

Marlpa Analysis; February 2021
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Following the discovery of a Marlpa speaker at Esperance, and subsequent language work undertaken by Goldfields Aboriginal Language Centre Aboriginal Corporation (GALCAC) linguists, the following document aims to produce a preliminary analysis of Marlpa. In particular, Marlpa's relationship to Mirniny and Ngadju and preliminary placement within a language family.

Marlpa people sociolinguistically distinguish themselves from neighbouring groups, and many feel the language to be different to Mirniny and Ngadju. Despite this, historical linguistic analysis places Marlpa (AIATSIS code A110) within Ngadjumaya (AIATSIS code A3), or what is known today as Ngadju (Thieberger, 1993).

Carl George von Brandenstein described the location of Marlpa country as rock holes and soaks around Balladonia, north the Kopai Cliffs and south to Israelite Bay (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [AIATSIS] n.d.). Ngadjumaya country being described as south of Goddard Creek to Mount Ragged, Israelite Bay and Point Malcolm. The Fraser Ranges marking the western boundary and east to near Point Culver, at Mount Andrew and Balladonia (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [AIATSIS] n.d.). Balladonia has since been determined under Ngadju native title in 2014.

These three codes; Marlpa, Mirniny and Ngadju, share lexical similarity and geographical proximity, with an historical classification of Dundas Region Dialects (along with Kaalamaya). Members of these groups have indicated to GALC that this label does not match the way they identify and thus, GALC linguists avoid using this term. However, work continues to place these codes within a language family.

The small sample below is taken from (non-aboriginal) Marlpa speakers living on and around Balladonia Station from the mid to late 20th Century. The Marlpa informant lived on Balladonia Station from 1941 until 2001. Ideally, language work is done with aboriginal language speakers, however; as GALC linguists were unable to locate aboriginal language speakers, the initial study has been undertaken with the assistance of non-aboriginal speakers.

Modified Swadesh Lexical Comparison.

#	Marlpa	Pitjantjatjarra	Mirniny	Ngadju	Gloss
1	nyuntu	nyuntu	ngurntu	nguntu	2sg
2	ngatju (possibly) <i>gnudda</i>	wati	mirniny	mirniny	man
3	paarti	lunki	paarti	parti	grub
4	kuntala	wana	kantala	karntula	stick used for digging rabbits
5	ngarnu	mintju	mirnu	kunapirti	wattle tree

					non-specific species
6	pulka	-	paru	pilkarra	sandlewood
7	pinyar	tjukutjuku	mungan	kaja	small
8	Balladonia	-	Palatunya	Balladonia	place name
9	putja	ngula	putja	purta	later, by and by
10	walyi	kurra	walyi	walyi	no good.
11	pinjal	kilipi	pintjal	pirntil	star
12	tjunginta	munga	tjungin	jungin	night
13	yakin	pira	yakin	yakun	moon
14	jintu	tjirntu	jintu	jirntu	sun
15	parna	ulpuru	purlpa	pirra	dust
16	mijal	kapi	warlpi	kapi	water
17	manjali	mai	ngamu	manjali	food
18	nanjil	kuka	tjuwi	juru	meat
19	tampuri	mangarta	kurti	tampuri	quandong
20	yurlka <i>ul'ga</i>	-	yurlka	yurlka	grass non-specific
21	tjunga	marru	ngurpi	jungin	dark
22	miran <i>meran</i>	urru	pirlaya	wangara	sea
23	puri <i>borrie</i>	apu	purtangu	puri	rock or rocks
24	tanku <i>tonko</i>	kurturtu	kurturtu	kurturtu	heart
25	ngarlti	alu	ngarlti	ngalji	liver
26	ngarnkurr <i>nangar</i>	ngarnkurrpa	ngarnkurr	ngarnkurr	whiskers/ beard
27	julit <i>jo'lid</i>	tjarlinypa	tjaalany	jalany	tongue
28	jinka	mamu	miringu meringoo	jinka	devil
29	wanti	tjitji nyirtayira	wanti	wanti	boy
30	wanya	akuri	wanya	wanya	girl
31	wanya katja	akuri tjukutjuku	wanya purtu	wanya kaja	girl small
32	katja	kurlunypa	purtu	kaja	small person
33	ngunga	minyma	yaka	yaka	woman
34	nurnti	wipu	nurnti	ngunti	tail (of an animal)
35	kata	kata	parlka	wiyuntu	head
36	mula	mulya	mula	mula	nose

