Aboriginal Linguistics

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The southern boundary of the Arnhem Land escarpment is enormously complex linguistically, and without the efforts of Jeffrey Heath and Francesca Merlan beavering away through the mid 1970s we would know very little about it. Merlan’s work on Ngalakan is by no means the major part of her fieldwork there, having been limited to about three months by her more concentrated work on Mangarayi and Jawoyn, but in that time she managed to collect a substantial amount of this morphologically daunting language. Merlan decided to publish her work at this stage as a tribute to her main informant, Edna Nyuluk, and in doing so has made available the best yet published account of a Gunwingguan language. But early publication has inevitably meant untidiness of organization, plentiful unanswered questions, and analytic issues treated somewhat sketchily.

Ngalakan is a typical Gunwingguan language, strongly head-marking, with subject and object prefixes to the verb, two applicative prefixes (benefactive and ‘antibenefactive’, of which more below), productive nominal incorporation, four noun classes with the two inanimate class markers (mu- ‘vegetable’ and gu- ‘neuter’) optionally incorporated into the pronominal prefixes, a complex battery of other verbal morphology such as quantifiers and modal/aspectuals, weakly developed nominal case with basically ergative case marking, and a single, multipurpose type of clause linkage. Phonologically Ngalakan is also typical of central Arnhem land languages in having two stop series (labelled fortis/lenis by the author) and a phonic glottal stop.

Organizing grammars of polysynthetic languages is a difficult task, not well resolved in this book. Unsuitable grouping of material, coupled with an exiguous table of contents and no index, makes it very difficult to use for reference purposes. A linguist colleague took over twenty minutes to locate the paradigm of pronominal verb prefixes, which ultimately turned up in the ‘nominal morphology’ section after 3.2.29 ‘noun phrases’. Material on verbal applicative prefixes, and factitive verb formation, also surfaces in the section on noun morphology, and the adverbal temporal suffix -gan-, a feature of intraclausal syntax, is in the section on subordinate clauses. The only advantage of this sort of organization is that it forces linguists to read the whole grammar.

One reason grammar writers can end up putting material on noun phrases side by side with pronominal verb prefixes is the predilection of head-marking languages like Ngalakan for joining subject and predicate in a single word, even when the predicate is also nominal, as in an ascriptive clause like gurru-gwok-ji [we.incl-house-PRIV] ‘we are without houses’ or mu-polka [dit:Mclass-big] ‘it is big’. A drastic illustration of the degree to which Ngalakan treats nominals as main predicates attracting the same trappings as verbs (e.g. verbal prefixes) is a construction in which the nominal becomes function as transitive predicates, as in gun-mana? [3sg/1sg-mother] ‘he calls me mother’; the only modification of the basic grammatical form is the addition of a final glottal stop to the basically nominal kin term. Grammars of such languages, which in addition typically allow inflected verbs to be used as arguments with zero derivation, and adjectives to incorporate the nouns they modify forming a compound verbless predicate, must confront the exceptional degree of disengagement between category (noun vs verb) and function (argument vs predicate) by treating functional configurations (e.g. transitive predicate) separately from morphological classes. But we have yet to see a grammar of a head-marking Australian language that does this.

Another interesting feature of the Gunwingguan languages, whose exact properties vary even between such close relatives as Ngalakan and Rembangna (McKay 1975), is the use of applicative prefixes to promote benefactive, proprietive and other adjectives to argument status. Applicatives interact in interesting ways with such other manifestations of argument structure as case marking, object prefixes, reflexivization and noun incorporation, and an understanding of their full ramifications will be as crucial to non-Pama-Nyungan syntax as the antipassive has been for some Pama-Nyungan languages. In Ngalakan there are two applicatives — a benefactive, bak-, and an ‘anti-benefactive’ bqt a, the latter with the two meanings ‘away from’ and ‘in the company of’. Both promote complements to argument status, creating a new object with underlying intransitives, and displacing the original object of underlying transitives. While promotion to object is obligatory with benefactive applicatives, it is only optional with ‘anti-benefactives’ when the ‘accompaniment’ meaning is expressed: ‘although bqt a can result in object promotion in transitive clauses, it need not do so in either transitive or intransitive clauses’ (p. 95).

