Some Observations on Spatial Referencing in Yindjibarndi Culture and Language

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This position paper reports on spatial referencing in the Yindjibarndi language. Yindjibarndi is spoken by about 500 people in the Pilbara region of Northwestern Australia (Wordick 1982; Mark and Turk 2003; Mark, Turk, and Stea 2007). Yindjibarndi belongs to the Coastal Ngayarda language group, within the southwest group of Pama-Nyungan languages. David Mark and Andrew Turk conducted landscape and language fieldwork with Yindjibarndi speakers on field trips between 2002 and 2009.

Spatial Referencing
Spatial referencing in Yindjibarndi is represented by several different parts of speech and linguistic structures, including locative suffixes, directional nouns, and other nouns.

Locative Suffixes
“Languages of the Pama-Nyungan family are entirely suffixing in their morphology. . . . Suffixes serve also to derive new words, and among them those meaning ‘having’ and ‘lacking’ are almost universal in Australian languages.” (Gutman and Avanzati 2013). Anderson (1986) listed 141 suffixes in the Yindjibarndi language. Anderson classified seven of these as “locative case.”

Directional nouns
Wordick (1982) and Anderson (1986) identified five classes of nouns. Two of those classes contain only three nouns each, and were named “Directional nouns (north type) (NDN)” and “Directional nouns (south type) (NDS)” by Wordick.

The three “north type” directional nouns (from Anderson 1986) mean “in or at the north,” upstream/interior, and downstream. The three “south type” directional nouns mean “in the south,” “in the west,” and “in the east.” The principal river of traditional Yindjibarndi country, known as the Fortescue River in English, has intermittent or seasonal flow. For most of its length, the Fortescue flows west. The two groups of directional nouns are grouped in a way that is unexpected to an English speaker: “In the north” is grouped with the two riverine directionals, whereas the other three cardinal directions are in the other group. This begs for further investigation.

Qualitative Distance Noun:
“Wana refers to ngurra (ground) in the middle distance, such as the side of a marnda (or perhaps a flat area)—where you can still see something (like a kangaroo) but it is much too far away to throw a stone at it (or shoot the kangaroo). Wanangga could refer to the location of something in the middle distance.” (Turk and Mark 2008).
Transcripts and word counts for locatives:
In June 2006, we showed (40) photographs of Australian landscapes, mostly from traditional Yindjibarndi country or the area where the people now live (Roebourne), separately to four groups of Yindjibarndi speakers. One “group” consisted of just one person, the oldest speaker living at the time. Others were small groups of two or more speakers. People were asked to “tell us what’s on the picture, in Yindjibarndi language” or something similar. The four sessions produced almost five hours of audio, and were transcribed by the authors. The transcripts contained 26,211 words.

Word Counts for locatives: The Yindjibarndi dictionary (Anderson) included 19 terms ending with the locative suffix –ngga. The combined transcripts contained at total of 64 terms ending with –ngga. The suffix was attached to 28 different nouns within the transcripts. Only four of the 28 terms from the transcripts appeared in the dictionary. Most or all of the others presumably were formed from –ngga as a productive locative suffix. Thungga is the most common –ngga word in the transcripts, occurring 40 times total, and also appears in the dictionary. But thungga is said to mean “soil, dirt, sand” and in this case, –ngga does not seem to be the locative suffix; “thu-” does not seem to be a root in Yindjibarndi. Similarly, bungga means “fall”. Wirrangga is a term for Red River Gum trees, and again the –ngga does not make sense as a locative, although since wirra means boomerang, perhaps there is a semantic connection. The other two –ngga words that were found both in the transcripts and in Anderson’s dictionary were: ngarlingga (downwind) and gardangga (down, low, below). The most common other –ngga compound nouns in the transcripts were wirgangga (wirga = gap), bawangga (bawa = water), biyungga (biyu = dry), and thalungga (thalu = ritual site).

Summary
Yindjibarndi speakers are able to communicate locations in the environment through a variety of elements of their language. Landscape terms themselves refer to entities in the environment. Locative suffixes are a way to use landscape entities as grounds for locating other entities (figures). Two closed classes of nouns denote directions. Four of the directional nouns appear to denote the four cardinal directions while to refer to upstream and downstream. The use of these six directional nouns would be a high priority if future research with speakers becomes possible.

References
