

# Ngadju Kakurtu - Ngadju Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

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## 1. Introduction

Every language has a story, and the Ngadju language of the southern Goldfields of Western Australia sits at a pivotal chapter in its history. Linguistic work on Ngadju has been sparse until recent decades when serious research has been undertaken by linguists in the Goldfields region. Documentary and descriptive processes for Ngadju are hindered by an incomplete record of several key lexical and grammatical features, most notably an incomplete pronominal record. This incomplete record poses both challenges and opportunities for Ngadju speakers and researchers committed to the revitalisation of the language. This paper introduces a proposed reconstruction offered for unattested Ngadju pronominal forms, detailing the process through which they are determined, and the required community consultation in preparation for inclusion in future Ngadju language resources.

## 2. Ngadju Language Background

Ngadju, previously also known as Ngadjumaya and referred to in older texts as variations on Ngadjunmaya, Partuk (Tindale 1974), and Kalaku (Bates c.1908; Tindale 1974; Dixon 2002; Roberts n.d.) is a language of the southern Goldfields region of Western Australia. The name 'Ngadju' is derived from the first-person pronoun **ngaju**, and modern speakers have requested

that the name of the language be written as ‘Ngadju’ using an older orthographic convention, the practice of which is adopted in the present paper. Ngadju is a member of the Mirniny family located in the South-West of the larger Pama-Nyungan language family, a small group that covers the southern Goldfields region of western Australia and includes the Kaalamaya and Mirniny languages. The contemporary heart of the language lies in Norseman, a town 726km from the state capital Perth, and 187km from the nearest city, Kalgoorlie.

As of 2023, Ngadju language is severely endangered, with a small number of heritage speakers retaining vocabulary, but little grammatical or native-speaker competence. The Third National Indigenous Language Survey Report (AIATSIS and ANU 2020) estimates 11-50 (self-identifying) speakers as of 2018, with that number split evenly between the age-group brackets 20-39, 40-59, and 60+. In comparison, the First National Indigenous Language Survey Report (AIATIS in association with FATSIL 2005) estimated 5-10 (self-identifying) speakers as of 2005, which indicates that the number of speakers is growing, however all those reported identify themselves as ‘part’ or ‘little’ speakers of Ngadju. Among these speakers however, there is enthusiastic support for Ngadju language revival efforts.

### **3. Previous Ngadju Linguistic Work**

The earliest written record of Ngadju language is the report of a botanical and anthropological expedition produced by Richard Helms in 1896. The earliest records of Ngadju which focus on the language itself are a series of wordlists recorded by Daisy Bates in the early twentieth century, with later wordlists including those collected by Norman Tindale (1940), Geoff O’Grady (1958), and Wilf Douglas (1968). The first systematic grammar and wordlist for Ngadju was produced by Carl von Brandenstein (1980), followed by a list of sentences (1982). Two further revised sketch grammars based on von Brandenstein’s were produced by

Steven Roberts (n.d., prior to 1996), and Doug Marmion (2008). A dictionary was produced by Wangka Maya Aboriginal Language Centre in the Pilbara in 2008, and a short picture dictionary was produced in 2013 by the Goldfields Aboriginal Language Centre.

Although von Brandenstein's 1980 text represents the most intensive analytical work of Ngadju, it is far from a complete academic nor user-friendly grammar of the language. Peculiarities of translation and analytical proposals not upheld by the examples presented are a feature of this work, and most importantly there is a lack of fully systematic morphological paradigms for several areas that writers of a modern grammar might consider fundamental. This work nevertheless represents the most extensive body of original natural language data in the form of the audio recordings made by Von Brandenstein with fluent speakers, and to a lesser extent the transcriptions provided in his texts which have no companion audio.

#### 4. Background to Ngadju Nominal Alignments

One essential area of Ngadju revitalisation that also presents a snapshot of a possible process of doing so is through the pronominal system. Firstly, a brief introduction to the Ngadju nominal alignment system is required to understand the finer pronominal system. Ngadju nouns exhibit extensive case morphology, and a tripartite core relation-marking system. In the following cases, the underlined variants are the most commonly found.

- Intransitive Subject: -Ø

The Intransitive subject marks nouns as the subject of an intransitive verb.

**Kala munta naatikin.**

*The fire is really burning.*

**Kutiwuwanakan marlpa nganawanya nyakirtiju nyinan.**

*My man is laughing about it.*

- Ergative: **-lu, -ku, -ngku, -tu**

Referred to in previous resources as the ‘agentive’, the ergative case marks nouns as the subject of a transitive verb. Von Brandenstein claims that the ergative ‘has the function of, and is originally, an instrumental (1980, p.19)’, however little more is made of this apparent historical claim other than formal resemblance.

