

R. M. W. DIXON

Edible Gender,
Mother-in-Law Style,
& Other Grammatical Wonders

*Studies in Dyirbal, Yidiñ,
& Warrgamay*

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LINGUISTICS

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Studies in Dyirbal, Yidiñ, and Warrgamay

R. M. W. DIXON

*Language and Culture Research Centre
James Cook University*

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In loving memory of
Chloe Grant (1903–1974)
dear friend and teacher
keen of intellect
resolute in character

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List of abbreviations

Dialects of Dyirbal (section 1.3.1)

A	Gambil-barra Jirrbal	N	Ngajan
G	Girramay	P	'Mourilyan' Mamu
J	Jabun-barra Jirrbal (Jirrbal)	U	Gulngay
L	Walmal	W	Wari-barra Mamu (Wari)
M	Dulgu-barra Mamu (Mamu)	Y	Jirru

Dialects of Yidiñ (section 1.3.3)

c	coastal Yidiñ	t	tableland Yidiñ
g	Gunggay	w	Wanyurru/Majay

Language styles

Ev	everyday language style	Ja	Jalnguy avoidance language style
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Kin terms (chapter 4)

M, mother; F, father; B, brother; Z, sister; S, son; D, daughter; W, wife; H, husband; Sib, sibling; Ch, child; Sp, spouse; e, elder; y, younger; ♀, female ego; ♂, male ego.

Other abbreviations

/	intonation break	ALL	allative case
#	word boundary	APASS	antipassive
I – IV	genders in Dyirbal (see chapter 2)	APPLIC	applicative
1	1st person	AVERS	aversive
2	2nd person	C	consonant
3	3rd person	CAUS	causative
A	transitive subject	CONTIN	continuous
ABL	ablative case	DAT	dative case
ABS	absolutive case	DELOC	delocutive
ACC	accusative case	du	dual
		ERG	ergative case

FUT	future tense	PERF	perfect
GEN	genitive marking	POS.IMP	positive imperative
IMP	imperative	PURP	purposive
INCH	inchoative	RC	relative clause
INST	instrumental case	REDUP	reduplication
LINK	linking element	REFL	reflexive
LOC	locative case	REL	relative clause marking
NEG.IMP	negative imperative	S	intransitive subject
NOM	nominative case	sg	singular
NP	noun phrase	SVC	serial verb construction
O	transitive object	UNM	unmarked
pl	plural	V	vowel

Background

A language is a social phenomenon. Some books concerning language seem to consider each word as an isolated item, each sentence as being complete in itself. Little insight is gained in this way. The meaning and function of a word should be considered with respect to the meanings and functions of related forms—how they interrelate and contrast. A sentence only has significance within a context of utterance; one needs to know who said it, to whom, in what circumstances. It is relevant to be aware of the social relationships between the participants in this act of communication. And also what is assumed, what is implied, and what is hoped to be achieved.

A critical factor, which is relevant to understanding, concerns the situation within which something is said. A certain utterance (for example, *The scheme looks as if it were meant to fail*) will have diverse implications depending on whether it is said in deliberate fashion during a formal meeting or as a whispered aside. And whether it is said with a harsh biting intonation or more tentatively, as a kind of gentle enquiry.

One can only fully comprehend the interwoven underpinnings and implications of a language through having some familiarity with the shared cultural heritage of its speakers. To be an effective member of the English language speech community, it is useful to have some acquaintanceship with nursery rhymes, parts of the Bible, and some of the works of Shakespeare. In similar fashion, in order to achieve a decent understanding of the language used by a community of Aboriginal Australians, it is of great help to be acquainted with some of their legends and beliefs.

Beginning in 1963, I worked—in the rainforest of north-east Australia—with communities speaking the Dyirbal, Yidiñ, and Warrgamay languages. *The Dyirbal language of North Queensland*, which is an ethnologically-informed grammar, was published in 1972. I have a collection of seventy-eight Dyirbal texts and a comprehensive thesaurus/dictionary, which are currently being prepared for publication. *A grammar of Yidiñ*, in 1977, was followed in 1991 by *Words of our country: stories, place names and vocabulary in Yidiñ*. Materials on Warrgamay were published in 1981, within volume 2 of the *Handbook of Australian languages*.

In all my writings I have tried to let a language speak for itself, illustrating its cultural milieu. Elicitation was kept to a minimum. Instead, I relied on what speakers

volunteered spontaneously, and on texts of all kinds—legendary tales, historical accounts, autobiographies, instruction on how to perform daily tasks, the manufacture of implements, techniques for dealing with ailments, and so on.

Putting to one side the many laudatory reviews, the comments I treasure most are in a 1973 letter from renowned anthropologist Ashley Montague:

I have been reading your *The Dyirbal language of North Queensland* with enthusiasm and excitement. I have always believed that the only genuine way to understand the way another people thinks and feels is to study their language, and your book has, of course, confirmed me in that belief. . . . Having studied linguistics with Boas and read it for 40 years, I have not found any work on an aboriginal language anywhere nearly as good as yours.

The present volume extends and expands on information presented in the grammars. There is discussion of how the world is categorised, through a system of four genders in Dyirbal and a set of around twenty classifiers in Yidiñ—chapters 2 and 3. As in other Australian languages, social interaction is mediated through the highly-articulated kinship system—chapter 4. When in the presence of a relative of a particular ‘avoidance’ class, it was obligatory to employ the special Jalnguy speech style (dubbed ‘mother-in-law language’ by bilingual speakers)—chapters 5 and 6.

