

1 *The language and its speakers*

1.1 Names

This study describes the language spoken by a local group of Wangaaybuwan ‘people with *wana:y* (for ‘no’). They know vernacular place names within the area encircled at Maps 1 and 2. They are *bila:rgiyalu* ‘bull oak (or belar tree) people’, and this area is their *ɲuramba:*, their ‘country’ or ‘homeland’, distinguished from surrounding areas by the plentiful presence of bull oaks. But few today even visit it, since most now live in or near towns outside the area (Map 1).

The *bila:rgiyalu* call their language Ngiyambaa ‘language’. They also identify themselves as Ngiyambaa or Ngiyambaambuwalı. But when distinguishing themselves from the speakers of other languages which do not have *wana:y* for ‘no’ they describe themselves and their language as Wangaaybuwan.

Wangaaybuwan country not only consisted of the *ɲuramba:* of the *bila:rgiyalu*, but also included those of all other local groups whose language had *wana:y* for ‘no’. No surviving *bila:rgiyalu* are able to delimit this territory with confidence. They know of only two other, adjacent, local groups of Wangaaybuwan, *nhi:lyigiyalu* ‘nilyah tree people’ and *garulgiyalu* ‘stone people’ (Map 2). Radcliffe-Brown (1923) mentions two more local groups, “Waránda” and “Kāńárama”, which I was unable to verify.

The only known remaining speakers ‘with *wana:y*’ are *bila:rgiyalu*. They regard themselves as further divided into two sub-groups, those who began life camping more regularly in the area around *yagararay* ‘Keewong Station’, known as the Keewong mob, and those whose association was stronger with the area around *gunambidja:l* ‘Trida’, known as the Trida mob (Map 2). There are occasional dialectal differences between the speech of the two groups, in vocabulary and in the forms of some suffixes.

Throughout Chapters 2 to 10, the language of the *bila:rgiyalu* is

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referred to as Ngiyambaa (phonetically [*ɲ^ɥɛ:mba:*]), the language name usually preferred by its speakers, and they themselves are referred to as Wangaaybuwan (phonetically [*wɔŋa:yb^w:n*]), the tribal name which identifies them by a feature of their language. All other words of the language are always spelled according to the orthographical conventions set out at 2.2, and are always printed in italics.

1.2 Neighbours and their languages

From Albury at the Victorian border of New South Wales northwards to the border with Queensland, maps of tribal Australia such as Tindale's (1974) show a belt of contiguous territories, bounded on the east by the Great Dividing Range, each bearing a name consisting of the word for 'no' in the language of the area, followed by its comitative suffix 'having' or 'with'. Wangaaybuwan country is the second most southerly of these (for other spellings see Table 1.4a). Wiradjuri territory, which flanks it to the east and south, is the southernmost and largest. (The names shown on maps both of these and of other territories in the region are names referring equally to the local inhabitants and to their languages, as will be seen from the way in which they are used in the remainder of this chapter.)

Austin, Williams and Wurm (forthcoming) have said all that can be confidently said at present about genetic relationships between the languages of the seven northernmost 'no-having' groups and those of the Wangaaybuwan and Wiradjuri. They map the probable territories of the seven northern groups and present a case for regarding the languages of three of them, Gamilaraay (Kamilaroi), Yuwaalaraay and Yuwaaliyaay (Euahlayi), as dialect forms of a single language. (The languages of the remaining four, Gawambaraay, Wiriyaraay, Guyinbaraay (Koinberi) and northern Gamilaraay, were poorly recorded and are now extinct.) They then canvass the evidence for relating this group of dialects to Ngiyambaa of the Wangaaybuwan and to Wiradjuri. Their preliminary lexicostatistical count of cognates shows Ngiyambaa to have 36% common vocabulary with Yuwaaliyaay/Gamilaraay and 41% with Wiradjuri. (The figures for verbs alone are higher, 41% shared with Yuwaaliyaay, 47% with Gamilaraay and 49% with Wiradjuri.) They also draw attention to morphological similarities between the case-marking and verb-final inflections of Ngiyambaa, Gamilaraay and Wiradjuri, and to their cognate systems of 'aspectual' verbal suffixes for indicating the time of day of an event.

