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# NGIYAMBAA

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For the people who said:

“Ŋiyanuna balunha:ra, waŋa:y mayi  
wizyagala, Ŋiyamba: ŋiyaŋaba.”

(When we die, there will be nobody  
left who can speak Ngiyambaa.)

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## *Maps and plates*

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### MAPS

- |   |  |                  |
|---|--|------------------|
| 1 | Ngiyambaa speakers past and present          | <i>page xxix</i> |
| 2 | The <i>bila:rgiyalu</i> and their neighbours | xxx              |

### PLATES

*between pages 12 and 13*

- 1 From left: Mamie King, Angeline Kirby, Eliza Kennedy, Lena Parkes and grandson Noelie, Gracie Taylor, Sarah Johnson and Eva Longmore (off to dig burrows near Euabalong West)
- 2 Archie King (Murrin Bridge)
- 3 Lily Hampton (left) and Eliza Kennedy (right) with their sister Lizzie Williams at Murrin Bridge
- 4 Sarah Johnson (near Euabalong West)

## *Preface*

---

In the opinion of the remaining speakers of Ngiyambaa the research for this grammar of their language was begun at least twenty years too late. Yet not one of the Australian languages once spoken to the east and the south has been or now ever could be described in such detail. And you would have to travel hundreds of miles north from Wangaaybuwan country into Queensland, or north-west into South Australia, before encountering a language with younger or more numerous speakers who are confident that they speak it 'right through'.

The central aim of the grammar is to be as detailed and comprehensive as is now possible. Ngiyambaa is likely to be otherwise accessible to future generations only through a limited number of tapes and texts, and a dictionary, which I am at present compiling. This dictionary will include not only words used by Wangaaybuwan speakers of Ngiyambaa such as appear in this book, but also words used by their erstwhile neighbours the Wayilwan, whose Ngiyambaa shows certain dialectal differences.

The grammar is a version of my Australian National University PhD thesis (Donaldson 1977), with minor changes. It is based on notes and forty five-inch field tapes (deposited with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra) which I recorded during a series of visits to Ngiyambaa speakers begun in 1972, supplemented by recordings made by Luise Hercus up to five years earlier.

Discussion of the phonology concentrates on those areas which posed most difficulties for orthographic representation. Some of this discussion is of wider interest, providing fuel for theoretical argument (the interpretation of diphthongs and certain long vowels as deriving from underlying vowel–glide–vowel sequences), and supplying precise exemplification of a feature common to the phonological systems of many Australian languages (severely restricted contrast among laminal consonants).



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Tamsin Donaldson

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A glance at the contents, which are deliberately listed in considerable detail, will reveal that Ngiyambaa is a language with a multitude of suffixes and enclitic forms, although the last generation to learn the language has reduced the morphological complexity of both the case and the conjugation system. The organisation of the remainder of the study is mainly morphological, except for Chapter 8, which draws together in a syntactic perspective material introduced elsewhere. The linguistic description is exhaustive in the limited sense that some account is given of every bound morpheme encountered, not only of its formal properties but also of its semantic and/or syntactic function.

A close investigation is made of the role of various features met with in other Australian languages, such as the enclitic pronoun system and the complex array of 'aspectual' and other verbal suffixes.

Some topics are given special attention, notably compound verbs, which occur in apposition to other verbs and act as verb-classifiers; particles, both free and enclitic, whose functions are fully illustrated in discourse; and complex sentences.

Grammatical points are frequently illustrated by reference to the texts and songs in the appendices, which have been chosen not only for this purpose but for their intrinsic interest. The morpheme-by-morpheme analysis of texts and other examples is complete, and any difficulties readers experience in their interpretation should be clarified by reference to sections of the grammar indicated by the upper case glosses.

The way in which examples are cited may give the impression that the language is more freely used than it actually is; a context is often given, such as 'said to a disobedient child'. In fact, the example is almost always what people say they would have said in that situation if they had been speaking Ngiyambaa rather than English, not what they were actually overheard to say. I shared a good deal of the daily life of the communities in which the speakers live, but it was only when I was able to bring two or more of their generation together, which sometimes involved us in long journeys, that I could hear much of the language spoken around me. Most of the material was collected in elicitation sessions where speakers were consciously acting as teachers.

