

# Reviving the Concept of Time: Glossing First Nations' Languages

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This paper discusses the mis-glossing of time concepts in Australian languages, and how correct glossing of temporal references and correct free translation of the example sentences protects the traditional knowledge concepts. Most Aboriginal languages include past, present, and future temporal references. *The distant past* is linked to the *Tjukurrpa*, sacred stories and songs, and happened 'a long time ago'. *The recent past* is used for completed actions posterior to the *present*. *The present* is now, then, and everywhen (Stanner, 1967) and it could be the moment of speaking or an unspecified period of time. *The future* is anterior to the present and does not indicate a strict point of time. Glossing and free translations of Australian languages requires maintenance of core perceptions of time, and cultural contextualisation. This process will require the re-contextualisation of English time constructs to effectively gloss Aboriginal time concepts.

## The different time concepts between Australian languages and English

Globally, time is commonly based on the solar dating system of Gregorian Calendar with 12 months, 52 weeks, and 365 days and 24-hour clock measured from noon to noon and consists of hours, minutes, seconds, and milliseconds. This linear structure of time is paramount for the global synchronisation of business, science, medicine, and economy. In its monochronic nature there are deadlines, temporal targets, goal orientation, clear cut beginnings and ends of activities, and strict schedules. Cultural expressions such as keeping time, losing time, saving time, wasting time, spending time, killing time, making time; being on-time, loosing track of time; being time efficient, being time poor, and time is money are the products of this perception.

In Aboriginal cultures, the innate perception of time is maintained in every aspects of life. Time is an infinite concept and lived in its circular sense. Although it comes, goes, and comes back again, sometimes it is always present. For example, Ancestors and ancestral beings are not in the past but are always at present time. Recurring patterns in the sky such as the motion of the sun and phases of the moon, constellations, motion of the planets, and weather conditions, changing flora and fauna are observed and the information is passed on through oral traditions. Therefore, monitoring time, keeping time, and track of time are cultural temporal expressions in Aboriginal cultures. Ngaanyatjarra women in the Western Desert area, for instance, would know if the food is ready by simply 'observing' the process. For example, to bake a damper, a type of bread, the dough is wrapped in foil and placed on hot ashes. Ngaanyatjarra women would nyinakarri, *sit still and be*, by the ashes and watch the damper being baked without the need to check it regularly.

The temporal expressions of events, in Australian languages, have interval references rather than having point time punctuations. The future events depend on the occurrence of anticipated conditions which cannot always be planned or controlled. In some polychronic cultures such as Turkish culture, the Arabic term '*inşallah*' shows how the concept of time is experienced. The term '*inşallah*' is a wish that the thing 'happens' and when it will happen is unknown and,

in most cases, not as important and it cannot be controlled. In these cultures the future is bound to the present because the present dictates whether the necessary conditions occur, or not, in order for the future action to take place. Therefore, anticipating a point time equates to expecting a doctor to tell their patient the date and time they will recover. The Kimberley example below shows that Aboriginal cultures share similar values around time with some polychronic cultures.

*My colleagues and I went to a remote Aboriginal community in the Kimberly [sic.] region and we were to meet with local elders. Now, it is a very small place so of course everyone saw us coming and so on and so forth. They were supposed to meet with us, discuss with us at 11 o'clock. 11 o'clock came and nothing, we were sitting under a tree and waiting. It was only around 1 o'clock or so that they came one by one. I was quite naïve at the time, so I asked them, 'Listen, we have been sitting here for two hours, why didn't you come immediately, why did you let us sit and wait?' I got no answer, but one of the elders said 'Listen, in this community it is not important 'when' things happen, it is important 'that' they happen.*

Janca, Aleksandar, as quoted by Adams, Kelly, 2009

### The different time concepts leads to mis-glossing

In this section, some of the diurnal temporal references in English is compared with the Goldfields Aboriginal languages of Western Australia, Tjupan, Mirniny, Cundeelee Wangka, and Wangkatja. Whilst time adverbial constructs such as yesterday, today, tomorrow, morning, noon, and night can have time point references in English, it is more with intervals in Australian languages. In Australian languages diurnal references follow the motion of the sun, the length of the shadows, and the light and the darkness of the period of time. Some references cover the span of days, periods that exceed a day, and portions of a day.

