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R. M. W. Dixon

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THE DYIRBAL LANGUAGE OF NORTH QUEENSLAND

R. M. W. DIXON

*Professor of Linguistics
in the School of General Studies,
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This study is dedicated to the surviving speakers of the Dyirbal, Giramay and Mamu dialects. For more than ten thousand years they lived in harmony with each other and with their environment. One hundred years ago many of them were shot and poisoned by European invaders. Those allowed to survive have been barely tolerated tenants on their own lands, and have had their beliefs, habits and language held up to ridicule and scorn. In the last decade they have seen their remaining forests taken and cleared by an American company, with the destruction of sites whose remembered antiquity is many thousands of years older than the furthest event in the shallow history of their desecrators.

The survivors of the three tribes have stood up to these adversities with dignity and humour, fortified by their amusement at the blindness of the invader to the richness of the environment, and of the life of the people he believes himself to be supplanting.

They continue to look forward to the day when they may again be allowed to live in peaceful possession of some of their own lands, and may be accorded a respect which they have been denied, but which they have been forcibly made to accord to others.

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| 1 | Chloe Grant (<i>marđi</i> , or <i>miđabunđal</i>), main informant for the Dyirbal and the Giramay dialects. In the left background is Mamie Grant, Chloe's daughter-in-law, whose mother was Mbabařam and father Waruřu. (1964) |
| 2 | George Watson (<i>muyiđa</i> , <i>řiyiđa</i> , or <i>bangandala</i>), main informant for the Mamu dialect. (1964) |
| 3 | From left: Rosie Runaway (<i>đarmay</i>), who speaks Giramay and Dyirbal dialects; the writer; Chloe Grant. Note Rosie Runaway's small stature (the writer is 6 ft 3 in). (1963) |
| 4 | The family of Joe Kinjun, last of the Malanpara tribe, at their camp on the banks of the Tully River. Joe Kinjun's head and left shoulder are visible, centre, behind his son. Joe Chalum, from the Dyirbal tribe, is furthest from the camera. (1963) |

Acknowledgements

It is impossible adequately to express the writer's gratitude to the informants, particularly Chloe Grant (*marđi* or *miđabunđal*) and George Watson (*muyiđa*, *niyiđa* or *bangandala*). It is their intelligence, and their unfailing interest, patience and willingness to work long hours to suit the writer's convenience, that has made this description possible. Amongst other informants who contributed to the variety of facts presented below are the late Paddy Biran (*garanba*), Tommy Springcart (*đumbulu*), the late Jimmie Murray (*giriņđan*), Jack Murray (*yangan*) Mosley Digman (*badibadi*), Joe Kinjun (*giņđubayil*), the late Joe Chalum (*đalam*), Spider Henry (*đinbala*), the late Jinnie Watson (*dunma* or *wargabařan*), Rose Runaway (*đarmay*), Mary Ann Murray (*miņadangay*) and Lorna (*đubula*).

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies wholly supported a year's field work in North Queensland from September 1963 to September 1964, provided a grant for continuing work on field material in 1965, partly financed a field trip in March and April 1967, and wholly financed a field trip in December 1970. The writer is most grateful for the constant encouragement, cooperation and help provided by the Institute, and its principal F. D. McCarthy, throughout this period.

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Many of the ideas of chapter 1 (and some of those in other parts of the book) evolved during discussions with Kenneth Hale and Geoffrey

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A. Capell has, since 1962, advised and shaped the writer's plans and given unstinting help in many ways. Thanks are also due, for linguistic help and advice, to La Mont West, Jnr, and Stephen Wurm. M. A. K. Halliday, John Lyons, T. S. T. Henderson and Erik Fudge read earlier drafts of this description and contributed a good deal of welcome comment. Warren Cowgill gave much useful advice during the writing of the main draft. John Haiman and Luise Hercus provided valuable criticism and correction of the final version.