**Yarntingwarri yaanjan munta, ngaatatarralu makun kuninyita muju ngarlkawaningy.**

*There are no more Tamars which the Europeans have eaten up for themselves.*

**Marlpaku puri wanjakin.**

*The person was throwing a stone.*

- Absolutive: **-nya, -n, -na, -ny**

Referred to in previous resources by the older term ‘essive’, the Ngadju absolutive marks nouns as the object of a transitive verb. Von Brandenstein mentions that the Ngadju absolutive also serves a determiner role, only being applied to nouns which are definite or identifiable, which appears a sound analysis but has not been confirmed with speakers. Roberts (n.d.) claims that the absolutive is only found on pronouns, and although a good proportion of tokens

are as such, the absolutive is also found on determiners and nouns. Marmion (2008) does not address this case at all, and instead labels the intransitive agent as the absolutive, while also ascribing the function of the absolutive to it.

**Ngaju wanta nangu all julayangarrinya nanjarr yapurru Wanantarrala, kuninyala jila ngarlkun, yapurru paninya.**

*I want to see all the penguins and the game down at Wannantarra, which is where I can eat down there.*

## 5. The Ngadju Pronominal System

Ngadju pronouns are entirely free; bound pronouns being a distinctive feature of the Wati family of languages to the north of Ngadju country. Ngadju pronominals exhibit a tripartite alignment system parallel to other nominals, marking for patient, transitive agent, and intransitive agent. Naturally, a language with a pronominal system, and especially one with case-marked pronouns will require a complete inventory for it to be used fluently and effectively. This poses a challenge for Ngadju as the pronominal paradigm is not recorded in its entirety within the Ngadju corpus.

A small degree of description has been made on the Ngadju pronominal case system, however previous analyses have not satisfactorily captured the tripartite alignment system. Von Brandenstein makes no systematic presentation of Ngadju pronouns, nor does he mention core arguments, instead introducing them briefly and without addressing their forms or functions. Fortunately however, von Brandenstein's recordings and transcriptions provide examples which demonstrate tripartite alignment system largely mirroring that of other nominals.

Roberts (n.d.) suggests that only some first-person pronouns display a tripartite marking system, with all other pronouns exhibiting a nominative-accusative system, an idea repeated by Marmion (2008). It is indeed the case that 1SG and 1DU person-number forms for which the full tripartite complement of core argument forms are found in the corpus, however this does not automatically indicate a nominative-accusative alignment. Firstly, the forms recorded are marked with suffixes that are very clearly phonetically identical to those of the 1SG and 1DU, e.g. 1PL and 2PL are found in examples with a **-lu** suffix identical to the nominal ergative suffix, while the 2SG, 3SG, and 3PL are found with a **-nya** suffix, identical to the nominal absolutive suffix.

**Nguntungarrilu kuwanarrak!**

*You all listen!*

**Kalikutartulu katika ranu.**

*Kalikutartu speared it in the head.*

**Marlpaku nguntunya nyangu junginta.**

*The person saw you at night time.*

**Ngaju murri naangun kuninya matalu ranu.**

*I have seen the one which it speared.*

Secondly, the examples found with these forms are consistent with the core argument functions of their nominal counterparts, e.g. the 2SG **nguntunya** with the transparently nominal ergative suffix **-nya** is found as the object of a transitive verb in all of its examples.

Were second and third person pronouns to use a nominative-accusative alignment as is claimed, one would expect to see for e.g. either of the two observed 2PL forms **nguntungarri** or **nguntungarrilu** in an object position, whereas instead **nguntungarri** is only found as an intransitive subject, and **nguntungarrilu** only as a transitive subject (ergative) as would be expected in a tripartite system.

## 6. A Hypothetical Ngadju Pronominal Reconstruction

A multi-level process of reconstruction is possible for the Ngadju pronominal system, and a hypothetical outcomes is presented here. It is important to state at the outset that the following reconstruction is for demonstration purposes only, and is not to be assumed to constitute a proposal in itself. The example paradigm has not been constructed with the Ngadju community, and was created only for the purpose of the present paper. The example paradigm provided below was achieved through a process which involves empirical research using the extant Ngadju corpus, and the application of observed inflectional rules supplemented by additional restrictions. Any future reconstruction would be driven entirely by contemporary community wishes and heritage speaker authority. In this process, the contemporary Ngadju community would be the decision-makers and holders of linguistic knowledge, with the linguist playing a technical and supportive role.

The reconstruction process used here is as follows:

- 1) Identification of all pronominal examples in the Ngadju corpus.
- 2) Functional and distributive analysis of these forms, identifying stems and case endings.
- 3) Identification of non-attested forms from the pronominal paradigm.

