The functions and forms of converbs in Australian languages: A typological study

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Converbs are specialised verb forms for adverbial subordination (Haspelmath & König 1995), and are a well-described and widely attested grammatical category across the world. However, the term is seldom applied to Australian languages, many of which have clause linkage-specific verb forms (Austin 2017: 5, but see Ross 2016). In a sample of 75 Australian languages, I show that the majority of non-finite verb forms primarily have adverbial functions, and can thus be called converbs. In function and form, a number of distinctions can be observed.

First, I show that non-finite forms in Australian languages almost always have adverbial functions, after which non-adverbial functions can be derived. This comes from the observation that adverbial functions are almost always possible, while relative and complement clause functions are not (as shown in examples 1a-b). Hence, these verb forms are better analysed as converbs, rather than participles, nominalisations, or infinitives (specialised forms for other linkage constructions). The primacy of adverbial meaning that I propose contrasts with the current description of these verb forms as 'general subordinate' markers, whereby neither adnominal nor adverbial functions are dominant (see Hale 1976, Blake 1999: 307, Nordlinger 2006).

I show that converb multifunctionality is prevalent in Australia (according with worldwide tendencies; Nedjalkov 1995: 104–106), both in the sense of having functions outside the adverbial domain, and of having multiple adverbial functions. The first sense is illustrated in the Yidiny examples (1a-b), where the "causal subordinate" form *-(C)nyum* may mark either temporal priority (adverbial) or a perfective relative clause, which includes the prior sense in its meaning. Hence, I argue that the adverbial function is primary. The second sense is illustrated in Dhanggati (2a-b), where the "subordinate" *-kayi* can mark two different types of adverbial linkage: motivated cause and open condition.

Secondly, I note some variation between converb forms, which allows some insight into their origins. Traditionally, converbs are regarded as minimal verb forms (as in 1a-b, 2a-b), but I also include in my analysis cases involving two morphemes: a semantically underspecified 'stem', and a specifying suffix, exemplified in (3) with Warumungu *-ji* 'nominaliser', and *-(k)kipurtu* 'privative case'. Case markers are a major source of converbs; even the Yidiny marker *-(:l)nyum* is historically decomposable into *-(:l)nyu* 'past tense' and *-m* 'ablative case' (Dixon 1977: 214–215).

Examples
Yidiny (Dixon 1977: 335, 336)

(1a) *muyngga* *gunda-:lnyum* | *wangga-:dyinga-:l*
      cicatrices(ABS) cut-**CAU.SUB** get.up-COMIT-PAST
      'After having had (my) cicatrices cut (I) was lifted up…'

(1b) … *mandya* *bunda-:dyi-nyum*
      culprit(ABS) hit-ANTIPASS-**CAU.SUB**
      '(The two children sat quietly,) the murdering culprits.' (paraphrased)

Dhanggati (Lissarrague 2007: 68, 90)

(2a)   *nuu*   *'ang*   *yama*   *gawa-**kayi***   *gayaan-du*   *ga-n*
       3sg(NOM)   DEM(ABS)   hand(ABS)   cut-**SUB**   back-to   come-NFUT
       'She came back because she cut her hand.'

(2b)   *nuu*   *gurumba-**kayi***   *nyiyanang*   *dhupiyn-ga-liyn*
       3sg(NOM)   lie-**SUB**   1pl(NOM)   know-VBLZ-FUT
       'If he tells a lie we will know.'

Warumungu (Simpson & Heath 1982: 82)

(3)   *karti-ngk(i)=ama*   *karta-nta*   *kayin*   *wangki-**ji-kkipurtu**-njul*
       man-ERG=3SG   cut-PRS   boomerang   speak-**NMZ-PRIV**-ERG
       'The man is cutting a boomerang without speaking.'

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