37	kuliya <i>goulla</i>	pina	kuliya	pinta	ear
38	mara	mara	mara	mara	hand
39	jina	tjina	jina	jina	foot
40	tjutju	papa	tjutju	juju	dog
41	kampu	tjarna	kampu	kampu	back
42	kampirti	tjuni	kampirti	kampirti	belly
43	warta	kuru	wartu	wartu	eye
44	wamu	ngurra	wamu	wamu	home or camp
45	puyu	puyu	puya	puyu	smoke
46	kaarla	waru	kaarla	karla	fire
47	kakarra	kakararra	kakarra	kakarra	east
48	jita <i>jidda</i>	tjurlpu	jirta	jirta	Willy Wagtail. (bird)
49	yarta	warlawuru	yarta	yarta	wedge tail eagle
50	ngawu <i>gnows</i>	ngarnamara	marnamara	warntu	mallee hen
51	yuuna <i>younar</i>	-	kalka kailga	kalka (short-tail)	bobtail goanna
52	kalka <i>kalgar</i>	-	kalka kailga	kaaluny	longtail goanna
53	kalwinj <i>kalwindge</i>	mirlparli	jalpu	kurlanj	goanna
54	kuulpi <i>koul'bee</i>	kulpirpa	kulpirr	kulpirr	grey roo
55	marlu	marlu	marlu	marlu	red roo
56	pikurta <i>bicquita</i>	-	pikurta	pikurta	wallaby
57	minta	marnngu	minta	pirti	bird's nest
58	tjuri <i>thorie</i>	-	parnta banda	parnta	penis
59	kulya <i>goolya</i>	-	pimpu bimbu	kulya	vagina
60	pitji <i>bidgee</i>	tjukurla	purtangu mirra	jukurlu	rockhole
61	kuyal <i>kooyal</i>	purnu	warta	jirin	tree
62	ngura <i>gnura</i>	kirripitji	ngura	ngura	native grapes
63	'orse	nyanytju	panyjin	puni	horse
64	wirlpa	rapita	wilpa	wirlpa	rabbit

**Items in italics represent the speaker's orthography.*

Items in bold are word final suffixes.
Boxes marked – represent no data available.

Table One; exact match.

	Marlpa	Pitjantjatjarra	Mirniny	Ngadju
Marlpa		10.71% 6/56	43.31% 29/64	40.63% 26/64
Pitjantjatjarra	10.71% 6/56		7.14% 4/56	10.71% 6/56
Mirniny	43.31% 29/64	7.14% 4/56		37.50% 24/64
Ngadju	40.63% 26/64	10.71% 6/56	37.50% 24/64	

The first table shows the percentage of exact matches between Marlpa and other languages. Mirniny has the highest correlation with Marlpa at 43.31%.

1. Marlpa and Mirniny 43.31%
2. Marlpa and Ngadju 40.63%
3. Marlpa and Pitjantjatjarra 10.71%

The figure between Marlpa and Pitjantjatjarra has been negatively affected by the gap in lexemes available, 56 compared to the 64 found for Marlpa, Mirniny and Ngadju.

Table Two; one phoneme difference.

	Marlpa	Pitjantjatjarra	Mirniny	Ngadju
Marlpa		12.29% 8/56	53.13% 34/64	57.81% 37/64
Pitjantjatjarra	12.29% 8/56		12.29% 8/56	19.64% 11/56
Mirniny	53.13% 34/64	12.29% 8/56		54.69% 35/64
Ngadju	57.81% 37/64	19.64% 11/56	54.69% 35/64	

The second table shows the percentage of matches with one phoneme's difference between Marlpa and other languages.

Marlpa and Ngadju returned the highest correlating percentage.

1. Marlpa and Ngadju 57.81%
2. Marlpa and Mirniny 53.13%
3. Marlpa and Pitjantjatjarra 12.29%

Again, resulting percentages from Pitjantjatjarra are lower than Marlpa/Mirniny/Ngadju figures, which affects the results of the test. This should be taken into account.

The missing lexemes have not made an impact on this comparison. Statistically speaking, another eight lexemes would only yield one more match, thus bringing the total to 12% (12/64). Using these calculations, the change in percentage values would be negligible.

Marlpa Results.

Lexical comparison tests require a minimum 65% correlation between lexemes to demonstrate a familial relationship. A Swadesh is completed with 100 lexemes. This test is a preliminary comparison between Marlpa and neighbouring codes, Mirniny and Marlpa. Pitjantjatjarra, from the Wati language family, has been included for familial comparison, and because it is a strong, widely spoken language in the Goldfields.

Marlpa and Ngadju returned the highest score of 57.81%, which falls short of the obligatory 65%. This figure is high enough to suggest that rather than being a separate language, Marlpa is in a dialectal relationship with Ngadju. This may also be referred to as a communilect; a code used by communities living in close proximity, that are mutually intelligible. There are a significant number of lexemes in this test whose orthography is different, but are effectively similar enough to be pronounced with minimal difference. Often these differences can be explained by transcriber error, that is a non-native speaker mis-hearing phonemes they are unfamiliar with. This may be especially true of Marlpa examples, given the data was provided by a non-indigenous L2 speaker of a language of which there are no remaining speakers.

