

Language Documentation and Description

ISSN 1740-6234

This article appears in: *Language Documentation and Description, vol 10: Special Issue on Humanities of the lesser-known: New directions in the description, documentation and typology of endangered languages and musics*.
Editors: Niclas Burenhult, Arthur Holmer, Anastasia Karlsson, Håkan Lundström & Jan-Olof Svantesson

Main clause TAM-marking in Ngarla (Pama-Nyungan), in comparison with two neighbouring languages

TORBJÖRN WESTERLUND

Cite this article: Torbjörn Westerlund (2012). Main clause TAM-marking in Ngarla (Pama-Nyungan), in comparison with two neighbouring languages. In Niclas Burenhult, Arthur Holmer, Anastasia Karlsson, Håkan Lundström & Jan-Olof Svantesson (eds) *Language Documentation and Description, vol 10: Special Issue on Humanities of the lesser-known: New directions in the description, documentation and typology of endangered languages and musics*. London: SOAS. pp. 228-246

Link to this article: <http://www.elpublishing.org/PID/120>

This electronic version first published: July 2014



This article is published under a Creative Commons License CC-BY-NC (Attribution-NonCommercial). The licence permits users to use, reproduce, disseminate or display the article provided that the author is attributed as the original creator and that the reuse is restricted to non-commercial purposes i.e. research or educational use. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

EL Publishing

For more EL Publishing articles and services:

Website:	http://www.elpublishing.org
Terms of use:	http://www.elpublishing.org/terms
Submissions:	http://www.elpublishing.org/submissions

Main clause TAM-marking in Ngarla (Pama-Nyungan), in comparison with two neighbouring languages¹

Torbjörn Westerlund

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to give a brief description of the tense, aspect and mood distinctions (henceforth TAM) made in main clauses in the everyday speech style of Ngarla (Pama-Nyungan, Ngayarta), an understudied Australian language.² Comparisons with two adjacent languages, Nyangumarta and Nyamal, will also be made. Following Comrie (1999: 363, cf. Comrie 1985), tense is here defined as a grammatical category that ‘serves to locate situations [...] in time’. In line with Dahl (1999: 30), the term aspect is used to refer ‘to the ways in which states of affairs may be related to time’. The term ‘mood’, finally, is employed for markers of the status of a proposition (cf. Palmer 2001).

The systems of verbal inflections found in Australian languages are very diverse, with great variations both in the meanings expressed, and in the number of distinctions made. The Wik-Ngathan language with its two inflections (realis and irrealis) can be placed at one end of a spectrum that has languages with a dozen or more distinctions at the other. Diversity exists also in the suffixes employed to mark different TAM-categories. For example, it is common to find that neighbouring languages share TAM-categories, but that different suffixes are employed to mark them in the languages in question (Dixon 2002).

As will be illustrated in this paper, there are main clause tense and mood categories in Ngarla, as well as categories that include both tense and aspect information, and tense and mood information. A total of 12 main clause TAM-categories will be introduced, which means that Ngarla belongs at the

¹ I wish to express gratitude first and foremost to the late language consultant Alexander ‘Sandy’ Brown, for working with such tenacity to ensure that knowledge about Ngarla would survive into the future. I also wish to thank Alan Dench, Brian Geytenbeek and Anju Saxena for commenting on the contents of this article, and Brian Geytenbeek, Alan Dench, Eleonora Deak and Jessica Denniss for providing Ngarla material used in the study of the language. The responsibility for any errors in the article however falls entirely on me.

² A more detailed description will appear in Westerlund (forthcoming)..

top end of the spectrum just mentioned. Many of the TAM-categories are shared with Nyamal and Nyangumarta, but similarities in the shape of TAM-suffixes will be demonstrated to exist mainly between Ngarla and Nyamal.

2. Background

2.1. The Ngarla language: geography, affinity, and publication status

In the linguistic literature, the Ngarla community and their language have been referred to by a number of different designations. Curr (1886) uses the terms Ngurla and Ngirla; Davidson (1938) adds Ngarla, Gnalla and Ngerla; O'Grady, Voegelin & Voegelin (1966; henceforth referred to as OVV) adds Wanbarda; and in Tindale (1974) the further designations Nga:la Ngala, Ngalanta and Kujunguru are mentioned. The Ngarla community traditionally lived around the mouth of the De Grey River, in the northernmost part of the Pilbara region of northwestern Western Australia (Thieberger 1993, Tindale 1974).³ Today, many members of the community live in and around the town of Port Hedland, located a short distance southwest of the original Ngarla territory (Brown, p.c.).

In the lexicostatic classification of the Australian languages presented in OVV, Ngarla was placed together with the remaining languages of the northern Pilbara region in a subgroup of the Pama-Nyungan language phylum labelled Ngayarta (preferred present spelling; in OVV spelled 'Ngayarda'). Pama-Nyungan is today considered by many scholars to be a language family proper (cf. Miceli 2004), and the following languages are included in the Ngayarta subgroup: Jurruru, Martuthunira, Ngarla, Ngarluma-Kariyarra, Nhuwala, Nyamal, Palyku, Panyjima, Yinhawangka, Yindjibarndi-Kurrama (Koch 2004). Dench (2001), however, demonstrates that it is impossible to show conclusively if the Ngayarta languages constitute a genetic subgroup or not, because of the lack of established reconstructions that could be used to distinguish innovations from retentions.

