

REASSIGNING UNDERLYING FORMS IN YIDINY – A CHANGE DURING LANGUAGE DEATH

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Yidiny language was originally spoken by three contiguous tribes, numbering in all perhaps 2,000 people, in the rain forest region of north-east Queensland (Dixon 1977:3-6). Following the white invasion of traditional Yidiny territory, which began in the 1860s, there was a rapid decrease in tribal numbers due partly to introduced diseases to which Aborigines had little immunity, partly to murder and partly through a lack of will to live in the new European-oriented world.

I worked intensively with the last few speakers during 1970-75 and wrote a comprehensive grammar of the traditional language (Dixon 1977). The speakers I worked with were mainly Dick Moses (born about 1898), Tilly Fuller (born 1903) and Pompey Langdon (born 1898).

Dick Moses and Tilly Fuller could each give fluent texts and were able to answer every type of lexical and grammatical query. A simple question would often set them off dictating a long 'conversation' in Yidiny, sometimes two or three pages in length. Tilly Fuller died in 1974 and Dick Moses in 1977. Pompey Langdon would not give texts but his Yidiny was full and consistent. Pompey is still alive and I continue to do a little work with him, but he is now very slow and rather deaf.

When I returned to work on tidying up a dictionary of Yidiny, between 1979 and 1989, very helpful advice was given by the remaining speakers: George Davis (born 1919), Ranji Fuller (born 1908, died 1988) and Katie Mays (born 1916). But I found that their knowledge of Yidiny vocabulary was not as good as that of Dick Moses and Tilly Fuller and that their grammar showed a number of interesting deviations from the traditional norms.

2. SEMI-SPEAKERS

The last people with some knowledge of a dying language typically fall into the category of 'semi-speakers' (cf. Dorian 1977).

Dorian (1981:107) characterises 'semi-speakers' of East Sutherland Gaelic in the following terms:

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Unlike the older Gaelic-dominated bilinguals, the semi-speakers are not fully proficient in Gaelic. They speak it with varying degrees of less than full fluency, and their grammar (and usually also their phonology) is markedly aberrant in terms of the fluent-speaker norm. Semi-speakers may be distinguished from fully fluent speakers of any age by the presence of deviations in their Gaelic which are explicitly labelled "mistakes" by the fully fluent speakers. That is, the speech community is aware of many (though not all) of the deficiencies in semi-speaker speech performance. Most semi-speakers are also relatively halting in delivery, or speak Gaelic in rather short bursts, or both; but it is not manner of delivery which distinguishes them, since semi-speakers of comparable grammatical ability may speak with very different degrees of confidence and "fluency"...

Schmidt (1985) recently undertook an in-depth study of language death among speakers of Dyirbal, the next language to the south of Yidiny. Contact with white invaders was less intense than it was for the Yidiny-speaking tribes. As a result, almost all people born up to 1930 (and some born later) from the southern Dyirbal-speaking tribes retain a full knowledge of the traditional language style. Schmidt (1985:4) comments:

...as a language moves towards extinction, a group of imperfect speakers characteristically appears who have not had sufficient exposure to the indigenous language, or who have been most intensively exposed to another language. The speech of such individuals is markedly different in form from the fluent-speaker norm. These imperfect speakers are called semi-speakers.

Schmidt investigated the speech of a group of semi-speakers born between 1950 and 1967 (children born after 1967 speak only a variety of English, with some Dyirbal loan words). She found that there was a continuum, among these semi-speakers, realised in terms of reduction of allomorphic complexity, reduction of inflectional and (to a lesser extent) of derivational affixes, loss of syntactic ergativity, and vocabulary reduction. There is a good deal of variation, among these speakers of 'Young Dyirbal', in grammatical competence (including the forms of affixes they use), and much mixing of languages in both formal and informal speech.

