

# **Mismatches between syntax and semantics in Mangarrayi complex verbs**

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Complex predicates and complex  
verbal constructions masterclass

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- ▶ Much of the complex predicate literature takes up the issue of classifying particular construction types as ‘complex predicates’ (e.g., Alsina et al., 1997; Amberber et al., 2010; Rosen, 1990)
- ▶ Works on individual languages often explore internal criteria for categorising construction types this way (Amberber, 2010; Bower, 2004; Krauß, 2021; Schultze-Berndt, 2000; Wilson, 1999)
- ▶ What about differentiating between the tokens of one construction type? Are all instantiations of a construction type equally good candidates for ‘complex predicate’?

## Goals of the session

- ▶ We will think about these how these questions relate to the coverb construction in Mangarrayi: a syntactically but not semantically homogenous category
- ▶ Unlike Wagiman, the complex verb system in Mangarrayi is not predominantly transparent

### Things to think about

Ask yourself:

- What criteria for 'complex predicate' might be suitable in Mangarrayi?
- Is 'complex predicate' the most useful characterisation of Mangarrayi complex verbs?

Syntactic overview of Mangarrayi verbs

Compositional constructions

Non-compositional constructions

Proposals and remaining problems

# SYNTACTIC OVERVIEW OF MANGARRAYI VERBS

- ▶ Non-Pama-Nyungan, formerly spoken in the Roper River region (Merlan, 1982)
- ▶ ‘Prefixing’ type: obligatory agreement prefixes and TAM suffixes on verbs, noun class/case prefixes and suffixes, and complex (two part) verb lexemes
- ▶ Mangarrayi has three kinds of monoclausal complex verbs: simple, compound, and phrasal
- ▶ Phrasal verbs will be our focus, as they have the most varied behaviour

## Simple verbs

- ▶ Simple verbs involve a monomorphemic verb stem, sandwiched in between an agreement prefix and a TAM suffix

(1) ŋan-**ka**-ŋjŋ

3SG>1SG-take-PP

‘He took me.’ (Merlan, 1982, p. 26)

(2) ŋawujan-**ma**-ŋ

1SG>3PL-say-PP

‘I told them.’ (Merlan, 1982, p. 65)

- ▶ There are 36 monomorphemic verb roots, with meanings typical for similarly sized inventories, e.g., /pu/ ‘hit’, /mi/ ‘get’, /ka/ ‘take’, /cajki/ ‘stand’, etc. (see also Bower, 2014; Schultze-Berndt, 2000)

## Compound verbs

- There is a large but unproductive class of compounds (N = 336), in which the verb stem is a compound consisting of non-finite coverb and finite verb root

(3) *ɲawujan-**caŋ**+**wu**-ni*      *ɲuku*

2SG>3PL-supply+HIT-PC    water

‘You supplied them with water.’ (Merlan, 1982, p. 65)

(4) *ɲijan-**kalic**+**ma**-ɲ*

3SG>1PL.EX-report+SAY-PP

‘He reported to us.’ (Merlan, 1982, p. 68)



## Phrasal verbs

- ▶ Phrasal verbs are the largest class of verb lexemes (N = 763); coverb and finite verb are separate syntactic words
- ▶ 25 of the 36 monomorphemic finite verbs can be used
- ▶ There are 614 unique coverbs

(5) **paɿik** ca-na-n  
dry.out 3.PR-BURN-PR  
'It's drying out.' (Merlan, n.d.)

(6) **taʔma** wur-ka-ŋij  
lift.up 3DU-TAKE-PP  
'They lifted it up.' (Merlan, n.d.)

# COMPOSITIONAL CONSTRUCTIONS

## Syntactic transparency

- ▶ The phrasal verb construction consists of two independent syntactic words
- ▶ Clitics (a) and modifiers (b) can intervene, and constituents can be reversed (c)

(7) a. [wolor]=**ca**            [ka-ŋa-ma]  
be.hungry=EMPH   PR-1SG-DO.PR  
'I'm *hungry*!' (Merlan, 1982, p. 47, emphasis in original)

b. [caŋ?~caŋ?]   **majawa**   [ka-ŋi-ma]  
RED~die            now            PR-12DU-DO.PR  
'Now you and I die.' (Merlan, 1996, p. 17)

c. [**wur-jini-wa**]   [katca]  
3DU-GO.PC-NAR   go.across  
'The two (girls) went across.' (Merlan, 1996, p. 6)

- ▶ Phrasal verbs are the only open / productive verb structure
- ▶ All English and Kriol loans are adopted into this structure (not as compounds or directly inflecting verbs)

