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# WORK PAPERS OF SIL-AAB

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### **Aboriginal and Islander Grammars: Collected Papers**

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# **KALAW KAWAW VERBS SPEAKER PERSPECTIVE AND TENSE, MOOD, AND ASPECT**

Rod Kennedy

## **0. INTRODUCTION**

A comparison of tenses, moods, and aspects used by Kalaw Kawaw Ya (hereafter referred to as KKY) speakers with those used by English speakers sheds some interesting light on the problems of bilingualism in these two languages. In English there is a basic focus on event time and the vast majority of ideas can be rendered in simple past, present, or future tense. Present continuous tense in English bears some

similarity to incomplete aspect which is so widely used in KKY. These two forms in their respective languages are frequently used to refer to actions not yet completed, including many that are still in the planning stage. Both tense and aspect are important to both languages but while English places a lot of emphasis on tense KKY emphasises aspect more, and the two KKY aspects mentioned above are in common use across the whole time scale.

When first language KKY speakers begin to learn English it is natural to look for simple correspondences between the two languages. The basic import of the distinction in KKY between complete and incomplete aspects is the relative probability that an activity will take place or go to completion. This has been a language which has been spoken by event oriented people who have been more concerned with the certainty or uncertainty of an event in its natural chain or sequence than with time as an abstraction. Those tenses in KKY which express time with some precision refer to time in its fundamental units such as days and months. These fundamental units are concrete events before they are mathematical abstractions. I suspect that, while white Australians and Islanders all talk of days, months, and years, the Islander thinks far more of the event aspect of these entities. The white man is more apt to be concerned with the precise number of minutes or hours that have elapsed.

So long as all members of one Islander community lived within the sound of one conch shell, the various events that made up the life of that community could be retained in their proper sequence by simple ordering of the event schedule which tied man's activities to natural events, sunrises, sunsets, lunar phases, winds, and tides. There was little intrusion from a mathematical conception of time. If an Islander in a traditional community tells you that a social will begin 'at about 7.30 p.m.', this is probably a euphemism for 'after the evening meal but before bedtime'.

An Islander boatman, on the other hand, who knows that a journey will be much more difficult if he misses a certain tide, may tell you to be ready to go when the sea level reaches some agreed marker. He will expect you to be ready to depart promptly when the prerequisite event takes place. This kind of definite readiness is expressed in KKY by means of complete aspect. Many Islanders who have studied some English grammar at primary school level tend to equate this complete aspect with simple past tense in English and KKY incomplete aspect with English present or future tense. Just as KKY speakers use complete aspect to express an absolute readiness to do something, the same person, if speaking English, tends to employ English past tense to fulfil this function. In KKY he will say,

- (1) *Wa ngoeba uzar-ma-n*  
yes we+DU+INCL go-DU-COM

'Yes, you and I will (definitely) go now.'

An equivalent expression in Ap'nap, a mixture of islander English and traditional language, is *ngoeba went* or occasionally we hear, *We will went now*.

The pattern of tense, mood, and aspect in KKY is elaborate and comprehensive but the differences from English demand careful attention when a KKY speaker is to learn English or vice versa. As with many Australian languages KKY speakers presumably associate irrealis (uncertainty) mood with future events and certainly there is a measure of correlation between tense and event certainty. The outcome of past events is more determined than the outcome of present events whereas future events tend to be shrouded in uncertainty. There is a measure of similarity between the structure of the two languages but in the absence of due care this partial similarity may add to the confusion.

#### 1. VARIATIONS BETWEEN TRANSITIVE AND INTRANSITIVE MORPHOLOGY

Numerous instances can be cited for KKY where the same verb root is used to describe a transitive act and a related reflexive act. Under similar circumstances, English tends to use different verb roots. The following pair of examples are typical. KKY has the same verb roots but the English glosses require different verb roots.

- (2) *Nuy-dh lag-oenu muy-nu ara-nu thusi*  
he-ERG house-LOC inside-LOC put:in-TP book

'He put the book inside the house.'

- (3) *Nuy lag-ia muy are-ma*  
he house-ROU inside enter-TP

'He entered the house.'

With verbs such as *purath* meaning 'to eat/dine', transitive morphology is used if the focus is mainly on the food being consumed but intransitive morphology is used where the focus is on eating as an activity not on the particular food consumed. Likewise the verbs meaning 'to teach' and 'to discover/learn' have the same root being *ngurpe* and *ngurpa* respectively. An alternate form of *ngurpe* is *ngurapi* which occurs before certain tense/aspect suffixes.

