Two Missing Pieces in a Nyulnyulan Jigsaw Puzzle

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1 The Problem[1]

Most classifications of Nyulnyulan languages [non-Pama-Nyungan, Northern Australia] show the family as having two branches (Bowern 2004; Stokes 1997; Stokes & William McGregor 2003; Dixon 2002). However, the languages in the geographic center of the family (between the Eastern and Western Nyulnyulan) are all but unattested, and have not been used in previous reconstructions and typological classifications. It is therefore difficult to judge whether the two primary branches are the result of actual branching, or are rather an artefact of the missing language data; it could be that we are missing data at a crucial point in a *continuum* which makes the subgroups appear more discrete than they actually are. Because of the emphasis on Diffusionist explanations of language change in Australian linguistics, a continuum has been assumed for the family (e.g. Dixon 2002, 666-67). I recently discovered hitherto unutilized data for both 'missing' languages and report on results of reconstructions which make use of it.

2 The Missing Languages: Nimanburru and Ngumbarl

2.1 Ngumbarl [no ISO code]

This language was thought to be unattested. The materials in the Bates ms collection (NLA ms565-26/2E.1) are from Billingee, who identified as Jukun and Ngumbarl (Coyne 2005). Bates recorded material for both Jukun and Ngumbarl, it appears, but previously it had been thought that the data were only for Jukun (Stokes & McGregor 2003:32). The materials comprise a wordlist and a few sentences in typescript. There are about 800 words in total, including many flora, fauna and environment terms and body parts. The materials are in a rather inconsistent English-spelling-based orthography and interpretation of the full collection is still in progress. The translations are also somewhat unreliable (e.g. "Are you hunting kangaroo?" is translated by <jooa inja pindana> *juwa inja bindana* 'you're going to the pindan (scrub)').

2.2 Nimanburru [nmp]

There is some Nimanburru material in Nekes and Worms (2006) (reprinted with additions from 1953); this included some verb paradigms and other grammatical information. However, Nekes and Worms's materials are heavily standardized towards Nyulnyul; their Bardi materials, for example, include numerous words that are clearly Nyulnyul and not Bardi (e.g. because they do not show Bardi sound changes, because they show Nyulnyul sound changes, or because they refer to cultural systems which were not present in Bardi country). Recordings of Nimanburru had also been made by Anthony R. Peile in c. 1965, however they had not been auditioned or transcribed. The Peile collection had numerous metadata errors (see Bowern (2010a)). Nothing is known of the speaker on the tape. Nora Kerr did some brief work with Nimanburru speakers Djabaḻaŋuru and her brother in the 1960s. This wordlist is on restricted access at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies and so has not been used in previous historical work. Nimanburru forms quoted here are from my transcriptions of Peile's recordings, but also from Nekes and Worms (1953) and Kerr's materials.

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3   Comparison of features

In order to discover where Nimanburru and Ngumbarl should be classified within the Nyulnyulan family, I compared aspects of phonology, lexicon, case morphology, verb morphology, and syntax.

3.1   Phonology

Nimanburru is very conservative in most respects, such as preserving Proto-Nyulnyulan vowel length (e.g. *baaba 'child' > *baaba* (Bardi *baawa,* Nyikina *baba, etc; *lagu:rru 'egg'*). There is some evidence that *ŋk > ŋ / _# (e.g. PWN *bardaŋka 'tree' > *bardaŋ*). It is difficult to infer much about the phonology of Ngumbarl because of the nature of the transcription system. (I have phonologized forms in part based on my knowledge of the other languages; therefore inferences about phonology here run the risk of being circular.) Initial ŋ sometimes written as *k* but I assume this is not a sound change but a result of Bates' difficult with non-English phonotactics. I reconstruct a tentative sound change of *i* to *a* word finally (e.g. *yaŋki 'what' > <yanga> *yaŋka*).

3.2   Lexicon
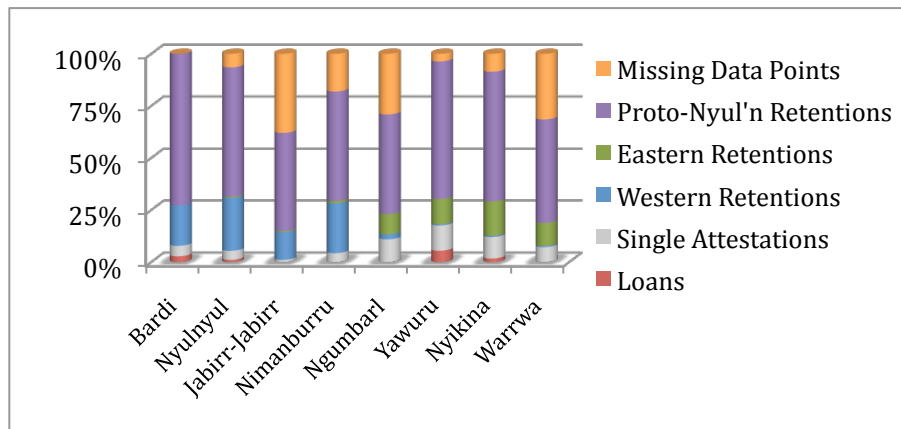
Nimanburru

Diagnostic items include (among many) *marrir* 'sister' (not *ŋurnu*), *yalurr* 'wife's mother' (not *darlu)* and *bardaŋka* 'tree' (not *ba(a)lu).* Evidence from all available reconstructions indicates that Nimanburru fits clearly within the Western branch of the family, sharing many terms of not only body parts but also flora and fauna and kinship terms with other Western languages. Currently there are no identifiable loans in the data (see figure 3 for comparison with other Nyulnyulan languages). The Nimanburru vocabulary is overwhelmingly Western Nyulnyulan.