Among non-Pama-Nyungan languages with applicatives, benefactives always derive arguments that outrank underlying objects, while accompaniment-type applicatives are extremely variable. In Mayali the comitative applicative derives new arguments that fail to outrank objects and hence get cross-referenced by prefix only with underlying intransitive verbs; in Nunggubuyu and Rembangna the corresponding comitative prefixes (cognate, in Rembangna, with Ngalakan bqt a) do not derive new arguments at all. Such facts are obvious candidates for an account in terms of thematic role hierarchies (Foley & Van Valin 1984);
unfortunately Merlan’s discussion leaves unclear the exact conditions on when object promotion occurs with bay a.

Like most Gunwingguan languages, Ngalakan permits noun incorporation, and the topic is well discussed here. (Interestingly, Ngalakan maintains both noun-class incorporation in the form of noun-class-specific actant prefixes, and noun incorporation). Merlan makes a useful distinction between ‘lexical noun incorporation’ — the relatively fixed compounding of noun stem with verb stem to form new lexemes, and ‘facultative incorporation’ — the optional incorporation of generic (rarely) or body part (commonly) nouns for discourse purposes or to signal ‘part-whole’ relationships. Since Sapir’s(1911) seminal article, discussions of body part noun incorporation have often been clouded by distinguishing, as grammatically separate arguments, the pronominally cross-referenced ‘possessor’ of the body part and the incorporated ‘body part’ itself. This forces us to attribute the bound pronoun to possessor raising, and to conclude that body-part noun incorporation changes the argument frame of the verb (cf Mithun 1984). But Merlan gives these constructions an analysis more in line with the emerging view of ‘part-whole constructions’ in Pama-Nyungan languages by suggesting that ‘where there exists a semantic part-whole relation between body-part and the possessor as locus or source, the (incorporated -N.E.) ‘part’ noun is syntactically in apposition to the whole’. This apposition analysis, now well-established for Pama-Nyungan grammars, relieves us of the need to posit ‘possessor raising’ or to set up alternate argument frames. At the same time, it extends generalizations about the grammatical function of incorporated nominals, namely intransitive subject and transitive object, to cover incorporated body parts. The only major omission from Merlan’s discussion of noun incorporation is a discussion of the interaction of noun incorporation with applicatives — is it based on undergo, incorporating grammatical relations only, as in Chukchi, or is it fed by the applicatives, as in Mayall? In several other areas as well, Merlan’s loose discussion of grammatical relations is the weakest part of the book. For example, there are many interesting manifestations of ergativity in Ngalakan, ranging from the absolute orientation of noun incorporation, through the use of ergative case marking on both nominals and pronouns, to the orientation of the ‘compassion’ verbal prefix (“poor X”) which modifies S and O, to other preverbal prefixes such as -gara- ‘all’ (p. 94). Yet nowhere does Merlan bring these facts together, or raise the question of whether these directly reflect semantic roles or must be mediated by grammatical relations. Other possible manifestations of ergativity are left unstated and unexemplified — the dual suffix -bira? — is ‘very commonly suffixed to verbs’, but Merlan does not state which arguments it quantifies, her only example involving an intransitive subject. The interaction of applicatives with absolutely oriented phenomena is also not analysed, though an example of the

‘compassion’ verbal prefix modifying a benefactive-introduced object (3-217) suggests applicatives feed an absolutive category for some operators at least.

The term ‘major syntactic function’ is used throughout the grammar ‘to refer only to those NP functions which can be cross-referenced by pronominals in the verb’ (p. 50), namely intransitive and transitive subjects and transitive objects (underlying or derived). The reason for this limitation is by no means obvious — why, for example, should one argument of a ditransitive, or the displaced underlying object of a transitive verb, not be a ‘major syntactic function’ — and Merlan’s sole justification seems to be to account for adnominal relative clauses, which must modify a NP in a major syntactic clause function’ (p. 138). Yet the section on adnominal relatives contains no examples of modified applicative-derived objects, and no examples of unacceptable adnominal relatives on underlying objects displaced by a ‘benefactive object’, or on the theme-objects of ditransitives. Obviously the many interactions of these phenomena would need to be spelled out before even the basic data on how grammatical relations are encoded in Ngalakan can emerge.