2. **ACTS WHICH IMPINGE FORCEFULLY ON THE UNDERGOER TEND TO HAVE TRANSITIVE MORPHOLOGY.**

With some verbs such as *yapu poeyba/e*, 'to question', transitive morphology is used where the questioner would be likely to subject the person asked to forcible or demanding questioning (e.g. a policeman questioning a suspected thief). Intransitive morphology is more likely to be used where the person asking the question is of lower status than the person being asked. Compare the following examples.

- (4) *Nuy-dh na-n yapu poeyba-n*  
he-ERG her-ACC ask-COM

'He asked her.' (demanding that she tell him)

- (5) *Nuy na-bepa yapu poeyb-iz*  
he her-GOA ask-COM

'He asked her.'

Where the asker is very circumspect, a different verb root is used along with transitive morphology. The item being sought, not the person asked, is now the object of the transitive verb. (Note the accusative suffix in Example 6.) The person to whom the approach is made is cast in a means role marked by *ia/ya/bia*.

- (6) *Nuy-dh na-bia kuyk wakaya-n za*  
he-ERG her-ROU source idea-COM thing

'He turned with this problem to her for her help.'

3. **AN INTERESTING IRREGULARITY—TRANSITIVE VERB CONSTRUCTIONS WITH INTRANSITIVE TYPE SUFFIXATION.**

There are a number of verbs in KKY where the morphology is a mixture of features that are normally regarded as transitive and those normally regarded as intransitive. The verb *moeydh* meaning 'to pole or punt a canoe through the water' is typical. The verb *moeydh* meaning 'to build' has completely normal transitive morphology.

- (7) *Nuy-dh lag-al moeydha-moey-n*  
he-ERG house-PL build-PL-COM

'He has built some houses.'

This normal morphology contrasts with,

- (8) *Nuy-dh kawtha-l moeydhe-mi-n*  
he-ERG canoe-PL pole-PL-COM

'He poled several canoes.'

With the verb *moeydh*, 'to pole', all morphology within the verb itself is intransitive in form. The stem is *moeydhe* not *moeydha*. The plural suffix to concord with the plural object is in the form normally found on intransitive verbs to concord with a plural subject. Had the object been singular, the verb aspect suffix would have been in the intransitive singular form *-iz*. The features outside the verb itself are typically transitive. In this respect, subjects take ergative suffixes. Object number, not subject number, determines the number of the concordance suffix shown on the verb. This is in spite of the fact that the form of that suffix is usually in concord with subjects not objects.

#### 4. GROUP PLURAL SUFFIX *-n*

As well as the above types of variation between transitive and intransitive morphology, there is a group of stylistic variations from normal transitive morphology which relate to the use of group plurals. In writing about the Mabuia dialect of KLY, Bani and Klokied (1976) refer to some of these stylistic variations as 'Ergative Switching'. Compare normal ergative or transitive morphology in Example 9 with the stylistic variant which Bani and Klokied describe as a 'switched ergative'.

- (9) *Nga-th puy-l patha-moey-ne*  
I-ERG tree-PL cut-PL-FUT

'I will cut some trees down.'

- (10) *Ngay puy-n pathe-dhe*  
I tree-GP cut-FUT

'I will cut all those trees down.'

Example 10 presupposes some understanding between speaker and listener, in this case it was an arrangement to cut enough poles to make a shelter for a feast. This sentence tells the listener that the complete set of trees has been dealt with. Bani and Klokied make this point, then go on to say that the *-n* suffix on *puy* is an ergative marker or suffix, shifted from its normal spot. In KLY the ergative suffix in common non-plural nouns is *-n*. My own research confirms Bani and Klokied's general findings as applying to KKY dialect as well as to Mabuia.

There are three more points I would like to make:

1. There are numerous instances in KKY of utterances where some morphological changes have been made away from the normal transitive pattern towards the intransitive pattern but the semantic intent is still similar to that of normal transitive utterances.
2. In many of these utterances, common nouns suffixed with *-n* indicate complete sets (e.g. all the trees growing in one garden, or all the trees needed for one project). Other findings lead me to prefer the name 'group plural marker' rather than 'switched ergative'.
3. Many of the stylistic variations which are used to underline the completeness of sets do not involve the deletion of an ergative suffix from the subject.

(11) *Na-dh koewsa im-iz*  
she-ERG fruit see-COM

'She saw those fruit.' (indicating some complete set of fruits)

There is an absence of plural suffixes on object or verb even though the object is a plural, a group plural. The completive suffix is of the intransitive type though the verb is certainly transitive. There is an ergative suffix on the subject. Compare the normal form of such an utterance,

(12) *Na-dh koewsa-l ima-moey-n*  
she-ERG fruit-PL see-PL-COM

'She saw some fruit.'

