

## ACTIVE CASE SYSTEMS IN AUSTRALIA AND PAPUA

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### 1. Core Case Frames in Old Australia

Most of the 200 or so native languages of Old Australia<sup>1</sup> are (or were), at least on the surface morphological level, clearly *ergative* in the realization of their core syntactic functions. That is, most of these languages code(d) the subject of a transitive clause as the marked (ergative) case, leaving the transitive object and intransitive subject to take the unmarked (absolutive) case, as these examples from Yalanga<sup>2</sup> demonstrate:

<i>kaya lanami</i>	child-abs. stand-past
<i>wamarilu kaya nanyi</i>	younger sister-erg. child-abs. sees
<i>kayangku watjani pinpama</i>	child-erg. firewood-abs. gather-pres.

In Yalanga, the ergative markers (*-ngku* for two syllable common nouns, *-lu* for kinship terms) is obligatorily suffixed to all transitive subjects (with a few exceptions not relevant here); transitive objects and intransitive subjects take the absolutive zero marker.

Yalanga is of a minority of "canonically ergative" Australia languages; most Old Australia tongues possess some kind of split in the case paradigm, as in these examples from Yandruwanda:

<i>person</i>	<i>absolutive</i>	<i>ergative</i>	<i>accusative</i>
1 singular	<i>nganyi</i>	<i>ngatu</i>	<i>ngana</i>
2 singular	<i>yini</i>	<i>yandru</i>	<i>yina</i>
3 sing. masc.	<i>numu</i>	<i>nulu</i>	<i>yina</i>
3 sing. fem.	<i>nani</i>	<i>ndra</i>	<i>nana</i>
1 dual incl.	<i>ngaldra</i>		<i>ngaluga</i>
1 dual exclus.	<i>ngali</i>		<i>ngaliŋa</i>
2 dual	<i>yula</i>		<i>yulu</i>
3 dual	<i>pula</i>		<i>pulu</i>
1 plural incl.	<i>ngandra</i>		<i>ngamuga</i>
1 plural excl.	<i>ngani</i>		<i>ngamiŋa</i>
2 plural	<i>yura</i>		<i>yuru</i>
3 plural	<i>lana</i>		<i>lana'</i>

Such splits in the personal pronoun paradigms are common across Old Australia, with splits between singular and non-singular, first and second person vs. third, and even masculine vs. feminine being reported (Dixon, 1976).

In addition to ergative case systems, accusative systems similar in their basic format to Indo-European core cases have been reported, mostly in Arnhem Land and the Cape York peninsula.

There is yet one type of core case marking system known to modern linguistics not yet mentioned—the so-called *active* type.

## 2. Active Case Marking—Characteristics

The active type grammar is the most recently codified and least known of the core-case grammatical systems. It is therefore useful at this point to set down in detail the characteristics of active grammar, as assembled by Schmidt (Planck, p. 335) and Klimov (Planck, p. 327ff):

1. Nouns in active languages are covertly classified as animate vs. inanimate; unlike semantic-level noun classes found in other languages (Swahili, for example, which possesses *overt* classes such as "trees and plants," "animals," "people," "abstract nouns," etc.) the animate-inanimate distinction has implications for the grammar.
2. Verbs are covertly classified as active vs. stative, instead of transitive and intransitive. Active verbs generate one kind of case, and stative verbs another. The best known example is Lakota, where the verb *waste* (be good) is stative, and thus prefixes *na* for "I" and *ya* for "you," but the verb *kle* (kill) prefixes *ni* and *wa*.
3. A large role is played by the *verba sentiendi*, or verbs of experience, and the *verba affectuum*, the verbs of thought and feeling.
4. Along with (3) above there is also a large sub-class of verbs denoting involuntary states and acts.
5. There is only rudimentary nominal inflection for number and case.
6. Polysynthesis is apparent, with a marked tendency to incorporate syntactic relations into the verbal form.
7. There is a lack of some kinds of pronouns (reflexive, possessive), and no real class of adjectives (*waste* in Lakota when used attributively means "good" but is functionally a stative verb meaning "be good.")
8. The basic word order is S (IO)OV.
9. Instead of tenses, a rich system of aspects is employed—Navajo is a classic example.
10. There is no active/passive voice distinction; instead, central (action focusing on subject) and non-central (action focused away from subject) "voices" occur.
11. A distinction is made between alienable and inalienable possession, the former indicating things that can be given away or over which the speaker exercises some control, the latter referring mostly to parts of the body and other "non-givable" objects. In Yalanga (which is not an active language, but serves as a good example of this contrast): *ngalji paupa* (my boomerang), but *ngia wama* (my heart).