Yidiñ and Dyirbal employ contrasting narrative techniques. A story is generally told in 1st person for Yidiñ but in 3rd person for Dyirbal. This has led to different syntactic principles for clause linking in the two languages—chapter 7. In Dyirbal, two verbs can be combined to form one predicate, a ‘serial verb construction’—chapter 8. It was at first surprising to me that Dyirbal has no complement clause construction (similar to *Mary saw [that John killed the kangaroo]*_{COMPLEMENT.CLAUSE} in English). Close investigation reveals that it has, instead, a number of what can be called ‘complementation strategies’—chapter 9.

In most Australian languages (including Dyirbal and Yidiñ) verbs fall into two syntactic classes, intransitive and transitive, and into two or more phonologically-defined classes, or conjugations. There is generally some association—but not identity—between these sets of classes; for example, most (but not all) intransitive verbs are in a certain conjugation. One dialect of Warrgamay has changed in a way that rationalises this, so that syntactic classes and conjugation classes now exactly coincide—chapter 10.

Information was obtained on two dialects of Warrgamay, and four of Yidiñ; these are fully documented in Dixon (1981a) and Dixon (1977a, 1991a) respectively. The 1972 grammar of Dyirbal was confined to description of just three—of the original ten or so—dialects. Further work has expanded this corpus; surveys of cross-dialectal grammatical and lexical variation are provided in chapters 11 and 12.

Intermarriage and social contact between tribal groups has led to the development of areal linguistic traits. Phonologically contrastive vowel length evolved in Yidiñ

and in the adjoining dialects of Dyirbal. In the most northerly Dyirbal dialect, this phonological gain was counter-balanced by loss of the contrast between two rhotic consonants—chapter 13. In chapter 14 there is investigation of how Yidiñ, Dyirbal, and Warrgamay have influenced each other in various grammatical and phonological respects, with the likely directions of diffusion for each being examined.

The effects of European invasion—from the 1860s in this region—have been devastating. Many Aborigines were murdered with others being transported to missions or government settlements, where children were separated from their parents in order to arrest transmission of culture and language. For the remainder, situations where traditional language would be used gradually contracted. When I began fieldwork, fifty years ago, there were half-a-dozen old people with a good command of Warrgamay and the same for Yidiñ; all are now gone. There were in 1963 several score fluent speakers of Dyirbal; the last of them died in March 2011, leaving only a handful of semi-speakers.

As a language fades away, it may change in interesting ways. Traditional Yidiñ had an underlying form for each noun and adjective, from which surface forms were created by application of certain rules. In chapter 15 there is an account of how the last semi-speakers of Yidiñ re-analysed the system, now deriving all other surface case forms from the absolutive. Chapter 16 chronicles the gradual decline of Dyirbal, over a half-century, as the fluent speakers—dialect by dialect—gradually died. The two most vibrant dialects merged, but are today only represented by semi-speakers; their talk shows simplification of paradigms, loss of gender contrasts, and further grammatical levelling.

When *The Dyirbal Language* was published, in December 1972, it attracted immediate attention, mainly due to the explicit descriptions of morphological and syntactic ergativity. There were a considerable number of papers (of variable quality) which attempted to reanalyse the system. *A grammar of Yidijn*, in 1977, attracted attention for the intricacy of its phonological rules, and also spawned a number of re-statements. I have chosen not to survey these here (only a couple of them provided useful further explanation).

The overarching theme of studies in the present volume is how the patterns in a grammar are explainable by factors outside it. For example, chapter 2 shows that the allocation of nouns to the four genders in Dyirbal can only be understood in terms of cultural ideas concerning physical association, eating habits, and harmfulness, together with knowledge of legends and beliefs. As a further example, chapter 7 describes how the contrasting story-telling techniques employed by speakers of Dyirbal and Yidiñ explain the differing syntactic orientations of these two languages.

NOTE. Most of the chapters in this book are revisions of earlier publications; details are provided at the end of each chapter. Only this chapter and chapter 11 are completely new.

1.1 Culture

Speakers of Dyirbal, Yidiñ, and Warrgamay lived in well-watered mountainous country—predominantly rainforest—with many short rivers, waterfalls, and swamps. There were numerous animals to hunt, fish to catch, and fruits and vegetables to gather (some requiring lengthy preparation). Indeed, one of the four gender classes in Dyirbal is ‘edible’, referring just to non-flesh food; around 200 plants have been identified as belonging to it.

A tribe consisted of a number of ‘local groups’. Each would be based in a particular location, but would move around the whole tribal territory according to the availability of foodstuffs. For example, the coastal groups of Yidiñ-speakers would be likely to ascend to the tablelands—to eat yellow walnut (*gangi*) and lawyer-vines (*mudi* and *yabulam*)—in the wet season, when the coastal flats were particularly hot, humid, and insect-ridden. And the tablelands groups would come down to the coast—for black walnut (*digil*) and quandong (*murrigan*)—in the winter, thus avoiding some of the worst of the mountain frosts and mists.

There was cannibalism, of a mild variety; people were never killed simply in order to be eaten. The grave of a recently deceased person from a neighbouring tribe was sometimes raided and the body consumed. Or a local person judged by the group to be guilty of a serious crime (for example, a man misbehaving with someone else’s wife, who was in a tabooed relationship to him) could be killed. The flesh was eaten and the blood given to young men to drink.

