

Verb excorporation in four Gunwinyguan languages

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Outline

Background

Formal properties

Meaning and function

Implications and conclusion

BACKGROUND

The Gunwinyguan languages

- ▶ Group of around 9 non-Pama-Nyungan languages from Arnhem Land, NT
- ▶ ‘Polysynthetic’, head-marking with complex verbal morphology, incorporation, valence-changing derivations, etc.
- ▶ Pragmatically-determined constituent order

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Structure of the verb

- ▶ Word structure is templatic, elements follow strict order (e.g., Evans, 2003)
- ▶ Most basic verb involves pronominal prefix, verb stem, and tense suffix

(1) Rembarrnga

a. ŋa-mi-ja
1M>3M-get-PP
'I got it.'

b. ŋa-calk-mi-ja
1M>3M-split-GET-PP
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A different structure?

- ▶ Phrasal verb constructions have occasionally been reported in four languages: Dalabon (Evans et al., 2008), Jawoyn (Merlan, 1989), Ngalakgan (Baker & Harvey, 2003), and Rembarrnga (McKay, 1975)
- ▶ Sometimes the verb stem occurs **outside the verbal word** altogether:

(2) Ngalakgan

a. ŋu-ŋej?-min
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- ▶ No detailed account of properties nor usage of ‘excorporation’
- ▶ What kinds of verbs can participate in this alternation?
- ▶ When does it occur, and does it correspond to any difference in meaning?
- ▶ What implications do these constructions have for theories of grammar?

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Data

- ▶ 136 texts/recordings reviewed across the four languages
- ▶ Mostly narratives, some procedural texts
- ▶ Focus on morphology and semantics, and implementation in Relational Morphology (Jackendoff & Audring, 2020)

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FORMAL PROPERTIES

What gets excorporated?

- ▶ Lexical content in the verb can alternate between two positions: internal and external (immediately preverbal)

(3) Rembarrnga

a. ŋa-ŋal?-mij

1M-climb-PP

'I climbed up.'

b. ŋal? ŋa-man

climb 1M-GO.PP

'I climbed up.'

(4) Ngalakgan

a. ŋu-pu-ku?-war?-mij-pira?

1M.S-3A.O-dead-throw-PP-UA

'I threw them two down dead.'

b. ku?-war? ŋu-pu-mij-pira?

dead-throw 1M.S-3A.O-PP-UA

'I threw them two down dead.'

What gets excorporated?

- ▶ Grammatical material stays on the auxiliary word, including applicatives, number, and subordinating morphology:

(5) pol? paran-**pak**-man
arrive 3M>3A-BEN-GO.PP

‘He came to them.’ (Rembarrnga)

(6) po{op puru-mij-**pira?**
lie.belly.up 3A-PP-UA

‘They turned themselves belly up.’ (Ngalakgan)

(7) ŋej? ŋu-mij-**kin** ... muŋcum-ka? ŋu-mi-je-ŋ
get.up 1M-PP-SUB shoulder-LOC 1M.S-III.O-put-PP

‘Having gotten up, I put it on my shoulder.’ (Ngalakgan)

Types of excorporant

(8) Simple verb stems

a. pu-ma-ŋaj
3PL>3SG-get-PC

'They got (nailfish).'
(Jwyn)

b. maʔ puŋ-cu-ŋaj
get 3PL>3SG-DO-PC

'They got (spears).'

(9) Coverbs (from complex verb stems)

a. ka-ʔ-tenʔenʔ-me-j
3SG-R-flex.spear-GET-PP

'He flexed the spear.'
(Dlbn)

b. tenʔenʔ ka-ʔ-me-j
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- ▶ **Is there a simple morphosyntactic generalisation we can make?**
- ▶ Answer: all excorporants are complete verb stems
- ▶ ‘Complex’ stems are not coverb + finite verb, but verb stem + classifier
- ▶ Motivated by independent factors like prosody and semantics, yet accounts for excorporation

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MEANING AND FUNCTION

Usage as ideophones

- ▶ Excorporation constructions are used to embellish narratives, much like ideophones (e.g., Alpher, 2001; Voeltz & Kilian-Hatz, 2001)
- ▶ They add “stylistic spice” (Heath, 1980, p. 75; Heath, 1984) to an utterance, often with extremely marked intonation
- ▶ Structurally similar to ideophones in other GN languages like Wubuy (Heath, 1976, p. 737):

(10) ca|k! ni-ja|t̥-in
go.past 3SG-go.past-PP
'He went past (all of a sudden)!'