12. Finally, a distinction is often made between inclusive and exclusive forms of the first person non-singular pronouns, as in the Yandruwanḍa examples above.

The best-known active languages have all come from two geographically restricted areas, Native North America and the Caucasus Mountains—Lakota and Bats are the most intensively studied among them. There is no reason to believe that active languages are restricted to these areas, however, even if active case grammar does prove to be an areal phenomenon. Thanks to the Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies, which for the past twenty or so years has funded research into the languages and cultures of Old Australia, we now have enough data to go hunting for active grammars thruout that continent. Since the most innovative languages of Old Australia are to be found in the northern fifth of the continent in the Arnhem Land region, it is here we would expect to find so unusual a grammatical system.

### 3. Ngangikurungur

Ngangikurungur is a member of the Daly River Family of west central Arnhem Land. It is a prefixing, multiple-classifying language, indicating case relations with post-positions. It is now spoken as a first language by some 150–200 souls on the Daly River Mission. Going down the list of active characteristics, we see that Ngangikurungur shares the following:

1. Rudimentary number and case inflection, most nouns being unmarked for number, and case inflections limited to at most five, of which four are locative. Possesive is not marked at all.
2. The language is somewhat synthetic, with obligatory marking for the subject, object, and tense. There is a complicated system of auxiliaries, which may be thought of as aspectual markers, altho this is quite a simplification.
3. There do not appear to be any reflexive pronouns, nor are there special possessives, as in many Australian languages.
4. There is a special class of involuntary verbs such as "fall," all of which take a particular auxiliary.
5. There is an inclusive/exclusive distinction in the first person non-singular, as is the case in most Australian languages.
6. There is no active/passive voicing contrast (Hoddinott and Kofod, in Dixon, 1976).

On the other hand, Ngangikurungur does not follow the active pattern in these respects:

- a. It possesses Bantu-style classes: masculine, feminine, and animal classes are known, and there may be several others.
- b. The basic word order is SVO.
- c. There seems to be a lack of an overt active/stative distinction in the morphology of the verb, as in Lakota, altho a covert distinction is not ruled out, and may in fact exist (see below).

What should we make of all this contradictory evidence? Before a judgement can be rendered, we must turn to actual examples of the language itself for analysis. Ngangikurungur does appear to have an "ergative" postposition *ninggi*:

<i>awermisa ninggi bengimngi katet</i>	crocodile ergative it-do-present-me bite
<i>fuke ninggi yawir winge juwifwavi</i>	wind ergative tree it-lie down-past blow

In the above examples, *ninggi* seems to serve the ergative function, marking the subject of a transitive clause. Suspicions as to its true function are aroused, however, by several anomalies: it does not appear to be a reflex of the Proto-Australia ergative marker \*-*lu* (as reconstructed by Dixon), and there are several examples from the corpus of sentences that should require an ergative but where no ergative is to be found:

<i>ngayi nginyinggin afenggu</i>	I (-nom.) I-see-present animal-long (snake)
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If *ninggi* is the ergative postposition, why does it not occur in the above sentence? True, the sentence is not ambiguous—the subject takes a concord marker within the verbal complex (the prefix *ng-*), so as to make its status as subject obvious. But then, most Old Australian languages place transitive subjects within ergative case frames regardless of the necessity of such marking, just as English requires the accusative frame in the phrase *I love her* even tho standard English word order makes ambiguity in such sentences impossible (after all, there is no ambiguity of role in the similar phrase *I love you*).