Ngumbarl

For Ngumbarl, reconstructions (where differentiated by subgroup) are mostly Eastern but there are some Western forms as well. Ngumbarl has considerable numbers of single attestations (18/204) and retentions from Proto-Nyulnyulan with semantic shift (15/204). The four words previously reconstructed to Proto-Western only are as follows:

- o *kunyul* 'star (also 'moon')': appears as 'moon' in Western Nyulnyulan languages; therefore this could be a retention from Proto-Nyulnyulan with semantic shift in either Ngumbarl or Western Nyulnyulan (the other Eastern languages have the word *larn* for 'star', not elsewhere recorded in Nyulnyulan or at this stage identifiable as a loan).
- o *mirrjil* 'moon': This is probably cognate with a word for an esoteric ceremony name

(*mirrjil* in Bardi). If not, then it should be counted as a single attestation. Note that *kunyul* is also given in the wordlist as a word for 'moon'.

- o *jabulyu* 'old (person)': This is found in Western Nyulnyulan as the word for 'gray hair'. Other Eastern Nyulnyulan languages use the word *yibala* (PN *yiibala 'father') in this meaning, and other Western languages use the word *nyuŋurl (PWN 'old, old person'). Therefore this is probably a futher example of semantic shift.
- o *marakub* 'far' (probably *mara-kup*, i.e. far-ABL): All Western languages have a reflex of *mara* for this word. Of the other Eastern languages, Yawuru uses a loan from Karajarri (*kajarri*), and Nyikina and Warrwa both have otherwise untraceable words (*kunabid/diyadiya* and *nyaarri* respectively).

In a larger sample, Ngumbarl shows more items which have been reconstructed previously to Proto-Western Nyulnyulan. However, many of these are flora and fauna terms. The Eastern Nyulnyulan languages have borrowed heavily from surrounding Marrngu and Ngumpin-Yapa (Pama-Nyungan) languages in this area of vocabulary (see Bowern 2007) and many items of Western flora and fauna were not reconstructed to Proto-Nyulnyulan simply because of lack of attestation in the available sources for Eastern Nyulnyulan at the time.

3.3 Case Morphology

Nyulnyulan languages have extensive morphology, including a case system. However, only certain cases (such as the proprietive) are informative for subgrouping. The core case system can be reconstructed to Proto-Nyulnyulan and developments are found in individual languages, not subgroups. Nimanburru shows the Western comitative *-nyarr*. The ergative case is *-nim*, from Proto-Nyulnyulan *-ni(ma) (regular ergative + focal ergative suffix (W. B McGregor 2006; W. McGregor 2007; Bowern 2003).

For Ngumbarl, little case morphology is found in the data. Ergative is *-na*, which if from *-ni shows the same apparent sound change of final *l* to *a* that is also seen in some other forms. The locative is *-kun* (a reflex of Proto-Nyulnyuylan *-kun). No other case forms are given in the data.

3.4 Verb Morphology

Nimanburru

All Nyulnyulan languages have verbs which inflect for subject person/number and tense (along with other categories). Most of the verb forms in the Nimanburru data are third person singular present. However, there are forms such as *darr unkara* 'he will go' in the data; this shows Western future (transitive) *-nk-* (cf also *nga**nk**amal* 'I'll cook it'), as well as an alternation between *l* and *u* for the 3sg prefix. This is also Western, and possibly a shared innovation with Bardi. Therefore on this basis Nimanburru is clearly Western.

Ngumbarl

There are very few verb forms in the data and no full paradigms. However, there are some partial singular paradigms. Eastern Nyulnyulan has undergone a cluster of changes in the verb prefix morphology (described in Bowern 2010b). The crucial changes are a merger of PN present and past (realis) prefix paradigms, as follows:

- o PN singular **intransitive past** > Eastern **intransitive** non-past
- o PN singular transitive present > Eastern **transitive** non-past
- o PN plural **present** (transitive and intransitive) > Eastern plural non-past

Attested forms in Ngumbarl are consistent with such a merger, assuming that the forms are

given in the same tense: I steal: <kangalainbee> *ngangalanybi*; he steals: <ingalaimbee> *ingalanybi*; they steal: <yeeralanbee> *yirrlanybi*. Here the singular forms continue earlier past forms but the third plural continues a present tense form (*yirr-*, not **yingarr-*).

3.5   Syntax

There are few syntactic features that clearly separate Eastern and Western Nyulnyulan languages. The languages show differences but the changes are at the level of individual languages, and not subgroups. Other morphosyntactic behaviors, such as the use of inflecting verb roots versus bipartite light verb constructions, do show an Eastern/Western split, but cannot be used to evaluate the position of Nimanburru and Ngumbarl because the relevant information was not recorded.

Nimanburru

There is no distinguishing data. Data are consistent with Western Nyulnyulan, including the use of both inflecting verbs and light verb structures, and inalienable and alienable possessive structures by prefix and possessive pronoun respectively.

Ngumbarl

For Ngumbarl there is also verb little data. However, many verbs are quoted only with the first part (the preverb) of the complex predicate. The use of preverbs without a light verb is much more common in Eastern languages than in Western ones. Many items that would be translated with an inflecting verb in Western languages are found in the dataset here with a preverb, or the uninflecting verb *inyja* 'go' (also found in Nyikina.)

- o   <ngai inja koolin> *ŋayi inyja **kulin**.* 'I'll sleep' (I go sleep);
- o   <kart> *kard* 'twist'

4   Summary and Conclusions

Nyulnyulan is not a dialect chain; there is a clear split between Eastern and Western Nyulnyulan even when considering data from the middle languages. The languages do not show 'mixed' Eastern and Western characteristics. A tree is an appropriate representation of the family. This is further evidence that Australian languages are not outside the methods of historical linguistics.

5   References

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