Languages which die do so at different speeds. Yidiny is proceeding towards extinction at a much faster rate than Dyirbal, which is itself expiring far more quickly than East Sutherland Gaelic. The last speakers of Yidiny have a fair degree of fluency in the language, much more than that shown by the average semi-speaker of Dyirbal or Gaelic.¹

Nevertheless, Katie Mays, Ranji Fuller and George Davis do show - in a small but significant degree - some of the characteristics of semi-speakers:

(a) LEXICAL INTERFERENCE FROM ENGLISH. The older speakers of traditional Yidiny mingled very little English into their Yidiny. I recorded 17 texts from Dick Moses and these included just two English interpolations: 'find him' in one text and 'dinner time now' in another. In four texts from Tilly Fuller there were odd occurrences of 'and', 'that', 'now', 'like', 'from', 'no more', 'standing there today' and 'all the way'; most of these bits of English stood outside the structure of Yidiny sentences.

A text from Katie Mays, although still a fair sample of Yidiny, showed more English elements, and of a more fundamental type, than texts given by Dick Moses and Tilly Fuller, for example:

- (1) *Young fellow wanggaajinyu*
 get.up+PAST
 The young fellow got up.
- (2) *Gundagundaal minya, an' then waymin*
 cut+REDUPL+PAST meat+ABS cousin+ABS
an' all them budiil ngunggu
 put down+PAST there
 The meat was cut up and then *waymin* and all them put it down there [to be cooked].
- (3) *Nganyji minyagimbal, only babaal*
 we+NOM meat+WITHOUT bone+ABS
nganyji findimalnyu, babaal can't bugang
 we+NOM find+VERBALISER+PAST bone+ABS eat+PRESENT
 We haven't any meat; we only found bones and we can't eat bones.

Note here the English noun phrase as subject of a Yidiny verb, in (1); an English addition to a Yidiny head noun in (2); and in (3) the transitive verbalising suffix *-ma-l* added to the nonce loan *findi* (the final *i* is necessary to satisfy the constraint that all roots in Yidiny should have at least two syllables). There is also the fact that *waymin*, although the subject of the transitive verb *budi-l* 'put down' in (2), does not bear ergative case inflection (this is at least partly due to the occurrence in the same noun phrase of *an' all them*). None of these features is found in any of the texts of Dick Moses or Tilly Fuller.

(b) OCCASIONAL OMISSION OF CASE ENDINGS. In traditional Yidiny every word in a noun phrase had to show an appropriate case inflection. In most sentences given by the semi-speakers this still holds, but there are occasional instances of, say, an ergative affix being omitted. (And this does happen where there is no English element in the sentence, as there was in (2).)

(c) VARIATION IN ALLOMORPHS USED. Dick Moses, Tilly Fuller and Pompey Langdon would always give a single form for each case inflection of a given word and were almost totally consistent in this. In contrast, the semi-speakers do – in direct elicitation – sometimes hesitate between two variant forms, and often say that both are acceptable. Usually, one is the traditional Yidiny form with the other being based on a 'new' root that is identical to the absolutive form (this is discussed in section 5 below).

(d) LIMITED KNOWLEDGE OF LEXEMES. I always try to check all lexemes with at least two speakers. While the semi-speakers have a fair-sized Yidiny vocabulary (at least a couple of thousand lexemes), they drew a blank at some uncommon words, from all the open word classes.

I have also done exhaustive botanical identification in the rain forest with speakers of both Dyirbal and Yidiny. Older speakers of Dyirbal (aged 50-90) can give a name for every tree and plant in the bush, as could Dick Moses. But Ranji Fuller and George Davis were only able to name the more important flora and fauna; there are a number of trees (those that are of little general use or interest), and some animals, the names for which they never learnt.

These observations suggest a distinction between traditional speakers and semi-speakers, and also a hierarchy within the semi-speaker category. (Birth years of speakers are repeated in parentheses, and the initials by which they are referred to below.)

1. Fully-fluent traditional speakers – Dick Moses (about 1898, DM)
Tilly Fuller (1903, TF)
Pompey Langdon (1898, PL)
2. Semi-speakers – George Davis (1919, GD)
Ranji Fuller (1908, RF)
Katie Mays (1916, KM)

Place on the hierarchy does not perfectly correlate with age. George Davis, although the youngest of the semi-speakers is also the most fluent of them; he was brought up by his grandfather and used Yidiny a great deal until he was about fifteen. (Dorian 1980 mentions the beneficial effect of grandparent contact on language retention.) The one text that George Davis gave had no English interpolations and no grammatical errors or omissions. He does reassign some absolutive forms as roots for oblique cases, but does so less frequently than Katie Mays or Ranji Fuller.