The people had a goodly array of artefacts—finely honed boomerangs, spears, woomera, and shields, intricately woven baskets, and traps. A special weapon in this area was the hardwood duelling sword, a metre and a half in length. This was slung in single alternating strokes from over the head against the opponent, who would attempt to defend himself with a shield.

The stock of oral literature explained how the landscape came into being, the ways in which places were named, the origin of everything now considered mundane. A number of birds and animals were people in legendary times and have a special significance today. Songs would mimic events in the world, or convey a message of love. The volume *Dyirbal song poetry* (1996a)—which I compiled together with musicologist Grace Koch—documents the words and music of 174 Dyirbal songs across five distinct styles of performance, each with its own metrical pattern and linguistic and musical characteristics.

Some legends appear to have historical authenticity. Creator beings were able to walk to what are now off-shore islands, which was possible before sea levels rose ten millennia ago. One story tells of a volcanic eruption and how at the time there was just open forest at that place, not the thick jungle one finds there today. Scientists have found that, indeed, the jungle is only about 7,000 years old. (For further details, see Dixon 1972: 29, 1977a: 14–15.)

Young men were initiated at puberty, scars being cut across the chest. The highest grade of Dyirbal elder was a *Gubi*, someone who was a proven hunter, had a deep knowledge of customs, legends, and songs and—sine qua non—who had drunk human blood.

Inter-tribal corroborees were regular events. Grievances would be settled, generally by single combat (leading just to minor wounding). News was exchanged, new songs learnt, and marriages arranged, amidst a great deal of dancing and jollity.

The overarching feature of all Australian Aboriginal societies is the classificatory kinship system. By applying a series of principles, each person is in a relationship to every other person. Mother's sisters' and father's brothers' children ('parallel cousins') are regarded as equivalent to one's own siblings. In contrast, 'cross-cousins', the children of father's sisters and mother's brothers, have a quite different status. They must never be directly addressed and, if talking in their presence, a special speech style called Jalnguy has to be employed. *Waymin* and *ñubi* are the labels for daughters and sons of father's elder sisters and mother's elder brothers. They are potential mother-in-law and father-in-law. That is, one should marry the child of a classificatory *waymin* or *ñubi*. (More on this in chapter 4.)

Kinship links determine not only who one may marry, but also every kind of social responsibility. They indicate who may be joked with, and who is not available for friendly interaction. Who has the obligation to organise a boy's initiation, or a certain relative's funeral. When a brace of wallabies was brought home, these would be carefully butchered and portions shared out among all the people in the camp, according to their relationship to the hunter.

Marriages were arranged a long time in advance, generally between a young boy and a baby girl. There is a verb in Dyirbal, *ñilbi-l* 'look longingly on a promised spouse'. As the potential wife advanced in years, she watched and admired her husband-to-be gaining in prowess and status. In turn, he delighted in watching the girl blossom into an attractive woman. Of course, they could not marry until the girl reached puberty. And until the boy had proved himself to be a good provider. When he brought home a carcass, the choicest portion would be ostentatiously presented to *waymin*, the potential mother-in-law, as a hint that she might soon consider him to be ready for the marriage.

Vagueness was held to be a severe fault, a mark of stupidity. In the everyday language style, each type of plant and animal had a specific name, which should be used. About twenty species of frog were recognised and named in Dyirbal. There was no generic term 'frog' since it is always possible to identify a frog—by size, colour, behaviour, and call. There was a generic term *wadam* 'snake', but this would only be used when a snake could not be identified, perhaps if just the tip of its tail were seen. (And *wadam* did not quite cover all the snakes; it excluded those considered edible—the 'carpet snakes' or pythons—which were in any case easily identifiable from their size and colouring. See chapter 2.)

1.2 Jalnguy, the ‘mother-in-law’ style

Each tribe in this region had two speech styles. When in the presence of certain relatives with whom contact should be avoided (classificatory mother-in-law, father-in-law, son-in-law, or daughter-in-law), the Jalnguy [jalŋuy] style had to be employed. In all other circumstances the everyday language style was used.

My first great Dyirbal teacher, Chloe Grant, described Jalnguy as ‘mother-in-law language’. However, it is not really a distinct language, rather a different language style. The everyday style and Jalnguy have identical phonology (and phonetics) and grammar. All grammatical suffixes—case and tense endings and the like—are the same, as are fully grammatical words such as pronouns, demonstratives, the negator *gulu* ‘not’, and so on. But all lexemes—members of open word classes noun, adjective, and verb—differ. (With just one exception: the four terms for grandparents are the same.)

Many Australian languages have a set of special lexemes to be used in the presence of ‘avoidance kin’. But it is generally a smallish set, a couple of dozen items (see Dixon 2002a: 92–6). Languages in north-east Queensland are unique in that every lexeme is different between everyday and avoidance styles.

However, there are fewer lexemes in Jalnguy than in the everyday style. What we get is a many-to-one relation between the everyday style and Jalnguy vocabularies. This can be illustrated with an example from each major word class—noun, adjective, and verb.

(1) As mentioned just before, there are in the everyday style, about twenty names for species of frog. For example *banguy* ‘green tree frog’ (*Litoria caerulea*), *dangu* ‘northern barred frog’ (*Mixophyes schevilli*), *yudi* ‘water frog with a sharp nose’ (*Rana daemeli*), and so on. There is in Jalnguy a single lexeme, *guwaga* ‘frog’, corresponding to each of the score of names in the everyday style.

(2) The everyday style has adjective *jamar* ‘bitter taste (said to be like quinine or lemon)’ and *muymur* ‘sour, salty’. There is just one Jalnguy adjective corresponding to both of these, *ŋumuy*.

