

The TAM-system of Ngarla: A language of Western Australia

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In Australian languages, nominal and verbal inflectional systems generally provide quite different pictures. The nominal inflections, and the functions they mark, are similar across the Australian continent, but the same cannot be said for verbal TAM-paradigms. Instead, the meanings expressed by TAM-markers vary widely, and while nearby and/or closely related languages may have TAM-suffixes expressing the same meanings, the forms of the markers in question may be very different. The size of the TAM-systems of Australian languages is also subject to considerable variation. The Wik-Ngathan language is claimed only to have two TAM inflections, irrealis and realis, and at the other end of the spectrum languages that make a dozen or more different distinctions can be found. Panyjima, of the Pilbara region of Western Australia, is with its fourteen different TAM-markers in Dixon (2002:212, c.f. pp. 209-211) mentioned as a good example of this type of language.

One Australian language that has previously not received much scholarly attention is Ngarla, traditionally spoken not far north of Panyjima, along the coast of Western Australia. Just like Panyjima, Ngarla is placed among the so-called Ngayarta-languages, a sub-group of the Pama-Nyungan language phylum. As pointed out by Dench (2001), it is however uncertain if these languages comprise a genetic group or a Sprachbund. In the second half of the nineteenth century several hundred people spoke the Ngarla language. Today only four fluent speakers remain.

The aim of the paper is to introduce Ngarla TAM-markers employed in main clauses. It will be shown that the language, just like Panyjima, is one that has a rich TAM-system. Similar to in many other Australian languages, there are a number of inflections that combine tense and aspectual information. No less than four different markers are for example used for past events that have taken place, but only one of these can be analyzed as a pure tense form, the remote past. Remaining past reference suffixes include perfective, imperfective, and habitual aspectual information, respectively. There is also a contrafactual inflection, used for events that could have or should have taken place in the past, but didn't. This marker is often, but not invariably, combined with an overt negation. One and the same suffix is employed for imperative mood and future time reference, a phenomenon found in a number of languages of the Australian continent. These, as well as the Ngarla deontic modal markers, will be exemplified and discussed in the paper.

References:

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