

# Complex predicates

Jane Simpson 28/11/2025

# Multi-predicator constructions

- Multi-predicator structures found across northern Australia
- They are typically two part, but can have more than two parts
- Closed class of finite verbs
- Typological parallels: German separable verbs, English phrasal verbs, Hindi compound verbs, Georgian preverbs, Algonquian preverbs, Hungarian locative
- In the Australian and other cases, the multi-predicator structures appear to be doing the same work as simple verbs.
- However, they behave differently from simple verbs in that
  - In some languages the order of the parts can be reversed
  - In some languages other elements can intervene between the parts.
- Sometimes the meaning of the multi-predicator structure is non-compositional.
- Do the parts form a single word? A phrase?
- What determines the case of the subject?
- How is the argument structure of the whole composite determined?

Nash, David. 1982. "Warlpiri preverbs and verb roots." In *Papers in Warlpiri grammar: in memory of Lothar Jagst*, edited by Stephen Swartz, 165-216. Berrimah, Australia: Summer Institute of Linguistics.

1980s analytic problem:

## The Lexical Integrity Hypothesis

- Words are the atoms of syntax. Words (lexical categories) are the terminal node of syntactic trees.
- **Weak LIH:** derivational morphology operates in the lexicon, not at the level of syntax. I.e. words are NOT assembled in constituent structure
- **Strong LIH:** syntactic rules cannot move elements into or out of lexical categories.
  - Constituent structure processes are blind to the internal structure of lexical categories.
  - Subparts of words cannot be re-ordered during syntactic composition
- Sometimes assumed: lexical entries (argument structure, selection restrictions) only undergo change before the word enters the level of syntax.

# Problem: Discontinuous verbs

- *John ran.* Intransitive
- *John ran up a bill.* (could be 'ran up' as a complex verb with the lexical entry of a transitive verb. Doesn't violate LIH)
- *John ran a bill up.* (Violates LIH)

# Problem: Light verbs

- *John looked (at the paper).*
- *John had a look (at the paper).*

*Look* has as participant the object of sight. This is expressed as an optional PP, whether it is N or V *had*.

*Had* acts as main verb, is identical in form (inflection) to the lexical/heavy verb *have*, and has the same transitive argument structure. It adds aspectual information converting a process to a bounded event.

- *John gave the paper a look.*
- *?John gave a look at the paper.*

*gave* acts as main verb, is identical in form (inflection) to the lexical/heavy verb *give*, and adds aspectual information converting a process to a bounded event.

It has the same ditransitive argument structure but then the object of perception is expressed as the Object, without the preposition *at*, and *a look* is discontinuous from *gave*. The transitive argument structure is odd, perhaps because '*to*', not '*at*' is the expected preposition for *give*.

In languages with Ergative case, the case of the subject is determined by the light verb, and not by the other verb.

# Complex predicates (LFG)

Two or more predication elements [...] come together to form a joint predication, with a jointly determined argument structure (Butt 2010)

Each predication element contributes something predication to the joint predication (contra *noun incorporation*, which, in Butt's view expresses an argument but does not add to the predication).

*Argument merger* draws together the arguments of each predication element to form the single argument structure of the complex predicate. It takes place at an argument structure level.

The complex predicate is the head of its clause (monoclausal).

In contrast with controlled complements, there are no embedded arguments and no embedded predicates at the level of syntax.

- Butt, Miriam. 2010. "The Light Verb jungle: Still hacking away." In *Complex predicates in cross-linguistic perspective*, edited by Mengistu Amberber, Mark Harvey and Brett Baker, 48-78. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Alsina, Alex, Joan Bresnan, and Peter Sells, eds. 1997. *Complex predicates, CSLI Lecture notes 64*<sub>6</sub>. Stanford CA: CSLI Publications

# Complex predicates

- Complex predicates can be formed in the morphology (e.g. derived causative affixes), or in the syntax (e.g. light verb structures).
- Claim: *argument merger* in argument structure works in similar ways in both morphologically created complex predicates and syntactically created complex predicates.

# Butt's proposal

The different parts of the complex predicate instantiate different subparts/ subevents of the overall predication.

