

How long can a verb go without a root? Semantics and historical reconstruction of Southern Daly finite verbs

John Mansfield

Languages of north-western Australia, from the Daly River to the Kimberly, have verbal lexicons that are built from small closed classes of finite verb stems, combined with open classes of non-finite 'coverbs'. An interesting question is what sort of historical processes lead to languages with small sets of finite verbs, presuming that these have derived at some stage from more typical large classes of verb lexemes. Several authors have proposed gradual reduction in the set of finite verbs, in tandem with increased compounding as a compensating source of verbal expressivity (Dixon 2002: 197–200; McGregor 2002: 342–351; Schultze-Berndt 2003: 146–147). But questions remain open about the more fine-grained mechanisms by which this gradual reduction unfolds.

In this study I provide a detailed account of some finite verb stems in Murrinhpatha, exploring both their current semantics, and the possible reconstructions from a Southern Daly ancestor based on comparison with the sister language Ngan'gi (Reid 1990; Reid & McTaggart 2008). On my analysis, Murrinhpatha has 26 distinct finite verb stems, each of which has a paradigm of 42 inflected forms. Although Murrinhpatha is now one of the better-documented Aboriginal languages, there is still relatively little analysis of the semantics of the finite stems (Barone-Nugent 2008; Nordlinger 2012; Seiss 2013). In this study I present detailed description of three stems (*ningam-* 'use fire', *dim-* 'sit', *dam-* 'use mouth'), each of which occurs in some dozens or hundreds of compound verbs (e.g. *ninganthi* 'cook food', *dimngerren* '(sit) talking', *dammirr* 'chew'). I trace recurrent semantic elements among the compounds, showing how they form semantic clusters. A crucial observation is that each finite stem appears in several distinct semantic clusters, and while some of these are likely the result of semantic extension (e.g. HEAT → ANGER), there are also many clusters that appear to be semantically unrelated, as well as individual idiosyncratic compounds that do not appear to fit any cluster.

I combine the semantic analysis with comparative analysis on Ngan'gi, as well as phonological erosion patterns in Murrinhpatha that suggest likely

reconstructions to Southern Daly, expanding on existing studies of Southern Daly history (Green 2003) and contemporary variation and change (Mansfield & Nordlinger 2020). Based on the triangulation of these analyses, I propose that some Murrinhpatha finite stems are historically derived from multiple distinct finite verbs, which have converged via phonological erosion. This is particularly the case for 'rootless' finite stems, where the historical roots have been completely eroded by processes of medial syllable deletion, leaving laminates of irregular inflectional material. I propose that this has been a long-term process in Southern Daly, implying that some verbs may have gone without a root for hundreds or thousands of years.

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