Curr (1886: 288) stated that the Ngarla community at the time consisted of 'several hundred souls' (and presumably the language had at least as many speakers), but today only a few old speakers remain. Late tribal elder

³ The Pilbara region is located 1,200 kilometres north of Perth. It covers 505,000 square kilometres and is bordered in the south by the Tropic of Capricorn, in the west by the Indian Ocean, in the north by the Kimberley region and in the east by the Northern Territory (Walker 2009).

Alexander Brown, deceased in October 2010, claimed to be the last person to speak the language fluently. Previously, Ngarla has received very little scholarly attention. A number of articles focusing on historical reconstructions of Australian proto-languages exemplify and discuss Ngarla lexical items: these articles were written mainly by O’Grady and by O’Grady et al.⁴ Ngarla word classes and pronouns were introduced briefly in OVV, as were some case and tense markers. The Ngarla pronouns are discussed also in Dench (1994), where the development of the pronoun paradigms of Pilbara languages is in focus. Case marking patterns in different clause types and Ngarla locative marking are considered in Dench (2001). Dixon (2002) also mentions that Ngarla has bound pronouns in clausal functions, although for 3DU and 3PL SA⁵ only. The focus of Westerlund (2007), a preliminary grammatical sketch, and Westerlund (2009), is nominal and verbal morphology of the language.

Available Ngarla linguistic sources are songs, quite a number of which were recorded at different points during the past century, and wordlists. Five wordlists are known to exist (Thieberger 1993, p.c.): an anonymous Ngarla-Italian wordlist from the 1860s, a wordlist by Harper, published in Curr (1886), a list by Davidson from 1932, a list by Smith from 1957 (which was included in O’Grady 1959), and Brown & Geytenbeek’s dictionary project (1990–2006), the last of which comprises 3,000 lexical items and also includes a few thousand example sentences. In addition, there are fieldnotes by O’Grady containing Ngarla material, some 10 stories told by Alexander Brown and written down by Brian Geytenbeek and others, and also elicited material from fieldwork conducted with Brown by Alan Dench (1993, 1994), Westerlund (2008, 2010), and Deak and Denniss (2009, 2010). All the Ngarla material used in this article has Brown as its source.

2.2. The Ngarla verb

Verbs are semantically taken to constitute the part of speech that describes experiences of short duration. Morphosyntactic characteristics of the word class are divided into distributional/configurational properties, which concern how verbs function in phrases, clauses, and texts, and structural properties, pertaining to the internal structure of the verb itself. Subject agreement and TAM-marking are included among the structural properties, while discussions about the distribution and configuration of verbs often point out that they

⁴ For comprehensive lists of articles by O’Grady and O’Grady et al., see O’Grady & Fitzgerald (1997) with references, and O’Grady (1998).

⁵ S = intransitive subject, A = transitive subject.

serve as the heads of verb phrases and also code events in texts/discourses (Givón 2001; Payne 1997). Distributional and configurational properties however work poorly in defining the verb in Australian languages, as do semantic criteria (cf. Dixon 1980, 2002).⁶ Consider for example the word *miranu* ‘knowledge’ in Ngarla sentence (1) below. Despite the fact that it is a nominal, it is commonly used as a predicate, as in (1). Structural properties are instead usually employed when defining word classes in Australian languages, and in line with that the Ngarla verb is here defined as the phrasal constituent that takes TAM- and person marking in main clauses (which *miranu* does not, cf. Blake 1987, Dixon 1980, 2002).⁷

- (1) *Ngunyi-rra* *ngaya* *para* *kunyjarta-rra* *miranu*
 DEM (distant)-DAT 1SG.ABS 3SG.DAT woman-DAT knowledge
 ‘I know that woman.’

Ngarla verbs come in two main shapes, called ‘simple’ and ‘complex’, respectively. Simple verbs consist of a verbal root taking TAM- and person-marking suffixes, as in (2), while complex verbs are made up of a non-verbal root and a verbalising suffix, together creating a stem that takes verb morphology (3); cf. also (23), where *miranu* is part of the complex verb. The latter strategy is by far the most common one. A total of 61 Ngarla verb roots are known, and over 450 complex verb stems. The non-verbal root of the

⁶ Concerning distributional/configurational properties, the Ngarla language, similarly to many other Australian languages, appears to lack the verb phrase category altogether, something that can be observed from the fact that no lexical arguments are compulsorily included in statements if otherwise understood through the speech context (cf. Dench 1999; Schultze-Berndt 2000). Word order is also remarkably unrestrained. Westerlund (2007), however, demonstrates that the lexical subject tends to be placed before the lexical object. This occurs in 75% of Ngarla prototypical transitive sentences (i.e. sentences with an overt subject (agent), a verb, and an overt object (patient)), in the following constituent orders: APV (36%), AVP (19,5%), VAP (19,5%). Remaining constituent orders were represented to the following extent: VPA (11%), PAV (11%), PVA (3%).

⁷ The relevant clausal constituents are highlighted throughout the paper. The abbreviations used in this paper are: 1 = first-person, 2 = second-person, 3 = third-person, ABS = absolutive, ACC = accusative, ACT = activity marker, ALL = allative, CAUS = causative verbaliser, CPST = continuous past, DAT = dative, DEM = demonstrative, DU = dual, EP = epenethic element, ERG = ergative, EXCL = exclusive, FACT = factitive verbaliser, INCH = inchoative verbaliser, INCL = inclusive, INSNOM = instrumental nominalization, INTNS = intensifier, IRR = irrealis, LOC = locative, NEG = negation, NOM = nominative, OBLI = obligative, PERM = permissive, PL = plural, PRIV = privative, PRS = present tense, PRSCONTRA = present contrafactual, PST = past, PSTCONTRA = past contrafactual, PURP = purposive, REMPST = remote past, SG = singular, SPEC = speculative, USI = usitative.

complex verb is usually a nominal, but there are also quite a few examples of what looks like complex verbs, but where the meaning and origin of the putative root is unknown. In such cases, the putative stem-forming affix is put within square brackets, as in (9).

