

1: An Introduction to the Orthography and Grammatical Structure of Ngaju



This paper offers an introduction to the Ngaju language of the southeastern Goldfields region of Western Australia and describes the objectives of the current research on the language.

Ngaju, often referred to as Ngajumaya, is considered a member of the Mirning subgroup of South-West Pama-Nyungan languages—a group which includes Ngaju(maya), Karlaaku, Mirniny and Karlamaya (Thieberger, 1993)¹. von Brandenstein referred to the languages of these regions as the Dundas District dialects which he lists as Mirning, Marlba, Fraser Range dialect, Norseman dialect, Windaga and Kallaargu (Brandenstein 1980:2). Research is ongoing to determine the interrelationship between the various dialects and languages of the Goldfields region and this will help clarify the classification of Ngaju.²

¹ There are variations of this classification, see for instance O’Grady, Voegelin and Voegelin (1966).

² See Hanson’s 2017 ALS paper *Languages and the Dialects of the Goldfields Region*

Ngaju country is traditionally located from “Goddard Creek south to Israelite Bay and Port Malcom; west to Fraser Range; east to Naretha; west of Point Culver; at Mount Andrew, Russell Range, Balladonia and Norseman” (Thieberger 1993:28).

Ngaju has become a generally accepted all-encompassing term for what remains of the various dialects that were once spoken in this vast region spanning over 100,000 sq. kilometers of South-East Western Australia. In fact, Brandenstein stated, “[i]t will be difficult to extract the different dialectal components of the DS dialects from the mixed language now called Ngadju” (1980:2).

Although many speakers I meet with make mention of the various different groups such as Fraser Range, Balladonia, Coolgardie and Norseman, they are unable to offer any examples of dialectical differences. Some people refer to the language interchangeably as Marlpa/Ngaju; however, there appears to be a general consensus that the term Ngaju now describes any one of the dialects spoken in this general area.³ Doug Marmion notes that Dorothy Dimer and her husband (who has since passed away) agreed that the terms Ngajunka, Ngajunkarra and Ngajumaya could all be used to describe their language but they specifically preferred the term Karlaaku (2003: 3). Ten years later, in my discussions with Dorothy Dimer, she refers to the language only as Ngaju. Perhaps due to the exposure granted to the label Ngaju by recent and current research and of course Native Title Determination, the name is becoming an accepted term to describe the varieties and dialects of the region.

Ngaju is classified as a highly endangered language, with only 2 partially fluent speakers, one from Norseman, the other from Coolgardie, both now residing in Esperance. There are a further five or so individuals from Norseman who, as very young children, were immersed in the language for a short period of time and are now, many decades later, returning to become actively engaged in relearning Ngaju. Despite the relatively low number of competent speakers, the language is enjoying a keen sociolinguistic resurgence in terms of many Ngaju people, young and old, actively engaging in language identity discussions and activities with the aim of learning and preserving the language for future generations.

³ A notable exception to this is an old station owner from Balladonia - John Crocker - who prefers the term Marlpa to be used when referring to the language once spoken at the station.

2: Historic Linguistic Context

The most comprehensive study of Ngaju to date is, of course, von Brandenstein's *Ngadjumaya: An Aboriginal Language of South-East Western Australia* published in 1980 and based on fieldwork conducted in 1969 and 1970. Brandenstein's work offers a wordlist of approximately 1,500 lexical items including 100 or so placenames, an affix inventory and a detailed grammar sketch. It also includes a collection of transcribed and interlinearised texts based on natural speech recordings in the form of reminiscences, conversations and songs. Although praised for his preference of natural speech collection over the more traditional methodology of the day, Brandenstein is criticised for his unorthodox departures from accepted linguistic approaches and for the many inconsistencies in his analysis.⁴

Roberts' *Sketch Grammar of Karlaaku* provides a detailed description and critical analysis of the language, which he concludes is mutually intelligible with Ngaju, and is based mainly on Brandenstein's material with references to other available wordlists. There are a number of short wordlists collected by Daisy Bates in the 1910s from the Norseman, Widgiemoltha and Balladonia regions. Norman Tindale, in the late 1930s, also collected a number of short wordlists around the Norseman and Israelite Bay areas. Wilf Douglas's (1958) *An Introduction to the Western Desert Language of Australia* includes another short wordlist, of less than 50 words, and 8 sentences from the Norseman region. In 1957, Geoffrey O'Grady recorded material in Norseman from Mr. Robin Graham in what is described as Marlpa/Karlarku. Doug Marmion produced a more recent account and sketch grammar on the language in his unpublished *Ngaju Fieldwork Project: Report* and, as per personal communication, is intending to publish a paper based on his 2013 fieldwork in the Goldfields. In 2009, The Wangka Maya Language Centre produced a *Dictionary of Ngadjumaya*, which is based on von Brandenstein's material and also includes a free translation of some of Brandenstein's texts.

