

GUNKURNG,⁶ A MOTHER-IN-LAW LANGUAGE

JOY HARRIS

It is well known that the Australian Aborigine has a highly developed kinship system, assigning each person within his social universe a classificatory relationship if he is not a blood relation. Reciprocal behaviour is traditionally specified according to one's standing in relation to Ego. According to Pike's thesis in his work on 'language in relation to a unified theory of the structure of human behavior',¹ language is a specified form of behavior. One can see this very clearly when analysing the taboo relationships in the Gunwinggu language group of Australian Aborigines. Avoidance is the ideal in social behavior between male Ego and his mother-in-law or female Ego and her father-in-law, and between Ego and his/her non-marriageable cousins.² The ideal (the simplicity of which is exaggerated in any analytical treatment) is not always practicable because of camp living and the responsibility the younger adults have to care for the older. Therefore, various forms of ritual avoidance are found in everyday camp life. A man hands his mother-in-law her share of his recent kill in his left hand with that wrist clasped in his right hand, eyes averted. Ideally cousins are never approached in isolation, but a discreet distance is kept. One never speaks to a taboo relation if there is a third person present, but speaks through the third. Here is the role of language in an avoidance situation. Whenever one finds it necessary to speak to a mother-in-law, or such relation, or finds need to speak in her vicinity, he does not use the regular language but a ritual language³ called *gunkurrng* (commonly *ngarrimikme*) *cousin talk*.

Gunwinggu is a virile language, spoken by several hundred men, women and children in locations from Goulburn Island in northern Arnhem Land to Bamyili settlement outside Katherine, so the gunkurrng is still well-used and virile also. Since the occurrence of ritual language is not uncommon in Australia,⁴ one would expect when finding evidence of such a dialect in a language to find the same phenomenon in other dialects or languages related to the first. However, this is not the case. Although there is a *cousin talk or mother-in-law language* in Gunwinggu, there is none in related languages Gunbalang, Gundangbon or Gunjawan, according to my Aboriginal informants. The presence of such a ritual language in these other dialects will bear further investigation, however, for although I had a close personal relationship with my Gunwinggu informant, I still had to produce a sample of the Gunkurrng⁵ before she would acknowledge its existence. Once we were beyond this barrier she was willing to give me any amount of material.

Phonology. Gunkurrng is readily recognizable as a dialect of Gunwinggu, for the phones are the same, with the same restrictions on occurrence in combination and initially or finally. Word and sentence stress as well as intonation are the same as Gunwinggu.

Morphology. The morphological structure is the same as that of the parent language, but the content or shape of the morphs is different. There are the same number of noun classes, designated by the same prefixes, but with different stems. Although the noun and verb stems differ from Gunwinggu, they are chiefly cognates with a discernible systematic change. Some examples of the nouns with the Gunwinggu example preceded by a G and the Gunkurrng preceded by an N: G kun-worr/ N kun-malaworr *leaf*, G kuku/ N kun-jurrkin *water*, G na-ko'payn/ N na-ka'poyrn *old man*. The class marker is separated from the stem by a hyphen. Some of the nouns of Gunkurrng have incorporated parts of the Gunwinggu: G yawurriyn/ N wurrgadik *young man*, G kurrukaji N ngalyoynkurrki *emu*, G karreparte/ N mankarremuji *yam*. There are several instances of a Gunwinggu word being used with a different meaning in Gunkurrng, or a word from a dialect being borrowed with its original meaning: G wampa *shark*/ N kunyampa *bad*, G kunngedlk *scale*/ N kurngedlk *fish*, G manyoyn *tendon*/ N manyoyn *road*, G (Goulburn Island dialect) kunkawo *smoke*/ N kunkawo *smoke*, G major *foot*/ major korongko *buffalo (foot-big)*. In other nouns there seems to be a type of syllable metathesis: G taluk/ N kartu kartu *woman*, G purrkyak/ N kayakurra *nothing*, G kunrrurrk/

N kunyurryurr *humpy*/. G kunjuding/ N kunjurnudik *dust*. Another style of sound change is a slight difference in articulation: G turuk/ N jung jung *dog* with a t/j, k/ng correspondence; G manjoko/ N namanyaku *narrow*.

The verb structures are identical, even to the same morphs occurring as person markers. There is the same differentiation in aspect but with less variety in allomorphs. This lack of variety is a general feature of Gunkurrng when compared to Gunwinggu, not only in structural features but also in semantic features. A stem in Gunkurrng will correspond to several in Gunwinggu: G -warl, -purri, -karr/ N -warl *motion in reference to one's hand* varied in Gunwinggu to *hunt, hurl, hold* respectively with corresponding aspect markers, whereas the nuance in Gunkurrng is carried by the aspect markers. Following are examples of the correspondence between verbs and aspect markers:

Gunkurrng

-po'me (aspect marker)

yi- jirrit- po'min
you-it-wash- past

ka-kun- -po'min
he-it cover- past

ka-warl- po'me
he-it hunt- present

nga-po'meng
I-hit past continuous

-po'me

ka-puk- po'me
he-it blow- present

ka-lerr- po'me
he-it uncover- present

nga-worr-po'meng
I -full- past

ka-parrkit-po'me
he-dance -present

Gunwinggu

-pun

yi- jirrit- pun
you-it-wash- past

ka-parrk- pun
he-it cover- past

ka-warl- pun
he-it hunt past

nga- pun
I-hit past

-me

ka-puk- me
he-it blow- present

ka-werrk- me
he-it uncover- present

nga-worrr-miyn
I -full -past

-ke

ka-parr- ke
he-dance- present

Gunkurrng**-po^oke**

ka-witit- po^oke
he-it put in- present

nga-marne-po -po^oke
I-he for-it cook- present

-ke

ngun-err- ke
(he) one who-lie- present

ka-warl- ke
he-it hurl- present

ka-murrij- ke
he-it break- present

ka-rridl- ke
he-it cut off- present

-me

kan-marne- takal^o-min
he/me-for-tell- past

murrij- meng
it break- past continuous

ka-rrurrkuy- me
he-it pull- present

-me

ka-ngol^o- meng
he-fire make- past

yi-marna- min
you-it place- past

ka-kurlkurl-me
he-run- present

ka-pojnjekngarrk-me
he-cold is- present

yi-ka-muke- meng
you-it-extinguish- past continuous

Gunwinggu**-we, irregular forms**

ka-ngimi- won
he-it put in- past

nga-marne- kiyne
I-he for-it cook- present

-we

ngun-ko- we
(he) one who-lie- present
(tell stories)

ka-purri- weng
he-it hurl- present continuous

-ke

ka-pak- keng
he-it break- present continuous

ka-pit- jop- kerriyn
he-finger-cut off- present
 reflective

-me

ka-marne- yi-meng
he-for-tell it me-past

papak- meng
it break- past continuous

nga-rrurr- meng
I-it pull- past

-me

ka-wurl^o- me
he-fire make- present

yi-kurr- meng
you-it place -past continuous

ka-lop- me
he-run- present

ka-pojnjek- me
he-cold is- present

-pun

nga-rrrom- pun
I-it extinguish- past

GunkurrngGunwinggu

	- ≠	
ka-marrngala?-min		ka-peka- n
he-listen- past		he-listen- present
ngan-karnkelk-la- meng		ngan-karre-paye- ng
he/me-leg- bite- past contin- uous		he/me-leg-bite- past
ka-munjut- me		ka-marneka- n
he-it carry- present		he-it carry-present
ka-rrurrkmijarrpel-me		ka-rrurrkmirri
he-work- present		he-work- present
-mo?me		-ma
yi- mo?me		yi- ?mang
you-it do present		you-it do past
yi- mo?min kunjurrkin		kan-marne-po- ma
you-it do past water		you/he-for-water-it do present
'you fetch water for him'		'you fetch water for him'
ka-jirrk- mo?me		nga-jirrk- man
he-it push- present		I-it push- present continuous

Nominalization in Gunkurrng follows the Gunwinggu type also. The third-person singular form of the verb without tense marker acts as a noun: G ka-pimti 'a painting'
he-to paint

N ka-waynjart-mornti 'a creek, river'
he-rippling-lengthwise.

This example with the suffix -mornti demonstrates another interesting feature of Gunkurrng, the use of a suffix denoting long or moving in a thin stream, in instances distinct from Gunwinggu:

G mantudk-parntat/ N manparntat yiri?mornti 'tree root'
tree-root root go-lengthwise

G ka-keyo/ N ka-yakurr-mornti 'he is sleeping'
he-sleeps he-rests-lengthwise

G ka-wurl?wurl-me/ N ka-wurltme-mornti 'he is sweating'
he-heat-is he-heat is- moving in a thin stream

Syntax. Higher level features in Gunwinggu and Gunkurrng are identical. Sentence construction, paragraph construction, intonation in conversation and discourse, all are the same. Questions are formed in the same way, function words carrying over from the parent language: /G nyale? yi?-mang/ N nyale? yi-mo?me *what are you doing?*
G pale? nguta-yi-re/ N pale? yi-rokan *where are you going?*

In summary, Gunkurrng is a dialect of Gunwinggu used in social circumstances requiring avoidance behavior. Its phonological morphological and syntactic structures are identical to the parent language with diversification in the lexical content and shape of the morphemes. Although the shape of the morphemes is different from Gunwinggu in at least half of the vocabulary, most of the forms are nevertheless distinctly cognates.

N O T E S

1. K.L. Pike, *Language*, Summer Institute of Linguistics, Santa Ana, Calif. (1954) Vol. I, II, III.
2. A.P. Elkin *The Australian Aborigines*, Angus and Robertson, (1943) pp. 117 ff.
3. R.M. & C.H. Berndt, *The World of the First Australians*, Ure Smith, Sydney (1964) pp. 40, 83 "...special vocabularies (are) used between a man and his actual or classificatory mother-in-law."
4. R.M.W. Dixon, *The Dyirbal Language of North Queensland*, unpublished thesis for the Department of General Linguistics, University College London (1967) pp 19, 230-77.

Z.D. de Zwaan, "Koko-Jimidir, Northern Queensland", in a personal communication from his supervisor at University of Queensland, (1968).

Berndt, *op. cit.*

T.G.H. Strehlow, 'Aboriginal Language, Religion, and Society in Central Australia' *Australian Territories*, Vol. 2 No. 1 (1962) pp 7 ff.

5. Ken Hale, 'Lardil Non-Singular Pronouns' (mimeographed MS) Dr. Hale included several Gunwinggu constructions used in an avoidance situation, and when I repeated these to my informant she gave me all the material I could transcribe at the time.
6. Mother-in-law language is generally referred to by the avoidance name Ngarrimikme, i.e., "we take (or get) abstention (or tabooess)" in avoidance of its real name Gunkurrng (or Gun-gurung). I am indebted to Professor R. Berndt (in personal communication) who has drawn my attention to its real name and pointed out the nature of the name Ngarrimikme to me.