(3) Consider the following verbs in the everyday style:

- *baga-l*, pierce with a sharp-pointed implement, including: dig with a pointed yamstick, sew, row a boat (the action of the oars on the water), squeeze a boil, sting (as a bee does), and spear something, throwing the spear by means of a spear-thrower or woomera
- *jinba-l*, spear something, throwing the spear from the hand, without use of a woomera
- *jurrga-y*, spear something which can be seen, holding onto the spear
- *waga-y*, ‘blind spearing’, using the spear held in the hand to try to impale something which cannot be seen, e.g. spearing among underwater tree roots in case

an eel is hiding there, or jabbing a spear into long grass where movement has been seen

- *jiñju-l*, poke a stick into a hollow log to see if there is an animal in it.

There is just one Jalnguy verb corresponding to these five (and a couple more) verbs from the everyday style—*ñirrinda-l*.

It can be seen that, whereas one should be as precise as possible in the everyday style, the Jalnguy style is deliberately generic. It is appropriate to be vague in the presence of an avoidance relative.

One can be more specific by adding modification to the Jalnguy word. For example, describing the nature and habits of a frog species, saying that a *ñumuy* taste is ‘like a lemon’, or adding *jugari-ga*, the Jalnguy for ‘in a hollow log’ to *ñirrinda-l* for a more specific correspondent of *jiñju-l*. In essence, it appears that Jalnguy has the minimum number of lexemes compatible with it being possible to say in Jalnguy everything which can be said in the everyday style.

There is mention of Jalnguy in chapter 2, on genders in Dyirbal. Then chapter 5 provides a detailed discussion of the use, nature, and semantic organisation of the Jalnguy style in Dyirbal, and chapter 6 contrasts the forms of Jalnguy lexemes between Dyirbal and Yidiñ.

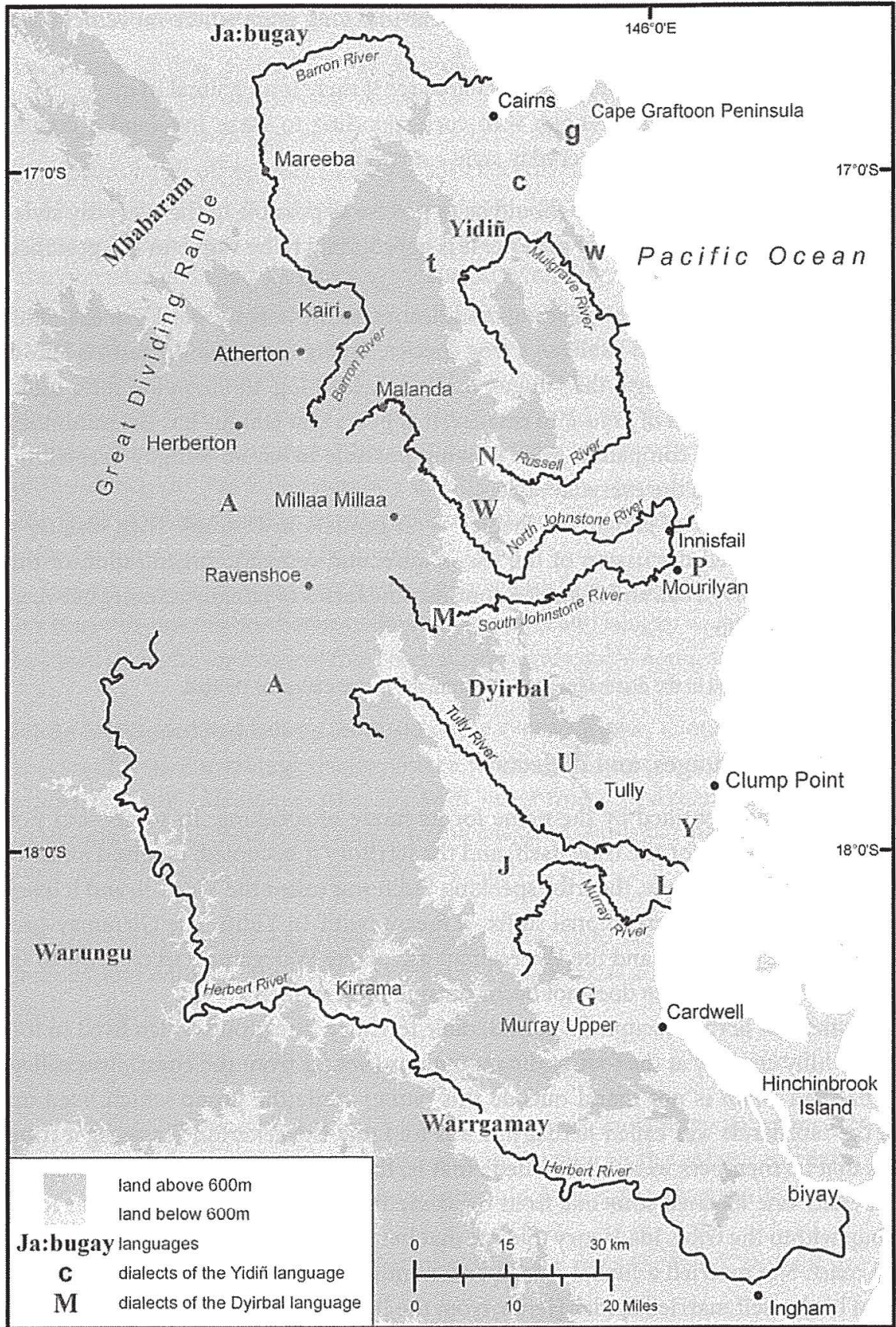
Note that forms quoted in the discussion above are from the Jirrbal dialect of Dyirbal.

