.g., colloquial, vulgar, etc.). The exact application of such evaluative labels is, of course, disputed. It is also usual to give at least some indication of restricted languages and registers (e.g., 'math', 'zool'). But in YM we have a language spoken by a relatively smallish society that has a somewhat different stratification from what lexicographers are accustomed to see, and which necessitates a different set of "labels". This may come as some surprise to one who is unaware of a society with such a small number of speakers showing such rigidity in the identification of lexical units, but this is precisely the case in NE Arnhemland. I have embarked on the production of a pan-YM dictionary (see ZORC 1983) because I found that mere "dialect" labelling would not be enough. It became necessary to indicate recognised divisions amongst at least five categories.⁴ Three of these are explicit in the minds of YM speakers, while two are linguistically derived (thus obviating the need for a long list of labels) and have been implicitly acknowledged by Yolngu.

sounds; underlining (d, n, t), retroflex or apico-domal sounds; single <r>, retroflex rhotic; double <rr>, an alveolar tap or trill; apostrophe ('), glottal stop; <e>, long high front vowel; <o>, long high back vowel.

³ That is prior to the advent of literacy within the last two decades. This has had the effect of making speech "permanent", and the culture has had to adapt or adopt laws regarding this. For example, if an author should die, his book is subject to the same period of taboo that are his possessions, his name, and words that sound like his name.

⁴ There is also a need for some familiar labels which will not be discussed herein, since they are common within lexicographic practice, e.g., *obsolete forms* and *child speech*. However, a sixth category is currently under consideration, namely *location*. Thus, Gumatj at Yirrkala reflects influences from Rirratjingu and Djapu, while Gumatj at Galiwin'ku from Djambarrpuyngu. Similarly Ritharrngu at Roper River has absorbed Kriol and Nunggubuyu elements while that of Lake Evella has Djambarrpuyngu elements. Such information has been gathered during brief forays into those communities for on-site courses, and cannot at present be investigated thoroughly since the bulk of my research is derived from the work of my students at the School of Australian Linguistics.

2. The language situation of Yolngu-Matha

There are three *natively derived criteria* (see SCHEBECK n.d. for a very thorough treatment).

(1) A bipartite split in *moiety* – Dhuwa {D} vs Yirritja {Y} or both {B} – cross-cuts all remaining categories.

walu {D} 'sun' vs ngalindi {Y} 'moon'
 banumbirr {D} 'morning star' vs djurrpun {Y} 'evening star'
 ngatili {D} 'black cockatoo' vs ngerrk {Y} 'white cockatoo'
 warnnyu 'flying fox' {B-D if large, black vs Y if small, brown}

(2) A recognition of *broad linguistic group* is based on the YM speakers' own classification via first person deictics ('this'). In the following examples (see WOOD 1978 or ZORC 1979a for more details), moiety is indicated along with a sample of communilects cited within square brackets:

dhuwala ('mirri) (Da) {Y} [Gumatj, Gupapuyngu, Madarrpa, Manggalili, Munyuku, Wobulkarra]
dhuwal'mirr (Dl) {D} [Da:tiwuy, Djambarrpuyngu, Djapu, Liyagalawumirr, Liyagawumirr, Marrakulu, Marrangu]
dhay'yimirr (Di) {B} [Dhaɭwangu {Y}, Djarrwark {D}]
dhiyakuy/yakuya (Dy) {B} [Madarrpa-dhudi {Y}, Ritharrngu {Y}, Wa:gilak {D}]
dhangu'mi (Dh) {B} [Ga:lpu {D}, Golumala {D}, Lamami {Y}, Ngaymil {D}, Rirratjingu {D}, Wangurri {Y}]
djangu'mi (Dj) {Y} [Madatja, Warramiri]
nhangu'mi (Nh) {B} [Bararrngu {D}, Bararrpararr {D}, Golpa {Y}, Gurryindi {D}]
djinang (Jn) {B} [Djinang {Y}]
djining (Jb) {B} [Djinba {D}, Ganalbingu {Y}]

(3) The distinction of *communilect* is based on membership in one or more social units or patri-clans, which are equivalent to surnames or family names. Some fifty communilects have been identified thus far (see WOOD 1978 for a comprehensive list). The corresponding clan names have been indicated within brackets⁵ in the list below, along with moiety and broad linguistic group.