Ranji Fuller had a white father, by whom he was largely brought up, and thus enjoyed less contact with the 'old people' of the tribe than did George Davis. Katie Mays was also brought up in more contact with whites than her elder half-sister, Tilly Fuller.

The next two sections discuss vowel length and nominal inflection in traditional Yidiny as a necessary preliminary to the description of root re-assignment by semi-speakers, in section 5.

3. VOWEL LENGTH IN YIDINY

Yidiny has three vowels (*i*, *a* and *u*), with a contrast between long and short varieties of each.² Long vowels are only found in non-initial syllables. The most efficient analysis of Yidiny sets up underlying forms without long vowels.³ Length is then introduced by:

RULE 1 – PENULTIMATE LENGTHENING. In every word with an odd number of syllables, the penultimate vowel is lengthened.

This, by itself, would not lead to vowel length being phonologically significant. But there is a second rule which interrelates with Rule 1 to give this result:

RULE 2 – FINAL SYLLABLE DELETION. The final syllable is deleted from words that have an odd number of syllables, under certain conditions. More precisely:

$$XV_1C_1(C_2)V_2\# \rightarrow XV_1C_1\#$$

if (a) $XV_1C_1(C_2)V_2\#$ is an odd-syllabled word;

and (b) C_1 is one of the set (*l*, *rr*, *r*, *y*, *m*, *n*, *ny*, *ng*) of allowable word-final consonants;

and (c) there is a morpheme boundary between V_1 and C_1 .

Thus we get root *bunya* 'woman' which remains *bunya* in absolutive form (with zero case realisation); but when ergative *-nggu* is added, this reduces to *bunyaang* as follows:

underlying	<i>bunya+nggu</i>
Rule 1 applies	<i>bunyaanggu</i>
Rule 2 applies	<i>bunyaang</i>

Note that the effect of Rule 2 is to ensure that most words (in fact, 85% of words in texts) have an even number of syllables.

Stress is assigned to the first syllable that involves a long vowel; if there is no long vowel, stress goes onto the first syllable of the word.

4. NOMINAL INFLECTION IN YIDINY

There are seven distinct case forms for each noun in Yidiny. It will be sufficient to illustrate here with four cases (full details are in Dixon 1977:124-42).

- (a) ABSolutive, marking intransitive subject and transitive object, has zero realisation.
- (b) ERGative, marking transitive subject, is
 - nggu* following a vowel, e.g. *waguja+nggu*, 'man+ERG' (-*nggu* is reduced to -*Vng* on a stem with an even number of syllables, as illustrated above);
 - du* following a consonant. The -*d*- of -*du* assimilates in place of articulation to a preceding nasal or *y*, e.g. *ngubirrbiny+ju* 'leech+ERG'. Between stem-final -*y* and ERG -*ju* an -*ny*- can optionally be inserted, and the stem-final -*y* may optionally be omitted, e.g. ABS *gunduy* 'brown snake', ERG *gunduu(y)(ny)ju*. When -*du* is added to an even-syllabled stem ending in a rhotic the rhotic must drop, e.g. ABS *gugar* 'black goanna', ERG *gugaadu*.
- (c) PURPositive is -*gu* on all types of stem.
- (d) GENitive is basically -*ni* (although when it is added to a stem ending in a nasal, one of the nasals may drop).

Some nouns show an absolutive form of two syllables, the final syllable of which contains a long vowel, and ends in a consonant. Such nouns always have a trisyllabic stem (with all vowels short) in all oblique cases, thus:

ABS	<i>gajaarr</i>	<i>wangaar</i>	<i>gugiiny</i>	<i>gan.guul</i>
ERG	<i>gajarra+nggu</i>	<i>wangari+nggu</i>	<i>guginyu+nggu</i>	<i>gan.gula+nggu</i>
PURP	<i>gajarra+gu</i>	<i>wangari+gu</i>	<i>guginyu+gu</i>	<i>gan.gula+gu</i>
GEN	<i>gajarra+ni</i>	<i>wangari+ni</i>	<i>guginyu+ni</i>	<i>gan.gula+ni</i>
	ring-tail possum	boy	flying fox	grey wallaby

We could take the underlying root as *gajarra*, *wangari*, *guginyu* and *gan.gula* in such cases. This root is retained before (monosyllabic) inflections, yielding a quadrisyllabic word. But in the ABS case *gajarra* reduces to *gajaarr*, etc. This can be explained in terms of the operation of Rule 1 and of a variant of Rule 2. (Note that condition (c) for Rule 2, as stated above, is not satisfied.)