- **Light verbs**
  - contribute to an independently existing event predication at the subevental level.
  - Always **form-identical** to a main verb of the language (inflect in the same way)
  - Aspectual class of light verb cannot conflict with that of the co-predicator.
  - Case of subject is determined by that of light verb.
  - *Form complex predicates*
- **Auxiliaries** situate an event in time. They do not modify the basic event predication.
  - *Do not form complex predicates*
  - Case of subject is determined by that of heavy verb.
- **Modals** situate an event with respect to possible worlds. They do not modify the basic event predication.
  - *Do not form complex predicates*
  - Case of subject is determined by that of heavy verb.



# Light verbs vs Auxiliaries (Butt)

- Light verbs and the other predicators form a complex predicate.
- The case of the subject is determined by the light verb.
- Light verbs do not grammaticalise into inflections
- Free auxiliary verbs do not form a complex predicate.
- Free auxiliary verbs do grammaticalise into inflections.

|          |   |  |                                    |  |                                |  |
|----------|---|--|------------------------------------|--|--------------------------------|--|
| Part 0   | Part 1 UP -<br>predicator that is<br>not inflected for<br>tense or mood | Part 2 IP predicator<br>that is inflected for<br>tense and mood        | ORDER                              | Language(s)  | Complex<br>construction name   | Source   |
|          | UV uninfecting verb   | IV inflecting verb predicate   |                                    | Comparative across<br>northern Australia<br>and Pama-Nyungan | compound verb<br>constructions | McGregor (2002);<br>Schultze-Berndt<br>(2017)                                  |
|          | Verb root   | Classifier (role)  | U I                                | Nyulynyulan languages  |                                | McGregor (2002)  |
|          | Preverb   | Verb   | U I, IU depends on<br>preverb type | Warlpiri   | Preverb-Verb<br>construction   | Hale (1982), Nash<br>(1982)  |
|          | Preverb   | Light verb<br>(dependent); Heavy<br>verb (independent<br>or dependent) | U I                                | Warlpiri   |                                | Laughren (2010)  |
|          | Coverb  | Verb   | U I                                | Jarragan, Wagiman, Jaminjung,<br>Warlmanpa                   |                                | Kofod (1996),<br>Wilson (1999),<br>Schultze-Berndt<br>(2000), Browne<br>(2024) |
|          | Verbal particle   | Verb/ Auxiliary  | U I                                | Wardaman   |                                | Merlan (1994)  |
|          | Main verb   | Auxiliary  | U I                                | Ngan'gityemerri  |                                | Reid (1990)  |
|          | Finite V  | Coverb   | IU                                 | Ngan'gityemerri  |                                | Reid (2003)  |
|          | Coverb  | Finite verb  | UI, IU                             | Ngan'gityemerri  |                                | Reid (2003)  |
|          | Compound verb<br>stem   | Free Auxiliary; Bound Auxiliary  |                                    | Ngankikurungkurr   |                                | Hoddinott & Kofod<br>(1988)  |
|          | Auxiliary   | Main verb stem   |                                    | Murrinpatha & Ngan'gityemerri                                |                                | Green (2003)   |
|          | Participle  | Finite verb  | U I                                | Wagiman  |                                | Cook (1988)  |
| Pre-verb | Co-verbal root<br>[category-less]                                       | Light verb   | U I                                | Jingulu  |                                | Pensalfini (2003)  |
|          | Preverb   | Verb root  | UI                                 | Bardi  |                                | Bowern (2012)  |
|          | Coverb  | Light verb   | UI                                 | Bardi  |                                | Bowern (2012),<br>Bowern (2014)  |
|          | Preverb   | Verbal base [role<br>'classifier'OR 'simple<br>verb']                  | U I                                | Bardi  |                                | Nicolas (2000)   |
|          | Coverb  | Verb   | U I                                | Murrinpatha  | phrasal verb                   | Mansfield (2019)   |
|          | Verb stem   | Coverb   | UI                                 | Murrinpatha  | compound verb                  | Mansfield (2019)   |

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# Warlpiri, Warumungu, Warlmanpa

- Neighbours
- All have multi-predicator constructions which include a verb that can be inflected for tense/aspect/mood, i.e. finite.
- Properties of these constructions depend on:
  - properties of the potentially finite verb
  - properties of the remaining parts on the other
- All accord special status to pronominal clitics representing arguments and adjuncts, constraining them to appear in 'second position' in the clause.
  - Warlpiri and Warlmanpa: Auxiliary complex (which also includes tense-aspect marking).
  - Warumungu: a portmanteau cluster of pronominal clitics.

