

The Meaning, Development of Relative Tense in Yolŋu

- Yolŋu Matha is a Pama-Nyungan dialect continuum spoken in northern Arnhem land on the Arafura coast of Northern Australia. It consists of six identified dialect groups. The dialects are mutually intelligible. Nevertheless, the semantics of their cognate tense suffixes exhibit some interesting variation.
- There are four types of tense inflection. Of particular concern to us currently are what Wilkinson refers to as the FIRST (I) and THIRD (III) inflections (in other works dubbed *contemporary and precontemporary*.) Her partial analysis, similar to Comrie's for Burarra (1985:89) suggests that these are exponents of relative tense. Comrie's Burarra data is summarised below for the verb *ŋupa-* 'eat':

INFL\FRAME		<i>today</i>	<i>–today</i>
CLOSE	<i>ŋupaŋa</i>	I am eating	I ate within the past few days
REMOTE	<i>ŋupade</i>	I ate today	I ate long ago

- A similar pattern to that of Djamparrpuynŋu (Dhuwal dialect) described below occurs for Gupapuyŋu and Djinaŋ (Yolŋu) as well as Nakkarra and Burarra ([non-PN] Arnhem). The Arnhem and Yolŋu families are unrelated.
- The pattern does not hold for Eastern dialects of Yolŋu Matha: Djapu or Ritharrŋu. It is reasonable to infer that this 'discontinuous' relative tense system is an areal feature.

Some thoughts on tense

Tense is largely modelled as a deictic system.

person SPEAKER/HEARER
time NOW
location HERE

"What's crucial to all tense specifications, however is the need for a deictic centre, or reference point... so far we have assumed that the deictic centre for tense will be a single point in time. **The question therefore arises whether all tenses can be described in terms of such deictic centres.**" (Comrie 1985: 17)

Finite verb forms in English are taken to always encode 'absolute time reference'. '[N]on-finite forms characteristically have relative time reference' (cf. *also time adverbials*)

- (1) *the people sitting on the bench were arrested*
- (2) *the passengers denied boarding to QF4 proceeded to gate 27*

‘**metrical**’ tense systems ‘...provide an approximate and subjective measure of the interval between the frame and the tense locus’ (Chung & Timberlake 1985: 207)

‘**cyclical**’ tense systems: ‘two oppositions... absolute cut-off point between today and earlier than today, the other between recent and remote within each of these two time frames’ (Comrie 1985: 89).

The phenomenon

Djambarrpuyngu (Western Yolngu)

Djambarrpuyngu (Yolngu): ‘use of two inflections: one to code realized events closest to the speaker’s moment of speech (the Contemporary tenses — present;yesterday/recent) and another to code Pre-contemporary events (earlier today and remote past)’ (Wilkinson 1991: 339).

- (3) a. *gunga mala ga dhaarra'-dharra*
pandanus tree IPFV stand~REDUP.I
‘The pandanus trees are standing (there)’
- b. *nhaakurr nhuma ga jirrimbu-m*
where 2.nsg IPFV go-I
‘where are you going?’
- (4) a. *yo barpurun jarra jana nhaa-ma-j (*nhaanj)*
yes, yesterday-PROM 1s 3s.ACC see-I-PROM
‘Yes, I saw him yesterday’
- b. *je gaathur jarra jana nhaa-jal godarr dhiyal*
yes, today 1s 3s.ACC see-III morning PROX-LOC
‘Yes, I saw him here this morning’
- c. *maarra ga-n malwan-dja dhaara-n yindi manḁa-j*
two IPFV-III Hibiscus-PROM stand-III big 3d-PROM
‘Two big Hibiscus flowers were growing there’ (at some place in the speaker’s youth)

Frequently cooccur with adverbials:

ṇaathil ‘prior/before’ (remote past)

barpuru ‘yesterday’ (recent past)

yawuṇu ‘recently’ (recent past)

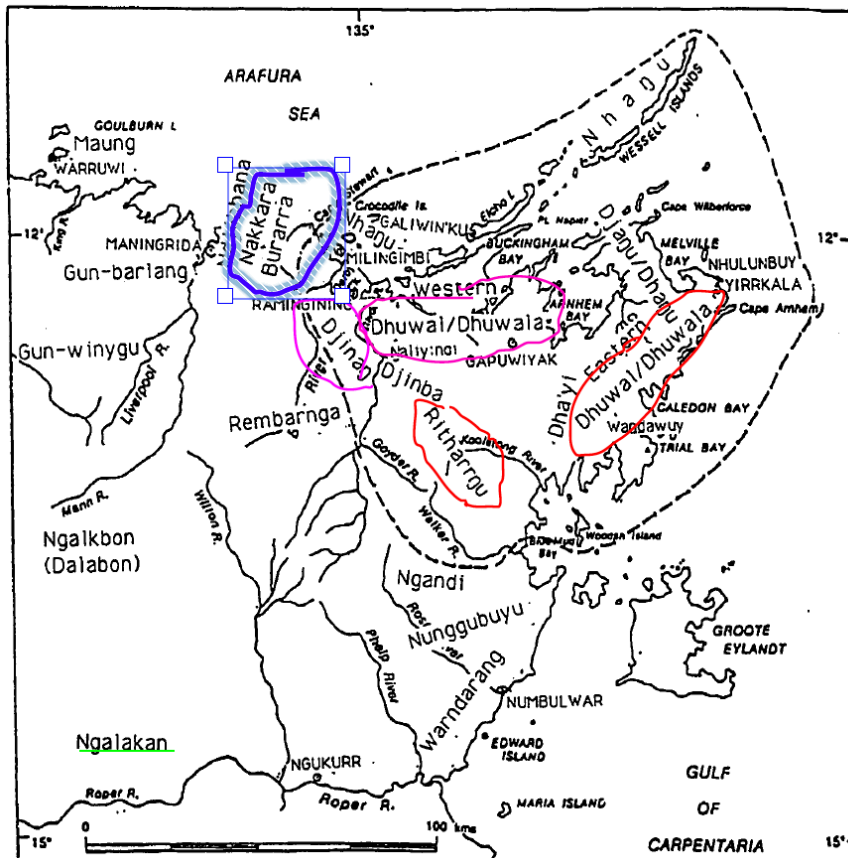
gaathur ‘these days’ (today past, present, today future [with *dhu* ‘FUT’])