The writer taught aspects of the grammar of Dyirbal at University College London in 1965/6, in 1967, and again in 1970, and at Harvard University in 1968. In all cases, the reactions and suggestions of students were most welcome. The Harvard class – consisting of Kenneth Hale, Ives Goddard, Michael Silverstein, Rudolph de Rijk and John Nicholls – was the most stimulating group the writer has ever confronted; several important new insights into the underlying grammatical patterning of Dyirbal emerged during that semester.

The writer's wife dislikes typical 'acknowledgements to wife' exusions. Amongst other things, she made a thorough study of the literature on the area and, much to their surprise, questioned aborigines on the details of several secret and half-forgotten practices. Partly as a result of this they continue to view her with awe, and to consider her the major investigator, with the writer merely a slave deputed to deal with the dull chores of grammatical detail. So be it.

Preface

What follows is a revision of the sections on grammar and phonology of the writer's London PhD thesis [Dixon, 1968*a*]. The main points of the semantics section have already been summarised in print [Dixon, 1971]. Further work on the lexicon, and its semantic structure, with particular reference to the special 'mother-in-law language' (2.5, 8.1), is proceeding, with a view to the eventual publication of a comprehensive dictionary-thesaurus of Dyirbal.

Since the grammatical natures of Australian languages are not widely known, it has seemed worthwhile, in chapter 1, to give a brief survey of some of the recurring characteristics of languages across the continent. In addition, some references to points of similarity in the grammars of other languages are included, in smaller type, throughout the description of Dyirbal.

The grammar is written at two distinct 'levels'. The 'facts' of the grammar – affixes, their syntactic effect, types of construction, and so on – are described in chapters 3, 4 and 6. Chapter 5 interprets some of these facts, setting up explanatory generalisations and describing the 'deep' grammar of Dyirbal in terms of a number of syntactic relations and a number of transformational rules. It has seemed desirable to (at least partially) separate facts from interpretations in the case of a language like Dyirbal that has not previously been described in any way. The correctness of chapters 3, 4 and 6 cannot seriously be in dispute. Chapter 5, however, is far more open to argument. A quite different set of generalisations, with greater explanatory power, might well be providable instead of those given here. As linguistic theory progresses chapter 5 is rather likely to stand in need of revision; this is unlikely to be true for chapters 3, 4 and 6.

The writer believes that syntax is, for a number of reasons, more interesting and more fundamental than morphology and is better presented first. Chapter 3 mentions the word classes of Dyirbal and gives inflectional paradigms that are needed for following the account of syntax in chapter 4. Chapter 5 attempts a 'deep' interpretation of

some of the facts of chapter 4. Chapter 6 discusses the non-inflectional morphology, and gives further detail on some of the inflections. The phonological description needs to refer to morphological and syntactic points – one criterion in setting up a phonological description involves maximum simplicity of morphophonological rules – and is placed after the grammatical chapters.

The grammatical description, and particularly chapter 5, is loosely based on the transformational generative model [Chomsky, 1957, 1965 et al.]. The presentation of grammatical facts, in chapters 3, 4 and 6, has been influenced in part by the grammar-writing tradition associated with Franz Boas, Edward Sapir and their pupils [Boas, 1911; Voegelin, 1952; et al.].

Informality has been aimed at throughout the exposition, in order to ensure maximum readability. Traditional terms – case names ‘dative’, ‘genitive’, and so on – have been used wherever possible, in preference to difficult, unusual or neologised terms. Excessive symbolisation has been avoided. In particular no attempt has been made to write a completely formal (transformational) grammar. The transformational rules that are given have considerable explanatory power (and are by no means obvious, from the information given in the factual chapters). A full set of phrase structure rules, and necessary additional transformational rules, can be constructed – by any reader who is interested in doing so – on the basis of the facts given in chapters 3, 4 and 6.