#### yesterday

Tjupan **karrajungka** *yesterday afternoon, afternoon, when the sun is still up*

Mirniny **kankara** *the day before today, yesterday*

**Matjalu ngurntunya nangu kankara.**  
 matja+lu ngurntu+nya na+ngu kankara  
 3SG+ERG 2SG+ACC see+PAST yesterday  
 He saw you yesterday.

Cundeelee Wangka **munga dark**  
**mungarrtji** *late afternoon, yesterday*

#### today

Tjupan **kuwarri** *now, present time, today*

**Kuwarrija yapun nyaku lirruja lirrpanapayi jurtijurtiingu Jiwalyta.**  
 kuwarri+ja yapu+n nya+ku lirru+ja lirrpana+payi jurtijurti+ngu Tjiwaly+ta  
 today+? rock+? see+REF snake+? wriggle+CHAR twist+PAST Tjiwaly+at  
 Today, you can see the rocks where the snake was wriggling and twisting at  
 Tjiwarly.

Cundeelee Wangka **kuwarri** *recently, today, now*

## tomorrow

Mirniny **miyaka** *tomorrow morning, in the morning*

**Matjarri minyaka tjantju yurlu nganarri.**  
matja+rri minya+ka tjantju yurlu ngana+rri  
3SG+ALL tomorrow+FUT tjantju this way go+IMP  
He will come this way tomorrow morning.

Tjupan **yungun** *in the morning*

**Pakalakuya walarlku yungkunti.**  
paka+la+kuya walarl+ku yungun+ti  
get\_up+IMP+? song+REF tomorrow+?  
They will get up and sing in the morning.

Cundeelee Wangka **tjirntu** *sun, day*  
**tjirntungka**, *in the morning, tomorrow, daytime*

**Ngarrirra tjirturringumpa pakarnumpa yunguntjarra.**  
ngarri+rra tjirntu+rri+ngu+mpa paka+rnu+mpa yunguntjarra  
sleep+SEQ sun+INCH+PAST+POSS arise+PAST+POSS morning  
After sleeping until it became day, he arose and it was morning.

## morning

In Wangkatja, **munga** is glossed as *night, dark, darkness* and *-ngka* is a locative suffix. Reduplication of **munga** might mean the period of time between two nights or between two dark periods. This example will be further analysed with the speaker.

Wangkatja **munga-mungangka** *first thing in the morning*

Cundeelee Wangka **yunguntjarra** *tomorrow, next day, morning*  
**mungawinki** *early morning*

## noon

Wangkatja **mungarntji** *afternoon, yesterday*

Cundeelee Wangka **winyurrrpa** *midday, noon*  
**mungarntji** *late afternoon*

Tjupan **karta** *afternoon; kartanka after sunset; kartaju late afternoon; kartangka after dark*

**Mangkupayiyinku jumpa-jumpalku kartajungka ngurrati.**  
manku+payi+yi+nku jumpajumpa+lku kartaju+ngka ngurra+ti  
hat+CHAR+3SG+INST hunt+HAB afternoon+LOC home+ALL

In the afternoon, they had to go home before the curfew.

## night

Mirninny **kankiya** *night, night time*  
**kankiya purtiyan** *dark, night time*

### **Kangkiya warlpi nganarrin.**

kangkiya warlpi ngana+rrin

night water go+FUT

Rain comes tonight.

It might rain any time after it becomes dark.

Wangkatja **mungatji** *dark, evening, tonight*  
**munga** *dark, darkness, dark time*

Cundeelee Wangka **munga** *night, darkness*  
**yukatji** *evening, dusk, after sundown*

Tjupan **jukalyta** *sunless time, evening*

In Tjupan the length of the shadows is used as temporal references.

### **Jirntu pakarnu wilja jupanarringu.**

jirntu paka+rnu wilja jupan+arri+ngu

sun up+PAST shade straight+become+PAST

The sun is overhead and the shadow is straight down.

