

8.3.2 A degenerate gender agreement system on the verb?

p. 193

The ancestor language, proto-Iwaidja, had a system of five genders (masculine, feminine, vegetable, neuter, land, and liquids¹⁴)—still preserved in Mawng. Verbs \hookrightarrow agreed with both subjects and objects in gender. However, in Mawng around 35 per cent of verb lexemes have the gender of one or both morphological argument positions fixed in a system of ‘lexicalised agreement’ (Singer 2007), indicating that the agreement system built in a lot of ‘pseudo-arguments’—something like expletive *it* in English *he carked it*,¹⁵ but with more choices for gender and argument position (Evans 2007).

On the basis of material available in the mid-1990s, I concluded (Evans 1998), that Iwaidja had generalized one gender (the neuter) at the expense of all others, retains traces of some others in some verbs with lexicalized agreement (vegetable and land and liquids objects and intransitive subjects, and feminine and masculine transitive subjects with neuter objects), but only a small minority of possible combinations are exemplified. We shall see below that a more extensive sampling of the verb lexicon unearths evidence for a much wider range of combinations.

8.3.3 Morphological opacity of verb stems

Two shortish grammars of Iwaidja had been published before the DoBeS project began—Capell (1962) and Pym and Larrimore (1979). Neither mentions anything about the internal structure of the verb stem, for the good reason that recurring elements are very difficult to find. As a language learner it can be difficult to master large numbers of long stems without any evident internal logic of composition.

Verb stems are long, and lack obvious segmentability once inflectional and derivational suffixes have been peeled off:

(2a)¹⁶

ɲanal ^ʔ auqarama	iwaca
nganaldaharrama	lwaja
‘I will speak Iwaidja’	
ɲa- ‘1sg.intrans.subject’, -na ‘irrealis’: leaving <i>l^ʔauqarama</i> ‘talk’	

(2b) ɲatpal^ʔakpu*li*wakpencil^ʔin

ngadbaldakburliwakbanjildin

 \hookrightarrow ‘we two are going to have a yarn’

Inflectional and derivational elements:

ɲat- ‘1st plural exclusive’, pa- ‘irrealis’, -kpa ‘dual’, -ncil^ʔi- ‘reciprocal’,-n ‘non-past’, leaving *l^ʔakbu/iwa* ‘have a yarn’

p. 194

In these two verbs, it is tempting to posit an initial *l^ʔa* or *l^ʔak* ~ *l^ʔasw* meaning ‘word’ or ‘mouth’ or ‘tongue’—cf. the Bininj Gun-wok verb *wokdi* ‘speak’, which can be decomposed into the noun root *wok* ‘language’ and the verb *di* ‘stand’. But there is little evidence for such a morpheme, except in these forms. The Iwaidja noun for ‘word, language’ is *ɲman*, the nominal root for ‘tongue’ is *ɲaɬalk*. The only glimmer of possible cognacy is the word *l^ʔakbiɬic* for ‘mouth; lips’, which looks like it might be an old compound containing *l^ʔak* as its first element, but the correspondence is less clear than one would wish.