- (2) *Paji-n-pi-ya yila nganyjarra-nya yukurru-lu wayakura-lu*
 bite-IRR-EP-3PL perhaps 1PL.INCL-ACC dog-ERG wild-ERG
 ‘Those wild dingoes might bite us.’
- (3) *Palura ngajapa murti-ngarri-nyu parnu-nga-karni*
 3SG.NOM 1SG.LOC run-INCH-PST 3SG-DAT-ALL
pirli-karni, jarrpi-nyu pala-ngka
 hole-ALL enter-PST DEM (mid)-LOC
 ‘On account of me he ran to his hole, (he) entered there.’

The verbs of Ngarla can be divided into four transitivity types, with nominals taking the associated case marking patterns shown in Table 1. Case marking on the subject is listed first in the right hand column of the table, case marking on the direct object in second place, and that on the indirect object last. Note that most pronouns of the language take nominative-accusative case marking, while nouns take ergative-absolutive marking (an ergative split common to Pama-Nyungan languages, cf. Dench 1994, Dixon 2002).

Table 1: Ngarla major transitivity types

<i>Transitivity type</i>	<i>Case frame</i>
Intransitive	ABS/NOM
Middle/Semitransitive ⁸	ABS/NOM DAT
Transitive	ERG/NOM ABS/ACC
Ditransitive	ERG/NOM ABS/ACC LOC
	ERG/NOM ABS/ACC DAT

⁸ ‘Middle/semi-transitive’ verbs taking the ABS/NOM-DAT case frame are common in Australian languages, the subject of these verbs typically expressing the semantic role of experiencer (Blake 1987). In the existing Ngarla material, the case frame has been found with three verbs only, *kunyji-kunyji-rri-Ø* ‘stalk’; *waja+rri-Ø* ‘search for, look for’; and *wanyaparri-Ø* ‘listen, learn’. These verbs, however, do not have experiencer subjects, but do have a reduced affectedness of O (transitive object) and/or a decreased telicity of the event described. The label ‘middle/ semitransitive’ is nevertheless kept here in order to signal a transitivity type different from the prototypical intransitive and transitive ones.

Most Australian languages have verbal conjugations (Dixon 2002). In Ngarla, there are two conjugations, which are labelled the L and \emptyset conjugations for the consistent differences found in nominalising suffixes, as in examples (4)–(5), that illustrate instrumental nominalisation.⁹ L conjugation nominalising suffixes take an initial *-l* element, as in (4), where *warnta pirri-lpunyarri* together mean ‘digging stick’, an element lacking the \emptyset conjugation suffixes. A correlation between verbal conjugation and transitivity type found in many Australian languages means that the majority of the verbs in any conjugation share a certain transitivity pattern (Dixon 2002). In Ngarla, transitivity and conjugation, however, coincide almost perfectly. The top two transitivity types in Table 1 are thus found with \emptyset conjugation verbs, the bottom two types with L conjugation verbs. There is less than a handful of known exceptions to this pattern.¹⁰

- (4) *Kunyjarta-lu* *mara-ku-rnu* *parnu-nga* *warnta*
 woman-ERG hand-CAUS-PST 3SG-DAT stick

pirri-lpunyarri, *kurni-rnu* *kunyjarta* *kurri*
 dig-INSNOM throw-PST woman teenage.girl

‘The woman picked up (lit. caused to be in the hand) her digging stick (and) threw it at the girl.’

- (5) *Jarrari-punyarri* *waa-n* *ngajapa*, *pinurru*
 light-INSNOM give-IRR 1SG.LOC fire

ngaya *nyali-ja-lu*.
 1SG.ABS light-CAUS-PURP

‘Give me a match (lit. something to light with), I intend to light a fire.’

⁹ These conjugation labels also correspond to the labels used for the verbal conjugations in other Ngayarta languages, e.g. Nyamal, Panyjima, and Martuthunira (Dench 1991, 1995, 1999).

¹⁰ One L conjugation verb, *jupiny+ma-L*, butt.in[+CAUS]-L ‘butt in’, triggers the intransitive case frame, and one \emptyset conjugation verb, *jurni-jarri- \emptyset* , laughter-CAUS- \emptyset ‘make laugh’, the transitive frame. *Jupiny* is however not a known Ngarla nominal root, and *-jarri- \emptyset* not a frequently occurring verbaliser, which leads to the suspicion that both verbs could be borrowed (as units) from another language (or languages). One ambitransitive verb has been found, *kalyu-rni- \emptyset /L* (the root of which means ‘shout’). When used intransitively, it takes \emptyset conjugation suffixes, and if used transitively, L conjugation morphology.

