Language of the Kūrnū Tribe, New South Wales

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First published as 'Langage des Kurnu, tribu d'Indigènes de la Nouvelle Galles du Sud' in *Bulletins et Mémoires de la Société d'Anthropologie de Paris*, 5 (5th series) (1904), pp. 132-38. The article was written in English and translated into French by Oscar Schmidt. This version was retranslated into English by Mathilde de Hauteclocque.[1]

In a previous article addressed to the society, I dealt with the language of the Wailwan, one of the native tribes of New South Wales.[2] Here, I will attempt to show the grammatical structure of the language of the Kūrnū tribe, who occupy a large territory along the Darling river.

The grammar of the Kūrnū language is one of the most interesting, because it possesses characteristics that I have not observed in any other of the native idioms in New South Wales. Thus, for example, it can be seen in the table of pronouns that their form is modified to express the present, the past and the future. It will also be seen that the pronouns governed by transitive verbs differ from those used with intransitive verbs. Although the present, past and future tense can be expressed within the verb itself, the pronoun suffix can also express tense.

In 1902 I communicated to the Royal Society of New South Wales[3] a summary of Kūrnū grammar, but I omitted the verbs and other details because I did not then understand the difficulties presented by the pronouns and the more uncommon variations they are subjected to in conjunction with the verbs. Since that first, succinct report, a journey to this tribe allowed me to collect much new data.

Kūrnū grammar

The territory of the native tribes who speak the Kūrnū language begins on the Darling, between Tilpa and Louth, and extends on both sides of the river, up to Bourke, and a little beyond. It also extends along the Warrego river as far as Ford's Bridge. Dialects of Kūrnū are spoken all along the Darling downstream from Tilpa, via Wilcannia and Menindie, as far as Wentworth, that is to say for a distance of about 350 miles. The Kūrnū language, with a few dialectal variations, also extends further beyond the Darling River, as far as the Tarowoto lake and the Barrier Ranges and back to the Paroo River, following it as far as the

Queensland border. I personally collected the following elements of the language in Kūrnū territory, from reliable and intelligent elders of both sexes.

Orthography

The system of spelling used in this article is the same as that in my previous paper on the Wailwan language, already published by the Anthropological Society.

Articles

The demonstrative pronouns in their various forms replace the definite article. The equivalent of the English adverb 'here', as well as its variations, is often treated as a demonstrative pronoun in the native language. These natives do not seem to have the abstract idea of a man, an emu or other similar subjects, but speak always of a particular man or animal and, as a consequence, make use of a demonstrative, such as: 'this man', 'the emu over there' and so on. If they want to specify that they do not have just one object in view, they do it by using the plural which can be considered a replacement for our indefinite article.

Nouns

Nouns have number, gender and case.

Number — There are three numbers: the singular, the dual and the plural. The dual and the plural are formed by adding the number 'two' or 'several' to the singular: *Thurlta,* a kangaroo; *Thurltapakula,* a couple of kangaroos; *Thurlta gutthalagu,* several kangaroos.

Gender — For human beings, gender is defined by the use of different words: *Wimbadya,* a man; *Kambukka*, a woman; *Kurtyungga*, a boy; *Karnkali*, a girl; *Mundhanggura,* a child of either sex.

The gender of animals is shown by the use of words which indicate male or female: *Thurlta dhuladya,* a male kangaroo; *Thurlta ngammugga*, a female kangaroo.

Certain male animals have a name that distinguishes them, without the sex being specified and certain females are also recognisable by a special word. In these cases, it is unnecessary to give the name of the animal.

Case — The principal cases are: nominative, causative, instrumental, accusative, genitive, dative and ablative.

Nominative — When the action described stays with the subject, the noun is not declined. Example: *Wimbadya ngingganunna*, the man is seated.

Causative — When the given action can be transferred to an object, in the accusative, the subject takes a case-suffix: *Wimbadyawa waku burtatyi*, the man a snake killed. *Kulliwa yerrandyi dhuttatyi,* a dog an opossum bit.

Instrumental — In many Australian languages, the grammar of which I have previously studied, the suffix is the same for the instrumental and the causative, but in Kūrnū it is the genitive suffix which is applied in the instrumental case. Examples: *Kumbukkawa wimbadya bulkatyi kurnkarna,* a woman beat a man with a yam stick. *Wimbadyawa thurlta bundatyi karpukkarna,* a man pierced a kangaroo with a spear. *Kutyunggawa thapura wurtatyi mulkarna,* the boy caught a cod with a net. *Bulkawutthuru wangulu wunnarna,* he killed a wallaby with a boomerang.

Genitive — *Wimbadyarna wunna,* a man's boomerang. *Kumbukkarna kurnka,* a woman's yam stick. *Kullirna gurni*, a dog's tail.

Accusative — Is the same as the nominative.