Dhaɭwangu [Dal] [Gumana, Wunungmurra clans]	{Y} (Di)
Djambarrpuyngu [Jam] [Dhamarrandji]	{D} (Dl)
Djapu [Jap] [Mununggurr, Wirrpanda]	{D} (Dl)
Ga:lpu [Gal] [Gurruwiwi]	{D} (Dj)
Golpa [Gol] [Gandangu]	{Y} (Nh)
Gupapuyngu [Gup] [Gaykamangu, Gumbula, Marrkula]	{Y} (Da)
Gumatj [Gum] [Burarrwanga, Mununggiritj, Yunupingu]	{Y} (Da)
Liyagawumirr [Liy] [Garrawurra]	{D} (Dl)

⁵ For the conventions governing my use of curly brackets { }, square brackets [], and parentheses () see section 3(3).

Liyagalawumirr [Lgl] [Birritjama, Galbayungga']	{D} (Dl)
Rirratjingu [Rir] [Marika]	{D} (Dh)
Ritharrngu [Rit] [Bidingal, "Billy" (English surname)]	{Y} (Dy)
Wangurri [Wan] [Dhurrkay, Munyarryun]	{Y} (Dh)
Warramiri [War] [Bukulatjpi]	{Y} (Dj)

Examples⁵ mostly include names of places which belong to each respective language group and a few idiosyncratic grammatical or lexical forms:

Galiwin'ku {Liy}	Place, main township on Elcho Island
Gatatangur {Lgl}	Place belonging to Lilipiyana clan
Yurrwi {Gup}	Place on Milingimbi Island
Yirrkala {Rir}	Place on Gove Peninsula
yukurra (Gum)	CONTInuous aspect marker

Linguistically derived criteria usually apply to functors or high frequency grammatical items. Use of such labels will serve to group together several members of the above three categories, so that a longish list of abbreviations will not be necessary (viz, Dal, Jam, Jap, Liy, Lgl can be characterized as Southern Yolngu Vowel Dropping).

(4) Three major *subgroups* have been identified (Zorc 1979a): *Southern Yolngu* (SY) includes Da, Dl, Di, Dy; *Northern Yolngu* (NY) includes Dh, Dj, Nh. *Inland Yolngu* (IY), which includes the remotely-related and rather distinct Jn and Jb, will generally not be represented in the dictionary, except where forms are used in common or have been borrowed by NY or SY.

- nhunu (NY) vs nhe (SY) 'you (singular)' ABSolutive
- nhurruli (Nh)/nyeli (Dh, Dj) vs nhuma (SY) 'you (plural)' ABS
- nha:n (NY) vs ngayi (SY) 'he/she (singular)' ABS
- balay/wulay (NY) vs manda (SY) 'they (dual)' ABS
- nga (NY) vs -ngur(a) (SY) LOCative suffix (at/in a place)
- murr(u) (NY) vs -kurr(u) (SY) PERgressive suffix (through a place)
- nharra (NY) vs -miriw (SY) PRIVative suffix (having no X)
- wuru (NY) vs -Gal(a) (SY) OBLique suffix used on names/kin terms

Cross-subgroup homonyms also exemplify the need for this distinction:

ngayi =	(1) (SY) 'he/she'	(2) (NY) 'camp, place'
wa:nga =	(1) (SY) 'camp, place'	(2) (NY) 'speak'
yaka =	(1) (SY) 'no, not'	(2) (NY) CONTInuous aspect marker

(5) *Final vowel status* – some communilects (Dl, Di, Dh, Dj) drop final vowels (VD) under certain conditions, mainly from function words and suffixes (see DIXON 1980: 39f.), whereas the others (Da, Dy, Nh) retain all final vowels (VR). Rather than introduce a complex system of cross entries and abbreviations, I indicate this final criterion by enclosing the dropped vowel within parentheses:

- dumurr(u) 'big' = dumurru (in VR) & dumurr (in VD)
- dja:lthirr(i) 'like, want' = dja:lthirri (VR) & dja:lthirr (VD)
- lakaram(a) 'speak' = lakarama (VR) & lakaram (VD)

3. Repercussions applicable to lexicographic theory

Following on from all of the above, there are several implications for the lexicographer. (1) Given Yolngu-Matha "purism", the *production of a communilect-specific dictionary is difficult*, if not impossible. Gumatj speakers, for example, will freely use neighbouring Dhuwa or Rirratjingu or Djapu forms in their speech, especially when the death taboo is in force, prohibiting the oral expression of words that sound similar to the names of the recently deceased. Thus, at Yirrkala, Gumatj speakers now are using *dhangu* (Dh) 'this' instead of their appropriate *dhuwala* (Da) and about five years ago used *bithiwul* (Rir) 'none' instead of *ba:yingu* (SY). A lexicographer wishing to write a "Gumatj dictionary" is placed in the invidious position of including such forms and then facing an "outburst" similar to the one I described above (section 1) concerning a Gupapuyngu dictionary.