# References

# Warlpiri: Multi-predicator construction

- multi-part verb constructions follow a template:
- X ? V where ? stands for different degrees of tightness of boundary:
  - - (affix), + (compound), # (word-boundary)
- X can be a range of parts of speech:
  - **Nominal, Nominalised Verb, Preverb**

# Warlpiri preverbs (coverbs)

- A distinct class of words in terms of their phonotactics. Unlike free-standing words, they can end with a consonant and they can be monosyllabic.
- The vast majority appear in front of the verb: hence the name ‘preverb’.
- Unlike Nominals true preverbs cannot take nominal case inflections. (Some preverbs can be converted into nominals through derivational suffixes or reduplication.)
- Unlike Verbs, preverbs cannot take tense/aspect/mood inflections.
- **Numbers**
  - 109 different words which are doubly classified as Nominal or Particle or Preverb in the *Warlpiri dictionary* appear with only one verb.
  - 508 different words classified solely as Preverbs appear with only one verb.
  - 634 other preverbs that occur with more than one verb
- Nash divides Preverbs into the following types: *lexical*, *semi-productive*, *adverbial (including quantifiers)*, *dative-adjunct*, according to the degree of tightness of boundary. To which were added Dative object preverbs

| <i>X type</i>                                  |  | Properties                 |
|--|--|----------------------------|
| <i>Vnom -ya-ni</i> 'go' and a few motion verbs | Associated path  | Inner: tight nexus         |
| <i>N-jarrimi</i><br><i>N-mani</i>              | become/be X<br>cause to be X, transitive                                   | Inner: tight nexus         |
| <i>N V</i>                                     | Few examples, like object noun incorporation                               | Inner: tight nexus         |
| <i>PV lexical</i>                              | Many examples, preverb usually unique                                      | Inner preverb: tight nexus |
| <i>PV semi-productive</i>                      | Many examples:   | Inner preverb: tight nexus |
| <i>PV adverbial quantifier</i>                 | Many examples<br>Few quantifiers   | Outer preverb: loose nexus |
| <i>PV Dative adjunct</i>                       | Modifies Dative adjunct, <i>for benefit/detriment/reason/threat...</i> Few | Outer preverb: loose       |
| <i>PV Dative object</i>                        | Adds Dative object, against, on top of.. Few                               | Outer preverb: loose       |

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# Nash's 4 tests for boundary tightness

- Can X host a directional clitic?
- Can the Auxiliary split X and the Verb?
- Is the order V X possible?
- Can the V and the X be separated by other words in the sentence?

Laughren 2010: inner (thematic core), outer (thematic periphery)

Browne 2024: loose nexus, tight nexus

# Outer preverb, loose nexus, adverbial

Pina ya-nu            =**0-pala**.

back-go-PST            =PERF-3dS

*They (two) went back.*

Pina            =**0-pala** ya-nu.

Back            =PERF-3dS            go-PST

*They (two) went back.*

Ya-nu            =**0-pala**            pina.

go-PST    =PERF-3dS            back

*'They (two) went back.'*

Jintilyka            ka=lu            **muku**=rra            paarr-pardi-mi.

Grasshopper    PRES=3plS            all=away            flight-rise-NPST

*The grasshoppers all fly away.*

# Outer preverbs

- *Adverbs*

Jurlpu ka=lu                      nguru-wana jaala-parnka-mi.

Bird    PRES=3plS    sky-across    **back&forth**-move.fast-PRES

*The birds are flying back and forth in the sky.*

- *Quantifiers*

Jintilyka                      ka=lu                      muku=rra                      paarr-pardi-mi.

Grasshopper                      PRES=3plS                      all=away                      flight-rise-NPST

*The grasshoppers all fly away.*

# Inner preverbs

- *Lexical* (mostly unique):

Wurru-ka-nyi =ka-pala-jana.

