Bardi Verb Morphology in Historical Perspective
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Many languages in Northern Australia exhibit complex verbal predication. Most commonly a subset of inflecting verbs appears with an uninflecting ‘coverb’; the two constituents jointly determine the argument structure and Aktionsart of the predicate. My dissertation is an investigation of these issues in Bardi (an endangered Nyulnyulan language spoken on the North-Western Australian coast) and the languages to which it is related. I examine possible synchronic analyses and reconstruct the history of the formation of the systems between Proto-Nyulnyulan and the modern attested languages. There has been very little previous work on the history of complex predicates, and no detailed historical reconstruction for the Nyulnyulan family.

Synchronically, there are issues in the analysis of predicate structure that reflect fundamental assumptions about the nature of generative grammar, such as lexical “adicity” (the ability of lexical items to be modified by their syntactic context) and the role of morphology and syntax (if there is one) in the lexicon. More basically: what should the analysis of a predicate with simple event structure but complex argument structure be? Various analyses have been proposed for North Australian languages, ranging from ‘compounds’ to ‘verb + auxiliary’ to ‘verb + classifier’ to complex predicates. I present evidence that the structures in Bardi are true complex predicates and that auxiliation, compounding, or ‘classifier’ analyses cannot account for all the data.

Diachronically, too, there are many intriguing problems in the syntax of Nyulnyulan languages that warrant investigation. Although the two branches of the family are very close, the number and type of simple predicates in each branch is very different. Why, for example, should so few inflecting verb roots be cognate between Eastern and Western Nyulnyulan when the languages otherwise share many lexical cognates? Why do Western Nyulnyulan languages have double the number of verb roots that the Eastern languages do? The answers to such questions can be found in the etymology of the inflecting roots themselves. In the modern Nyulnyulan languages the simple inflecting verb roots are monomorphemic. Historically, however, many such roots appear to include an ‘incorporated’ element (either phrasal incorporation or argument incorporation, or perhaps compounding). It is striking that the verbal elements used in root formation of this type are the same light verbs that are used in complex predicates in the modern Nyulnyulan languages. The complex predicates are also very interesting from the point of view of syntactic reconstruction, and the tracing of calquing and language contact. Closed class simple predicates and (co)verb + verb complex predicates are an areal feature of Australia’s North-West and cross-cut genetic families. Thus a further result of my dissertation is the elucidation of the relative roles of calquing, lexical borrowing and internal change that have caused the diversification of the Nyulnyulan languages. This is especially apposite in the current context of debates on the place of genetic linguistics in Australia and the utility of reconstruction methods developed for Indo-European languages. I show that the same methods apply to Australian languages.
This dissertation falls into two parts. The first is introductory. Because the Nyulnyulan languages and the area in which they are spoken are not widely known in the historical and syntactic literature, I give information on the speakers and their history, and a brief sketch of the non-verbal information important for an understanding of Bardi clause structure. I also provide an overview of the major points of the phonological system which Nyulnyulan languages share, and discuss the sound changes which the various languages (and Bardi in particular) have undergone.

The second part contains the synchronic and diachronic analyses of Bardi’s simple and complex predicate structures. Inflecting verb roots in Bardi are synchronically unanalyzable; historically however they show relics of incorporation. I show in Chapter 5 that Proto-Nyulnyulan is most likely to have had a syntactic process of noun incorporation which was preserved longer in the Western Nyulnyulan languages than in the Eastern languages. This accounts for the number of verb roots which can be reconstructed only to one branch of the family. In chapters 6-8 I discuss the affixal morphology which inflecting roots may exhibit. The Nyulnyulan languages have complex verbal agreement paradigms and a combination of morphological and phonological changes has made the segmentation of morphemes an interesting synchronic problem. I also provide a rare case study of morphological reanalysis and restructuring in a complex morphological system. The remainder of the work is devoted to a discussion of complex predicition and verb classification. Previous work on Nyulnyulan complex predicates has paid little attention to the syntax of these constructions and even less to a detailed study of their historical origins. I show that despite objections by McGregor (2002) the Bardi coverb + inflecting verb construction should, in fact, be classed as a complex predicate and that this analysis is compatible with the functional analysis of the light verb as a verbal classifier. In the Nyulnyulan languages we have a laboratory to test some of the predictions of theories of complex predicate structure, and I do this in the context of previous work by Wilson (1999), Massam (2002), and Hale and Keyser (2003).