(2) For those scholars who maintain that there is *no absolute synonymy*, YM provides some striking evidence since the moiety or other subcategory of a form *subtly* affects the connotational meaning. YM speakers can in fact be very free in associating forms when asked for synonyms, and sometimes it is only after much deliberation that they are able to distinguish among commonly used words, for example:

'big' = bathala {Y}, yindi {D}, ngutu {B}, dumurr(u) {B}⁶

(3) Since a lexicographer must distinguish between ownership and use, I am proposing to utilize curly brackets to designate ownership, parentheses to highlight actual usage, and square brackets to indicate tentative observations. Thus:

Biranybirany {Gum} Place name on Gove Peninsula = word belonging to Gumatj people, but open to use by anyone
 yukurra (Gum) CONTInuous aspect marker = generally limited in use to Gumatj communilect
 wirrka [Gum, Jap] INTensive marker Syn: mirithirr(i) (SY), marimi (NY) = the form has been heard most often from Gumatj and Djapu speakers, but is also used randomly by speakers of other communilects; ownership is subject to further research

(4) Closely tied to the conventions just mentioned is the function of the proposed YM Dictionary:

The *descriptive* function is the broadest, outlining the sociological, grammatical and cultural domains of each form.

The *prescriptive* function corresponds to Yolngu Rom (law, culture and ceremony) which defines the universe of discourse and behaviour in no uncertain terms. The dictionary will help reinforce tribal law and knowledge against the onslaught of White Australian values, education and language. That a form represents a Dhuwa high totem, for example, is non-negotiable and simply must be committed to memory, belief and appropriate action (avoidance, respect, etc.).

The *restrictive* function delimits the actual usage of forms. For example, it has been suggested that a word currently under the death taboo be marked with an asterisk to

⁶ Following the convention described in 2(5), this represents dumurr in vowel-dropping and dumurru in vowel-retaining communilects, cross-cutting both moieties.

warn the user not to say it aloud (it is permissible to write, but not to speak such words). More prominent in the formation of the dictionary will be a *restrictive principle* by which secret names and words (restricted to sacred ceremonies) will be excluded, since the dictionary is likely to be seen by women and children (who are forbidden access to such forms). It has already been mentioned that words limited to Djinang and Djinba will not be included [see 2(4)].

The situation outlined above is a highly original phenomenon without parallel in theoretical literature on lexicography, so far as I know. There is some similarity to our understanding of copyright, in that the literature "belongs to" an author, but may be "cited" by others, so long as the original "ownership" is acknowledged. There is an absolute parallel to the Aboriginal idea of land ownership. One may pass through, hunt on, or otherwise use land which is undisputedly recognised to belong to a given clan (*provided* it is not sacred), but such land is not subject to claim or transfer *so long as* the caretakers (= owners) are still alive.

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List of abbreviations

ABS	ABSolute	Jb	Djinba linguistic group
B	both moieties	Jn	Djinang linguistic group
D	Dhuwa moiety	Lgl	<u>L</u> iyagalawumirr communilect
Da	Dhuwala linguistic group	Liy	<u>L</u> iyagawumirr communilect
Dal	Dhalwangu communilect	Nh	Nhangu linguistic group
Dh	Dhangu linguistic group	NY	Northern Yolngu subgroup
Di	Dhay'yi linguistic group	Rir	Rirratjingu communilect
Dj	Djangu linguistic group	Rit	Ritharrngu communilect
DI	Dhuwal linguistic group	SY	Southern Yolngu subgroup
Dy	Yakuya linguistic group	VD	Vowel-dropping communilects
Gal	Ga:lpu communilect	VR	Vowel-retaining communilects
Gol	Golpa communilect	Wan	Wangurri communilect
Gum	Gumatj communilect	War	Warramiri communilect
Gup	Gupapuyngu communilect	Y	Yirritja moiety
IY	Inland Yolngu subgroup	{x}	ownership by group x
Jam	Djambarrpuyngu communilect	(x)	limited to group x
Jap	Djapu communilect	[x]	tentatively assigned to x

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