Pvb-bound.verb 'stalk'-NPST =IMPF-3dS-3pNS

*The (two) are stalking them (more than two).*

- *Semi-productive*

Kulanganta    yinga    payi-ngki    pirri-kiji-karla    yujuku,

As if                    COMP    wind-ERG    scatter-throw-IRR    \_humpy

*I thought that the wind would have scattered the humpies*

# Outer: Dative-orienting preverbs

## Modifying adjunct

Wati =rla                      jurnta-ya-nu                      karnta-ku  
Man =3sDAT                  away-go-PAST                  woman-DAT  
jarda-nguna-nja-rlarni.

sleep-lie-INF-**OBVCOMP**

*The man went away from the woman while she was sleeping*

## Adding object

Wati=ji kulu    jangkardu=rnu                      ya-nu    waparlku-kurra-ku  
man-1sO fight    against-hither                      go-PST    unknowing-**OBJCOMP**-DAT

*The man came to fight me when I didn't know about it.*

# Nash's 4 tests for boundary strength

- Can X host a directional clitic?
- Can the Auxiliary split X and the Verb?
- Is the order V X possible?
- Can the V and the X be separated by other words in the sentence?

| <i>X type</i>                  | <i>Directional</i> | <i>X Aux V</i> | <i>V X</i> | <i>X..Y.. V, V..Y..X</i> |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|----------------|------------|--------------------------|
| <i>Vnom -ya-ni 'go'</i>        | Yes                | No             | No         | No                       |
| <i>N-inch</i>                  | Yes                | Rare           | No         | No                       |
| <i>N-cause</i>                 |                    |                |            |                          |
| <i>N V</i>                     | Yes                | Yes            | Yes        | Irrelevant               |
| <i>PV lexical</i>              | No?                | No             | No         | No                       |
| <i>PV semi-productive</i>      | Yes                | Yes            | No         | No                       |
| <i>PV adverbial quantifier</i> | Yes                | Yes            | Yes        | Sometimes                |
| <i>PV Dative adjunct</i>       | No                 | Yes            | Yes        | Sometimes                |
| <i>PV Dative object</i>        | Yes                | Yes            | Yes        | Yes                      |

# Ordering

Consonant-final preverbs must be augmented (mostly with *-pa*) if they are split from the verb or postposed to it

Laughren (2010:179-180)

- PV in thematic core may not be postposed to the thematic V; PV in thematic periphery may be pre- or postposed to the thematic V
- order of PVs within the thematic core is fixed ; order of PV in the thematic periphery is variable.

