Yanyuwa: ‘Men speak one way, women speak another’

John Bradley

This paper describes briefly the apparently unique system within the Yanyuwa language of having separate dialects for male and female speakers. I will highlight some of the social and ethnographic features of language as it is used in day-to-day speech and in such specific examples as song and ritual. The system is pervasive and distinctly marks the way in which men and women must speak. As a result the roles of men and women in Yanyuwa society are not only contrasted by their social roles, such as ritual life, hunting and nurturing, such as can be found in other Aboriginal communities, but also explicitly by the use of different dialects by male and female speakers. The sex of the hearer has no relevance to the way the language is spoken: men speak their dialect to women and women speak their dialect to men.

The Yanyuwa people today are centred around the township of Borroloola some 970 kilometres south-east of Darwin. Traditionally the Yanyuwa people occupied the Sir Edward Pellew Group of Islands and the lower reaches of the McArthur River delta system and the Wearaway River.

Today Yanyuwa speakers number approximately 90 to 150, ranging in age from the late twenties upwards. The younger generation have grown up speaking English with some influence from Kriol, though many have obtained a passive knowledge of Yanyuwa.

The reasons for the decline in the language are many, varied and complex and have been described by Jean Kirton (1987). She has been working with the Yanyuwa since 1963 and has been in a position to document the language in considerable detail (see bibliography).

There have been a number of languages recorded throughout the world that have some sex differences. Edward Sapir (1923:263-283) documented the now extinct Indian Yahi language, a dialect of the Yana group in Northern California. Sapir noted dialect differences relating to sex and found that in Yana the male form was longer than the female form and included a final syllable as the root; dialectal differences occurred more in complete words than in suffixed elements. There was also a further non-structural distinction in pronunciation whereby men when talking to men spoke fully and deliberately and when speaking with a woman preferred a ‘clipped’ style of speaking. Three examples of the Yana speech are given below.

|   |  
|---|---|
| 'grizzly bear' | 'grizzly bear' |
| 'see me' | 'see me' |
| 'Yana' | 'Yana' |

Sapir concludes that there are or have been few if any languages in the world in which the split in a dialect has been so pervasive or so thorough. See the paper by Jean Kirton (this volume) for a summary of work documenting sex differences in other languages.

The sex-based dialect differences in Yanyuwa are at least as far-reaching. The following text illustrates the extent of divergence between dialects — see Kirton (this volume) for a full discussion of the grammatical differences. Note that the same word stems are used in both dialects, but it is the class marking prefixes on the noun classes, verbs and pronouns which are affected.

Women’s Dialect

Nyja-ja nya-wukuthu nya-ruwarra niya-wini nya-Wungkuri kiwa-wingka

This short initiated man his-name M-personal name he-go wayka-liya ji-wamarra-lu niya-yirdi na-ridirdi ji-walya-wu down-wards MSC-sea-ALL he-bring ARB-harpoon MSC-dugong/turtle-DAT

Men’s Dialect

Jinangu o-wukuthu o-ruwarra na-wini o-Wungkuri ka-wingka

This short initiated man his-name personal name he-go wayka-liya ki-wamarra-lu na-yirdi na-ridirdi ki-walya-wu down-wards MSC-sea-ALL he-bring ARB-harpoon MSC-dugong/turtle-DAT

“The short initiated man whose name is Wungkuri, went down the sea, taking a harpoon with him for dugong or sea turtle.”

The reason behind this dialect distinction is today unknown and the reason why a male and female dialect arose can only be left to the realms of speculation. The Yanyuwa themselves give no definitive answer as to why there are two dialects, and there is no mythological account for the distinction. In their mythology the female Creator Beings speak the women’s dialect and the male Creator Beings speak the men’s dialect. The Yanyuwa give no special terms for the two dialects and refer to them simply as liyi-wulu-wu ‘for the men’ and liyi-nhanawy-wu ‘for the women’. The most common statement given by the Yanyuwa people in relation to their language is as follows.

“Men speak one way, women speak another that’s just the way it is!”