The situation is complicated by the existence of nouns that behave like *gajarra* in oblique cases, but retain the trisyllabic form in the ABS case, for example:

ABS	<i>gujaarra</i>	<i>galgaali</i>
ERG	<i>gujarra+nggu</i>	<i>galgali+nggu</i>
PURP	<i>gujarra+gu</i>	<i>galgali+gu</i>
GEN	<i>gujarra+ni</i>	<i>galgali+ni</i>
	broom	curlew

Here, Rule 1 has applied to lengthen the middle vowel of the ABS form (Rule 1 always applies, to every odd-syllabled word), but Rule 2 has not applied.

Speakers have to 'know' which nouns with trisyllabic roots reduce in the ABS and which do not. It is convenient to use morphophoneme symbols *A*, *I* and *U* for root-final vowels which are deleted by Rule 2 (and we now amend condition (c) on Rule 2 to read: EITHER if there is a morpheme boundary between *V*₁ and *C*₁, OR if *V*₂ is *A*, *I* or *U*). We thus write 'broom' as *gjarra*, but 'ring-tail possum' as *gajarraA*, and also *wangarI*, *guginyU*, *gan.gulA*, etc.

ABS is the unmarked, citation form for each noun. In texts, nouns occur in ABS more often than in all oblique case forms put together. But it is not possible to infer oblique forms from the ABS for words like *gajaarr*. If the ABS ends in a long vowel followed by a consonant then one knows that there must be a 'third vowel' before oblique cases, but the identity of this vowel is not inferrable from the ABS form.

It is interesting to note that cognates from neighbouring languages for morphophoneme-final roots in Yidiny do show a trisyllabic root (and the third root vowel is never deleted), for example:

Yidiny	<i>gajarrA</i>	brown possum	Warrgamay	<i>gajarra</i>	Jabugay	<i>gayarra</i>
Yidiny	<i>gan.gulA</i>	grey wallaby	Jabugay	<i>gan.gula</i>		
Yidiny	<i>wangarI</i>	boy	Jabugay	<i>wangari</i>		

There is one other class of nouns that inflect on a rather special pattern. About a dozen lexemes (in my corpus of around two thousand words) inflect like:

ABS	<i>galgii</i>	catfish
ERG	<i>galbiinyju</i>	

Now ERG is normally *-nggu* after a vowel but *-du* (with assimilation) after a consonant. The ERG form of 'catfish' is similar to the ERG form of *-y*-final roots, mentioned above. This suggests a root *galbiy*, the final *-y* selecting ERG allomorph *-(ny)ju*. We require a phonological rule that replaces *iy* by *ii* at the end of a word, to yield ABS form *galgii* (there is other justification for a rule of this form – see Dixon 1977:77-83).

5. ROOT REASSIGNMENT

The older speakers with whom I worked were quite sure of each case form of every noun we discussed. I took hundreds of pages of notes from Dick Moses (over six field trips), involving well over 1000 nouns, over 80 of which have a morphophoneme-final root on the pattern of *gajarraA*. There were only very occasional hesitations or inconsistencies. For instance, 'red bream' was given with ABS *wayiil*; the ERG was first said to be *wayiildu*, but then corrected to *wayilinggu*. 'Moon' has ABS *gindaan*; the COMitative form (with allomorph *-yi* after a vowel and *-ji* after a consonant) was said to be *gindanuyi* or *gindaanji*. With Tilly Fuller and Pompey Langdon (with whom I worked less intensively) there were no inconsistencies or exceptions to the pattern of inflection described in the last section.