The description is built around ‘word’ and ‘sentence’; suffixes, modifying words, and so on, are added by grammatical processes. Functional relations – subject-verb, verb-object, etc – are dealt with in terms of ‘deep syntactic relations’. Word order in Dyrbal simple sentences is extraordinarily free – words can occur in any order in a sentence (irrespective of phrase membership); order constraints only really enter with repeated iteration involving more than one indirect object.

Dyrbal has very strong topic patterning – that is, grammatical patterning that involves several sentences in sequence in a text. This has been described in a fairly ad hoc way, in the absence of any established grammatical technique for handling it.

Phonology is regarded as an interpretative component, whose primitives are systems of phonological features. A phonological feature has a range of phonic realisation, RELATIVE TO the realisations of the other features in its system. It should be noted that the phonological

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description is less complete than the grammar, with no attempt being made to deal with intonation or sentence stress.

Informants' judgements of acceptability merged 'grammaticalness' and 'meaningfulness' (in the sense of Chomsky, 1957: 15). Thus, sentences that were grammatically illformed were rightly rejected; and, for instance, the perfectly grammatical *bala miḍa bangul yaṛangu wamban* 'the man is building the mia mia' was also at one time rejected, on the grounds that men do not build huts. The non-acceptability of *bala miḍa bangul yaṛangu wamban* is a cultural and not a linguistic matter. We have not, as a rule, attempted below to deal with selectional restrictions, of this or other types.

Canberra, September 1971

Abbreviations and Conventions

The three dialects of the Dyirbal language (2.2) are normally referred to by single letters:

- D Dyirbal dialect
- G Giramay dialect
- M Mamu dialect

D always refers to the Dyirbal dialect of the Dyirbal language and never to the complete Dyirbal language.

Three deep syntactic relations are referred to by single letters:

- S subject of an intransitive verb, for instance *bayi yaɾa* ‘the man’ in *bayi yaɾa ɟiŋgaliŋu* ‘the man runs’; *balan guda* ‘the dog’ in *balan guda yamu* ‘the dog goes’
- A subject (or agent) of a transitive verb, for instance *bangul yaɾangu* ‘the man’ in *balan guda bangul yaɾangu balgan* ‘the man hit the dog’
- O object of a transitive verb, for instance *balan guda* ‘the dog’ in *balan guda bangul yaɾangu balgan* ‘the man hit the dog’

Three abbreviated names for grammatical classes are employed:

- NP noun phrase, consisting of a head noun, a noun marker, any number of adjectives, and so on
- VC verb complex, consisting of one or more verbs and/or adverbals, agreeing in surface transitivity and final inflection, together with locational adjuncts, and so on
- VP verb phrase, an immediate constituent of a sentence, consisting of either an intransitive verb complex, or a transitive verb complex together with an NP whose words are in ergative case

Examples quoted from Dyirbal texts are referred to by text and line number. Page numbers are also given in the case of those texts set out in full at the end of the book. Tapes and transcripts of other texts have

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been deposited with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (see p. 368).

Dyirbal sentences are sometimes provided with an interlinear gloss, and also an English translation of the complete sentence. In the interlinear gloss, lexical items are given in lower case and grammatical elements of all types in small capitals.