Australia is not the only place where the ergative case frame may be regarded as optional. The Papuan language Enga (Li and Lang, in Planck, p. 307ff) possesses an ergative marker (*-mi/-me*) which Li and Lang have described as "syntactically irrelevant"—that is, it could be eliminated from the grammar with no resultant syntactic ambiguity. As in Ngangikurungur, the system of bound subject markers in Enga insures that the subject may always be identified, even in third person subject sentences, where the somewhat fixed S O V word order also comes into play. In Enga it appears that the ergative case is generated neither by the syntax nor by the needs of discourse; instead, ergativity in Enga seems to corrolate with the notion of *agency*, at least in complex sentences where the ergative marker may be optionally deleted depending on which verb (main or dependent) the speaker wishes to emphasize, and the *animation* level of the verb, as in the following examples (suprasegmental tone is left unmarked for readability):

<i>baa-me mena pyala pelyamo</i>	He-erg. pig kill-inf. go-pr.-3s.-sp.
<i>baa-(me) mena nyala pelyamo</i>	He-erg. pig get-inf. go-pr.-3s.-sp.

In the first example, the subordinate verb *pya* is highly active, requiring a highly animate subject, and the ergative marker *-me* is highly desirable; in the second example, the desirability of *-me* depends on which verb the speaker wishes to emphasize—if *nya*, the ergative is preferred; if *pe* (*pa*), it is not (Planck, p. 321).

Enga and Ngangikurungur share many similarities. Both have obligatory subject marking in the verb but (to a certain extent) optional core case marking on the noun, unlike the vast majority of ergative languages, where the ergative case is inevitable whenever a transitive verb takes a subject. Both have identical ergative and instrumental markers either suffixed or post-posed; neither has an active/passive voicing distinction.

Ngangikurungur has one important difference, however, mentioned by Hoddinott and Kofod in their article on Ngangikurungur case grammar (Dixon, p. 401-405) and illustrated below:

<i>ayeyi ninggi warani fitilit tje</i>	"Those other birds rose up into the air"
<i>ayeyi ninggi kakana wayim pir batj</i>	"Those other animals are hot"

The verbs *warani* (they went) and *wayim* (they are, do) are both intransitive. So why are their subjects marked with *ninggi*? Altho Hoddinott and Kofod suggest these sentences might represent idioms, they are uncomfortable with their own interpretation, pointing out that such words as *ayeyi* (those others) and *waruani* (that one) also occur unmarked.

Finally, there are sentences where *ninggi* appears to have no syntactic function at all, but represents instead the general notion of "extent," as in *wurweli ninggi*, "When I was a little girl," and *ninggi kinji yewir fuggu kadi*, "This stick is long enough." There is also a word *nunyananinggi* meaning "yesterday" which perhaps is a compound of *nunyana* (?) and *ninggi*.

The main motivational distinction between ergative and accusative case systems, on the one hand, and active systems, on the other, is the contrast between *syntactic* and *semantic* marking—ergative and accusative differing not in their underlying motivation, but only in surface manifestation (Klimov, in Plank). The syntactic value of *ninggi*, like its Enga counterpart, appears almost nil. It is not necessary in order to disambiguate subject from object, nor need its appearance correlate with the transitivity of the verb. Instead, there is some indication that *ninggi* is primarily a *semantic* marker, as *-me* is in Enga. Thus, altho on the basis of the data so far published it is too early yet to tell if Ngangikurungur has true verb animicity classes as does Lakota, its apparent failure to distinguish between transitive and intransitive verbs in its assignment of case frames and its perhaps semantic (or at least, non-syntactic) use of the "case marker" *ninggi* would seem to put it somewhere within or close to the active category.

#### 4. Further considerations

This paper has attempted to address the question, "Do any of the languages of Old Australia classify their verbs into active/stative semantic categories?" To my knowledge such a question has never been systematically asked of any Old Australian tongue. The evidence so far for one such language, Ngangikurungur, is mixed. For Old Australian languages as a whole however, there is much tantalizing evidence that, tho perhaps few (if any) modern languages possess fully active grammars, there may at one time have been a wide-spread active substratum thruout the continent. Practically all of the characteristics of active languages listed in section 2 above are to be found in one place or another throughout Australia. To take several examples:

Many Old Australian languages, particularly in the north, have noun classes with a strong semantic basis, much as does Ngangikurungur.

Many languages, again in the north, have numerous morphologically distinct verb classes. The members of the Daly Family have between 12 and 30 different classes,

including verbs of sitting, laying, and standing, destroying, lifting, handling, moving, doing, saying, falling, painting, scratching, carrying, and others obviously semantic in orientation (and this list is far from exhaustive!). Each class is defined by the unique relationship between its member verbs and their conjugation and auxiliary particles; some of these particles may represent case frame contrasts, as do the Lakota verbal particles *ma-* and *mi-*.