## **Australian languages time references contain critical cultural concepts: Seasons**

In Noongar language, the south-western region of Western Australia, there are six seasons observed and each season is glossed according to its features as a contemporary construct: Birak *season of the young*, Boonaroo *season of the adolescence*, Djiran *season of adulthood*, Mookaroo *fertility season*, Djilba *season of conception*, Kambarang *season of birth*. In Ngadju language, Goldfields-Esperance region of Western Australia, the seasons are named as Ngarngi *the hot time* and Kaluru *the cold time*. Ngarngi contains Ngawu *the eggling season* and Nganji *the hot season*. Kaluru contains Kupilya ngarrin *sleeping and hibernating season* and Karrlkunja *courting and mating season*.

In Mirninny language, wilu is glossed as *summer* and kutjarra as *two*. The temporal reference wilu kutjarra means *two summers*. It does not indicate a 12 month-period of one year in Gregorian calendar. It indicates two hot periods and the length of these periods might vary. In the same language, kantji mula is glossed as *the time for March flies* and in Gregorian calendar it is the time between November and December; paartingkarra is glossed as *lots of paarti grubs* and it is a temporal reference because it happens in the warmer periods of time.

This critical information around seasons is gathered by observing the animals, plants, and the weather conditions, and tells when to move to cooler or warmer regions, or drier or rainier areas; when to expect other family groups in order to share food, water, and other resources and hold important meetings, cultural practices and customs.

## **‘ngurra’ as a time reference**

In the languages of the Goldfields, Western Australia ngurra is glossed as *camp, home, country, and heart-land*. An example in Cundeelee Wangka shows that ngurra has a temporal sense in addition to its broader definitions.

*A recurrent theme in many languages is a connection between space and diurnal time, with 'day' reference replaceable with a term that means 'space, region, country, camp'. Thus, McGregor (1994a:xxii) notes: "in Gooniyandi the term riwi 'camp, place' is used to refer to a day (this presumably based on the association of a camping place with a day).*

McGregor quoted by Austin 1998

***Ka paluru mayi wiyangka nyinangu, ngurra 40, pira kutjarra nguwarnpa. Nyin-nyinarra tjuni anymatjarrarringu.***

ka paluru mayi wiya+ngka nyina+ngu ngurra 40 pira kutjarra nguwarnpa. nyin nyin+arra tjuni anymatjarra+rri+ngu  
and 3sg food no+INCH sit+PAST camp 40 moon two nearly. sit sit+? stomach hungry?+INCH+PAST

And he stayed in that place for 40 days, nearly two months. Then after staying (in that state) his stomach became very hungry.

## **Accurate glossing of Australian languages time concepts is critical**

Many Australian languages have a very complex tense-aspect-mood systems and the use of verbal affixes is a very common feature of these languages. List of verbal inflections, serial verbs, and tense differences can occur in one sentence.

Cundeelee Wangka

**Watingku kuka wakarnu, mantjirnu malingu nyinarringu, yarlarni, angatjarra, wirliitjarra, kulpa kutipitjangu.**

wati+ngku kuka waka+rnu mantji+rnu mali+ngu  
nyina+rri+ngu yarla+rni angatju+rra wirli+tjarra kulpa  
kuti+pitja+ngu  
man+TRNS meat spear+PAST grab+PAST go+PAST  
sit+IMP+PAST open+PRES block+IMP stick+INST return  
go.towards+go+PAST

A man speared an animal, picked it up and went and sat down and after gutting it, he closed it with a probe stick and went home.

Future verb marker -ku, -lku in Cundeelee Wangka might indicate an action that will take place anterior of the present time:

**Ngayulu nyinaku.**

ngayulu nyina+ku

1sg sit+FUT

I will sit.

It might indicate some instructions to follow at the present moment or anterior of the present time:

**Matjirra runkala tililku, mirungka runkala tililku.**

matirra runka+la tili+lku miru+ngka runka+la tili+lku

matches rub+IMP light.fire+FUT spear.thrower+LOC rub+IMP light.fire+FUT

You make fire by striking matches, or by rubbing with the edge of a spear thrower.

Or it might indicate a responsibility and not a planned action.