3. Ngarla tense, aspect and mood distinctions

This section introduces and discusses the 12 TAM-categories employed in Ngarla main clauses.¹¹ The main findings of the section are summarised in Table 2. As shown in the table, the sets of TAM-suffixes in the two conjugations are partly different (i.e., of partly different shape(s)), and apart from certain nominalising suffixes (see above) there is little evidence of the so-called conjugation markers claimed commonly to appear first in verbal suffixes in Pama-Nyungan languages (cf. Dixon 1980, 2002, McGregor 2002).¹² Tense marking is discussed in subsection 3.1, mixed tense and aspect marking in 3.2, mood categories in 3.3, and TAM-categories combining tense with mood information in 3.4. TAM-suffixes given within parentheses in the subsections appear in the following order: Ø conjugation/L conjugation.

Table 2: Ngarla main clause TAM-markers

TAM-category	Suffix (Ø/L conjugation)
Present tense (PRS)	<i>-yan/-rri</i>
Remote past tense (REMPST)	<i>-rnta/-rnta</i>
Past (PST)	<i>-nyu/-rnu</i>
Continuous past (CPST)	<i>-yanu/-yinyu</i>
Usitative (USI)	<i>-yanta/-yirnta</i>
Speculative (SPEC)	<i>-mpi/-mpi</i>
Purposive (PURP)	<i>-kura/-lu</i>
Permissive (PERM)	<i>-mara/-nmara</i>
Present contrafactual (PRSCONTRA)	<i>-yanma/-rrima</i>
Past contrafactual (PSTCONTRA)	<i>-marnta/-nmarnta</i>
Obligative (OBLI)	<i>-nyamarta/-rnamarta</i>
Irrealis (IRR)	<i>-Ø/-n</i>

¹¹ There might be a thirteenth Ngarla main clause TAM-category. So far it has however not been possible to ascertain the function of the suffix *-rna* (occurring on L conjugation verbs, frequently in songs, but only occasionally in spoken discourse), and neither to find a Ø conjugation equivalent.

¹² Note the markers for the permissive and past contrafactual categories, which differ only in that an initial *n* element appears in the L conjugation suffixes. These markers can be suspected to be combinations of other verbal markers, the first element of which being the irrealis suffixes (*-Ø*, *-n*). Concerning the permissive, see section 4 below. The present contrafactual suffixes are clearly also combinations of other verbal markers.

3.1. Ngarla tense categories

Ngarla can, with the definition of tense given in section 1 above, be considered to have two pure tense categories: the present tense (*-yan/-rri*), the basic function of which is to locate a situation at the time of speaking (i.e. the present), and the remote past tense (marked by *-rnta* in both conjugations), which, according to the intuition of Brown, is employed in descriptions of situations, events, etc., which happened a few years ago, or further back in time. The present tense is exemplified in (6)–(7), and the remote past tense in (8)–(9). According to Comrie (1985), the present tense is in many languages used with a habitual aspectual meaning (habituals describing situations that are characteristic of extended periods of time; Comrie 1976), and this is the case in the Ngarla example (7), where an iterative meaning is implied. Note that the pain here is conceived of as an agent that is repeatedly biting the speaker. Compare (7) to (15)–(16), which exemplify the usitative category (used for habitual past). The remote past is, as illustrated by (8)–(9), used both for ‘real situations’, i.e. situations remembered by the speaker, and for mythological events.

(6) *Palakarni ngapurta pilyka-ngarri-yan*
 DEM (mid) melon cracked-INCH-PRS
 ‘That watermelon is cracking up.’

(7) *Jarrumirnti paji-rri nga-nya parralya-lu.*
 joint bite-PRS 1SG-ACC ache-ERG
 ‘My joint is aching.’ (lit.: ‘An ache is biting my joint.’)

(8) *Murlurnu jarppi-rnta kanta-ka.*
 long.ago enter-REMPST small.crack-LOC
 ‘Long ago (he) squeezed through a narrow gap.’

(9) *Manguny-ju yarni+ma-rnta*
 manguny (Dreamtime.being)-ERG make[+CAUS]-REMPST
 ‘A manguny-being made (it) long ago.’

3.2. Ngarla mixed tense and aspect categories

TAM-categories that combine tense with aspect are common in languages in general, and are also found in many Australian languages (Comrie 1976, Dixon 2002). In Ngarla, three TAM-categories are employed in descriptions of events that took place prior to the time of speaking (i.e. in the past), but

which do not qualify for remote past marking, all three of which combining a past time frame with aspectual information. The categories are labeled as past, continuous past, and usitative, respectively.

The past (*-nyu/-rnu*) in most contexts appears simply to be a past tense marker, but the category in fact also includes perfective aspect (i.e. involves the lack of explicit reference to the internal temporal constituency of the situation), something that becomes obvious when it occurs together with the continuous past (*-yanu/-yinyu*; example (10)). The latter category instead implies an imperfective reading (which draws attention to the internal temporal constituency; Comrie 1976; Dahl 1999). Apart from being used for events that both began and finished in the past (10), the continuous past is also employed for events that started prior to the time of speaking, but which are still ongoing in the present, as in (12). Compare in this context (11) and (12). According to Brown, (11) implies that the speaker has finished and is ready to go, while (12) might be taken to indicate that one horse has been fastened to the buggy, and that the speaker still needs to go back to the stable and get the other one. Occasionally, the past category is used in a passivising function. Sentences (13)–(14) both include the verb *nyuka-L* ‘penetrate’. Present tense examples of this verb are always fully transitive, like (13), but in (14) a passive reading is implied. Only one noun phrase is present in (14), *kunyjarta* ‘woman’, and it appears in the absolutive (i.e. unmarked for case), unlike the subject of (13), *pirirri* ‘man’, which takes ergative marking.

