

Polysynthesis in Northern Australian languages

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Polysynthetic languages in Australia are all found in the 'Top End' region, distributed over three regions and/or genetic groupings, all non-Pama-Nyungan: the Daly River region (Murrinh-Patha, Ngan'gi-Tyemeri), the isolate Tiwi on Bathurst and Melville Islands to the north of Darwin, and the Gunwinyguan family of around ten languages centred on Arnhem Land and nearby Groote Eylandt. Altogether around a dozen languages of Northern Australia exhibit strong polysynthetic traits.

In this talk I will focus on these three groups of languages, with particular reference to

(a) setting them in the context of the head-marking languages which surround them, which typically have a double-indexing system of pronominal prefixes (possibly augmented by encliticised pronouns), and suffixal TAM inflections, but no noun or adverbial incorporation and a more sober inventory of applicative affixes.

(b) with regard to North Australian polysynthetic languages, looking at which typological characteristics they share and which they don't share, and examining what implications this has both for theories of which traits are linked in polysynthetic languages – I will focus in particular detail on the range of semantico-syntactic roles available for incorporated nouns, on the richness of the applicative system, and on the availability or otherwise of specific subordinating mechanisms

(c) looking at some for diachronic scenarios for the rise and fall of polysynthesis and what it implies about genetic groupings. Topics to be examined here include

(i) the very recent increase in morphological complexity in Ngan'gi-Tyemeri (likely within the last century) achieved by fusing a morphologically complex light verb and a simpler lexical verb into a single unit, trapping body part nouns between them,

(ii) the possibility that at least some non-polysynthetic languages (such as those of the Iwaidjan family) have reduced their morphological complexity through freezing an older and more productive system of noun-verb compounding so that incorporation is no longer productive

(iii) the intriguing likelihood that some of the morphological complexification within Gunwinyguan polysynthetic languages has occurred through expansions at the heart of the verbal word (e.g. by turning suffixes piggybacking incorporated nouns into applicatives) rather than at the word edge, and

(iv) bringing data from other typological features to bear on the question of whether the striking parallels between Tiwi and Gunwinyguan polysynthetic structures are independent innovations or shared retentions.