(8) a. **tɬaŋk** wu|a-ma  
drunk 3PL-DO.PR

‘They’re drunk.’ (adapted from Merlan, 1982, p. 129)

b. **klinim?** ŋa-ma-ɟi-wa patum  
clean 1SG>3SG-DO-PC-FOC bathroom

‘I cleaned the bathroom.’ (Merlan, 1996, p. 65)

## Semantically compositional constructions

- ▶ Out of 763 phrasal verb lexemes, 545 are potentially compositional structures (the rest involve the 'do' finite verb – stay tuned)
- ▶ 335/545 (~61%) can be analysed as being semantically compositional (coverb and verb have similar meanings)

(9) **ŋoncot** wuran-**pu**-ni-wa  
whack 3SG>3DU-HIT-PC-NAR

'She whacked the two of them.' (Merlan, n.d.)

(10) **pul**                      ŋa-**waɬ**-ak                      cip-nawu  
throw.on.ground 2SG>3SG-THROW-PP seed-3SG.POSS

'You threw the seeds on the ground.' (Merlan, n.d.)

(11) **jarp**                      wur-**ja**-c  
go.separate.ways 3DU-GO-PP

'Those two split up.' (Merlan, n.d.)

## Causatives

- ▶ One of the main uses of complex verb systems is to alter the transitivity or aktionsart of a given construction (see e.g., Baker & Harvey, 2010; Merlan, 1983; Schultze-Berndt, 2000; Wilson, 1999)
- ▶ Often, the choice of finite verb conditions these syntactic alternations

### (12) Causative alternations with /paɿik/ ‘dry out’

#### a. Intransitive

ca-**na**-n

3.PR-burn-PR

‘It is burning.’

#### b. Transitive

ŋa-**waɿ**-ak

1SG>3SG-throw-PP

‘I threw it.’

#### c. Intransitive

**paɿik** ca-**na**-n

dry.out 3.PR-BURN-PR

‘It is drying out.’ (Merlan, n.d.)

#### d. Causative

**paɿik** ŋa-**waɿ**-ak

dry.out 1SG>3SG-THROW-PP

‘I dried it out.’ (Merlan, n.d.)

- Some other examples of /waɪ/ 'throw' as a causativiser

(13) a. ɲoɬ        ni-  
         heap.up SIT-  
         'be in a heap/pile'

b. ɲoɬ        waɪ-  
         heap.up THROW-  
         'heap up, make a pile'

(14) a. ɲereɲ ma-  
         cry DO/SAY-  
         'cry'

b. ɲereɲ waɪ-  
         cry THROW-  
         'make someone cry'

## Multiple causativisers

- ▶ But... causativisation is not entirely predictable
- ▶ Some pairs use other causative finite verbs, like /ka/ 'take' or /cut+ma/ 'cause'

### (15) Unpredictable causativisation

#### a. Intransitive

**maŋkaljaɬ**    ka-ŋa-**jak**  
be.ashamed    PR-1SG-GO.PR

'I am ashamed.' (Merlan,  
n.d.)

#### b. Causative

**maŋkaljaɬ**    ŋanpa-**ka**-ni  
be.ashamed    3PL>1SG-TAKE-PC

'They would shame me.'  
(ibid.)

#### c. Intransitive

**paɬʔ**            wut-**ni**-wa  
sit.down    3DU-SIT.PR-NAR

'They sit down.' (Merlan, 1996, p. 5)

#### d. Causative

**paɬʔ**            wu[a-**cut+ma**-ɬi-wa  
sit.down    3PL>3SG-CAUSE+DO-PC-NAR

'They set it down.' (Merlan, 1996, p. 70)



## Is that all?

- ▶ Apart from those 335 compositional lexemes (including the 39 intransitive-causative pairs), there are no other compositional phrasal verbs
- ▶ Compositional constructions make up about 43% of all phrasal verbs
- ▶ The rest are non-compositional in one way or another

# NON-COMPOSITIONAL CONSTRUCTIONS

## Lexicalised pairings

- ▶ 428 (~56%) of phrasal verbs are not straightforwardly compositional
- ▶ There are two relevant kinds of non-compositionality; the first is lexicalised, where the coverb and finite verb have no sensible semantic or syntactic relation

(16) **mir?** ka-ŋanpa-**na**-n  
know PR-3PL>1SG-BURN-PR  
'They know me.' (Merlan, n.d.)

(17) ŋa|a-la-wura                      **ca|uk** wuran-**jac**  
mother-DU-3DU.POSS forget 3SG>3PL-GO.PP  
'Their mother forgot them.' (Merlan, n.d.)

## More lexicalised pairings

- There are about 210 such lexemes, and they are fairly easy to find

(18) **jalja?**                    ŋan-**wa**-p  
be.suspicious 3SG>1SG-VISIT-PP  
'She was suspicious of me.' (Merlan, n.d.)

