

ALS 2006 – ABSTRACT

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Verbal Classifiers in Marringarr

Keywords: Historical linguistic methodology; Verbal classification; Australian language typology; Australian language pre-history; non-Pama-Nyungan languages.

Abstract:

This paper presents an overview of the Marringarr verbal classifier complex, seeking to identify in particular those features that situate the language in its historical and typological context, and testing the appropriateness to the language of the emerging descriptive framework being developed by the Australianist community of practice (cf. Baker & Harvey 2006). Marringarr is a language of the Daly River region (NT, Australia), the only published description of which is a 20 page sketch grammar in Tryon (1974). Tryon presents the language as having 16 formally and semantically distinct verbal classifiers, and sees the data on these as consistent with Marringarr being closely genetically related to neighbouring Marrithiyel and Marramaninjsji as the members of the 'Brinken' sub-group. This Brinken sub-group is then claimed to belong with the Marranunggu and Wogaity groups to the north in the higher-level 'Brinken-Wogaity' family.

A review of more extensive data on the Marringarr verbal classifier system casts doubt on the genetic classifications proposed by Tryon. Employing the methodology outlined by Green (2003) in establishing a case for the genetic relatedness of Murrinh-patha and Ngan'gityemmerri in the southern part of the Daly River region, this paper sets out the key morphology of the Marringarr verbal classifier paradigms, and illustrates significant correspondences that are to be found in the other languages of the region, drawing on the reference grammars of Emmi (Ford 1999) and Marrithiyel (Green 1989). This comparative exercise advances a case for Marringarr to be considered as closely genetically related to the Marrithiyel, Marramaninjsji and Marranunggu languages, in a family which we will refer to here as 'Western Daly'. However, it does not support an hypothesis of close genetic relationship to the Wogaity group. Neither does it yet motivate any internal sub-grouping of the Western Daly family. Indeed, several features which implicitly fall out from Tryon's scenario as recent Marringarr innovations – for example, its distinctive dual marking, and its split of the realis classifier paradigm into distinctive perfective and imperfective inflectional forms – now appear to be reconstructible for proto Western Daly, thus raising the possibility that innovations in these areas of the morphology may be shared instead by the other members of the family.

References

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