

Compound verb formations in Australian languages:  
with special reference to Yawuru preverbs

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When we take a survey of the languages of the north and northwest Australia, we find a general tendency that despite the highly complicated verbal conjugational systems these languages have relatively few verbs, ranging roughly from 30 to 150. In the case of Yawuru of west Kimberley, for which we have a database involving over 1300 pages of field notes and a 4500-item vocabulary, there are only 85 conjugatable verb roots on record. Consequently, most verbal expressions in Yawuru are of a compound nature, consisting of a normally inflected finite verb (FV) and a combined (usually preposed) non-finite verbal word, which is called "preverb" (PV).

Pairing of PV and FV is a productive system in which a relatively small number of verb roots are combined with non-finite verbal words producing a large number of verbal expressions. The system also provides a very simple, but nonetheless effective way for a non-verbal word to be incorporated into a verbal predicate. The preverb system also involves a certain degree of grammatical optimization (a process in which languages attain higher simplicity and productivity). In Yawuru, aspects of the optimization are observable in (i) intransitive/transitive alternation, (ii) causative formation, (iii) encoding of aspect such as inchoative and iterative, and (iv) subordination.

It has been clarified through a detailed analysis of the PV-FV pairings in Yawuru that in this language the verbs have no fixed transitivity value, contrary to the widely spread belief of the disjoint transitive/intransitive categorization of verbs in Australian languages. Another finding relates to the problem of ergativity. Syntactic behavior of non-matrix preverbs in Yawuru has given us an important clue to the understanding that, although the Yawuru verb-agreement operates in the nominative-accusative system, some part of the syntax (apart from the case-marking) is organized along the ergative system, in that intransitive subject and transitive object are unmarked whereas transitive subject is marked.

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