Dative — *Yuppira,* a camp. *Yuppiramirra,* to a camp.

Ablative — *Yuppirandu,* of a camp/from a camp.

Adjectives

Adjectives follow the nouns which they qualify and take the same inflections for number and case: *Wimbadya wurta*, a man large. *Wimbadyawa wurtawa wunna ngartatyi,* a tall man threw a boomerang. *Wimbadyrna wurtana wunna,* a tall man's boomerang.

The suffix is often omitted from one of the words and applied either to the substantive or only to the adjective to indicate the number and the case of it, usage being governed by the euphony of the sentence.

Comparison of adjectives is expressed by two positive statements, such as: *Ithu gundyalka, ithugaru dhulugalla,* this one is good, the other is bad.

Pronouns

Kūrnū pronouns have several special inflections which are not found in other Australian languages described by me. An entire series of pronouns applies only to transitive verbs, while another series is used only with intransitive verbs. Moreover, these pronouns change as much for the transitive verbs as for the intransitive verbs, according to whether they relate to the present, the past or the future. There are two forms for the first person, according to whether a dual or plural is intended.

Here is a table of nominative pronouns, used with transitive verbs, in each of the three tenses. Apart from their use as pronouns, they express, at the same

time, the different forms of the auxiliary verb 'to be'; for example, *ngutthu* which not only signifies 'I' but also 'I am'.

		Present	**Past**	**Future**
	I	*Ngutthu*	*Wutthu*	*Gutthu*
Singular	You	*Ng'irndhu*	*Wirndu*	*Girndu*
	He	*Ngutthera*	*Wutthera*	*Gutthera*
	We, incl.	*Ngulli*	*Wulli*	*Gulli*
Dual	We, excl.	*Nguttherangulli*	*Wuttherawulli*	*Guttheragulli*
	You	*Ngupa*	*Wupa*	*Gupa*
	They	*Nguttherangulu*	*Wuttherawulu*	*Guttheragulu*
	We, incl.	*Nginna*	*Winna*	*Ginna*
Plural	We, excl.	*Dhūndinginna*	*Dhūndiwinna*	*Dhūndiginna*
	You	*Ngurta*	*Wurta*	*Gurta*
	They	*Ngutthē*	*Wutthē*	*Gutthē*

The pronouns that are used with intransitive verbs differ from the preceding ones, in the first and second person, in the present, past and future, as the following table shows:

		Present	**Past**	**Future**
	I	*Nguppa*	*Wuppa*	*Guppa*
Singular	You	*Ngimba*	*Wimba*	*Gimba*
	He	*Ngutthera*	*Wutthera*	*Gutthera*

As intransitive and transitive verbs are conjugated identically in the dual and plural there is no need to repeat the forms here.

The possessive pronouns are as follows:

	1st person	mine	*Ngari*
Singular	2nd person	your	*Ngoma*
	3rd person	his	*Githuna*
	1st person	our (incl)	*Ngullina*
		our (excl)	*Wuttherangullina*
Dual	2nd person	your	*Ngupunna*
	3rd person	their	*Wutthawuna*
	1st person	our (incl)	*Nginnunna*
		our (excl)	*Dhūndinginnunna*
Plural	2nd person	your	*Ngurtunna*
	3rd person	their	*Wutthina*

The following are the accusative forms of the singular pronouns:

	1st person	me	*Ngunnha*
Singular	2nd person	you	*Ngūmma*
	3rd person	him	*Ginnunna*

There are other modifications of pronouns, signifying 'to me', 'away from me' etc. as in the following examples.

	1st person	to me	*Ngunnhari*
Singular	3rd person	to him	*Gitthunari*
Dual	1st person	to us, incl	*Ngullinari*
Plural	1st person	to us, incl	*Nginnanari*
Singular	1st person	of me	*Ngunnarndu*
	3rd person	of him	*Wutthunardu*
Dual	1st person	of us, incl	*Ngullinarndu*
		of us, incl	*Nginnanarndu*
		with me, near me	*Ngariri*

In each of the above examples the same inflections can be applied to all persons in the singular, dual or plural.

Interrogatives — Who (in the singular) *windyaka*. Who (dual) *windyula*. Who (plural) *windyiwindyi*. What, *minnha*. What for, *minnhamundi*.

Demonstratives — The demonstratives are numerous and varied and indicate the position, the distance, the direction, the size, the number, the person, the possession etc. All pronouns in the third person are, in fact, demonstratives, which explains their irregularity and the absence of their etymological connections.

Here are some examples of these demonstratives: This one, *ithu*. This other one, *ithugari*.These two, *ithuwutu*. All these, *ithangirnga*. That, *githu*. That other one, *wutthagari*. That one over there, *wurradyalanaga*. That one behind me, *dhurnangurrina*. That one (above me), *buringunna*. That one (below me), *kukuruna*. On this side (of the person who is being spoken to), *yaumirri*. On the other side (of the person being spoken to), *wurramungamirri*. That big one there, *wurtuwurri*. Belonging to this one, *ithuna*. Belonging to these two, *ithuwuna*. Belonging to all these ones, *ithinna*.