The rules for inferring ergative from absolutive forms in traditional Yidiny are:

- (a) if the ABS ends in a consonant and there is no long vowel, add *-du* (and apply rules of assimilation, *-ny*-insertion, rhotic deletion etc.), e.g. 'flat rock' ABS *malan*, ERG *malaandu*;
- (b) if the ABS ends in a vowel, add *-nggu*, e.g. 'curlew' ABS *galgaali*, ERG *galgalinggu*;

(c) if the ABS ends in a consonant and the preceding vowel is long, then work in terms of a trisyllabic root ending in a vowel, and add ERG -*nggu*.

The semi-speakers did not recognise all of the morphophoneme-final roots I had recorded from DM, TF and PL. And for those that are known, they only sometimes follow (c). The rest of the time semi-speakers will simply add -*du* to the ABS form of a noun ending in a consonant, *regardless* of whether there is a long vowel present or not. Thus:

ABS (for all speakers)	<i>gajaarr</i>	<i>wangaar</i>	<i>gugiiny</i>
ERG (for DM, TF, PL)	<i>gajarranggu</i>	<i>wangaringgu</i>	<i>guginyunggu</i>
ERG (for KM, RF)	<i>gajaarrdu</i>	<i>wangaardu</i>	<i>gugiinyju</i>

Pre-Yidiny must certainly have had trisyllabic roots *gajarra* etc. These were retained in oblique cases but reduced to *gajaarr* etc. in ABS. A perfectly natural next step in the process of diachronic change would be for the ABS to be generalised as a new root, for all case forms, i.e.:

	ABS	Root	ERG
ORIGINAL	<i>gajaarra</i>	<i>gajarra</i>	<i>gajarra-nggu</i>
ATTESTED	<i>gajaarr</i>	<i>gajarra</i>	<i>gajarra+nggu</i>
NEXT STAGE	<i>gajaarr</i>	<i>gajaarr</i>	<i>gajaarr+du</i>

It could be suggested that KM and RF are merely representatives of the 'next stage'. This is true, in a sense. But it is a change that is a function of the language death situation (where the language has been only partially learnt⁴) rather than a natural change in a living language situation. The following points are relevant:

(a) There is a good deal of inconsistency in the forms given. KM and RF gave ERG *wangaardu* on one occasion and then *wangaranggu* the following year. The form *wangaranggu* shows a realisation that, from ABS *wangaar*, there should be a trisyllabic oblique root. But these semi-speakers did not know what the third vowel should be (*i*, in fact) and so they used *a*, repeating the previous vowels. Of course, every language situation involves some degree of variation; the point is that the variation among semi-speakers of Yidiny is much greater than that for the full speakers, or than what would be found in any stable (i.e. non-dying) context.

When talking to KM and RF together I asked for the Yidiny translation of 'the wallaby eats grass' involving *gan.gula* 'grey wallaby'. RF gave the ERG form *gan.guuldu* and KM *gan.gulanggu* – both semi-speakers said that either form was perfectly acceptable. Similar results were obtained for other words.

Even George Davis, who has a slightly fuller knowledge of the language than KM and RF, gave case forms:

ABS	<i>gan.guul</i>
DAT	<i>gan.guulgu</i> (based on a root <i>gan.guul</i>)
GEN	<i>gan.gulani</i> (based on a root <i>gan.gula</i>)

(b) The traditional language had a minimal pair *malan* 'flat rock' and *malanU* 'right hand'. Thus, in ABS case and in LOC (which has allomorph -*la* after a vowel and -*da* after a consonant), the full speakers gave:

Root	<i>malan</i>	flat rock	<i>malanU</i>	right hand
ABS	<i>malan</i>		<i>malaan</i>	
LOC	<i>malaanda</i>		<i>malanula</i>	

But KM and RF consistently gave the LOC of 'right hand' as *malaanda*. When I enquired the LOC of 'flat rock' this was also given as *malaanda*. The two LOCatives were accepted as identical; no worry was felt about this neutralisation.

It should be noted that the ABS forms *malan* and *malaan* were clearly distinguished. The semi-speakers always correctly used long vowels in ABS forms of nouns that (for traditional speakers) show a morphophoneme-final root. And they always show a long vowel in the penultimate syllable of a word with an odd number of syllables, by application of Rule 1.