- (10) *Palakarni-lu mantu paji-yinyu jinta wanyja-rnu*
 DEM (mid)-ERG meat eat-CPST some leave-PST
 ‘That (fellow) was eating meat, (but he) left some.’

- (11) *Yawarta ngaja piya-nya jangka-ja-rnu*
 horse 1SG.ERG 3DU-ACC fastened-CAUS-PST

paki-ngka nyangkala.
 buggy-LOC today
 ‘I fastened the horses to a buggy today.’

- (12) *Yawarta ngaja piya-nya jangka-ja-yinyu paki-ngka*
 horse 1SG.ERG 3DU-ACC fastened-CAUS-CPST buggy-LOC
 ‘I fastened/am in the process of fastening the horses to a buggy.’

- (13) *Pirri-lu* *ngunyi* *kunyjarta* *nyuka-rri*.
 man-ERG DEM (distant) woman penetrate-PRS
 ‘The man is having sex with that woman.’

- (14) *Nyuka-rnu* *purtukarri* *kunyjarta*.
 penetrate-PST unwilling woman
 ‘The woman had sex unwillingly.’

Habits that hold at the time of speaking are, as illustrated above, expressed through the present tense. However, habits occurring at points in time prior to the speech situation have a TAM-category of their own – the usitative (*-yanta/-yirnta*). This category is often employed for iteratives, as in (15). Note that the usitative is also used for habits that held at remote points in time (16), the non-habitual equivalents of which would be expressed through the remote past tense.

- (15) *Palakarni* *kunyii~kunyii-rri-yanta* *pana-nga*.
 DEM (mid) stalking-INCH-USI 3PL-DAT
 ‘He used to sneak up on them.’

- (16) *Murlurnu* *nganarna* *pana-nya* *yurta*
 long.ago 1PL.EXCL.NOM 3PL-ACC fish

mara-ku-yirnta *mangkurtu-ngura* *mulya~mulya-ngura*
 hand-CAUS-USI flood-LOC incoming.tide-LOC
 ‘Long ago we used to get the fish out of the incoming tide.’

3.3. Ngarla mood categories

A basic modal distinction is made between epistemic modality, concerned with the speaker’s judgement of the factual status of a situation, and event modality, relating to the speaker’s attitude towards a potential future event. Event modality, in turn, is further subdivided into deontic modality, relating to obligation and permission, and dynamic modality, pertaining to ability and willingness (Palmer 2001). In Ngarla main clauses, the epistemic speculative mood (marked by *-mpi* in both conjugations) is employed when a speaker is speculating about what may take place, as in (17)–(18). The mood appears to correspond most closely to the use of English ‘might’. In all existing examples with this mood, an overt subject is missing, something that might or might not be coincidental.

- (17) *Yata+ja-mpi.*
 push[+CAUS]-SPEC
 ‘(He) might push (it).’
- (18) *Warrumurntu milpa-mpi.*
 tomorrow come-SPEC
 ‘(He) might come tomorrow.’

Purposive (*-kura/-lu*) is a deontic mood found in many Australian languages. It is commonly used in both main and subordinate clauses, in main clauses predominantly to express obligation (and epistemic necessity; i.e., that the actor ‘has to’, ‘tries to’, ‘wants to’, or ‘should’ perform the action described by the verb; Dixon 1980, 2002, Palmer 2001). In Ngarla, it is in main clauses employed to describe future events which someone intends or desires to come about, as in (19). (There are examples with first, second and third person subjects, examples with second person subjects generally being enquiries about what someone might want or intend.) The TAM-category is also used with first person and second person subjects for hortations (20), which are milder, and not as direct, as the commands that result from the use of the irrealis category (cf. example (28) below), and for all types of negative commands and hortations (21). Purposive main clauses with \emptyset conjugation verbs either only include one noun phrase, which is unmarked for case (i.e. marked by absolutive/nominative), or two NPs, the first of which is unmarked, the second taking dative marking (or, if location or direction is being discussed, allative, ablative or locative marking). In Brown’s Ngarla, case assignment in purposive main clauses with L conjugation verbs is, however, not at all as straightforward. In sentences with two overt noun phrases, the ABS/NOM-DAT and ABS/NOM-ABS/ACC case frames are represented in almost equal numbers, the reason for which has yet to be discovered.

- (19) *Kalya parni-kura ngaya.*
 remain.in.state.or.process stay-PURP 1SG.ABS
 ‘I intend to stay in the one place.’
- (20) *Nyuka-pi-lu nyinpa jankurna-rra.*
 increase-CAUS-PURP 2SG.ABS emu-DAT
 ‘You should do the increase ceremony for the emu.’

- (21) *Mirta nyinpa nyini-kura nyayi-ngka.*
 NEG 1SG.ABS stay-PURP DEM (proximate)-LOC
 ‘Don’t stay here!’

The second Ngarla deontic modality, the permissive (*-mara/-nmara*), has two different uses. Most frequently, it expresses a fatalistic attitude, i.e. that the speaker allows the event/action described by the verb to happen/continue happening (22). In such contexts, the word *wataku* ‘unimportant, never mind’ tends to be present. Occasionally it is also employed in statements of what the speaker thinks that someone should or ought to do (23).

- (22) *Wataku jilya-nkgu yukurru kaju-nmara.*
 never.mind child-ERG dog tie-PERM
 ‘It doesn’t matter, let the kid tie the dog up.’

- (23) *Palakarni jilya-karrangu miranu-ngarri-mara-ya wangka-rra*
 DEM (mid) child-PL knowledge-INCH-PERM-3PL speech-DAT

ngarla-rra.