1.3 Tribes, languages, and dialects

Each tribe was identified by the name for its mode of speaking. In some—but not all—cases the label for the tribe itself, and the territory it occupied, involved an addition to this. For example, the tribe speaking Yidiñ was called the Yidiñ-ji, and it lived in Yidiñ-ji territory. Derivational suffix *-ji* means ‘with’ in Yidiñ. The Girramay-gan people spoke Girramay and the Warrgamay-gan spoke Warrgamay; in contrast to *-ji* in Yidiñ, the ending *-gan* does not occur outside these names.

Speakers of Jirrbal occupied a considerable territory. The group which lived in the mildly hilly country at the foot of the mountains (not far from the coast), was called Jirrbal-ñan (*-ñan* is not found outside this name) while the group which lived up on the tablelands was called Jirrbal-ji. I was told that the criterion for being a tribe was that its members were ‘all blooded’; that is, that they were related to each other. Generally one married someone from the same tribe, preferably from another local group within the tribe. Ida Henry told me that her mother was Jirrbal-ñan, from near the coast. She married a Jirrbal-ji man and went to live with him on the tablelands. Then Ida herself married Spider Henry, from the Jirrbal-ñan, and went back downhill to live.

There was a limited amount of marriage between tribes, this being specially arranged and generally reciprocal—what is called ‘sister exchange’. When a Ngajan-ji



MAP 1.1 Map of languages and dialects

man married a Yidiñ-ji woman, it was expected that the brother of the Yidiñ-ji woman should marry the sister of the Ngajan-ji man.

If two modes of speaking are mutually intelligible, they are regarded as dialects of a single language. Typically, a number of contiguous tribes can be grouped together as speaking dialects of one language. Each could understand the others. They were aware of (and, often, proud of) the minor differences between them, but these did not impair intelligibility. We can now list the dialects on which material has been collected for the languages dealt with in this volume. Each is assigned a code letter, for ease of reference and for location on the map.

1.3.1 The Dyirbal language

(Note that this name is an alternative spelling of the name of a central dialect, Jirrbal.)

- N The Ngajan dialect, spoken by the Ngajan-ji tribe, living around the Russell River and across to the headwaters of the Barron River.
- W The variety of Mamu spoken by the Wari-barra group, living around the deep gorges (*wari*) of the North Johnstone River. (Suffix *-barra*, found in Dyirbal, Yidiñ, and Warrgamay, means 'belonging to'.)
- M The variety of Mamu spoken by the Dulgu-barra group, living in the thick jungle (*dulgu*) around the South Johnstone River.
- P Only known from 137 words of 'the Mourilyan language' in an 1884 letter from 'Christy Palmerston, explorer' to anthropologist A. W. Howitt. Probably from the Jirri-barra group of Mamu speakers.
- A Gambil-barra Jirrbal, spoken by the Jirrbal-ji groups on the tablelands (*gambil*), around the headwaters of the Tully River and the Herbert River.
- J Jabun-barra Jirrbal, spoken by the Jirrbal-ñan people, in country at the base of the mountains towards the coast (*jabun*), on the north side of the Murray River.
- U Gulngay [gulñay], spoken by the Malan-barra people, living around the lower Tully River. (In Gulngay, *malan* is 'sandbank', which are plentiful on the lower Tully.)
- Y Jirru, spoken by the Jirrubagala (I have no etymology for this), around Clump Point along the coast.
- G Girramay, spoken by the Girramay-gan people, living just inland from the coast, south from the Murray River almost as far as Cardwell, and westwards up the range to Kirrama Station (which is an attempt to write Girramay/Kirramay).
- L Walmal, known only from a manuscript list of 175 words, taken down by W. E. Roth in 1900 and labelled 'coast line from Tully to Murray'.

Commencing in 1963, and extending over 40 years, I was able to gather materials on eight of the dialects just listed (all but P and L). A goodly collection of texts, detailed grammatical information, and a substantial vocabulary were obtained for each of M,

J, and G. Also for N, except that here it was not possible to record texts. Materials in Jalnguy, the ‘mother-in-law style’, were gathered for N, M, and J. A fair amount of lexical and grammatical information could be obtained for W, some for A, rather less for Y and U. I also made use of short word lists which earlier investigators had compiled (commencing in 1900) on the various dialects; see Dixon (1972: 365–7).

It is likely that, in pre-invasion days, there were additional dialects which disappeared before they could be recorded. Speakers told me that there were further dialects between P and Y on the coast, and inland from Y. There were probably several dialects of N, of W, and possibly also of G; the evidence available suggests that these would have differed in only very minor ways. Gambil-barra Jirrbal (A) covered a considerable area and there is here definite evidence for several sub-varieties. The manuscript vocabularies gathered by W. E. Roth at Atherton and Herberton around 1900 differ in a few items from the data I obtained in the Ravenshoe area (this agrees fairly well with Tindale’s manuscript word list from 1938). I visited Herberton in 1979 and could only gather a few score forms but these did contain a number of critical items agreeing with Roth, and supporting his work.