Genetic relationships between the 'no-having' languages appear to be closer than genetic relationships between any 'no-having' language and any other adjacently spoken language with a name formed according to

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different etymological principles. To the south-west of Wangaaybuwan and Wiradjuri languages were spoken whose names are reduplications of the local form for 'no'; while Baagandji, spoken immediately to the west of Wangaaybuwan, is the vernacular equivalent of 'belonging to the Darling River'.

What is known about the 'no-no' languages has been recorded by Luise Hercus (1969 and 1978). Baagandji has many dialects, mostly no longer spoken. Luise Hercus is currently writing a Baagandji grammar based on salvage work she has done with the last speakers (forthcoming (b)). For an account of the salient characteristics of the dialects (with map), which incidentally reveals how little their morphology has in common with that of Ngiyambaa, see Hercus forthcoming (a).

The *bila:rgiyalu* sub-group of the Wangaaybuwan, whose language this book describes, think of traditional social organisation primarily in terms of groups of people named as 'owning' or 'belonging to' tracts of land adjacent to their own 'bull oak' country, each of which is similarly distinguished by some topographical feature (Map 2). The names used to distinguish different groups according to this system are all words in their own language (which are analysed into their constituent morphemes at 4.3.4.1). They use the name system described above, in which each name is a word of the language concerned, to explain which languages were spoken by each of these neighbouring groups (Table 1.2). Where the language spoken was the same as their own, they call it either Ngiyambaa or Wangaaybuwan. They prefer the latter 'no-having' name only when the question of the language spoken is raised in the context of a comparison with a group speaking some other 'no-having' language (Table 1.2).

Table 1.2 includes only one of the 'no-having' names besides Wangaaybuwan, Wiradjuri (4.3.2.2). It is not known what Wiradjuri people called their language among themselves, when not contrasting it with another 'no-having' language. Günther lists *ngiang* 'a word', and several other words with the initial element *ngiamba-*, with glosses such as 'converse', 'reply', 'bragadoccio' and 'truth, a fact' (1892: 92). This suggests that they had a word cognate with Ngiyambaa to refer at least to language in general. (See 4.4.1 for the etymology of Ngiyambaa.)

Beyond the territory ascribed to the vanished *garulgiyalu* at Map 2, to the north-east, was once the country of another 'no-having' tribe, the Wayilwan, with *wayil* for 'no'. A couple of isolated speakers remain with whom Janet Mathews has made recordings (1.4). They have a word

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[More information](#)4 *The language and its speakers*TABLE 1.2. Languages of the immediate neighbours of the *bila:rgiyalu*

Neighbours	Gloss	Language	Speakers
<i>galiyargiyalu</i>	Lachlan River people	Wiradjuri	None ¹
<i>nhi:lyigiyalu</i>	nilyah tree people	Ngiyambaa/Wangaaybuwan, Baagandji	None ²
<i>ba:wangay</i>	Darling River people	Baagandji	A couple
<i>gaꞤulgiyalu</i>	stone people	Ngiyambaa/Wangaaybuwan	None ³

¹ The knowledge of those few who still remembered a few words into the 1970s was too slight to be significant, even as corroboration of nineteenth-century written records. These words had been passed on as isolated items of vocabulary for a couple of generations.

² Luise Hercus has recorded a few words with Jimmy “Christmas” Murray of this group. Members of this very small group tended to speak Baagandji as well as “their own”, through living in proximity with *ba:wangay* (introduction to Text 3). (*nilyah* = *Acacia pendulosa*.)

³ Surviving *bila:rgiyalu* know very little about their northern neighbours, except for a story about the founding of Cobar told by the late Dave Harris (Donaldson forthcoming (a)). They have not extended their “beat” in that direction (Map 1). (For the reasons behind movements of people of Aboriginal descent in the area see Beckett 1965.) The last Wangaaybuwan known to the white community at Cobar as a language speaker, “Old Nanny”, died around 1914 (Mathews and Mathews c. 1914).

nyiyamba: ‘language’ which they also use in reference to their own language and to themselves, in the fashion described for the Wangaaybuwan at 1.1.