Ngarla-DAT

‘Those children should learn the Ngarla language.’

3.4. Ngarla mixed tense and mood categories

Four Ngarla TAM-categories can be considered to include both tense and mood information, the present and past contrafactual, the obligative, and the irrealis. The epistemic mood labelled contrafactual is employed to express what does not/did not happen, but what can/could have or should/should have happened. It occurs with two different time frames, the present (*-yanma/-rrima*; (24)) and the past (*-marnta/-nmarnta*; (25)).

The obligative (*-nyamarta/-rnamarta*), another epistemic mood, is employed to express a firm belief on the part of the speaker that the action described by the verb absolutely must or will take place. The implied time frame is here the present or the (near) future, as in (26)–(27). Occasionally what, in the opinion of the speaker, must take place is described as being the effect of some previous action, as illustrated in (27).

Ngarla, as shown in (28)–(30), also belongs among the small group of Australian languages that uses the same set of suffixes (in Ngarla *-Ø/-n*) in imperatives (28), and to express future tense (29)–(30) (see Dixon 2002). In both these uses, a certain amount of uncertainty can be considered to be

implied if what is described by the verb will in fact take place. The category is therefore here labelled as irrealis.

- (24) *Mirta ngaja paji-rrima jinyji,*
 NEG 1SG.ERG eat-PRSCONTRA fat

kampa-lkarra-lu mantu nganu-Ø waa-rrri jinyji-yanya
 cook-ACT-ERG meat 1SG-DAT give-PRS fat-PRIV

‘I don’t get to eat fat (these days), the cook only gives me skinny meat (lit. fat-free meat).’

- (25) *Nyaarru ngayya wangka-karri-marnta,*
 in.favour.of 1SG.ABS speech-INCH-PSTCONTRA

kulpa-ma-rnu-ya nga-nya panalu.
 break-CAUS-PST-3PL 1SG-ACC 3PL.NOM

‘I would have talked, (but) they kept interrupting me.’

- (26) *Punya-rnamarta murri palakarni kuyu!*
 drink-OBLI INTNS DEM (mid) medicine
 ‘(He) really has to drink that medicine!’

- (27) *Katu-ja-n palakarni, waa-rnamarta nyinu-Ø mantu*
 kind-FACT-IRR DEM (mid) give-OBLI 2SG-DAT meat
 ‘Be nice to him, (and he) is sure to give you meat.’

- (28) *Pinurru japa-n!*
 fire cover-IRR
 ‘Cover the fire!’

- (29) *Purntul-tu nganyjarra-nya japa-n.*
 dust-ERG 1PL.INCL-ACC cover-IRR
 ‘The dust will cover us.’

- (30) *Jarrpi-Ø-pula para.*
 enter-IRR-3DU 3SG.DAT
 ‘Those two will go into (the yard) for him.’

4. Comparison with surrounding languages

A comparison with main clause TAM-categories in two of the languages that were originally spoken by groups adjacent to the Ngarla community, Nyangumarta and Nyamal, might be typologically interesting, since these three languages all belong to an area in which the languages have extensive TAM-systems. This comparison is further warranted by the fact that Nyamal is another language for which very little information has been published.

As stated above, Nyamal is generally listed as belonging to the Ngayarta subgroup of the Pama-Nyungan language family. Worth noting is that Dench (1994) proposes a division on morphosyntactic grounds between Ngarla and Nyamal (in the article together labelled ‘the Northern Ngayarta group’) and the remaining Ngayarta languages (‘the Central Ngayarta group’).¹³ Nyangumarta belongs to the Marrngu group of the same family (Sharp 2004). Table 3 presents an overview of Ngarla main clause TAM-categories shared with either or both of the other two languages. TAM-categories found in only one of the three languages, or in Nyamal and Nyangumarta but not in Ngarla, are shown in Table 4. Nyamal has two verbal conjugations (Ø/L), and Nyangumarta four (NY/RN/N/NG; Dench 1999, Sharp 2004).

It is important to point out that some of the categories presented along the same lines as Table 3 (over page) do not fill exactly the same, but merely similar, functions. The Nyamal speculative mood is, for example, used to describe situations which the speaker sees as possible future outcomes, but it also occurs in warnings against imminent disasters. The Nyangumarta equivalent is employed when indicating that something might or that something is expected to happen. The Nyangumarta purposive mood has the meaning ‘X wishes Y would happen’ and ‘X expects that Y will happen’, and is also used in first person non-singular hortatives. The Nyamal permissive mood is employed when speakers wish to express a desire that something be allowed to happen and that the addressee does not interfere with this. Concerning the Nyamal ‘directive mood’, included in Table 3 on the present contrafactual line, this TAM-category is not only a contrafactual, but is also employed to create mild imperatives. The Nyangumarta past imperfective suffixes are included on two lines in Table 3, the reason being that they fill both functions here labelled as continuous past and usitative (Dench 1999; Sharp 2004).

¹³However, in Dench (2001) this division has been abandoned in favour of a division between Northern, Central and Southern Pilbara languages.

