Frames of Reference

Different aspects of Frames of Reference (FoR) have been analyzed in detail since (at least) the early 1990s. Researchers have studied cross-linguistic variety (Levinson, 1996; Levinson and Wilkins, 2006; Pederson et al., 1998), given detailed accounts of individual languages (François, 2003; Haviland, 1993; Hoffmann, 2011; Schultze-Berndt, 2006), considered the impact of landscape and cognition on FoRs (Bohnemeyer and O’Meara, 2012; Danziger, 2010; Levinson, 2003, 2008; Palmer, 2015), explored usage patterns (Hoffmann, sub), and provided regional overviews (Bohnemeyer, 2013; François, 2004, 2015).

I am interested in how languages express absolute Frames of Reference focusing particularly on the Australian continent. How do genetic affiliation, location and landscape features, climate zone, typological area, and cultural overlap influence choice and usage of these types of spatial reference? What happens at boundary areas and which factors are the most influential?

Absolute Frames of Reference in Australia

Absolute FoR requires fixed bearings that are instantly available to all members of the community (Levinson and Wilkins, 2006, 21). There is a wide variety of absolute systems in Australian languages, including compass- (e.g., Warlpiri (Laughren, 1978)), wind- (Kala Lagaw Ya (Stirling, 2011, 182; Bani, 2001)), river drainage- (Dyirbal (Dixon, 1972)), ocean- (Iwaidja (Edmonds-Wathen, 2011); Edmonds-Watthen, 2012, 142–143), and tide-based (Bardi (Bowern, 2012, 30). Recently, Blythe et al. (2016) described the Murrinh-Patha system where no absolute directionals are present, but speakers instead utilize named landmarks, demonstratives and pointing in spatial descriptions. Finally, for some languages, a number of systems overlap, for example in Gurindji sun- and river-drainage-based systems as in (1) (Meakins, 2011) and in MalakMalak wind-, sun-, and riverbank-based systems (2) (Hoffmann, 2016).

(1) **Gurindji: River drainage and sun-based system**

ngu-rnalu ya-ni kanimparra, kaarnimpa nyawa. Nangala-lu paraj pu-nya cat-1pl.excl go-pst downstream east.along this subsect-erg find pierce-pst ngu-∅-∅ ngarlu. cat-3sg.sbj-3sg.obj honey

“We came downstream along the eastern side here. (Then) Nangala found some bush honey.” 

(2) **MalakMalak: Wind- and sun-based system**

yinya nende dangid-en pud wu-runguny, miri-nen man thing/person southeasterly-dir chest 3pl-go/be.ipfv, sun-dir payi-ga-ma change.location-come-cont

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1 Abbreviations used are the following: cat = catalyst, cont = continuous, dir = directional, erg = ergative, excl = exclusive, ipfv = imperfective, obj = object, pst = past, pl = plural, sg = singular, sbj = subject
“the men are facing towards the southeasterly wind direction, towards the east (where the sun comes up)” (Hoffmann fieldwork, 2012)

Furthermore, there is variation within absolute systems. For example, wind-based systems can either be seasonally dependent or fixed. In Kala Lagaw Ya there is evidence for a system bound to winds at specific times of the year, even though the younger generation is now shifting towards a fixed system (Stirling, 2011, 186–87; Bani, 2001, 477). On the other hand, the system employed by MalakMalak and Matngele winds from the (distant) sea and inland blowing at distinct times of the year is used year-round with fixed reference-points (Hoffmann, 2016). Additionally, such wind-based systems are common in small island communities, especially in Oceanic (François, 2003, 2004, 2015) and Austronesian languages (Adelaar, 1997), but also in Polynesian (Svorou, 1994), some African (Brauner, 1998; Mietzner and Pasch, 2007) and a Tibeto-Burman language (Post, 2011). However, their existence in mainland Australia has been largely overlooked with the exception of Hoffmann (2016) and Nash (2013).

Finally, usage patterns for these absolute directionals have only been tentatively described. Edmonds-Wathen (2012, 90) determines that non-Pama-Nyungan languages, such as Jaminjung and Warrwa use the absolute frame in small scale space only when other resources are not available, while Pama-Nyungan languages make widespread use of absolute systems in large- and small scale descriptions. Furthermore, in some languages with a number of absolute systems there is systematic usage variation based on different contexts. For example, in MalakMalak the wind-based system is limited to motion and orientation settings (in Terrill and Burenhult (2008)’s sense), the sun-based system can additionally be used in deictic FoR settings, and the riverbank system is most flexible in allowing for deictic and non-deictic FoR settings in addition to orientation and motion descriptions (Hoffmann, sub).

Questions to address

In previous studies of spatial language and absolute directionals in Australia, much attention has been paid to compass-directions and their usage in either only large- or both small- and large-scale settings. Other systems have been described for individual languages, but so far no comparative study has been conducted taking into account what possible influences on absolute systems across linguistic and cultural areas exist. I am currently preparing a manuscript on this subject.

Another area of particular interest are absolute systems employed by newly emerging languages such as the varieties of Kriol, an English-lexified creole spoken across indigenous language boundaries all across northern Australia, or mixed languages such as Gurindji Kriol and Light Warlpiri (Meakins, 2011; OShannessy and Meakins, 2016). Are the systems used similar to those of their substrate or superstrate languages? To what extend are they dependent on extra-linguistic factors? What cognitive and linguistic shifts are taking place? Additionally, are there universal uses of absolute directionals across the Australian continent or can systematic variation be found with regards to genetic and/or typological variation? What roles do landscape and geographic conditions, climate and seasonal patterns play (Palmer, 2015)? Finally, what wider implications for cross-linguistic generalization are evident from
observing spatial frames of reference in a typologically and culturally relatively homogeneous, but genetically diverse area such as Australia?

**References**