It is interesting that tribal names Jirrbal-ji and Ngajan-ji are like Yidiñ-ji in including *-ji*. This is a suffix in Yidiñ but not in Dyirbal, suggesting that the technique of naming a tribe by adding *-ji* to the dialect name diffused from Yidiñ into these two neighbouring dialects of Dyirbal.

1.3.2 The Warrgamay language

There is evidence for the following varieties of this language:

- The dialect called Warrgamay, spoken by the Warrgamay-gan people along the lower Herbert River.
- Dialects called Biyay, spoken by the Biyay-girri people. *Biyay* is ‘no’ in these dialects (‘no’ is *maya* in the Warrgamay dialect) and *-girri* is, in all dialects, a derivational suffix ‘with’ (probably cognate with *-ji* in Yidiñ).

There appear to have been two varieties of Biyay: (a) spoken by people on the mainland, around the mouth of the Herbert River; and (b) spoken by people on Hinchinbrook Island and the adjacent mainland, south from the present town of Cardwell.

There was more intensive colonisation in Warrgamay lands than in some parts of Dyirbal territory. As a consequence, the language moved towards extinction at a faster rate. I was able to gather some grammatical and lexical data from the last two speakers of the Warrgamay dialect (one of them also provided five short texts) and from the last speaker of Biyay dialect (a). There were also a few early word lists (see Dixon 1981a: 9–13). Biyay dialect (b) is known only from nineteenth-century materials, mainly the word list which Houzé and Jacques (1884) took down in Brussels from Aborigines who had been captured by an American showman and exhibited (like animals) all over the USA and Europe.

1.3.3 The Yidiñ language

There were three tribes speaking dialects of this language:

- The Gunggay [gungay] dialect, spoken by the Gunğaŋji [gunğaŋji] people, living on Cape Grafton Peninsula; shown as ‘g’ on Map 1.1.
- Majay (spoken by the Majaŋji) and Wanyurr(u) [waŋurr(u)] (no tribal name known), which may have been distinct dialects or else alternative names for one variety. These were spoken around the mouths of the Mulgrave and Russell Rivers; shown as ‘w’ on the map.

Gunggay and Waŋurr(u) are known only from old vocabularies, from 1896 to 1953; full details are in Dixon (1977a: 508–12). Nothing was recorded on Majay. All had passed into extinction by the time I began fieldwork.

- The Yidiñ dialects, of the Yidiñ-ji tribe. These were spoken over a wide area, from low-lying country west of the Murray Prior Range, up over the tablelands as far as the present-day town of Kairi. My material relates to two major varieties (with their map codes):
 - c Coastal Yidiñ, spoken from the city of Cairns and along the lower Mulgrave River (not quite to its mouth).
 - t Tableland Yidiñ, spoken up the Mulgrave River and as far as the headwaters of the Barron River.

There were half-a-dozen local groups within the tablelands territory (see Dixon 1977a: 3–4), presumably showing some dialect differences, but these are likely to have been rather minor.

There was more intensive European intrusion into Yidiñ-ji territory than into the lands of people speaking dialects of Dyirbal. As a consequence, the material I was able to record was less rich than that for Dyirbal (but more copious than that for Warrgamay). This comprised 20 texts, around 2,000 lexemes in the everyday language style, and about 200 in the Jalnguy style (all are in Dixon 1991a).

To the north of Yidiñ there was Ja:bugay, spoken by the Ja:bugaŋji tribe (there is good documentation in Patz 1991). It is a near genetic relative of Yidiñ—the two languages are about as similar as Spanish and Italian. Dyirbal shows no close genetic connection with Yidiñ, to the north, or with Warrgamay, to the south. Nor is there any genetic link between Warrgamay and its southerly neighbour Nyawaygi (documented in Dixon 1983).

Languages to the inland are also unrelated. To the west of Yidiñ there was Mbaram (the last fragments of this are in Dixon 1991b), and to the west of Dyirbal and Warrgamay there was Warungu (a poorish account of this is in Tsunoda 2012).

1.4 Phonology

There are many similarities, and also important differences, between the phonological systems of Dyirbal, Yidiñ, and Warrgamay.

1.4.1 Word structure

A word typically consists of two syllables with the following structure:

$$\text{CVC}_{1-3}\text{V}(\text{C})$$

That is, there is an obligatory consonant at the beginning, an optional consonant at the end, and one, two, or three consonants between vowels. There are no sequences of vowels. A longer word repeats the middle portion: $\text{CV}[\text{C}_{1-3}\text{V}]^n(\text{C})$.

There are no monosyllabic words in Yidiñ. Dyirbal has six: the interjections *ŋa* ‘yes’ and *ŋu* ‘alright’, plus reduced versions *ban*, *bam*, *ŋan*, and *ŋam* of noun markers *balan*, *balam*, *ŋalan*, and *ŋalam* (see chapter 2).

Warrgamay does have a small set (in the corpus collected) of about a dozen monosyllabic words. These all have a long vowel, with structure $\text{CV}:(\text{C})$; for example *ma:l* ‘man’, *ji:n* ‘eyebrow’, *wi:* ‘sun’, *ŋa:* ‘not’.

1.4.2 Consonants

There is a basic system of 13 consonants, set out in table 1.1.

The stops have voiced and voiceless allophones; they could, alternatively, have been written as ‘t, c, k, p’.

The apico-alveolar rhotic, *rr*, is in all languages a trill or tap. The apico-postalveolar (semi-retroflex) rhotic, *r*, is generally a continuant but can be realised as a trill articulated at the back of the alveolar ridge (further back than *rr*).