**jurnta**= [ **tarda** - ya- ] nu **pina** 'sat/landed back away (from)

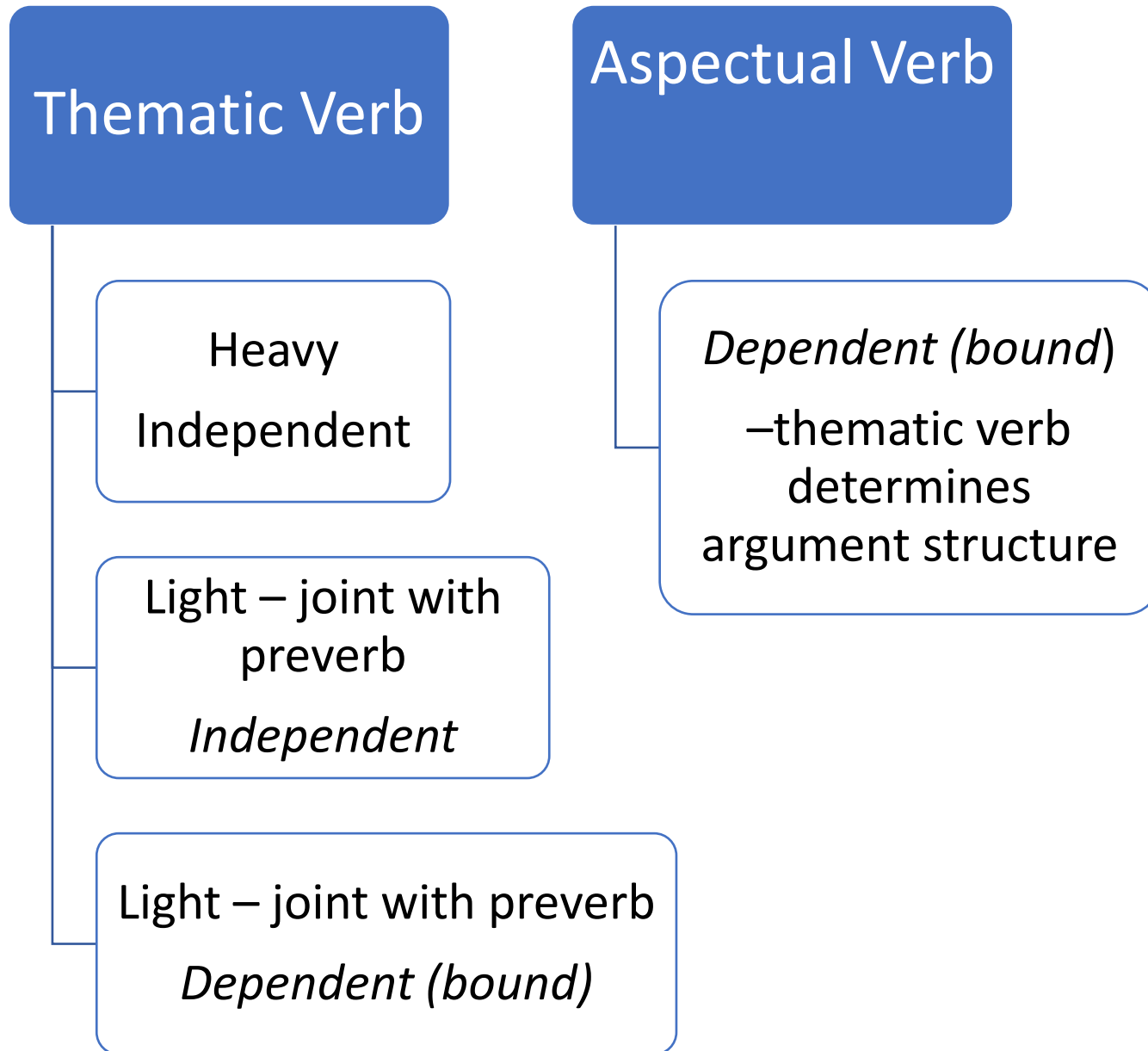
**muku =jurnta**= [ **walku-jarri-** ] ja 'all ran out on'



# Verbs attested in dictionary with many preverbs

| Form          | Meaning   | Number of attested combinations | Meaning           | Number     | Transitivity                       |
|---------------|---|---------------------------------|-------------------|------------|------------------------------------|
| <b>Kiji-</b>  | throw   | 101                             | throw             | 101        | transitive                         |
| <b>Wanti-</b> | fall  | 108                             | fall              | 108        | intransitive                       |
| <b>Paka-</b>  | hit   | 112                             | hit               | 112        | transitive                         |
| <b>Yirra-</b> | put   | 131                             | put               | 131        | transitive                         |
| <b>Ma-</b>    | <b>get and... (at least 6 different senses)</b> | <b>194</b>                      | <b>get and...</b> | <b>194</b> | <b>transitive and intransitive</b> |
| <b>Karri-</b> | stand   | 210                             | stand             | 210        | intransitive                       |

# Laughren's classification of verbs



# *Ya-ni* ‘go’ (Laughren 2010)

- **Heavy**

Ngarrka ka yani

*The man is going*

- **Light:** joint with preverb

Kurdu waku **rdilyki-ya-nu**. *The child’s arm broke*

Child arm broken-go-PST

- **Aspectual (attached to nominalised verb ‘go’ PATH)**

Wati ka [ngurrju-jarri-nja]-ya-ni.

man AUX:PRS good-INCH-INF-PATH-NPST

*The man is getting better/becoming good.*

Wati ka [ngurrju-ma-ninja]-ya-ni nyanguwaji-rli.

man AUX:PRS good-CAUS-INF-PATH-NPST doctor-ERG

*The doctor is making the man better.*

# Subject case distinguishes aspectual and light verbs

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- Heavy and Light verbs provide the case for the subject
- Auxiliary verbs are transparent, and the subject's case is provided by the other predicator

- **Preverb/Nominal verb**

(i) Warlu-ngku=juku=palangu paarr-jurru-rnu [**transitive**]

Fire-ERG=still=3duO

flight-force-PST

*The fire just forced them up into the sky.*

(ii) Jintilyka ka=lu muku=rra paarr-pardi-mi [**intransitive**].