⁴ For more on this topic, see David Nash's review of Brandenstein's work (1982) and Steven Powell Roberts' undated essay *A Sketch Grammar of Karlaaku*

3: Orthography

This table illustrates an orthography for the language that is largely derived from Roberts and Marmion’s separate analyses of von Brandenstein’s material. I have also been in regular contact with the Ngaju community and speakers in relation to orthographical decisions, and although the discussion is still ongoing, here are some preliminary points of note:

Peripheral and coronal consonant description

	Peripheral	Apical			Laminal	
Place of Articulation	Bilabial	Velar	Alveolar	Retroflex	Dental	Alveopalatal
Stops	p	k	t	rt	(th)	j
Nasals	m	ng	n	rn		ny
Laterals			l	rl		ly
Rhotics			rr	r		
Glides	w					y

Voicing is not contrastive so that the unvoiced stops p,t,k are preferred over the voiced stop series b,d,g. Although Brandenstein notes that speakers have a natural tendency to use the voiceless plosives both word-initially and word-finally, and the voiced forms morpheme-medially, contemporary Western Desert orthographies consider both forms allophones of a singular phoneme. Therefore, the current orthography employs only the voiceless forms p, t, and k.

There is no phonemic contrast between the alveolar nasal /n/ and a dental /nh/ nor indeed between a dental lateral /lh/ and alveopalatal lateral /ly/. Thus the lateral phonemes are represented here as /l/, /ly/ and the retroflex /rl/.

Another point worth mentioning in this short synopsis is the slightly ambiguous interdental stop *th* that appears in Brandenstein’s work which seemingly contrasts with the alveopalatal /j/. For example: *mathai* and *kutharra*. I am currently working through a list of minimal pairs with two elderly speakers and a clear decision is yet to be made by the community whether the dental *th* is to be represented as a separate phoneme or whether it

is to be incorporated, as an allophone, in the alveopalatal stop. There is, of course, a concern that if the dental stop is represented in text as a separate phoneme, that it gains more currency than it ever had in natural speech and becomes a contemporary phoneme, of a more interdental than dental nature, based on an English language *th*.

An interesting example of hypercorrection based on written forms came to my attention during a fieldtrip to Norseman where a speaker—who is in her 40s and very engaged with the metalinguistic features of her language—asked why some words that she had always pronounced with a -j were now being changed to -y. Clearly, she was referring to the common orthographic symbol /j/ that was used in the past to represent this alveopalatal glide. It is important to be mindful of the fact that the majority of present and future speakers of Ngaju are, in fact, learners of the language and are learning from written texts and any representation of phonemes needs to be considerate of this fact. Therefore, the dictionary will include a comparison table of the phonetic symbols used in historical documents, including Douglas, Brandenstein, O’Grady, Tindale and others.

4: Grammar

I am currently working towards producing an updated grammar sketch for Ngaju. The following description offers a basic overview of nominal and verb markings derived from all available grammatical material on the Ngaju language, specifically von Brandenstein, Steven Powell Roberts and Doug Marmion, along with some example sentences.

Ngaju has free word order but generally conforms to a SOV or SVO syntax. The Ngaju case marking system is typical of Western Desert languages in that it follows a split ergative pattern. Nominals follow an ergative/absolute alignment and pronouns are marked according to a nominative/accusative pattern. The subject of a transitive verb takes a visible marking while the object of a transitive verb (the absolute case) usually remains unmarked.

The following table gives an overview of the nominal case markings in the language according to whether the root is disyllabic or larger and/or depending on whether it is consonant or vowel final. The variant forms under ergative and locative are selected depending on the place of articulation of the preceding consonant.

Nominal case markings

Case	1: unspecified root or having only one case marking for all roots	2: disyllabic roots	3: vowel final roots (larger than 2 syllables*)	4: consonant-final roots (larger than 2 syllables*)
Ergative		-ku	-lu	-tu/(-rtu)/-ju
Absolutive		X	X	X
Dative/Purposive		-ku	-ngu	-ku
Locative	-ka	-ngka	-la?	-ta/-rta/-ja
Allative	-rti (warti)			
Ablative	-nguu			
Instrumental	-ku			
Genitive	-(wa)nya			
Abessive	-panyi/-panya/-pany			

Example sentences demonstrating case markings:

Ngaju wamurti wujina (J. Schultz)

Ngaju wamu -rti wuji -na
 1SG camp/home ALL go PAST

I'm going home

Marlpa marluku wijarnu (W. Douglas)

Marlpa marlu -ku wija -rnu
 Man kangaroo -PURP go PAST

The man went out for kangaroo.

Verb Conjugation Classes

Roberts concludes that at least 2 conjugation classes can be extracted from Brandenstein's texts, with the possibility of "further forms for each morpheme, though not large open classes" (n.d.: 18). Marmion concurs with this observation and notes that Brandenstein's material "assumes three conjugation classes however the imperative has four forms, suggesting four classes. It is likely that, as in many other languages in WA, two

conjugation classes are large and open while the other one (or two) is small and has closed membership” (2008: 23).