TABLE 1.1. Basic system of consonants

	apico- alveolar	apico- postalveolar	lamino- palatal	dorso- velar	bilabial
stop	d		j	g	b
nasal	n		ɲ	ŋ	m
lateral	l				
rhotic	rr	r			
semi-vowel			y		w

The one deviation from the standard system is in the Ngajan dialect of Dyirbal where an historical change has neutralised the rhotic contrast (see chapter 13). Ngajan has a single rhotic phoneme, written as *R* to distinguish it from *rr* and *r* elsewhere. It is generally pronounced as an alveolar tap.

In earlier publications—notably the three grammars, Dixon (1972, 1977a, 1981a)—some phonetic symbols were used. These have now been replaced by the ‘practical alphabet’ set out in table 1.1.

- the apico-alveolar rhotic was originally written as *r*, now as *rr*
- the apico-postalveolar rhotic was originally written as *ɺ*, now as *r*
- the lamino-palatal stop was originally written as *d̟*, now as *j*
- the lamino-palatal nasal was originally written as *ɲ*, then as *ny*, now as *ñ*

So that the names of tribes, dialects, and languages should only use letters of the roman alphabet, ‘ŋ’ is here written as ‘ng’. Thus Ngajan for [ŋajan], Gulngay for [gulŋay] and Gunggay for [gungay].

1.4.3 Vowels

All three languages have a system of three vowels: close front *i*, close back *u*, and open vowel *a*. There is a contrast between short vowels (*i*, *u*, *a*) and long vowels (*i:*, *u:*, *a:*) in Warrgamay, in the two northerly dialects (N and W) of Dyirbal, and in Yidiñ. The nature and development of this contrast are dealt with in chapters 13 and 14.

These languages have the smallest phoneme systems found in Australia. For an overview of phonological systems across the continent, see Dixon (2002a: 547–658).

1.4.4 Phonotactics

The three short vowels can occur in any syllable for all three languages. The same applies for long vowels in the N and W dialects of Dyirbal. In Warrgamay long vowels are only found in the initial syllable of a word, and in Yidiñ they are restricted to non-initial syllables.

In word-initial position, all three languages have the four stops, the four nasals, and the two semi-vowels. The lateral, *l*, does not occur word-initially—save in one word in Yidiñ and in one word in the Girramay dialect of Dyirbal.

In Warrgamay both rhotics may commence a word. In Yidiñ and the adjacent N and W dialects there are no initial rhotics (except in recent loans from English). The remaining dialects of Dyirbal have a few score words commencing with *r*, none with *rr*. There is discussion of initial rhotics in section 14.5.

Word-finally, we find *y*, *l*, *n*, *ñ*, and *m* in all languages, never a stop or *w*. Dyirbal and Warrgamay have no final *ŋ*. In Yidiñ a root may not end in *ŋ*, but a suffix can (presumably due to historical changes of reduction). A word may end in either rhotic in Yidiñ and Dyirbal (in the single rhotic in the N dialect) but only in *rr*, not *r*, in Warrgamay.

Between vowels we get, in outline (i) a lateral, rhotic, or *y*, followed by (ii) a nasal, followed by (iii) a stop. Or just (i) plus (ii), or just (i) plus (iii), or just (ii) plus (iii). Or any single consonant (this is the only position where all consonants contrast). The full details differ a little from language to language—see Dixon (1972: 272–4, 1977a: 35–7, 1981a: 21–2).

1.4.5 Stress

Rules for which syllables in a word are stressed (shown by an acute accent on the vowel) vary between languages.

In Dyirbal the basic principle is that the first and every alternate syllable of a word should be stressed, except that a final syllable never bears stress. This applies irrespective of whether a vowel is long or short. For instance, ‘spear’ is *báŋgay* in most dialects but *báŋga:* in Ngajan, with the initial short vowel stressed and the final long vowel unstressed. In addition, the first syllable of an affix may be stressed (conditions for this are set out in Dixon 1972: 274–5).

If the first syllable of a word in Warrgamay has a long vowel, this receives primary stress. If there is no long vowel, stress goes on the first syllable of a word with two or four syllables, and on the second syllable of a word with three or five syllables. Secondary stress then goes onto every second syllable after the one with primary stress excepting that, as in Dyirbal, a final syllable cannot be stressed. (See Dixon 1981a: 20–1.)

Turning now to Yidiñ, stress is assigned to the first syllable with a long vowel. If there is no long vowel, it is assigned to the first syllable of the word. Further stresses are then allocated to alternate syllables forwards and backwards from this. Note that long vowels always occur in a stressed syllable; in keeping with this, two long vowels are always separated by an odd number of syllables. (Full details are in Dixon 1977a: 39–42.)

Note that it is neither possible nor profitable to distinguish between two degrees of stress in Dyirbal and Yidiñ, as was done for Warrgamay.

1.5 Typological characteristics

These languages have a basically agglutinative structure, with many suffixes but no prefixes. There are four main open word classes:

noun	}	nominal
adjective		
verb	}	verbal
adverbial		

Nouns and adjectives take the same set of cases and share other morphological properties. A main criterion for distinguishing them in Dyirbal is that generally a noun can occur with the marker of only one gender, while an adjective may be associated with several genders. There is a similar criterion in Yidiñ with respect to classifiers. See chapters 2 and 3.

Verbs and adverbals show the same morphological possibilities. Just as an adjective typically modifies a noun, so an adverbial typically modifies a verb. Examples are *gija-n* ‘do quickly’ in Yidiñ, *gulma-l* ‘do something that shouldn’t be done’ in Dyirbal, and *ga:ma-l* ‘do like this’ in Warrgamay. The nature and function of adverbals (in Dyirbal) are discussed in chapters 8 and 9.