Example 11 is significant in two ways. The reduced transitive morphology indicates that the object is a collective plural. Secondly, this structure usually signals a story climax. Further examples of this will be given later. (See Section 7).

## 5. VERBS WHICH DO NOT TAKE PLURAL SUFFIXES

There are a number of transitive verbs in KKY which may only be used to refer to plural objects and intransitive verbs that may only refer to plural subjects. Other verbs in this general category may refer to either plural or dual objects or subjects but never to singular. This restriction is a straightforward matter of semantics and applies for much the same reasons as the ones which prevent English speakers from making statements such as, 'He gathered his shotput together'. (This is excepting the possibility that he may have just broken his shotput.)

While the KKY verb *mange* meaning 'to arrive' may refer to either a singular or a plural subject, its close synonym, *ngabuna* must have a plural subject.

- (13) *Thana ngabuna-dhin*  
they+PL arrive-HP

'They arrived as a group.'

With such obligatorily plural verbs, no pluralisation suffix occurs on the verb. This is consistent with the absence of plural verb suffixes on verbs where nouns are marked as group plurals by means of the *-n* suffix. In the one case, group plural status is established through the use of the *-n* suffix, in the other by means of the specialist verb. Similarly *ladhu*, 'to depart', may be used only of a party, (a plural subject) and its synonym *ulay* may only be used with non-plural subjects. There are other verbs which may have singular subjects (intransitive) or singular objects (transitive) but occur more frequently with plural subjects or objects respectively. A typical example would be *zura woeydha* meaning 'to stew'. It is uncommon 'to stew only one fish'.

- (14) *Na-dh wapi-l zura woeydha-nu*  
she-ERG fish-PL stew-TP

'She stewed some fish.'

These verbs which either obligatorily or generally take plural subjects or objects are frequently used with nouns suffixed '*-n*' to indicate that they are group plurals. In the case of transitive constructions, there is a reduction of transitive morphology which Bani and Klokied refer to as 'ergative switching'. In place of Example 14, we find,

- (15) *Na wapi-n zura woeydhe-ma*  
she fish-GP stew-TP

'She stewed all the fish.'

As well as the use of the group plural, the verb stem has been changed from 'a' final form typical of transitive verbs to the 'e' final form typical of intransitive verbs. The special singular intransitive form of the today past tense marker has been used rather than the usual form used with non-singular intransitives and all normal transitives. Ezra Waigana of Saibai Island pointed out an interesting related phenomenon, that of groups of collectives. With verbs that usually or always deal with collective plurals, the verb may take plural suffixation if it relates to a plural of collectives. Compare Examples 16 and 17.

- (16) *Na-dh wapi-lnga zura woeydha-nu*  
she-ERG fish-HAV+SG stew-TP

'She cooked a boiler of fish stew.'

In this example the object of the verb is the boiler of fish, or literally 'fish having'. Where several boilers of fish are involved the verb takes plural object suffixation.

- (17) *Na-dh wapi-lmayl zura woeydha-moey-nu*  
she-ERG fish-HAV+PL stew-PL-TP

'She cooked several boilers of fish stew.'

Here the role of the collectives in determining whether the verb takes a plural suffix is easily seen, since the collective is the direct object of the verb in the surface structure of the sentence. In other examples this evidence is much less certain. For example,

- (18) *Thana koewbu mabayga-l garwoeydhamoe-dhin*  
they+PL war person-PL gather-HP

'The warriors gathered into a fighting band.'

Compare with

- (19) *Thana koewbu mabayga-l garwoeydha-moey-dhin*  
they+PL war person+PL gather-PL-HP

'The warriors gathered into several fighting bands.'

The pluralisation of the verb in Example 19 is the only clue given to this multiplicity of collectives, the stem final 'moe' being deleted before the suffix '-moey' on the verb.

## 6. **EXAMPLES OF STYLISTIC REDUCTION OF TRANSITIVE MORPHOLOGY**

In common speech, collective plurality may be signalled by the omission of almost any morpheme normally employed to signal transitive action. Language speakers, however, do express strong feelings about the appropriateness of different variants. Some are regarded as incorrect usage while others are highly acceptable. The following are examples of stylistic variants which tend to be well accepted.

- (20) *Na-dh koewsa im-iz*  
she-ERG fruit see-COM

'She saw all of those several fruit.'



Compare the usual construction,

(21) *Na-dh koewsa-l ima-moey-n*  
she-ERG fruit-PL see-PL-COM

'She saw some fruit.'