Thus there are two known surviving kinds of Ngiyambaa, one ‘with *wana:y*’ and one ‘with *wayil*’. One of the last Baagandji speakers, Elsie Jones of Wilcannia, recalls being told as a child precisely this, that there were two sorts of Ngiyambaa.

1.3 Ngiyambaa of the Wangaaybuwan and Ngiyambaa of the Wayilwan

Speakers of Ngiyambaa ‘with *wana:y*’, although able to recall nothing about the extent of Wayilwan territory or Wayilwan social organisation, had enough contact with individual speakers of Ngiyambaa ‘with *wayil*’ in years gone by to have views on the differences between the two. Apart from the obvious difference between their respective words for ‘no’, what struck them most was that Wayilwan people said *gumali* for ‘hit’ and *wala* for ‘head’ (while they say *bumali* and *bala* respectively). They sometimes mention that the Wayilwan had different words for some things, but are rarely specific in a reliable context. (When unable to

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recognise a word I was checking, people would sometimes say “might be Wayilwan”). The difference, like so many dialectal differences in Australia, is conventionally summed up “They’re lighter (in the tongue) than us.”

When I asked a Wangaaybuwan speaker what was different about the way in which the late Janey Frail, a Wayilwan, used to talk, she imitated her threatening a child with what she regarded as an unusual punishment. The sentence she quoted (which did not contain a word for ‘no’) had no features to distinguish it from Ngiyambaa ‘with *wana:y*’. Since Janey Frail’s differing views on child-rearing struck my informant more forcibly than any linguistic differences, I take it that Wangaaybuwan and Wayilwan speakers had little difficulty in understanding one another.

Preliminary study of the taped material in Wayilwan (1.4) suggests that there are some differences between Wangaaybuwan and Wayilwan in the forms and functions of bound morphemes, particularly enclitic particles, besides the vocabulary differences and phonological correspondences alluded to by Wangaaybuwan people, but that their grammar is essentially the same. Where known differences are relevant to the analysis of Wangaaybuwan they are alluded to. Other idiosyncrasies of Wayilwan are not touched on in this book.

1.4 Previous investigations

Interested whites who gathered information from Wangaaybuwan people about their language would sometimes record its name as Ngiyambaa, and sometimes as Wangaaybuwan, depending on the name informants chose for their benefit. Information gathered from Wayilwan speakers would likewise be recorded sometimes as Ngiyambaa, and sometimes as Wayilwan. Only one investigator, the surveyor R. H. Mathews, recorded material in both kinds of Ngiyambaa, ‘with *wana:y*’ and ‘with *wayil*’; and he published his findings, not as descriptions of two dialects, but as descriptions of three separate languages, namely “The Wongaibon language” (1902), “Le langage Wailwan” (1903) and “The Ngeumba language” (1904). He described the Ngeumba people as inhabiting “the country from Brewarrina on the Darling River southerly up the Bogan almost to Nyngan. They stretched thence westerly beyond Cobar and Byrock, including the upper portions of Mulga Creek and surrounding country” (1904: 219).

Most subsequent tribal maps, including Tindale’s (1974), reflect this

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confusion. His, for instance, shows three territories, named “Wongaibon” (of which the countries of the *bil:rgiyalu* and *nhi:lyigiyalu* at Map 2 occupy the south-west corner), “Weilwan” and “Ngeмба”. This last is almost coterminous with the “Ngeмба” territory described by Mathews, except that it extends further west and less far south.

One writer however did notice the etymology of the name Ngiyambaa and of the ‘no-having’ name in the language with which he was concerned: “Wailwun or ŋiūmba is the language spoken along forty miles of the Barwon, from the junction of the Namoi downwards. It is called (Wailwun) from the negative ‘wail’ (sounded like the English word ‘wile’), meaning ‘no’[;] it is called ‘ŋiūmba’ from ŋiā = to speak (Mr Honery prefers the name ‘ŋiūmba’, which he says is that generally used by the people as the name of their own language. They call themselves ‘Wailwun,’ and sometimes use this word for the language[.]” (Ridley 1878: 246).

Radcliffe-Brown realised that “the evidence is all against . . . the existence of a separate ŋiambar tribe” (1923: 433). His tribal map shows only two territories, “Wongaibon” and “Weilwan” (1918: 226). But he did not seem to know that the name Ngiyambaa was used by BOTH tribes, and furthered the confusion by offering the notion that “the ŋiambar” were “. . . a local division of the Weilwan” (1923: 433).