Table 3: Main clause TAM-categories shared between Ngarla and Nyamal and/or Nyangumarta (Dench 1999, Sharp 2004)¹⁴

TAM-category	Ngarla (Ø/L)	Nyamal (Ø/L)	Nyangumarta (NY/RN/N/NG)
Present tense	-yan/-rri	-yampa/-lka alt. -ka	-yinyV/-rninyV/-ninyV/ -nganyV ¹⁵
Remote past	-rnta/-rnta	—	-nyVl(pV)/-rnVl(pV)/ -nal(pV)/-ngal(pV)
Past	-nyu/-rnu	-nya/-rna	—
Continuous past	-yanu/-yinyu	-yana/-nya	-nyVkinyV/-rnVkinyV/- nV(nyV)kinyV/- nganyVkinyV
Usitative	-yanta/-yirnta	-yamu/-l(k)amu	
Speculative	-mpi/-mpi	-mpa/-npa	-a/-i_-IV, -lV_-IV, -rra_-IV, -wa_-IV
Obligative	-nyamarta/ -rnamarta	-a_-mu/-Ø alt. -la_-mu	—
Purposive	-kura/-lu	-yartara/-lartara	-u/-lku/-nku/-ngku
Permissive	-mara/-nmara	-mara/-nmara	—
Present contrafactual	-yanma/-rrima	-ma/-nma	-nyika/-rnaka/-nanyaka/ -nganyaka
Past contrafactual	-marnta/- nmarnta	—	-ma/-rnama/-nama/-ngama

¹⁴ Here, the same category labels as in Table 2 are employed. Dench (1999), however, uses the following designations for the Nyamal TAM-categories (from top to bottom): Present, Past, Continuous past, Usitative, Speculative, Anticipatory, Purposive, Optative, Directive. Sharp (2004) uses the following for Nyangumarta: Present tense, Remote past tense, Past imperfective, Anticipatory mood, Potential mood, Present contrafactual, Past contrafactual.

¹⁵ ‘V’ in the Nyangumarta suffixes stands for ‘vowel’, i.e. the same vowel as in the stem.

Table 4 illustrates the fact that all three languages have at least one unique TAM-category (i.e., a TAM-category that is not shared with the other two languages). The Nyamal and Nyangumarta categories in the table can be described as follows: the Nyangumarta non-future tense expresses perfect aspect, while the remote future according to Sharp (2004: 179) has the meaning ‘X knows that Y will happen at some time hence but not immediately’ or ‘X intends that Y will happen at some time hence’, the ‘not immediately/some time hence’ distinguishing it from the future tense. The Nyamal prospective expresses perfective aspect, and at the same time constitutes a mirror image of perfect mood, in that it places participants in a state that immediately precedes the event described. The Nyangumarta purposive advisory mood, on the other hand, serves to indicate a desired or sensible course of action to take, or a sense of duty or obligation. The Nyamal and Nyangumarta imperatives are both employed when giving positive direct commands (Dench 1999, Sharp 2004).

Table 4: Main clause TAM-categories existing in only one of the languages Ngarla, Nyamal and Nyangumarta, and categories not shared with Ngarla (Dench 1999, Sharp 2004)

TAM-category	Ngarla (Ø/L)	Nyamal (Ø/L)	Nyangumarta (NY/RN/N/NG)
Non-future tense	—	—	<i>nyV/-rnV/-na/-nya</i>
Prospective	—	<i>-ku/-lku(ra)</i>	—
Future	—	—	<i>-uliny/-lkuliny/-nkuliny/-ngkuliny</i>
Remote future	—	—	<i>-ulV/-lV/-nkulV/-ngkulV</i>
Purposive advisory mood	—	—	<i>-nyaku/-naku/-ninyaku/ -nganyaku</i>
Irrealis	<i>-Ø/-n</i>	—	—
Imperative	—	<i>-a/(-ka)</i>	<i>-a or -i/-lV/-rra/-wa</i>

As shown in Table 3, Ngarla and Nyamal have nine TAM-categories that more or less correspond in meaning and use. However, in only four of these cases are there clear similarities between the suffixes employed:

past (-nyu/-rnu and -nya/-rma respectively); continuous past (-yanu/-yinyu and -yana/-nya); speculative (-mpi/-mpi and -mpa/-npa); and permissive (-mara/-nmara and -mara/-nmara). The similarities between the Ngarla purposive and the Nyamal prospective suffixes (-kura/-lu and -ku/-lku(ra)) are also worth noting, as is the fact that the present contrafactual markers of the two languages have a common *-ma* element (an element also present in the Ngarla and Nyangumarta past contrafactual suffixes). How much of these similarities can be attributed to retention from a putative parent language, or to areal spread, is impossible to say at this stage (see section 2.1 above and Dench 2001). That the two languages have an identical set of markers that are used for similar functions, the permissive category, is, however, suggestive of borrowing in either direction. Ngarla and Nyamal thus share a fairly large number of TAM categories, but in slightly more than half of the cases these are marked with suffixes of a different form. This is in line with Dixon's (2002) statement, referred to in section 1 above, that neighbouring Australian languages frequently share TAM-categories, but that the categories are marked by different suffixes in the different languages. Dixon's assertion also holds for the Ngarla and Nyangumarta languages. Seven categories are shared between these languages. In this case, one is hard pressed to find any similarities between TAM-suffixes. Considering that the languages are classified as belonging to different Pama-Nyungan subgroups, and in some ways also are very different from each other, it here seems most likely that categories, but not the suffixes that mark them, have been borrowed between the languages (the one obvious exception being the contrafactual *-ma* element).