- 2SG pronoun 'you' *nyuntu/ngurntu/nguntu*.
- 'grub' *paarti/paarti/parti*
- 'liver' *ngarlti/ngarlti/ngalji*
- 'later' *putja/putja/purta*
- 'tail' *nurnti/nurnti/ngunti*
- 'smoke' *puyu/puya/puyu*
- 'bird' *jita/jirta/jirta*
- 'rabbit' *wirlpa/wilpa/wirlpa*
- 'grey kangaroo' *kuulpi/kulpirr/kulpirr*

Some examples provided by the Marlpa speaker were vague, or too general to result in exact matches. This meant non-specific items such as 'inland snake' and 'tiger snake' were left out of the analysis. In the same manner, descriptions such as 'bobtail goanna' and 'long tail goanna' may have returned incorrect samples, because data contained in Mirniny and Ngadju toolboxes are more specific, often using scientific names rather than colloquial or informal terms like those provided by the Marlpa speaker.

- 'bobtail goanna': *yuuna* (Marlpa example) – 'bobtail lizard': *kalka/kalka*
- 'longtail goanna': *kalka* (Marlpa) – *kalka/kaaluny*
- 'goanna': *kalwinj/jalpu/kurlanj*
- 'wattle tree': *ngarnu/mirnu/kunapirti*
- 'South Australian sandalwood': *pulka*

The analysis found two examples used in Marlpa, that have been borrowed from the Western Desert (Wati).

- ‘head’ *kata*
- ‘woman’ *ngunga*

Similarity, or borrowing between languages that share a border, or are close in proximity is not uncommon. It is worthwhile noting that Wati languages are classified as a separate language family from Marlpa. As for Marlpa, its language family is yet to be determined. The small number of similarities between Marlpa and Pitjantjatjarra lexemes has already been established. There were also a number of differences observed as a result of the lexical comparison.

For example,

- ‘beard’ *ngarnkurr* and *ngarnkurrpa* are the same in both Marlpa and Pitjantjatjarra, with the exception of the **-pa** suffix. We know that Pitjantjatjarra was a vowel-final rule (words must end in a vowel) meaning the **-pa** suffix is added to words that would otherwise end with a consonant. Because the **-pa** suffix is absent from the Marlpa example, we can say there is no vowel-final rule in Marlpa. This places it closer to Mirniny and Ngadju in terms of familial relationship.
- Other consonant-final examples such as: ‘star’ *pinjal*; ‘moon’ *yakin*; ‘water’ *mijal*, and ‘tree’ *kuyal*, act to provide further evidence towards the absence of word final rules in Marlpa.
- The analysis includes several examples of the Pitjantjatjarra lexeme being ‘the odd one out’. That is to say, when Marlpa, Mirniny and Ngadju words are clearly related (similar) the Pitjantjatjarra example is obviously quite different. For example: ‘digging stick’ *kuntala/wana/kuntala/karntula*; ‘no good’ *walyi/kurra/walyi/walyi*; ‘star’ *pinjal/kilipi/pintjal/pirntil*; ‘moon’ *yakin/pira/yakin/yakun*, and ‘eye’ *warta/kuru/wartu/wartu*. This pattern supports the concept that Marlpa and Pitjantjatjarra are from different language families. Based on the lexical comparison, Marlpa is more closely placed to Mirniny and Ngadju than the Western Desert Pitjantjatjarra.

Conclusion.

This analysis is a preliminary investigation into similarities between Marlpa and its neighbouring codes, Mirniny and Ngadju. Speakers of Marlpa maintain their code to be distinct from others in the region, even though this is contrary to the findings of historical linguistic work, which suggests Marlpa to be a dialect of Ngatjumaya, or modern-day Ngadju. Given that the traditional lands of Marlpa, Mirniny and Ngadju are co-located, significant cross over between these three codes is to be expected. The extent of this cross-over and what it means for the status of Marlpa (be it language, dialect or communict with neighbouring languages) is the aim of this comparison.

Results from the lexical analysis showed commonalities of less than 65%. That figure is lower than what is required to demonstrate a familial relationship. However, because only a small number of lexemes were gathered in the first session, only a small selection was analysed. Initial testing was promising and further testing is clearly needed.

Comparison between Marlpa and Pitjantjatjarra resulted in very few matches, in both tests. Pitjantjatjarra is a Western Desert (Wati) language; a language family that has different

features to the (previously known as) Dundas Region Dialect. Figures of between 10-12% were not unexpected. Linguists used these differences to better understand the Marlpa code.

Even though similarities between Marlpa, Mirniny and Ngadju were less than anticipated, the evidence confirms that Marlpa is in a communilect relationship with Mirniny and Ngadju. Further analysis is required to learn more about Marlpa; its relationship with other codes in the region and a language family. GALC linguists will continue to work with the Marlpa informant with the aim of collecting more data for this purpose.

References

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