Verbs of sensation and feeling seem to be treated uniquely in many Australian languages. In Yalanga, for example, most transitive verbs generate ergative case frames. However, there is a set of verbs ending in *-li* that realize their subjects in the absolutive and their objects in the genitive—these include the verbs for “drink,” “eat,” “cook,” and “look for,” this last being derived from the verb “to look” (Blake, in Planck, p. 294–97).

Involuntary action verbs constitute a unique class in the Daly River languages (Tryon, in Dixon, p. 673).

Number and case markings tend to be rudimentary thruout a large number of Australian languages—at least in the common nouns, which are seldom marked for number and whose case forms tend to be simpler than those for the pronouns, even in languages with complex case systems.

Many Australian languages are highly polysynthetic, especially in the north—Wunambal, Tiwi, and Rembarrnga are good examples, the last two even incorporating objects into the verb, as do many Native American languages.

Most Old Australian languages have no true reflexive pronouns, indicating reflexivization in the verb. Most also have no true adjectives, the same words taking noun endings when used attributively and verbal endings when used predicatively.

The basic word order in Australian languages is SOV.

Tense systems are well developed in most Australian languages, altho some have complex aspect systems—Dieri, for example, has aspectual markers on the verb indicating benefactive, new vs. old information, and relative motion.

Most Australian languages have no voicing contrast, tho some possess an “anti-passive” (Blake, in Planck, p. 294). Some even have what appears to be “centrifical” markers: Wanggabuan, in southern Australia, has verbal markers *-tu-*, “focus on self,” and *-yili-* “focus away from self,” much used in benefactive constructions: *ngindu-ti-ni nguka*, (you-me-it give-imp.)=“give it to me,” and *ngindu-ti-ni ngukilitja*, (you-me-it give-yili-imp.), “give it on my behalf.”

The distinction between alienable and inalienable possession is widespread in Old Australia, as is the inclusive/exclusive distinction in the first person non-singular pronouns, as already shown above.

With the exception of Dyirbal, so well treated by Dixon, no major in-depth syntactic study of an Australian language has ever been attempted. Thus, it is too early to tell in detail what peculiarities Australian languages may possess or what implications these peculiarities may have for theories of universal grammar. So far, active grammar has seldom been found in naturally occurring languages—but could it be that this rarity is a function, not of actual distribution, but of its strangeness vis-a-vis the Indo-European tongues? This paper is presented in the hopes that other, more competent scholars will tackle the issues herein presented with an eye to uncovering the new and unusual.

Old Australia offers the linguist countless opportunities for discovery. As our knowledge of Australian languages improves, so too will our understanding of linguistic universals, as well as our appreciation both of the uniqueness of each individual language and of the wide variety of ways we human beings have invented to express our experience of the World.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Throught this paper I use the term "Old Australia" to refer to the the continent of Australia before the invasion of the civilized peoples some two hundred years ago. I also speak of the Old Australian languages in the present tense, altho many are by now either dead or almost so.

<sup>2</sup> Yalanga is commonly spelt "Jalanga" or "Jarlarnga" in most sources. I have adopted for this paper the simplified orthography of Dixon, where *tj* is the lamino-palatal stop similar to the *ch* in *cheese* and *ng* is the velar nasal (*ngg*=velar nasal plus stop); *r* is commonly trilled; *ɬ*, *ɲ*, *ʃ* are the lamino-interdentals, pronounced as their alveolar counterparts but with the tip of the tongue sticking out between the teeth.

I have also tried to keep references to a minimum. My two main sources are Planck's *Ergativity* and Dixon's *Grammatical Categories*. Unless otherwise noted, all data on Enga and the characteristics of active grammer derive from the former; all information on Australian languages comes from the latter. The Yalanga sentences are my own, and are based on the outline morphology of Yalanga given by Barry J. Blake in *Papers on the Languages of Australian Aborigines*, pages 12 to 27.

<sup>3</sup> J. G. Breen, in Dixon, p. 595. Yandruwanda, unlike most Australian languages, has a voicing contrast in the stops. Ngangikurungur is another such exception.

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