(c) It was noted in section 4 that ERG is *-du* after a stem ending in a consonant, and that for an even-syllabled stem ending in a rhotic the rhotic drops before *-du* (as it also does before LOC *-da*). If this rhotic-dropping rule were consistently retained by semi-speakers there would still be a difference between the ERG form of *gugar* and of a noun that differed from *gugar* only in having a long vowel in the second syllable of its ABS form (like *wangaar*), with the ABS form being taken as root for oblique cases. (This is assuming that the rhotic did not drop in ERG after a long vowel.) That is:

	Root	ABS	ERG
goanna	<i>gugar</i>	<i>gugar</i>	<i>gugaadu</i>
boy	<i>wangarI</i>	<i>wangaar</i>	<i>wangaringgu</i> (for traditional speakers)
	<i>wangaar</i>	<i>wangaar</i>	<i>wangaardu</i> (for semi-speakers)

But it appears that semi-speakers do not always apply the rhotic-dropping rule. Once more, there is variation. I have recorded ERG *gugaardu* and LOC *dubiirda* (from root *dubir* 'hollow log') – with the rhotic retained – but also LOC *jubuuda* (from *jubur* 'stone') – with rhotic dropped – among other examples.

No minimal pairs are known ending in a rhotic, on the pattern of *malan/malaan*, but if there were any they might well fall together in the ERG (and LOC) for semi-speakers.

The semi-speakers also show some deviation from the norms of traditional Yidiny grammar for oblique inflections of lexemes that have ABS ending in *-ii*, such as *galbii* 'catfish'. They gave ERG *galbiing*, i.e. *galbii* plus the vowel-final ERG allomorph *-nggu*, reduced by Rules 1 and 2 (see section 4 above). But the following year RF gave the correct traditional Yidiny ERG form *galbiinyju*. For *guwi* 'frog', KM gave the ERG form as *guwiing* while GD volunteered the traditional ERG form *guwiinyju*. Note, however, that for the very common noun *gidigidiy* 'young children', ABS *gidigidii*, all the semi-speakers gave the correct traditional Yidiny ERG form *gidigidiinyju*.

In summary, for nouns where traditional Yidiny worked in terms of a root that differed from the absolutive form, there is a tendency among semi-speakers to form oblique cases directly on the ABS as root. But they do not do this consistently; in many cases the new form exists side-by-side with the old. It is likely that for the most common nouns the traditional inflectional forms are used, since these would be 'remembered' by semi-speakers from their youthful contact with fluent speakers of traditional Yidiny. But for less common words oblique case forms have to be generated, and there is a tendency to derive them from the ABS form, rather than from some more abstract underlying form.

6. OTHER VARIATIONS

Rule 2 (discussed in section 3) shortens many odd-syllabled words. As a result of this, many inflectional affixes have variant allomorphs depending on whether they are added to stems with an odd or with an even number of syllables. Thus:

<i>waguja+nggu</i>	man+ERG; compare with
<i>bunyaang</i>	woman+ERG (reduced from <i>bunya+nggu</i> by Rules 1 and 2)

and

<i>majinda+nyu</i>	walk up+PAST; compare with
<i>galiiny</i>	go-PAST (reduced from <i>gali+nyu</i> by Rules 1 and 2)

These reduced allomorphs of nominal and verbal inflections are very common and are *always* used correctly by semi-speakers in the corpus I have collected.

But Rule 2 also applies to some derivational affixes, and here there is variation in semi-speaker usage. There is an affix *-nga-* which can be added to nouns and to intransitive verbs to derive a transitive verbal stem of the L conjugation. Now imperative inflection has zero realisation for the L conjugation. Thus with a disyllabic vowel-final nominal we get a form that is, in traditional Yidiny, reduced by Rule 2:

<i>bumba+nga+ø</i>	dry-MAKE-IMP
<i>bumbaanga</i>	by Rule 1
<i>bumbaang</i>	by Rule 2

KM gave this form as *bumbaanga*, without the final reduction. However she did, in the same elicitation session, correctly reduce *mada+nga+ø* 'soft-MAKE-IMP' to *madaang*. And on a later occasion KM did give *bumbaang*. She made another error in giving *gidigidiinga* 'small-MAKE-IMP' in place of *gidigidiing*.