If there were a separate Ngiyambaa tribe, its language would presumably be distinguished from that of the Wangaaybuwan and the Wayilwan by having neither *wana:y* nor *wayil* for ‘no’ (and from any of the other ‘no-having’ languages such as Wiradjuri, if they had alternative names cognate with Ngiyambaa).

No evidence has been forthcoming for such a language, either from living Wangaaybuwan or Wayilwan people, or from material recorded in writing.

Three types of written records were collected:

- [1] material recognisably named as Wangaaybuwan, Wayilwan or Ngiyambaa;
- [2] material not ascribed to any particular language, but gathered within the area described by other collectors as Wangaaybuwan, Wayilwan or Ngiyambaa country;
- [3] material gathered outside this area, or said to be in other languages, taken down from named informants known to surviving Wangaaybuwan or Wayilwan people.

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Not only was there no evidence in all this material for any word for ‘no’ other than *wana:y* or *wayil*. It was also possible to make a reasonably confident positive decision as to whether each item had been gathered from Wangaaybuwan or Wayilwan speakers (Tables 1.4a and 1.4b). (Items listed among the references under Donaldson are omitted.)

The criteria used were:

- [1] name given, if recognisable as Wangaaybuwan or Wayilwan;
- [2] word for ‘no’;
- [3] presence of initial *b*, *g* or *w* in relevant forms;
- [4] available information about named speakers.

Several investigators found *wana:y* for ‘no’ in the area R. H. Mathews described as “Ngeumba” country, including Mathews himself (also Dunbar, Worms, T. Mathews).

Two vocabularies from Curr which are substantially comprehensible as Wangaaybuwan none the less have “*weeri*” and “*weera*” for ‘no’ and are on these grounds regarded as Wiradjuri. They are No. 190 – Bathurst (1886–7: 378–9), and No. 190 – Sources of the Bogan River (1886–7: 382–3) respectively, the former from outside, the latter from just inside territory ascribed to the Wangaaybuwan elsewhere.

None of these written records is of any great linguistic interest. Only Mathews, and to a lesser extent Ridley, attempt any grammatical description of the language, and there is neither enough information nor enough consistency in its presentation for conclusions made on such a basis alone to be entirely reliable. For this reason I have not listed or commented on the very small amount of printed linguistic discussion of Wangaaybuwan or Wayilwan which draws on these sources.

The written records have however proved extremely useful in stimulating people’s memories of activities, beliefs and practices long in abeyance, and the vocabulary associated with them; and in reminding people of mythological stories. Particularly useful were Mathews’ fourth notebook, Mathews’ Ngeumba vocabulary (1904), Dunbar’s descriptions of the technology of the Wangaaybuwan who lived around Yanda Station south of Bourke (1943–4) and Berndt’s account of magic and clever men (1947).

Other written material which contains no linguistic information was also valuable in this way: chiefly stories recorded by Jeremy Beckett which form the basis of Blows (1975), and also material recorded by Roland Robinson from Fred Biggs, Beckett’s main informant on traditional matters (1966, 1976).

TABLE 1.4a. Written records of the Ngiyambaa of the Wangaaybuwan

Reference	Name given to language	Contents
Richardson 1875	Wonghi-bone	a few words
Cameron 1885	Wonghi	18 words
Cameron 1900	Wonjibon	90 words
Cameron 1902	Wonghibone	section terms
R. H. Mathews [n.d.]		
{ Notebook 1 p. 65	Wonghiban	} miscellaneous sentences, paradigms, words, "... Organisation, Stories"
{ 3 pp. 51-3	Wongaibon ¹	
{ 4 pp. 38-67	Wongaibon at Cobar, Ngeumba	
{ 4 inserted p.	Ngeumba	
{ 5 pp. 105-6a	Wong-hi-bon	
{ 7 pp. 111-13	Wongaibon	
{ R. H. Mathews 1902	Wongaibon	
R. H. Mathews 1904	Ngeumba	sentences, paradigms
T. Mathews and [] Mathews c. 1914	Wongiwoibon	sentences, paradigms, 520 words ²
Radcliffe-Brown 1923	Wongaibon	60 words
Dunbar [n.d.]	Ngemba	kin terms
Dunbar 1943-4	Ngemba	130 words
Dunbar 1945	Ngemba	20 words, a few phrases
Berndt 1947	Wuradjeri	150 words
Nekes and Worms 1953	Ngiemba	words, short texts
Beckett 1959	Wongaibon	34 words ³
Reay 1966	Yaam	kin terms
		219 words

¹ Though named Wongaibon, this has '*koomé*' for 'hit' where one would expect an initial *b* (*bumayt*).