In each language verbals are grouped into two or three conjugations, according to their allomorphic choices for suffixes. These are shown by a hyphenated letter after the root; for example *bura-l* ‘see, look at’ in Dyirbal belongs to the ‘-l’ conjugation. There is also a division into intransitive and transitive. In Dyirbal and Yidiñ, transitivity correlates—but does not coincide—with conjugation membership. Dyirbal has two conjugations; the -y class is predominantly intransitive while the -l class is predominantly transitive. The two major conjugations in Yidiñ, -n and -l, correspond to -y and -l classes in Dyirbal. Yidiñ also has a small -r conjugation, mostly transitive. Warrgamay has undergone a fascinating change whereby transitivity now does coincide with conjugation—see chapter 10.

Dyirbal and Yidiñ each has a system of verbal inflections which includes tense, purposive, apprehensive, positive and negative imperatives, and subordinate clause markings. There are generally two tenses: these are future/non-future in southern dialects of Dyirbal, and past/non-past in northern dialects of Dyirbal and in Yidiñ. In Ja:bugay—Yidiñ’s northerly neighbour and close genetic relative—there are three tenses: past, present, and future. Warrgamay is distinctive in having no tenses at all, but instead a number of aspectual-type distinctions; see chapter 10.

Each language also has classes of time words, locational words, particles (including ‘not’), interjections, demonstrative(s), and, of course, pronouns.

As in many Australian languages, 1st and 2nd person pronouns and nominals have different ways of showing core syntactic functions. The most complex situation is found in Warrgamay and in Girramay, the contiguous dialect of Dyirbal, as illustrated in table 1.2.

In Warrgamay and Girramay, 1st and 2nd person singular pronouns have distinct forms for A, S, and O (what is called ‘tripartite marking’). Non-singular 1st and 2nd person pronouns have one form (nominative) for both S and A and another form (accusative) for O. In Yidiñ, and in other dialects of Dyirbal, all 1st and 2nd person pronouns are on a nominative/accusative basis. In all three languages nominals have an ergative case for A function and are in absolutive form, with zero case marking, for both S and O. (This is known as ‘split-ergative’ morphological marking.)

The ways in which syntactic functions A, S, and O are grouped together for clause linking is also a matter of interest. In some circumstances S and O are linked; this is

TABLE 1.2. Marking of core syntactic functions in the Girramay dialect of Dyirbal

	1st and 2nd person non-singular pronouns, e.g. 1dual	1st and 2nd person singular pronouns, e.g. 1sg	nominals (nouns and adjectives) e.g. ‘man’
transitive subject (A)	ɲali NOMINATIVE FORM	ɲaja	yara-ɲgu ERGATIVE CASE
intransitive subject (S)		ɲayba	yara ABSOLUTIVE FORM
transitive object (O)	ɲali-ña ACCUSATIVE CASE	ɲaña	

called ‘ergative syntax’. In others S and A are linked: ‘accusative syntax’. These circumstances are described and explained in chapter 7.

Pronouns in Warrgamay and Dyirbal have three number forms: singular, dual, and plural. Just in northern dialects of Dyirbal, there are two 1st person dual pronouns, depending on the relationship between the people referred to. For example, *ɲali* is used for ‘me and a sibling or grandparent’ and *ɲanaymba* for ‘me and a parent or child’; see section 4.3. Basically, Yidiñ just has a singular/non-singular distinction plus the 1st person dual form *ɲali* which is probably a recent borrowing from Dyirbal; see section 14.4.

Only in Warrgamay do we find a full set of 3rd person pronouns. These occur in singular, dual, and plural, each having separate forms for A, S, and O functions (like 1st and 2nd person singular). In Yidiñ, demonstratives fill some of the roles associated with 3rd person pronouns in other languages. And in Dyirbal ‘noun markers’ (which show gender) fill some of the roles of a 3rd person singular pronoun; these are discussed in chapter 2. Dyirbal does have dual and plural 3rd person pronouns, the forms varying between dialects; see chapter 11.

Looking now at demonstratives, Warrgamay has a two-way contrast, ‘this’ versus ‘that’. In the other two languages there is a three-term system. The meanings are ‘here and visible’, ‘there and visible’ and ‘not visible’ all through Dyirbal (see Dixon 2014) and in the adjacent tablelands dialect of Yidiñ, but ‘here’, ‘there, mid-distance’, and ‘there, far’ in the coastal dialect of Yidiñ. There is discussion of this in section 14.2.

Each of the three languages has two possessive constrictions. If the ‘possessed’ item is a part, it is simply apposed to the ‘possessor’. A Dyirbal example is *yara jina* ‘man’s foot’. If the ‘possessed’ is a kin term or some object, then the genitive suffix is added to the ‘possessor’, as in *yara-ɲu yabu* ‘man’s mother’ and *yara-ɲu waɲal* ‘man’s boomerang’.

We can now in chapter 2, consider the workings and semantic basis of the gender system in Dyirbal, with its unusual member 'edible gender'.

A prefatory note is needed. The reader must excuse me for using the word 'sex' in its traditional meaning, for the biological difference between women and men, rather than 'gender', which is properly a grammatical label. I can then say 'female sex is marked by feminine gender', which is clear, whereas 'female gender is marked by feminine gender' sounds distinctly obtuse.