Intransitive verbs can take a transitivising affix *-nga-* and the same reduction applies. Thus *gali+nga+ø* reduces to *galiing*, but with a trisyllabic root we get transitivised *majinda+nga+ø* and there is no reduction (since condition (2) for Rule 2 is not satisfied). KM consistently gave *galiing* 'go with!, take!' but she also quite incorrectly reduced *-nga-* on the trisyllabic root *wulwuri-* 'shake' to give the imperative transitivised form *wulwuriing*. Here Rule 2 has been over generalised to apply to a four-syllabled word, yielding one that has only three syllables.⁵

7. CONCLUSION

Yidiny is a language that is dying very quickly. It has ceased to be actively used within one hundred years of the first white invasion in the 1860s. There has been a rather sudden switch from people (born before about 1900) who were fluent speakers, to their descendants who can only speak English. But there are some 'younger' people who have reduced fluency and can be regarded as 'semi-speakers'.

These semi-speakers derive oblique forms of nouns directly from the absolutive (=citation) form, rather than from a more abstract underlying root as did fluent speakers of traditional Yidiny. They show a good deal of variation in the oblique case forms they do use.

Final syllable deletion (Rule 2) is applied rather haphazardly to the derivational affix *-nga-*. But it is applied quite exactly, according to the norms of traditional Yidiny grammar, to all inflectional endings.

There is always variation in language use, and a language is always changing. But in a 'language death' situation – where members of a last generation of speakers only partly acquire a language, understand it as it was used by their parents, employ it in some circumstances for talking to each other, but do not pass it on to their own children – there is more variation, and simplification, which leads to accelerated change (cf. Dorian 1978).⁶

NOTES

1. The semi-speakers of Yidiny represented in this paper have a far larger vocabulary than semi-speakers of Dyirbal studied by Schmidt (1985). Their texts approximate to the traditional language with just a few allomorphic variants and occasional English interpolations, whereas the Dyirbal semi-speakers have lost some morphological categories and include a considerable admixture from English. See Austin (1986) for discussion of language death in languages from the south-east of Australia, which has proceeded over several generations, far more slowly than that in Yidiny.
2. A practical orthography is used in this paper (as in Dixon 1991). The consonants are (with the phonetic alphabet used in Dixon 1977 shown in parentheses, where this differs): bilabials *b*, *m*; apico-alveolars *d*, *n*, *l*; lamino-palatals *j* (*ɟ*), *ny* (*ɲ*); dorso-velars *g*, *ng* (*ŋ*); semi-vowels *w*, *y*; apical trill rhotic *rr* (*r*); retroflex continuant rhotic *r* (*ɭ*). A sequence of *n* followed by *g* is shown as *n.g*. The vowels are *i*, *a*, *u*; long vowels are shown as *ii*, *aa* and *uu* (*i:*, *a:* and *u:*).
3. There are a handful of other, rather minor, sources of vowel length – see Dixon (1977:83-86, 98).
4. Semi-speaker competence can, in general, be due to either of two factors: (a) incomplete language acquisition; or (b) loss of an originally acquired fluency due to extraneous factors, e.g. marriage to a non-speaker, movement away from places in which the language is spoken or other breaking of links with fluent speakers (see Dorian 1982). All the semi-speakers still live in their traditional territory and have kept up limited use of Yidiny (as far as there have been people to use it with). It is because of this that I suggest that in this particular language death situation (as in that reported by Schmidt (1985) for Dyirbal), incomplete competence is due to incomplete acquisition.
5. There are a few other instances of derivational affixes appearing, within the speech of semi-speakers, in forms that are at variance with the conventions of traditional Yidiny. The nominal comitative affix was *-ji* after a consonant and *-yi* after a vowel, reducing to *-Vy* with a disyllabic root ending in *-a* or *-u* and to just vowel length with a disyllabic root ending in *-i*. KM gave the comitative form of *nyanggi* 'annoying noise' as *nyanggiiji* (in traditional Yidiny it would have been *nyanggi*).
6. This paper was read at the Annual Meeting of the Linguistic Society of America in Minneapolis, 28 December 1983. I am most grateful to J.G. Breen, Tamsin Donaldson, Nancy Dorian, Frances Morphy, Bernhard Schebeck and Annette Schmidt for constructive criticism of an earlier draft.

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