	0 class	n class	r class
past	-	-nu	-
non-past	-ng	-n	-
imperative	-ka	-n(k)a	-ra
irrealis	-ku	-nku	-
iterative	-ju	-nju	-
causative/hortative	-ji [-ja]	-ti	-
purposive	-	-	-rti
perfect	-ki	-nki	-
continuous	-	-ni/-na	-
?	-ta	-nta	-
?	-	-	-lpa
?	-pi	-	-

Example sentence demonstrating verb markings:

kujana nanjarrku wijanu (von Brandenstein)

kuja -na nanjarr -ku wija -nu
 go/run IMP meat -PURP go -PAST

Go for game!

5: Current research and conclusion

Since January of this year, I have been collating all available historical documents relating to Ngaju and entering lexical items from wordlists, texts and field recordings onto Toolbox. Toolbox, of course, is a Data Management and Analysis Tool for field linguists. Here at GALC, we use Toolbox to produce lexical databases and dictionaries in the Goldfields languages. At present, the Ngaju lexical database consists of over 1,500 entries. The first step is the entry of verified lexical items onto the database, according to specific lexical categories such as part of speech and semantic domain. Ideally, there will be 3 separate records (written or recorded), in three different settings, for each dictionary entry. The next stage is the addition of example sentences in order to provide contextual usage for each term and in order to demonstrate the morphological breakdown.

An important addition to the historical material is the inclusion of present day fieldwork and language recording which in many cases verifies a particular usage of a lexical entry or indeed brings to light previously undocumented words. For the past 12 months, I have been travelling on a regular basis to Norseman and Esperance to visit and record with speakers, namely Sonny Graham, Dorothy Dimer and the Schultz family. The language centre also works in partnership with the Ngadju Rangers who are based in Norseman where we go out on country with Ngaju speakers and Rangers to assist in the documentation of language words for the local flora and fauna. The Rangers are a vibrant and engaged group of young (mostly) Ngaju men and women with a keen concern for the interconnected relationship between language, people and country.

This research has also resulted in the production of body part charts, syllable and alphabet charts and family activity packs.

6: Conclusion

The most obvious aim of this research is to produce a dictionary and educational resources for the Ngaju community in order to document, preserve and analyse the language. An equally important, underlying objective is that the research is conducted in an open and collaborative manner with the community, thus the aforementioned phonology workshops. To that end, a draft of the dictionary is being presented to the Ngaju people early next month, with not only the intention of receiving feedback but also as a sign of good will that the work we produce together is consistently accessible to the speakers and to the community at large. Additionally, in the name of transparency, it is important that the building blocks of the written text are exposed allowing the reader access to his/her own interpretation of the material. For example, each lexical item will be referenced to a particular source, but also the various wordlists being used, such as Tindale, Daisy Bates, the John Crocker diary etc, along with geographical information for each, will be available as an appendix at the end of the dictionary. This will enable readers to have easy access to information about the different dialects and/or regions that are now being included under the umbrella term Ngaju. It is of utmost importance that the Ngaju community are involved at every stage of the discussion thus allowing and encouraging a collaborative endeavour between speakers, linguists and community.

References

Douglas, Wilf. 1958. *An Introduction to the Western Desert Language of Australia*. Sydney: Oceania Linguistic Monographs.

Marmion, Doug. 2008. *Ngaju Fieldwork Project: Report* (unpublished).

Nash, David. 'Review of C.G. von Brandenstein's (1980) *Ngadjumaya: An Aboriginal language of south-east Western Australia*' in *Australian Journal of Linguistics*. Vol. 2, no. 2.

O'Grady, Geoffrey N and Voegelin, C.F & F.M. 1966. "Languages of the World: Indo-Pacific Fascicle Six" in *Anthropological Linguistics* Vol. 8, no. 2. Bloomington: Indiana University.

Roberts, Steven Powell. n.d. *A Sketch Grammar of Karlaaku* (unpublished student essay).

Thieberger, Nicholas. 1993. *Handbook of Western Australian Aboriginal Languages South of the Kimberley Region*. C-124. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics.

von Brandenstein, Carl George. 1980. *Ngadjumaya: An Aboriginal Language of South-East Western Australia*. Innsbruck: Institut für Sprachwissenschaft der Universität Innsbruck.

von Brandenstein, Carl George. 1982. 'Eighty-eight grammar text sheets, exemplifying grammatical, lexical and phraseological diversities as well as links of 25 Aboriginal languages from Western Australia'.

Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre. 2009. *Ngajumaya Dictionary*.

Wordlists

Bates, Daisy. Native vocabularies - Norseman Magisterial District

Bates, Daisy. Native vocabularies - Norseman, Dundas Magisterial District

Bates, Daisy. Native vocabulaires - Fraser Range

Tindale, Norman. 1936. Vocabulary no. 86. Australian vocabularies.

O'Grady, Geoffrey N. 1958. Wordlist of Marlpa/Kalaku. Collected at Norseman.