(Annie Karrakayn, 1986)
When I first asked why men and women had different dialects, people deferred to the knowledge of the elders who also readily admitted they did not really know, and thought that the question was a little peculiar. As one of the older Yanyuwa men put it:


“I am ignorant why there are languages for the men and women, maybe the Dreamings made it that way. I don’t know, the old people spoke that way and we follow them. What about him, that ‘whitefella boss man’ (scientist) he might know you should go and ask him.”

(Old Tim Rakuwurlima 1985)

Other people who profess a belief in Christianity believe that their language was given to them by God because that is the way He wanted the Yanyuwa people to speak. Only a few individuals offered opinions which were different from that of the general community.

“I don’t really know, but I was thinking that men and women have to respect each other, so we talk different ways and so we show respect for each other, just like ceremony; you know men have their ceremony and their language well same way women have their own ceremony and their own language”

(Mussolini Harvey, 1986)

Two women, on hearing of Mussolini Harvey’s comment, said they would do more thinking on the question and eventually came up with the following statement.

“Look at you, you’re different you don’t have na-wunhan [breasts] and you are a man, well same way you can’t have woman’s parts (vagina) so you see we’re different, different body, different job, different language, that’s why I can’t talk like a man and you can’t talk like us ladies.”

(Amy Friday with Bella Charlie, 1986)
John Bradley

To the Yanyuwa the two dialects are socially very important and after maturity it is considered only proper to speak the dialect of the sex to which one belongs.

Today most young people are more familiar with the female form of the language because of their frequent association with female company, for example at meal times and shopping trips to the store. Consequently when on the odd occasion a young Yanyuwa male uses Yanyuwa he often speaks the women's dialect, for which he is then disciplined. The following example is typical of such a situation.

Son: Mum, did you buy ni-warunyi [meat]?

Mother: Hey! Are you a man or woman? Man got to talk na-warunyi not ni-warunyi that's women's talk, you got to talk properly, you not little kid you know.

Son: Hey look you complain because young people don't talk language and when we do you got to laugh at us, man may as well not even bother.

Mother: Well, you just got to learn to talk proper way just like we did.

(A.I. & D.I. 1985)

It would appear that the system of having separate dialects for men and women invokes strong feelings about speaking correctly, which in itself creates a system where slovenliness of speech is not acceptable social behaviour. If individuals wish to speak Yanyuwa then they are expected to speak the dialect which is associated with their sex — there is no other alternative.

The groups neighbouring the Yanyuwa, such as the Mara, Garawa and Kurdanji, all say that Yanyuwa is "too rough to learn", that is, the sex-differentiated dialects are somewhat obstructive to the understanding and learning of the language for a person of non-Yanyuwa descent. Only a few Garawa and Mara speakers today speak Yanyuwa with an easy fluency, while the Yanyuwa declare that Garawa and Mara are easy languages and the fact that many Yanyuwa people today have Mara and Garawa as second and third language is proof of this for the Yanyuwa.

There are occasions when the Yanyuwa men and women do speak each other's dialects, such as when they are relating a story where people of the opposite sex to the speaker have spoken, in which case the quotation will normally be in the dialect which relates to the sex of the person who has spoken. However, there are times especially in rapid general conversation where the distinctions are not highlighted and one must rely on other contextual clues to find out the sex of the speakers involved.

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On rare occasions, men and women utilize the dialectal differences in Yanyuwa to draw attention to themselves. Once an elderly man in charge of certain public funeral rituals was not pleased with the way the performances were developing. He began orating his displeasure. At first people paid little attention until a woman pointed out that he was using the female dialect. When this was realized people listened to what was being said. I have witnessed such an occurrence once in eight years of fieldwork, though people present at the time said it had occasionally happened in the past. It is more common for both sexes to be somewhat hesitant to speak the dialect of the other sex unless it is for a specific reason, such as working for anthropologists or linguistic researchers, and on some occasions male Yanyuwa speakers have difficulty constructing the female form of the language and often defer to their wives or ask what they have stated to be checked with a female speaker; the women's dialect is the more complex of the two.

Both men and women will use the dialect of the opposite sex quite freely in joking situations, more specifically in situations relating to male and female relationships and sexual encounters. These situations are somewhat ribald and risque and full of humour to the Yanyuwa. Amongst the men such occurrences take place after certain ceremonial performances, for example where a male dancer impersonates a woman, after which he will tease his brothers-in-law as if they are his prospective wives. An example is given below.