Further observations (Wilkinson 1991: 343ff).

- The ‘switch-over’ between remote past and close past is not associated with an absolute time: Wilkinson gives an example of the *contemporary* marker occurring with ‘**did you**

meet my father, who died last year' and the pre-contemporary marker occurring with 'what did your brother do last summer?' As such, she observes that it is possible that some clauses could occur with *either inflection* and that notions like *relative relevance* may be at play (temporal specification is more likely to be omitted in the distant past).

- first (close/contemporary) inflection cooccurs with *gaathur* ‘today’ or *dhiyanbala* ‘now’ appears to be felicitous with an XN reading: problematic for TODAY/–TODAY “FRAME” opposition.



Gurr-goni (Arnhem)

Green's work on GURR-GONI (the language directly to the west of Nakkara in the above map) provides further data on the Arnhem contemporary v. contemporary tense distinction.¹

- **‘today’ frame:** contemporary = moment of speech; precontemporary = previous night-fall until ‘moment before speech’
- **‘before-today’ frame:** contemporary = several days before today, pre-contemporary = long ago.

¹Additionally, I used to work with Bron Eather, who has done work on Nakkara and evidently introduced this contemp v precontemp metalanguage

- ‘between these two poles, there is a large span of time that can be referred to using either tense’ (speaker’s discretion w/r/t relative recency/distance). The use of the contemporary tense below is an example of

(5) *gugoni balanda birdibirdi a-garnagirri-dji*
 IV-this white_man recently 3IS-sit_down-CON
 ‘White man settled only recently’

- **continuous frame:** Green refers to this as *all time up to and including present*. She claims contemporary tense in this frame refers **habitual and generic statements** whereas pre-contemporary refers to **states and events of long ago**.

Wangurri (Eastern Yolŋu)

- 1 ‘neutral’ -*Na?*~ ∅
- 2 ‘pfv’ -*(Ka)n(a)?*
- 3 ‘hab’ -*(Ka)rra*
- 4 ‘irr’ -*(ŋ)u*
- 5 ‘imper’ -*Ka*

- auxiliaries: *bayiŋ* ‘hab’ and *ŋarru* ‘irr’, *gayŋa* ‘cont’
- Past readings normally obtain with bare neutral verb form (irr.) as opposed to cooccurring with *gayŋa*.
- expression of present situation requires an IPFV auxiliary.
- irrealis marker gives rise to futurate meaning. Where combined with CONT auxiliary, a deontic reading can obtain.
- PFV > PST-shift: the perfective (form 2) only occurs as realis (zero-marked): completeness, boundedness:

Realis implies that the event has happened or is happening. Perfective indicates a boundedness or completeness which is not available to an event that is *happening*. Therefore [the perfective form (2)] is only applicable to an event which has happened. For this reason the perfective in Wangurri also carries the implication of *past event*.

S. Yolŋu – Dhaŋu/Ritharrŋu

Heath describes the cognate second form as a regular, absolute ‘past tense’ marker. He pays little attention to its specific semantics claiming there isn’t much to report. The small narrative corpus included at the rear of the volume routinely uses the marker to refer to events before present.

A semantic Change account

Djambarrpuyŋu [djr]

- (6) *yo barpurun ŋarra ŋaŋa nhaa-ma-n*
 yes, yesterday-PROM 1s 3s.ACC see-1-PROM
 ‘Yes, I saw him yesterday’
- (7) *ŋe gaathur ŋarra ŋaŋa nhaa-ŋal goḍarr dhiyal*
 yes, today 1s 3s.ACC see-3 morning PROX-LOC
 ‘Yes, I saw him here this morning’

N. Yolŋu

Wangurri [dhg]

- (8) *barpuru ŋaya garramatpuy nhaama nhaan barpuru dhal’yun munhaku*
 recently 1s aeroplane see.I 3s recently land-I night
 ‘...I **saw** the aeroplane yesterday which arrived last night’
- (9) *ga nhaama ŋanap gayŋa banha ŋunha-l bala gali’-ŋa ga raali-m*
 and see.I 1p.excl.nom CONT that there.LOC DEIC other.side-LOC and there.d
ŋanapu ditjun ga bitjuwayiŋ bayiwitjana-ya liŋgu dhanal banha
 1p.excl.nom come-I and thus that- because 3p that
batjiwarr-murru-m nhana gutjparruwanam
 path 3s.acc **take**.III-D
 ‘and **we could** see there to the other side and we came along that (road) because they had **taken** him along that road’

See in (7) above the use of the PFV (inflection 3) in *they had **taken him along***. The story is of a group of Indigenous people visiting Israel and recounting their story of retracing the path of Jesus’s crucifixion. All events recounted occur before speech time, the reference time is relativised given rise to neutral marking of *nhaama* ‘see’.