There are two reasons for the emphasis on using the verbatim remarks of speakers as examples, set in contexts they have themselves provided. The first is that it helps understanding of the way in which Ngiyambaa sentences are structured to contribute to a conversation, since both word order and the incidence of ellipsis depend largely on context. The

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second is of more general importance. What Ngiyambaa speakers have to say in their language matters as much as how they say it. In so far as there is room for such things in a grammar, I have tried to allow their own voices to create a portrait of themselves and their concerns, and to communicate what they have managed to salvage of their heritage from the vicissitudes of the past century and a half.

The Australian National University *and*  
The Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies  
*September 1979*

## *Acknowledgements*

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All that I have learned about Ngiyambaa is the result of its remaining speakers' readiness to talk the language in my presence so that it could be recorded and analysed. Texts and song words are accompanied by the names of their contributors and, in the case of the latter, of their original composers. I should like to draw attention here to the contribution of those whose verbatim remarks are cited anonymously among the examples. Everyone who still knows something of the language participated in one way or another in making this record of it.

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies financed fieldwork for this study in 1972 and 1973, and provided a research grant which enabled me to work on it as a PhD student during 1974–7. Without the Institute's generous and timely assistance the book could not have been written.

Bob Dixon introduced me to Australian linguistics, and gave crucial encouragement, guidance and criticism while the study was taking shape. Harold Koch supplied a wealth of detailed comment during its later stages. Anna Wierzbicka and other members of the Linguistics Department in the School of General Studies at the ANU, both staff and students, read drafts of various parts and made suggestions.

I owe a particular debt to Luise Hercus who introduced me to the Wangaaybuwan community, and lent me all the field tapes she had previously recorded with Wangaaybuwan and Wayilwan people. Without her salvage work in Victoria and southern New South Wales the possibility of such a study might have vanished unnoticed. Janet Mathews made available all her field tapes recorded with Wayilwan descendants, and asked those she worked with various questions at my request. Stephen Wurm lent me his field notes on Wayilwan, accompanied by a tape.

Many other people also provided information, encouragement or comment, in particular Peter Austin; Jeremy Beckett; Penny Carter;

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## *Abbreviations and conventions*

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### Dialects (1.1):

- K indicates that a form is used by the “Keewong mob”
- T indicates that a form is used by the “Trida mob”

### Syntactic functions (5.1 and 8.1):

- S subject of intransitive verb
- A agent, subject of transitive verb
- O object
- IO indirect object
- POSS possessive
- NP nominal phrase (8.2)

References preceded by T and S are to lines of Texts (Appendix A) and Songs (Appendix B) respectively. These and the Ngiyambaa examples which are numbered afresh in each chapter are presented in a three-line format. Directly below the Ngiyambaa is a second line of morpheme-by-morpheme glosses, and below that an English translation. The following symbols and conventions are used:

- \* precedes an ungrammatical example (or, especially in Chapter 2, a reconstructed form)
- ? precedes an example whose grammatical status is dubious
- / pause
- = enclitic pronoun boundary (5.1.3)
- other morpheme boundary
- + links glosses for morphemes occurring in sequences within which boundaries cannot be marked with a hyphen
- (. . .) enclose material, except for articles, which is supplied in the English translations.
- “ . . . ” enclose Ngiyambaa speakers’ English translations of examples when they are deliberately given verbatim, and also all direct quotations elsewhere in the book, whether from spoken or written sources.

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‘...’ enclose all other English translations, except for those in the appendices.

Each of the upper case morpheme glosses consists of the description or translation by which the morpheme is identified in the contents, or, more commonly, of an abbreviation or contraction of this. The (part of the) description or translation used as a gloss is picked out in upper case in the contents. These glosses are recapitulated below in an alphabetical finder list together with the number of the section where they are introduced. A small number of glosses which do not appear in the contents are also listed:

A BIT	‘a bit’	6.3.4.5
ABS	absolutive	4.1
ADD TOPIC	additional topic marker	9.3.1.4
ADOPT POSI	‘adopt position’	6.3.4.14
AFTERNOON	‘in the afternoon’	6.3.4.2
AGAIN	‘again’	6.3.4.6
ALL DAY	‘all day’	6.3.4.4
ALTER TOPIC	alternative topic marker	9.3.1.5
ASSERT	‘assertion’	9.3.3.1
AUG	augmentative	4.2.1.3 & 4
BAD JOB	‘bad job’	9.2.5
BACK	‘back’	6.3.4.13
BEFORE	‘before’	6.3.4.7
BEHIND	‘behind’	6.3.4.8
BELIEVED TRUE	‘believed true’	9.2.3
BELONGING	‘belonging to’	4.3.4.1
BUSY	‘busy’	6.3.3.2
BY BEHAVIOUR	‘by behaviour’	6.3.1.4
CARIT	caritative	4.3.3
CATEG ASSERT	‘categorical assertion’	9.3.3.2
CAUS	causative	6.3.1.2
CIRC	circumstantive	4.1
CIRCUM	circumstantial	10.1.3
CM	conjugation marker	6.1.2
CNTR ASSERT	‘counter assertion’	9.3.3.3
CNTRFACT	counterfactual	9.3.2
COMIT	comitative	4.3.2.1 & 2
CONT	‘continued action’	6.3.4.12

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CONTRAST TOPIC	contrastive topic marker	9.3.1.3
DAT	dative	4.1
DIM	diminutive	4.2.1.1
DOMAIN	'domain'	4.4.1
DOWN	'down'	5.2.4.1
DRINK	'drinking'	6.3.3.4
DU	dual	4.2.2.1
DUBIT	dubitative	9.2.4
DUR	durative	6.3.4.16
EAT	'eating'	6.3.3.4
ERG	ergative	4.1
EST	'established reference'	5.2.2
EVEN	'to get evens'	6.3.3.3
EXC	exclusive	5.1.1.2
EXCLAM	exclamative	9.3.4.1
FEAR	'for fear'	10.1.2
FURTHER	'further'	5.2.4.2
GEN	genitive	5.1
GETTING	'getting to'	6.3.4.11
GOOD JOB	'good job'	9.2.5
GROUP	'in a group'	6.3.4.10
GROUP OF MANY	'group of many'	4.2.2.2
HEAT	'heat'	6.3.1.3
HIT	'hit'	6.3.1.3
HYPOTH	'hypothesis'	9.3.3.4
IGNOR	ignorative	9.3.4.1
IMMATURE	'immature'	4.2.1.2
IMP	imperative	6.2.2.1
IMPOSS	'impossibility'	9.2.2
INST	instrumental	4.1
INTR	intransitiviser	6.3.2.2
IRR	irrealis	6.2.2.2
LATE	'late'	4.2.4
LIKE	'like'	9.3.1.6
LING EVID	'linguistic evidence'	9.3.6.2
LOC	locative	4.1
MAKE BELIEVE	'make believe'	4.3.4.4
MORNING	'in the morning'	6.3.4.1
MOVING	'moving'	6.3.4.11

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NAME	name marker	4.2.3
NASTY WITH	'nasty with'	4.3.2.4
NECESS	'of necessity'	6.3.4.9
NEG	negative	9.2.2
NIGHT	'at night'	6.3.4.3
NOM	nominative	5.1
OBL	oblique	5.1
ONLY	'only'	9.3.1.7
OWNER	'owner'	4.3.4.2
PARTICIPLE	participle	6.5.1
PARTY	'party'	4.2.2.4
PAST	past	6.2.2.2
PITY	'pity'	6.3.4.15
PL	plural	5.1.1.3
PL AUG	plural augmentative	4.2.1.5
PL DIM	plural diminutive	4.2.1.5
PRES	present	6.2.2.2
PRIOR TOPIC	prior topic marker	9.2.1.2
PRIV	privative	4.3.2.1
PROG	progressive	6.3.4.17
PROHIB	prohibitive	9.2.1
PRONE	'prone to'	6.5.2
PURP	purposive	6.2.2.4
QUANTITY	'quantity'	9.3.5.4
RECIP	reciprocal	6.3.2.1
RECIP PL	reciprocal plural	4.2.2.3
REDUP	reduplicated	3.2.2
REFL	reflexive	6.3.2.1
REFL FOCUS	reflexive focus	6.3.3.5
SENS EVID	'sensory evidence'	9.3.6.1
SIDE	'side'	5.2.5.2
SKILLED AT CATCHING	'skilled at catching'	4.3.4.3
SUB	subordinator	10.2
THEN	'then'	6.2.2.3
TOPIC ISOLATOR	topic isolator	9.3.1.1
TOWARDS	'towards'	5.2.5.1
TRANSITIVISER	transitiviser	6.3.1.1
ULT FOCUS	ulterior focus	6.3.3.6
UNIV	universal quantifier	3.3.3.1