Female Dialect spoken by Male Speaker

Nya-ngatha nya-Nyalba nya-yabi yinda nya-marrungaya nda-wana
M-for me M-pers.name M-good you:sg M-beautiful your:sg-buttocks

‘My Nyalba, you are too good, you have beautiful buttocks.’

(T.F. 1986)

Another unusual occurrence is the use of the female dialect form within the song cycles used by the Yanyuwa men during ceremonial performance. Many of the male mythological species are marked with the female dialect male class marker nya-. In everyday spoken Yanyuwa the men do not use the names of these creatures with this prefix. Examples are nya-Yilayi, Spotted Nightjar, nya-Walungkanarra, Rainbow Serpent, and nya-Wurrunkardi, the personal name of the Dingo Dreaming.

Within the song cycles, there are also female dialectal markers on common nouns and a number of verb stems from the female dialect. Two examples are given below.

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**Song Verse**

*Manankurra*

kiya-alarri

*Manankurra*

place name

kiya-alarri

he : stand

The prefix *kiya-* in the second line of the above verse is a women’s dialect prefix, while in the men’s dialect it is *ka-*.

**Song Verse**

*Warrigayanja*

*ni-mambul ni-ngurru*

*Warrigayanja*

Hammerhead shark

*ni-mambul ni-ngurru*

its: spray its:nose

The prefix *ni-* in the second line is the female masculine form. In the male dialect it would be *na-*.

When the men were questioned as to why the female dialect forms were found in song cycles, especially when some song cycles deal with male figures, they could give no answer and did not appear to be particularly disturbed. They classed such occurrences as “That’s just the Dreaming, they’re different”. It is tempting to hypothesize that the female dialect may be the more archaic of the two, but without sufficient evidence such a hypothesis remains very tentative. The occurrences of feminine dialect forms in the song cycles are too irregular to form any definite conclusions.

A hypothesis put forward by Dixon (1968) suggests that in some Aboriginal languages there is evidence of an underlying logic in apparent exceptions. He puts forward rules which apply to transfer of class membership in Australian languages. He believes irregular occurrences are in fact a purposeful class transference which classifies according to mythological characteristics rather than observable ones or which mark some important property, quite often danger. Dixon’s hypothesis may be relevant to the unusual prefixing which occurs in Yanyuwa song cycles.

There are other examples of unusual language usage which fit more into the mundane social life of the Yanyuwa. Two such examples are where root words are given irregular male and female prefixes:

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**References**


Nasal Cluster Dissimilation and constraints on phonological variables in Gurindji and related languages

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 In this paper I will describe two phonological rules of Gurindji which have the effect of eliminating a nasal cluster where it is preceded by another nasal cluster. By “nasal cluster” in this context I mean a cluster of the form nasal consonant — non-nasal stop. I shall refer to these rules collectively as NASAL CLUSTER DISSIMILATION, or NCD for short. The effect of one of the rules is to convert the nasal element of the right hand cluster into a non-nasal stop with the same point of articulation. I shall refer to this rule as NCD DENASALISATION. The effect of the other rule is to delete the nasal element of the right hand cluster altogether. I shall call this rule NCD DELETION. Later in the paper I shall consider the question whether NCD DENASALISATION is the only true NCD rule, and whether NCD DELETION can be replaced by a DEGENERATION rule.

I shall also examine the operation of these two rules in two closely related languages, Mudbura and Bilinara, in particular the different conditions on the rules in the latter, and in different dialects of Gurindji. By comparison of these languages I shall show that NCD has operated historically and continues to operate not only over morpheme boundaries, but also within lexical items to produce new canonical forms.

Finally I shall consider the question of the nature of the variable which may intervene between the two nasal clusters while still permitting the rule to apply. In this case the nature of the variable in one of the Gurindji dialects and, as far as I know, in Mudbura and Bilinara, lends support to the RELEVANCY CONDITION proposed by Jensen 1974, but the deviations from this in other dialects seem to provide evidence for a particular type of weakening of this, involving a phonological strength hierarchy of consonants similar in general outline, but not in specific detail, to that proposed by Foley 1977.

1.2 The three languages discussed here are eastern members of the Ngumbin group of languages, which are spoken in the upper Victoria and Ord River