**Pitjalinku watingku kuka wakalku marlu.**

pitjali+nku wati+ngku kuka waka+lku marlu

travel+FUT man+SUB meat spear+FUT red.kangaroo

The man will travel around and spear meat, a red kangaroo.

## Cundeelee Wangka Verb Endings

	<b>-l</b>	<b>zero</b>	<b>-n</b>	<b>-ng</b>
<b>Future</b>	wana <u>lku</u> <i>will follow</i>	nyina <u>ku</u> <i>will sit</i>	tjunku <i>will put it</i>	yungku <i>will give it</i>
<b>Imperative (Command)</b>	wana <u>la</u> <i>follow</i>	nyina <i>sit</i>	tjurra <i>put it</i>	yuwa <i>give it</i>
<b>Continuous Command</b>	wana <u>ma</u> <i>keep following</i>	nyina <u>ma</u> <i>keep sitting</i>	tjunama <i>keep putting it</i>	yungama <i>keep giving it</i>
<b>Continuous Future</b>	wana <u>ma</u> <i>will keep following</i>	nyina <u>ma</u> <i>will keep sitting</i>	tjunama <i>will keep putting</i>	yungama <i>will keep giving</i>
<b>Present</b>	wana <u>ni</u> <i>following</i>	nyina <u>ni</u> <i>sitting</i>	tjunanyi <i>putting</i>	yunganyi <i>giving</i>
<b>Past</b>	wana <u>nu</u> <i>followed</i>	nyina <u>ngu</u> <i>sat/stayed</i>	tjunu <i>put</i>	yungu <i>gave</i>
<b>Participle</b>	wana <u>ra</u> <i>having followed</i>	nyina <u>ra</u> <i>having sat</i>	tjunkula <i>having put</i>	yungkula <i>having given</i>
<b>Past Continuous</b>	wana <u>rantja</u> wana <u>rangi</u> <i>was following</i>	nyina <u>rrantja</u> nyina <u>rrangi</u> <i>was sitting</i>	tjunktantja tjunktangi <i>was putting</i>	yungkulantja yungkulangi <i>was giving</i>
<b>Habitual</b>	wana <u>payi</u> <i>follower</i>	nyina <u>payi</u> <i>always sitting</i>	tjunkturpayi <i>always putting</i>	yungkurpayi <i>giver</i>
<b>Cessative</b>	wana <u>wiya</u> wana <u>tjarra</u> <i>stop following</i>	nyina <u>wiya</u> nyina <u>tjarra</u> <i>stop sitting</i>	tjunkuwiya tjunkturjarra <i>stop putting it</i>	yungkuwiya yungkurjarra <i>stop giving</i>
<b>Intention</b>	wana <u>ntjakitja</u> <i>intend to follow</i>	nyina <u>ntjakitja</u> <i>intend to sit</i>	tjunkturjakitja <i>intend to put it</i>	yungkurjakitja <i>intend to give</i>
<b>Desire</b>	wana <u>ntjaku</u> <i>want to follow</i>	nyina <u>ntjaku</u> <i>want to follow</i>	tjunkturjaku <i>want to put it</i>	yungkurjaku <i>want to give</i>
<b>Circumstantial</b>	wana <u>ntjala</u> <i>when he followed</i>	nyina <u>ntjala</u> <i>when he sat</i>	tjunkturjala <i>while he was putting it</i>	yungkurjala <i>when he gave it</i>
<b>Same subject doing actions</b>	wanaralpi <i>having followed it, he...</i>	nyinarralpi <i>having sat he...</i>	tjunkturkuralpi <i>after putting it, he...</i>	pungkuralpi <i>after hitting it, he...</i>

## **CONCLUSION**

Temporal references in Australian languages contain significant cultural knowledge. These references might not have equivalents in the target languages such as English. Therefore, whilst glossing temporal references, the broader definitions that are outside the scope of the English definitions must be maintained. The temporal references must not be equated to English language but the English definitions and expressions must be broadened to accommodate the source language. Accurate glossing and free translation of Australian languages will protect the traditional knowledge and the original form of the language from being damaged.



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