- 4) Engagement with community members to determine any pronominal forms not previously attested. This process could take a variety of forms using elicitation techniques salient to the task at hand; from direct questioning, to example sentences in which an attested pronoun is present and informants are asked to replace the pronoun with another, e.g.

**Puuni nganawanya walyipungu purralypungu munta.**

*My horse got weak after getting tired.*

How could we change this to '*Her horse got weak after getting tired*'?

- 5) Once the paradigm contains every observable form, technical reconstruction of missing forms can be undertaken by appending the most frequent variation of each attested pronominal case-ending onto the most frequent variation of each attested stem.
- 6) In situations in which step 4 results in a breach of general Ngadju phonotactics, or an identical form to another attested pronominal form, another variant is used to avoid ambiguity.
- 7) The presentation of this paradigm on a pronoun-by-pronoun basis to the Ngadju community, with rigorous discussion and consultation on their inclusion in any further publications or work on Ngadju. Community desires could take many forms, for example, community members may prefer that the identical predictable forms avoided in the above process are included as they are more consistent throughout the paradigm. Academically and socially-informed amendments to any individual form may be implemented, until finally a confirmed and functional new paradigm would be agreed upon. Only then could linguists begin including the reconstruction in any publication. Alternately, the Ngadju community may outright reject any additional new vocabulary such as a reconstructed paradigm, and the linguist would



subsequently be ethically required to avoid the inclusion of any reconstructed forms in any publications.

In the following table, pronouns are listed with their attested (no shading) and hypothetical reconstructed (grey) cases. Some notes on decisions made on individual forms help to illustrate the reconstruction process:

- The first-person singular is naturally a heavily attested pronoun, with von Brandenstein recording a special respectful form **nganawala** constructed from the genitive and comitative, used as a first person dual, despite being grammatically singular. A combined genitive-ablative is also recorded for the first-person singular, carrying the meaning of ‘out of my X’, or ‘because of my X’. As a useful construction, this is tentatively reconstructed for the remaining pronouns.
- Dual pronouns of any person are found infrequently in the Ngadju corpus, and much of their morphology is therefore not observable.
- The first person dual is attested with three variants, however very few cases are recorded, and the missing forms have been reconstructed using **ngajukuja**, the most common variant. The first person dual is also transparently constructed from the first person singular subject **ngaju** and **kujarra** (‘two’).
- For the first-person plural, **ngajungarri** is the most common variant, and is used as the basis of reconstructions here. Only one token of the first-person plural genitive is attested in the Ngadju corpus, which is an irregular form of **ngajungarriyanya**, rather than the expected \***ngajungarriwanya**. As this is the sole token, there is insufficient evidence to verify either form.
- The second person singular is realised as both variants **nguntu**, and **ngyuntu**, however **nguntu** is found far more regularly and is used as the canonical basis of reconstructed forms.

- The only pronoun found with a locative construction is the third person singular **mataka**. A tentative locative is reconstructed here for the remaining pronouns.
- The reconstruction of the third person singular transitive subject pronoun proposed here uses the nominal variant **-tu** rather than the more regular pronominal **-lu** in order to avoid a clash with the attested third person plural stem **matalu**.
- The reconstructed form of the third person plural transitive subject pronoun **matalungku** uses the **-ngku** variant in order to avoid a repeated syllable which is generally dispreferred in Ngadju i.e., **\*matalulu**, and to also avoid clashing with the reconstructed third person plural dative **mataluku**.
- The third person dual pronoun demonstrates several variants, with **matawaja** being the most common, which is the basis of reconstructions.

Table 1 Attested Ngadju pronominal forms (unshaded cells) and proposed reconstructed forms (shaded cells)