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1: Expressing sudden events

- ▶ Ideophones in Wubuy, BKW, Ngandi, Ritharrŋu tend to express very brief or sudden events, like changes in state or stance (Evans, 2003; Heath, 1978, 1980, 1984)
- ▶ Excorporation constructions very similar, mostly express atomic events (~92% of all excorporations):

(11) tuɿ~tuɿ puru-mij
RED~sit.down 3A-PP
'They sat down right there.' (Ngalakgan)

(12) towk ka-ʔ-lŋ-ta-ŋij
burst 3SG-R-SEQ-STAND-PC
'Bang! The boil burst open!' (Dalabon)

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1: Expressing sudden events

- ▶ States and activities have inchoative/inceptive readings:

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1A-UA-sleep-PP

'We two were
sleeping.'

b. ɣum? jara-jappa?-man
sleep 1A-UA-GO.PP

'We two fell asleep.'

(14) Ngalakgan

a. Ø-po|op-mij
3M-lie.belly.up-PP

'He was lying belly up.'

b. po|op puru-mij-pira?
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'They turned themselves
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2: Textual distribution

- ▶ Ideophones are carriers of new information, often the only contrastive element in the clause (Alpher, 2001)
- ▶ Excorporation (almost) only occurs when subject is same as preceding clauses, so is new information
- ▶ Also occurs in sequences of dynamic events, typically expresses culmination or climax, or an otherwise notable event (cf. Brye, 1991; De Jong, 2001; Heath, 1984)

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'Those kangaroos scratched the grass, they were lying there licking themselves (on the forearms), then **they galloped away**. They went.'

- ▶ Expresses contrast to preceding actions, marking (episode) boundary

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3SG-as.for IV-backbone IV-whatsit-COM IV-bum-COM ribcage
- ja. “ η i-koj η ?~koji-n-ku.” koj η ?~koji-naj napaj tara mam
okay 12DU-go.back-PR-SUB 3SG.go.back-PC that too devil
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whistle 3SG>3PL-DO-PP whistle.sound that I-what
- nin-wi η -ma η ?”
3SG>12DU-whistle-PR

‘And as for him, (he took) the spine with what’s it, with the tail part, and the ribcage. Ok. “We’ll go back (to eat)”. He was going back, and **that devil whistled at them**. Whiss! [whistling sound] “What’s that whistling at you and me?”’ (Jawoyn)

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- ▶ They are (almost) never durative or continuous, always atomic/punctual event structure
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3: Complementary distribution

- ▶ Excorporating languages don't have ideophones, and vice versa
- ▶ Instructive exception is Dalabon which has both:

(17) Dalabon

a. Excorporation

towk! ka-ʔ-lŋ-ta-ŋjŋ
Burst 3SG-R-SEQ-STAND-PP
'The boil burst open!'

b. Ideophone

paŋ! ca-ʔ-toŋp-mu
appear 2SG-R-appear-PR
'Your head appears!'

- ▶ Same intonation contour, extreme pitch excursion on first element in both cases

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appear 2SG-R-appear-PR
'Your head appears!'

- ▶ Same intonation contour, extreme pitch excursion on first element in both cases

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Conclusions

- ▶ ‘Excorporation’ in four Gunwinyguan languages: verb stems can optionally occur externally to embellish narratives
- ▶ Semantic modification meaning ‘suddenly do X’
- ▶ Speakers can adjust lexical aspect of verbs by overtly manipulating components of the construction (Bednall, 2021; Guerrero Beltran, 2024; Nordlinger & Caudal, 2012)

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Implications

- ▶ Discourse has strong effects on syntax and word order in Australian languages (e.g., Hale, 1992; Simpson & Mushin, 2008), but what about word structure?
- ▶ Word-internal structure often assumed to be opaque to syntax (Bresnan & Mchombo, 1995)
- ▶ Similar alternations (e.g., incorporation) associated with fore/backgrounding in discourse (Heath, 1984; Mithun, 1984)

(18) Ngalakgan (Merlan, 1983, p. 56; Baker, 2008, p. 143)

a. puru-mala-maji-cci-nip
3A-COLL-get-RR-PC

'They gathered themselves.'

b. mala jiri-ŋaŋa-n
COLL 1A-sit-PR

'We sit as a group.'

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COLL 1A-sit-PR

'We sit *as a group*.'

Thank you!*

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