(19) **cimi**                    ŋawujan-**pu**-ni  
think.about 1SG>3PL-HIT-PC  
'I thought about them.' (Merlan, 1982, p. 62)

(20) na-piwa            **kal?ma**    Ø-**ni**-ŋ  
M.NOM-boy climb 3SG-SIT-PP  
'The boy climbed up.' (Merlan, 1982, p. 26)

## Auxiliary-like constructions

- ▶ The other type of non-compositional construction is one where the the finite verb is /ma/ ‘say/do’
- ▶ There 154 phrasal verb lexemes of this type (~20% of all)
- ▶ Like ‘auxiliary’ constructions (e.g., Anderson, 2006) because the finite verb is completely bleached, has purely grammatical function

### (21) Intransitive, stative

... **wolor**      ka-ŋa-**ma**  
be.hungry   PR-1SG-DO.PR  
‘I’m hungry.’ (Merlan, 1982, p. 35)

### (22) Transitive, dynamic

wuɭaj   **to?**      a-ŋajan-**ma**  
maybe shoot   IRR-3SG>1PL.IN-DO.PR  
‘They might shoot us.’ (Merlan, n.d.)

## Excluding 'do' tokens

- ▶ On its own, /ma/ can be intransitive or transitive so we cannot say that it contributes argument structure
- ▶ Most non-stative predicates involve 'doing', so we cannot say that it contributes event structure
- ▶ The use of /ma/ with states, which involve no 'doing', suggests that it contributes nothing

- ▶ Arguably, only the coverb contributes predicate structure and therefore these constructions are not compositional
- ▶ The /ma/ verb is there simply to satisfy syntactic conditions: a finite verb is obligatory in the clause, but the class of finite verbs is closed
- ▶ That is, /ma/ is like a ‘dummy’ or ‘expletive’ verb that hosts all the required morphology but is otherwise meaningless
- ▶ Like expletive subjects in English, where an overt NP is required to satisfy syntactic minima: [ [It]<sub>NP</sub> [rained]<sub>VP</sub> ]<sub>S</sub> but not \*[ [Rained]<sub>VP</sub> ]<sub>S</sub>

- ▶ So, /ma/ phrasal verbs are probably not good candidates for ‘complex predicate’ because the finite element does no predication!!
- ▶ Let’s think about the implications of this fact in the context of their productivity
- ▶ If this were the only productive class of phrasal verbs, would it be practical to describe Mangarrayi as having complex predicates?



## Loan productivity

- ▶ Loaned verb lexemes are always borrowed as coverbs with the /ma/ finite verb

(23) **ciŋiŋ?** ŋin-ma-ŋ  
cheat 3SG>1DU.IN-DO-PP  
'They cheated us.' (Merlan, n.d.)

(24) **tʌŋk** wu|a-ma  
be.drunk 3PL-DO.PR  
'They're drunk.' (adapted from Merlan, 1982, p. 129)

- ▶ Contrast this with some other Australian languages with productive phrasal verb systems, where loans combine with a semantically compatible finite verb (e.g., Marra: Baker & Harvey, 2010; Jaminjung: Schultze-Berndt, 2000; Bardi: Bower, 2004)

## Productivity more broadly

- ▶ The largest class of phrasal verbs is /ma/, which occupies about 20% of the (phrasal verb) lexicon
- ▶ Out of all the other phrasal verbs, about 40% are lexicalised
- ▶ It's probable that only the /ma/ class is open
- ▶ So, the only productive complex verb structure is one that doesn't intuitively fit the notion of 'complex predicate'

# PROPOSALS AND REMAINING PROBLEMS

## Criteria for 'complex predicate' in Mangarrayi

- ▶ What can we say about Mangarrayi complex verbs?
- ▶ If we rely on purely syntactic criteria for COMPLEX PREDICATE, then all phrasal verbs are complex predicates because they are monoclausal constructions with two verb-y elements (see also Haspelmath, 2024)
- ▶ If we introduce semantic criteria, we can be more restrictive: only compositional complex verbs are complex predicates, since both parts of the construction jointly contribute to the predication meaning

## A cost/benefit evaluation

- ▶ Both options have issues...
- ▶ Establishing a category of 'complex predicate' with purely syntactic criteria eliminates the distinction between compositional and auxiliary constructions, even though they demand different semantic generalisations
- ▶ Building in semantic criteria isolates compositional constructions, however these are a quantitative minority of the lexicon and don't appear to be productive
- ▶ So, is 'complex predicate' a motivated – or useful – category in Mangarrayi? Is this concept necessary to describe languages like this?

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