	Stem	SUBJ (INTR)	OBJ	SUBJ (TRANS)	ALL	ABL	DAT	GEN	LOC	GEN+ABL	GEN+COM
1SG	ngo-	ngɔɔ	nganyə	ngɔɔli	ngantɔ	*ngantɔngu	ngɔɔkɔ	ngantɔwɔnyə, ngantɔwɔnyu	*ngɔɔkɔ	ngantɔwɔngu	ngantɔwɔ
Eng:		I (intrans)	me	I (trans)	to/towards me	*away from me	forme	my, mine	*in me	out of/because of my	we two (respectful form, lit. with my)
1DU	ngɔɔkɔyɔ, ngɔɔkɔyɔrə, ngɔɔkɔkɔ	ngɔɔkɔyɔnyə, ngɔɔkɔyɔnə	ngɔɔkɔyɔnyə, ngɔɔkɔyɔnə	ngɔɔkɔyɔ	*ngɔɔkɔyɔrɔti	*ngɔɔkɔyɔngɔ	*ngɔɔkɔyɔkɔ	*ngɔɔkɔyɔwɔnyə	*ngɔɔkɔyɔkɔ	*ngɔɔkɔyɔwɔngu	
Eng:		we two (intrans)	ustwo	we two (trans)	*to/towards us two	*away from ustwo	*for ustwo	*both of four/fours	*in both of us	*out of/because of the two of us	
1PL	ngɔɔlungarɔti- ngɔɔlungarɔti, ngɔɔkɔwɔrɔti	ngɔɔlungarɔti, ngɔɔkɔwɔrɔti	*ngɔɔlungarɔnyə	ngɔɔlungarɔli	*ngɔɔlungarɔrɔti	ngɔɔlungarɔngɔ	ngɔɔlungarɔkɔ	ngɔɔlungarɔnyə, ngɔɔlungarɔwɔnyə	*ngɔɔlungarɔkɔ	*ngɔɔlungarɔwɔngu	
Eng:		we (intrans)	*us	we (trans)	*to/towards us	away from us	for us	our, ours	*in us	*out of/because of my	
2SG	nguntɔ-	nguntɔ, nguntɔ	nguntɔnyə	*nguntɔli	nguntɔwɔrɔti	*nguntɔngɔ	*nguntɔkɔ	nguntɔwɔnyə	*nguntɔkɔ	*nguntɔwɔngu	
Eng:		you (intrans)	you	*you (trans)	to/towards you	*away from you	*for you	your, yours	*in you	*out of/because of your	
2DU	nguntɔkɔkɔ-	nguntɔkɔkɔ	*nguntɔkɔnyə	*nguntɔkɔkɔ	*nguntɔkɔkɔrɔti	*nguntɔkɔkɔngɔ	*nguntɔkɔkɔkɔ	*nguntɔkɔwɔnyə	*nguntɔkɔkɔ	*nguntɔkɔwɔngu	
Eng:		you two (intrans)	*you two	*you two (trans)	*to/towards you two	*away from you two	*for you two	*both of your, yours	*in two	*out of/because of both of you	
2PL	nguntɔngarɔti- nguntɔwɔrɔti	nguntɔngarɔti, nguntɔwɔrɔti	*nguntɔngarɔnyə	nguntɔngarɔli	*nguntɔngarɔrɔti	*nguntɔngarɔngɔ	*nguntɔngarɔkɔ	*nguntɔngarɔwɔnyə	*nguntɔngarɔkɔ	*nguntɔngarɔwɔngu	
Eng:		you all (intrans)	*you all	you all (trans)	*to/towards you all	*away from you all	*for you all	*all of your, yours	*in you all	*out of/because of all of you	
3SG	matɔ-	matɔyɔ	matɔnə	*matɔ	matɔwɔrɔti	*matɔngɔ	*matɔkɔ	*matɔwɔnyə	matɔkɔ	*matɔwɔngu	
Eng:		it (intrans)	it	*it (trans)	to/towards it	*away from it	*for it	*its	in it	*out of/because of its	
3DU	matɔwɔkɔ- matɔkɔyɔ, matɔwɔjɔ	matɔwɔkɔyɔ, matɔkɔyɔrə, matɔwɔjɔ	*matɔwɔkɔnyə	*matɔwɔkɔ	*matɔwɔkɔrɔti	*matɔwɔkɔngɔ	*matɔwɔkɔkɔ	*matɔwɔkɔwɔnyə	*matɔwɔkɔkɔ	*matɔwɔkɔwɔngu	
Eng:		they two (intrans)	*both of them	*they two (trans)	*to/towards both of them	*away from both of them	*for both of them	*both of their, theirs	*in both of them	*out of/because of both of their	
3PL	matɔkɔ-	matɔkɔ, matɔkɔ	matɔkɔnyə	*matɔkɔngɔ	matɔkɔwɔrɔti	*matɔkɔngɔ	*matɔkɔ	matɔkɔwɔnyə	*matɔkɔkɔ	*matɔkɔwɔngu	
Eng:		they (intrans)	them	*they (trans)	to/towards them	*away from them	*for them	their, theirs	*in them	*out of/because of their	

## 7. Conclusion

For languages like Ngadju which have not been extensively recorded and have no fluent speakers but an enthusiastic community of learners, complete functional paradigms of common vocabulary are essential. In the absence of fluent speakers with which linguists may consult to complete these paradigms empirically, robust analytic procedures based on historical data combined with consultation with heritage speakers can produce functional reconstructions that can aid the revitalisation of the language. As purely reconstructed forms of course, there is no assumption that any of these accurately represent the genuine forms that may have existed previously. They are nevertheless systematically designed and based entirely on the observable forms in the Ngadju corpus, and the intention is to facilitate revitalisation efforts rather than to condemn Ngadju to an incomplete historical language with no modern or future use.

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