Many of these demonstratives are modified to adapt them to the accompanying transitive or intransitive verbs and also to adapt them with the tense, as is the case with pronouns.

Verbs

Verbs have three numbers and three persons and have a variant 'inclusive' or 'exclusive' in the first person of the dual and plural forms.

Each tense has its own distinct form, but the tense can also be indicated by pronouns suffixed to the verb. Here, for example, is a summarised conjugation of the verb *bulka*, to strike or to kill.

Present Indicative

	1st person	I strike	*Bulkangunna-ngutthu*
Singular	2nd person	You strike	*Bulkangunna-ngirndhu*
	3rd person	He strikes	*Bulkangunna-ngutthera*

I do not consider it necessary to give examples for the dual and the plural; the variations of number and person can be expressed by applying in each case the special pronoun that can be found in the table of nominative pronouns given on an earlier page of this article.

Past

	1st person	I struck	*Bulkangga-wutthu*
Singular	2nd person	you struck	*Bulkangga-wirndu*
	3rd person	He struck	*Bulkangga-wutthera*

Future

	1st person	I will strike	*Bulkara-gutthu*
Singular	2nd person	You will strike	*Bulkara-girndu*
	3rd person	He will strike	*Bulkara-gutthera*

Imperative

Strike, *bulkalla*. The negative or prohibitive form is expressed thus: *killa bulkalla*, do not strike.

Conditional

Should I strike? *Killamura bulkaragutthu*.

Reflexive

The reflexive form of the verb describes the action of the subject directed towards himself.

	1st person	I strike myself	*Bulkamuldhanguppa*
Singular	2nd person	You strike yourself	*Bulkamuldhangga-wuppa*
	3rd person	he strikes himself	*Bulhamuldhara-guppa*

Imperative

Strike yourself. *Bulkamuldha*.

Reciprocal

One form of the verb serves to express the communal and reciprocal action of two or more persons; this form is obviously restricted to the dual or plural.

We (dual inclusive) hit each other, *Bulkkamilla-ngulli*. We were hit by each other, *Bulkamillangga-wulli*. We will hit each other, *Bulkamillara-gulli*. In the

preceding examples all forms of 'person' and 'number' can be indicated by pronouns.

The conjugation of an intransitive verb can only change according to the pronouns that are added to it as shown by the following example, *ngingga* to sit:

Indicative

Present	1st person	I sit	*Ngingganggunna-nguppa*
Past	1st person	I sat	*Ngingganggа-wuppa*
Future	1st person	I will sit	*Ngingara-guppa*

And so it follows for the other 'persons' and 'numbers' the appropriate pronouns being used as shown in the preceding tables.

Verbs, whether transitive or intransitive, have forms that indicate whether the action described is immediate, imminent or distant, either in the past or in the future; these forms also express continuity or repetition of the action. Numerous other modifications of the verbs serve to highlight a whole series of nuances of meaning. I will refrain from entering into a discussion of these for the moment.

The passive has no special form and the sentence 'a boy was punished by his father' would be expressed by the paraphrase 'a father punished his son'.

Adverbs

Yes, *ngi*. No, *ngattha*. Here, *kungara*. There, *wurra*. Over there, *wurtityallinnaga*. Today, *kailpomainka*. Yesterday, *yillana*. Tomorrow, *wambinna*. By and by *gunni*. In the future, *gundigundyi*. First, *mirraga*.

Where are you, *windyarra ngimba*. Where are you going, *windaywurradhani ngimba*. How many, *ngulthurra*. How or why, *nunguna*.

Prepositions

In front of, *mirrika*. Behind, *ngunda*. Between, *bukkula*. Beside, *gungo*. At the bottom, *baikakika*. At the top, *wunggalu*. Inside, *ngungguru*. Other side, *murlaka*. This side (of the river), *wurrangurraga*. Behind me, *dhurna-ngariri*. Behind you, *dhurna-ngumari*. Behind him, *dhurna-gitthunari*.

ENDNOTES

[1] [Editor's note] Offprints of these articles, containing pencilled corrections in Mathews' hand, are located at National Library of Australia MS 8006/8/199 and 8006/8/200. Another is in the possession of Mathews' descendants. These amendments have been incorporated into the text.

[2] [Editor's note] R. H. Mathews, 'Le langage Wailwan', *Bulletins et Mémoires de la Société d'Anthropologie de Paris*, vol. 4 (5th Series), no. 1, 1903. Reproduced this volume.

[3] RHM 1902, 'Languages of some Native Tribes of Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria', *Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales*, vol. 36, pp. 154-57.