

Tense Categorization in North-East Arnhem Land

Claire Bowern, *Rice University* — bowern@rice.edu, <http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~bowern/> — LSA, Jan 5th, 2006

1 Introduction

Several Yolŋu languages (Northern Australia) have an unusual tense-marking system in which tense categories mark discontinuous chunks of time. Events which occurred in the unspecified past or earlier on the day of speech are marked with ‘past’ tense. Events which occurred ‘yesterday’, however, are denoted by the same tense used for present and future events. Wilkinson (1991:335ff) claims that this is an areal feature of NE Arnhem Land. Here I describe the system. I show how the system arose in Yolŋu Matha and then briefly discuss the implications for theories of language contact in Australia.

1.1 Talk plan

- Overview of the languages in question, their tense marking strategies and the problem (using Yan-nhaŋu as an example)
- Reconstruction of the relevant historical changes
- Discussion and Conclusions

1.2 Language information

A map of the area can be found at the end of the handout.

- Yolŋu Matha is a complex dialect chain in NE Arnhem Land (a pocket of closely related languages surrounded by unrelated languages).
- The subgroup belongs to the family of Pama-Nyungan languages (cf. e.g. Alpher 2004).
- There is extensive multilingualism in the area (fluency in 4 or 5 languages is quite common).
- Yan-nhaŋu is the north-western-most Yolŋu language.

2 Yan-nhaŋu tense marking

- Time in Yolŋu languages is marked by a combination of tense/aspect particles and inflection on the verb (cf. Lowe 1960, Morphy 1983, Schebeck 2002, Wilkinson 1991).
- In Yan-nhaŋu, there are four main inflectional categories (and one minor one) and about ten particles in common use (Baymarrwaŋa *et al.* 2005).

- Here we will be concerned with only two of the categories (the other two are the form used for commands, and for habituals, irrealis, and some types of negation).

3 The problem

- Yan-nhaŋu is one of a number of Yolŋu languages with discontinuous tense categorization:
 - Events which happened ‘yesterday’ are marked with the same tense used to mark ‘present’ (and definite future) tense.
 - Events which happened ‘earlier today’ are marked with the same tense used to mark ‘remote past’ events.
- “Cyclical” system (Chung and Timberlake 1985, Comrie 1985)

(1)	Remote Past	Nhani He/she	(ŋätjili) (long ago)	manan ha CONT.	waŋan ha talk	He was talking.
	Yesterday	Nhani he/she	gathara yesterday	mana CONT.	waŋa talk	He was talking yesterday.
	This morning	Nhani he/she	munhagubi this morning	manan ha CONT.	waŋan ha . talk	He was talking this morning.
	Now	Nhani he/she		mana CONT.	waŋa. talk-	He’s talking (now).
	Future	Nhani he/she	godarr’ tomorrow	gurrku FUTURE	waŋa. talk	He’ll be talking tomorrow.

(2)	remote past	before yesterday	yesterday	earlier today	now
	waŋan ha	waŋan ha	waŋa	waŋan ha	waŋa
	‘past’	‘past’	‘present’	‘past’	‘present’

4 Reconstruction of historical changes

Two factors shaped the synchronic system in Yan-nhaŋu and the other Yolŋu languages with this type of tense marking.

4.1 Tense merger

- There have been numerous changes in Yolŋu tense marking.
- Some Yolŋu languages have two past tenses – ‘recent past’ and ‘general past’, cf. Wangurri (McLellan 1990, Wilkinson 1991) – see Appendix for information.
- Other Yolŋu languages have a general past tense (e.g. Ritharrŋu; cf. Heath 1980)
- Others have the tense system described for Yan-nhaŋu (or a variant of it; Djinaŋ, Djambarrpuyŋu)
- Finally, Djapu is described as having a primarily aspectual opposition between complete and non-complete.
- The system with two past tenses is the historically prior one and can probably be reconstructed to Proto-Yolŋu. Therefore the Yan-nhaŋu-type system is an innovation.

4.2 Borrowing or influence from Burarra

A plausible source of the innovation is the tense-marking system of Burarra, the language immediately to the west of Yan-nhaŋu (and also found in Nakara (Green 1987) and other languages of the Maningrida family).

- Three tense frames (‘today’, ‘recent before today’ and ‘distant past’).
- Contemporary versus Precontemporary (Glasgow 1964, Green 1987, McKay 2000, Wilkinson 1991).
- A type of relative tense marking: events occur either prior to, or at the same time as, a certain reference point.

(3)

	Contemporary	Precontemporary
Today	Now	Earlier Today
Before today (recently)	Yesterday	Before Yesterday
Distant past	Simple past	pluperfect

(4) Burarra (Green 1987)

Ngu-na-cha ngu-ni-rra an-gurrorlpa
 1M/3M-see-CON 1min-be-CON ant
 “I’m looking at the ants.”