On Merlan’s description, Ngalakan is a language that defies tight syntactic generalizations; many points of grammar must be stated as tendencies rather than absolute rules, responsive to the organization of discourse rather than strictly syntactic conditions. Discourse-motivated word order, for example, at least partly determines whether the ergative case is used. And the three-way choice between short vs long verbal noun-class prefixes vs zero appears to be governed by discourse factors: although ‘the tracking of a single noun over a multi-clause sequence by means of a pronominal was definitely found to be uncharacteristic of text material’, the combination of pronominal cross-reference with the external noun forms ‘small information units which tend to be extended over more than two or three clauses’. Here and in many other places, for example the variable case-marking on external benefactive NPs when an applicative is present, and the way discourse factors can override the interpretation of the compassion verbal prefix and apply it to a transitive subject (p. 186), Merlan does not shrink the full complexity of the data. But the lack of recorded dyadic conversational material and the fact that declension state of the language works against a satisfactory analysis of such discourse-based phenomena.

The same holds for Ngalakan’s ‘generalized subordinate clause’ construction, which Merlan analyses as ‘signalling that the interpretation of the clause is to be made by recourse to something else — generally to a preceding constituent, but up to and including larger information units’ (p. 136). A satisfactory theoretical framework for meshing such constructions with the pragmatics of the speech event, and good field procedures for teasing out the whole range of utterance-specific interpretations, have yet to be developed. Meanwhile, Merlan includes a
well-rounded (though exclusively monologic) set of eleven texts, grist for many discourse-based reanalyses.

Merlan’s grammar of Ngalakan is the first detailed published description of a Gunwingguan language and as such makes a wealth of material available to comparatists; this is enhanced by a reasonably full vocabulary. Unfortunately there is little comparative discussion in the book, although Merlan does note the many similarities with Rembarrnga (McKay 1975). Ngalakan appears to have undergone several regular sound changes, in particular 1 > w/e (cf Ngalakan -gewen- ‘(in fear), Mayali -kele-; Ngalakan bewk ‘white’, Mayall bele) and palatalization of initial stops before front vowels (cf Ngalakan jele ‘urine’, Mayali dele); the full reconstruction of these sound changes will be interesting. There is also minor evidence of intermittent structural calking from its southern, non-Gunwingguan neighbours Mangarayi and Alawa, with sporadic replacement of the characteristic Gunwingguan verb structure prefix-X-Y (where X is a compounding element and Y the inflected verb root) with the structure X prefix-Y, characteristic of the non-Gunwingguan languages of the Roper area (129-30). Similar changes have occurred in the westernmost Gunwingguan language, Kungarakan, under influence of the Daly languages (Evans MS).

As one of the traditional languages spoken among the first inhabitants of the Roper River Mission, Ngalakan should also be of interest to Creolists looking for substrate influences on Roper Valley Creole and Kriol more generally. I have long been intrigued by the use of dumaji, apparently derived from English ‘too much’, as a causal conjunction in Kriol, and was therefore interested to discover the Ngalakan conjunctions mači and mačnin, which basically expresses an emphatic meaning like ‘indeed’ or ‘truly’, but can also be used as a causal conjunction. Unless the Ngalakan term is a loan from Kriol, which seems unlikely given the existence of the longer form, the modern Kriol usage may derive from a transfer of the Ngalakan semantics, facilitated by chance resemblance between the traditional conjunction and English ‘too much’.

The typological similarity of Pama-Nyungan languages has allowed the in-depth examination of a number of central morphosyntactic phenomena, as well as the evolution of a conceptually apt framework for grammatical descriptions. Some, like Warlpiri, have even had the luxury, by Australian standards, of several linguists working on them, in depth and over long periods. Although it is unlikely that any Gunwingguan language will be examined so thoroughly, the Gunwingguan group does provide a large and still-viable set of typologically similar languages where a similar degree of cross-fertilization could be achieved. Merlan’s description of Ngalakan, for all its incompletenesses, has enough insights and provocative analyses to inaugurate this process. Hopefully

she will be able to carry out her stated intention (p. viii) of undertaking further and more comprehensive work on this complex language.

REFERENCES

Evans, N. MS. Linguistic convergence in the North Daly: the case of Kungarakan, Pungu-Pungu and Wadyiginy.