Grasshopper

PRES=3plS

all=away flight-rise-NPST

*The grasshoppers all fly away.*

Wati ka ngurrju-ma-ni [**transitive**] nyanguwaji-rli

man AUX:PRS good-CAUS-NPST

doctor-ERG

*The doctor makes the man better*

- **Aspectual verb** [ya- as heavy verb is intransitive, ma- CAUS is transitive]

Wati ka [ngurrju-ma-ninja]-ya-ni nyanguwaji-rli.

man AUX:PRS good-CAUS-INF-PATH-NPST

doctor-ERG

*The doctor is making the man better.*

# Laughren's proposal for Warlpiri preverb-verb structures

- Considers contribution of both preverb and verb to the complex predicate
- Argues for two levels:
  - Lexical event structure (roughly equivalent to argument structure)
  - S-Syntax structure
- Types of preverb include among others resultant states ('broken') and states ('good')
- Types of verbs on continuum between Heavy and Light include among others
  - Lexical verbs
  - Syntactic light verbs
  - Abstract change
  - Change plus additional manner
- Thematic verbs express ATPs: may be Heavy (stand on their own) or Light (associated with a preverb) – these have selectional restrictions
- HV and LV versions of same thematic verb have same valency and argument structure
- Aspectual verbs combine with other verbs (NOT preverbs) and do not affect argument structure: productive

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# Warumungu

Neighbour of Warlmanpa and Warlpiri (Yapa languages)

Long intermarriage and connection with Warlmanpa

Genetic position unclear – properties in common with Yapa languages, but also with Arandic languages.

Pronominal clitics in ‘second position’

# Comparing Warumungu and Warlpiri

|  | Warlpiri             | Warumungu           |
|--|----------------------|---------------------|
| <i>Inflected predicates<br/>(simple verbs)</i>   | 165                  | 64                  |
| <i>Attestations of compound<br/>verbs/phrasal verbs</i>                                      | 2464                 | <b>178</b>          |
| <i>Uninflected predicates<br/>(preverbs) double<br/>classified ( N ,Interj Adv)</i>          | <b>150</b>           | <b>8</b>            |
| <i>Preverbs (other than<br/>double-classified)<br/>occurring with more than<br/>one verb</i> | <b>565</b>           | <b>62</b>           |
| <i>Compounds/phrases with<br/>unique preverbs</i>  | 630                  | 118                 |
| <i>Bound verbs</i>   | 19 (2 with nominals) | 5 (3 with nominals) |



| <i>X type</i>                  | <i>Directional</i> | <i>X Aux V</i> | <i>V X</i> | <i>X..Y.. V, V..Y..X</i> |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|----------------|------------|--------------------------|
| <i>Associated path inflect</i> | n/a                | No             | No         | No                       |
| <i>N-inch</i>                  | n/a                | No             | No         | No                       |
| <i>N-cause</i>                 | n/a                | No             | No         | No                       |
| <i>N V</i>                     | n/a                | Yes            | Yes        | Irrelevant               |
| <i>PV lexical</i>              | n/a                | No             | No         | No                       |
| <i>PV semi-productive</i>      | n/a                | Yes            | No         | No                       |
| <i>PV adverbial quantifier</i> | n/a                | Yes            | Yes        | Sometimes                |
| <i>PV Dative adjunct</i>       | n/a                | Yes            | Yes        | Sometimes                |
| <i>PV Dative object</i>        | n/a                | n/a            | n/a        | n/a                      |

# Warumungu associated path: inflection

|           |                  |                |               |
|-----------|------------------|----------------|---------------|
| <i>Go</i> | <i>go-hither</i> | <i>go-away</i> |               |
| Apan      | Apirrapan        | Apijjirranta   | Present       |
| Api       | Apijirra         | Apirrkarl      | Future        |
| Apinyi    | Apirrkarni       | Apirrarni      | Past Punctual |

papulu-kku = arni                      juku-**nyu**                      *I took it to the house*

House-Dative = I                      carry-past.punctual

papulu-kku = arni                      juku-**ntirrarni**                      *I took it away to the house*

House-Dative = I                      carry-away-past.punctual

i.e. This combines both the concepts expressed by Warlpiri directional clitics and the Warlpiri aspectual verb Vnom-yani into inflections on verbs.

Fits with Butt's proposal about grammaticalisation of auxiliary verbs.