5. Concluding remarks

Twelve Ngarla main clause TAM-categories have been discussed in this article, categories that include tense, aspect, as well as mood information. The great number of categories warrants that the language be included among the Australian languages with large TAM-systems. As indicated by Table 3, this is in fact an areal trait. The two languages Ngarla and Nyamal were found to have nine identical/similar TAM-categories, and Ngarla and Nyangumarta to share seven such categories. Similarities were noted between certain Ngarla and Nyamal TAM-suffixes, but no pronounced similarities were found between TAM-markers in Ngarla and Nyangumarta.

While the grammar of the Nyangumarta language is the subject of Sharp (2004), much descriptive work remains to be done on the Ngarla and Nyamal languages. This paper constitutes one piece of the puzzle. It is the hope of the writer that many of the remaining moribund languages of northwestern Australia will be described in detail before they disappear completely.

References

- Blake, Barry J. 1987. *Australian Aboriginal grammar*. Beckenham: Croom Helm.
- Brown, Alexander & Brian Geytenbeek. 2006. *Ngarla–English dictionary*. Interim printout. South Hedland: Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre.
- Comrie, Bernard. 1976. *Aspect*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Comrie, Bernard. 1985. *Tense*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Comrie, Bernard. 1999. Tense. In Keith Brown & Jim Miller (eds.), *Concise encyclopedia of grammatical categories*, 363–368. Oxford: Elsevier.
- Curr, Edward M. 1886. *The Australian race: its origin, languages, customs, place of landing in Australia and the routes by which it spread itself over that continent*. Volume 1. Melbourne and London: John Ferres and Trübner & Co.
- Dahl, Östen. 1999. Aspect: basic principles. In Keith Brown & Jim Miller (eds.), *Concise encyclopedia of grammatical categories*, 30–37. Oxford: Elsevier.
- Davidson, Daniel S. 1938. *A preliminary register of Australian tribes and hordes*. Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society.
- Dench, Alan. 1991. Panyjima. In Barry J. Blake & Robert M. W. Dixon (eds.), *The handbook of Australian languages: volume 4, the Aboriginal language of Melbourne and other grammatical sketches*, 125–243. South Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Dench, Alan. 1993–1994. *Ngarla fieldnotes*. Unpublished.
- Dench, Alan. 1994. The historical development of pronoun paradigms in the Pilbara region of Western Australia. *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 14, 155–191.
- Dench, Alan. 1995. *Maruthunira: a language of the Pilbara region of Western Australia (Pacific Linguistics C-125)*. Canberra: Australian National University.
- Dench, Alan. 1999. *A grammar of Nyamal: a language of north western Australia*. Unpublished UWA manuscript.
- Dench, Alan. 2001. Descent and diffusion: the complexity of the Pilbara situation. In Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald & Robert M. W. Dixon (eds.), *Areal diffusion and genetic inheritance: problems in comparative linguistics*, 105–133. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dixon, Robert M. W. 1980. *The languages of Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dixon, Robert M. W. 2002. *Australian languages: their nature and development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Givón, Talmy. 2001. *Syntax: an introduction*. Volume I. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

- Koch, Harold. 2004. A methodological history of Australian linguistic classification. In Claire Bower & Harold Koch (eds.), *Australian languages: classification and comparative method*, 17–60. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- McGregor, William B. 2002. *Verb classification in Australian languages*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Miceli, Luisa. 2004. Pama-Nyungan as a genetic entity. In Claire Bower & Harold Koch (eds.), *Australian languages: classification and comparative method*, 61–68. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins.
- O’Grady, Geoffrey N. 1959. *Significance of the circumcision boundary in Western Australia*. B.A. Dissertation, University of Sydney.
- O’Grady, Geoffrey N. 1998. Toward a proto-Pama-Nyungan stem list, Part I: Sets J1–J25. *Oceanic Linguistics* 37(2), 209–233.
- O’Grady, Geoffrey N. & Susan Fitzgerald. 1997. Cognate search in the Pama-Nyungan language family. In Patrick McConvell & Nicholas Evans (eds.), *Archaeology and linguistics: Aboriginal Australia in global perspective*, 341–355. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- O’Grady, Geoffrey N., Carl F. Voegelin & Florence M. Voegelin. 1966. Languages of the world: Indo-Pacific fascicle six. *Anthropological Linguistics* 8(2), 1–161. (Referred to as OVV.)
- Palmer, Frank R. 2001. *Mood and modality*. 2nd edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Payne, Thomas E. 1997. *Describing morphosyntax: a guide for field linguists*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schultze-Berndt, Eva F. 2000. *Simple and complex verbs in Jaminjung: a study of event categorisation in an Australian language*. Doctoral thesis, Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen.
- Sharp, Janet. 2004. *Nyangumarta: a language of the Pilbara region of Western Australia (Pacific Linguistics 556)*. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics.
- Thieberger, Nicholas. 1993. *Handbook of Western Australian Aboriginal languages south of the Kimberly region (Pacific Linguistics C-124)*. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics.
- Tindale, Norman B. 1974. *Aboriginal tribes of Australia: their terrain, environmental controls, distribution, limits, and proper names*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Walker, William. 2009. Pilbara. In Jenny Gregory & Jan Gothard (eds.), *Historical encyclopedia of Western Australia*, 691–693. Crawley: University of Western Australia Press.
- Westerlund, Torbjörn. 2007. *A grammatical sketch of Ngarla: a language of Western Australia*. South Hedland: Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre.
- Westerlund, Torbjörn. 2009. The basic case marking of Ngarla, a language of Western Australia. In Anju Saxena & Åke Viberg (eds.), *Multilingualism: proceedings of the 23rd Scandinavian conference of linguistics*, 115–126. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.