(5) *Ngu-na-na ngu-ni-ø.*
 1M/3M-see-PRECON 1min-be-PRECON
 “I’ve just been looking.”

(6) Timeline:

remote past	before yesterday	yesterday	earlier today	now
	PreC	Contemp	PreC	Contemp

5 Discussion

- The Burarra and Yan-nhaŋu systems are similar, but not identical.
- Extensive multilingualism between Burarra and Yan-nhaŋu (and other varieties of Yolŋu Matha too).
- **However**, not all aspects of the system have been borrowed, only the use of the contemporary to mark events which occur ‘yesterday’. (Not corresponding marking in the remote past, for example.)
- The surface patterning has been borrowed, not the system itself.
- This is contrary to expectation. Categorical oppositions do get borrowed; cf. Thomason and Kaufman (1988), but surfacey borrowing of this sort is rare with intense contact (metatypy is expected; cf. Ross 1997).
- Therefore, we most likely have a case of reinforcement/entrenchment of a pattern.
- There have been tense/aspect shifts in many Yolŋu varieties; in the case of Yan-nhaŋu the outcome of the shift was shaped by morphological patterns in Burarra.
- Note that this would not be a case of L2 affects on L1 or vice versa, since everyone has multiple L1s.

6 Conclusions

- There are many claims about ‘areal features’ in Australia (cf. Dixon 2002, Heath 1978) but few discussions about how features are actually transferred from one language to another.
- Here is one example of a good candidate for an areal feature.

- In this case, it's an unusual tense categorization scheme which (I claim) has been influenced by the categories in another language rather than directly borrowed from it.

Appendix

Compilation of tense systems in different Yolŋu languages (from Schebeck 2002, Wilkinson 1991, source grammars and the author's field notes).

Language	System
Wangurri	Remote past versus recent past
Djinaŋ	Remote, Recent, Yesterday, This morning, present all marked differently (+ aspect)
Yan-nhaŋu	Discontinuous marking
Gupapuyŋu	Discontinuous marking
Djambarrpuyŋu	Discontinuous marking
Djapu	completed/uncompleted (aspectual) marking
Ritharrŋu	past versus present
Burarra	contemporary/precontemporary
Nakkara	contemporary/precontemporary
Ndjébbana	contemporary/precontemporary

References

- Alpher, Barry (2004). Pama-Nyungan: Phonological reconstruction and status as a phylogenetic group. In Claire Bowern and Harold Koch (eds.), *Australian languages: Classification and the comparative method*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, chap. 5, pp. 105–142.
- Baymarrwaŋa, Laurie, Rita Gularrbanga, Laurie Milinditj, Rayba Nyaŋbal, Margaret Nyuŋunyuyŋu, Allison Warrŋayun and Claire Bowern (2005). *A learner's guide to Yan-nhaŋu*.
- Chung, Sandra and Alan Timberlake (1985). Tense, aspect and mood. In Timothy Shopen (ed.), *Language typology and syntactic description*, Cambridge University Press, vol. III, chap. 4, pp. 201–257.
- Comrie, Bernard (1985). *Tense*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dixon, R.M.W. (2002). *Australian languages: their nature and development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Glasgow, Kathleen (1964). Frame of reference for two Burera tenses. In R Pittman and H Kerr (eds.), *Papers on the Languages of the Australian Aborigines*, Canberra: AIAS, p. 118.
- Green, Rebecca (1987). *A sketch grammar of Burarra*. BA Hons thesis, Australian National University.

- Heath, Jeffrey (1978). *Linguistic diffusion in Arnhem Land*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.
- Heath, Jeffrey (1980). *Basic materials in Ritharrŋu: grammar, texts, dictionary*. Pacific Linguistics.
- Lowe, Beulah (1960). *Grammar lessons in Gupapuyŋu*. Milingimbi.
- McKay, Graham (2000). Ndjébbana. In *The handbook of Australian languages*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 155–354.
- McLellan, Marilyn (1990). *Wangurri*. Ph.D. thesis, University of Sydney.
- Morphy, Frances (1983). Djapu, a Yolŋu dialect. In R.M.W. Dixon and Barry Blake (eds.), *Handbook of Australian Languages, Volume 3*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, chap. 1, pp. 1–188.
- Ross, Malcolm D. (1997). Social networks and kinds of speech-community event. In Roger Blench and Matthew Spriggs (eds.), *Archaeology and Language I*, London: Routledge, chap. 13, pp. 209–261.
- Schebeck, Bernhard (2002). *Dialect and social groupings of northeast Arnhem Land*. Munich: Lincom Europa.
- Thomason, Sarah Grey and Terrence Kaufman (1988). *Language contact, creolization and genetic linguistics*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Wilkinson, Melanie (1991). *Djambarrpuyŋu: A Yolŋu variety of Northern Australia*. Ph.D. thesis, University of Sydney.