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UP	'up'	5.2.4.1
VBLSR	verbaliser	7.5
VIS	'visible to the speaker'	5.1.2
WATCH	'watching'	6.3.3.1
WITH A LOT	'with a lot'	4.3.2.3
WITH BIG	'with big'	4.3.2.6
WITH PROMINENT	'with prominent'	4.3.2.5
YONDER	'yonder'	5.2.4.1
1	first person	5.1.1
2	second person	5.1.1
3	third person	5.1.2

## *Rough guide to pronunciation*

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What Ngiyambaa speakers have to say in their language is of potential interest to people who may be unfamiliar with linguistics. This rough guide is deliberately non-technical, describing Ngiyambaa pronunciation by reference to the most closely related sounds of English (Australian or southern British except where other dialects are mentioned). The aim is to simplify reading out and quoting aloud from examples, texts and song words. A better pronunciation can be achieved by studying Chapter 2, especially 2.4 and 2.7.

*a* is like *u* in *cut*, and even more like *a* in north of England *cat*.

*i* is like *i* in *bit*.

*u* is like *oo* in *book*.

*:* indicates a lengthened vowel – thus *a:* is pronounced as *aa*, *i:* as *ii* and *u:* as *uu*.

*b*, *d*, *g*, can be pronounced either without voicing them, like *p*, *t*, *k*, in English, or voiced, like English *b*, *d*, *g* (*g* as in *good*). Which pronunciation you use cannot affect the meaning of what you say, and the choice of the symbols *b*, *d*, *g*, rather than *p*, *t*, *k*, is essentially arbitrary.

*ɹ* is like *r* in *foreign*, especially in west country British dialects.

*r* is rolled like the Scottish pronunciation of *r* in *foreign*.

*ŋ* is the single sound written as *ng* in *ring*. It regularly occurs at the beginning of words in Australian languages. A way to practise *ŋ* in this position is to repeat the word *ringing*, separating then dropping the initial *ri*.

The following pairs of letters each represent single sounds (as *ng* or *sh* do in English). The first two are stop sounds like *b*, *d*, *g*, and are pronounced without the friction of escaping air associated with the English sounds which most closely resemble them.

*dh* is made with the tongue touching both top and bottom teeth as for *th* (like *th* in *thin* or *this*).

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*dj* is like *t* or *d* and *y* pronounced simultaneously (like *ch* in *teacher*, *j* in *jilt* or *dg* in *midget*).

*nh* is like *n* and *y* pronounced simultaneously (like *ni* in *onion*).

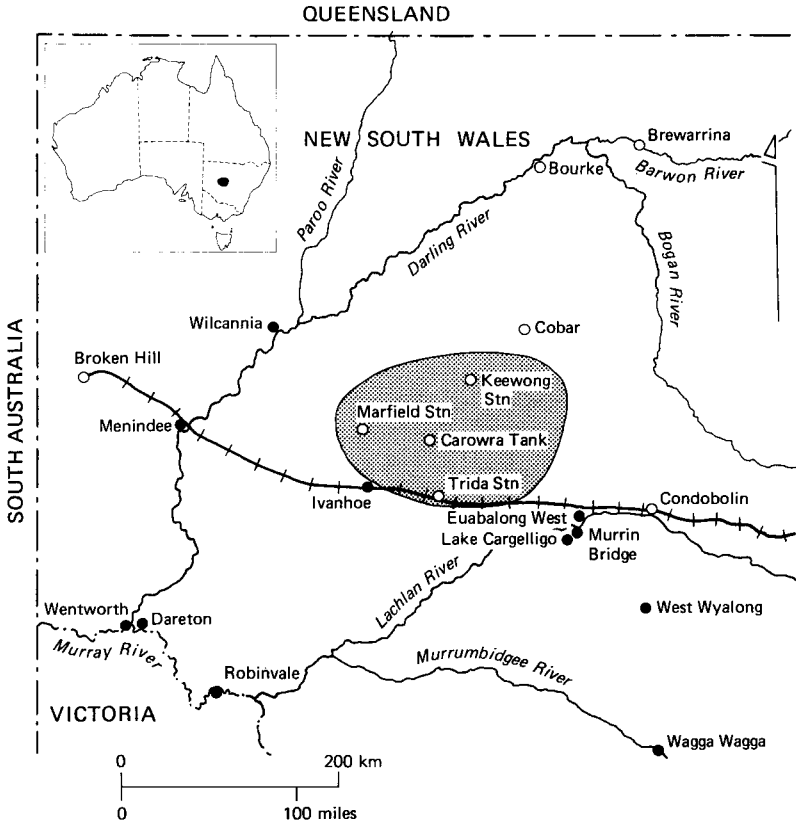
Tribal and language names are written with double vowels instead of length colons, and the letters *ng* instead of the symbol *ŋ*. Wangaaybuwan can be pronounced to rhyme with the sequence of English words *lung-éye-born*, accenting and lengthening *eye*; and Ngiyambaa to rhyme with *gém-bar*, accenting and lengthening the initial element.