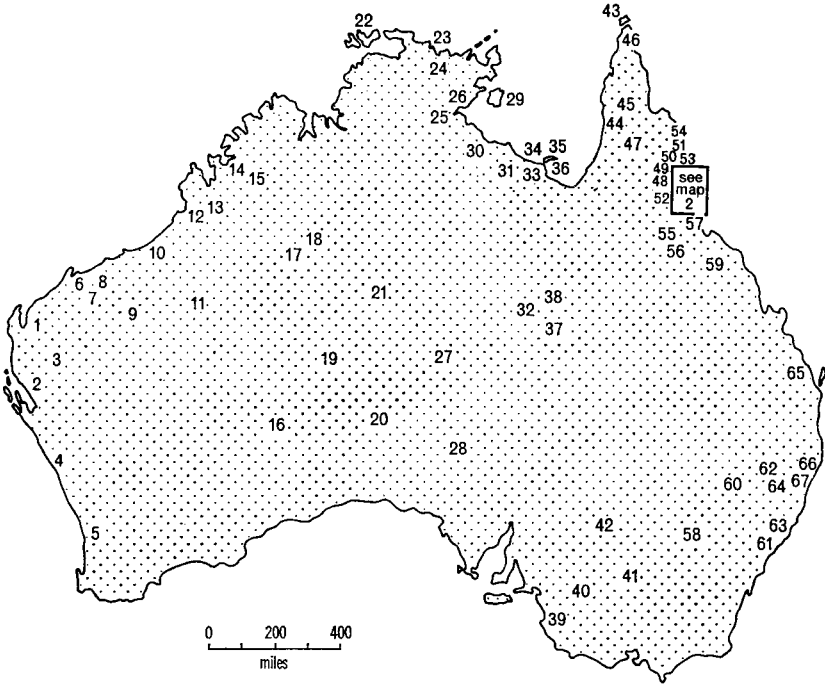
Dyirbal NPs do not obligatorily choose for definiteness or number; the main tense system involves a contrast between future and non-future (= present or past). Thus a sentence *balan dugumbil miyandaynu*, quoted in isolation, could equally well be rendered at least eight different ways in English 'the/a woman/women laughs/laughed'. In English translations of Dyirbal examples articles are generally omitted, and singular or plural, past or present forms are used fairly arbitrarily, or as the context demands. Both grammatically and lexically, English translations give only a rough and partial indication of the meanings of Dyirbal sentences. Nothing concerning the structure of Dyirbal should be inferred from an examination of the translations.

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MAP I. Australia, showing approximate locations of languages referred to

Key

Alawa 25	Gugu-Yimidir 54	Muluridyi 50	Walmatjari 18
Anewan 62	Gulṅay <i>see map 2</i>	Nanda 4	Waḷuwara 32
Aniṅḍilyaugwa 29	Gumbaingar 67	Narrinyeri 39	Wanman 11
Arabana 28	Guṅu 42	Ngadyan <i>see map 2</i>	Wargamay <i>see map 2</i>
Aranda 27	Gunwinggu 24	Ngajuma 6	Waruṅu <i>see map 2</i>
Awabakal 61	Gunḡay <i>see map 2</i>	Ngarinjin 15	Wembawemba 41
Bailko 9	Iiba 56	Nuṅḡubuyu 26	Werḡaia 40
Bandjalang 66	Inggarda 2	Nyangumarda 10	Western Desert 16
Bandyin <i>see map 2</i>	Kalkatuṅu 38	Nyawigi 57	West Torres 43
Biria 59	Kamilaruy 60	Nyigina 13	Wik Meṅ 44
Bulway <i>see map 2</i>	Kattan 63	Olgolo 47	Wik Munkan 45
Dyabugay 53	Kayardilt 36	Ooldean 20	Wiradhari 58
Dyangun 49	Kurama 7	Pitjantjatjara 19	Worora 14
Dyrbal <i>see map 2</i>	Kutjale 55	Pittapitta 37	Yanggal 34
Dyiru <i>see map 2</i>	Lardil 35	Talandji 1	Yanyula 30
Gabi 65	Mabuiag 43	Thangatti 64	Yaraikana 46
Garadjari 12	Madyay <i>see map 2</i>	Thargari 3	Yidin <i>see map 2</i>
Garawa 31	Mamu <i>see map 2</i>	Tiwi 22	Yintjipaṅi 8
Giramay <i>see map 2</i>	Maung 23	Wadjuk 5	Yirgay 53
Gugu-Baḡun 52	Mbabaḡam <i>see map 2</i>	Wagaman 48	Yukulta 33
Gugu-Yalanji 51		Walbiri 21	Yulbaridja 17