² Wangaaybuwan speakers failed to recognise a larger proportion of the words listed as "family terms" than of the remainder of the word list, and suggested they might belong to "the Brewarrina mob" (i.e. Wayilwan).

³ Worms interviewed Wangaaybuwan people "south of Bourke", transcribing their word for 'no' as '*wungai, wungo*' (Nekes and Worms 1953: 264). He combined his findings with vocabulary from Ridley (1875), which was collected from Wayilwan people, and called the result Ngiemba.

TABLE 1.4b. Written records of the Ngiyambaa of the Wayilwan

Reference	Name given to language	Contents
Ridley 1873	Wayilwan	70 words, a few sentences
Ridley 1875	Wayilwan	150 words, a few sentences
Ridley 1878	Wayilwan or Djumbaa	150 words, a few sentences and the words of a song
Brewarrina Magistrates 1887	Wayilwan	110 words
T[] 1896	of Brewarrina Tribe	30 words
Quinn 1897	Wayilwan	56 words
R. H. Mathews [n.d.]		
{ Notebook 4 p. 15	Ngeumbaa	miscellaneous sentences, paradigms, words
7 pp. 68–9	Ngiambaa	
7 p. 114	Wayilwan or Ngeambaa	
7 p. 115	Ngeumbaa	
7 p. 116	Ngiambaa	
7 p. 118	Ngiũmbaa	
Untitled MS 4 pp. 6 pp.	Wayilwan	
R. H. Mathews 1903	Ngeumbaa	sentences, paradigms, 210 words
Taylor and Jardine 1924	Ngai-ambaa	14 words
Reay 1945	Wayilwan	section and kin terms

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There is a considerable number of relevant tape-recordings in the tape archive of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra (named as being in Wangaaybuwan, Wayilwan, Ngiyambaa and (a little) Wiradjuri). Material recorded by Luise Hercus with *bila:rgiyalu* people forms part of the corpus which this study describes (whereas none of the written material does, unless authenticated by informants). Among those she visited between 1967 and 1971 were a number of people who died before this study began, and as a result of her work it has been possible to pursue vocabulary and grammatical forms whose existence I might otherwise not have suspected; and songs and stories have been preserved which living speakers had forgotten.

The Ngiyambaa of the Wayilwan is chiefly represented in the archive by more than forty field tapes named as being in Ngiyambaa or Wayilwan collected by Janet Mathews, mainly in Walgett and Coonamble. Stephen Wurm also made a short tape which is unique among the tape-recorded evidence in having been made in conjunction with field notes (1955).

Presentation of a tribal map correcting the confusions described earlier in this section is best deferred until a separate comparative study of Wayilwan is completed. Such a map can then be as definitive as is ever likely to be possible.

1.5 Recent history of the *bila:rgiyalu*

The Ngiyambaa of the Wangaaybuwan is the only language in New South Wales west of the Great Dividing Range with more than a couple of speakers. This extraordinary survival is partly explained by the geography of *bila:rgiyalu* country, which set limits to white encroachment. It is a dry land without any rivers (4.3.4.1). The area was divided up into sheep stations. There are no towns within the area and none for many miles around, except Ivanhoe, whose population is only a few hundred. White settlement meant a radical change in the economy of the *bila:rgiyalu*, and much else besides, but not, initially at least, physical displacement. The rest of the explanation lies in their history during this century.

I spoke about, and later in, Ngiyambaa with about thirty people. Of these the ten oldest, born around the turn of the century or before, regard each other as 'having the language' (*ngiyamba:m-buwan*). They derive their sense of themselves as inheritors of a cultural tradition from