The singular intransitive form of the aspect suffix is again used to indicate the group plural effect. This type of stylistic effect is also important for another reason: it is especially likely to occur just prior to a narrative climax. For example, in the story of the frog monsters, the hero's wife desires to see the monsters. When she does so, she is quite devastated with horror. Our expectation of something unusual in the offing is heightened by the use of this device.

(22) *Ngitha ngaw ipi-n thur-iz imay-pa*  
you+PL my wife-ERG summons-COM see-INC

'My wife calls you all to come so that she can see you.'

Note that both verbs lack the pluralizing suffix *-moey*. Only the verb *thur*, 'to summons', takes the special singular intransitive form of the aspect suffix. This places the focus on the act of summoning to precede the crisis. Likewise, in the Boigu Island legend of the children who are punished with death for stealing yams, this form of the verb 'to see' is employed to indicate their being caught in the act, the discovery being the prelude to revenge.

(23) *Nuy-dh thana im-iz*  
he-ERG they+PL see-COM

'He saw all of them.'

As well as such heroic examples from legend, language speakers frequently omit both noun and verb plural suffixes where the noun refers to a collective. Such variants, in the absence of any modification to ergative suffixing or of verb tense or aspect suffixing, do not indicate narrative climax. A typical example is,

(24) *Wa nagu uthu-n mura*  
yes young:plant plant-COM all

'Yes, all the young plants have been planted.'

## 7. EXAMPLES OF COLLECTIVE PLURAL SUFFIXES APART FROM TRANSITIVE VERBS

The above evidence suggests clearly that there is a connection between group plural suffixes and variant transitive morphology. However, the connection is not absolute as the following will show.

a) Group Plural Subjects of an Intransitive Verb do occur

(25) *Thana mabayga-n mangay-dhin*  
they+PL person-GP arrive-HP

'That group of people arrived.'

b) Rare Examples of Verbless Stative Constructions with Group Plurals occur

(26) *Thana mabayga-n mura uma-mayl*  
they+PL person-GP all death-HAV

'These people have all died.'

Examples such as this are rare. It is more common to find the ordinary form of plural *-l* with such a stative construction. Even in the case of motion verbs there is a tendency to restructure the utterance as a transitive type construction where a group plural is used. Compare Examples 27 and 28.

(27) *Mabayg-al mab ladhu-n*  
person-PL walk move-COM

'Some people have departed on foot.'

This is an intransitive construction, but the sentence may readily be cast as transitive by replacing the group plural verb *ladhu* with the transitive verb *ayma*, 'to make'. Where a group plural noun suffix is employed to emphasise the fact that some group in its entirety departed, the transitive construction is preferred, as follows.

(28) *Mabayga-n mab ayma-n*  
person-GP walk made-COM

'All those people walked.' (literally, 'made a walk')

It is common to find group plurals as subjects of transitive verbs.

(29) *Thana mabayga-n dhangal uthu-nu*  
they+PL person-GP dugong harpoon-TP

'That group of people harpooned a dugong.'

## 8. SUMMARY

To summarise, there is a tendency for group plurals to occur in conjunction with a reduction in transitive morphology and for group plurals and transitive morphology reduction to be associated with pre-climax situations. It is interesting that the phenomenon of group plurals is so important in KKY. In the Mabuiaq dialect of KLY, it is also significant that there are numbers of specialist verb forms which relate exclusively or primarily to group plurals. A great deal of morphological variation relates to indicating of group plurals. Sometimes, it is the number of group plurals rather than the number of individuals in a situation which determines whether the verb should have dual or plural suffixation or not. This grouping is a very important phenomenon in the world view of KLY speakers. Certainly, for example, family groupings mean a great deal.

## ABBREVIATIONS

ACC	accusative case
COM	completive aspect
CON	continuous aspect
CR	concrete referent/old information
DU	dual number
DV	dormant verb
ERG	ergative
FLI	focus link
FUT	future tense
GOA	goal
GP	group plural
HAB	habitual aspect
HAV	'having' suffix
HP	historic past tense
IMP	imperative mood
INC	incompletive aspect
INCL	inclusive
ISA	immediate striving aspect
KKY	Kalaw Kawaw
KLY	Kala Lagaw Ya
LOC	location
MASC	masculine
NEG	negative
PL	plural
POSS	possessive
QUE	question marker
ROU	route/means
SG	singular
SOU	source
TA	tension avoidance
TCH	temporary characteristic
TCON	terminated continuous aspect
TP	today past tense
:	more than one English word needed for one vernacular word
+	morpheme cannot be separated from word
_____	concordance

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