ERRATUM

Line 3 above should read:

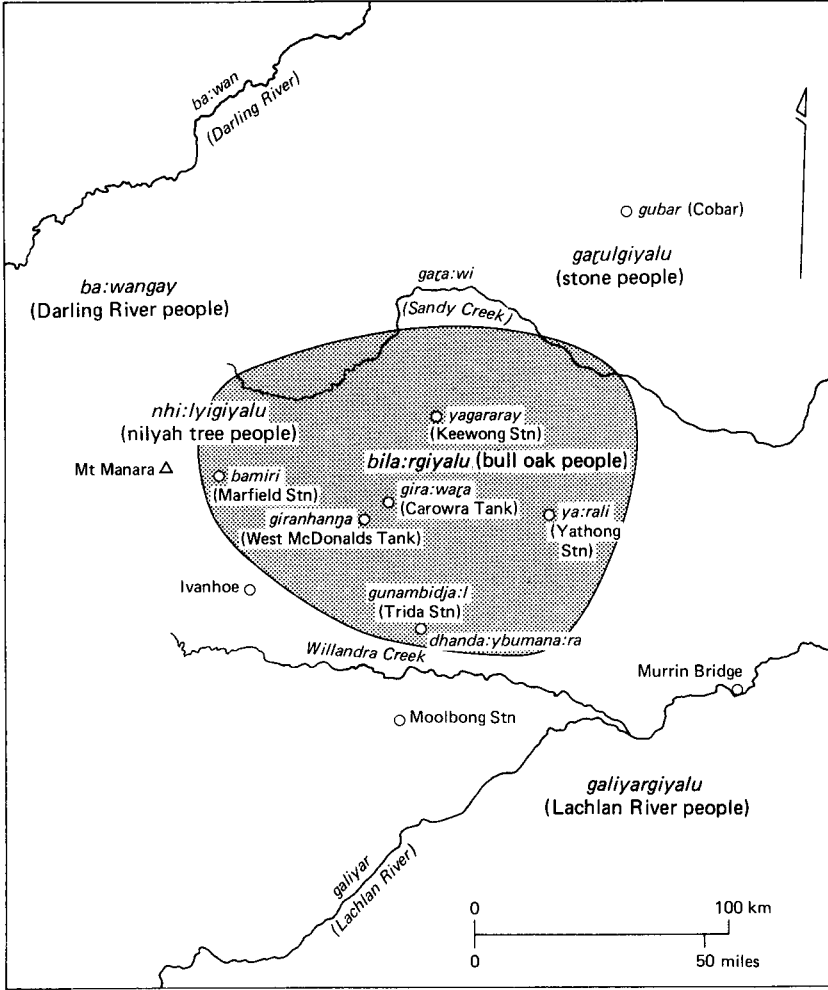
*nj* is like *n* and *y* pronounced simultaneously (like *ni* in *onion*). *nh* is like *n* made with the tongue touching both top and bottom teeth.

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MAP 1. Ngiyambaa speakers past and present  
 The ring encloses the area in which surviving Ngiyambaa speakers were born and for which they know place names, the *nuramba*: ('homeland'). Black circles mark towns in which Wangaaybuwan descendants with some knowledge of Ngiyambaa now live.

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MAP 2. The *bila:rgiyalu* and their neighbours. This is a closer view of the ringed area of Map 1, showing the creeks which bound it to the north and south. All places mentioned in texts and songs are marked.